The Nightingale's Mate

by FieryPen37

Summary

Erik begins his life anew in Paris after many years of trial and struggle, swearing to never again submit to a man's fickle emotions. Perhaps Christine Daae can change his mind . . .

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
He, the Unseen Genius

The Nightingale’s Mate

A cold wind bearing the grit of coal and dirt scoured him, eerily reminiscent of the arid, sand-laden winds of Persia. Erik breathed deeply of the air of his home country, relishing the faint snatches of lyric French the wind brought to him. After a decade of wandering, an absurd sense of nostalgia fluttered in his breast. Even with his blighted childhood, France was home. The heavy cloth of his cape billowed out in elegant folds and Erik tucked his chin to keep the low-slung fedora from exposing the white mask that covered the right side of his face to the glare of the gas lamps. The wet cobbles gleamed an unearthly gold in their wavering light.

With an obligatory courtesy, he tossed a few bills in the direction of the brougham driver. He moved with catlike quiet across expanse of cobbled road, pocked here and there with slushy piles of dirty snow. His breath misted in the thin January air. The door was locked, of course, but quickly acquiesced under the nimble persuasion of Erik’s skilled fingers.

The elegant walls of the Opera House embraced him like the arms of a lover. Erik padded through the darkened halls like a dewy-eyed pilgrim, the hem of his cape penitently kissing the polished marble floor. He knew and cherished every tile, every column, every mortared joint. After months of squalid accommodations aboard a wretched excuse of a ship, the rich opulence that surrounded him saturated his senses, glutted him with beauty. His quiet cathedral of music . . . this was a homecoming more profound than that of simply nation and language. The Opera Populaire welcomed her lord and master.

An elegant black-gloved hand caressed the smooth marble banister, and Erik remembered with a faint smile the many times he has slid down it as a feral, dirty boy. Minette looked on with horror, no doubt regretting her decision to smuggle him from the Gypsy fair all those years ago. Guilt assailed him and a fresh spurt of pain seeped from the old scar. He had given her many causes to regret her unfortunate act of kindness. Last he’d heard she was a respectable ballet mistress now, happily married to her precious Pierre. He would have to speak to her eventually, he supposed, if he was to live here.

The Populaire’s darkened silence reproached him for his long years of absence, but reluctantly yielded her secrets as Erik triggered the trap door at the center of the first landing. He leapt lightly down as the aperture closed, casting the hexagonal chamber of mirrors into complete darkness. The lack of light didn’t trouble him. A darkness deeper than hell existed within his mind. Hadn’t he taken this design—the room of mirrors—once a childish product of boredom and mischief and used it for the khanum’s twisted pleasure?

He descended the five levels in a dull thrall of exhaustion. It was only when the portcullis closed and a brace of candles lit that Erik breathed a sigh of mingled relief and melancholy. His pipe organ was the forlorn cave’s only extravagance. His throne of music.

He would have to expand to fit the riches he had acquired during his travels, a stable of César . . .

A bath was forefront on his mental list.

Erik could still taste the fetor that hung over the shah’s capital of Teheran, the film of dust and human misery seeped into his pores, along with the blood spilled as the khanum’s favorite
assassin. Across the barren landscape of exhaustion surged a wild typhoon of hate at the thought of that spoiled, bloodthirsty woman who was so dreadfully fascinated with the wreckage of his face. ‘Half angel, half demon. Behold my Angel of Doom!’ she crowed. The black leather of his gloves whined as he clenched his fists.

*Praise your Allah that you are half a world away!* He thought blackly.

Erik sighed; the anger ebbed from him, boiling water trickling through a sieve with a petulant updraft of steam. He had drunk his fill of blood, of killing. At first, under the wild grip of hashish, single combat slaked the unholy lust for blood that lurked within him, that of a beaten animal lashing out mercilessly at a world that had shown him the same. Later, a destructive spiral of drugs served to numb the pain, hold the demons at bay . . .

He shrugged off the cape, wishing he could shed the memories as easily. While his escape from Persia was far from amicable, at least he survived with a modicum of his fortune intact—not to mention the lingering shreds of his sanity. The wanderlust of his teenage years had long since been purged from his system and he was weary of humanity. He felt far older than his twenty-six years, having done and seen too much of the world’s cruelties in his travels. The softer emotions: kindness, compassion, love . . . they were so easily crushed, ground to dust under the blind, clawing necessity of survival.

None of it mattered now.

He was content to stay here, in the cold, quiet solitude of his home for the rest of his life.

xxx

Wrapped in a gauzy cloak of grey mist early in the morning, Erik hovered in the shadows, watching the progress of the dock men he hired to bring him his things. César looked well, prancing proudly on the line, arching his muscled black neck, glad to be free of the confines of the ship. The dozen assorted boxes and crates held all of his worldly possessions: his designs and sketches, his clothes, his magician’s tools, rare medicines and poisons spanning the entire continent of Asia, and the veritable dragon’s hoard of gold and jewels he’d acquired—both by reward and by theft—stowed safely in a lockbox he designed himself. It would take a talented thief years to dismantle it.

He watched, with mounting ire, as his belongings were thrown carelessly to the ground. The lid of one battered chest buckled, spilling several books—priceless originals. And now their spines were cracked!

“If this is the way you handle my belongings, I shudder to think what would become of those of one who paid you less,” he hissed, stepping into the light. The man in the cart froze, hands fastened on the handle of a trunk. His partner stepped down from the wagon’s high seat. He scurried to retrieve the books, glancing nervously at the mask every few seconds. Impatience built in Erik, a quick flash of anger.

Oh, what a fine day it would be when he no longer had to endure such inane conversation, such fumbling stupidity!

“W—we didn’t see you there, Monsieur. Uh . . . we’re sorry about your book . . .” Erik snatched
the book so quickly the man stared at his filthy hands as if they could somehow offer him a clue to the book’s whereabouts.

“The Vedas in its original Sanskrit. Have you read it?” Erik drawled, words dripping with scathing mockery. The man blinked as if he was speaking a different language. Erik made a terse gesture, suddenly weary.

“Unload the cart and get out of my sight.”

They hastened to obey, with far greater care.

“Stop!” he barked as they began to depart.

The driver froze in place, hand poised on the buggy whip. Years ago, Erik had learned to harness the hypnotic potential of his voice. It was his power, his tool, emotion incarnate, beauty made audible. A sharp command from him could urge even the most thickheaded into immediate obedience.

“Did you find what I asked for?” the words fell like hailstones, hard and cold. That particular tone worked wonders with recalcitrant masons, lazy servants and slovenly dock men.

“Oh oui, Monsieur. Pardon,” the first man said, pulling a small package from his coat. Erik seized it, and tucked a few discreet bills into the inner coat pocket with well-placed sleight of hand.

“Merci. Good day, gentlemen,” Erik bade with a slight bow. Erik melted into the shadows, clutching his morphine to his chest, already eager for the burning prick of the needle and the sweet, numbing relief it brought.

XXX

Minette Giry eyed her new ward with unguarded concern. A normal girl of seven years would be asking effusive questions about the bustle and glitter of Paris, eager for distraction after long weeks of the slow crumbling of her father’s mortal body, and weeks more enduring the tedium of travel. Meg had, laughing with desperate gaiety after Pierre died.

But not Christine.

She sat silent as a churchyard angel, solemn brown eyes staring sightlessly out the window. Her hand was limp and cool within Minette’s grip, impassive to the comfort offered. The tragedy of her air worried Minette. She mourned her father with a stark and unnatural intensity. Christine was so delicate, a fragile waif of a girl, her pale face dominated by wounded eyes and framed by that improbable mane of brown curls. Minette strove to break the yawning silence.

“I think you will like the Conservatoire, Christine. All of the singing instructors are very kind—”

“I don’t want to sing,” she replied softly, the first words she’d spoken since Gustave breathed his last, muttering a promise about an ‘Angel of Music.’ The ephemeral worry crystallized into fear.

“Why ever not, my dear? You sing so beautifully. I’m sure your papa would want you to sing.”

“I will never sing again,” Christine said, the faintest quaver belying the steel in her tone. Minette
forced a weak smile of encouragement.

“Very well then. Perhaps you would like to join the ballet corps? My daughter Meg is studying to be a ballerina, she is about your age.” Christine smiled a little, a very adult understanding in her eyes.

“I’d like that,” she whispered, squeezing Minette’s hand, as if to comfort her. The rest of the ride through Paris’ clogged avenues passed in silence.

Disembarking outside the Populaire, Minette led Christine on an abbreviated tour. Monsieur Lefavre gave an obligatory hello, accepting Christine into the ballet corps with a sloppy signature. Minette patiently introduced Meg and Christine and left the two girls to play in her chambers while she attended the few legal matters that remained of Christine’s inheritance and wardship in her cramped office.

Minette sighed and discarded her shawl and bonnet onto the back of a chair. The lamp had gone out and she muttered a soft curse as she fumbled for the drawer that held the matches. Her knuckle throbbing after rapping it against a lead paperweight, Minette at last succeeded in lighting the cursed lamp. A wavering bubble of golden light illuminated the desk—and the tall figure lurking in the corner. Minette uttered a small cry of alarm, shrinking back against the desk as one hand flew up to cover her mouth. Like a douse of cold water upon her head, she recognized the white mask covering the right half of his face.

Nipping at the heels of her alarm was a curious conglomeration of surprise, joy and anger. “Erik,” she whispered, giving a name to the looming apparition. He bowed elegantly.

“Good day, Madame Giry. You look well,” he murmured. That simple sentence, spoken in his unbearable mellifluous voice, washed over old wounds. Numbed, but not forgotten.

How long had it been?

Twelve—thirteen years?

Minette’s eyes traveled over him. Gone was the dreadfully thin thirteen-year-old boy, the feral and fiendish child emperor of the Opera House. A man stood in his place, elegant in black evening dress and cape. The left side of his face was starkly beautiful; his chiseled features pale and narrow. Somehow, his beauty made the mask that much more heinous, and perversely alluring. He exuded waves of latent danger that thrilled the animal senses, suggesting depth and turmoil behind the glacial calm of his blue eyes. Those gelid eyes bore into her with his usual intense scrutiny, waiting with a gentleman’s banal patience to see what she would make of the situation. He had matured in his years abroad. She smiled weakly.

“If you’ll pardon the cliché, my how you’ve grown!” she murmured. Even Erik’s laugh was musical, a brief burst of rich, masculine mirth.

“The interesting thing about clichés is that they often contain a kernel of truth,” he observed.

A quick feint of his gloved hand produced a silver crucifix studded with garnets at the Christ’s nailed limbs.

“For you, Minette. A belated wedding present,” Erik said gently. Minette held out cupped palms to accept it, tears gathering in her eyes. The metal cross was cool and the delicate chain tickled as Erik lowered it into her hands. A gesture of apology—and forgiveness. She remembered all too clearly the night he left.
Sixteen-year-old Minette stood shivering on the banks of the lake near his home. The air was damp and as frigid as a tomb in winter. Erik’s cave was barren and empty save for stacks of books, floor length mirrors covered with sheets, and the magnificent pipe organ he’d spent meticulous hours building. A few candles offered light but not warmth. The only heat was the anger blazing in Erik’s eyes.

“You’re marrying him?” he hissed, his skeletal body held in the tense, deceptively calm pose of a cobra about to strike. Minette staggered back, placing a table between them for fear of his anger. He had such a terrible temper . . .

All her practiced words, all her careful arguments slipped away like forgotten notes of music. Erik filled this underground cave as he had filled her life in the two years since she had rescued him from the Gypsy fair. Since that fateful night, her world existed in a near constant state of crisis, torn paradoxically between guarded affection and mounting resentment. Constantly trying to temper his wild schemes and pranks, constantly worrying that he would be discovered and tried for murdering his master, constantly satisfying his insatiable thirst for knowledge with all the books she could find.

She was world-weary at sixteen—all because of this little . . . tyrant! Pierre, sweet, gentle Pierre, he was her comfort and she loved him. The weight of his ring on her finger, adorned with its tiny diamond, gave her courage.

“Yes. I’m marrying Pierre Giry. I don’t understand why this upsets you so,” she said coolly. Though she knew why. Marrying Pierre bought her freedom—blessed distance from Erik’s overbearing, all-consuming presence. Tantamount to abandonment in his eyes.

The black bandit’s mask covered Erik’s face from hairline to upper lip and succeeded in concealing any clue to his expression. Minette thought she saw a flicker of emotion in his eye, thinning the line of his mouth.

“No,” he said in that wickedly sharp tone that seemed to cut her with razors, “you will not marry him.” Minette flinched, like a slave under the threat of her master’s whip. How dare he use his angel’s voice as a weapon against her!

“I will!” she snapped back mutinously, “I love him!” Erik folded his arms over his thin chest. Even through the fabric of his white shirt, Minette could count his ribs.

“Then I will haunt you like I haunt this opera house. I am a very good ghost. I nearly drove my mother mad before I was ten. Your Pierre won’t last long.”

“No!” Minette’s howl was like that of a cornered animal. Some part of her went cold at Erik’s sparse words. She knew nothing of his past, or his family. Minette pushed aside pity and sorrow aside, submerging herself in a hateful rush of anger.

"For the love of God, Erik! I saved your life and this is how you repay me? I wish I--” she bit off the end of the sentence, seeing the dangerous glitter in Erik’s eyes.

“Go on, say it,” he urged softly.

His shoulders sagged and Minette was assaulted by the magnitude of his loneliness and the brittle pride that hid it. His pain was more unbearable than his anger. When she only stared into his broken eyes, he snarled, “Say it!” The tears in her eyes spilled over and the words emerged from
the deepest, darkest part of her soul.

“I wish I had never laid eyes on you!”

Erik became curiously tranquil, all of his quivering energy ebbing away.

“Don’t spare me another thought, Minette. Go marry your Pierre. You will never see me again.”

And he was gone, heedless of her crying his name.

“I didn’t mean it, you know. I didn’t—and don’t—regret saving you. I was a stupid child who didn’t know what it meant to have someone in her charge,” Minette whispered, pulling the crucifix over her head and tucking it into her gown.

“Thank you, Minette.” he said quietly, “I have said and done much, but there is nothing I regret more than pushing you away. You, who saved me from a life of degradation and squalor in some distant prison.” His simple, heartfelt apology touched the lingering poison of resentment in her heart, healing it. Minette ducked her head, swiping away the tears on her cheeks. A twist of his elegant hand produced an embroidered handkerchief. She accepted it with a murmur of thanks and dried her tears. Minette craned her neck to see his face, struck once more by his size. Questions boiled in her mind.

“Where have you been? Why have you come back? What is that?” she exclaimed, pointing at the dark knot in his sleeve exposed when he tucked away the handkerchief. Rope? Why would he have rope up his sleeve?

“So many questions, Minette!” he drawled, his visible brow arched in supercilious amusement. He gestured toward the chairs in her tiny office.

Minette took a seat and watched in fascination as Erik swept off his cloak and slid into the vacant chair with nonchalant grace. The way he moved . . . it was less like the quick, darting grace of his childhood. Now it was more regal, a slow unfolding majesty of movement, coordinated by the music within him. Once the selfish prince of the Opera House, now he transcended effortlessly into kingship. His long-fingered hands folded under his chin, he eyed her with gentle seriousness.

“I have questions of my own. I see you are in mourning dress. May I ask after the deceased?”

Minette’s throat tightened and she fiddled with the crucifix, the charm now warmed by her touch.

“He was a very dear friend. His daughter is now orphaned—she’s only seven.”

“My condolences,” Erik offered. The tears fell faster and Erik returned the handkerchief. Minette dabbed and sniffled, her grief over Gustave shifting to the years-old wound of her husband’s death.

“And Pierre . . .” she trailed off, blowing her nose, “He died three years ago. Our Meg was only four.”

“Oh Minette, I’m sorry.” Erik’s voice broke over her in a warm wave.

Slowly, deftly, he began to sing, a low soothing lullaby that smoothed the rough edges of her grief. Minette sighed, surrendering to the singular power of his voice. When he released her from his song, she felt curiously languorous, as if he had wrapped her in downy blanket of dreams. He rose with barely a whisper of sound.
“My mind has touched the farthest horizons of mortal imagination and reaches ever outward to infinity. The world has offered me the riches of its bounty and I am . . . unimpressed. I am content to live in my peaceful solitude. But I will need a liaison with the outside world. If you would like the post, meet me on the banks of the lake this evening.”

XXX

The next months passed in a blur of happy activity. No, ‘happy’ was the wrong word. Erik was quite sure he had never known happiness. Contentment, satisfaction, a quieter, more subtle fulfillment reigned in his world. With Minette as his mouthpiece, the materials he required were bought and he spent incalculable hours expanding and furnishing his home in the cellars. With five levels separating himself from the upper world, Erik did not trouble himself with silence. Instead of a crude pallet on the floor, he created a small bedroom furnished with a magnificent bed crafted to look like a phoenix. He added on a stable for César with a revolving wall that fit into the Populaire’s own stable. A bathroom and simple kitchen completed the design.

King Hades would envy Erik’s realm!

In winter’s quiet darkness, he took César on long rides down the Bois, or spent an evening comfortably immured in Box Five. True, La Carlotta’s butchery of perfectly mediocre music made him want to claw at his ears, but even the Populaire’s dismal chorus line could not tarnish the sense of homecoming he felt, of a quiet, domestic existence surrounded by a beautiful building and beautiful music. Maybe here, he could sleep without nightmares. Maybe in time, he could break the morphine addiction that would eventually kill him.

Maybe . . . maybe . . .

As winter softened in the first tender unfurling of spring, a vague restlessness gnawed at Erik’s prized contentment. His home was well expanded, and furnished to his exact specifications. The impetus to create ate at his bones, but every time he sat at his organ to write, or rosined his bow to play, the resulting notes affronted him in their fatuousness, their disgusting banality. He noted wryly that it was a minor miracle his violin survived his violent handling when he threw it down in a fit of self-loathing.

His haunting the Opera Populaire began purely by chance.

Drawn from his solitude by this vague itching urge, Erik paced the deserted halls, not caring to disguise the sound of his step or the sound of his cape. In truth, he thought himself quite alone in the wee hours of the morning. A soft gasp caught his attention. He whirled around, his cape eddying behind him like dark wings. One of the ballet rats looked up at him from the orchestra pit, face set in a comical mien of slack-jawed surprise, revealing several missing molars. An irrepressible mischief rose up and he melted into the shadows. Using well-placed ventriloquism, he made it so the walls echoed a soft, creepily maniacal laugh. As the girl scurried back to the dormitories, Erik remembered his puerile post of resident ghost, bragging to Minette on his skills of haunting.

Why not take up the role?
After Persia, perhaps such innocent diversion would drive away the spell of uninspired tripe taking shape at his organ bench.

So began the midnight games of hide and seek with the ballet rats that were deliriously scandalized by glimpses of him. Those who saw him embellished their tales, and those who did not made up ones of their own. Soon, every mishap on set was blamed on the anger of the Opera Ghost, or, the appellation he preferred, The Phantom of the Opera. So picturesque! So dashing! And who was he to hamper their poetic license? The words of the story were the teller’s to twist and change. Truth was irrelevant.

One night, while taking tea, Minette eyed him with guarded suspicion. He arched a brow, taking another sip of truly awful tea with polite indifference. During his travels, he had found a preference for Russian tea, tangy with lemon.

“I’ve been hearing stories lately about a ghost. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Erik?” she asked, in her stern ballet mistress’s voice. Vaguely irritated by her quelling manner, Erik bristled.

“And if I did, my dear Minette?” her gimlet stare did not alter, but the slightest of smiles touched her thin lips.

“Then I would ask you to keep it at simple mischief: scares, ventriloquism. No dropping set pieces on La Carlotta if her singing displeases you!” Erik laughed, amused by the image.

“Of course, Madame. Though I might write the management. I’ve so far been an unpaid ghost. Every opera house needs a ghost, you know.”

Minette laughed delicately into her napkin, taking his words as simple jest, and they were—nothing but a simple joke to make his serious friend laugh. But as he bid her goodnight and descended the five levels to his home, the seed of idea germinated and grew.

XXX

In hindsight, it was criminally easy to take advantage of Lefavre’s naïveté. A picked lock and judicious use of his highly evolved powers of deduction revealed to Erik the manager’s astronomical gambling debts, embezzlement ploys and ailing wife. A letter painted with decidedly menacing tones of veiled threat—written in red ink and signed with a cryptic O.G.—brought the manager trotting to Box Five like La Carlotta’s pudgy spaniel. The theater was deserted, sets and rehearsals completed for this evening’s production of The Magic Flute.

In three hours more, gaudily dressed patrons would be chatting in hushed tones and Carlotta and Piangi’s hubris would be in high gear at the adulation of insipid crowds. Erik hid in a hollowed pillar, watching the stringy middle aged man mop his perspiring face with an air of barely suppressed amusement.

Lefavre’s small dark eyes found the box empty and he nervously fumbled for his pocket watch. Perhaps a meeting with a ghost at three thirty-three in the afternoon was a tad ridiculous, but it suited Erik’s current mood. He rolled his shoulders, growing very hot and uncomfortable in his current hiding place. His discomfort tempered the giddiness of the endeavor enough for him to pitch his voice in the correct tone of ghostly resonance and ire.
“I suppose I should be grateful that you are at least punctual, Monsieur Lefavre,” said the Opera Ghost. The man jumped, looking around in vain for the source of the mocking voice that seemed to echo in the empty chambers of his brain. Hat in hand, Lefavre bowed at the box’s empty chair, the perceived origin of the voice.

“Indeed, Sir. When I received your letter, I knew at once that this was a matter of delicate . . . ah, timing.” His own voice was small and timid. The poor man probably thought he was going mad.

“I suppose my threat of exposure had something to do with that conclusion,” Erik observed. Lefavre correctly interpreted the humor in his tone and smiled weakly.

“Yes. Yes it was, Sir.”

“Now, Jules if we are to enter into a business arrangement . . . Do you mind if I call you Jules?” He stuttered a negative reply.

“What may I call you, Sir?” asked Lefavre tentatively, then hurriedly adding, “If we are to do business, I would like to know your name.”

“’Opera Ghost’ will do nicely, Jules,” Erik drawled magnanimously, “Or ‘Phantom,’ whichever you prefer. Now, as to our business arrangement . . .”

It went very simply after that. When Erik withdrew his threat of exposure of Lefavre’s minor embezzlement schemes—either to the press or the emperor’s gendarmes—the man was nearly tripping over himself in gratitude. Twenty thousand francs was a ludicrous sum by any estimation, one Erik was prepared to negotiate. Half of that was more than enough for any of his future endeavors. But after a moment’s pause, Lefavre accepted without a murmur of protest. In return for the Opera Ghost’s silence, the exclusive privilege of Box Five, and the offer of increased revenue for the Opera House via influence with production, every month Lefavre would deposit twenty thousand francs in the velvet seat he now genuflected towards. Lefavre left the box with a bouncing stride, leaving Erik to puzzle over the curious consequences of extortion.

XXX

Erik wandered sleepless through the Opera House, the lower levels still bearing the dregs of the night’s revels, a couple locked in a passionate embrace, a stage shifter passed out with his empty bottle held in slack fingers, another singing tunelessly as he tottered off to his bed. Erik scorned them, turning toward home when her heartrending cry reached him. Curious, Erik crept to the chapel, squeezing into a narrow space behind the mural of an angel.

There was a crack hidden in the angel’s halo of dark hair and Erik peered through the slender aperture to find a curly-haired moppet kneeling at the brace of candles, their wavering light shining on the tracks cut by her tears. Christine Daae, Erik thought, Minette’s ward, the daughter of the Swede. Erik recognized this fact from afar. Erik, who had seen every conceivable shade of human emotion and considered himself above such simple urges, was touched deeply by this child’s bleeding grief. Her naked loneliness screamed at him, a cry in the dark.

“It’s no use, Papa,” she whispered between sobs, “there is no Angel of Music. Oh Papa, you promised! You promised he would come, that he would protect me. Why, why did you lie?”

Her broken words seared through him. Inspiration appeared, fully formed from the hopeless
quagmire of listlessness. He had been an Angel of Doom for Persia’s khanum. Why couldn’t he be the Angel of Music for Christine?

Slowly, gently, he began to sing.

The dawning joy in her eyes filled his cold heart with blessed warmth.

Of all of his titles, the last was the most precious. Christine, that sweet, shy child, had unwittingly become his muse. After singing to her that first time, the formless urge, the insatiable hunger to create was now given purpose and direction. Descending to his lair, he lost himself in music, each note utterly incandescent in its purity, its beatific innocence. Time ceased to have meaning as he lost himself in the joy of composing. When he emerged from his creative cocoon, he was exhausted, but exultant. *Don Juan Triumphant* would be unlike any opera the world had ever seen. Disgusted with his unshaven, ink-stained carcass, Erik bathed and dressed. No matter how eccentric he grew, he would not let his standards of hygiene lapse.

As he made his way toward the upper world, he wondered absently how much time had passed. Years ago, after collapsing after nearly three weeks without food, he made a point to eat at regular intervals. An otherworldly being though he claimed to be, his body was that of a man and suffered from such needs as food and drink. Now, something like hunger made itself known to him, a distant grumbling in his empty belly. He would eat. But not now. Now he had to find Christine.

He found his little muse tucked away in her narrow bed in the ballet dormitories, among a dozen more such beds, each adorned with their own sleeping cherub. Erik watched the rise and fall of Christine's small chest and was soothed by its even cadence. Moonlight bathed her in its pearly glow and as she rolled over, his keen eyes caught the silvery path of tears on her cheeks. It was a knife's blade to his heart. Pain ebbed, replaced by a fierce, unreasoning anger. Who had dared harm his precious child? He released the anger with a slow breath. The lilting melodies of *Don Juan* lingered in his inner ear.

*No thoughts within her head but thoughts of joy . . .*

"Christine . . . Christine . . ." he sang tenderly, projecting his crooning voice into her ear. She woke with an audible gasp, her eyes darting wildly to and fro.

"Angel," her childish treble hushed with reverence and tragic joy.

"Why do you weep, my dear child?" he whispered. The most extraordinary expression of reproach touched her delicate features.

"You were gone, Angel. Why did you leave? Was it something I did?" she quavered, tears gathering like liquid diamonds on her graceful lashes.

Erik was taken aback. A muse, a talisman, he had named her, a *pet*. But she was a living, breathing girl. He, above all others, should know what it meant to be treated as less than human. Never in his life had he been responsible for another's wellbeing. Never had someone relied solely on him. As
her Angel, it was his responsibility to safeguard her from the cruel world that would only crush this
delicate flower beneath its boot heel. He contemplated this new duty and found a wellspring of
protectiveness that almost frightened him in its scope and magnitude.

"Forgive me, child. I have no concept of mortal time. What was days to you was mere moments to
me. I will be more diligent in the future," he soothed. Relief spread across her face.

"Oh thank you!" her effusive gratitude made him oddly abashed. He was, after all, manipulating
this child's fantastical imaginings.

"Sleep now, Christine," he said, more sharply than he intended. Obediently, she snuggled beneath
the covers. Erik began to depart, when her soft voice called him back.

"W—will you sing to me, Angel? I do love listening to you sing. Or would you like me to sing
with you? Papa said I had a voice like an angel." Erik's heart tightened in a rush of tenderness so
profound, he nearly swept her into his arms.

"Not tonight, darling Christine. Lay your head and sleep. I will sing to you."

XXX

The next night Christine stood, endearingly tousled in her shift with her small, pale hands folded
demurely in front of her. The air of hushed significance gave Erik pause. Nebulous fear gnawed at
his innards, as if he was swaying on the edge of a great precipice.

Stay away from the edge.

"What shall I sing for you?"

Memory swamped him of a similar scene in his own childhood, a stout, aging priest who found
beauty in his voice where his mother only found misery, the promise of retribution livid in her dark
eyes. In an absurd symmetry, he heard himself say, "The Kyrie, Christine. You know the lyrics?"

"Yes, Angel," she answered, eyes sparkling with joy even as her voice quavered with nervousness.
The fear lingered, like the shadow of his Punjab lasso, the keening grate of a sharpening blade. He
couldn't summon a word of encouragement, or so much as a bar of accompanying song. Christine
began very softly, like the distant fragrance of roses borne by the wind.

"Kyrie eleison . . ."

The lasso tightened around his neck, the knife plunged into his chest. Those soft, trembling words
sank into his mind with exquisite pain, brutal elation. Opium, hashish, morphine, none had the
addictive power of Christine's angelic voice! Erik forced himself through the rude motions of
breathing, thankful the moldering stucco hid the tears in his eyes. He found his voice in the last
repetition of the chorus, and together they soared through the notes. Something burst into life even
as their song died. Something as profound as the creation of music and as old as mankind.

XXX

In teaching Christine, Erik filled a void within himself that he hadn't even recognized. Watching
her bloom with newfound confidence, to be gifted with that slow, shy smile . . . ah, it was
perfection!

Her voice! By God, what beauty lurked under her strangling timidity, like a rare flower suffocated
by choking vines. And he would be lying to himself if he didn't say that her childish worship didn't
appease his deepest inward yearning for love.

Erik led her deep into the rich landscape of music and literature, painting a rainbow of beauty and knowledge. The hours between when he would teach her stretched on and on. With her, he saw the world through new eyes; he discovered again the simple splendor of ancient fables and poetry, the soaring beauty of the world's greatest composers, the quiet poignancy of a great artist's brush. Under her Angel's guiding hand, she flew.

The only obstacle to the perfect contentment that existed between master and pupil was, ironically, Minette Giry. His deception vexed her, and Christine's deferential, nearly slavish attitude toward her 'Angel' worried her. Erik understood, in an oblique fashion, acknowledging that Minette loved Christine as a daughter.

As if Erik would ever harm her! The thought of anyone causing her the slightest displeasure angered him beyond belief.

"You must acknowledge that she has a magnificent gift, Minette," he pointed out in exasperation. The tact to accept her revolting tea was beyond him today, his grew tepid in its saucer. Minette sipped hers delicately; her hazel eyes boring into him like an auger.

"Oui. I am aware that Christine is very talented. If you think she needs training, the Conservatoire could—"

"Bah! The Conservatoire would corrupt her, stifle her genius! I'm the only one who can give her the tutelage she needs. The world will be her stage, if she wishes it," he vowed passionately. The calculating glitter in Minette's eyes softened slightly.

"You truly want the best for her," she whispered. Erik swallowed an offended rejoinder and instead said, "Yes."

"Very well. Teach her."

Erik smirked. It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he didn't need her permission, but he stopped himself. As Christine's warden, her surrogate mother, not to mention as his only friend left alive in the world, Minette deserved a say in her agenda. Minette lifted an admonishing finger.

"But there must be limits, Erik. Be reasonable. I'll not have Christine traipsing around the halls at all hours of the night in naught but her shift!"

"Of course," he replied, striving to be accommodating.

"Only an hour each night. She needs her rest," Minette ordered. Erik's eyes narrowed.

"Two."

"One and a half."

"Done."

"And no more practicing in the chapel. It's damp and cold down there, she could catch her death," Minette fussed. Erik's patience was rapidly wearing thin.

"Where then do you propose we practice, Madame?" Minette shrugged in an expressive Gallic gesture.
"The music room?" she offered.

"There are windows everywhere! We'll be seen!" Erik protested. Minette sipped her tea, a self-satisfied smile curving her bowed lips.

"You're the magician, Erik. I'm certain you can make it work."

Erik took Minette's sarcastic comment as a professional challenge. When Christine entered, now clad in a woolen nightgown and robe, he watched her wondering brown eyes wander over the empty room. Her humming awareness told him that she felt his presence. She had a knack for it, when he watched her from afar, even when tossing in her bed as she slept. More than once, he heard her murmur, 'Angel.' She could sense his presence just as he could sense hers.

Theirs was a rare bond.

"Good evening, Christine." Careful ventriloquism emanated his godlike Angel voice from the piano bench. Christine bowed her head in a solemn nod.

"Angel. I cannot stay long tonight."

"Why not?" he demanded harshly, slipping easily into the role of autocratic master. Christine shrank from the force of his anger that arched like a bolt of lightning through her and Erik regretted his mock irritation. Christine was such a delicate creature, possessing such a tender heart. In a profession notorious for its frivolity and scathing criticism, Christine was an incongruous fit.

"M—M—Madame Giry, my warden. She—she doesn't like me to sneak away. She's caught me sleeping in ballet practice. I try to stay awake, really I do. I'm so sorry, Angel . . . " The words tumbled out of her and Erik was horrified to see tears in her soulful brown eyes, threatening to fall.

"Oh, my darling child! Hush! Hush, now." His voice swooped down and grabbed her with gentle hands, softening to honey and silk.

"Forgive me, my child," he crooned, "You possess the voice of one of my brethren and I often forget that you are simply human. If you ever tire, or have need of anything, please tell me." A sigh of relief escaped her and she straightened up.

"Thank you, Angel. I will not fail you," she promised with such honest bravery that his heart melted into a puddle. Instead of replying, Erik made the keys of the piano begin a scale with a brisk flourish.

"Let us begin."

XXX

Years scrolled by in a comfortable rhythm. Under Erik's influence, the Populaire flourished. Instead of the same tired track of simpering tragedy and hackneyed comedy, Erik's selections brought depth and artistic expression. For flavor, he even sprinkled in a few of his own works, left with unnerving anonymity on Lefavre's desk. It gave him a wicked thrill to watch the manager change the locks and surreptitiously check his snuffbox where his wad of gambling francs was kept. And, true to Parisian form, nobles clamored for novelty, devouring the mystery of the enigmatic composer who signed his works Erik with greed reminiscent of a child for another sweetmeat.

In those halcyon years, Erik knew the first untroubled sleep of his life.
Christine flourished under his guidance; every note that fell from her lips was a tear from God's eye, exquisite in its beauty. When he did not teach her, he watched her, ever protecting, guided by a gentle, abiding emotion he at last realized was love. He loved Christine as his pupil, his protégé, as heir to his throne of music. In his mind's eye, he saw Christine as the prima donna of the Opera Populaire, his spirit soaring through her voice, in one combined . . .

Soon, the day would come when she would break free from the petty obscurity of the chorus line and take her rightful place in the limelight.

The only thing that tarnished his existence was Christine's soft-spoken pleas to see him. She did not ask often, but whenever she overcame her innate shyness long enough to ask him, confessing her simple longing for her beloved Angel's presence, it took every molecule of his will to refuse her. Erik would have gifted her with anything under the moon—what an infernal irony that she would ask for the one thing he could not give! When she asked for the third time, he snapped something sharp and cruel, and that had silenced any further requests. But without fail, after every lesson, Erik gifted her with a token of his praise and affection. A white rose, bound by a black ribbon; a symbol of her pure beauty.

Early in 1868, Erik paced in his hiding place behind the mirror in La Carlotta's old dressing room. The temperamental diva had complained that the room was too drafty and obscure for one of her talents, but not before painting the whole room with garish pink roses. With the spring production of *Faust* in full swing, and Christine dividing her efforts between ballet and her position in the chorus, Minette wrangled him into continuing her lessons in the afternoon. Erik agreed with an obligatory grumble, but without any heat. He and Minette were united in their desire for Christine's continued happiness and he wouldn't dare deny her rest to appease his selfish hunger for her presence.

But today, she was late.

As the minutes ticked by, his ire climbed. He heard the click of the door opening and whirled around to deliver a scathing tirade on the virtue of promptness. Upon seeing her, the words died stillborn. This time, it wasn't a noose, but a steel cord suffocating him, wrenching his neck at that impossible angle. It wasn't a knife, but a sword carving out his heart. Winded and flushed from the exertion of ballet and clothed in ridiculous scraps of cloth that passed for a costume, Erik was confronted with the knowledge that he had not purged himself of fleshly human longings as he hoped.

No, the latent hunger roared to screaming life, howling in his ears like a mad animal. Christine, his muse, his darling angel, had made that miraculous metamorphosis from a slender waif of a girl to the budding beauty of a woman. Terribly young and immature still, but her body was undoubtedly a woman's. Erik recognized the surge of primal emotion as a man's honest lust, indecent as it was.

"Forgive my tardiness, Angel, but-" she began.

On any other day, her lack of punctuality would have earned her a stern but gentle reprimand, or a bout of mild teasing. But now, filled with such utter disgust and self-loathing, Erik lashed out like the cruel, revolting animal he was.

"How dare you keep me waiting! If you have so little respect for my teachings, perhaps I should find someone else who is more worthy of them!" he snarled, thundering into the vulnerable chambers of her mind with his vicious rebuke.

The words boiled with all the seething, angry heat of a volcano, matching the throbbing agony now raging to life in him. With a soft cry of pain, Christine crumpled to her knees before the mirror,
trembling hands clutching her head, her beautiful mane of brown curls surrounding her like a living veil. Like a lanced boil, the poison vomited forth from his mouth, spewing hateful words, *"You would come before me dressed as a slattern? You defile my music! I tire of your mortal vices. Perhaps a time without my presence will teach you humility!"* 

"Master, please . . ." she sobbed.

She seemed to shrivel under the onslaught of his displeasure. His final words raced through her and she lunged for the mirror, lovely face contorted with raw pain, hands beating against the thick glass. Erik shrank back, ravaged by the sight of her so demented in grief.

He ran.

All of his grace and power deserted him—he stumbled and fell more than once, blinded by suspicious moisture. Shattered by Christine's pain that even now called out to him and sick with his disgusting cravings, Erik was soon lost, lost in the labyrinth of his own making, choked by the noose he'd made with his own hand. Had he not spent the last eight years molding her voice into one angels would envy? The Angel of Music loved her for her voice. But what of poor, unhappy Erik? His hands scrabbled against the inanimate stone, howling in frustration in the consuming darkness of the fourth level cellar.

It was only once the portcullis slammed closed that Erik was confronted with the macabre nature of his chosen existence. A lair carved out of a sewer. Was the portcullis to keep people out, or to lock him in? An unloved son, a sideshow freak, a magician, an assassin, an extortionist, a morphine addict . . . his sad, convoluted past rose up to swallow him. He yanked the sheet covering the mirror and ripped off the mask—scourging himself with his hideousness. A broken wail issued from his lips and he attacked the gruesome vision, slamming his fists into the glass, ignorant of pain, or the blood weeping from his knuckles.

*Attacking the monsters in the magic mirror . . .*

The faithful mirror reflected his twisted face into ever smaller pieces, peeking through smears of red. One tiny kernel of truth settled into the fevered tapestry of his thoughts: He was no angel, or even a man.

*Oh Christine,* he thought, *it is a monster who loves you.*

Erik turned from the shattered mirror, and yanked open the drawer containing the morphine. He hadn't touched it in weeks, preferring the high of Christine's voice. His bleeding hands shook, and he plunged the needle deep. The grunt of pain turned to a sigh of relief as a sweet, numbing euphoria enveloped him in silken arms. Here, the supple curves of Christine's nubile body could not torture him. As sanity slipped away, Erik swore a vow.

*I won't go back.*

*I will never go back.*

XXX

He was gone.

Her Angel of Music was gone, never to return.

Her copious tears, her sobbed pleas, the grief bleeding from the deepest parts of her soul were all in vain. Christine leaned her forehead against the cool surface of the mirror, exhausted. She wept
until there were no more tears, pounded against the inanimate glass until her hands were bruised in a paroxysm of desperation. Sadness wrapped around her in a familiar cloak of wet, grey despair.

Her mortal hands could not hold him; he slipped from her grasp as he had recently begun to in her turbulent dreams, a bewildering impression of primal, possessive pleasure . . .

Oh, she was awake now. Awake for perhaps the first time since her father died.

The happy confection of her existence with her beloved Papa had swiftly collapsed on itself when he breathed his last. The world wasn't just sunshine and music, but darkness and loneliness. Madame Giry and Meg, they loved her, but still Christine yearned for the angel her father promised on his deathbed.

Then, he was there. Her miracle. Her Angel of Music.

*His voice!*

Oh, the voice of smoke and honey that surrounded her in such incandescent warmth! She had longed to clothe herself in it, hide in that voice forever. The simplest phrase sounded like poetry on his lips. Perhaps it was her desire to see him that pushed him away. *Mortal vices,* he'd said. Why was it such a crime that she wanted to look upon his beautiful face? In her deepest heart of hearts, she wished he was a man she could see and touch and adore.

Or was she being punished for loving him? Surely God would not allow one of His angels to usurp His rightful place in the heart of his followers! Her Angel was her Gabriel, bringing a forlorn child without a father tidings of joy. He was her Uriel, her fiery Angel of Music who taught her passion for their art. He was her Michael, fighting away the demons of loneliness and sorrow with his mere presence.

Christine saw her face in the mirror and winced. Eyes swollen and bloodshot from weeping and startlingly pale, it was no wonder someone like her Angel would shrink from her human excesses. The wild mane of curls that earned her such scorn fell around her face, defying the mess of pins that Madame Giry used to tame it.

He had said she was beautiful once . . .

"*Angel of Music, you have shunned me . . ."* she sang softly, the last notes that would ever pass her lips.

Without him, none of it mattered.

"*Angel of Music . . ."*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I always thought that Erik would have a 'Holy crap!' moment when he realized that his feelings for Christine were more than platonic.
Until We're Dead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Until We're Dead

"A very small degree of hope is sufficient to cause the birth of love."

-Henri B. Stendhal

A woman's voice permeated the morphine-induced fog clouding his brain, shrill and decidedly incensed. Minette, curse her, rattling at the portcullis, barking in her stern ballet mistress' tone.

As if that could intimidate him!

Erik burrowed deeper into the plush comfort of his bed, lying inert as he had for the past three days—or was it four? He couldn't remember. Time slipped through his fingers like the fine clear sand used to make mortar that would last a thousand years. Phantasms spiraled in his inner eye, images of the past blurring in a grotesque carousel.

A broken mirror, a crumbling rail, a pair of manacles thrown to the ground . . .

"Christine," he rasped, using his angel's face as a talisman to ward off the painful memories of his mother, Luciana, and the Daroga.

No! He wouldn't think of her! He refused to dwell on this perversion of the sweet, tender love he felt for her. Christine was all that was good and pure in this wretched world!

The racket at his door had mercifully ended. Minette had given up.

"Erik."

With an explosion of bedclothes, Erik was on his feet, a naked knife glinting in his grasp. Minette stared at him, clutching the crucifix he'd given her, hazel eyes round.

"How did you get in here?" he rasped, swaying slightly. The morphine slowed his reflexes, dulled his senses, twisted and warped the world so that the ground undulated under his feet; the wavering golden light of the candle Minette held made the walls shiver. Had he still been in the habit of it, he would have made a very easy mark for an assassin.

"Y—you gave me a key, remember?" Minette whispered.

It was true; he had given her the key to the Rue Scribe entrance, damn it, wishing to be alerted if Christine needed him. What an infernal mistake that had been—Minette had taken the key as permission to invade his home whenever the fancy struck her, urging him to eat or tidying his lair with longsuffering silence. Erik tolerated her fussing, but resented it fiercely at the moment.

A cool kiss of air on the right side of his face told him he was without his mask. Erik mastered the
impulse to hide, or even to cover it with his hand. Minette had seen him far worse. To her credit, she held his gaze without flinching, but her nostrils were pinched, her complexion ashen. She dropped his gaze. Not out of horror for his ugliness, he knew, having become a keen enough judge, but something else. The knife, he thought, sheathing it with such fluid ease and familiarity that Minette began to tremble. Why did she fear him now? She had watched him kill a man before her very eyes, and still she saved him. Didn't she know that he would forever be at war with the world because of his face? A string of corpses ten miles long stretched behind him, branded him as murderer, shackled him as a freak of nature.

"So I did. To what do I owe the honor?" he drawled sarcastically, leaning against the down-swept wing of his swan bed frame. Not a gesture of deliberate casualness; Erik took pride in his gentleman's manners. The truth of the matter was he did not want to disgrace himself by collapsing. Days with only morphine and misery as sustenance had worn away his strength.

Minette gasped, staring aghast at his arm. She reached out to touch him and he shrank back, tugging down his sleeve to hide the scabbed puncture marks and collapsed veins of an addict.

"Are . . . are you ill, Erik?" Minette said softly. The sound of his laugh was bleak and empty of an iota of true mirth.

"You could say that. It is a sickness, in a way."

Yes, lusting after an adolescent girl qualified as a gross morbidity of the mind.

"Should I call for a physician?" Erik waved off her concern, noting her avid glance on his scabbed knuckles.

"No, I'll attend to it myself, thank you. Now why have you come?"

"Christine," Minette said.

Her name penetrated the stone wall of cold civility he'd begun to build around his heart, and he flinched as if receiving a blow. He turned his back to Minette, hiding his ravaged expression. Appalling bad manners . . . he really was a boorish monster . . .

"She's been nearly out of her mind with misery. I haven't seen her like this since her father died. What did you say to her? She says she offended you."

"Is it not possible that she did?" he offered coolly, equally miserable at the picture she painted. The poor child! Demented with grief over her *Angel*. God, it was his greatest sin to pervert her innocence!

"Erik, for the past eight years, you've led me to believe that Christine is the center of your universe. Now, all of a sudden, she isn't worthy of your attention? What happened?"

*She became a woman,* he thought, *and my wretched flesh yearns for her.* His hand fist and he struck the pockmarked wall impotently.

"I can no longer be her tutor." Erik spoke the words with deliberate care.

"What are you saying? I thought you wanted her to take the stage. Are you just going to aband-"

"Silence, Madame!" he shouted, rounding on her, watching her shrink against the wall under the distilled anguish in his voice. He could not tolerate the word 'abandon.'
He was doing this for her own good!

The only truly selfless act of his life!

"She will still take the stage. I will give her the heart of the world, if it is what she desires. But I can no longer be her tutor. I will remain so only long enough to find a replacement," he repeated, bleating the words over and over to make them true in his own fickle heart.

The thought of anyone else attempting to mold Christine's voice—his most prized possession—made his stomach turn, but it was necessary. If he even looked upon her again, he would not stop until she belonged to him—in soul . . . and in body. The impression of hurtling inertia loomed ominously over him, like an impending avalanche.

"I don't understand your motives, Erik. But you do realize that Christine loves you. You know how sensitive she is. If you leave her now, she will think it's her fault." The threat of Christine's anguish was nearly enough to make him capitulate.

"So be it," he snapped viciously, "Leave me, Minette. I fear I'm not in a proper mood for company."

*It's for her own good*, he told himself.

This time, Minette was wise enough to hear the note of wavering control in his voice and absconded. Erik was left in the darkness, alone.

Always alone.

***

Erik wandered across a strange landscape of barren loneliness, chained by the pathetic remnants of morality and scourged mercilessly by his baser longings. In his bitter arrogance, he considered himself an expert in the cruelties of love. But what did he truly know of it? He couldn't compare what he now felt for Christine to anything else in his life. Not the convoluted knot of love, fear and loathing he felt for his mother, nor his infatuation with Luciana, his boyish worship of Giovanni, nor the friendship he bore for Minette and the Daroga.

Erik blinked back from his listless contemplation of the wall and laughed bitterly to himself.

"How did it escape me? How could I not realize I was falling in love with her?" he whispered.

Ah, what a cosmic irony it was!

When he at last succumbed to the sting of love's dart, it was a tragic, impossible love—blighted from its conception. Had all things been simple and fair, more than twenty years separated them. It was obscene, revolting, this shameful yearning. Beyond the fact of age, there was the hideous truth of his face and such sundry flaws as his morphine addiction, his checkered past and murderous temper.

Erik raked a hand through his hair. Through the mire of misery that enveloped him, a faint prick of clarity reached for him, like the plunge of a syringe's needle. The walls of his lair were no longer a cold, comfortable barrier between him and the world that didn't want him. Now, they seemed to smother him, the crushing weight of the Populaire pressing on his naked limbs, the deformed Atlas.

Imprisoned, *caged* . . .
Erik relinquished his hold on sanity, however tenuous it had been.

His feet led him to César's stall; his hands saddled him with atypical brusqueness. The revolving wall offered him a portal of freedom, the glimmer of a world beyond the Underworld, the dark kingdom where he reigned, where Persephone tempted him with her siren's voice and her maidenly innocence . . .

César sensed his fractious mood and flew beneath the slight touch of heel, flew like bat from Hell into the velvet embrace of the night.

In the weeks that followed, Erik threw himself headlong into his opera. The organ groaned under his merciless playing, birthing strange and beautiful music, unheard of on a corporeal plane. But it was not the purity of heaven that flowed forth, but the unspeakable desires of hell. Within the staves of that manuscript, written in ink as red as blood, were all the most violent and tortured of emotions made audible, an assault of body and soul.

And when he stood swaying with exhaustion, he cried out in exquisite agony upon the realization that his pitiful longing was still there.

He could not escape it, not in morphine, not in madness, not even in music.

Especially not here, in this prison of his own making.

No, he must go up!

Perhaps, if he flung himself from Apollo's lyre, then his pain would die with him!

Bathing and dressing was a solemn ceremony, garbing himself in his own funeral clothes. His white half mask fit to the contours of his ravaged cheek, its expression stern and cold. He tucked a red rose into his breast pocket. The symbolism pleased him. The only red rose this nightingale would ever sire! He would carry this symbol of his passionate, undying love for her to his grave—such shameful, terrible love!

With the wild desperation of a frightened animal, Erik climbed. Some vague instinct urged him to evade detection—ridiculous when he would be dead within an hour! He would be Phantom and Ghost in fact very soon! But he heeded it after a lifetime of living on the fringes of humanity, never daring to show his face lest he be screamed at, hunted down, locked away.

Upon reaching the roof, he registered a slender figure standing near the edge of the roof. He cursed to himself, melting against a statue of Pegasus. Why would God dare impede his mad dash toward Death's embrace? Is that not what He had been goading him towards since the day he was born? Erik glared at the interloper, hating them impotently.

Then, his eyes adjusted to the clear, cool dimness of the night. His heart tore free from his chest in its haste to return to its young mistress. Paradoxically, she was both the source of his madness, and its cure. The balm of her presence calmed the fevered tempo of his thoughts and revealed his suicidal impulse as foolish.

He devoured her appearance hungrily, like a starving wolf. Ah, how had he forgotten that freckle on her jaw, the endearing point to her chin? His memories and feverish dreams did not do his angel justice! Christine stood as the wind caressed her as Erik would never dare—pressing her dress taut to the nubile curves of her body, brushing aside the crimson cape, running its fingers through her mane of hair. The delicate line of her shoulders shuddered and Erik though for a moment she was shivering under the wind's cold ministrations. It was only when that same taunting wind brought
him her thin cry that he realized she was sobbing. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, a throbbing regret burning in his chest.

*Oh my love, if only I had never sang to you. Better for you to believe that there are no angels than for your Angel to betray your sacred trust . . . he thought.*

Christine began to speak softly in a different language and Erik mentally made the switch to Swedish. After singing to her that fateful first time, he had devoted himself to tackling the nuances of Christine's mother tongue. With his skill with languages, it took little effort and seemed to comfort her. A fleeting flower of amusement bloomed. How charming! She spoke Swedish with a French accent!

"I thought I would hear you here, if you chose to speak."

Her head tilted back, looking up at the glittering constellations of stars. The waterfall of her brown curls cascaded down her back, nearly to her waist, and Erik was seized by a potent desire to bury his fingers in the rich, silky bounty, to feel the warm weight of her skull cradled in his hands. . .

"So close to Heaven . . ." her broken voice murmured. Christine's slender shoulders hunched, like a wilting flower.

"It's no use, though. You are gone." Erik winced the stark loneliness in her words, a mirror image of his own despair.

_Sing to her, you fool, whispered an insidious voice in his head, you want to. She wants you to. You want to make her happy, don't you?_

Christine gave a bleak little laugh, colored with tones of cynicism he thought beyond her.

"I must be going mad," her small, pale hand floated up, resting over her heart like an alighting dove.

"I can feel you close. It must be wishful thinking."

Erik pressed his forehead against the stone of Pegasus' flank, worn featureless by the elements and cool in the small hours of the night.

*Oh Christine . . .*

Her soft gasp caught his attention. Her brown eyes, reddened and tearstained, vainly searched the darkness, her lips quivering.

"Angel?" she breathed, "Angel, are you here?"

Had he said it aloud? Or was she privy to the whispers within his mind?

He had to leave. But Erik couldn't bear to leave her waiting and wondering. He drew the rose from his pocket and laid it at the base of Apollo's lyre.

XXX

Christine fancied that she knew what it was for a criminal to receive pardon, how it was to have blind eyes opened to the beautiful light of day. All for the fragile token cradled in her hand. A red rose, bound by a black silk ribbon.
Even if she never heard his voice again, she knew he was with her.

*He'll always be there, singing songs in my head.*

She could think of no happier fate.

"Christine!" Meg called in a hoarse whisper.

Christine bit back a howl of frustration and paused at the door of the dormitories. Every night she stood vigil on the roof, clutching the rose to her chest like a talisman. If she proved herself faithful, her Angel would deem her worthy of his instruction—she knew it! Any rule he demanded, she would obey, if only he would lift this cruel ban. His voice had become a drug to her, vital to her existence.

She *needed* it.

"What is it, Meg?" she hissed as her lithe young friend crept past the sleeping forms of their fellow ballet rats to where she crouched by the door. A sliver of moonlight pierced the window and shone on Meg’s round face, creased in concern. Christine's irritation faded. Meg had been nothing but the most steadfast of friends ever since Christine was brought here when she was seven.

"Where are you going at this time of night?"

"The roof. The Angel of Music is waiting for me," she blurted. Meg's hazel eyes flickered, fear was evident there, as well as . . . something else. Concern for her sanity? Was she going mad?

"Christine . . . come back to your bed. You were dreaming," Meg insisted, tugging at her captive hand.

She *was* very tired . . . had she dreamed of his voice on the roof, crooning her name with such reverent tenderness? She must have. Now she would forever be chasing phantoms in the mist, running after at voice in the wind . . .

Her limbs felt leaden, chills wracked her slender shoulders. Very gently, as if she would break, Meg coaxed her back to her narrow cot, and Christine obediently curled under the covers. The world was spinning around her, her breath felt tight in her chest. Darkness rose up and swallowed her, the tapestry of her dreams dark and turbulent without her Angel's calming presence.

***

"Erik!" Minette's voice shattered the fragile shell of music he had begun to construct, and Erik lowered the bow of his violin. By God, he would wring her slender neck for abusing the use of that damned key!

"I do not take kindly to interruptions, Madame. State your business and *leave,*" he snapped, each syllable enunciated with scathing clarity.

Minette was unmoved, as stubborn as ever. In fact, her reserved mien was now edged with what Erik identified as sorrow mingled with anger.

"Forgive the intrusion, *Maestro,* but I thought you would like to know how your pupil fares." Erik laid his violin in its battered case with tender care. He snapped it shut and the small sound ricocheted off his lair's walls.

"I have no pupil, Madame. I told you that," he choked. Minette's growl of irritation sounded like an
"Fine," she spat through clenched teeth, "but pupil or not, I thought you would like to know that Christine is ill."

Every muscle and sinew in his body wrenched taut like piano wire—threatening to snap. Erik found himself at the door by the portcullis, shaking Minette by her shoulders.

"What? What has happened to her? Have called a physician? How serious is it? Answer me!" he howled, shaking her emphatically. Minette's smiled mirthlessly.

"I thought you didn't care what happened to her," she sneered.

"Don't be glib with me, you wretched woman! Just tell me what happened to Christine!" he roared. The power of his voice rang through her and she flinched.

"Erik, calm down. You're hurting me," she said softly. Erik loosened his grasp, but did not release her, with his hands or the potent scrutiny of his gaze.

"You've succeeded in goading me, Madame. Tell me."

Minette glared at him, unimpressed by the battering force of his anger. She had endured far worse in the long years of their acquaintance. Her thick skin made her invaluable as a companion, he thought privately. She and the Daroga would have gotten on famously.

"Apparently, Christine has been going up to the roof in the wee hours of the morning for the past week. Even in the pouring rain."

Guilt flooded Erik, deep and hot. The demon inside him had tormented him with his longing, whispering that Christine missed him, that she wanted him. Erik fought tooth and nail against his seductive persuasion.

"It's just a simple cold. The physician said that with a few days' rest, she should be fine." Erik swept past Minette.

"Erik, where are you going?" she called, jogging to keep up.

"I want to see her myself," he answered tersely.

Erik steeled himself against the surge of lust he knew would churn through his blood upon seeing his innocent love. Instead, his heart tightened in a painful rush of tenderness. Lying there in Madame Giry's private chamber, her head elevated by pillows to ease her breathing, she look so pale and delicate—his white rose. His gloved hand hovered over the curve of her cheek, brushing away a damp tendril of hair. She didn't even stir. The old doctor had given her enough laudanum to sleep the clock round.

A gasp slipped past his lips at the sight of his rose in Christine's tender grip, tucked under her chin. The pale oval of her face, illuminated by the wavering light of a taper, blurred and Erik realized with horror that there were tears in his eyes. Struck by her beauty or abject at the thought the hopelessness of his love, it didn't matter. He was completely and irrevocably tied to her.

"I will prepare a decoction for her. Better than any the good doctor can prescribe," he whispered to Minette. She had the audacity to smile smugly at him.

"I have no doubt of it," she fist her hands on her hips, "remind me again why you refuse to see
her? What offense has that dear child said against you? She wouldn't harm a fly."

Words of confession trembled on his lips, but Erik clenched his jaw around them.

*Don't be a coward!* chided the remaining shreds of his honor. Erik memorized the sweep of her eyelashes, capturing every minute detail with an artist's keen eye.

"I love her," Erik whispered. Minette's reply was quick and light.

"Yes. You've loved her for some years now."

"No, Minette," he said, straightening to his full height, nearly knocking his head on the Japanese paper lantern he'd given her and looking her in the eye unflinchingly.

"I love her," he said again. He watched comprehension dawn on her face, a startled horror.

"Erik . . ." she said slowly, as if explaining something elementary, "She's only fifteen."

"*Don't you think I know that?*" he hissed in a fierce undertone. He glanced at Christine's sleeping form with naked yearning.

"This . . . *affliction* is a betrayal of her trust in me. But it remains true. We cannot chose where we love. You see now, Minette, why I cannot be her tutor, or even be near her? I cannot scourge this wretched longing from my flesh."

Minette made a terse motion toward her office and Erik left Christine reluctantly, pathetically basking in her closeness. The door closed and Minette ushered him into a chair, plying him with her tea. He threw back the tepid cup like whiskey.

"So that's why you broke with her. You realized you had . . . feelings for her," she said delicately.

"*Lustful* feelings. A deep, hungry passion to possess every bit of her: her heart, her soul, her body . . ." Erik corrected.

"I understand," Minette interjected sharply.

Erik eyed her, stiff and wary, ready for her to curse his very existence and order him to stay far away from her foster daughter. Silence reigned for innumerable minutes as Erik waited for his sentence. There was a morbid sort of relief in it, he supposed. Maybe if Minette took the decision from his hands, he could find the will to leave her.

"There is only one thing you can do."

He laughed bitterly to himself and spread his hands.

"I am open to suggestion, Madame! Please, by all means, share your miraculous solution!" Minette smiled, a token curving of lips, her eyes solemn and oddly sympathetic.

"You must reveal yourself to her, Erik." The words had the same effect as a douse of cold water, an electric shock. He had expected her to condemn him, revile him. Leaping to his feet, he paced the small room in restless turns.

"Are you mad?" he demanded. He raked a nervous hand through his hair, wayward ends defying his careful grooming and sticking at wild angles.

"She would despise me for deceiving her."
"Then that would be her choice. It would be criminal for you to use your influence on her to twist her affections. Perhaps this 'Angel of Music' illusion was necessary years ago, when she was a child coping with the loss of her father, but not now. Christine is a woman in the most basic of senses. But at the same time, she is still very, very innocent. Thanks, in large part, to you." Erik's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"What I did, I did to protect her." he snapped. Minette spread her hands in a placating gesture.

"I know. You had her best interests at heart. And only because your motives were pure did I allow the farce to continue. But no more, Erik."

A smart retort hovered on his tongue, but he bit it back. He stilled, expelling a massive sigh. Her logic was elegant and impregnable. Truth dashed him in the face. He was afraid. Deathly afraid of her choice. He could easily have remained in the role of her guardian and angel, forcing her to forswear anything that displeased him—parties, drinking, the attentions of admirers—and, in her childish devotion, she would have obeyed.

Erik whispered: "I know you are right, but . . . I'm afraid."

Minette's eyes softened and a moment of tender intimacy warmed the air between them.

"Don't be. Christine is stronger than you give her credit for. I will tell her that you wish to see her as soon as she is recovered."

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I for one think that Erik wouldn't, couldn't, stay away from Christine for very long. She's all twisted up in his heart and soul. And now that our wise Madame Giry has given him permission, whatever will he do?
Christine watched the red paper lantern hanging from Madame's rafter swing idly on a wayward whisper of air, casting weird, undulating shadows on the walls. Her days of bedrest had stretched on unendingly—especially with Madame Giry's promise hanging over her head.

He wanted to see her! Face to face, at last!

The door creaked open. Christine closed her eyes, feigning sleep. She was tired of being fussed over. The light, dancing patter of slippers could only be Meg. Christine cracked open a discreet eyelid and saw her friend bearing a tray with a steaming tureen of soup and a vial of medicine with soft-footed care. Christine made a show of yawning and blinking sleepily up at Meg.

"And how ees zhe patient thees evening?" Meg drawled, imitating the old doctor's heavy accent. Christine smothered a giggle in her hand, then mustered an appropriately sober expression. Meg set down the tray on a nearby table and fistd her hands on her hips, eyebrow arched in teasing invitation.

"I am well, Monsieur, I mean Herr Hauptmann." Christine said solemnly. A smile threatened to break Meg's tenuous hold on her character, but she was the best ballerina in their corps even at the tender age of fifteen, and a professional.

"Vell, en zat case, I sink you can continue your normal achtivities in zhe morning," 'Doctor Hauptmann' bade. Eyes sparkling with humor, Christine nodded, not trusting her voice.

"But first," 'Doctor Hauptmann' went on, the accent faltering, "You must take your medicine."

Christine wrinkled her nose, remembering the viscous, bitter liquid the doctor made her imbibe every time she had the slightest hint of a cold. This vial was different, a small cylinder of clear glass instead of a dubious brown liquid made even more suspicious housed in an opaque green goblet.

Meg pulled the stopper and handed it to Christine, warm with sympathy. Madame Giry was most zealous in matters of their health, and every ballet rat adhered to her strict regimen of tonics and cures. Christine threw back the medicine, bracing herself for a horrid taste. It wasn't Doctor Hauptmann's brew, but something densely herbal with the faint sweet tang of honey. Not bad, considering.

Meg nestled beside Christine on her narrow cot, their role-playing game forgotten. Meg picked up Christine's hand with familiar ease and Christine nearly breathed a sigh of relief. In the throes of her fever, Madame and Meg's touch was as cold as ice. Now, gentle warmth emanated from her casual clasp.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better, Christine. You had me worried, rambling about angels on the roof. You must have been delirious."
Christine bit her lip, feeling a faint sting of regret. How many nights had she and Meg stayed up late whispering their darkest secrets? What sort of friend was she, withholding the most wonderful truths from her best friend? Meg was morbidly fascinated with the Phantom of the Opera, claiming that her mother spoke to him often and collected a portion of his salary from Box Five. Christine had asked her Angel about it, and he had ignored the question and instead directed the conversation quickly back to her lesson.

"I must have," Christine mumbled.

The uncomfortable moment passed and Meg chatted about the inconsequential happenings in her convalescence as Christine ate her soup. She was passionately grateful for Meg's happy gossip, comfort and entertainment after long, lonely days of resting. Presently, Madame entered and brushed her dry hand across Christine's forehead. A darting glance confirmed that her medicine vial was empty and the stern ballet mistress smiled.

"Your fever has broken. Good." She rounded on her giggling offspring, pinning her in place with a gimlet glare devoid of any real irritation. The amused sparkle of hazel eyes matched between mother and daughter.

"And you, young lady? Go wash for supper! Go on, shoo!" Meg grinned impishly.

"Oui, Maman. See you later, Christine!" as Meg danced away, Christine felt the cool, concerned weight of Madame's gaze.

"I feel fine, Madame. I promise," Christine said earnestly, standing up to prove it. The world tilted and she stumbled.

"Mon Dieu," Madame muttered, touching her crucifix surreptitiously as Christine sat on the edge of the bed, giggling ruefully to herself.

"Perhaps we should put this off another night. You're still weak . . ." Madame said softly.

"No!" Christine protested, "No, Madame, please! You promised! I feel fine!"

Madame cupped Christine's cheek, her eyes searching Christine's face. The familiar, comforting fingers placated her with a soft pat.

"Very well, my dear. It will be better to get this over with."

_get it over with? What does that mean?

Christine mulled over Madame's cryptic words as her adopted mother helped her bathe, combing the snarls from her impossible mane of hair and attempting to tame it with pins, to no avail. Finding a suitable dress was quite a task. Christine remembered all too clearly the potent heat of Angel's anger. She had disrespected him by—how had he put it?—ah, yes, 'dressing like a slattern.' True, some of the costumes were revealing, but he hadn't protested before, and she hadn't had the time to change . . .

Madame made no comment when Christine chose a dress of dove gray with a collar up to her chin and sleeves down to her wrists.

Her hands quivered in excitement as Madame led her down the corridor, but instead of scaling the stairs to the music room, or descending to the chapel, Madame wove through the labyrinth of corridors to La Carlotta's cramped old dressing room. Dread weighted her steps. Not here! Not where he had rejected her! Was her Angel still angry with her? Christine would have touched the
petals of the rose he'd given her to reassure herself, but in her haste, she'd left the battered, wilted bloom drooping in its glass in Madame's chamber. Outside the door, Madame grasped Christine's hands in a firm grim, eyes wide and almost pleading.

"Christine, I will be waiting outside. Rap twice on the door if you need me, or if you feel frightened."

The dread broadened and swelled. Did Madame know something she didn't? Why on earth would she be afraid of her Angel? True, he had a frightful temper, but he would never hurt her! Christine nodded bravely, struck mute by apprehension.

Madame unlocked the door. Christine tripped a little on the rug crossing the threshold, pitching forward. She steadied herself on the vanity and smiled for Madame. A token grin was all that greeted her before she closed the door between them. A quick glance around the room found it empty save for the vanity, dressing screen and huge, ornate mirror. Christine bit back her disappointment. Maybe he chose not to reveal himself to her. Why would he, after she had angered him so?

The air pulsed with a primal heartbeat, the notes of some hypnotic melody fading to silence in her inner ear. No matter. He was here.

Her apprehension faded into nothingness. The only emotion she could muster was a wild, singing joy.

_He was here!_

"A—Angel?" she quavered, her voice trembled at its master's nearness. She gasped as the sumptuous timbre of his voice wrapped around her like the finest velvet cloak. How was it that such beauty could exist on earth?

"Good evening, Christine." Of all things, tears flooded her eyes at those simple words. Such sweet relief after all these long weeks denied the utter pleasure of his voice!

"Master," she whispered reverently, sinking into a deep curtsey.

"I must apologize for my behavior of late, my dear child. I am horribly impatient at times and you caught me after a very long and trying day."

Christine frowned. How could an angel possess such vices as impatience, or suffer something as banal as exhaustion?

"No forgiveness is necessary, Angel," Christine said quickly, eager to put that awful day behind her.

"Nevertheless, I would like to have it," he replied and Christine let her eyes slip closed briefly under the honeyed crooning.

"Y—you . . . you are forgiven," Christine stuttered, wondering at his odd mood.

"Thank you, Christine," he said softly. Silence stretched between them, and Christine wound a lock of her hair around her finger, unsure of how to continue. What could she say?

"Angel? Could I ask you something?" she wondered, her fragile courage threatening to give way.

"Of course, my dear. Ask anything."
"Madame Giry—my warden and foster mother—she . . . she said that you wanted to . . . see me. I thought that meant . . . face to face. I would love to see you, Angel."

Christine steeled herself against the awesome lash of his anger, the thunderous power of his voice bringing her to her knees. Instead, the seductive crooning of his voice melted seamlessly into a soft song.

*Flattering child, you shall know me*

*See why in shadow I hide*

*Look at your face in the mirror,*

*I am there inside!*

A veil of mist flooded the room and with the curious deliberation of a sleepwalker, Christine lifted her gaze to look at her reflection. Something shifted—the world perhaps, the curtain dividing the corporeal and spiritual. For she saw the figure of a *man* in the mirror. A negligent wave of his hand and the mirror moved aside. Then her angel stood in a shabby pink dressing room with her. Had she breath, Christine would have laughed at the incongruity of it. Had she a voice, she would have sang in exultant joy.

Instead, she stared.

He was such an imposing figure, her Angel. A dark angel, she realized. No denizen of Heaven could dress in such a flowing black cape that ebbed and rippled like wings. No servant of God could wear such mysterious eyes, such a full mouth. Her Angel was no more. A man stood in his place.

Her only thought was: *Of course. Of course it was him!*

When this realization dawned on her, she studied him with greater care. A white mask covered the right half of his face. She noticed it, dimly recognizing the oddity, and dismissed it as inconsequential. The left side was a careful sculpture of masculine beauty, with black hair combed severely back, a strong jaw, full lips, and his eyes!

She could puzzle over their color, some intermediate between blue and grey, for hours. But, like a sculpture, his expression was unreadable, blank and remote. The rest of his form was garbed in black evening dress, tailored to perfection. He graciously allowed her time to adjust to his presence, his solid reality.

The pulsing of the air thickened, gathered around him like his cloak. Christine felt young and foolish and drab next to his dark splendor.

Christine at last found control of her tongue.

"Hello." As soon as the word left her lips, she hated herself for its air-headed idiocy. The tension ringing in the air lessened and there was the barest hint of curl at the corner of his mouth.

"Hello," he replied. The beauty of her Angel's voice remained, if lacking its echoing resonance within her head. An absurd surge of relief rushed through her.

"I am obviously not an angel," he observed carefully, as if explaining a simple concept to a dull child. She felt dull and stupid, but responded sharply.
"I can see that." His lips thinned, turning down in a faint frown.

"Would you care to hear my explanation?"

"Please," she replied politely, as if he had asked if she wanted two lumps of sugar in her tea.

He gestured toward the vanity bench for her to sit. Christine felt hypnotized by the gesture, a slow unfurling of wrist and fingers, imbued with remiss elegance. She sank gracelessly onto the bench. To her surprise, he plucked the candelabra from the vanity. As he leaned close, his scent wafted over her, a mix of spicy soap, leather and ink, as heady as incense. Angel turned toward the mirror and Christine took in a breath to ask him what on earth he was doing.

"Look here, Christine," he murmured, the words ringing faintly of command. As she had for the past eight years, Christine obeyed the voice without question and looked. He held the candelabra to the mirror; the glass shone faintly gold with the wavering reflection of his startlingly white mask above it.

"See? The mirror is on runners. A mechanism here opens it," he explained, pointing with one black leather clad finger.

"I see," Christine replied dutifully, though she did not.

"W—why did you show me that?" she asked as he closed the mirror and replaced the candelabra.

"So you harbor no illusions about my divinity. I am a very talented magician and illusionist, but I am no angel."

"Then why did you say you were?" Christine asked innocently.

"Allow me to explain," he asked, with the faintest edge to his voice. Not anger, but something she couldn't identify. As he spoke, her eyes drifted to his mask and a dreadful curiosity livened in her belly.

What was he hiding?

XXX

Erik tried very hard to keep the desperation from his voice, and contain the blatant rationalization of his actions. God in Heaven, what he wouldn't give to know what she was thinking! Christine normally had a face as transparent as glass. It was his blighted luck that she would learn the trick of inscrutability now!

To be in the same room, breathing the same air, looking into the eyes of his beloved was heady stuff; he felt drunk on her easy acceptance, clumsy at her calm attention. No tears or hysterics—a very rare occurrence for him.

He finished speaking and waited tense and desperate for one word of pardon, one gesture of approval. He grasped for his equanimity. In his current state, he would fall to his knees and kiss her feet if she said one kind utterance.

Pathetic, observed a sneering voice in his head, the same that tormented him with the ridiculousness of his love.

"I see," she said, dropping her gaze to her folded hands.
Those two syllables, stated in the soft, calm tone, as if remarking on the weather, nearly drove him raving mad. He wanted to shake her shoulders, kiss her hem, beg and grovel like a dog. Instead, he waited. A man of thirty-five years could learn some bloody patience!

"Thank you," she quavered and Erik was horrified to find tears in her eyes. He had made her cry!

"Christine," he whispered, pleading.

She looked up at him and his chest squeezed at the sight of her pale, luminous face with tears like pearls on her cheeks.

"Thank you for caring enough to sing to a lonely child."

His jaw worked as he groped for a reply. This slip of a girl seemed determined to defy his expectations and set him off balance. He was wheeling wildly between passionate gratitude and stinging guilt.

"It . . . it was my pleasure," he stuttered.

Holy God, he was stuttering!

The tips of his ears burned. He almost laughed. How long had it been since he'd felt embarrassed?

A nauseating emotion—with all its sweaty-palms and tingling skin.

"Why do you wear a mask?" she asked, brown eyes wide and trusting like a wobble-legged fawn. It served as a quick cure for his embarrassment—now something like grief howled in his chest. Erik's fingers strayed to the mask, as if to ensure it was still in place.

"I . . . I am . . . disfigured."

The words emerged from deep in his chest, a sorrow that haunted his every moment. He watched the pain ripple across her face, watched that shift in her eye from innocent question to accursed pity.

He hated pity!

"I'm sor-" He held up a hand, cutting off those paltry words.

They were profanity on her lips.

Erik turned his back to Christine, staring at his reflection in the mirror. A man of lofty height, the considerable power of his intellect, and his peerless voice, all this was nothing compared to the flaw to his face! Now Christine would only see the mask, the monster, never the man, like everyone else.

"Angel?" Christine said, anxiety evident in her voice.

"Don't call me that," he snapped, refusing to look at her pale, frightened face, "I am neither angel nor phantom nor ghost."

I am a deformed wretch of a man who will spend the rest of my miserable existence worshipping the ground you walk on, he thought.

"Then what shall I call you?" A tentative question, tiptoeing around the pitfalls of his perilous temper. She was afraid of him. His misery deepened.
He thought a moment.

"Call me Maestro. Call me Teacher," he said, hoping against hope that she would at least allow him to tutor her. Her voice was the only drug on earth that could save him from the white hell of morphine.

"Could you tell me your name?"

Erik smiled thinly at her, momentarily struck by her delicate beauty. A wayward curl had sprung free from its prison of pins and swung gaily at her right temple. He longed to touch her hair, bury his face in its warm softness.

"I have given you much to think over this evening. Perhaps another time."

Erik turned toward the mirror, toward blessed escape from that quavering voice, those needling questions. He was a raw nerve, every jab and prick of word or glance caused a stab of pain. Would it be better—safer—to worship her from afar? She could destroy him with a word; tear his hard-won peace to shreds with one slender hand.

"Ang—I mean, Maestro?" she called after him. He stopped, like a dog at the jerk of a leash.

"Yes?" he replied, not looking at her.

The soft fall of her footsteps forced him to turn and look at her. His breath caught and he memorized the way the candlelight backlit her fuzzy halo of hair, catching reddish highlights in its golden warmth. She stood so close . . . he could smell her—the heady aroma of violets and clean linen. The humble fragrance was more precious to him than all the perfumes in Persia.

"When . . . when will I see you again?" Hope surged through him, bright and terrible. Did she want to be near him, even after his betrayal of her trust? Comprehension dawned and Erik's jaw clenched around a cry of pain.

"Ah, your lesson," he said wearily, "I must consult Madame Giry, but would tomorrow afternoon be amenable?"

"You know Madame Giry?" Christine asked eagerly, interest burning like a candle in her face. He would rather her come at him with a knife than that innocent, eager look.

"Yes. She has been my friend for many years."

Christine began to ask another question, but Erik stemmed the flow with a raised hand.

"Later, child. I will see you tomorrow, yes?" She nodded enthusiastically. Erik bowed with a flourish of cape.

"Then I bid you adieu."

A quick sleight of hand produced his customary rose bound in a black ribbon out of thin air—this one as red as blood. She accepted the rose with trembling hands, as if it were some holy reliquary. The ember of hope flared again, kindling to an infant flame in his chest.

"Goodnight, Christine."

"Goodnight, Maestro."
Were it not for the rose, Christine would have assumed that she would never see him again. Holy Virgin, the look on his face when she asked what the mask hid! *Curse* her careless tongue, her accursed curiosity! Even as he admitted his scar, she longed to snatch the words back and restore the tenuous camaraderie between them.

Angel, *Maestro* . . . he was just so *big*, literally and figuratively.

He towered over her, possessing a lissome grace to match his lofty, dignified carriage. But more than his physical height, the pulsing power of his presence filled the room, pressing her back against the walls, suffocating her. She would orient herself under his whim, the ocean under the moon's pull, a tiny spec of flotsam in a typhoon's surging current.

Christine followed the Madame into her chambers, bursting with questions. Madame set the ring of keys on their hook and turned to face her. Concerned speculation gleamed on those gimlet hazel orbs, and Christine reassured her with a beaming smile. The night was not a complete disaster, after all. He had promised to meet her tomorrow! Even the name he'd given her was a promise: *Maestro*. Surely he wouldn't abandon her now!

Madame Giry made an abortive gesture toward the cot on the floor. Christine sat obstinately in one of the creaking chairs. How could she think of sleep? His presence energized her.

"How do you know *Maestro*, Madame?" she asked. A brief flash of humor darted across the Madame's stern features.

"*Maestro*, is it? He told you we knew one another?" Christine bobbed her head in a swift nod.

"He said you have been his friend for many years," she parroted. The corner of Madame's mouth lifted, an extraordinary tenderness softening the world-worn angles of her face.

"Did he? Well, it is the truth, Christine. I met him when I was very young."

"How did you meet? Where does he live? What's his name?" the questions surged from her like a wave. Madame laughed softly, revealing twin curves of small, white teeth.

"Ah, *ma petit*, I'd rather not reveal his past without his permission. He will tell you in his own time." Christine frowned, stroking the waxy outer edges of the rose's petals. Its sweet fragrance wafted in her nose, potently intoxicating.

"Fine. But he was going to ask you—may we resume our lessons tomorrow?" Madame considered it a moment, muttering: "If Marie takes your position, then someone from third string must replace her . . ." She nodded to herself in affirmation. At last, she replied, "I don't see why not."

As Christine burst into a torrent of 'thank yous' and feverish compliments, Madame swept her hand in a curt dismissive gesture, as she did whenever a ballet rat offered an excuse for tardiness.

"Now off to bed with you! You need your rest!"

Christine scurried off to change with a smile on her face.

XXX

He was like the coiled spring of a trap, threatening to spring and snap closed over an unsuspecting bystander. It had been a mistake to leave his home—on foot, no less, without even César to aid in escape. If he was accosted, he had nothing with which to defend himself beyond his bare hands. Though they were formidable in their own right, he missed the coarseness of his Punjab lasso up
his sleeve or the reassuring weight of a dagger at his side.

It seemed obscene to bring weapons into Christine's presence.

After supper, in the young glittering hours of the evening, the streets were crowded. Tension radiated off of him in palpable waves. His height had its advantages, he thought dryly, shouldering his way through the throngs. A few uttered startled exclamations, but upon seeing his tall bearing and glowering, masked mien under the shadow of his fedora, their words died on their lips.

How long had it been since he'd mingled with humanity? Minette was most adept in her capacity as liaison—he was never without parchment or ink, and less important things like food and a reputable tailor. His morphine was delivered by a discreet and surprisingly reliable dealer. Apparently there were many rich nobles who found morphine a fashionable addiction.

Hmm . . . five years at least.

A careless foot trod on the hem of his cape and a muted hiss alerted him to the abused fabric. In that five-year interim, apparently rudeness had become commonplace. Erik's jaw clenched and he rounded on the hapless offender.

"Excuse me, sir," Erik snarled, his icy politeness meant to be interpreted as insult. The blond young man in his path blinked mildly, his white smile dying as he turned from his conversation with his companions.

"De Chagny," one of his friends alerted, pointing with his cane. This de Chagny looked down and moved his offending appendage. Erik yanked the cloth close to his body.

"Clumsy as a bear, eh Raoul?" another of his companions jibbed.

"My apologies, Monsieur," he said with such gut-churning sincerity that Erik hated him immediately.

It was the entire tableau that affronted him—this charming young man—a boy, really, Erik thought uncharitably—handsome blond and wealthy judging from the cut of his clothing, surrounded by friends casually enjoying the warm night air. Jealousy, he recognized dimly. Slightly mollified by his manners, Erik nodded politely.

"Gentlemen," he murmured, tipping the brim of his fedora.

"Good evening, Monsieur," Raoul de Chagny called after him.

Some time later, Erik found himself at the door of a jewelry store. The walk had calmed him considerably, along with the thinning crowds. Most couples atwitter with spring fever, were happily strolling along the Bois.

A tottering shopkeeper was sweeping the interior of his store, preparing to close up. Upon impulse, Erik entered, the bell affixed on the door uttering a faint tinkle of notes. The old man looked up from his intent sweeping and his rheumy blue eyes flared wide. He held his broom stiff across his chest like a shield. In an effort to look less threatening, Erik removed his fedora and smoothed his hair.

"Good evening, Monsieur. May I peruse your wares?" Erik said, taking on a low, almost hypnotic tone. If he was allowed time to speak, he was usually able to diffuse whatever violent emotion his presence induced.
The man relaxed, a sharp gleam in his eye telling Erik that he was a canny businessman.

"Of course, of course. You startled me, for a moment, Monsieur. Forgive an old man," he rasped, setting aside broom with the slow, limping care of an arthritic.

"No offense taken, Monsieur," Erik replied. The old jeweler lifted the hinged portion of his counter and stepped behind the glass-guarded shelves.

"Now . . . what would you like to see?" he asked.

"An engagement ring," Erik heard himself say. As the man offered his obligatory congratulations, Erik inwardly cursed. What in God's name was he thinking?

An engagement ring?

He was mad.

She'll never know. Christine is my student and will remain so. It's a private indulgence. A fantasy, he told himself.

"And ah, what sort of price range are you-"

"Money is no object. Show me the best you have."

Chapter End Notes

I love the idea of Erik and Raoul meeting outside the Populaire, on neutral ground. And an engagement ring . . . a wax doll may be on the horizon if he keeps this up!
"Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies."

-Aristotle

It was a warping of the world, he thought, sitting and playing idle melodies waiting for Christine to glide through the door. Part of him was locked in the role of her Angel of Music and urged him to run, hide, lest she catch a glimpse of him. Another, larger part was vividly aware of the small velvet box in his chest pocket. The ring was his secret talisman, the private residue of his love. He would be content with being her teacher.

He would be anything she wanted him to be.

A faint waft of air brought the scent of violets to his nose and he turned to find Christine standing barely a pace from the piano bench. How had he not sensed her near? Was music's hold so complete that even his angel's presence couldn't break its spell? The faint, plaintive melody ended with a discordant clang. The sparkle in her eyes hypnotized him.

"Oh please don't stop," she begged, reaching out as if to touch his shoulder. Every muscle in his body tensed, waiting, yearning for that casual touch . . .

Her arm fell slack to her side.

"What were you playing? An opera?" she asked eagerly.

Erik honestly didn't know. Lost in thought, he could have played any note under heaven. Maybe even Don Juan. The melodies were carved into his mind, engrained in his fingers. He hoped she hadn't heard it. Don Juan was another private madness, unfit for his angel's ears.

"It was nothing," he dismissed his idle playing with a shrug.

An awkward silence fell between them, during which Erik carefully took in her appearance. She looked well rested and nourished, steady in limb and breath. Assured of her sound health, he noted the stifling dress she wore, similar to the one she'd worn the night before. This one was somber black instead of gray, like she was in mourning. It rested on his tongue to say she could wear whatever she wished, but refrained. He did not want to insinuate that he was looking at her body. Very impolite and ungentlemanly.

Surely Raoul de Chagny would never say such a thing! Erik thought sourly.

Likewise, Christine seemed to be studying him. He wondered what she saw. He had forgone his cape, coat and gloves and now sat in shirtsleeves and sapphire blue waistcoat. As long as his cufflinks were firmly affixed, she would not see the ravages of morphine on his forearms . . .

At last, she mustered up the courage to ask, "M—Maestro . . . before we begin my lesson, I would . . . I would like very much to know more about you."
Erik's jaw clenched and a sharp, wicked thing called panic rose up in his chest. The 'more' she wanted was full of trapdoors, torture chambers and warped mirrors. She would go mad if he told her 'more.'

"What would you like to know?" he strove to keep his voice at an even keel. _Slowly, gently_, he urged, _she is still so much a child_. She gifted him with a blazing smile. He could only offer a faint curl of lip in return, a cold sweat breaking on his skin.

"First, what is your name?"

Erik nearly laughed.

"Do I not have names enough? _Opera Ghost, Angel, Maestro_ . . . take your pick." Christine thought for a moment, and then replied, "Those are titles. A name is different. A name means more."

Erik was taken aback. He knew better than anyone of Christine's sharp intelligence, but these moments of maturity brought him up short.

_Christine. Christ-follower_. A sweet and pious name given to her by her God-fearing Swedish parents. The word was synonymous with beauty and love to him.

_Erik. Honorable ruler_. An ironic mockery of his life, but appropriate, considering. He was the self-styled emperor of the Opera House, King of Music.

"Erik," he offered shyly, "my name is Erik." Her eyes softened as if he had given her a precious gift. Erik's chest was tight, aching.

"Erik," she repeated, almost reverently.

_God help me_, he thought, every fiber of his being yearning for her to say his name again. With her hair spilled across his pillow, silken arms reaching out to him . . . He sliced off the end of that thought and threw it into the fire.

She was his _student_, for God's sake!

"How do you know Madame Giry?" she asked. Erik swallowed. They were skirting ever closer to a trap door—this one with a corpse and a cage behind it.

"I met her when I was a boy. She . . . was of some service to me, and she brought me to the Populaire," he remarked, pleased that he hadn't been forced to lie. He hoped this skeletal picture was enough to satisfy her curiosity.

"Did you learn to sing at the _Conservatoire_?" Now Erik did utter a sharp bark of mirthless laughter. His sweet innocent love! The _Conservatoire_ in all its wisdom would have shooed him with a broom—as if he was vermin.

"No. Singing as always been an innate talent of mine," he said solemnly, noticing that his amusement had startled her. She nodded in swift agreement.

"Do you live nearby?" Erik grinned. His home was six levels beneath her delicate dancer's feet.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," he replied, almost enjoying this verbal sparring match. His ridiculous preoccupation with deception and illusion. A few carefully couched sentences and she would think of him as a respectable businessman with a flat on Foubourg Saint-Honoré . . .
No! he thought viciously. He had deceived her for years as her Angel. The least he could do now was honor her with truth.

"My home is five levels below the opera house, along the underground lake. I have lived there for roughly ten years," he stated baldly, watching her reaction. The faint smile was uncertain, as if she was deciding whether or not he was teasing her. At his cool silence, a glittering interest lit up her face.

"Will . . . will you take me there sometime? I'd like to see it," she asked and Erik wondered at her newfound boldness. Scarcely a year ago, it took her days to muster up the will to ask to even see him!

"Perhaps. Now, enough questions. We must begin your lesson," Erik said shortly, tripping mentally over the thought of Christine in his home—his walls covered with his attempts to capture her in every medium, cluttered with the accrued curios of ten years abroad and another ten as a recluse.

An angel cast down from Heaven.

A flaw in his fantasy presented itself. He had an engagement ring, but would his lady spend her days languishing in the darkness of a sewer?

Certainly not!

To be authentic, he must have a house, a manor, a palace! Nothing less would do for his angel.

XXX

Christine heard the note of command in his voice and obeyed immediately, standing with perfect posture to his right—his masked side. He—Erik! Such a simple name to encompass such a curiously complex man—transfixed her attention so completely she was scarcely aware of anything else. She studied him in profile: the mask's shape and stern expression, so perfectly starkly white. His sideburns were impeccably groomed, framing large, neat ears. His eye, a shining jewel set in a socket of marble, were a dark, brooding shade today—like the sky before a storm.

"Am I interrupting your daydreaming, child?" irritation was an ugly yellow streak across the kaleidoscopic pallet of his voice. She nearly scowled at the soubriquet. He had had no trouble calling her by her Christian name last night!

"I'm sorry, Maestro," she replied automatically.

Erik's fingers danced over the ivory keys, the cue for a scale. His scrutiny was intense and complete as he listened to her sing, and Christine felt a strange, clutching thrill at being the center of his undivided attention. Her voice soared and as the last note faded Erik's pale, long-fingered, unbearably elegant hands stilled.

"Brava, Christine. Your voice seems to be unscathed." Christine flushed under the simple words of praise, idly twisting her mother's silver ring around her little finger.

"Thank you," she mumbled. He stood and Christine was struck once more by his poetry of movement, the graceful strength ringing from every gesture. The visible half of his face was set in an expression of regret.

"Once again, I seek your forgiveness, Christine. Your illness was my fault." Christine frowned, processing this. Yes, it was his fault, in an obscure fashion. Did he think that she blamed him?
"Nonsense," she said, in response to her thoughts. His brow arched, a bold stroke of ink. Nervous, she plunged on, "'I—I don't blame you for getting a cold, Maestro. It was my choice to go to the roof, and stubbornly staying there in the rain. To blame you... why, that would be like blaming Madame Giry for stubbing my toe dancing!" A smile flirted with the corners of his mouth, his grey-blue eyes glinting.

"Well in that case, what say we continue with your lesson?" he suggested, laughter adding a trembling edge of delight to his words. Christine's chin lifted very primly, even as her heart did merry somersaults in her chest at the sight of his faint smile.

"Yes, let's."

The initial discomfiture of their meeting slipped away as the lesson progressed. Erik, as she now thought of him in her innermost being, was the same gentle, but exacting tutor as before. It was the same—yet so radically different. So many barriers between them were erased, but new ones replaced them. As her Angel, his mystery was explicable, and awed by the gift of his presence, Christine had striven to abide by his every wish. The aura of mystery was still there, as thick and enveloping as his black cloak.

Christine hungered for the details of his life. Where had he acquired all of his talents? An architect and designer, a composer and magician... instead of cowering before his celestial majesty, now Christine was cowed by the magnitude of his genius! More questions trembled on her lips, but she bit them back. She had pestered him enough today.

As the lesson drew to a close, Erik eyed her coolly. Christine's heart leapt to her throat under the weight of his significant silences, each a benediction in their own right. Her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips. What was he thinking?

"Will you carry a message for me, my child, to the most excellent Madame Giry?" he said, each syllable caressed as they flew from his throat.

A man he claimed to be, but Christine was convinced otherwise. Men were plain and rude and crass. None had Erik's quiet, dignified grace, his incredible intellect, his angel's voice.

"Of course," she replied. He didn't appear to move, but when she blinked, an envelope appeared in his hand, emblazoned with the red death's head of the Opera Ghost's seal. Christine accepted it, the paper smooth and heavy in her hands.

"Am I carrying Monsieur Lefavre's new instructions?" her tone held the faintest accusing ring. In addition to realizing he was in fact a man, there was also the jarring realization of his capacity as Opera Ghost. The frightful tales of him were dreadfully exaggerated, she knew, but he was extorting untold sums of money from the managers, as evidenced by the stipend Madame Giry received. The three of them were never in want for anything, and Christine knew for a fact that her income did not cover half of their expenses. If that sum was a paltry fraction of the Opera Ghost's salary, the true amount must be astronomical. Erik's eyes narrowed, his lips thinning in an expression of displeasure that made her palms sweat.

"No, child," he said, his tone unbearably gentle, "I am merely informing the good Madame that I will be taking a short leave."

Christine struggled to master her disappointment. How terribly selfish she was! Of course he had more to do than look after a naive girl like her! Christine stroked the gilt corner of the envelope.

"Where are you going, Maestro?"
"That is my own business."

The tone brooked no argument. Christine wilted. He must have changed his mind. He didn't want to be her tutor anymore. She looked up at him, committing his features to memory. This would be the last time she saw him. Words of devotion flew to her lips, but she swallowed them.

She had her dignity!

"Child." his voice was the warmth of the sun on her face, the tranquil expanse of a cloudless sky. His stride was soundless, and suddenly he towered over her, his eyes burning coals. A long, pale hand rose and her breath caught in her throat, every muscle and sinew of her body frozen. Sweet, terrible fear quivered in her belly. His hand hovered over her cheek for a fraction of a second, so close she could feel the warmth radiate from it. Then he sank into a neat bow.

"Take care."

And he was gone.

A red rose bound by a black ribbon rested on the piano bench.

XXX

God, she could kill a man with those eyes of hers! His gentle rebuke had brought naked pain to those rich brown orbs, framed with such long, graceful lashes. The bruising softness of her heart only made him love her with an even greater tenderness. Erik's heart seemed ready to burst free from his chest, unnerved by that last moment. He had nearly touched her. Had she frozen in fear? Confusion? Revulsion?

He was too much of a coward to risk losing her forever to reveal the depth of his love. No, it was far better to be her tutor, to have her voice that was irrevocably his, even if her heart and body were beyond his reach.

The pain would pass in time.

To numb it, to hide from the ugly truths of the world as he had in a gypsy cage, he began construction on his fictional life.

A ring was only the beginning!

Erik hailed a brougham cab.

"Train station. And be quick about it."

The man grunted his acquiescence and the brougham mingled with dozens of others along Paris' thoroughfares. With Lefavre marching merrily to the Opera Ghost's tune and all the Opera staff busily preparing for the new production, Erik had long planned a holiday of sorts from the Populaire. While unwilling to leave Christine for any reason, he realized that he must give her space, and time to come to terms with his deception and reality. In addition to this precious distance, Erik was shamelessly indulging his fantasy.

Years ago, after returning from his travels on his journey northward from the port of Marseilles, he had bought a stately old manor on a whim. He was charmed by its exemplary architecture and its forgotten dignity in the French countryside, but since he had bought it, Erik had yet to set foot on the property. A deplorable waste, he realized, letting it molder and crumble.
Impatience ate at him as the brougham jostled through the congested streets of Paris. The stink and noise of humanity repelled him. Mired in traffic, Erik's anxiety climbed. The brougham's shabby walls closed in. Sweat broke on his skin. He remembered the tears shed in a dusty attic room, too terrified to emerge without the mask, he remembered the terror and filth of a gypsy cage. It took every molecule of his will not to burst from the brougham and run back to the safety of his home beneath the Opera.

*Stop this foolishness!* he scolded himself. *What a fearsome ghost you are, scared of a cab!*

Then the hansom lurched to a stop and interrupted Erik's thoughts. A moment later, Erik stepped out into the noise, pollution and crowd of a Parisian train station. He paid the driver and surveyed the shoving clutter of his surroundings with disdain. His loathing for humanity had not diminished over the years, though he had found exceptions. Minette he respected and held a degree of guarded, grateful affection for. And Christine . . . he shook himself from the thought of her.

As he made his way through the crowds, he noted the careless wallets and purses, sagging with the weight of their bounty, seemed to beg for him to snatch them away. He had always had a talent for theft, though he thought it a commoner's means of accruing wealth. Erik thought himself above that sort of all too simple play. How the Daroga had lectured him in his Persian manner on the sin of stealing, never mind the betraying glint of interest he had shown when Erik offered to teach him.

Poor Nadir, a pious Muslim, playing truant with a true pariah. *Yes,* he thought to himself, remembering a ship ablaze, the screams of terrified horses echoing across the water. *Poor Nadir, left with nothing but an infidel to mourn his loss.*

He sat on a bench in the sunlight; an old woman sitting beside him stared at his mask pointedly, whispering to the man—obviously her husband—seated on her other side. Erik reached into his waistcoat pocket and heard a muted gasp. Rolling his eyes at the melodrama, he pulled out his gold pocket watch and checked the time. Ten past three o'clock. Damn. Erik would now have to wait another torturous hour among this rabble.

A gendarme marched by with his hand nonchalantly on his pistol, whistling—quite badly in Erik's opinion—a bawdy tune. As he passed by, he noted Erik and slowed his pace. Erik busied himself with his watch, matching the clock on the station wall precisely, all the while feeling the weight of the gendarme's curious glance. When Erik looked up and lifted an eyebrow in innocuous question, the gendarme lifted his hands in careless supplication, tipped his cap to Erik and moved on. As the man walked away, Erik tucked his Punjab lasso back up his sleeve. The man was lucky he hadn't investigated. Even in the rare event that his Punjab had failed, the dagger inside his suit coat would deter any attack on his person.

Erik rested an ankle on the opposite knee and waited, seething at the stinking humanity surrounding him. Commuters and families on holiday and old couples enjoying a day in the countryside surged in eddying masses into the station like a hive of bees. They twittered and ran and crashed into one another, chattering gaily about the inane nuances of their everyday lives, arguing over pointless things, *living.* They were all so blissfully ignorant of how blessed they were. Of their normalcy.

Oh, how Erik longed to walk proudly in the sunshine with Christine on his arm as so many young couples did. Could he even dream of such an outcome, when all he received were cold stares and threats?

Before Erik could sink any deeper into the bitter cesspool of depression, a whistle blew. Relief trickled through him. His train was merely late. He shouldered his way through the crowd and handed the conductor his ticket, appropriated several weeks prior. The man's weak eyes peered at
Erik’s ticket from behind thick half-moon spectacles. He stamped the ticket and glanced up. Upon seeing his masked visage, the conductor paled.

"H—here you are, Monsieur. Have a pleasant day." Erik smiled tightly. He hated their staring eyes, their whispers and snickering, gawking at the freak in the cage! Man was a cruel, stupid race.

"Good day," he said, frigidly polite.

He surged past gawking patrons and mounted the stairs. A piercing whistle screamed over the cacophony of the goodbyes and the crowds, announcing the train's exit. The floorboards shivered under his feet as train lumbered from the station. Once safely immured in his sleeper car, he locked the door and flared the gas lamp. Satisfied with the train's sparse accommodations, Erik looked around his suite. Though first class, the bed was cramped, with a sparse desk, tiny chest of drawers and washbasin and laver with a chamber pot tucked discreetly underneath.

It was also stifling.

Even Erik, who was never overly bothered by extremes in temperature, began to feel tiny rivulets of sweat meander down his neck and chest. He moved unsteadily to the window and muscled it open with a hideous screech. He gingerly pulled the mask from his face. The rough, pitted skin underneath was rubbed raw by the grain of the leather and the film of sweat trapped under it. The fresh air pouring in smelled of rain and washed his bare face, invigorating him.

Erik hunched over the tiny desk and began to write, the strokes of his pen carefully accounting for the lurching of the train. There was much to do: finding suitable, trustworthy staff, overseeing the quality of the repairs and accommodations—most of the masonry he could do himself, but he must find quality stone, limestone or marble would do nicely— and there was the task of shifting some of his wealth from the Populaire to the country. . .

Erik touched the small velvet box in his vest pocket and dreamed.

XXX

Christine could feel the prickle of watching eyes on the back of her neck during choir practice. It was not her Angel's—Erik's!—comforting presence, but Meg, emanating concern. Of course her best friend would see through the façade of cheerfulness she wore.

She had faithfully delivered the letter to Madame Giry. To her chagrin, the Madame simply tossed the missive onto her desk to read later. She contemplated peeling it open, just so she could commit his last words to memory, trace the shapes of his handwriting, touch the parchment he had touched. Christine put effort into her smile, hoping to placate Meg. She hadn't the energy to conjure a plausible explanation for her behavior. The weak grin she received in turn told her that Meg remained unconvinced. Her hazel eyes blazed the message: We need to talk!

Hours meandered by, altered only by the activity Christine performed, lacking inspiration or focus. Monsieur Reyer and Madame Giry scolded her repeatedly. Those harsh words, once enough to send her into nervous apologies and tense overcompensation, now bounced off a curious wall of . . . apathy. The notes she sang flattened under its weight, the steps she danced dragged.

Never had Erik's pervasive influence ever been more apparent. True, when he had rejected her, she had moped for days. But always, those vague embers of hope remained that he would forgive her and return. Now he had returned and gone again, a darting shadow in her dreams. He left her reeling in the vacuum left by his absence. Christine could never bring herself to be irritated at her Angel, but Erik was different. He was a man with all the talents of a true genius, but prone to all
the vices of a common man. He was her teacher, her *Maestro*, and he had *left*!

*Well, I refuse to let him dictate my mood a moment longer!* Christine thought defiantly.

In her mind's eye, she imagined him returning from his holiday and her refusing to see him. There! Let him wait upon her whim for once! The thought pleased her, gave her a precious iota of autonomy. Without it, she would be swallowed by his driving force, enslaved by the suggestion of his smile. Her mood lightened after that.

Christine snuck away after dinner. She wanted to light a candle for her father. It seemed like ages since she'd done that—longer still since she'd visited his tomb. Guilt assailed her at the thought of the roses she laid on the grave drying out and the petals fluttering away in the wind. Madame Giry's gaze slid over her with something Christine couldn't identify, but she made no comment. Christine had reached the stairs when Meg's voice called out to her. Christine bit her lip. No doubt her curious, garrulous friend would be brimming with questions as to her odd behavior. Tonight, Christine hadn't the heart to dodge her queries—all made with the best of intentions.

"Christine! Christine, wait!" An edge of hurt embroidered Meg's bubbly voice and Christine stopped, looking appropriately abashed. Meg touched her shoulder, her scrunched brow and frowning mouth evidence of her worry and vexation.

"What's *with* you today? Why have you been avoiding me?" Meg fisted her hands on her hips in a perfect imitation of her mother. Christine sighed, and grabbed her friend's hand.

"Come here. Let's talk in the chapel."

The temperature plummeted as they descended, until Christine could see faint wisps of her steaming breath in the chapel's dim interior. Meg voiced a faint protest, but the words fell on deaf ears. This sad, neglected chapel would always be a place of magic for her, a mystical grotto where a wizard lived—no, it was more than that, *holy*. Here she had met her Angel. She found beauty in the chipped, mildewed murals, the stale smell of closed air and wet stone, the play of rippling light reflected from a gas lamp onto the sewage pipe outside the stained glass window.

She released Meg's hand and shielded her wavering taper with her hand, enjoying its faint aura of warmth. Only two others had lit candles—out of a population numbering in the hundreds, it was a fair reason for the chapel's neglect. The candle set above her father's icon had been changed since she was here last, a tall, proud taper whose wick had yet to be lit. Christine carefully lowered the taper and touched the golden flame to the fresh wick. A tiny kernel of flame, spectral blue, flared into life, shriveling the white wick black and undulating into golden maturity. Christine blew out the taper and took a seat in the alcove under the stained glass window. She patted the pitted stone beside her and Meg sat with a petulant flare of skirt. One blond eyebrow rose.

"Well? Aren't you going to tell me why you've been acting so strangely?"

Erik's name quivered on her lips. The same defiant voice bucked under Erik's unspoken injunction for secrecy. He was no Angel, she need not fear being branded a madwoman who heard voices inside her head.

*He'll always be there...*

The thought comforted her.

Christine smiled, taking Meg's hand in her own and squeezing it.

"Meg, I can explain everything."
"Enter," Erik said, not looking up from his desk, or what functioned as a desk, specifically an uneven stack of books. The manor was in a state of grave disrepair, a state Erik was striving to remedy. Jacques Durand, his newly hired butler, pushed open the door with a ginger touch. Monsieur Durand had two key identifiers: one, none of the others on his staff or the crew had the nerve to approach him, and two, he wore an atrocious cologne, so noxious in its vapors that Erik knew he was coming from a hundred yards off.

He supposed the staff's reluctance stemmed from the incident last week where the master mason had utterly mangled his design for the front façade. Erik had descended into a blind rage unlike any since Persia. Such willful destruction of beauty—the beauty he labored to create—offended him to his very core. When he was at last aware of himself, the master mason was on the floor spitting out fragments of his teeth and two of the mason's brawny compatriots were holding him against a wall.

A subtle itch wormed its way under his skin, breaking the cocoon of focus that he could have immersed himself in for untold months or years. The itch had a face and a name and she was pulling him back to her, a gyrfalcon on his mistress's tether.

The conflict had been resolved with healthy compensation for the master mason, well bribery, to put a fine point on it, and he was dismissed from the project. Erik shook his head, filling out the ledger with a flourish. He would not sacrifice his vision for haste. The stone and materials were bought, the rotted roof replaced. There was time, on later trips, to complete the work to his satisfaction. He slammed the ledger closed and rose to his feet, towering over the middle-aged butler, who was nervously tugging at the hem of his tight-fitting waistcoat. One of the tottering stacks of books collapsed in a heap of paper and dust and Erik repressed a snarl as one landed squarely on his foot.

"State your business, Monsieur. I have a train to catch." Erik longed for the cold, quiet solitude of his home, and his beloved. Without the perfection of her voice and the beauty of her face to sustain him, he was starving.

"O—Of course, Monsieur Rousseau. Of course. I won't be but a moment. S—Some of the staff have expressed a certain . . . dissatisfaction."

"Are their wages inadequate?" ice frosted the words.

Monsieur Durand's already pale complexion bleached further, a fine dew of perspiration shimmering in the light pouring from the window. Sampled at the proximity of less than a meter, Monsieur Durand's cologne threatened to make him physically ill.

"No, Monsieur, in fact, you have been most generous. B—But-

"Have any of the staff been inconvenienced or harassed in any way?"

"No, Monsieur, but-

"Spit it out!" The incident with the master mason still left a bad taste in his mouth.
"While you have offered a fine opportunity, there are some who would like to seek employment elsewhere."

Monsieur Durand expelled a heavy sigh, the waxed tips of his iron gray mustache wilting. Erik's jaw tightened. Good, hardworking folk fleeing from the monster in the castle. His leather gloves squeaked in protest as his fists clenched.

"I see." The words emerged sharp and compressed, bursting out around the fist of anger tight in his chest.

"In that case, I expect to have the empty positions filled by the time of my return."

"When will that be, Monsieur?" Monsieur Durand's high-pitched quaver grated on Erik's nerves.

"I will inform you of the dates upon my return to Paris. Good day, Monsieur." Erik donned cape and fedora, swept down the hall and out the door to the waiting brougham cab.

xxx

The small hours of the night found Erik at last scaling the steps to the Opera Populaire. Locked doors, grandiose architecture and sleeping ballet rats slipped past him unheeded. His sole focus was in the next bed . . . terror clutched his heart at the empty bed, the corners folded with the maid's usual military precision.

Where is she?

Erik hastened to Minette's chambers and . . . relief loosened his joints at the sight of her, tenderness flooded his being. She looked like a kitten curled on the rug, the little Giry across the game board in a similar state. He longed to carry her in his arms and tuck her snug into her bed, but he checked the impulse. Instead, he loosened the ties of his cape and draped its rich folds over her.

"Pleasant dreams, my Angel," he murmured.

XXX

Christine woke to the lush, warm crumple of silk enveloping her, and a rich scent in her nostrils. She hummed a little in contentment and breathed deeply of that intoxicating aroma, smelling smoke, leather and a spicy, masculine musk. Her eyelids cracked open, seeking the source. A cloak was draped over her, heavy black cloth lined with white silk, deliciously warm and sumptuously elegant. Whatever sleepy indolence enveloped her vanished like a morning mist in the wind.

"Erik," she whispered.

He had returned! He had been here, in this room! Lazy joy unfolded in her heart and she pressed his cloak to her nose, nuzzling the rich fabric and sucking in breaths of his scent until her head swam. The tenderness behind the gesture touched Christine. The roses were beautiful and a symbol of their bond, but this . . . this meant he cared for her comfort and well-being, not only the spectral link of music between them. As her Angel, he had been solicitously aware of her 'mortal needs' for rest and food, but she wondered if her mysterious, exacting Maestro would be similar. She glanced at the high window. Grey predawn light filtered in. With the knowledge of her Maestro's return dangling over her head, there was no way she could waste more hours sleeping!

Christine cut a sly glance at Meg's slumbering form. True, there had been tears and huffing fits as her tale of her Angel emerged, but Meg was much too good-hearted and genuine to remain angry for long. Her offer of a game was tantamount to the proverbial olive branch. As hours ticked by,
Meg's irritation faded into curiosity. Imagine, Christine's Angel of Music and the dreaded Phantom of the Opera was the same person!

*I would like to be a fly on the wall when Meg confronts her mother about Erik!*

Christine smiled, affection suffusing her at the messy snarl of Meg's mop of blond bangs hanging in her eyes. Her friend was dying to meet Erik, perhaps enough to provoke the Opera Ghost's wrath by entering the sanctity of Box Five at the opening a few nights away. Christine smothered a giggle in the folds of Erik's lovely cloak.

Her giddy joy was dampened a bit by the thought of his holiday away from the Opera.

*What a jealous, selfish little imp you are, Christine Marie Daae!* The chiding voice in her head took on the accented tones of Madame Giry's voice.

*Erik is a very busy man . . .*

"Run along a play, Christine. I have work to do," Christine said sourly in a poor imitation of the incomparable timbre of Erik's voice.

That was it. His leave-taking made her feel young and in the way, a child to be indulged and cosseted then tidily ignored. She had never felt worthy of her Angel's tutelage, and certainly not the razor-like focus of Erik's undiluted genius. Christine felt unworthy, but selfishly glutted on his attention, craved his voice like a potent drug. She confused even herself at times.

The fabric of his cloak was soft under her cheek, a tangible remnant of his presence. Her devilish impulse to deny him rose up again, augmented by childish pique. Warring desires tangled into a confused knot in her heart.

She wanted to see him, sing for him, admire that stern angle of his jaw, the bewildering beauty of his eyes. She wanted to defy him, challenge him.

Christine buried her face in Erik's cloak to stifle a sigh.

XXX

Erik's mood was too fractious and irritated to concentrate on playing, so he paced up and down the length of the small music room, waiting for Christine to arrive. Lefavre was preparing to retire. His note accompanying this month's salary had been overlaid with weary tones, a longing for a simpler time, perhaps the farm in Australia where he had spent a summer as a boy. Australia! The other side of the world! How ironic that as soon as Erik had found something to spend his ill-gotten salary on, there was the threat that it would no longer come!

Erik growled low in his throat, reminded of that fatuous master mason and the flighty staff. And *this* was the human race, the pinnacle of creation!

The tread of a step reached his ear and he turned, heart in his throat, for Christine to appear in the doorway. He smoothed his hair, tugged at the diamond stick-pin in his cravat. Minette materialized, clad in her somber black. Erik's heart plummeted to his toes. An inarticulate panic clutched him.

"Is—is she all right?" Minette hesitated, then nodded. Erik frowned.

"Where is she?" Minette looked distinctly uncomfortable, ramrod straight and fingers restlessly tracing the crucifix he'd given her. Nonplussed, Erik's hands fist ed at his sides, ringing with
"Minette? Where is Christine?" He thickened his voice into a warm, coaxing shape, eyes riveted to the minutest change in her face. Still, Minette hesitated.

"Pardon, Erik, but Christine says she doesn't want to see you today."

Erik's whirring brain dissected this sentence and observed it from every angle.

"But . . . why?" he asked, dimly registering the bleak pain in his voice, the betrayed confusion of a wronged apprentice.

Raw sympathy filled Minette's eyes, diffusing her face with its gentle glow, like a medieval icon. Erik hardened under her gaze; sympathy was akin to pity in his eyes—wholly unacceptable.

"Don't try to spare me, Minette. What did she say? Does she fear the Opera Ghost's wrath? Or is it this?" he pointed emphatically to his mask. His cursed face! Minette spread her hands in an expressive shrug. That knack for theatricality had served her well as prima ballerina, and now as ballet mistress.

"I truly don't know. She was devastated when you left. I have no idea why she would refuse to see you now. All she said was: 'Tell Erik that I don't want to see him.' She would say no more to me."

Erik processed this, his ragged breathing echoing in his ears. His chest felt unbearably tight, as if held in a vise. The prospect of never seeing her again was misery of the acutest kind, his own private Hell.

His mind blazed through possibilities. He played back every word, gesture and expression that had transpired between Christine and himself during their lesson. True, she had seemed wounded when he informed her of his leaving, but he had dismissed it . . .

The formless panic was calcifying into prickly spires of anger.

Why was she torturing him like this? He hadn't thought such cruelty existed in her. Minette's voice reached for him at a distance, ringing tinny in his ears.

"Now Erik, don't overreact-"

"Overreact? Oh, certainly not, Minette!" he burst out, exposing his teeth in a macabre imitation of a smile.

"I will follow her instructions to the letter. She will never see me again."

"Erik, wait! Please!" Minette shouted, lunging forward and clutching his forearms, as if afraid he would evaporate straight through the walls like the ghost he claimed to be. A small, amused corner of himself observed that Minette, the hard-nosed skeptic, truly believed in his skills as a magician.

"Don't do this. Christine is still a child. I don't understand her reasons, but I know she meant you no harm. Don't rush off in a huff and do something you'll regret."

Erik's jaw tightened. Poor Minette, soothing his factious moods and tempering his sweeping proclamations. The glaring subtext of her words referenced another overreaction, one that had pushed him across continents.

"Whether you recognize it or not, that child cares for you." Erik tried to tear himself free, but
Minette's grip was implacable and he didn't want to add harming a woman who had the misfortune of being his friend to his list of sins.

"Don't. Just . . . don't, Minette. Don't say that to me." his voice quavered, warbling with emotion.

*She cares for me,* he thought darkly, *how sweet. But she will never love me. She will never yearn as I yearn.*

"She makes herself ill waiting for my presence, then refuses to see me. And they call me unpredictable," he grumbled.

Minette laughed softly, relief diffusing her features. If he had enough good humor left to joke, then the likelihood of a tantrum drastically dropped. It was a mathematical theorem, Erik noted with some dryness. Minette patted his cheek with a sisterly sort of affection.

"I'm certain she'll come around." Erik heaved a massive sigh and smiled reluctantly.

"Let us hope so. I left her my cloak and I'd rather not brave the winter without it." He expected laughter, or a similarly witty riposte on how foolish he was for leaving such a valuable garment in Christine's uncertain custody, but Minette was frozen, unblinking eyes fixed on the piano.

"Minette?" Erik asked, following the trajectory of her gaze. His gut clenched. Resting innocently in a shaft of sunlight sat a small velvet box. She tore her eyes away and slowly swiveled her head to meet his eye.

"Erik," she said, very calm, "you seem to have omitted a few vital details. Where exactly did you go on your recent outing?"

**XXX**

When Madame Giry returned, the mournful reproach in her gaze did not fill Christine with a sense of feminine power, or even gratification in her independence. Instead, she was mortified.

"What did he say, Madame? Was he angry?" Christine whispered.

"Was that what you wanted?" Madame shot back.

"No! Of course not!" Christine stroked the fabric of his cloak, plucking an imaginary speck of lint from its velvety surface. Madame sighed and the chair across from Christine creaked as she sat, with an artful rustle of skirts. She felt the earnest weight of Madame's gaze and squirmed under its directness.

"Look at me, Christine."

Christine darted a glance up and Madame captured her chin in a light, cool grip. In the smothered light of the gas lamp, Madame's face looked softer, younger. Love for her warden pierced Christine's heart. She was stern and taciturn, but Christine had no doubt that Madame loved her as her own daughter.

"Then why did you, *ma petit,* I can think of no good reason. Help me understand why you would deliberately avoid him. If not anger, then is it fear? Did he do something to frighten you?"

Christine wanted to blurt out that his very presence filled her with such delicious, breathless fear—but it was not the sort of fear that terrorized. It was a sweet anticipation, a tension that pulled somewhere deep within her.
"Erik, he . . . he's so . . . powerful." Christine said, unable to articulate the particular chemistry she felt near him. The air crackled with blistering energy, intense significance was laden in every glance and gesture. Madame's brow arched.

"Powerful?" she repeated. Christine nodded, embarrassed color stinging her cheeks.

"His presence swallows me, and when he looks at me, I feel like I can't breathe."

Something altered subtly in Madame's expression, but Christine could not identify what it was. Her grip on Christine's chin tightened, eyes blazing with conviction.

"Christine . . . Erik may seem like a romantic figure, but for all his talents, he is a man like any other. A man with a very sad, dark past. Erik is not only powerful, but dangerous. Don't forget that, my dear. Ever."

Terror clutched Christine, her heart, her throat, her belly.

"What do you mean, Madame? Do you want me to reconcile with him or never see him again? I thought you were his friend!"

"I am his friend. But befriending Erik is like befriending a wolf—I admire him and I love him, in a careful, wary sort of way. But I also would never allow him into a sheepfold."

"And I'm the lamb?" Christine asked, sarcasm sharpening her tone to a shining edge. Madame released her chin and grasped both Christine's hands, squeezing with earnest fervor.

"You are young, Christine. Very young, and innocent. I'm simply asking for you to guard your heart with him. It is precious." Tenderness surged through the pique and the apprehension Madame had roused. In this, as with everything else, she was worried only for Christine's welfare.

"I will, Madame. I promise." Christine said solemnly.

XXX

The hours ticked by slowly in the interminable night of Erik's underground kingdom. None of his usual pursuits appealed to him. He couldn't play, design or draw, not with this infernal anxiety gnawing at his belly. He glanced at his clock for the thousandth time. Erik smothered a growl and leapt to his feet to continue pacing like cat in a cage. He hated this feeling! He hated the tension in the air that cut like a knife, eyes watching him, waiting for him to make a mistake, loose his temper. He expected it from his mother and later, Luciana, but certainly never his beloved Christine!

Erik uttered a string of profanity in a particularly musical Cantonese dialect, raking a nervous hand through his hair. And that infernal Madame Giry! She had drilled him in the chest with the silver point of that cane of hers, stating in very plain terms that he was not, under any conceivable circumstance, to burden Christine with the depth of his affections when she was only fifteen, or sixteen, or seventeen for that matter. Erik had resented this ultimatum. From there, it had degenerated into a shouting match the likes of which had not happened between them in over twenty years. A fleeting admiration had warmed him. Minette was a lioness, fighting with tooth and claw for her cub.

"She had no right to interfere! It was not as if I was actually going to propose to her! It was only a fantasy, after all and Christine is still so young . . ."

Who are you trying to fool, my friend? Nadir's dry, faintly caustic voice echoed in Erik's inner ear.
You love the little Daee. It is only a matter of time before Christine's singing coach becomes her adoring suitor.

Between the two women, Erik was faintly amazed that his hair wasn't as white as driven snow. Erik glanced in one of the mirrors, grimacing at the hideous dual mien that stared back at him. He was no longer a young man, pushing forty. A few threads of silver streaked his black hair, and the harshest light of day revealed faint wrinkles around his eye and mouth. His right side was repulsive in any light and had endured the ravages of time with obscene health.

"Enough," he said aloud, his voice bouncing off the cave's walls back to him. He needed focus and preparation. No moods or tantrums today. Christine needed to see that he could be accommodating, a gentleman.

If nothing else, he was that.

An hour later, he stood in an empty room with despair beginning to claw at his hard-won composure. For one wild moment, he cursed his beloved.

If you had not come, I would have lived and died here in peace. I was content! I was bloody well content with my lot! Why did you come to torment me with what I can never have?

Then she appeared and the raging storm of defensive vitriol mellowed into the gentle kiss of spring rain over parched ground. He stiffened under her gentle perusal, breath and speech beyond him. How was it possible that she had grown more beautiful in the scant weeks of his absence? But she had performed a miracle and grown lovelier, even clad in the drab bolts of brown cloth that had the impudence to call itself a gown. She deserved silk, velvet, strings of diamonds, ropes of pearls! Content he might have been before her, but he hadn't been alive. The twenty-seven years before he met her were nothing but bland purgatory, a colorless limbo. Christine Daee was his heart and breath, voice and life.

Erik shook himself, realizing that he had been staring at her—with his mouth hanging open, by God—and she waiting politely for him to say something. Something about the shifting in her posture, the wide, unblinking doe eyes, told him that she was expecting his anger.

He was angry, and hurt.

Above all he wanted to know why. He would be very careful never to make that misstep again. He had an iron-clad memory; he would not forget. He would cut out his beating heart and give it to her if that was what she wanted. Anything she wanted. A faint, cynical voice mocked him for this abject slavery of heart and soul to a slip of a girl barely in the flower of her womanhood. The mighty Phantom was on his knees, wide open for the killing blow, and she was holding the knife. Holding the knife poised over his heart, and didn't even know it.

Say something, you idiot!

"Good afternoon, Christine," he blurted. A hesitant smile touched the inviting curve of her mouth and she ducked her head bashfully.

"Good afternoon, Maestro. I've brought you your cloak. Th—Thank you for . . . thank you for it. Madame said that your business went well. I'm glad."

Erik carefully extracted the cloak from her grip without touching her. He must be very careful not to alarm her in any fashion. As he did so, a faint tendril of her scent tickled his nose and the cloth held the trapped warmth of her body. His fevered imagination conjured her stretched naked upon
the cloak, eyes heavy with desire, breathing his name as he . . .

"Yes," he forced himself into speech, clawing free from the silken bonds of his fantasy.

Dangerous things, fantasies.

Something charged the air, the gnawing anxiety he felt, the calcified anger raked across his skin. The power dynamic was brutally clear between them. He was hers to twist and mangle and shatter with a word, a gesture. It was not a feeling he relished.

"My business was satisfactory. I was . . . surprised to hear that you did not wish to continue with our lessons. Were you feeling poorly, my dear?" he asked, his eyes blisteringly intent on her face, on the slightest change in expression. Her pale hands clasped in front of her, Christine's gaze remained studiously fixed on the ground.

"Yes . . . no." she whispered. Erik set his cloak aside and took a seat at the piano bench. He forced out a laugh even as he wanted to shake her shoulders, demand an answer.

"Which is it?" She winced at the edge in his voice. Erik was rapidly ceasing to care. He wanted to know!

"No, I wasn't ill, Maestro." Erik's visible brow lifted, mocking.

Calm. Remain calm.

"Oh? Then pray, what kept you?"

Her eyes flickered up and met his. Whatever she saw there drained every iota of color from her face, those eyes stark and hurt and innocent.

Damn her innocence! The innocence that was blinded to the wretchedness of his lust! A large part of him wanted to drown out that angry thing in his head, to soothe and coax, woo her with the undeniable power of his voice. She would respond to him with her voice. She had to. It was a compulsion she could not ignore. If not her body, then at least her voice would be one with his!

Silence roared between them.

"It doesn't matter," he snapped, dismissing the subject with a wave of his hand, "you are here now. I presume you wish to continue with our lessons?"

"Y—yes," she stuttered weakly.

"Good. Now begin. Rigoletto Act II."

He waited, pinning her in place with his gaze, daring her to protest. So much for gentleness and calm. He was a towering inferno of emotion. She waited too, waiting for the cue to a scale to loosen her voice, even a bar of accompaniment. Erik sat resolute, unmerciful. He acknowledged that he was punishing her. Hardly a way to garner a lady's trust and affections.

Christine plunged into the aria like a racehorse from the starting gate. Erik's eyes slipped closed. Even taut with nervousness, Christine's voice was undiluted perfection. Her voice would make the angels weep with joy and was his nourishment, his addiction. His own voice rose to join hers and together, they soared into the clouds, wholly unfettered.

The forbidden love of the nightingale and the white rose. The old Arabic tale drifted through the
tapestry of his thoughts as his voice surged and challenged, and hers softened and melted, both striving towards ecstasy . . .

Silence throbbed around them, cocooning the two of them in an intimacy too perfect to cheapen with words.

Erik's heart ached at the sight of her face lit by joyous flame, eyes dewy, pert bosom heaving. So excruciatingly beautiful. Desire roared to life within him. When he spoke, his voice was thick with it: "Your voice is without compare, Christine. The world is your stage."

She slipped into a deep, elegant curtsey, her forehead nearly touching her knee.

"Thank you, Master." Her soft, reverent tone sent delicious shivers through him. The tension in him snapped and crackled. He had to be closer. Erik rose to his feet and floated across the floor to her side.

His beloved one, his shy Persephone, his white rose.

"Christine." The word flew from his lips and wrapped her in a silken embrace, possessive and urgent. Startled brown eyes met his own blazing blue, rosy lips parted. He produced his customary rose and offered it to her. She reached out and accepted it, brushing his hand as she did so. A shared gasp broke the air. That grazing touch wakened the nerves in his skin, as intimate as a kiss.

An angry voice chanted in his head with increasing urgency: Your student, your student, your student!

I am a glutton for punishment, he thought.

He tore his gaze from her radiant face and stared at some distant point.

"I will be watching the production this evening from Box Five."

Erik turned and swept on his cape, swathing himself in clouds of her sweet scent.

"I will sing my best for you, Maestro."

He eyed her over his shoulder, cherishing every dip and curve of her face and body.

"You always do."
Christine clutched the high, stiff neckline of her gown, as if to still the fevered pounding of her heart, cool the damp film of sweat gathered beneath the stifling dress. She sank onto the piano bench, lungs dragging in greedy breaths. Erik's absence yawned, sucking all the air from the room. Holy Virgin, these feelings churning through her, a bewildering and heady mixture of excitement and fright, educated by the avid glitter in his ever-changing eyes and his voice that raced over her skin and echoed within the very depths of her soul! He had slipped away again, robbing her of balance and breath while remaining coolly composed. Oh, how she envied that trick! Didn't he know how devastating he was to her senses, overwhelming her equilibrium?

She brought his parting gift to her nose and breathed deep of its sweet fragrance. Her passionate promise to sing her best for him was perfect truth; she would bargain her soul to make him smile! Her soul and voice belonged to him, her teacher.

Her teacher . . .

How could he simply be her teacher? Was it normal, this . . . this hunger she possessed—for the simple intoxication of his voice, for the secrets of his mind, the hopes of his heart? Certainly not! What existed between them was more. What 'more' entailed, she had only the vaguest of inklings. But she knew she would be swallowed whole by the power of his will if she did not exert hers more often. His anger was potent and frightening, but she knew that Erik would never hurt her.

A secret smile touched her lips. If his anger led to more lessons of this intensity, Christine would be sure to provoke it at every opportunity! The fresh reminder of those incandescent moments where their voices had joined in a writhing coil sprang to her mind and Christine exhaled a shaky sigh. Raised a devout Catholic by a stern ballet mistress like Madame Giry and protected by an even sterner Angel, Christine had only a nebulous idea as to what Erik's virile presence actually meant and no proper words to categorize the sensations churning through her, a sparkling heat that made her fingertips tingle and her belly ache. The promise of it tantalized and tempted her, but she was terribly unsure.

Oh God, she was so afraid!

“Christine?” Meg’s soft voice reached her. How long had she and Erik been locked in the throes of their music? With him, time held no meaning. Christine lifted dazed eyes to the window and found the darkening shadows of dusk. The faint gargling in her belly reminded her that it had been a long time since this morning’s porridge.

"Here, Meg," she replied, rising on shaky legs.

A pale head peered around the corner and Christine uttered a snort of startled laughter. Meg's
beautiful hair had been replaced with a ridiculous towering wig, complete with its own model of a wrecked ship, moored between fluffy white curls. Her face was painted with thick stage cosmetics, bleaching her as pale as a ghost and exaggerating the lines of brow and lash with heavy black. Her mouth was painted in a pert bow, and the dress . . . she was drowning in flounces and ruffled petticoats, all in various pastel hues.

*Ill Muto*, Christine thought. *The winter's production.*

"What happened to you? Were you mobbed by a gaggle of demented cosmeticians?" Christine teased. Meg wrinkled her nose disdainfully.

"Is that any way to speak to a Countess? Kiss my hand, you knave!" her voice was airy, and trilled in a precise imitation the Countess de Chambourg's sophisticated accent. Meg's theatricality and knack for impression had always been a secret envy of Christine's. She made friends so easily, both the corps and the chorus adored her, while they often forgot Christine's name because of her paralyzing shyness. Beyond the two Girys, there was no one in the world that cared for her—except Erik.

Christine laughed and made a show of floundering through the layers of lace fringing her sleeve. She pecked a kiss on the back of Meg's hand. Meg laughed and threaded her arm through Christine's.

"There is no way I could dance in this getup, but I wanted to try it on." She swayed, showing off the yards of pale pink fabric that formed the pleated skirt.

"Do I really look that bad?"

"I'm sure from the boxes you look like a vision, but from here . . ." Christine grimaced. Meg's lower lip painted a garish red, pouted, though her eyes gleamed with amusement. Together they made their way from the music room, delicately picking their way down the narrow spiral stairs, nearly smothered by Meg's dress.

"*Maman* was worried when you didn't return for supper. How was your lesson with the Phantom?"

Reminded of the intensity of their connection, Christine blushed. It terrified and humbled her . . . whatever it was that existed between her and her teacher.

"It was . . . amazing."

Meg's startlingly dark eyebrow rose, a wide smile stretching her lips. Meg pulled Christine into the store room where she began to shed her pilfered costume. While she dressed, Meg offered her some bread and cheese left over from supper.

"Amazing?" she repeated, "do tell!"

Between bites, Christine struggled to articulate what had transpired and the twisted tangle of fear and joy she felt.

"It feels like I'm . . ."

"Standing at the edge of a cliff, about to jump, and you don't know how deep the water is?" Meg supplied, eyes sparkling. Christine nodded, leaning forward.

"And when we sing together . . . I feel like I can fly. What does it mean? I feel so afraid."
"Of course it's scary. That's why they call it 'falling in love,' silly!"

XXX

When Minette appeared, brow furrowed in an expression of perplexed dismay, Erik accepted his protégé's absenteeism without a murmur. He had been a perfect beast; punishing her for his hurt feelings. What a surprise, he had pushed her away. It was a particular talent of his. Experience didn't improve the feeling, no, instead Erik felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He slumped forward, hiding his face in his hands. What was he to do if he couldn't even be her teacher?

Minette's small, cool hand alighted on his shoulder in a rare physical gesture of comfort. His throat closed and Erik covered her hand with his own. Resignation warred with grief and Erik unfolded his long limbs from their hunched, defeated position. He would hear her rejection from her own lips. Let her be the one to send him away! She owed him that, at least.

"Erik, where are you going?" Minette called after him.

"I must speak with her!"

Erik followed the peculiar sixth sense that tied him to her; the subtle inner ringing led him up, to the roof. Thick, cloying heat embraced him, the blazing afternoon light stabbing his eyes. The air was hot and torpid, a smothering blanket over the city as a long July day droned on. Christine sat at the base of Apollo's lyre, staring sightlessly across the cityscape.

"Christine."

She uttered a soft gasp as she jumped to her feet, one hand splayed at the base of her throat.

"Maestro! Wha—What are you doing here? How did you find me?" Erik shrugged.

"How is that you are able to sense my presence even if you cannot see me? We are linked, you and I, by music." Possessive heat crackled in his tone, and he glimpsed the flicker of fear in her face. Anger, hurt and sadness formed a thorny knot in his chest and he found it difficult to breathe around its shape.

He retreated a step, shifting his gaze to the city beyond in an effort to distract himself. It was so rare for him to see it under the sun's piercing light. Living so many years on the fringes of humanity, he had learned swiftly to hide under night's soft veil. The bright light revealed both the strengths and the flaws in every building, and Erik found a fresh beauty in Paris' nakedness.

"Tell me, Christine, is your health poor?" he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, saw her pressed flat against the base of Apollo's lyre, as if afraid he would jump on her. A clawing grief seized him. Why did she shrink away? Surely she knew he would never harm her!

"No, Maestro."

"Is there some conflict with your obligations to the ballet or the chorus?"

"No, Maestro."

"Then why do you continue to cancel your lessons and waste my valuable time? I do not enjoy being yanked around like a dog on a leash! If you have some grievance with me, by all means, voice it! Or, if you wish to desist with the lessons entirely, do not send the good Madame Giry to me like a royal emissary, simply tell me and be done with it!"
Erik closed the distance between them and braced his hands on the stone on either side of her head, caging her within the prison of his arms. His heart was thundering on so loud, he wondered if she could hear it. Good God, she was trembling! A part of him wanted to fall on his knees and beg for her forgiveness, but he ignored the lure. He would have his answer!

"Is that what you want?" he said huskily, "to sever the bond between us?"

Her eyes were so wide and terrified, pools of rich brown that threatened to draw him in, swallow him in their limpid depths.

"No, Maestro," she whispered.

"Then what do you want?"

By God, what do you want? I will move Heaven and earth to bring it to pass.

Something flickered in her wide gaze, an entirely unexpected kindling of anger. Her dark brows snapped together, her chin jutted in defiance.

"Do you wish to compare slights, Erik? Let's. Why did you pretend to be the Angel of Music that my father promised? Why did you spend your valuable time tutoring me all these years? Why did you leave me all those weeks ago? Why did you let me think that I had offended you? Why did you reveal yourself to me at all? You never asked if I wanted it—what if I don't want to be a prima donna like Carlotta?"

Erik stood stunned by this splendid animation, this vivid manifestation of feelings he hadn't known she had.

He frowned.

"Christine, it would be the gravest of sins to squander a gift of the caliber of your voice!" Erik stared dumbstruck as the chocolate depths of Christine's eyes softened, melted.

"If that is so, then what about your voice, Erik? You made me believe that angels graced the earth with your voice. It is an abomination then to deny it to world."

Erik grew very still.

When he spoke, his voice was deadly soft, a threat woven of velvet and silk.

"An abomination? It is unwise to bandy about that word so glibly, my dear. I've been called that before—by priests, nobles, even the crudest of peasants, all because of the horror of my face." a gasp left her lips, one hand lifting to cover her mouth. Her eyes shone. Was she weeping for him? Pierced by the image, Erik showed her his back, eyes wandering restlessly over the Parisian cityscape.

"As for denying the world my voice, let's just say that it was quite the other way around."

Once, he had aspired to teach the world, to fill it with enough light and music to drown out darkness and pain. Persia had crushed out the dying ember of that hope—until Christine had opened her mouth and glory spilled forth.

"On the matter of impersonating the Angel of Music, I have already explained my sentiments at length. I do not need to reiterate them," the words were hard and sharp-edged, like a stone knife.
"So that is the only reason you tutor me? For my voice?" her tone matched his in sharpness, and Erik turned to face her, perplexed. He smiled thinly.

"I sense a trap. What answer would you most like to hear, child?" the smooth white column of throat shivered as she swallowed. Erik's eyes fixed on a drop of sweat meandering down the smooth line of her jaw.

"The truth." He made a derisive sound in his throat.

"Truth? Truth is a matter of perspective."

"Erik, please."

It was the third time she had used his name, and even in the heat of the moment, he relished the sound of it on her lips. He would hoard these moments like a miser, something to linger over and treasure in the timeless hours of his midnight kingdom. He was undone by her plea.

"No, I do not only tutor you for your voice, though it is without peer. You must know that you have given me great joy in your years as my pupil. I am proud of your dedication to your art, and to learning. No other ballet rat had to learn to speak and read Italian, but you never complained."

The lessons in question were a source of agony for her, he remembered. A natural polyglot himself, he often forgot how difficult learning a new language was for others, even for Christine, who was already bilingual. Christine laughed a high, soft sound that made every corner of his heart dance with joy. She rolled her eyes in exaggerated horror.

"Not aloud, at least! You were a very exacting tutor, Maestro, merciless in the face of my atrocious accent." Erik smiled.

"La Carlotta's warbling does not do it justice. Italiano is a very musical language and many of the world's finest operas are written in it. Much of its magic is lost in translation."

"Sí, sono d'accordo, è bello." Christine said.

"Bravissima, mia cara," he murmured.

Through all the intimacy of mind and of music over their years together, Erik could not recall a moment like this one—a moment tinged with humor and camaraderie, all tension and urgency forgotten. It was more precious than gold to him. But the sweetness was fleeting, like the caress of a ghost, and Erik watched the smile fall from Christine's lips with a pang of dismay. She shifted her gaze up to the dramatic sweep of Pegasus' spread wings.

"Your lessons were the light of my childhood. You sang to comfort a lonely child, and gave her art and knowledge. But now that you're a man, not an angel . . ." She turned to face him, uncertainty evident in the nervous gesture of twisting her mother's silver ring on her little finger. But her eyes were direct, blazing with conviction. Erik tensed, waiting for condemning words.

"Everything is on your terms. I . . . I would just like a say in some things, that's all." Erik arched a brow.

"Oh? In what manner may I accommodate you?" his tone was laden with dread. Her white teeth flashed as she gnawed on her lower lip.

"I would like to see your home." The vague suggestion of a smile touched his lips. Perhaps her demands wouldn't be so terrifying.
"That could be arranged. I must hire a housekeeper first; it is a bachelor's house, after all. And there is the lake...hmm. I do hope she doesn't mind getting wet." The dry humor in his tone educed another trill of laughter and Erik had the wild desire to do something utterly foolish to make her laugh again.

"Is there anything else?"

"Just one more thing." Christine's eyes darkened, trapping him in warm, serious regard.

"I want you to stop extorting money from poor Lefavre. It isn't right. With all you do for the Populaire, there is no reason why you cannot earn a...honest salary from the managers. You could negotiate face to face." Erik's eyes narrowed.

"'Poor Lefavre' indeed! Christine, if you knew half of what the man has done, then—"

"Erik. Please."

All of his anger deflated. One simple entreaty, judicious use of his given name, ah, how could he deny her? He smiled gently, longing to brush his knuckles along the curve of her cheek, comb that wayward curl behind her ear.

"Does my salary vex you so?" She nodded solemnly.

"I will think on it."

The smile she gifted him with was like a rose's petals unfurling under the sun's gentle persuasion. It was well worth twenty thousand francs a month.

XXX

Even after their earnest conversation on the roof, Erik was pacing the length of Carlotta's shabby former dressing room the next night. Even the Phantom of the Opera, lord of the Opera House and mastermind extortionist, could not predict the moods of an adolescent girl with any surety.

With that sobering thought, the door opened and Minette appeared. Erik's jaw clenched, but his tension eased when Minette gifted him with a rare smile, displaying matching curves of small white teeth. She moved with her quiet, dignified grace that still held the faint, flamboyant bounce of her dancing days and held the door for their shared charge. There was a subtler artistry of movement in Christine, Erik noted with an artist's keen gaze. Petite and coltishly slender, she glided through space with a curious abstraction, as if listening for her soul's music.

"Good evening, Maestro," she murmured. Erik grasped the hem of his cape and swept into an extravagant bow.

"I remain, ladies, your most obedient servant."

Grinning, Minette replied, "Such fine manners, Monsieur Opera Ghost! Where did you find time to learn them between frightening my ballet corps and using set pieces to terrorize La Carlotta?"

Erik scowled in mock irritation.

"The incident with her spaniel she brought upon herself. No Opera Ghost worth his salt would allow that spoiled little tart to make a mess on the stage!"

"The spaniel or La Carlotta?" Christine asked with utter innocence. The statement was so
unexpected and absurd that Erik laughed aloud.

"There is scarcely a distinction, is there?" Christine giggled. Out of the corner of his eye, he recognized the smug look on Minette's face as she looked between him and Christine. Congratulating herself on the stroke of sheer brilliance that prompted her to browbeat Erik into revealing his humanity, he supposed. Clearing his throat, he reached behind his back and activated the mirror's mechanism. Cool, damp air seeped from the narrow aperture, the gate to the Underworld.

"Shall we, my dear?"

Christine nodded, that shy, serious smile stretching her lips.

"Ten o'clock, Erik, and not a minute later," Minette reminded sharply.

"Ten o' clock, Madame. Though don't wait up. Clocks are hard to come by in my home."

Minette's eyes narrowed even as her smile betrayed her.

"Don't be late."

He let her have the last word, pushing the mirror along its runners and revealing the dank, dripping interior of the tunnel to his home. It offended his magician's sensibilities to reveal the passage's crude reality, but honesty without artifice was one of Minette's conditions, damn her. He turned to Christine and offered his hand—the first physical contact he had ever offered. A lifetime of rejection had taught him brutal lessons illuminating an impersonal world without even the simplest comfort of touch. The starving thing inside him that craved it still hadn't died.

He waited in an agony of hesitancy... her small, cool hand alighted on his, her oval nails shining like fish scales. His fingers curled possessively over hers, and he wished the barrier of his gloves were removed, so he could sample the heady feeling of skin on skin. Not relinquishing his hold on her hand, Erik slammed the mirror shut, locking the mechanism with a faint click. He plucked the gas lamp from the hook just within the tunnel's interior.

"Come."

XXX

The warm, firm contact of Erik's hand in hers, the searing look in his eye as he looked back at her, illuminated in a wash of gold anchored her to reality. This was surely a dream, being whisked away to the Phantom's lair beneath the Opera! Christine could scarcely believe her own boldness on the roof yesterday. All but shouting at him, demanding to have a say. Was Meg right? Was she really falling in love with Erik? Her own feelings were such a confused muddle that she could give no definitive answer.

The poignancy of his words yesterday struck her. They illuminated how dark and cruel his life had been and she was honored by the vulnerability he revealed in voicing it. The sound of his laugh rang in her inner ear, so rich and musical, filling the world with color.

Excitement raced through her now, hammering swiftly with her heartbeat.

The cold, embracing darkness of the tunnel did not fill her head with childish nightmares of leering shapes in the dark, not with Erik's hand in hers. Christine felt uplifted, energized, the faint cobweb of weariness brushed aside. A great staircase spiraled down into the very bowels of earth, a cold breeze smelling of moldering earth and fetid water wafting up. Forlorn posters of years-old operas
rippled in that icy wind, their cheerful colors faded to indistinguishable shades of brown. Erik led her in silence and normally Christine would have poked and prodded for conversation, if only to hear the lilt of his heavenly voice. But this silence held a different savor, one she couldn't quite identify and dared not mar.

Her feet began to ache as they descended the last stair and began down a tunnel that widened into a shallow ramp, lit by sconces of candles. Moisture thickened the air and condensed in diamond trails on the stone. A horse stood tethered, neat black ears pricked in interest. Christine glanced at Erik.

"Christine, this is César, a stallion of the finest Persian lines. Hold out your hand, let him smell you." She did as he asked, her mind chewing on this new knowledge. Persia! Had Erik been to Persia? The huge animal ambled over to her, his gleaming muscles coiling under black satin skin like oiled rope. Warm, damp breath fluttered over her palm in a delicate caress and César gifted her with a gentle nudge.

Erik knelt and offered his woven fingers for her to mount. In one fluid movement, she was settled sidesaddle on the great animal's wide back. Christine clung to handfuls of glossy black mane as César followed the gentle tug of Erik's hand on his rein. To make the journey even more surreal, Christine glimpsed a gondola moored on the banks of a lake!

Eyes wide with wonder, she smiled down at Erik from her perch on César. He returned with a nonchalant shrug and a token curving of lips. The white silk lining of his cape rippled as he spread his arms. Christine's hands shook as they alighted on the solid curves of his shoulders, but with nerves or simple cold she wasn't sure. Her breath misted in the chill. How strange! It was the height of summer above ground. How was it so cold down here?

But he was warm.

The force of his body's heat seared her hand through layers of cloth. Erik lifted her from César's saddle with no discernable effort and lowered her to the ground, her body brushing his and setting nerves afire. Christine peered at him through the veil of her lashes and found his stormy eyes keen. The cadence of her breathing quickened, her heartbeat fluttering. Erik broke the moment by leaping with agile grace into the gondola, the craft barely rocking. He offered his hand again, which she took, passionately grateful for his help. Falling into a lake with an ignominious splash and the subsequent panic and sputtering was not the triumphant chord she wanted for this magical night.

Seated on silk cushions, she resisted the urge to laugh in delight as Erik poled the gondola down the narrow canals, revealing ghoulish carvings of grimacing faces, and the torsos of Atlas holding up the roof. A portcullis loomed and before her wondering eyes, it rose, the lower rungs clotted with filth. Candelabras rose gracefully from the water, their wicks blazing to life of their own will. Erik's realm was one of wonder and magic and Christine was content to absorb its secrets.

XXX

No soul had ever breached the sacred realm of his home, save Minette. And now his beloved Christine was gracing his kingdom with her beauty and her sweetness, each thing she touched made sacred. Erik watched from his organ bench as she wandered, first peering at his scale replica of the theater, then wandering over to his architect's slanted desk, and the building sketches on the walls, camouflaging the countless representations of her. A secret obsession, he reflected, an element of the landscape of his fantasies, hidden behind the thinnest of veneers. If she cared to look, cared to see . . .

"Your home is beautiful, Maestro. Truly," she said, her voice reverberating of the walls.
"Thank you, Christine. I find it . . . tranquil," he replied.

Tranquility, privacy, solitude—the qualities that made his home so attractive upon returning from Persia made them a prison now. His angel could not stay here. She deserved light and freedom, the feel of the sun on her face. Christine wandered to his side, leaning over his shoulder to look at the score on his organ. She was not touching him, but her hair draped across his shoulder, caressing the curve of his jaw with its soft warmth. If he turned his head, he could set his lips at the leaping pulse point on the underside of her jaw.

"Don Juan Triumphant. Oh, is this a new work, Maestro? Will you play it for me?" her eyes shone with interest, reaching out to trace across the staves. Erik shot to his feet, snatching the thick sheaf of paper from her.

"Absolutely not! You may not even touch it, Christine. It's dangerous." A frown marred Christine's brow.

"Dangerous? How can music be dangerous?"

Erik ignored her, tucking the manuscript into a drawer and returning to the organ bench. His gaze flicked over her, a discreet clearing of his throat shooing her from the bench. He caught the flash of hurt in her eyes, but her presence here discomfitted as well as elated him. To have her here, in the one place he felt safe . . . Erik found he was distinctly uncomfortable. His fingers rested lightly on the keys.

"You mentioned yesterday that I did not consult your opinion during my tenure as your tutor. Forgive me, but I thought it a moot point." Two spots of color blazed on Christine's high cheekbones.

"I do wish to sing, Maestro. It is only . . ."

"What, my dear?" he prompted. Christine smiled tremulously.

"I despise Carlotta's . . . smugness. I'm just afraid that if I do take the stage I will become like her or worse, I could . . ." She lapsed into embarrassed silence.

"Truth, remember?" Erik said gently. Her entire posture seemed to shrink, as if she wished to melt into the floor.

"I could disappoint you," she whispered. She made such a heartbreaking portrait that Erik rose with the intention of embracing her. He stopped short just in time, settling instead for a tender smile.

"Impossible. You could never disappoint me. You honor me simply by being who you are. As to La Carlotta, her fits of histrionics are made to mask a deep feeling of inadequacy and insecurity. You have more talent in your little finger than she could every hope to have, and yet are humble and gentle in spirit. The world will fall at your feet and worship you as you deserve."

Every muscle and sinew in his body tensed as Christine threw her arms around his torso. Body, mind and heart were in perfect accord: this was perfection. The tickling caress of her hair under his chin and the soft scent of violets wafting from it, the delicious solid warmth of her body against his. Every cell of his body rejoiced.

Oh Christine . . .

His arms rose to encircle her back under the warm cascade of her hair. Tears pricked his eyes.
Is this happiness? This breathless rapture? This joy that fizzles like champagne bubbles in the blood?

"Thank you, Erik," she whispered, her cheek pressed against his chest, her breath a warm, damp caress through the layers of his clothing.

Erik waited, careful to keep his hold light, neutral when every instinct screamed to cling and press her tight against the heart that was lost to her. He waited until he could speak without sobbing in joy, passionately grateful she could not see his face. A snide voice sneered at his pathetic ineptitude, but was too busy wallowing in this simple hug to care.

"Y—you are quite welcome."

All too soon, she pulled back and Erik strove to collect himself. His arms fell slack to his sides, bereft without her. He mustered what he hoped was a casual smile.

"Thanks to the good Madame Giry, our time is very short. Let us begin your lesson. Begin with a seven-note scale in C-minor."
Two years flew by in a blur of frenetic activity. Erik hurled himself into the building of the manor, spending many weeks and francs on restoring its former glory. *Don Juan Triumphant* was a cancer in his bones, eating him alive. He acknowledged that it was not the merit of the work, or even the architecture of his fantasies that drove him like a beleaguered horse under its coachmaster's whip. It was a frantic attempt to keep him busy. The distance gave him room to breathe, work to occupy his mind and hands, *anything* to distract him from the addiction more dangerous than morphine: Christine.

She was his singular obsession, greater even than the bondage that tied him to music. Christine—the central axis of his universe.

More than once he was tempted to spirit her away to his home and keep her there, where at last he would reveal the truth of his affections, and present her with his ring and his heart. But always, as the words flew to his lips, or his hands trembled with the urge to touch her, he would remember Minette. His brave friend whose reserved nature hid a warm and gentle heart, she loved Christine as a daughter and cherished her purity. Erik fisted his hands on his knees, staring sightlessly out of the brougham's window as Parisian traffic inched by. He would sacrifice his own soul before he became a Don Juan in fact and ruined Christine.

Even if her beauty was driving him out of his mind.

His beloved white rose had grown thorns. She confounded, confused and challenged him at every turn. One minute their voices would fuse into an entity of living beauty, the next she would defy his will. In her presence he was in a constant state of disquiet, a penitent who had once been king. *Maestro*, she called him. What a mockery it was! His affliction was of no end amusing to Minette, who snickered into her handkerchief watching him pace and rant.

The brougham pulled into the Cirque de l'Opéra and Erik disembarked. He suppressed a snort at the sight of the poster for the opera's new production. *Hannibal*, a favorite of La Carlotta's. Perhaps because it so easily mimicked her true life, Erik thought bitterly, she played Elissa, a narcissistic, vain little princess and the lover of Hannibal, who was a married man. Piangi was married unhappily to Italian nobility and was notorious for his gambling and his drinking. The embodiment of personal vice were that pair.

Erik slipped into the stables and noted the fine carriage and white horses nibbling on hay, liquid dark eyes regarding him with supercilious disdain. Lefavre's replacements were due. These junk men, Firmin and André, were variables—variables that made Erik uncomfortable. He enjoyed his roles as Phantom and Opera Ghost, lucrative and mysterious as they were. Despite Christine's plea, Erik had yet to relinquish his salary. He needed every franc for the manor. Lefavre's tired abdication challenged the status quo. He must assert his authority and rein them in before they took any grandiose ideas of ownership over *his* opera. Tonight, Christine would take the stage as was her divine right! He would make it so if he had to drop a set piece on Carlotta's vain head!
"Christine Daae can sing it, sir." Madame volunteered and Christine stared at her warden with a look of shocked betrayal. How could Madame say such a thing? Christine wasn't ready. She knew in her bones she wasn't ready. She would disappoint him! The diminutive grey-haired manager's pig-like eyes darted over her.

"What, a chorus girl? Don't be silly," he said, sweeping a negligent gesture as if to physically discard Madame's suggestion.

"She has been taking lessons from a great teacher," Madame said, giving Christine's arm a gentle squeeze, of encouragement, Christine supposed, though she scarcely felt encouraged being put on the spot like this! Lips thinned an expression of exaggerated patience, André demanded, "Who?"

Christine squirmed under the combined attention of Messieurs André, Firmin, Reyer, and Lefavre, not to mention Madame, Meg and half of the opera!

"Erik," she whispered miserably.

"Erik what?" Firmin pressed.

"Erik," Christine repeated, looking to Madame for assistance. She glanced at her audience and caught the awed look shared by Reyer and Lefavre.

"You are Monsieur Erik's student?" Lefavre asked. Christine nodded.

"Who is this Erik fellow?" André snapped.

"He's only the greatest composer to have ever graced this opera!" Reyer enthused, black eyes shining with approval. Lefavre nodded in agreement.

"If you are ever lucky enough to get another of his works, you'll have a queue out the door, some from as far as La Scala."

"Let her sing for you, Monsieur. She has been well taught," Madame insisted. The junk men shared a long look and finally André shrugged.

"All right. Come along then."

Christine's throat felt as barren as a desert, her mind bereft of any note or chord. The words, Holy Virgin, she couldn't even remember the lyrics! Madame swept her hand in another dubiously encouraging gesture and Christine's suddenly dry, sticky tongue darted out to wet her lips. Reyer hurried to his place and tapped his baton. Faintly, the leading chords began to play and something brushed the edges of her perception, a delicate caress of souls. All of the tension ebbed from her.

He was here.

He was with her.

Recognizing the touch of its master, her voice soared through the notes with ease.

 Damn Raoul de Chagny! Erik thought, fuming impotently in the hollow pillar of Box Five. That golden-haired fop, that callow boy, the Populaire's new patron and a bloody Vicomte, had taken his
box on the night of Christine's triumph—their triumph! She sang for him!

The gentle building of the orchestra's melody reached him through the layers of stone and plaster that separated him from his protégé. Her voice flowed like a river of living, liquid silver, bathing him in the beauty of her soul. That aristocratic simpleton was rapt, mouth hanging open, giving a very fair imitation of an ox struck with a pole axe.

*Think of me, think of me waking*

*Silent and resigned*

*Imagine me trying too hard to put you from my mind . . .*

A tidal wave of applause tore the cocoon of hushed silence, a spontaneous burst of adoration for the perfection of her aria. His spirit was entwined in the notes, bound inextricably with her voice. They were one. A rush of satisfaction washed over him. Those insipid crowds cheering for her, blind and mute in the thrall of her beauty, they paid homage to him as well, the one they had spurned and hated from the day he was born.

*Recall those days, look back on all those times*

*Think of the things we'll never do*

*There will never be a day when I won't think of you!*

The blond fop leaned against the velvet railing of the box, a look of revelation on his striking features.

*Can it be? Can it be Christine?*

The Vicomte had a decent tenor, Erik noted clinically. Icy fingers wrapped around Erik's heart. He knew Christine? Where would a boy of the French aristocracy ever cross paths with the daughter of a Swedish violinist? Oh God, this brat with his epicurean parents to indulge him, his wealth, his accursed handsomeness, and this mysterious history with Christine . . . The combination resulted in a rival. Hardly a rival, he reflected bitterly, that implied competition for Christine's affections, a desire he had never dared voice.

The boy burst to his feet, clapping ecstatically, then bouncing out of the box with a stupidly happy smile on his perfect face. Erik dismissed the boy, and the worrying potential of his stake in Christine's heart. He would not abandon his Angel in the moment of her triumph! He emerged from his hiding place and sat in the shadows of Box Five, viscerally pierced by the sight of her in Elissa's ethereal white gown.

*Flowers fade, the fruits of summer fade*

*They have their season, so do we*

*But please promise me that sometime*

*You will think . . .*

The orchestra paused, unsure of the slowing of tempo. The theater was utterly silent save for the lilt of Christine's voice. The silver incandescence softened into a gentle playfulness and Erik laughed breathlessly.
Ah, my love! What a marvelous cadenza! Erik thought.

Reyer caught the gist of her intentions and chimed the finale perfectly.

*Of me!*

He heard the tread of a step on the plush carpet behind him and turned to find Minette. Hazel eyes flickered over him, taking in his easy posture and the marked lack of the Vicomte's corpse.

"No, Minette, I did not kill him. I was sorely tempted, but I did not," he said with a tolerant smile. As the opera house erupted into rapturous applause and shouted compliments, Erik felt a vicarious buoying of mood.

"Why are you here?" he asked. She gave a Gallic shrug.

"I came to inform the Vicomte that the box had already been rented."

"In the third act, Minette? Hardly. You came to protect him from my wrath." His light tone and easy manner educed a slight smile.

"Perhaps. It seems my fear was unfounded."

Erik made a noncommittal sound in his throat. He would not tell Minette that she needn't fear for the boy's safety. That remained to be seen. Instead, he produced a rose from his vest pocket.

"Give this to Christine. Tell her that I am very pleased."

Minette accepted the token with a lifted brow.

"Will you not tell her yourself, Erik?"

Erik's eyes wandered as if magnetized from Minette to Christine, who blushed and beamed amidst piles of thrown flowers, eyes scanning the crowds restlessly. She was looking for him among the blur of faces, listening for his approval amidst the shouted cheers from her adoring crowd. Erik's heart swelled with love.

De Chagny would not take her from him! Erik would become his rival in fact tonight!

Across the theater, the cheers from the manager's box reached him.

"Brava! Magnifica! Stupenda!" bellowed the brash André in a horrific accent, while Firmin's narrow black gaze was fixed on Christine with a burning intensity that made Erik's stomach turn. He would attend to them later. For now . . .

"I will visit her shortly."

The Vicomte's appearance acted a spur to his long-held desire.

The decision was made.

Tonight would be the night of Persephone's abduction!

XXX

Christine rested her pounding head against the cool wood of the vanity's surface, grateful for a moment of quiet, thanks to Madame Giry, and even more grateful to be free of that stifling costume.
and in a modest gown of sapphire velvet. Her throat tingled with a pleasant strain, arms quivering from the heaping bouquets laid in her arms, ears ringing with applause and incessant yammering of 'Miss Daae!'

She and Erik had spent years preparing for this moment, the moment of their triumph, but still she was overwhelmed with the sudden burden of fame.

_Erik!_ Christine thought. Of late, the Opera Ghost's incidents had taken a violent turn. And now, now that he had threatened the new managers and nearly done Carlotta bodily harm . . . Christine had always loved watching the way he moved, but now she realized what lay behind the slinking predator's grace: _danger_! Madame's warning was deafening in her ears.

The soft fragrance of roses reached her nose. With a sigh, Christine straightened, frowning at the sight of his token. How could she smell only Erik's gift among all the others? Her head swam with the combined scents. Amidst garish bouquets of pink and white, his rose distinguished itself with its stark elegance and simplicity.

But why had he told Madame Giry to bring it to her? Why not give it himself? A pleasant fission of mirth spread through her at the thought Erik outside her dressing room door with the gaggle of admirers and sycophants, lording over them in his dark evening dress and staring down his long nose at them. Another thought occurred to her, quelling the amusement like the chill of a cold sweat. Christine rubbed her upper arms, gooseflesh stippling her skin. What if she had disappointed him?

"No," Christine whispered.

_Madame said he was pleased with me. I sang for him tonight. Didn't he hear it?"

_Where is he?_

His was the only praise she craved, the only smile that would make her heart flutter.

The door handle turned. Christine straightened on the stool, eyes fastened to the point where Erik would appear . . . and was obliged to drop her gaze several inches to meet Raoul's eye.

"Raoul!" she exclaimed.

"Good evening, Little Lotte. It has been too long," he said, flashing a white smile.

"Do you remember me? Those picnics in the attic when we read to each other?" He knelt beside the vanity chair, laying his own gaudy pink bouquet of lilies and freesias on the table.

"With Father playing the violin? Yes, I remember." Christine said, smiling at the fond summer spent by the sea.

"I remember you well, Little Lotte. That hair, those brown eyes. The rest has changed a bit."

"As charming as you were at eleven, saving my scarf, Monsieur," Christine replied tartly.

His intent perusal and familiar manner unnerved her. It had been over ten years since they had seen each other! She berated the silly, twittering part of herself that fawned over his attention. Raoul's thin, mobile mouth lent an air of sensitivity to his charming blond good looks, and his hands were long and aristocratic, nails filed to smooth ovals. If her words irritated him, he gave no sign. Raoul rose and stepped back.
"Forgive me, Miss Daae, I have been extremely rude and offended your modesty. Perhaps I may earn such familiarity over supper." Christine searched his face and tone for an iota of teasing or sarcasm. She found nothing but sky-blue eyes framed by blond lashes, wide and guileless.

Christine twisted her mother's ring around her little finger, contemplating Erik's rose. Supper with Raoul . . . it was such a simple thing, just a casual meeting of old friends. A small voice said that he was not likely to see it that way, but she ignored it. If he wished to see her, he should have come for her himself! She sniffed primly, turning up her nose.

"I'd love to," Christine said. Raoul's luminous smile sent a warm rush of pleasure through her, as did the unexpected kiss on the cheek.

"On the off chance that you said yes, I had my man order my carriage. Where would you like to go?"

She stood, nervously brushing her skirts, feeling a leaden judgment emanating from the silent mirror.

"I have no preference." Raoul threaded her arm through his and winked roguishly, eliciting a soft giggle.

"I know just the place."

XXX

The marble bust struck the mirror with a satisfying crash and an explosion of glittering fragments. Erik's unmasked face leered in the fractured pieces, hair in wild disarray, cravat askew, and coat with a long tear down one arm. His ragged breathing reverberated off the walls. The natural euphoric joy he felt with Christine's triumph had come crashing down when he went to her dressing room and found it empty, when he saw her leaving on the arm of that damned boy! Like with morphine, the euphoria didn't last long.

Erik's eyes sought something else to destroy—the hot, maddened thing in his chest wasn't satisfied yet. He whirled around to face the wall—the shrine—of drawings he'd built of Christine. Wild anguish clawed at his chest, and he seized a wad of parchment, intending on setting it alight. Then eight-year-old Christine's cherubic face stared back at him, eyes creased into crescents as she laughed. Not the woman he craved beyond all reason, but the child he had cosseted and indulged and adored.

Erik replaced the drawing and took up the gondola pole and brought it down with an almighty crack on his organ bench. The creak of weakened wood was like blood to a shark, he pressed the weakness and under the next blow, the abused furniture collapsed into splinters. He snapped the pole in half over his knee and threw the pieces aside. He kicked a candelabra into the lake, swept a hand across his architect's desk watching papers flutter and pens bounce with vicious approval. His breathing was hitching oddly, the tickle of hot moisture on his face. And where was that awful keening noise coming from?

His logical brain presented the answer. The noise was coming from him.

He was sobbing.

Erik swiped his face viciously. Morphine called to him, promising relief. Erik was growing increasingly jaded to her siren calls, and though the compulsion had not waned, Erik had succeeded
in diluting the dose to a tolerable level. No, tonight he needed César’s speed and strength, the sting of the wind in his face. Erik had the presence of mind and the bizarre sense of vanity to tie on a black bandit’s mask and change his coat before thundering off into the night and the cold. César was spoiling for a good run, and the two of them were in one perfect agreement thundering across the Bois, swerving to avoid statuary and clusters of foliage.

At long last, César’s great strength began to wane and Erik eased him to a canter, then a walk. He rewarded César with a pat on his damp muscular neck. Threads of silver peppered the sable of César’s mane. Neither of them was young and green anymore.

"Not bad for such a middle-aged pair, eh?" Erik murmured.

"Quite. You should consider racing him. You would rake in purses."

Erik flinched, twisting in the saddle to find a man seated at the lip of a fountain, gloved fingers idly trailing in the water. He reined César around and urged him closer. It would be mannerly to introduce himself, Erik thought as he stroked the Punjab lasso up his sleeve. But killing this anonymous fool and imagining de Chagny in his place would also be very satisfying . . . it had been years since he'd used the lasso, but killing was like riding a bike, one never really lost the knack.

"Forgive me, sir, I did not see you there."

A dry, wheezing chuckle emanated from the man.

"I thought not. You were riding as if the devil himself was at your heels." Erik clenched his jaw. The man's accent was familiar. Had Erik been in a clearer frame of mind, he would remember it . . .

"The hour is a bit late to be out alone, is it not?" even a dullard like this man could hear the veiled threat in Erik's tone. But the dark shapes of his shoulders lifted as he shrugged.

"I've heard tell of a ghost that rides through here some nights on a stallion as black as Death. I came to see for myself."

"Devils and ghosts? Do you truly believe in that mystical rubbish?"

"Frenchmen as a rule are a very excitable bunch; everything is either haunted or in the providence of some obscure saint." The man paused.

"Besides, a wise man taught me the merits of artifice."

Erik went cold, frozen solid by shock.

The man had spoken in Persian. He rose and stepped closer, revealing the pale brown of his skin, the knowing dark eyes, the unbearably familiar face.

"Nadir?"

The ghost smiled.

"Hello, Erik."
Even after ten years, Nadir recognized the queer feeling of having his back to his dark friend, unable to hear the sound of his step and painfully aware that he had left his pistol back at his flat. Under the promise of answering questions out of the night's frigid embrace, Nadir had begun walking. Erik trailed after him like a ghost; the only sound was the heavy, ringing clop of César's steel-shod hooves as he followed his master like a dog. They must have made a strange sight, two men walking single file in the dead of night with a horse trailing after them as if begging for a treat!

Erik was as beleaguered by demons as ever, Nadir could smell it on him. But underneath the pain and anger was a heart as pure as diamond. That purity was why Nadir had risked the shah of Persia's wrath in saving Erik from imprisonment, torture and execution. They had escaped easily enough, and boarded a passenger ship that was also carrying several of a wealthy English noble's prized racehorses. All of their belongings, including Erik's César, were safe aboard a following barge. The subsequent tale was split into halves, and Nadir was eager to hear Erik's side.

He led Erik to the small flat that the remnant of his pension could afford, and Erik stabled César into the communal yard shared by carriage horses. Nadir led on until they were comfortably immured in his tiny study by the fire and the housekeeper brought tea and biscuits.

"You still take lemon with your tea, yes?" Nadir asked. Looking dazed, Erik nodded.

"Could we perhaps partake of something stronger?" he added. Nadir grinned and moved to the decanter and poured brandies for both of them. The Quran forbade the drinking of spirits, but his interpretation had relaxed in some areas during his travels.

The particular music of Erik's voice was not something one forgot, but fresh listening livened Nadir's memory to its subtleties. Was that faint hoarseness from present emotion or an outburst from earlier tonight? What was so terrible that his only outlet was escape? A faint prickle of fear scraped along Nadir's nerves. One of the conditions of his freedom was Erik's solemn promise never to kill again beyond the needs of self-defense. Had he broken his promise? Erik accepted his brandy and threw it back in one swig.

"So... resurrection, Daroga. Now that is a feat even I cannot boast of. However did you manage it?" he said. One ankle rested on his opposite knee and he leaned comfortably back in his chair. But for all his relaxed posture, Nadir knew it hid a deadly tension, like a cobra.

"What is the last you remember?" Nadir asked instead.

He caught the icy flash in Erik's eyes but remained implacable. Erik exhaled an irritated breath through his nostrils and replied, "That squalid ship was on fire. I had secured a boat to take the two of us to safety and you decided to run back after a screaming woman. I, of course, as the guardian of your tedious health, ran after you. A beam fell just as I began to enter and knocked me out. I woke in the water. By then, the ship was sinking. I swam to the barge and... questioned the captain as to the persons rescued. Without my mask, he found me very convincing." Nadir could only imagine what a soaked, battered and desperate Erik without his mask would do under interrogation circumstances.

"Of the handful remaining, there were three women and two toothless old men. I assumed you were lost." The forlornness of Erik's voice was a moving testament to the significance of their strange friendship and Nadir swallowed the knot in his throat with a sip of brandy.

"My story isn't very interesting, I'm afraid. I did manage to free the trapped woman—Sophia, if you care to know—but by the time we escaped the ship, the barge was already too far away to swim to or hail. We floated on pieces of wreckage until another ship picked us up. Sophia and I parted ways
in Sicily." Nadir looked up from his contemplation of his brandy snifter straight into the jagged grey-blue spires of Erik's sharp gaze.

"I did not know where you planned to travel and I had no idea if you had even survived. So I wandered for many years."

Nadir smiled faintly, six words encompassing years of rootless existence in lands populated with pale infidels and their Christian god where a mostly penniless foreigner like himself was at best treated with suspicion and disdain. His years abroad were not entirely wretched, there was much beauty in the world beyond Persia, and Nadir had seen much of it.

"I made my way here about a year ago. I frequent the Opera Populaire often, I hold a season ticket. I was curious to learn of the ghost that haunts that place." A flicker of amusement lit Erik's cold eyes and he laughed, a sound of honey and velvet.

"Right under my nose for years! You would make a better ghost than I, Daroga!" Nadir laughed with him and wondered how long it had been since he laughed. Nadir nibbled on a biscuit.

"So, my friend, what have you been up to? What had you in such a mood tonight?"

Erik bowed his head and was silent for a moment. When at last he lifted his cold eyes to Nadir's, the Daroga was stunned by the raw pain in them.

In his eyes, all the sadness of the world . . .

"Christine," he said.

Allah help him, he's fallen in love.

XXX

Time with Raoul flew past like a summer breeze. He was polite and charming, cultured and intelligent. Over a very fine supper, they discussed the merits of particular books and opera, of which he was an avid admirer.

"I must confess a particular relief, Christine," he murmured in a confidential whisper. Christine sipped wine, feeling slightly muddled. She and Meg had only ever snuck sips of champagne at the New Year's balls before Madame shooed them off to bed. This wine slipped into her blood and loosened gravity's hold on her.

"By all means, say on!" she encouraged with a wry grin. Raoul leaned across the table and Christine stifled a gasp as his lips brushed her ear.

"I am very grateful it was you who took the stage tonight. I couldn't bear to hear Signora Guidicelli torture me with another aria." Christine smothered her undignified snorts of laughter in her palm. The corners of Raoul's eyes crinkled into slender fans as he beamed a wide smile.

"Now you sound like Erik!" Christine said.

"And who is Erik?" Raoul drawled, taking a liberal sip from his own glass. Christine froze.

Erik. She was assaulted with the potent vision of Erik pacing behind the mirror, waiting, staring at the clock . . . Christine heard the clock chime and she waited in dawning horror as the clock
announced the hour. Midnight! She had meant to be back hours ago! Christine carefully set down her wine glass.

"I am very tired. I would like to return to the Populaire now." The narrow golden bands of Raoul's eyebrows snapped together.

"Of course, Christine. I'll order the carriage." Christine dismissed him with a distracted nod, in an agony of guilt. Her belly clenched in roiling waves of nausea.

She had to get home!

Raoul was the picture of concerned solicitousness as the carriage creaked and bumped down pot-hole ridden streets back to the Populaire. She waved off his concern, insisting that it was merely fatigue, and perhaps the prawns had not agreed with her. He gallantly offered to escort her to the dormitories, but Christine warded him off with the very real threat of what Madame Giry would do to him were he to bring her home at such a late hour.

Christine skittered across the foyer and through the deserted labyrinthine passageways to Madame Giry's chamber. Madame, her half moon spectacles perched on her nose, was reading a novel by the light of a gas lamp. She looked up as Christine burst through the door and dog-eared her page. Christine was convinced that it was impossible to catch Madame unawares, or to shake her unflappable calm.

"Has he come? Is he here?" Christine hissed, so as not to wake Meg, who slept in the next room.

Madame rose and led Christine into her office. A firm gesture toward a chair urged Christine to sit and she obeyed mutely. Madame took a simmering pot of tea from the heat and poured two cups. After years under Madame's tutelage, Christine knew that demands and questions would be met with a tranquil silence and would only prolong the agony of waiting. Christine's knee bounced in a nervous rhythm as she waited for Madame to stir a sugar into her tea and take a contemplative sip.

"You have returned late this evening, my dear." This oblique statement made Christine want to howl in frustration.

"Madame, please! I have to know: did he come looking for me?" Madame softened at the urgency in Christine's tone and patted her hand.

"Who, ma petit cherie? The Vicomte?"

"No, Erik!"

Madame frowned.

"I don't know. I have not seen Erik since the end of the production. I assumed he had come for you." Christine groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"What's wrong, Christine?" Madame demanded sharply. The story tumbled from Christine's lips and she watched in despair as Madame grew paler and more still. She rose, her fingers surreptitiously touching her crucifix, a sure sign of her agitation.

"Go get some rest, Christine. There is enough room in Meg's bed for the two of you."

"Where are you going?" Christine asked.

"To catch a ghost."
His Eyes Will Find Us There

"Love is a symbol of eternity. It wipes out all sense of time, destroying all memory of a beginning and all fear of an end."

-Author Unknown

The night was not a total disaster, Erik reflected. Sure, he had lost the love of his bloody life to that blond fop, but he had gained a friend from beyond the grave. It was so good to speak to the Daroga again, to find his wry humor and firm moral compass un tarnished by time and hardship. Good company and very good brandy—copious amounts of the latter—had made him almost forget her. Almost.

Near dawn, they had drained the second decanter and Erik rambled bitterly until the Daroga pried the snifter from his fingers and shooed him back to the Populaire with a firm promise that he should visit again once he'd sobered up. The Daroga was scarcely one to lecture, Erik mused, remembering his teetering steps and slurred speech. Bless César, he seemed to sense Erik's impairment and picked his way slowly back to the Populaire. By the time they entered the stables, the sun had well risen. Erik slid boneless from César's wide back, grateful to at last be still. He felt no need to quicken his pace to avoid detection. If previous opening nights were any compass to guide him, it would be after noon before anyone dragged themselves from their celebratory orgies to return to work.

The mechanism of the revolving door required more coordination than he could summon: he had designed it so that no one who happened upon it by accident could open it. He forced clumsy fingers to twist and pull the separate devices simultaneously. It took three tries, but eventually the seam popped and Erik led César to his comfortable stall. The next hour was spent in quiet labor: grooming César until his sable coat shone, buffing his tack to a mirror shine, even preparing a warm bran mash to ease the effort of his aging horse's chewing. The world had ceased spinning crazily whenever he closed his eyes, so Erik made his way down the five cellars to the wreckage of his home.

And found Minette armed with a broom, sweeping up the shards of glass from the destroyed mirrors.

"If your talents extend into the realm of a maid, remind me to increase your pension," he said sharply. Were it anyone else—except the Daroga—his sudden appearance would have caused an amusing jump, or at least a flinch. Minette had known him too long, and become acquainted with his sudden and soundless comings and goings. Minette's hazel eyes met his with a curious conglomeration of sympathy, irritation and vague amusement.

"Hardly a talent, Monsieur. I've simply had a great deal of practice at it with you," she shot back. Erik winced as he surveyed the remains of his organ bench. At least in a blind rage he hadn't destroyed anything priceless. Even in extremis, he loved beauty more than his own selfish emotional excesses.

Bitterness boiled in molten waves inside him, hardening to steely words. The time for simple
banter had passed.

"Are you happy, Minette? Surely anyone whole would be preferable to a deformed monster, but a Vicomte, now that it is a fine catch indeed for a penniless opera singer. You must be proud."

Minette rose with careful dignity, brushing dust from her hands.

"I am quite certain that I have no idea what you are talking about, Monsieur Opera Ghost."

"Allow me to elucidate," Erik snapped, shucking off his coat, peeling off his gloves. Deliberately casual, he removed his mask and tossed it aside. She paled, the hazel irises swallowed by the widening black of her pupils.

"My feelings for Christine deepened several years ago, and as a courtesy to her foster mother, I shared them with you. And the look of horror upon your face! I might have easily admitted that I often sup with brothel madams and roast children for my breakfast!"

"That isn't fair-" she began. Erik ignored her.

"Then you goad me to reveal myself to her, and I reluctantly accede. And within my own mind, I imagine the day, however distant and uncertain, that I would ask her to be my wife." Dimly, he heard her saying his name.

"I buy a ring. And you curse and shout as if I had said I would ravish her on the chapel steps!"

"Erik!"

"But now, now that it is a golden-haired fop with a fat wallet; now that the Populaire's new patron shows an iota of attention to our sad, Swedish orphan, you send them off with your merry blessing to-"

"Erik, shut up!"

Startled by the vehement sharpness of her tone, Erik gaped. Minette stood ablaze with anger, nearly shaking with it. Erik had always been puzzled by the cane she often carried. The lithe way she moved did not require the slightest aid, nor did she use it to intimidate recalcitrant ballet rats. Now, its silver tip rapped against the stone with a metallic ring and Erik appreciated its use for emphasis.

"I will not stand here and allow you to malign my intentions to suit your temper tantrum. Now sit!" she gesticulated with that infernal cane to the velvet chair beside the scale model of the Populaire’s theater. Erik mutely obeyed.

"Despite what you may believe, despite whatever flaw there is to your face, I know you to be a good and honorable man. Whatever horror you perceived upon revealing your feelings for Christine, or later upon my seeing the ring, was simple shock, a concern for her tender age and an unwillingness to let a girl who is so dear to my heart grow up. As to the Vicomte . . . I did not give my blessing. In fact, I was under the impression that you had finally plucked up the courage to reveal your love to her when she returned. She said-"

Erik jumped to his feet, cutting off the end of her sentence with a sharp gesture.

"No more, you infernal woman. You have made your point. 'Good and honorable.' Tch!" Erik made a derisive sound in his throat, "Biased is what you are."
Madame heard the humor in his tone and smiled.

"Perhaps."

By tactful agreement, they spoke no more of the previous night, Christine, or the reason why his home looked like the scene of a hurricane. He and Minette simply cleaned up the mess. Then she insisted on making him breakfast in his tiny kitchen. Erik devoured the simple omelet and toasted bread with atypical relish. The food helped to anchor the alcohol. Minette rested her hand over his in passing, offering a faint squeeze. Erik's throat closed as the reality of what had occurred came thundering down on him. His eyes burned.

He would not cry.

"Thank you." Minette offered a small smile, and finished tidying the dishes she'd dirtied.

"Off to bed with you, Monsieur Opera Ghost. Get some rest. And bathe. You smell like a distillery."

When Erik woke next, he felt substantially better, in body at least. His mind flinched away from contemplation of the ugly wound streaking across the soft, pulpy mass of his heart. He attended to the mundane needs of hygiene and hunger, and even bestirred himself enough to climb the five levels to the upper world. Something was wrong. He could feel it, a subtle crawling under his skin, and a faint clenching of his gut. Erik loosened the Punjab lasso from his sleeve and held it ready. The Opera Populaire was his realm, after all, and he was its guardian.

The cold, dark stillness told him it was in the small hours of the morning, well past time for every self-respecting denizen of the Opera to be safely immured in bed. Erik crept through the main foyer, the new managers' offices, and the theater, seeking what had disturbed him. He padded catlike backstage, concealed by the heavy crimson folds of the curtain. A muffled sound, a growled curse, and a scuffle reached his keen ears from above in the flies. His lip curled in disgust. As a young boy of thirteen, he had found a certain mischievous delight in interrupting couples locked in fevered embraces with ventriloquism, a smothered lamp, or a slamming door. Later, compelled by curiosity, he measured what knowledge could be gained by reading with what he observed. The lascivious nature of the shah's harem in Persia had long since quenched that particular curiosity.

Erik turned to leave, but another whimper caught his attention and held it. That sounded like pain. He peered up into the darkness, and from the light of a flickering lamp recognized Josef Buquet, one of the scene-shifters. A voyeuristic lecher and drunkard, but harmless. Or so Erik had previously thought. For beneath Buquet's brutish shadow, he glimpsed a nimbus of dark curly hair.

White-hot rage exploded to vivid life in him along with a terrible, gut-wrenching fear, and Erik scaled a nearby rope with grim swiftness. So intent was he on his perverse labor, Buquet didn't even hear him coming, or see the lasso until Erik yanked it taut around his fat throat. A swift jerk would have killed him, but a dark, hungry desire wanted it to be slow and painful. His prey uttered an inarticulate sound of pain, one hand swinging wide and knocking the lamp to the floor. The wet, choking sounds he made were music to Erik's ears, as was the swift weakening of his muscles. Buquet toppled to the floor with a tree's ponderous grace and Erik kicked him onto his back so he could see the face of his killer and know true terror. Erik sank over him, his cape flaring like the wings of a vulture, bracing one knee on Buquet's flabby chest.

"Prepare your soul for the fires of hell," he rasped, his voice low and thick, distorted with fury. Buquet's bulging, wild eyes were fixed on his face in horror and revulsion. The dim, sputtering lamp illuminated his right side. It struck Erik that he was without his mask. His lips twisted in a
cruel smile.

"Maybe you're in hell already. This is a face of a demon, no? Now suffer . . . and die!"

Erik jerked the Punjab, snapping his neck like a twig. Buquet's fat body undulated in obscene convulsions, and then went still. Appropriately, the lamp's flame died as well, casting the upper floor in darkness. He loosened the lasso from around Buquet's neck and tucked it up his sleeve.

Mostly composed, he steeled himself for what he might find. He turned and all breath left his lungs. Meg Giry sat huddled in a ball, a dark wig hanging half off her head, dress torn and staring up at him with wide, terrified eyes. He hoped she couldn't see him clearly. After the trauma she suffered, looking upon the wreckage of his face would do little to soothe her. Erik himself had no difficulty, but his eyesight was far keener than most.

"I—Is . . . is he . . . d—dead?" she stuttered, clutching the tattered halves of her dress over her budding breasts.

"Very dead. You have nothing more to fear from him," Erik crooned, crouching down in her direct line of sight, Buquet's corpse safely hidden behind him. While he felt a cruel relief that it was not Christine who was Buquet's victim, the fact that it was Minette's daughter struck him swift and hard, like a kick in the gut.

"You killed him," she whispered.

"Yes," he replied softly.

"S—So fast! It was so fast! One second he was there and . . . and then . . . and then you—you killed him!"

The faint accusing ring in her voice touched a raw nerve.

"Would you rather I had let him continue?" Erik snapped.

Every remaining drop of blood drained from her face, hazel eyes bleak, pleading holes and she shook her head jerkily, like a poorly constructed marionette. A faint, nagging sting of guilt reached him. Ten years and he had kept his promise to the Daroga, and now that the man had managed to resurrect some semblance of a life after Persia, Erik had broken his faith.

"Are you all right? Did he . . . ?" he let the sentence hang, a grotesque world of possibilities hidden in it. She was very brave, Erik noted with pride, most would be in sobbing pieces on the floor, but she was upright and dry-eyed, the only betrayal a quivering lower lip. Meg shook her head.

"He . . . he was . . . t—trying. B—but . . ." Two tears defied the iron of Meg Giry's will and slipped down her cheeks, one bearing an ugly bruise where Buquet struck her.

"Why am I sh—shaking so badly?" she asked, showing him one quivering hand.

"You are going into shock," Erik stated, untying his cloak and sweeping it around her shoulders in one graceful motion, "Take a deep breath in through your nose. Count to five as you exhale." She did as she was told.

"Again," Erik said. He watched as she breathed four more times, and the tremors began to subside, some vestige of color returning to her face.

"Now tell me what happened."
A brittle smile touched her lips.

"I kicked him in the stones."

Erik grinned.

"Good girl."

He pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve and offered it to her. Meg accepted it, wiping away the tears and dabbing her swollen lip. Erik rose and offered her his hand.

"I would like more answers from you, Mademoiselle Giry, but they can wait. I must take you home to your mother."

Meg agreed with alacrity, and took three steps before collapsing in a dead faint. Erik's quick reflexes only narrowly saved the little Giry from a nasty bump on the head. Erik lifted the girl's slight form in his arms, hate for Buquet boiling up at the sight of the bruises on her face, her torn dress, and yet more bruises on her arms. Abstractly, Erik could appreciate the lithe beauty of her form, and acknowledged the sweet innocence of her face that was so succulent to predators like Buquet.

"What in God's name were you doing out alone this late . . . and wearing a wig?" he whispered.

His arms laden with unconscious female, Erik encountered a problem at Minette's door.

*Stymied by a doorknob,* he thought dryly. Erik took a deep breath and insinuated a tendril of his voice through the panels of wood that separated him from Minette.

"Minette," he half sang, half whispered, "Minette . . . open the door."

He heard the soft patter of footfalls, then the key turning in the lock. Then Minette appeared in the doorway, holding a lit candle.

"Erik, what is the meaning of—*Mon Dieu, Meg!*" she cried, reached for her daughter. An inarticulate sound, half stifled by her hand, left Minette's lips at the sight of the bruises on Meg's sleeping face.

"What has happened?"

"Where may I lay her, Minette? She needs rest," Erik said, using a low, hypnotic tone. But the power of his voice was nothing compared to a distressed mother. Erik's eyes flickered over Minette's long white nightgown and her waist-length blond hair loose and free in crimped blond waves down her back. He had never seen her in such a state of dishabille.

"In here," Minette whispered, not taking her eyes from her daughter's battered face. Once Meg was tucked into her own bed and the door securely closed, Minette rounded on him, drilling her pointer finger into his chest.

"*Speak,* Monsieur, if you value your life! What happened to my daughter?"

"Josef Buquet. You are familiar with the man?" Erik drawled. Hazel eyes narrowed into flashing slits of suspicion.

"Yes. He's one of the scene shifters. Why?" A muscle fired in Erik's jaw. There were more tactful ways to phrase it, but Minette deserved—needed—blunt truth tonight.
"Because I narrowly stopped him from raping Meg tonight."

He watched the words pierce her like a blade to the heart. She gasped and staggered back, tears welling up and overflowing as she stared without blinking into his face. Erik grasped her arms and guided her to a chair.

"Wha—what did you do?" she asked.

"I heard some commotion. When I saw what was happening, I . . . intervened."

"Did you kill him?"

Minette was merciless, with the stern visage of some warrior goddess, unmoved by softer emotions. Erik held her gaze unwaveringly. His talent for killing had long lurked unspoken between them. Erik couldn't bear to tell her of Persia and relive the nightmarish years spent as the khanum's Angel of Doom. To have her eyes opened to the truth—the fact that she had fostered and trusted a monster with the ones she loved most—would assuredly put a damper on their friendship.

"Yes," he admitted at last.

Minette processed this.

"Good," she whispered finally, her fingernails digging into his wrists, "Good." Her eyes blazed with a mother's justified rage. Of all the reactions, he never expected thanks, or gratification. Unnerved, Erik cleared his throat.

"She is unhurt, as far as I can assess, bruised, shaken, but unhurt." Minette's lips trembled, containing a sob, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, one hand fisted in the lapel of his coat.

"Thank you. Thank you!" A knot of emotion tightened around his vocal chords, and he cleared his throat again.

"You are welcome," he choked. He uttered a breathless laugh.

"When she wakes, you must ask her about the wig!"

"What?" Minette asked, swiping tears from her cheeks.

"Meg was wearing a wig tonight, a dark wig of curls. I have no inkling of her intentions, but as to Buquet, it is my belief that Christine was his intended victim and Meg was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I will speak to Meg in the morning," Minette said. Fresh tears welled in her eyes and Erik offered his damp, rumpled handkerchief. Minette snorted a little and dabbed her eyes.

"I'm sorry. It's just . . . she's all I have. Meg is my whole world."

"That is not entirely true, Minette," Erik said gently, "You have Christine. You have me. However many times I make you regret it, you do have me, whenever you have a need." Minette smiled.

"Thank you."

XXX

Christine sat up straight in her narrow dormitory cot, gulping in huge, panting breaths, a sour,
metallic taste filling her mouth, like blood. Something cold and ugly had slithered into her dreams, raising gooseflesh on her skin and filling her with a nameless fear. By habit, she strained her ears for the hypnotic purr of her Angel's voice. He had soothed her nightmares as a child . . . but she had spurned her Angel, abandoned her *Maestro* in their triumph.

Erik would not come for her.

Christine lay back, snuggling deep into the pocket of sleep-warmth under her blankets. Sleep did not find her again; instead she stared at the ceiling until grey dawn light streaked through the windows listening to the small moans, snores and tossing of the other ballet rats. When minutes ticked by and Madame Giry had yet to roust the sluggish ballet rats out of bed for another early morning rehearsal—a favorite punishment of hers for the notorious excesses of opening nights—the ethereal anxiety sharpened into true fear. She hurriedly dressed as well as she was able and hastened to Madame's chamber. She knocked and waited . . . and waited. Panic clawed at her heart like a wild thing.

"Madame? Meg? Are you there?" Christine shouted, slamming her fist against the door. The key screeched in the lock and Madame appeared, still clad in her nightgown. The miasma of panic thickened. If it was horrible enough for the disciplined Madame Giry's clothing standards to slip, then . . .

"M—Meg? Is she . . .?" Christine's voice broke, and she blinked away a film of tears. She couldn't imagine a world without Meg's joy and humor to buoy her. Madame waved her hands in a welcoming gesture and Christine fell into her embrace gratefully, breathing deep of Madame's familiar scent of starch and the faint flowery notes of her perfume.

"She is fine, my dear. She has had . . . a difficult night."

"May I see her?" Christine whispered, transported instantly to the small room where her Papa lay dying, his wide body wasted with long sickness and his chest rising and falling in a cruel mockery of health, his booming voice degraded to a hoarse whisper. Madame squeezed her shoulders, dropping a kiss into her hair.

"Of course."

Despite Christine's attempts to steel herself for whatever lay beyond Meg's door, the sight of bruises marring Meg's dear face was a hard blow. Meg opened her eyes at the sound of the opening door, and mustered a brave, sunny smile that wrenched Christine's heart.

"Oh God! Meg!" Christine cried, catching her in a delicate embrace, as if she was a china doll.

"I will prepare your tonic, *ma petit cherie*," Madame murmured, stroking her daughter's hair and closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"Oh Meg! What happened?" Christine wept, petting Meg's warm hand. Meg's hazel eyes slipped closed, her bruised visage set in an expression eloquent with sorrow.

"I . . . I only wanted to help. I saw how miserable you were without your *Maestro*—Monsieur le Fantome. I thought if he saw you, or someone who looked like you, he would reveal himself. And . . . and I wanted to meet him for myself. So I put on a wig."

Christine's heart rested in her throat.

Holy Virgin, had Erik . . .
Meg's hand tightened on Christine's and she forgot her own misery in the light of Meg's horrified face.

"Then . . . then he gr—grabbed me, and . . ."

"Who, Meg? Who did this to you?" Christine asked, one fingertip stroking the deep purple-black contusion on her cheek very gently. Whatever the state of his temper, Erik was too much of a gentleman to strike a woman, especially Madame's daughter.

"Buquet! He tried to rape me! I fought him, scratching and kicking. But he was so strong! I tried to scream," the words emerged in sharp bursts, as if to try and minimize the pain by using the least amount of words. Christine's squeezed her hand in dawning horror.

"He hit me. He covered my mouth. He pushed me down and ripped my dress."

"Oh Meg. You don't have to tell me any more if you don't want to," Christine murmured, stroking Meg's silken blond hair. Meg's eyes blazed and she seized Christine's hands with her own, the torn nails and bruised knuckles evidence of her struggle.

"No, Christine, listen! He rescued me—your Maestro, the Opera Ghost, he rescued me!" Christine gaped.

"What?"

"Erik," Meg whispered, "he saved my life."
Track Down This Murderer

A damn inconvenience, spending his night looking for a suitable place to dispose of a body. After long minutes of deliberation, with the stink of Buquet's voided bowels permeating the air, Erik at last seized upon the tenuous form of a plan. He heaved Buquet's dead weight upright, fashioned a noose from thick, coarse stage rope, and strung him up in the flies. One of Buquet's signature liquor bottles was easy enough to recover and plant at his swaying feet. To the rest of the world, Buquet was a sad drunk who committed suicide. Only three people would know any different. Sick and weary in a way he hadn't been since his years in Mazanderan, Erik retreated to cold tranquility of his home, remembering wistfully the day he had sworn to never again trouble himself with the human race.

XXX

'Erik saved my life.'

The words followed Christine through the Populaire's winding corridors. They chased her into her dressing room to the gilt-framed mirror, a half-formed intention hardening into iron resolve. If he wouldn't come for her, then she would just have to go to him! She would throw herself to his feet and beg his forgiveness. She would lure him with music. He could no more resist the beckoning of her voice than she could his. They were bonded through music—he had said so himself!

The sun had risen and the Opera House was quiet still, but she knew it would not remain so for long. After such an opening as Hannibal had been, the staff was still basking in their success. The new management, eager to exert their authority and impress their rich patron, had ordered rehearsals and sold out the theater for another week. By all rights, Christine should be wading through Elissa's part, sharpening the finer points of her character.

The night they met face-to-face at last, Erik had pointed out a mechanism to open it . . . her trembling fingers felt along the cold edges of molded flowers, her own face staring back at her wild-eyed and sleep-tousled. Her index finger bumped a small lever. It took much grunting and cursing and for one wild instant, Christine considered throwing the vanity stool through the cursed mirror, but at last there was a rusty sigh as it unlocked.

Cold, damp air curled around her ankles, like creeping chill of an icebox. Christine uttered a hoarse cry of triumph, only to have it wither into an inarticulate grunt of effort as she tried to push the mirror on its runners. She heaved and wiggled and shoved until the aperture was wide enough to slip an arm through. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase on something solid within the tunnel, breaking several nails and digging into a soft bed of moss. Christine seized the hard shape of an iron sconce, braced her back against the mirror, and pushed with all her might.

At last, she succeeded in prying the mirror open. Giddy with the accomplishment, Christine armed herself with a shawl, sturdy shoes, and a gas lamp. With a steadying breath, she forged into the realm of night, seeking an audience with its king.

XXX

The violin uttered a discordant squeal under Erik's fingers. Sleep had long deserted him, and he sought to lose himself in music when a knot of unease gripped his stomach.
"Christine," he whispered.

Had that boy made an untoward advance? The thought blew on the smoldering embers of rage remaining from Buquet's heinous offense against the little Giry, coaxing a kindling flame. The urge to kill was stirring from its long hibernation, tingling in his fingertips. Erik cast out his awareness, seeking the inner knowing, to the portion of himself tied in bondage to her. Erik tensed. She was close!

Jagged fear roiled in his belly as if he'd swallowed broken glass. Many of the tunnels were fitted with traps to discourage any who dared wander into his realm. They weren't Cerberus or the River Styx, but they were effective.

A shudder raced through him.

*Effective.* The thought of Christine caught in any one of those traps chilled his very bones.

The wavering glow of her gas lamp swayed like a demented firefly. Relief sluiced through him. She had made it to the staircase at least without incident. Erik pressed a loose stone and melted into a cramped passage, working his way up the rusted rungs of a ladder to the approximate level Christine was on. He emerged behind her with a soft sigh of air swirling through the folds of his cape. God, two more steps and she would have gone down a trap door!

"What in God's name do you think you're doing?"

Christine uttered a sound that could only be classified as a squeak, and dropped the lamp, which promptly sputtered out with a petulant crack of glass. In an utter blackness so complete that he was certain she could not even see her hand before her face, he listened to her breathing pattern quicken to soft, panicked pants, pale hands stretched out as if to embrace the dark.

"E—Erik? Are you there?" she quavered. Erik waited in the stillness, as time drew out like a blade, punishing her. It was cruel to let her gasp and stumble in fear, but he was rapidly ceasing to care.

"Erik? *Erik!*" the music of her voice was lost on a shrill, desperate note, fraught with pleading.

"I am here, child," he whispered. The catch of breath could have been relief or a sob, Erik could not tell which.

"Why didn't you answer?" the uncertain warble in her tone inexplicably irritated him. Was she afraid he would attack her? Had he proven to be such a monster? Maybe her thrice-cursed Vicomte had warned her against the perils of a demented masked man's temper! Her shoulders shook underneath the dubious protection of her shawl and Erik viciously stifled the impulse to wrap his cape around her. Her comfort was now the concern of the bloody boy, not him.

"A simple experiment, child. Don't trouble yourself over the details." He threw his voice into her right ear. Christine pivoted in the dark, hands outstretched as if to grasp his sleeve. Her fingertips rapped the stone wall hard and she uttered a soft cry of pain. Curse his traitorous heart! That fickle organ urged him to grasp that delicate hand and kiss the abraded flesh.

"You force me to repeat myself: What do you think you are doing? Have I not warned you of the dangers of traveling the tunnels unaccompanied? Some are outfitted with traps—you could have been injured."

Christine's arms wrapped around herself, her cloud of tousled curls obscuring her expression. She
presented such a thoroughly forlorn portrait that sympathy wormed its way through the layers of hurt and anger.

"I suggest you return to the upper world. You don't belong here," he said, more gently.

"Erik, wait!" she shouted, correctly interpreting the silence as a signal of his intent to leave and not merely a lapse in conversation. He sighed audibly.

"Why are you being so cruel?" she demanded, the hitching cadence of her breathing suggesting tears. Her words were kerosene on a fire.

"Cruel? Any cruelty I learned, I learned from you, my dear. Allow me to explain cruelty to you! Imagine if you can, a teacher. He and his pupil have spent many years pursuing her rise to fame in the theater. Many long years of sacrifice, of discipline. And picture this same teacher, arriving at the moment of their triumph only to find her gone! Not only gone, but whisked away on the arm of a rich aristocrat who would not even know her name had it not been for her teacher's instruction!" the volume of his voice steadily climbed, until he was shouting at the top of his lungs, the bellowed words bouncing back at him in mocking echoes. His gaze was fastened unerringly on her face, but in the dark he could discern little of her expression, save for the shudders and hiccups as she wept.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry," she said thickly. Christine swiped the tears away with the back of her hand. How he hated her tears! Even when she was a child, they struck him straight in the heart.

"B—But . . . why didn't you come for me? Why didn't you bring it yourself? I thought I had disappointed you." Erik reeled, grasping for something, anything to say. He was passionately grateful for the lack of light. It offered a degree of anonymity, like the interior of a confessional, allowing him to say things he would not have the courage to say under the weight of her soft brown gaze.

"Disappointed me? Did Madame Giry not relay my message? I said I was pleased with you!"

"Yes, she said so. But why didn't you come?" her soft query was gentle and tentative, like a small child asking for a biscuit before dinner. That fateful night, Erik had been gathering rose petals to carpet the gondola and the surface of the lake. His preoccupation with beauty and perfection for the arrival of his queen had made him late.

A fatal mistake, it seemed.

"You hardly gave me time. The Vicomte must have been very . . . persuasive." The last word he laid thick with insinuation, and the echo of an unanswered question. Why would she be seeking him out if she had the Vicomte waiting? Pity and fear were not strong enough motivators. She stomped her foot and the sound of her shoe heel rang in the dead air.

"That isn't fair! You and Madame both! Do you truly think I'm such a . . . a loose woman?"

"You are very young. You think and act without spite, and you expect the world to do the same."

"You give me too much credit, Erik. I came to apologize for my thoughtlessness. It was your triumph as much as mine. And I wanted to thank you . . . for what you did for Meg. She is very dear to me." Erik narrowed his eyes.

"I've killed better men for less than what Buquet attempted. Do not thank me for murdering a man, Christine. I will answer for his blood sooner or later."
She recoiled as if he had burned her, the pallor of her robe and gown a faint blur in the dark. Erik's jaw fired at the rash words. He had an eerie talent for pushing her away when all he wanted to do was draw her near.

"You saved Meg's life. I will thank you for that if I wish," she said frostily, with the sort of tidy dignity that reminded him of Minette. It rested on his tongue that rape did not equate death, of the body at least, but he refrained. An innocent like Christine was surely oblivious to the subtleties of such abuse.

"Suit yourself. You have unburdened your conscience. Now leave me in peace." His hand rested on the loose stone.

"Erik, please," she whispered.

"What is it?"

"Do—does this mean that you don't want me as your pupil anymore?"

Erik suddenly felt very weary, as if his bones had been filled with lead. God help her, she was so young and innocent.

Was he any different than Buquet, slavering after a morsel of succulent beauty, scourged by the agony of desire? The thought sickened him. If he was a better man, he would let her go . . .

All the beauty drained from his voice, leaving a rasping husk.

"No. Some bonds are not so easily severed. We begin again tomorrow."

To be the object of Erik's derision was a terrible thing. His scorn radiated like a throbbing heart of ice, chilling her to her very bones. She followed the dark shape of his shoulders through the meandering tunnels back to the surface. He did not offer his hand, even when she tripped and fell to her knees in a filthy puddle. Fresh tears welled in her eyes and she bit them back viciously. What had she expected him to do? He was a man of particular pride, a man of intense passions—who had been scorned and rejected since before Christine had been born.

The mirror loomed, a portal to a mundane world of rehearsals, catty fights between ballet rats, and the leering weight of Firmin's oily gaze. While a part of her longed for the comfort this world offered, she also wanted to stay with Erik. Scorned or not, his presence was sustenance to her, his voice like a drug.

Erik opened the mirror with a swift jerk, pulling his cape tight against his body. A curt thrust of his chin was all he offered. Faint sunlight streaming through the mirror highlighted the dark semi-circle of sleeplessness under his eye, that stormy eye that blazed with so many shades of emotion. Her throat burned with guilty tears. If she threw her arms around him, would he push her away? As if you would have the courage, sneered a voice in her head.

"Angel?" she whispered.

"Angel?" she whispered.

His head snapped toward her, the duality of his masked and unmasked sides intensified by the filtering beams of sunlight. The light danced along the smooth surface of his glaringly white mask, and made the unmasked side a sight of breathtaking beauty. His visible brow crouched low over his eye, his mouth thinned to a disapproving line. Christine plunged forward before any more cruel words spoken in his heavenly voice could crush her tenuous courage.
"A—after the production tomorrow night, the managers have ordered a week-long furlough before Ill Muto. I—I was wondering if . . . if I could . . ."

"If you are asking if you may spend time with the Vicomte, save your breath, my dear. Your time is your own. I don't care."

"I-was-wondering-if-I-could-stay-with-you-at-your-home-to-practice-for-the-new-role!" The words emerged in a jumbled rush, completely oblivious of Erik's brutally casual sentence. Erik's scowling face settled into a blank mien. He stepped into her dressing room and gestured for her to join him. She stepped obediently into the dressing room, instantly grateful for the warm sunlight spilling in from the windows.

Erik exploded into motion, closing the mirror and locking the dressing room door before Christine had finished settling under a coverlet on the chaise lounge, shivering. Erik folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the vanity table. His still, watchful posture reminded Christine of a large, deadly feline. If he had a tail, it would be twitching idly now. The absurd thought made her smile, and Erik arched a brow.

"Now what is this nonsense you're saying?" he asked gently. The color of his eyes had softened to the gentle hue of the sea on an overcast day. Christine took heart in this.

"Not nonsense, Maestro. I . . . I simply said it would be easier if I stayed at your home with you. To rehearse the new part."

If it was possible, his eyebrow climbed higher, the corner of his mouth curled in a faint smile.

"Easier? I was unaware our present arrangement was so onerous. What spurred this request?"

Guilt, she thought, hope . . . longing. Heat tingled in Christine's cheeks and she cursed her delicate complexion that revealed the slightest blush. The logic of her plan was flawed, but she knew that if she didn't do this thing, he would slip away from her. If not in body, than hiding behind that habitual wall of icy poise, his heart as blank and stern as the white mask he wore. His scrutiny thrilled and excited her.

"I . . . I want to prove my dedication, Maestro." Some of the deadly tension eased from Erik's posture, though his expression remained unchanged.

"What about the Vicomte?" Christine prickled under the mention of Raoul. In the short span of his reintroduction to her life, he had caused discord between teacher and guardian alike!

"Raoul has been nothing but kind to me. He is a childhood acquaintance, nothing more." Erik uttered a derisive sound in his throat, but made no comment. Long minutes of silence stretched the air taut as Erik considered. Christine waited with bated breath, all of her hopes pinned on whatever words fell from those full, sculpted lips.

"Very well, Christine. If . . . if that is what you want, then . . . then you may stay in my home over the furlough." A wide smile split her face, her heart aqiver with joy. The hesitance of his speech puzzled her. Erik did not strike her as a type of man who would doubt a decision once it was made. She swore she would not give him cause to doubt her ever again.

"Thank you, Maestro!"

His smile was a shadow, a mere token tilt of lip.

"I doubt you will be thanking me once we begin practice. But you must go now, Christine. I'm sure
the great *La Daee* is very much in demand today."

"Yes," Christine said weakly, dropping her gaze to the pattern of roses on the thin coverlet. Erik was far too clever not to notice her hesitation.

"Christine?" Erik asked, his tone sharpening, "What is it?" the anger in his voice was potent and she was stunned by its raging fire possessing him. She squirmed on the chaise.

"Oh *Maestro*, please don't be angry. I'm sure they mean well . . ."

"What has happened?" Each word was enunciated with such scathing clarity that the babbling words pouring from her lips abruptly stopped.

"La Carlotta. The managers gave in to her. I am to be her understudy tomorrow night."

"Those fools!" Erik bellowed, fists balled, eyes boiling in a hurricane of rage.

"I will rectify this mistake." The deadly calm of his answer sent a shiver up her spine.

"Erik, please. The Opera Ghost will only cause further discord. I beg you; meet with them, face to face." His fingers fluttered up to touch the mask.

"Yes, I believe you are correct, my dear." A bitter smile twisted his mouth.

"Perhaps the horror of my true visage will be more effective than silly ghost stories."

**XXX**

He could hear the murmur of André and Firmin within the confines of Lefavre's small office.

"Did you hear about the scene shifter . . . um, Buquet, I think his name was?" André was saying.

"No. What happened?" Firmin replied.

"The poor man hanged himself in the flies. Another of the shifters found him this morning."

"Damn," Firmin muttered, the clink of glass suggesting that he was pouring himself a drink, "That's just what we need before a production. The crew will probably credit the damned ghost with this! We need to get a gendarme in here quick, get an article in the *Époque*, just so there is no suspicion."

Erik smiled slightly at Firmin's apt appraisal of the situation. The man had surprising acumen. He made a mental note to keep a close eye on the older man. Erik mustered the frayed ends of his patience and smoothed his hair. A gentleman must look presentable while issuing threats. His balled fist defied his intention and slammed with deafening force on the flimsy wooden paneling in three crisp knocks.

"What the devil?" said Firmin.

"Who could that be at such an ungodly hour?" André wondered aloud.

Erik waited, listening to the hesitant, staggering taps of Firmin's shoes as he made his way across the office. A fastidious sniff alerted Erik to the managers' activity. *Up late drinking brandy are we? Patting themselves on the back while they ruin Christine's career!*

A fresh surge of anger raced through his veins and this livid expression was the first Firmin saw of
him as he opened the door. His square, pointed face paled, his mustache twitching as he slowly took in Erik's form and puzzled over his presence. Erik could almost hear the cogs turning in Firmin's mind. Erik brushed past him, sweeping into the office. André who sat with his feet propped up promptly stood, spilling his cognac on his shirt.

"Good evening gentlemen," Erik said with cool, banal civility, as if greeting old business acquaintances.

"G—good evening, sir," André stammered, his piggish eyes fixed on the mask.

"Excuse me, but may I ask to whom am I speaking and why have you chosen to call on us at-" Firmin's quick glance at the clock confirmed his sense of outrage, "Eleven o' clock in the evening?" Erik smirked.

"I am Erik Rousseau." The two managers shared a dubious glance, then Firmin's gaze dropped to the desk, to a sheaf of sheet music. His bloodshot eyes flew wide.

"E—Erik? As in Monsieur Erik the composer?"

"The same. Though you might know me better as O.G."

"Y—You're the . . . ah, you're . . ." André stammered.

"The Opera Ghost?" Firmin finished.

"Yes." Erik allowed that percolate for several minutes, measuring their shock by the blood ebbing from their faces, the greenish tinge to their skin.

Erik folded his hands behind his back and made a show of casually perusing the books on the shelves. In fact, he swiped the letter opener from the desk and held it ready. Devilish delight sluiced through his veins. As much as he enjoyed his capacity as Opera Ghost, watching the two managers trip and stutter was far too much fun.

"I have come to inquire about your casting choices for tomorrow evening. I noticed that my student has been miscast."

"Miss Daae?" André clarified, tugging at his sweat-stained cravat as if it was trying to strangle him. Erik fastened his gaze on the diminutive manager, sensing a vacillating fear growing in him. Indeed, the man squirmed under Erik's gaze, clearing his throat.

"Very astute, Gilles. Yes, Miss Daae is my protégé. Imagine how very upsetting it was to discover that she has been denied the role of Elissa, especially after her success upon the opening of Hannibal, not to mention that the role was given to Signora Guidicelli—an Italian cow who is seasons past her prime! Can you explain that to me gentlemen?" His tone struck the perfect balance between icy politeness and pure menace. Judging from André's slight shriveling against the wall, perhaps the menace was laid on a tad thicker than he meant to.

"We can see how that would be very . . . ah, very upsetting, Sir," André said with an obsequious little bow.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Rousseau. May I have a moment to speak to my associate?" Firmin asked.

"Of course."

Erik waved a hand between the two of them, but made no move toward the door. Firmin jaw
flexed, choking on words, but instead of voicing a potentially dangerous sentence, he simply hissed at his partner in an undertone. Erik's ears were keener than most and made out most of the conversation.

"What are we supposed to do? . . . the man is clearly quite insane . . . operas fetch a fine price . . . who is this Daae . . . with both the patron and the composer . . ." Erik's jaw fired at the mention of the Vicomte and he turned toward the managers, a picture of gentlemanly attention. Firmin smiled tightly at Erik, while André looked ready to vomit.

"The Signora has proven most unwilling to relinquish her role as the leading soprano, Monsieur. I'm sure you understand." Erik's smile was razor thin.

"I see. Very well then," he murmured.

He struck with lightning's ferocity and precision. The letter opener flew true, pinning André's cravat to the wall. His Punjab lasso arched, a thin, deadly black snake, landing gracefully around Firmin's fat neck and tightening the barest of fractions. André immediately began blubbering and bleating pleas for mercy, while his partner eyes bulged and lungs scrabbled greedily for air, despite the minimal pressure exerted. Erik leaned one shoulder against the wall near where André was pinned, motioning with one gloved fingertip for silence as Firmin choked and gasped at the end of the Punjab. Give a man enough rope to hang himself, Erik thought with grim humor.

"Dignity, Messieurs. Dignity. Now, do I have your attention? If so, nod." Both men nodded distinctly.

"Excellent. Now listen carefully: If that squawking Italian diva takes the stage tomorrow night, you gentlemen will never see another opera penned by my hand, nor will you have the singular pleasure of hearing the voice of my protégé. I'm certain our talents would be better appreciated in any opera house on the continent. In fact, I've heard La Scala has a position open. But, you see, gentlemen, your hubris has put me in a terrible position. For while I cannot allow the insult against my star pupil and myself to stand, I also am loath to remove her from the Opera Populaire, where she has spent many happy years. Can I count on you, good Messieurs, to rectify this mistake?" Erik's glacial tone sharpened.

"If not, then . . ." he let the sentence hang ominously, allowing their imaginations to create a suitably disastrous outcome.

"Do you have an answer for me?"

Erik left the managers' office in a curiously buoyant mood. Christine was returned to her rightful place in the limelight, with a slight nudge by her Phantom, of course, and what was more, she . . . she wanted to be with him. In his home. For an entire week.

There was so much to do!

As Erik pressed the stone and leapt into the mirrored torture chamber, he composed a mental list of all that he needed to accomplish. His cache of food was dismal—a trip to the grocer's was in order. Sleeping arrangements . . . Christine would have his bed, obviously . . . Erik permitted himself a brief moment to imagine her there, chocolate curls fanned across the pillow, her ivory skin a stark contrast to the vivid scarlet sheets. Erik smirked as he felt a twinge of arousal race through him. A thin cot in his storage room would seem very lonely with his Angel sleeping a few steps away.

God, this was madness! Christine with him alone, for an entire week! A brilliant frisson of happiness bubbled through his veins. Hmm, it was very cold in his home. With some work, he
could divert some of the furnace's heat down the cellars. His mind chewed busily on the problems and solutions. So much to do and so little time to do it!
The silver radiance of Christine's voice soothed a nameless pain in him. All of his restless thoughts, his worry for his father's ailing health, his brother's reputation, his own loneliness . . . all of it melted away when the first incandescent note left her lips.

So beautiful.

She glittered in diamonds and silver and yards and yards of gauzy fabric, an ethereal goddess of song. In his mind, he still called her by the childish appellation of 'Little Lotte,' but in truth she could not have looked less like a child. Raoul squinted through the opera glasses from the box near the rear of the theater. He would have vastly preferred Box Five, but it had already been rented, by a man named Erik Rousseau.

The pleasure of Christine's performance was tarnished by the thought of the Populaire's masked composer—coincidentally Christine's teacher. Rumors traveled fast, the whole Opera knew about his 'visit' to the managers' office. Raoul frowned. This was the same Erik that Christine seemed frightened of the night of Hannibal's premiere, he was sure of it. So frightened that she was scurrying back to the Populaire as fast as his carriage would allow. If this arrogant composer had laid one finger on her . . . his hands fisted around the program.

Riding in on a white horse and sweeping Christine away from danger would suit his hero-complex as Philippe called it. The frown marring Raoul's handsome face deepened at the thought of his lascivious brother who had accompanied him to the Opera this evening. Not even a quarter hour into the first act and Philippe was leaving the box, claiming boredom. As of now, he was probably in some seedy alcove with La Sorelli.

The last chord of Elissa's aria soared up to the highest rafters, dancing like the crystal droplets of the chandelier. Applause thundered from every corner of the theater and Raoul clapped enthusiastically as she took her bow. But as the rest of the cast filed onstage, Raoul left the box. He had to catch her before she made it to her dressing room!

XXX

A dazed exaltation and breathless excitement mingled indivisibly within her until she felt as if she was floating. She cowered behind the protection of Madame and Meg as they made their way through hordes of well-wishers and admirers, she stood passively as they helped remove the heavy dress and wipe away the stage cosmetics.

Judging from Madame's brittle smile and the overbright edge to Meg's laugh, they knew of her arrangement with Erik over the furlough and didn't approve. The bruises on Meg's face were sickly purple crescents, skilfully hidden under cosmetics. But her bubbly young friend had been irrevocably changed by Buquet. Nightmares kept her from sleep and her wild bravery—to the point of recklessness—had been crushed and strangled by a taut vigilance. Christine bit her lip. Maybe
she needed to stay with Meg. Her best friend needed her . . . Meg saw the evidence of her thoughts and embraced her.

"Don't you worry about me, Christine. I'll be fine. I promise."

"I love you, Meg. You're more important to me than any silly old opera," Christine vowed against the golden fall of Meg's hair. A watery sheen of tears obscured the stunning hazel of Meg's eyes as she pulled away and Christine bit back tears of her own.

"I know. I love you too, Christine. But I'll be fine." Meg bade them both goodbye, and left to attend the crowd outside. Madame Giry bent and kissed Christine's forehead. Her hazel eyes were sharp and knowing. She cupped Christine's chin, holding her gaze.

"I trust you both, my dear." Underneath this statement of faith, Christine heard something of a demand, as if the giving of her trust was in itself an obstacle to any transgression that may occur to her. Beneath 'I trust you' lay 'Don't disappoint me.'

"Thank you, Madame. Everything will be all right," Christine assured her.

Madame Giry departed, leaving Christine to fret and pace by the mirror. Onstage, as the applause and shouted compliments of her adoring public fell over her, she heard his voice—soft and sweet.

*Brava . . . Brava . . . Bravissima . . .* a single red rose fluttered to her feet and she caught it up to drink in its heady scent, clutching the proof of his presence. Outside her door, she heard Meg and Madame shoo the surging crowd of sycophants, no doubt waving her cane for emphasis.

A polite knock on the door sent Christine flying across the worn pink carpet, the flimsy door groaned as she tore it open, expecting Erik's dark form and stormy eyes. Instead it was Raoul's fair winsome figure, hand poised mid-knock and blue eyes wide. They shared a tense laugh.

"Good evening, Christine," he said with a gallant bow, "may I come in?" Christine mustered a thin smile. She had better let him speak his piece and hurry him out before Erik arrived. Keeping the two of them separate was of utmost importance. Christine waved him into her dressing room, eyes restlessly scanning the deserted flies for him. She gripped the doorjamb, permitting a moment of fierce concentration as she searched for her Angel's presence.

Nothing.

A clawing, desperate emotion roared in her belly. Holy Virgin, what if he had gone?

XXX

Nothing on this earth was going to keep her from him this time. Not the managers, not the idiot Vicomte, and not . . .

"Daroga?" Erik said aloud. He peered from his hiding place within the hollow pillar of Box Five as the Daroga's slight, dark form tiptoed into the Ghost's Box.

"Erik?" he hissed, "Erik, are you here? I must speak with you."

*Of all the damnable timing Daroga!* Erik thought viciously. Erik projected his voice in a menacing murmur into the Persian's ear.

"What do you want? I have pressing matters to attend."
Nadir's dark eyes scanned the room, seeking places where his quarry might be hiding. Despite the urgency of his errand and his friend's irritating interruption, Erik could not help a surge of amusement as the Daroga began looking behind velvet curtains and feeling along the walls for a hidden seam. As if Erik was a bumbling amateur! Surely the Daroga had greater faith in Erik's skills!

"As do I. What is this I hear about a scene shifter named Josef Buquet?"

"What about him? The gendarmes concluded that he committed suicide. He was quite the drunkard, if I recall correctly."

"It's a bloody fine coincidence that he decides to take his own life the very day after the little Daae has an evening with the Vicomte de Chagny!" Erik blinked at this, then laughed at his acumen.

"It is a coincidence, isn't it? But I assure you, Daroga, that is all it is. The man may spend a merry eternity in Hell for all I care." Despite himself, there was a scathing satisfaction in his tone and unfortunately for Erik, Nadir Kahn was no slouch in reading tones.

"Erik, what did you do?" Erik opened his mouth to reply when a cascade of shouted compliments and bleats of 'Miss Daae!'

"It has been a pleasure conversing with you, Daroga, but I must go."

"You must tell me if you have broken your promise!" Nadir demanded.

Erik heaved a sigh. All those years ago, when the shah's chief of police was ordered to take the errant magician in chains to his comeuppance, virtuous Nadir had forced a promise from Erik: Do not kill, save in self-defense. That cross had not been hard to bear; until Raoul de Chagny waltzed into the Populaire, that particular addiction had slept dormant. If Erik was the guardian of Nadir's fragile health, then the Persian was still his conscience. Some things never changed.

"Damn it, Daroga! Your infernal pestering! Yes! I killed that man, but not as a substitute for the wretched boy, or to feed some appetite for murder. Persia burned away any joy I felt killing. If my word is not enough, speak with the ballet mistress Madame Giry, an old friend of mine. Now I must go."

Erik yanked on the rope in a swift hand over hand motion that brought him to the base of the pillar within moments. He didn't want to see the stricken expression in Nadir's eyes when he discovered that he had lost his life and fortune to aid a monster with half a face. A small voice inside him whispered that when Christine finally realized it, she would run screaming.

It took him a few moments to circle the rear of the theater and reach the tunnel behind the mirror. And he very nearly broke his promise again upon seeing that miserable boy with his hands on Christine. The world contracted to one shining point, the periphery of his vision pulsed a deadly red. The effort of containing the clawing demon of rage left his will scarred and battered, but he was well rewarded when Christine selected the perfect words both to dismiss the boy and soothe Erik's rabid anger.

"I appreciate your concern, Raoul—" Erik rankled under the casual use of his name, "—but I want you to leave. I have a previous engagement."

"With Erik?" Raoul pressed. Grim amusement flickered to life in Erik. Apparently, seething jealousy and murderous rage was mutual between them. Christine's chin lifted.

"Yes. He is my tutor, after all." Possessive pride throbbed in Erik's heart.
Hear that, boy? She's mine. Mine! Raoul made a derisive sound in his throat, but he obeyed Christine's wishes. He shrugged on his coat and smoothed his golden locks.

"Very well. Good evening to you, Miss Daee."

Christine closed the door after him and leaned against it, eyes closed. Did she regret sending him away? What had the boy said? Erik opened the mirror and stepped inside, uncertain of his welcome. Christine was either unaware or did not acknowledge his presence, for she simply stood there, leaning against the door with her head tilted back and eyes closed, one pale hand splayed at her throat. The privacy of her closed eyes gave him leave to look at her, to absorb her beauty and study its angles and planes. The snowy column of her throat, so delicate and vulnerable, invited kisses, the glossy fall of her hair beckoned the touch of his fingers. He yearned to set his lips at that hollow at the base of her neck and breathe in her scent. The gown she wore displayed the glory of her figure. He vastly preferred its lush green lines to the drab greys and blacks she usually wore in his presence. His eyes wandered over her form and desire unfurled, hot and heady.

This coming week would be the truest test of his will and sanity.

_I must endure it_, he thought, _for Minette's sake. For hers . . . and mine. Any honor I have left would be forfeit if I take her._

The throbbing silence shifted and Erik realized she had opened her eyes. Christine had seen him looking at her. Erik prayed that her innocence would distort the hunger she saw in his eyes.

"Erik."

XXX

The door was cool and solid against her back and she let her eyes slip closed. She hadn't been able to sleep the night before, not with the performance and Erik cavorting in her thoughts. Hannibal and the confrontation with Raoul had deepened her fatigue. And despite how much she hated to admit it, Raoul brought up several good points, one in particular being the most profound. Christine knew very little about Erik, and what she did know sent dozens of little red flags waving. He was a violent man. Not only had he threatened the managers in the interest of her career, but he had admitted to killing a man only two nights ago. From what Meg had told her, he did so with terrifying ease and skill. He had done it before. Many times. What made this revelation even more confusing was how little she cared.

Erik . . .

A sudden stillness settled over her like a warm blanket. Christine felt knots of tension dissolve and enjoyed the red patterns dancing behind her eyelids. The formless stillness morphed into warm, caressing hands that tangled in her hair and stroked the curves of her body. Warm lips kissed her throat. A dull ache of yearning settled in her belly. Heart and blood, breath and body wakened and with that waking, hungered for a completion too deep to name. Christine quivered with desperate hope as she opened her eyes and found the haven of his. Doubt and worry seemed so pointless now. They were connected so deeply that his emotions and hers tangled into one complicated knot.

"Erik," she said aloud, her voice breathless. Was her breathlessness from this yearning, or from petty mortal annoyances like tight stays, no sleep and little food? Christine would much rather focus on this delightful heat. So immense and beautiful . . . she couldn't wait to plumb its depths, explore its borders. The air crackled around them, a roaring fire flared between their locked eyes. She took in his dark magnificence with a tingling feeling of awe, as well as something hot and possessive. _Kiss me_, she pleaded silently. _Kiss me and don't stop there!_
"G—Good evening, child." her hands balled into fists. *Child!* Did he truly think her a child? Did he not feel that tension between them?

"Elissa has won more adoring hearts this evening. You did very well, my dear," he purred in his unearthly voice.

"Thank you," she quavered, swallowing the tears by force of will. They stuck in a hot lump in her throat.

"Are you . . . are you ready to go?" Christine shook herself, eyes alighting on her small bundle of clothes.

"Yes. I'm ready." She bent to pick up the bundle when his long black gloved fingers covered hers. A hot stream of sensation shot up her arm and educed a gasp.

"Allow me."

"Thank you," she repeated woodenly.

Neither one of them spoke again until it came time for Christine to dismount from César's wide back. He held up his hands to help her dismount. This time there was no sinuous caress of body as he set her on the ground. She could have been a sack of grain for all the attention he paid her!

"Erik . . ." she said, grasping his sleeve. The visible side of his face matched the blank, stern expression of the mask.

"What is it, Christine?" even the beauty of his voice had dimmed, clipped and distant, as if she was an onerous burden. One tear defied her will and leaked out of the corner of her eye. She glanced away to hide it.

"I . . . I'm cold." The flat line of his full lips softened.

"I apologize, my dear. It will be better once we reach my home. In the meantime-" a graceful draping of cloth swathed her in his cloak, still warm from the heat of his body, emanating his rich, masculine scent. If it was possible to be jealous of a piece of cloth, then Christine was violent jealous of the cape.

Once safely ensconced in the cushioned seat of the gondola with the soft music of the water lapping against its shining black hull and the faint scrape of Erik poling them along, Christine plucked up the thread of thought Raoul had woven so skillfully into her mind. He believed that Christine was afraid of Erik, because she was so desperate to return to the Populaire on the night of Hannibal's premiere.

The insidious germ of an idea nagged at her. Erik was dangerous. This was fact. A genius, a talented killer and magician, who could enslave her simply by exercising his vocal cords . . . yes, Christine would be a fool not to fear such a man. But it wasn't any man, it was *Erik*! The man who sang to comfort an orphaned child, who had tutored and nurtured and protected her. This was a man she lo—

A drop from the portcullis' teeth plopped squarely on her head and fell in an icy trickle down behind her ear. She uttered a squeak of discomfort and glared at the moss-covered rungs of iron, covered with a faint coat of rust. A deep chuckle reached her ears. She swiveled to glare at him.

"One of the perils of boats, my dear. You risk getting wet," Erik pointed out.
On impulse, Christine swept her hand across the frigid surface of the lake, casting a thick sheet of droplets across Erik's face and chest. Christine clapped both hands over her mouth, shocked by her own conduct. Erik blinked, looking down at the soaked front of his shirt. A small piece of scum clung to the pristine surface of his mask. A half-strangled snort of laughter emerged from the prison of Christine's woven fingers.

"Amusing is it?" he said mock-stern, eyes creased in mirth.

"One of the perils of boats, Erik!" Christine teased.

His eyes glinted and as he bent to splash her, Christine stood suddenly to escape. The gondola lurched under her feet and she felt a sudden breathless sensation as she was airborne. The lake gathered beneath the Populaire was cold in any weather, but in late autumn, it was knives scoring her skin, shocking her brain with the immense, biting cold. Christine struggled with soaked layers of petticoat and velvet and cape, but finally found her feet and stood waist deep in the water. She shoved her thick pelt of soaked hair back with a breathless laugh, expecting to find Erik watching her progress with a superior smile. The gondola had completely capsized, its pole floating idly in the faint current tugging at her legs. Her eyes at last alighted on Erik, as soaked and bedraggled as she, hand slapped against the right side of his face. Christine waded toward him, thinking he had struck his head on some unforgiving edge. She dragged the sodden cape up over her shoulders, attempting to salvage any bit of body heat.

"Stay back!" he shouted, thrusting out an arm to bar her progress. It was only then that Christine deduced the reason for his agitation. The mask. Had it sunk? The water was a thick, murky green; even the mask's sharp white would be difficult to find. Erik seemed rooted in place, paralyzed by humiliation and uncertainty. Her heart broke for him and the blank, glazed look on his face, a defense against insults he knew would come. Not tonight! She vowed, not ever! Christine, who could no longer feel her feet, sank clumsily to her knees, nearly kissing the surface of the water, shivering hands groping along the slimy, moss-covered bottom for the mask.

"Leave it, Christine," he commanded shakily. She ignored him. A strong, hot hand clasped around her upper arm, hauling her to her feet.

"I said leave it!"

Christine blinked at this fierce outrush of bluff anger, and fiercely longed for the carefree playfulness of moments before. Strands of black hair were plastered to his face, the visible half contorted with anguish. A deep well of compassion opened in Christine and she longed to reassure him, tell him that whatever deformity the mask hid, it didn't matter. But she bit her tongue. He was not in any mood to believe any proclamations from her, and a small, secret thought, a nagging curiosity wondered if it did matter. Could their relationship bear the strain of such a thorny problem? They stood staring at each other and shivering for a long moment.

"You must be freezing. Come." He motioned for her to go ashore.

"M—m-my c—c—clothes," Christine stuttered, teeth chattering. Erik uttered a string of foul words under his breath in a lilting language she couldn't understand.

"I'll get them. Go to my chamber, there should be a robe across the foot of the bed. Strip off your wet clothes and put that on. It will take some time to draw a hot bath."

Numb and shivering, Christine could find no will to fight him. As she crossed the threshold to his room, she sighed as dry, warm air enveloped her. She wandered about the cluttered room and found the source, a vent blowing hot air. A thick Persian rug was spread on the floor and felt
heavenly on numb toes as she pried off shoes and peeled off soaked socks. Luckily, Madame Giry had had the presence of mind to fit her with a front-lacing corset in the Gypsy style. A hot blush stole over her cheeks at the thought of Erik's deft fingers undoing the laces of her corset.

When her clothes were a sodden pile on the floor, she picked up a long white shirt of Erik's and dried herself with it in lieu of a towel. The robe was beautiful, very fine black silk with designs stitched along the shoulders and cuffs. She swathed herself in it, embraced once more by a soft cloud of his scent. She sucked deep lungfuls of its rich scent. To her, it seemed like the notes of leather, smoke, ink and spice had been specifically designed to intoxicate and soothe her. Christine raked her fingers through her hair in an effort to tame the riotous tumble. She surrendered that particular battle and twisted her hair into a makeshift bun.

She waited in the safety of Erik's room, eyes wandering over the swan bed, the elegant dresser covered with an odd assortment of objects, a piece of coral, a few coins with square holes in the middle, and an ivory letter opener with a black pearl fixed at the hilt. With a few steadying breaths, she stepped out, seeking Erik. The main room was empty. The gondola was moored—upright this time—with its pole leaning against one of the covered mirrors, but Erik was nowhere to be found.

"Erik?" the word echoed back to her, mocking the thin, frightened tone.

Christine peered into the deep shadows, as if his tall, lean frame was hidden behind a curtain. The stone was achingly cold under her bare feet and she considered retreating to the warmth of his room and letting him gather his composure. She heard the thunder of flowing water and she followed the sound down a narrow hall. To her right, she found a small kitchen, complete with a stove, sink and cupboards. A tendril of heavenly scent reached her nose. Some sort of stew? She swallowed hard. When had he had time to make a meal? She had sensed his presence during the performance . . .

She walked farther and peered into the last room. A bathroom, she saw, a huge copper tub dominating the room. The tub was filling from a small faucet, tendrils of steam rising in the air. Every other detail flew from her mind at the sight of Erik who stood bare to the waist with his back to her. He stood wringing out her soaked clothes and she admired the subtle twist and flex of ropy muscles under his pale skin. Pale, but with a golden sheen, she noted, a flush of heat surging through her. The combed black silk of his hair was bisected by a mask's tie.

The graceful splendor of his movements, even when tired and cold and irritated, stole her breath.

So beautiful . . .

He bent and the light caught the graceful slopes of his back. Christine clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her dismayed cry. Thin, faint marks crisscrossed across his back. Scars! Someone had beaten him, repeatedly and unmercifully. Tears flooded and fell from unblinking eyes. How many more past indignities were written in stark detail on his skin? Now she did flee back to Erik's room, grateful for the roar of the water that hid her presence. Had he seen her tears, Christine was sure he would not have taken it gracefully. Erik interpreted sympathy as pity and despised both. Such a proud, complex man. She gathered her wet clothes into a bundle in Erik's cape, swiping tears from her cheeks and sniffing.

Reluctantly, she returned to the bathroom. The tub was full and Erik was bent over, testing the temperature. He heard the tread of her step and straightened, eyes fixed on hers. Such intense, direct scrutiny unnerved her. Had she done something wrong? The black bandit's mask he wore obscured any clue to his expression. Her eyes skittered across his bare torso and the long muscles of thigh and calf visible through his sodden trousers. Then her gaze moved restlessly over a paneled changing screen and rested on the safety of a large iron furnace, upon whose screen her
"How does this work?" she asked. Still staring, Erik shrugged and replied, "It's really very simple. The furnace heats a tank of water and piping leads to the tub and also the sink the kitchen." Christine made a noncommittal sound. Erik gestured to a stool beside the tub that held an assortment of soap and oils, combs and brushes. Christine was touched by his efforts to accommodate her comfort, made on such short notice. Fresh tears threatened, but she bit them back.

"Here are some, ah . . . essentials. There are towels behind the screen. Your clothes should be dry soon, but if you are uncomfortable there is an old shirt and a pair of trousers for you."

"This is wonderful, Erik. Thank you." His smile was brittle. Still brooding, emotions sharp and thorny—closed to her.

"Well. I'll leave you to it." She nodded as he left, closing the door behind him.

Silently she wondered where he would do his own ablutions. She quite liked the view without his shirt. Well, perhaps when she learned the trick of not crying every time she saw his scars. Cold crept up from frigid toes and the steaming bath beckoned. Shivering, Christine shed Erik's robe, draping it over the changing screen. She plucked up two snowy white towels, each plush enough to be a blanket and lay them at the foot of the tub.

She stepped in, uttering a sharp gasp. The heat of the water screamed along her chilled flesh, bringing it to throbbing awareness. She squeezed her eyes shut, breath coming in quick pants as she adjusted to the scalding temperature. She sank down in the bath. Accustomed as she was to the narrow tub she shared with Madame and Meg, Erik's tub was like a small swimming pool. The delicious heat sank into her bones and dissolved hidden knots of tension. She reached for the soap and started the onerous task of washing her hair. The musical sloshing of the water and the rhythmic hissing of water dripping from her sodden clothes were the only sounds. Such utter silence was foreign to her. When her Papa was alive, on long lonely winter nights his violin would sing . . . and she would sing with it, filling the yawning silence with music. The whisper of a song surfaced in her memories and she hummed the lilting melody as she washed.

XXX

Erik bent over the sink in his small kitchen, scrubbing his lathered hair with the tips of his fingers. Naked, with the door securely locked, he scrubbed every inch of skin with stinging soap. He couldn't wait for Christine to finish her bath to take his own. He needed distance and time to gather the frayed ends of his composure and control. God in Heaven, had he been dreaming, or had her eyes really burned with desire, a challenge echoing through their bond . . . No! Of course not! A fabrication of his hope, a manipulation of his fantasies.

Erik was trying very hard not to think of Christine naked in the other room. The sight of her clad in naught but his robe would be fodder for his fantasies for a very long time. It was a close thing. Had she surfaced even a second sooner, she would have been privy the horror of his bare face. That thought chilled the thundering arousal in his veins and the evidence of his lust mercifully descended. He upended his washing bucket over his head, shaking and sputtering like a dog. He covered his face with his hand. It would be a miracle if he survived this week with his sanity intact.
Madame Girya glared at the brown hand that had attached itself to her arm for the third time.

"For the last time, Monsieur, I do not have time to answer questions at the moment." Her tone flirted with the line between direct and rude. She followed the dark coat up the arm to the swarthy face of the Persian, a face of stern angles and gleaming intelligence. There was kindness in his dark eyes, she noted, even though he now frowned beneath the frame of his red velvet fez.

"Forgive my impertinence, Madame," he said in flawless French, marred only by a faint trace of accent, "but I would like to inquire about Josef Buquet."

He removed his hand and pulled a small black book from his coat. Licking the tip of the pencil he pulled from its place behind his ear, his thick eyebrows lowered over those brooding eyes in earnest question. A faint chill settled over her, remembering the shouts of 'Murderer!' echoing in her ears as she hauled Erik from that filthy Gypsy cage. Now he had done so again, in defense of her own daughter's honor. Her eyes narrowed to slits of suspicion. Surely the Persian wasn't in the service of the emperor?

"If you would like the official statement, take it up with the managers." She brushed past him, intent on making it up the small flight of stairs to the stage. The high-pitched lilt of girlish chatter and giggles of mes filles filtered from the stage. Ill Muto's choreography was more complex than marching rank and file in Hannibal, prompting Madame to schedule a short practice during the furlough.

"It is not a statement I seek, Madame, only . . . peace of mind, for the sake of a man I call my friend—our mutual friend, I believe. Erik?" Madame Girya stumbled, clasping the banister for support. This man knew Erik? She glanced back, scrutinized the tall, lean frame; clothed respectably in black, save for the crimson sash draped majestically across his chest. The Persian did not seem to be a con artist, or cruel, or mad.

"I have a prior commitment, Monsieur, but you are welcome to wait in my office," she said smartly. The Persian's dark eyes glinted with triumph and underneath the lush curve of his mustache she thought she saw the twitch of a grin.

"Of course, Madame. I completely understand. I will wait on your whim," he said with an extravagant bow. One of Madame's thin brows lifted. This time, she was sure of the twitch and found herself suppressing a smile as well.

"Right this way," she said.

XXX

Erik rose from the small cot on the floor of his storage room, scrubbing his naked face with both hands. While in many respects he did not consider himself a member of the human race, he was privy to the same weaknesses such as the need for food and sleep. His rest had been fitful at best. Christine, of course, starred in his dreams in erotic, explicit detail. Curse his fevered imagination and his fleshly appetites!
He shook away the dregs of his dreams, seeking the cool haven of control and focus where he was most comfortable. Long years of solitude had fortified his already stalwart mental defenses. He would not allow the sweet tendrils of Christine's beauty to make the mortar crumble. For her own good. For any hope of salvation. Erik and the God Christine and Minette worshipped were not on speaking terms, but . . . but if there was a Heaven, and that was where Christine would be, he wanted to keep the possibility alive that maybe, one day he could be there too.

Erik completed his ablutions as usual, though a chiding voice in his head noted how he lingered over the combing and shaving. Was he primping? It was too much to hope that Christine would find beauty in his unsightly carcass, but there was no harm in being neat and cleanly. He wore the guise of a gentleman well.

He settled at his organ bench, fingers stroking the ivory keys with a gentle familiarity. Don Juan intruded into his thoughts with all the pounding urgency of a racing heartbeat, but he resisted the lure. To insinuate tentacles of lust and animal hunger into Christine's mind while she slept would be the ultimate betrayal of her trust. The blessing and curse of free will, he thought. Perhaps it was his previous ruminations on Heaven, but Erik found himself wondering if God ever regretted the notion of free will.

Erik banished Don Juan, reaching back into the annals of his memory. The tenderness before the lust . . . his fingers danced over the keys, improvising new melodies, soft and gentle, like a lullaby. Or a kiss. Yes, he would shower her with kisses of music. A quiet patter alerted him to her presence. His fingers stalled on the keys and he took a fortifying breath. It was a good thing he did, for as soon as he turned to look at her, his breath whooshed out of him when confronted with the tousled vision standing two paces from him. Mental conditioning was nothing to the seductive potential of virginal innocence and the potent loveliness that was so clearly visible through the near-sheer fabric of her nightgown. The sleepy joy in her eyes made him want to grin like an idiot.

"That was beautiful, Maestro." she whispered. Erik jumped to his feet.

"You have risen early, my dear."

What was he to do with his hands? They refused to hang obediently at his sides, but plucked nervously at the silk of his robe, the same robe that Christine had worn so devastatingly last night. Christine nodded, tossing her mane of hair casually over her shoulder and stretching like a cat. Erik quickly diverted his gaze.

"A habit, I suppose. Madame likes to wake us early after the night of a performance. It's the perfect punishment for those who overindulged as she says."

"I would say so. But it would do little to help the janitorial staff if one of them made a mess on the stage." Christine grinned.

"No, it wouldn't."

The conversation stalled and Erik at last found a place for his wayward hands, folded firmly behind his back. Christine's small white teeth raked over her lower lip, a habit of hers when she was hesitant to speak.

"I didn't think you knew it," she said in a small voice. Erik frowned, mentally replaying the last exchange.

"Know what, my dear?"
"What you were playing just now. It was a part of the lullaby Papa would play for me when I was young. The notes were the same, but... the feel of it was different."

Perhaps because your father loved you as his daughter and I love you as a woman... as a wife.

"As much as I would like to claim so, I did not play it intentionally, Christine. I was simply... playing. I am pleased it was a comfort to you." he glanced down and saw her slender white feet peeking from the ruffled hem of her nightgown.

"The stone is very cold on bare feet. Why don't you dress, and then would you like breakfast?"

XXX

It was only once Christine sat at Erik's tall table and he set hard boiled eggs and a slab of toast in front of her that it struck her how privileged she was to see this side of him. She never imagined Erik, the devastating and rakish figure in her dreams to be so... domestic. She stared at the two lightly salted eggs, the precisely cut nine-grain bread sprinkled with cinnamon, and the sprig of parsley set in the center of her plate and felt tears clog her throat. He cared so much for her comfort.

"—I apologize for the sparse fare. If you are still hungry, I believe I have some soup leftover from supper, or I could—Christine?" Erik's voice sharpened with worry. She realized that she was staring teary-eyed at an egg and shook herself. His face filled her vision as he knelt beside her.

"Are you all right? Are you feeling ill?" one rebellious curl swung into her face and Erik's hand rose to brush it behind her ear. His hand hung, a breathless moment away from action... then fell to his side.

"Fine," she replied, grabbing the toast and taking a bite for demonstration.

The ensuing silence held all of the things that she wanted to say, but was too cowardly to manage. Erik did not need to hear the passionate declarations of a love struck girl. She wished desperately for him to do something! One did not act as Erik did, especially concerning Raoul, if one was merely concerned about a student's welfare, or a friend's. Erik heaved a sigh.

"I will gather your things," he said quietly. Christine, who had polished off the last of the eggs, sat up ramrod straight in her chair.

"What? Why?"

Erik's face was inscrutable as always, and Christine wondered if the white half mask he wore was the same one that had fallen in the lake or if he had a spare. Like a lady has gowns, she imagined a wardrobe full of masks for every occasion. Did he sleep in them?

"You needn't put on a brave face, Christine. I will take you back and-"

"No! I don't want to go!" Erik's eyes flashed. A dangerous energy gathered around him, blisteringly hot, anger and pain and... something else. He rose to his feet, towering over her.

"I will not have you crying at the breakfast table and staring off into space without acknowledging your own name! If you are so homesick, it would better if I simply took you back."

"Erik, I wasn't-"

"I understand your trepidation; of course, being trapped in close quarters with a monster would
make anyone nervous, I daresay. And after my behavior last night, I would quite understand if you
never—"

"Don't say that. Not ever! You are not a monster!" she said, rising from her chair. Erik softened,
smiling gently.

"You poor child. How little you know of the world." Something snapped in Christine, like breaking
glass. She slammed a palm flat on the table, barely feeling the sting.

"I am not a child!" she stood on her tiptoes to shout in his face. Another Christine looked in horror
as she drilled a finger into Erik's chest.

"I am a woman, and you are a man." Her voice softened as she reached out to touch the smooth
surface of the mask, "a scarred man, but still a man." Erik, who had watched this display
dispasionately, seized Christine's wrist just as her finger grazed the pristine white leather.

"Stop this, Christine. Stop this at once," he hissed. Christine sank back on her heels, mildly
bemused by her own conduct.

"Sit." Erik's tone, though as soft as velvet and as sweet as honey, had the same echoing finality of
an absolute command. Christine obeyed, studying the delicate blue pattern rimming the edge of her
plate.

"If you don't want me here, if you have work to do, then you should take me back," bitterness laced
her tone. She dared to glance at Erik, who stood with his arms folded, leaning against the edge of
the counter.

"I do want you here. Let us begin our practice. No more talk of leaving, hm?" he said gently.
Christine brightened, relief loosening her limbs.

"Yes, Maestro!"

After such a tumultuous morning, Christine was eager to bury her embarrassment. The roles of
Maestro and pupil were comfortable ones for both of them, without all the pitfalls of emotion. The
score of Ill Muto was simplicity itself, and Christine learned the notes and lyrics by rote as she was
so accustomed to doing under her Angel's tutelage. The character of the Countess, however . . .

"No. No. No!" Erik's fist slammed on the organ's keys, which uttered a wheezing groan in protest.
Christine exhaled through her nose, frustrated tears welling in her eyes. Tension rang through her.
She sang the notes well, but lacked that elusive sparkle to make her performance real. Elissa, for all
her selfishness and narcissism, was an innately tragic figure, passed between lovers against her will
in Hannibal's absence. That tragedy and vulnerability had been easy to adopt. The Countess'
aspirations eluded her. She and Erik had been at this particular aria for over an hour and patience
on both sides was running thin.

"Christine . . ." he began, the visible side of his face tight with dissatisfaction.

"I know! I know! I can't get it right!" she snapped, kneading her pounding temples with her
fingertips. To her ears, the air rang at her stunning audacity. She had never spoken so brashly
against her Maestro, her Angel. What had possessed her?

"Perhaps we should take a break," Erik said. Christine nodded, too busy choking on shame to
speak.
"Christine," he crooned and she gasped, taking an involuntary step back.

She hadn't heard him move and to have him looming there, exuding that irresistible mixture of tenderness and mystery unbalanced her. His scent and his heat rose up in soft clouds to embrace her and she longed to cradle her head against that little hollow in the center of his chest, the taut golden skin with its sparse dusting of hair visible through the loose lacings of his shirt. A muscle fired in the square angle of his jaw, but his voice was so incredibly gentle, like the lap of a tranquil lake against her toes.

"Forgive me. I shouldn't have snapped at you, my dear. You're doing wonderfully." Christine uttered a disbelieving snort, dropping her gaze to her folded hands. Erik's finger curled around her chin, lifting her head to meet his gaze. Her skin tingled with delight under such a small, simple touch.

"There is no shame in finding a selfish, conniving little twit like our Countess difficult to portray. In fact, I'm grateful the transition hasn't been an easy one." Christine giggled, marveling at the flash of his straight white teeth as he smiled, framed by that handsome groove in his cheek.

"There's a smile," he said, releasing her.

Christine flinched as a flat, irritating buzz shattered the peaceful moment.

"Damn," Erik muttered, glaring in the direction of the portcullis.

"What was that, Erik?" Christine asked, watching in fascination as he shed his robe and finished dressing in his dark garb with his usual poetry of movement. A waistcoat of a deep green, a black coat, gloves . . .

"It's an . . . an alarm, so to speak. Designed to alert me when someone enters my tunnels, or the Rue Scribe entrance."

"Is it Madame Giry?" His twitch of lip was wry.

"No. She knows the paths to take to avoid setting my alarms."

"Is that how you knew where I was a couple days ago?" He paused and studied her, his blue-grey eyes pensive.

"I found you then as I always have. I told you before, we are linked through music. I can sense your presence, just as you can sense mine." A warm rush of pleasure raced through her, a secret possessiveness delighting in the fact. The sensation rapidly chilled as another thought occurred to her.

"Maestro . . . when you warned me of dangers in the tunnels . . ."

"There are some . . . traps. None are lethal," Erik looked distinctly uncomfortable, tossing his hat between his hands.

"Well, some are," he amended. Christine gasped, her active imagination fabricating the worst possibility.

"Oh, I hope Raoul hasn't . . ."

If Christine hadn't had Erik's attention before, she had it now. She could have bitten off her tongue! His eyes seethed and boiled like a thunderous sky, his lean body deadly in an attitude of perfect
stillness.

"What?" the word whipped out with a sharp bite and Christine shrank back in the face of his anger. Holy Virgin, how could he reach inside her and twist some vital part with one glance? Her hands gripped the edge of a nearby table for support.

"It would be a shame if your gallant lover was caught in the Phantom's traps in his daring rescue, would it not? Shall I go armed, Christine? Is your boy waiting for me with gendarmes above ground?" The thought of Erik fighting Raoul made her stomach pirouette inside her. She couldn't bear it if either one of them was injured.

"No, Erik! Of course not! It's just that with the way we left things the other night, he might-" Erik stalked toward her. Christine shrank back against the table. He halted suddenly, radiating conflict.

"What does he know about me?"

"Only that you are a composer and you are my teacher. I didn't tell him anything." Christine despised her sullen tone almost as much as Erik's suspicion. He held her gaze for an interminable length and she felt seared, stretched, pulled apart under the burning weight of his eyes. When he at last glanced away, she expelled the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"I must go." A new terror gripped her.

"Can I go with you?" she asked, standing awkwardly as Erik whirled around her, the cape and fedora completed the ensemble. He exhaled through his nose, and Christine was unsure where the source of his irritation lay. Was it with her for pestering him or whatever waited in the cellars?

"No, you may not. I will return shortly."

XXX

The lyric Persian cursing that reached his ears told him that it was the Daroga and not that miserable Vicomte who had tripped his alarm. Erik was unsure whether to be relieved or irritated at this development. He would greatly enjoy watching the boy muddle through his traps. It galled him to his very core that Christine would worry for his safety. Damn you, Raoul de Chagny! Damn your mother and father and your philandering brother as well! Erik seethed.

This particular trap in the third cellar was one of his cruder creations. A trap door dropped the hapless captive into a tangled web of ropes soaked in sticky adhesive—a particularly diabolical recipe of his own making. If the captive did not panic and did not mind ruining his suit, he could emerge perfectly unharmed, if exhausted, unkempt and emitting a foul odor. And, judging from the virulent cursing and noxious vapors emerging like a cloud of incense from the pit's depths, the Daroga was more irate than frightened. Erik's shoe crunched on glass and he hunkered down to find a gas lamp, presumably belonging to the Daroga, extinguished at the lip of the trap door. Despite the latent embers of rage for the bloody boy, despite his potent confusion and longing for Christine, amusement at the Daroga's expense flickered to life in Erik. Below, Nadir tapered into milder French.

"Goddamn bloody French bastard! I'll wring his skinny white neck for this!" Erik sank back on his heels, enjoying this performance far too much to interrupt.

Half-stifled grunts of effort muted struggling and the wet sucking and slapping sounds of the soaked ropes were telling. Erik could easily imagine the Daroga flailing helplessly like a fly in a spider's web.
"The little Daae can ruin her reputation all she wishes, I daresay she deserves it for stringing along the Vicomte de Chagny and our dear Phantom, but—Allah above that stinks!—but-" this little rant was cut off by a wordless exclamation and a wet squelch. The Daroga had mired himself even deeper. Erik's shoulders quivered with suppressed laughter. After another minute of futile struggling on the Daroga's part, Erik at last took pity on him. He shrugged the coil of rope off his shoulder, looping one end through a ring in the ceiling and fashioning a wide loop with the other end for the Daroga to slip his body through.

"Hello? Hello, is someone there?" Nadir shouted.

"Who do you think it is you bloody fool? I would have thought you knew better than to chase after me when I do not wish to be found!" Erik shouted back. Erik lowered the rope into the trap.

"Shall I schedule an audience then, O Shadow of God?" Nadir quipped in Persian, mocking one of the shah's favored monikers.

"If you had, you wouldn't be drenched in glue, now would you?" Erik replied in the same tongue. The rope went taut and Erik set about hauling Nadir's carcass from the pit.

"I spoke with Madame Giry. She explained the Buquet matter. In very succinct detail, I might add. A very curious woman, Madame Giry." The muscles of his arms and chest screamed at the burden of pulling up Nadir's dead weight. As such, he could only grunt in reply. Nadir needed little prodding.

"It was justice for what he did to little Meg Giry, but I don't want you to think you can go around killing people like some masked vigilante. Let the proper authorities attend these matters." Erik was very tempted to let go and have Nadir preach his sermons to an audience of rats and cockroaches. Hand over hand over hand . . .

"As to the little Daae-"

"Daroga, if you don't shut up, I will drop you!" Erik bellowed, the snarled words echoing off the close stone walls of the third cellar. The Daroga, who had spent many years managing Erik's temper, wisely shut up.

Erik forgave his meddling when he at last came into view. Erik made the mental note of adding feathers in the future for the proper effect. Erik manfully swallowed his laughter at the Daroga's general state of sticky dishabille, thinking the reality was humiliating enough. The Daroga attempted to loosen the knot around his middle, but his fingers stuck together. Erik drew a small dagger from his coat and cut the rope.

"Thank you," Nadir said, reaching into his coat for a handkerchief. He made an admirable attempt at wiping the adhesive from his face, but when the handkerchief stuck to his cheek, Erik finally released the laughter bottled up inside, letting it ring out and echo through the cramped corridor. Nadir, to his unending credit, laughed too, and soon they were both howling like loons at the absurdity of it. Some time later, Erik wiped tears from his eyes and said, "What in God's name brought you down here, Daroga? Surely the good Madame's explanation satisfied your perverse sense of morality."

"I am satisfied that your ah . . . your former pastimes have not found resurgence. But the little Daae . . . she left so suddenly after the performance, and I saw the Vicomte leaving her dressing room, so I thought . . ." the lingering high of laughter vanished.

"What? That I had kidnapped her?" Nadir shook his head.
"No. I also inquired after her to the Madame, and she was most adamant about the little Daee's desire to leave with you." there was a certain wryness in Nadir's tone that gave leave for Erik to imagine just what words Madame Giry had chosen to earn the title 'adamant.' *Stubborn woman,* he thought fondly.

"So? Why venture down into the Phantom's cellars?" Nadir's dark eyes were serious.

"To warn you. The Vicomte has a warrants issued for your arrest." **Damn you, Raoul de Chagny!** Erik thought, fists balled in impotent anger. Nadir's earlier blather about Christine made sense. Nadir had come to the erroneous conclusion that that Christine had somehow incited this, or that Erik had somehow snubbed the Vicomte to explain their present predicament.

"For what charges?"

"Insanity, it seems," Nadir said primly. Erik snorted.

"Well, I've never claimed to be sane," he heaved a sigh. That wretched boy was causing no end of trouble.

"Thank you for telling me, Daroga. Come, I'm sure I can find you some turpentine."
Twisted Every Way

Twisted Every Way

Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love.

-William Shakespeare

Christine tried her very best to remain composed. She tried not to dwell on the state of Erik's mood when he left, and how well that would bode for whoever had tripped his alarm. She tried not to dwell on the fact that only a few braces of candles held at bay a darkness so complete that she would never be able to find her way out in the event that some ill wind did away with the candles. She tried not to feel so small and insignificant, trapped in this echoing lair without Erik's presence to fill and animate it. She tried all of these things, but did not succeed.

There were precisely thirty-seven steps between the outcropping of rock where Erik's bedroom was and the scale model of the Populaire's stage on the other side. To calm the frayed edges of her nerves, Christine paced this route back and forth, back and forth as the clock ticked relentlessly.

When an hour passed and Erik had still not returned, Christine wandered around his home, tidying the kitchen and washing the last of the lake water from her clothes in his tub. She poked around his organ, making a show of tidying the piles upon piles of score, while in truth she was snooping for Don Juan Triumphant. How could a score be dangerous? Erik's enigmatic words fired her imagination, whetted her curiosity. She just wanted to look . . . after encountering several locked drawers, Christine abandoned that line of inquiry.

There was no end to the fascinating treasures cluttered with a bachelor's sloppiness in Erik's home. All it needs is a woman's touch, she thought, and in thinking it, blushed furiously. The convoluted tangle of her feelings for Erik she tucked tidily into their own jeweled box within her mind. She spent another agreeable hour picking up objects at random and wondering where he had acquired them and what significance they held. Christine discovered a cozy chaise lounge in the corner near the architect's desk, and judging from the stacks of thick tomes and the braces of candles dripping stalactites of spent wax, this was where Erik did his reading.

She admired the cadre of artist's and architect's tools cluttering his slanted desk, and peered at the drafts and calculations all drawn with geometrical precision. Her eye traveled up from the desk to the designs pinned to his wall. She wondered what made these special enough to merit a place on the wall. They seemed wholly unremarkable to her, but then again, the beauty of a schematic was beyond her. The corner of the one nearest her was fluttering in a faint current of air. Christine grabbed the fluttering end, intending on pinning it down. A yellowish cast caught her attention. Another design? Gently, she peeled back the schematic and gasped.

Her! It was her!

"Me?" she said aloud.

It was unquestionably a likeness of her, sitting with her knees folded up under her chin on the bench near the stained glass window in the chapel. How was it possible for a charcoal drawing to
capture vulnerability in the slenderness of the wrist, in the wide, trusting gaze of her ten-year-old self? Christine pushed the schematic farther and saw another drawing and another . . .

To avoid tearing Erik's designs, she pulled out the pins and let them flutter to the floor, exposing a wall carpeted with her, in every attitude, in every medium . . .

Epiphany struck her with all the searing potency of a lightning bolt.

"Oh Erik," she whispered, tears filling her eyes, "you love me. Oh, why didn't you tell me?"

xxx

The hours stretched by unendingly when Christine had only herself for company. Dinner was a simple affair: Erik's supplies and utensils were easy enough to find, though Christine's culinary skills were somewhat lacking. At long last, when the words of the book plucked from one of Erik's teetering stacks blurred before tired eyes, Christine curled up in the cozy warmth of Erik's swan bed and sought sleep.

Her dreams writhed in a senseless tangle. She remembered a terrible darkness, inky and complete that pressed upon her like evil, seeking hands, panting raggedly like an animal in her ear. Then the darkness had laughed: a horrifying laugh, rich with murder and lust and ringing with malice and evil intent. Cold, slippery snakes with jagged-edged obsidian scales wound their muscular bodies around her ankles and held her immobile. She heard a forlorn voice crying out in the darkness, weeping her name with such anguish that her heart simply shattered within her chest, sending shards of pain chasing the droplets of blood through her veins. No light, no hope, no warmth . . . just a yawning abyss and a deadly, raping darkness . . .

Christine woke with a gasp in utter darkness. Her childish fear rose up, augmented by the dregs of the dream and possessed her. She struggled free from the tangled purchase of sweat-dampened sheets and the gossamer cage of silk encircling the bed. Christine glimpsed a golden waver of light beyond Erik's room. Like a moth to a flame, she flew toward it.

XXX

These then, though unbeheld in the deep of night/ shine not in vain, nor think though men were none/that heaven would want spectators . . .

While the themes of noble sacrifice and redemption seemed farfetched to Erik's jaded appraisal, he could not fault Milton for mastery of blank verse or the air of tragic dignity that permeated the work he had written while blind. The pleasure of reading a familiar volume would hopefully coax Erik into sleep and distract him from the beautiful woman in his bed . . .

A sob caught his attention and he looked up in time to see Christine flying toward him. He had time to close the book and set it aside before she fell into his lap. Even startled, his brain dissected the delicious feeling of having her in his arms, of having her breath against his skin and hands fisted in his shirt.

"Christine! Child, what wrong?" he asked, both hands stroking her back in an awkward effort to still the heaving sobs wracking her.

"A n—nightmare. I had a nightmare," she breathed against his throat.
Erik cupped her head in an attempt to peel her back far enough to look in her eyes, but she refused to move, clinging blindly. He gave up, stroking her mane of brown curls, relishing the warmth and softness. He made a wordless sound of empathy and a wry voice wondered at the mighty Phantom of the Opera, humming comfort to a frightened child.

"What happened in the dream? Tell me," he crooned.

"I don't remember," she replied swiftly—too swiftly. So she didn't wish to tell him. Was the prospect of reliving the dream too terrible or . . . had he featured in her nightmares? It would be no great surprise; he had no doubt lived in terror of those who saw the Devil's Child. The Gypsies had threatened errant children with a visit from him. The thought of Christine fearing him would be too much for him to bear. She gulped down breaths as if still locked in mortal struggle, hands white knuckled with handfuls of his shirt.

"Sssshhhh, hush, my dear," he whispered, "you're safe. It was just a dream. I won't let anything ever hurt you."

The words seemed to calm her: her breathing evened, the humming tension ringing from her body relaxed by inches. He waited for the moment where she would realize where she was and pull away in shy, polite mortification.

It never came.

Minutes ticked by in silent contentment, measured only by the warm thud of her heart against his, the soft rise and fall of their breathing.

Erik began to hum softly, weaving a lullaby of a simple collection of notes. A wordless crooning, like the touch of a mother's hand, imbued with love. She made a soft sound of contentment, nuzzling his neck. His throat closed with a painful rush of tenderness.

"Let's get you to bed," he murmured, arranging her limp limbs in a manner where he could carry her. He frowned as he did so. She was much too light, like thistle down in his arms. He bit his tongue to stifle any fretting words. Wrapped in the cocoon of warmth within his room, he laid her in his bed and draped the sheets and coverlet over her.

"Goodnight Christine," he whispered. Her hand shot out and seized his. Her eyes were dark holes, ones he could fall into and lose himself.

"Stay." A single word, voiced in a childlike treble, with all the trust in the world shining in her upturned face had the power to destroy him.

"Christine . . ." Torturous hours rose in his mind's eye, of he lying inches from the woman he loved beyond all reason and being unable to touch her. A virgin offering that he dared not sully.

"Erik, please."

That erased any further protest. He exhaled heavily.

"Very well."

XXX

Relief coursed through her. She felt safe in Erik's embrace, hearing the music of his heartbeat and enshrouded in his warmth and protection. She released his arm as a measure of good faith. Erik disappeared beyond the gossamer black curtain and she peered through the barrier that undulated
idly in currents of warm air at the pale square of Erik's shirt. He returned a few moments later and she saw that he had changed masks, trading the austere familiarity of the white half-mask for a bandit's mask, covering his face from forehead to upper lip in a seamless barrier of soft black silk.

Christine scooted back to make room for him. The downy soft bed, so massive before, now seemed scarcely big enough with Erik's tall frame curled up in it. An air of constrained shyness filled the awkward moments where they settled next to each other. Christine settled into her favorite sleeping pose, on her side with her hands tucked beneath her chin. Erik filled her vision, draped across the bed with all the negligent ease of an indolent sultan. A smile quirked his lips, lessening the air of stern remoteness.

"Madame Giry will have my head for this."

"Why is that?" she asked. The mask concealed any evidence of expression and without the dip and arch of his brows, she was unsure if the downward turn of his mouth meant irritation or regret.

"I am instructed to treat you with the utmost respect and courtesy."

"You always do," Christine said softly. Erik's smile was tight, pained.

"I am honored by your high opinion of my morals, my dear, but sharing a bed with you is highly improper." A delicate savagery underscored his words and sent a delicious shiver down her spine.

He did want her.

Christine was grateful that the lack of light hid her blush. The boneless relaxation she felt as he sang her the lullaby had vanished, replaced by tingling excitement, an acute awareness of where they were and the secret knowledge of his feelings for her. How did one proceed in a seduction? Christine's fingers crept a few inches forward, approaching his hand with what she hoped was nonchalance. Had she had the brazen wantonness of some of the other ballet rats, she would have rolled on top of him and taken what she wanted. But Christine was out of her depth, paralyzed by the morally reprehensible nature of such conduct and her natural shyness. A creeping hand was all she could manage.

"I won't tell," she tried to purr. The piercing intensity of his eyes blazed in the darkness, enigmatic and all-knowing behind the mask. Her face flamed, but she did not dare blink.

"I dislike deception."

Christine uttered an unladylike sound that could only be classified as a snort.

"You did so easily enough when you pretended to be my Angel." A shiver of tension raced through him, a wary, watchful concentration.

"That was different. I . . . I never meant to hurt you."

It was natural and easy then, to take his hand in hers, weaving their fingers together.

"You didn't. I understand, really I do. But imagine waking up one day and have someone tell you that the sky isn't blue, that the sun didn't rise."

"I didn't realize that I meant that much to you."

She squeezed his captive hand, mesmerized by the warm pulse of his heartbeat against her palm and sensual embrace of their woven fingers and his skin against hers. She craved more. And palm
"You are my Angel," she whispered by way of explanation. That cursed mask hid any clue to what he was thinking or feeling, save for the seething coils of emotion in his eyes and what lurked there defied description.

"The hour is late. We should sleep," he said. Christine recognized the note of command in his voice and struggled to obey, snuggling into the pocket of drowsy warmth beneath the coverlet. Sleep coaxed her lower and she struggled to lift her heavy lids. A sudden thought occurred to her.

"Erik?" she whispered.

"Yes, Christine?"

"Who tripped your alarm?" the soothing cadence of his breathing rushed out in an expelled sigh. She mentally prepared herself for a careful shaking loose of his hand. Instead, his thumb stroked the back of hers.

"It was not our dear Vicomte," he said tonelessly. Christine bit back words of protest as she waited for him to elaborate. When she realized no further description would be forthcoming, she prompted, "Who was it then?"

"An old friend of mine from Persia." Again that tantalizing glimpse into his wandering past! The hunger to know more was almost visceral. Any probing questions on the subject would be met with a stony wall of silence, so she swallowed them.

"Was he injured?" Erik uttered a dry snort in reply.

"The Daroga is as tough as boot leather. I'm sure not even my most lethal devices could faze him. But no, he was not hurt. He came to deliver a message. The Vicomte de Chagny has issued a warrant for my arrest." Christine shot up straight in the bed.

"What? Why? On what charges?" Erik was unmoved, a sardonic smirk quirking his mouth.

"If I told you, you would not be so keen on sharing a bed with me." The faint condescension in his tone infuriated her.

"Try me," she snapped.

"Insanity. With the managers corroborating my performance in their office, no doubt. If insanity is a crime, I am guilty of it. I am guilty of a great many things. So, Christine? Do I still make you feel safe? You run into the arms of a madman to comfort you after a nightmare. You must appreciate the irony."

Christine paused, considering the various ways she could reply. Fatigue had robbed her of her wit and the lingering dregs of her nightmare her courage. She sighed.

"If you don't believe me when I say I trust you, I don't know how else to convince you. I'm tired. We should sleep."

Erik made no reply as Christine settled down beside him. But neither did he try to relinquish her grip on his hand. After a moment, his soft whisper caressed her ears.

"Goodnight, Christine."
"Goodnight, Erik."

XXX

As he predicted, the hours that followed were torture. But ah, a sweeter torture he had never known! Silken sleep ensnared him in its web, dragging him down into a pool of warm, comfortable somnolence. He woke to the scent of violets, the tickle of Christine's soft curls and the slender solidity of her. Sometime in the night, Christine had insinuated herself firmly beyond the imaginary line halving the bed. Her slender legs were braided with his, the infernal shift rucked up to mid-thigh, exposing far too much creamy white skin. Her face was nestled comfortably under his chin, the humid warmth of her breath caressing his throat, and her mane of curls tickling his nose. Their hands remained linked, a secret kiss of palm beneath woven fingers. A stray thought pondered on the ancient customs where to sleep in the same room was a mark of trust. There was a strange sort of intimacy to share in that particular vulnerability of sleep, as if the tendrils of their dreams wove them together. By his estimation, it was early morning, on the second day of Christine's week long furlough.

God help him.

A dull, pulsing ache made itself known and Erik's jaw clenched.

He, who could master any skill he put his hand to, who sampled all the world's knowledge, was at the mercy of a slip of girl and the throbbing of his virility, so achingly close to the haven of her warmth. His hips arched and pleasure coursed through him at the exquisite friction. A snarl of savage longing rose in his throat.

That shameful farce of finding release within the grasp of his hand repelled him, but in order to maintain any grasp he had on sanity, it was his only alternative. He cursed his fleshly desires for the thousandth time, all the more viciously for the fact that they now robbed him of the singular pleasure of sleeping with his beloved in his arms. Erik disentangled himself from her embrace and limped from the room to seek relief from the burning ache in his loins.

Erik found he could not return to his bed and face perhaps her wounded eyes at finding him absent, or even the sweet vulnerability of her sleeping form. Christine was temptation incarnate to him, a breathtaking Galatea who embodied preferences he hadn't even known he had. The act of relieving his baser needs had not dulled the ache of yearning, but sharpened it, illuminating the crude realities lurking behind the pure protestations of love.

Erik sank onto his organ bench. Music was another of his addictions and Erik sank willingly into her soft arms, borne on the ebb and flow of color and emotion. While the memory of passion still churned in his veins, he clutched at Don Juan with the same desperate feverishness as the fleeting moments of pleasure in the relative privacy of his bathtub. Maybe in her sleep she would hear the yearning he could not voice and respond . . . No!

The graceful splay of his fingers curled into crude fists on the keys, his body doubled over until his forehead touched the lip of the organ. Yesterday's promise held true. He would not twist her fragile innocence with the power of his music. An empty ache yawned in his chest. He needed something to dull this terrible pain! His hand scrabbled for the key, opening the drawer that held his morphine. The vice that would save him from an even greater sin.

He rolled up his sleeve in precise turns, exposing the irregular pattern of purplish punctures from previous doses and the green-hued streaks of collapsed veins. He tightened the tourniquet with a
yank of teeth as deft fingers prepared the syringe. He flicked the syringe free from trapped air bubbles and poised the glinting needle over the turgid snakes of his veins, busily pumping blood back to his heart. His thrice cursed heart. A quick, dartlike jab and the needle sank in. With a sob of relief, Erik depressed the plunger, feeling warmth and that elusive euphoria wash over him. Erik staggered to his feet, intent on hiding from Christine in his storeroom. Stars burst before his eyes, multicolored sparks distorting the world. Inarticulate terror rose like a demon. The ground reached up to embrace him.

XXX

Christine shifted and stretched beneath the coverlet, warm and languid with deep, restful sleep. A thought intruded on her blissful waking and soured her mood. Erik was gone. Her hand felt forlorn and lonely without his fingers woven with hers and that heady kiss of palm. Christine sighed and sat up, finger-combing her wild mane. What time was it? In Erik's kingdom, she obeyed the rhythms of her body. When she was hungry, she ate, when she was tired, she slept, wholly unaware of whatever timetable they followed in the world above. Christine rose and contemplated the neatly folded pile of her clothes. A part of her wanted to flaunt her body before him—as much as her timid heart could manage, which was to say, respectably clothed in her shift and stockings—but another part could not stand another scolding word. If he called her a child one more time . . . her fists balled. He would be sorry!

In the end, she chose the green velvet, who had survived its odyssey through the lake mostly unscathed. She spent another few minutes wrestling her hair into a semblance of propriety before she emerged. A quick glance found the lair empty.

"Erik?" With the air of sleepwalker's unreality, she was seven years old again and walking toward the ominous silence in her father's room.

He told me I'd be visited by an Angel. An Angel of Music.

The sight of Erik's long body sprawled on the stone floor would be forever inscribed on her memory, just as her father's wasted body and fever-bright eyes were.

"Erik!" her panicked shriek reverberated in absurd echoes off vaulted walls.

Oh Holy Virgin, oh God, oh sweet Lord Jesus, please don't let him be dead!

Christine knelt beside him, her breaths coming in hitching, sobbing pants, her hands fluttering, unsure of where to land. She grasped one brawny shoulder and heaved with all her strength, hauling his torso across her lap. He uttered a low groan as she did so and tears sprang to her eyes. Alive! Thank God!

"Erik? Love, can you hear me? Wake up," she crooned, caressing the black silk covering his right cheek.

His eyelids fluttered, lips moving over soundless words. One blue eye rolled into view, its pupil a tiny speck of black. It was then that she saw the cloth tied around his upper arm and the painful red hue of his half curled fingers. She attacked the knot, yanking off the slip of cloth and throwing it aside.

His arm . . . oh God, his arm!

Peppered here and there were pitted purple marks, one weeping a sluggish trickle of blood,
strategic over the visible lines of his veins. Horror unfurled in her.

"What did you *do* to yourself?" she hissed, clutching him to her chest.

In that interminable twilight Christine held a silent vigil over him, stroking the warm black softness of his hair. Christine watched the rise and fall of Erik's chest, sometimes so unbearably slow that she shook and shouted at him to breathe. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks unheeded. A fierce protectiveness rose up in her. Had anyone, in his whole life looked after him, other than Madame Giry? Christine swore she would. She would protect him—even from himself. She took in a deep breath and released that hot emotion. They were bonded in music. She would call him back.

*Angel of Music, guide and guardian,*

*Grant to me your glory*

*Angel of Music, hide no longer*

*Come to me, strange Angel*

"Come back to me," she whispered.

XXX

It was a bloody miracle he wasn't dead. Like an idiot, in a wild fever of tormented lust, he grabbed the wrong bottle. Instead of the diluted morphine he had weaned himself to, he grabbed the pure bottle. A dose of that amount should have killed him.

The question remained: *Why wasn't he dead?*

No St. Peter and no hellfire and brimstone.

No, he could feel the cool air moving in and out of his lungs, the cold stone beneath his face, the pain of his arm trapped beneath the weight of his body. He swam in and out of consciousness; the soft clouds of the morphine high had given way to that blank, stuporous state. The tapestry of his mind presented an exquisite vision of Christine calling his name, Christine holding him to her bosom, Christine singing . . .

Ah, perhaps this was Heaven after all!

"Come back to me."

His soul strove to obey its mistress, surging up into consciousness. Her face filled his vision, the face he knew better than his own. No, he would not compare the perfection of his Angel to his own twisted visage! She was art, poetry, music incarnate! Ah, that cascade of brown curls glinting with hints of red, the heartbreaking oval shape of her face with skin like porcelain, adorned with those chocolate brown eyes, the wide full curve of her mouth . . . so beautiful.

The beauty of his voice had deserted him and her name emerged in a garbled rasp. His hand floated up to wipe away the tears staining her cheeks. Regret pierced him. She should have never seen him like this. His slack muscles couldn't manage it, but Christine's cool hand trapped his against her face.

"Oh Erik . . ." her breath was a benediction against the heel of his hand.
Erik commanded his muscles to move, bracing one shaking arm on the ground to sit halfway up from Christine's lap.

This was a mistake.

His body rebelled, nausea washing over him like floodwaters. Muscles seized a paroxysm of agony, his gorge rose. In the most humiliating moment of his thirty-seven years of existence, Erik vomited all over the beautiful green velvet of Christine's skirt.

"Oh dear," she said softly. He groaned, burying his face in her bodice to hide his mortification. His arms of their own will wound around her torso, clinging.

"What can I do for you? Can I help?" the warm, even murmur of her voice reverberated through him. Erik summoned his voice, tasting bile.

"I . . . I didn't want you to see me like . . . like this."

A crude half-apology, but it was all he could manage at the moment. Erik was vaguely surprised that anything articulate emerged from his throat, what with the headache pounding in time with his heartbeat and the world performing cartwheels whenever he opened his eyes. Christine was his ballast, anchoring him to reality. Even in a morphine-induced dream, he would never have imagined a more ignominious outcome. He was most definitely awake.

"What did you do?" she demanded with such a quiet desperation that Erik could not lie. Not when she held him to her heart even as he expelled his breakfast all over her skirt.

"Morphine," he paused for a delicate moment, then forged ahead, "I am an addict." Erik was very glad that he could not see her face. He couldn't bear the look of disgust, betrayal, pity.

"Oh." That small syllable encompassed a gamut of emotion that Erik was too tired to decipher. His cursed stomach was doing flips and twists within him.

"Oh God. Christine, the basin-" he made a weak gesture towards the washstand near the organ bench. She barely fetched it in time. When the retching passed, Erik groaned again.

"Just leave me, Christine. Let me die," he murmured, only half serious. He was absolutely miserable, yes, and mortified beyond belief, but if he was going to die he would have done so already. That damned muscle in his chest was still beating with relentless tenacity, no doubt to please its virgin goddess of a mistress.

"No! Don't say that! Don't you ever say that again, Erik!" The hot vehemence in her voice took him aback. He jerked his head in a weak gesture of assent.

"As you wish. Now I must . . ."

Bless her, Christine correctly interpreted his broken command as a desire to die in a more dignified position. She drew his arm across her slender shoulders and Erik paused as he rose. Blood drained from his head and they swayed dangerously, like a mismatched dancing pair. Erik clenched his jaw against another rising wave of nausea.

_For the love of God don't let me embarrass myself again!_ he thought. Christine uttered a soft cry as he slumped against her and Erik mustered his once great strength.

"I apologize for ruining your dress, my dear," he whispered as they lurched across the room and up the slight incline to his room.
"I have others," was her laconic rejoinder, followed by, "How long have you been . . . doing this?"

"Morphine? Off and on for about ten years. Many others before that, in Persia. I feared damaging my voice with the opium pipe and hashish was too . . . intense for my particular need. Morphine seemed the most logical alternative."

It had also loosened his tongue.

"I see." That enigmatic statement drove him insane.

If only he could crawl inside her mind and wander around, absorbing every facet of her thoughts and feelings! This, his private shame, his self-destructive madness, he never intended to show her. Ever. Eventually, through science or will, he would have devised a way to free himself from morphine's seductive clutches. To show it to her now in such a disgusting and embarrassing fashion was . . . unexpected to say the least.

"Do you wish to leave?" he asked as neutrally as he could manage. God, this was a disaster! First the gondola capsizing, then the intruding Daroga and the threat of arrest the moment he set foot above ground, now his own foolish addiction . . . it would be a miracle if she wished to associate with him at all! In response, Christine eased him into a seated position on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not leaving you," she replied, unsmiling. She made a curt gesture with her fingers and Erik's muddled brain could not follow the gist of her command. Heart, mind, body, they were all hers to command. Thankfully his lips chose to keep that secret!

"Here. Let's get that shirt off. You've sweat through it." She plucked the limp linen distastefully. Erik wrung the damp tails of his shirt in his hands, his embarrassment deepening, if that was possible. He chose his words with care.

"I . . . I was not well treated in the past. I am . . . scarred." An incredible softening washed over her face, and tears welled in her eyes. The naked sympathy in her eyes did not affront him. Some desperate starving thing inside him wanted to fling himself into her arms and cling to the comfort she offered.

"The marks on your skin will not repel me." The solemn promise in her words relaxed a hidden knot of tension.

He peeled off the damp shirt. Gooseflesh stippled his skin despite the warmth of the room. Erik snatched the clean shirt from her hands and yanked it over his head before he embarrassed himself any further. Quite by accident, he fell sideways into the soft embrace of his bed. As fragile as a kitten. Christine uttered a soft cry, kneeling beside the bed. Erik twitched a hand in a weak wave. Her cool hand slid into his, with perfect ease, as if they had done so a thousand times. His skin tingled and sang at the soft touch of hers. His heart would continue beating for the hope of that alone!

"I'm all right, my dear. Truly. The worst is over. I'm . . . I'm just very tired."

His eyelids felt as if they were weighted with lead. He shook himself, struggling against the morphine . . . Morpheus's drug of choice no doubt! The weak joke roused a snorting chuckle. Christine's face was a picture of seriousness, her graceful brows furrowed together. God, laughing to himself he must look like a madman! A madman and a morphine addict as well as a ruthless, lying aristocrat in the form of the Vicomte, she truly did attract the worst sort of characters. That almost pushed him off into another bout of absurd giggles. He mastered them and said, "Now, when I've amply recovered from my foolishness, we begin again with Ill Muto. There isn't much to
do and a great deal of time to do it." Now he did laugh, the garbled sentence clouding those brilliant brown eyes with confusion.

"The drug makes me stupid and ties my tongue in a knot. I meant: there is much to do and-

"I understand, Maestro. Now rest," Christine ordered gently, drawing the coverlet up to his chin. Tears stung his eyes. Tucking him into bed? Not a lover crying out his name in the heat of passion, but a sweet little nurse!

*Kill me now.* On that merry thought, Erik sank into a dreamless slumber.
In A World With No More Night

Despite Erik's insistence to his health, Christine spent the next two days nursing him. She could scarcely blame him for his exhaustion, especially when the first afternoon and evening were spent retching in the privy closet. Christine offered him her mangled attempts at soup and porridge, which he accepted with a certain ironic tolerance. Had Erik had the energy, she was certain he would have teased her for her efforts. Ever the exacting teacher, he instructed from his bed, arranged like a king in velvet and silk. Christine sang scales and recited lyrics as she tidied the mess made from his emesis, sadly bidding farewell to the green velvet.

It's a good thing I don't sicken easily, she thought dryly.

For all her shrinking violet persona, she had a strong constitution and was able to nurse Erik despite the ill-smelling substances spilling forth from his belly. And all because of that accursed morphine! Christine had only the vaguest ideas of illicit substances. The managers had their cigars and their snuff, and several of the scene-shifters swilled laudanum by the quart, but morphine... and injected into his very veins! It seemed very exotic and dangerous to her. She hated it passionately for nearly killing him. What had possessed him to take it?

She glanced at his sleeping form, reassured by the steady rise and fall of his chest. Oddly, knowing about the morphine made her feel closer to him. Another barrier overcome; intimacy deepened. Maybe he would trust her when he saw that she wasn't going to leave. Maybe before the furlough was over, she would gather the courage to seduce him.

XXX

Erik rose from his bed on the fifth day of Christine's furlough completely restored. His sweet nurse, wrapped in all the trappings of one of the shah's nubile harem girls, was innocently asleep beside him, her hand woven with his. He glanced ironically at his lower half where the early hour in combination with Christine's presence in his bed had yielded predictable results. One could never credit Erik with making the same mistake twice, so he simply rose—albeit limping carefully until the tumescence abated—and went about his usual ablutions, including scrubbing his teeth and tongue with a paste of his own concoction made with sea salt and peppermint.

The remains of Christine's foray into pea soup stagnated in the kitchen, flecks of char dotting the thick green surface. Erik smiled, touched by her efforts, despite the fact that food of such quality in and of itself would be enough to cause vomiting. Luckily, she hadn't seen fit to fiddle with the samovar or he would have been in trouble! Grateful for something to do after days of limp-limbed bed rest, Erik tidied the kitchen—along with disposing of the humiliating evidence of his illness—and set a rich Persian broth to simmer for luncheon.

A curious contentment settled around him as he sat at his drafting table. While his mask had preserved the most rudimentary of defenses, Christine had seen him at his lowest—vomiting on her skirt!—and still she stayed. She nursed him. She cared. With this knowledge, Erik considered himself well satisfied with the world. Inspiration possessed him; his fingers itched to draw, to capture the magnificent innocence of her sleeping profile. If only he could imbue her sweet fragrance of violets into the page! Charcoal marred the pristine page in the first curved stroke. Erik lost himself in the simple pleasure of melding his vivid memory with his chosen medium. Ever
conscious of his wandering charge and her peculiar talent of catching him unawares, an unfinished
design sat at the ready.

"Erik! Thank God!" Christine cried.

Erik covered the drawing and swiveled in his chair in time to catch Christine as she flew into his
arms. He would never become accustomed to the unique euphoria of her unthinking embraces, he
thought. To think, for over thirty years no one had ever embraced him and in one week, Christine
had gifted him with half a dozen!

"W—when I woke up alone, I thought you had . . . oh God, I was so afraid!" she cried, her lips
moving in a sweet caress against his throat. His arms, unbelieving, closed around her.

His precious Angel!

"Oh Christine. Forgive me. I didn't mean to cause you pain . . . I am not so foolish as to repeat the
same mistake again," he crooned, stroking her back, feeling the warmth of her through the shift.

God, she wasn't wearing a corset or wrapper. Beneath a thin layer of linen, she was naked. Half
naked, and straddling his lap in the chair. She nuzzled his neck in blind, innocent affection. His
nerves shamelessly translated the sensation as pleasure, gluttonous for her touch.

"I realize that now." Was he going mad, or had her voice softened to a husky timbre?

Erik did not wish to spoil the fragile pleasure of the moment with questions, so he abided happily in
her thrall. How long had he dreamed of this? To simply share the same air as this delightful,
perplexing creature? Christine pulled back far enough to look at him. In the golden glow of
candlelight, she was perfection. Content to marvel, he was wholly unprepared for her to dart close
and peck a quick kiss on his lips.

XXX

Raoul waited outside the ballet mistress' apartments, bouncing nervously on the balls of his feet. It
was rumored that Erik Rousseau—the infernal O.G.!—had a connection with the ballet mistress,
just as Christine had. Madame Giry could lead him to Erik and wherever he held Christine captive.
A fierce pleasure rushed through him. It would be a fitting tableau, the righteous hero rescuing the
maiden from the clutches of her mad professor! Surely it was only a matter of time before Erik was
safely carted away to an asylum!

Christine wouldn't be safe until that day.

The door opened, revealing the slender figure of the ballet mistress’ daughter, Meg. For a moment,
Raoul was struck dumb by the marks of a beating on her face, ugly purple bruises marring her
delicate features. Then he realized how rude he must look, staring slack-jawed at the evidence of a
painful memory. Hardly the conduct of a gentleman. Wildly, his mind presented him with the
image of Erik Rousseau threatening this slender girl with far worse than a bruised face if she
breathed a word of Christine's whereabouts. His hero's heart instantly softened with pity and rallied
with gallant intentions. Meg GirY's hazel eyes regarded him in silence, her face flat and
expressionless.

"Pardon, Mademoiselle. I am seeking a word with your mother. May I come in?"

"Maman is not here, Monsieur. Good day," she replied and made to close the door. Raoul moved
forward, insinuating an arm through the aperture of the door.
"Wait! Please. Might I have a word with you, then?" The pert bow of Meg Giry's mouth turned down in a pretty frown.

"You're the one who's issued a warrant of arrest for Monsieur Rousseau." A moment of triumph, to be sure, and a product of his desperation when the woman he loved disappeared off the face of the earth!

"Yes," he replied with a shrug. Meg's eyes narrowed. Or was that simply the result of the swollen lower lids? Raoul exerted the slightest of pressure, testing her grip on the door. She held fast.

"Will you go away after I've answered your questions?" she asked wearily. Raoul offered an impudent grin.

"Of course. Then I will be yours to command, Mademoiselle." A fugitive sparkle of amusement glittered in Meg's eye.

"Very well, then. Come in." the words were dry and nonchalant, as was the careless shrug.

Raoul entered the main parlor, eyes darting here and there as if to absorb some semblance of the history Meg shared with Christine. A childhood summer over ten years past and an adult infatuation seemed a very tenuous hold on her. Certainly more slender than the domination of a mad magician! He thought bitterly. Raoul settled on the sagging chair and politely declined Meg's offers of tea and biscuits. Meg settled across from him and raised an inquiring brow.


"To save you embarrassment, Monsieur, I will say that the unfortunate evidence of violence on my face has been dealt with. The one responsible is gone." Raoul processed this.

"Good," Raoul said with a savage satisfaction.

"Second, I will not betray Christine's confidence by revealing anything to you." Raoul stiffened.

"Now listen here, Mademoiselle-" Meg's tragic face hardened into an impenetrable mask.

"You listen here! Christine chose to go with Monsieur Erik for the furlough. And despite whatever you may think, I'm certain he has the most honorable of intentions! You slander my mother's judgment as her warden by saying otherwise!" Raoul rankled under the casual use of his rival's name, but realized sheepishly that Meg was correct.

"I can commend him in one respect: he draws great loyalty from his women," Raoul remarked with acerbic dryness.

A vivid vision of his mother's face rose in his mind's eye, gripping the back of his father's chair with white-knuckled fingers, her face a blank mask of pain, eyes the wild cast of a trapped animal. A marriage poisoned from its genesis. The Château de Chagny hid secrets around every corner. Raoul's cherished dream was a union free from secrets, a true, intimate marriage replete with honest love. It was laughable really, he a man of wealth, standing and looks, and still a virgin at one and twenty!

"Mademoiselle, I simply want to know that she is safe. That she wasn't under any sort of . . . duress." A small, secret smile played at Meg's lips and Raoul felt an unaccustomed and unexpected surge of attraction.

"Christine was not under duress. In fact, she seemed quite eager." Raoul frowned, troubled by the
power Erik wielded over her.

"Be that as it may, I will not be able to rest easy until I see for myself that she is well. Where does this—Where does Monsieur Rousseau live?" he tripped a little at the thought of his virtuous Christine in the abode of her dark master. Meg shrugged.

"I don't know. If Maman ever needs to talk with him, he just . . . appears." This startled a genuine laugh from Raoul.

"A friendly and courteous Phantom, then!" he spat.

Suddenly, the room was intolerable, with those wide, watchful eyes set in that poor abused face, with the insufferable knowledge of his darling Christine in that madman's charge, and of his impotence in doing anything about it. Raoul stood, uttering stiff words of courtesy forced into him by strict repetition as a young boy. His angry stride, though, was of a jilted young man, bristling with hurt and anger. These feelings followed him out of the Populaire and chased after his carriage as he rode to the de Chagny townhouse along the Foubourg Saint-Honoré.

The sight that greeted him as his man opened the door was his brother Philippe, Comte de Chagny, sprawled snoring across a low couch near the fire, an empty brandy snifter upended a few inches from his limp fingers. From the reek of cheap perfume and the earthy stench of sweat and sex, Raoul deduced that his elder brother's female companions had just left. A quick glance around the room found the strongbox yawning open, its lock forced. And taken all their francs with them!

"Damn it, Philippe!" Raoul shouted in a rare show of temper. He kicked the couch, causing it to scrape across the wooden floor with a hideous screech. Philippe moaned piteously and roused, half-lidded grey eyes glaring down his aquiline nose at Raoul. A surprising feat considering he was soused, half-naked and unkempt.

"What is it Raoul?" he drawled.

"What is it? It's the fact that your whores just robbed us blind! It's the fact that even if they had not robbed us, you would have happily spent every franc on wine and women! It's the fact that our Father is dying. It's the fact that Christine could be in danger and there is nothing I can do to help her!"

During his rant, Philippe dragged himself to a half sitting position, scrubbed his stubbled face and made an attempt to order his shoulder-length black hair. Philippe yawned, beckoning him with a gesture.

"Come here and sit, little brother. I swear, Raoul, you're wound so tight it's a sodding miracle that you don't spring when you walk."

Raoul obeyed, a hot, ragged thing breathing in his chest. He'd spent too many years stuffing his emotions into a cramped little box to know what to do with them when they broke free. Philippe, the god of Raoul's childhood, oh how Raoul envied his older brother's loose, roguish charm, his flippant regard for the authority and etiquette that ruled his own life! With a sly glance, Philippe groped for the snifters and decanter and poured them both a tot of brandy. Raoul threw his back without pause. Heat chased its bitter gall, warming his insides. Philippe clapped a hand on Raoul's shoulder.

"Now, I'll be the first to admit, I am a bit," he paused to hiccup, "drunk. But that's the best way to be when tangled with such problems, I've found. A tried and true method."
Beneath the nonchalant humor, Raoul heard the vestiges of true grief. No doubt the results of Philippe loosing his wife and infant daughter in childbirth half a dozen years earlier. The elder de Chagny had always been intemperate and wayward, but after that he was lost: a ship without a rudder.

"Ah, well. Whores always get their due. I could scarcely fault them for taking an opportunity that presents itself, the poor things. And Father has been dying for years. I doubt the old goat will ever give up the ghost. And this girl-"

"Christine," Raoul corrected testily. Philippe's grey eyes narrowed in mock irritation, a smile playing with the corners of his mouth—the full mouth women were so enamored with.

"Christine," he repeated, rolling his eyes, "she's the opera singer you're so mad over?" Raoul nodded, grateful the golden wash of firelight hid his blush.

"What grave peril awaits our shy Swedish maiden?" Philippe swallowed his brandy awaiting Raoul's reply.

"Her mad professor. Her masked Phantom," he spat, reaching for more brandy. Philippe snorted in irreverent laughter.

"Sounds dashing."

"God! I'm so mad with jealousy, I fear I'd kill him!" Raoul said. Philippe's dark brows rose.

"He must be quite the man to have attracted your ire, oh sainted Raoul. What sort of man is he?"

"Utterly insane. He threatened the managers when they tried to remove Christine from the lead role."

"Weren't you about to do the same thing?" Philippe drawled in that irritatingly superior way of elder brothers.

"That's not the point! He's clearly unstable, and there's rumor that he's some sort of magician!" Philippe's manner altered subtly, a sharper shine in his grey eyes.

"What did you say his name was?"

"Erik. Erik Rousseau," Raoul pronounced his rival's name with distaste, feeling pleasantly detached with the brandy. Philippe surprised him by leaping to his feet, uttering a long string of profanity under his breath.

"I've heard tell of this man. He's dangerous." Vague fear gnawed at Raoul's belly. He'd never heard Philippe use that tone.

Oh Christine!

"What have you heard? Damn it, Philippe, why didn't you tell-"

"Just stay away from him!" Philippe interrupted, face contorted into a ferocious mask.

Raoul rose to his feet and began to say something when Philippe threw his arms around him, grasping him close in a fierce embrace. Raoul was overwhelmed by his brother's taut strength and the overwhelming scent of alcohol and sweat reeking from his pores. Baffled, Raoul patted his brother's back, listening through the blubbering of his tears.
"Philippe?"

"Promise me," Philippe whispered against his neck, "just promise me, Raoul. Stay away from this Erik. He's dangerous."

"I will," Raoul promised.

Once Christine is free of him, I will, he thought. Philippe pulled back, grasping the back of Raoul's neck and offering a smile, firelight catching the trails of tears and the dew of sweat.

"You're a good lad, Raoul. Now, I think I'll need your help getting into bed."

"Of course, Monsieur le Comte," Raoul replied dutifully.

XXX

There. She'd done it. Tingling awareness raced through her, intensely aware of her provocative position astride his lap and his warm, sinewy strength surrounding her. Christine could feel the throb of her heart, heat gathering in her fingertips, her breasts, between her thighs. She'd plucked up her courage and kissed him. But now he was just staring at her! Had she done something wrong?

Her nerve failed her and she took in a breath to say something when Erik leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers in a butterfly's caress. A soft sound left her, caught somewhere between a sigh and a moan. She swayed toward his heat, the touch of his breath. He kissed her again, deeper, and Christine melted at the velvet rub of his lips.

She was drowning in sensual pleasure. Erik's scent was sharper, saltier, a pungent male musk. She basked in his heat, his power. His lips tasted of . . . peppermint? Christine craved more of the taste. Erik's long, musician's fingers tangled in her hair while hers fisted in handfuls of his shirt. Novel sensations burst in riotous bloom within Christine, a deep, yawning need, forbidden pleasure. Erik made a low sound that vibrated against her lips and shivered through her throat and chest.

So deeply connected.

Erik's mouth slanted across hers, widening the opening of her sealed lips. Startled, Christine opened her eyes to look at him, then was carried away by the sweet, wet heat of his mouth and . . . oh God, his tongue! It was a damp velvety caress along her lower lip, gently probing. The marvelous heat deepened, swelled, blurring the edges of reality.

Christine flung her arms around his neck, dragging him closer. He was the only cure for this ache, this tension, the only remedy for her burning fever! His magical fingers moved from their feverish grip in her hair, gently stroking the back of her neck and tracing the lines of her shoulders. Those deft fingers then slid down the line of her spine, setting nerves afire. Suddenly, his strong, warm hands cupped her hips, pressing her womanhood against its throbbing opposite, trapped within his trousers. Christine cried out at the sudden rush of pleasure.

The heat spread, the tension gathered even tighter. A greedy, grasping hunger gnawed at her, tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She was reaching, reaching for something . . . something only he could give her! She tried to speak, tried to beg for it.

Erik! Erik, please! She screamed wordlessly.

Erik's tongue plunged into her mouth, his rigid body surging up against hers. The world contracted to one shining point, this one man, this one kiss. All else fell away. She broke the heady contact of their mouths to cry out, a thin, high wail. Pleasure so exquisite it was almost pain exploded through
her. Christine writhed in his arms, mindless in its throes.

Breath came in ragged sobs, her face buried against his neck. Erik made a low sound, hands stroking her back soothingly, dropping gentle kisses along the curve of her jaw and her throat. Christine clung to him as her heartbeat slowed, as the wild pleasure receded. It was almost frightening in its immensity and power. As the fever abated, mortification gradually replaced it and she shivered in his arms. Holy Virgin, she had . . . she had . . .

"Erik?" she whispered.

"Yes, Christine?" against her will, fresh pleasure bloomed at the sensual caress of his low voice.

"What . . . what j—just happened?"

"*Le petite mort*, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he crooned, doing something sinfully wonderful with his tongue to the curve of her ear. Christine gasped, both at his words and his action.

"The little death? That's what it's called? When the world went away like that?" she whispered, heat stinging her cheeks. Christine was grateful he couldn't see her face. She felt so young and ignorant.

"Yes," he replied simply. An awkward pause, broken only by the steady rise and fall of his breathing and his absent stroking fingers along her back.

"What, ah . . . what do you know of what happens between a man and a woman, Christine?" the slowing pound of her heart cleared room for her to think.

"Um . . . I know the rude mechanics of it but little else. I definitely didn't know I could . . . that you could make me, ah, do that while only kissing."

"Nor I. From what I've read, female satisfaction is somewhat elusive."

*Not experience?* She was tempted to say. A violent, possessive emotion rose up in her at the thought of Erik with another woman.

Christine pressed her lips against the starchy surface of his linen-clad shoulder, feeling pleasantly languid. Erik however, was stiff, tension humming through him. He shifted beneath her and brought the throbbing evidence of his desire to her attention. Christine gasped, pulling back to look into his eyes, those glinting blue-grey eyes and the supple line of his mouth beneath the black bandit's mask, his lips red and swollen, moist from their kisses. The sight inflamed her, roused a yearning for more of his lips and tongue.

"You . . . you didn't . . . ?" she stuttered, at a loss. He combed a wayward curl behind her ear with a faint smile.

"No, my dear. I did not."

"Do you . . . do you want me to . . ." She hated the idea of him left unfulfilled, especially when he had been so generous with her pleasure. But she also had no idea how to go about alleviating it.

"I'll manage. But . . ." he trailed off, his eyes somber, "We must speak of this. I must apologize, my dear. I have . . . complicated things. When you kissed me, I lost my head. I didn't mean to compromise things this way. I made a promise to Minette and to you that I would treat you with the utmost respect."
The words were poison in her ears. He was *apologizing*? Why, *why* would he tarnish this beautiful, fragile thing as it took its first breath? Complication? Did he see her as a complication to his success as a composer? He loved her! Why wouldn't he say so?

"I've seen the drawings!" she blurted, cutting Erik off mid sentence. His hand fell from her hair to hang limp at his side, as if the nerve had been severed.

"So you know." His tone was flat, emotionless.

"You love me," Christine whispered, her voice warbling. She was dangerously close to tears.

"Yes," he said, looking miserable, as if he'd bitten into a lemon. Christine was shaken by his lack of emotion. How was this the same man who kissed her with such incandescent passion? Why was loving her so dreadful?

He moved to rise and Christine slid off his lap to stand on shaky legs. Her thighs tingled with residual pleasure, firing tiny echoes through her body. Christine bit her lip in mortification at the embarrassing dampness between her thighs. Tears welled in her eyes. It rested on her tongue to say she loved him, but she bit it back. Christine hated that miserable, defeated look! Did he think she would mock him for loving her? Lord it over him like some sort of shameful secret?

"You should get dressed."

He wouldn't look at her. Christine wanted to scream and slap him.

"Erik?" she pleaded, shivering in the chill of his lair, bereft without his warmth. Christine wrapped her arms around herself.

"Yes?"

"Never mind," she said, retreating with what dignity she could to the safe haven of his room.

The room was outfitted with a thick wooden door which Christine slammed closed with vicious satisfaction. Two more days with this . . . whatever it was looming between them, with him staring at her with those enigmatic eyes—surely it was torture! Christine sank down to the rug against the door, no longer bothering to quiet her sobs.
Shame, Shame, Shame

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.” Song of Solomon 1:2

Erik couldn't think. The only relevant fact, the only lucid thing in the throbbing hellish haze he wandered in was: I am a fool. Blood roared in his ears, desire made even the touch of his clothing on his naked skin unbearable. Dimly, he heard a door slam and Christine's stifled sobs. He regretted her wounded feelings, but was quietly amazed that anything coherent at all had left his lips after . . . A tortured groan left his lips and he staggered to the storage room, closing and locking the door with shaking hands.

No help for it.

He had to . . .

He freed his throbbing organ from its imprisonment and hid its turgid eagerness within the grasp of a linen towel. He closed his eyes and felt again the plush press of Christine's lips against his, the flavor of her mouth. She tasted so sweet! He felt again her urgent writhing in his lap, the helpless, hungry tension gathering, gathering . . . oh God!

Erik bit his lip to stifle his cries of rapture as he found blessed release. He slumped down to his knees and adjusted his clothing. He tossed aside the towel in disgust. A rueful smile touched his lips. At least he hadn't damned them both by taking her. It had been a close thing. Feeling her climax in his arms with only a thin barrier of cloth separating him from her delicious wet heat . . .

Erik struggled to stifle the film of erotic images scrolling through his head, but Christine had shattered him, decimated him with the sublime beauty of her pleasure. He craved it more than morphine, more than music. He untied the mask and dabbed sweat from his twisted visage with his sleeve. Erik's tongue darted out to touch his lips, as if to savor any lingering bit of Christine's taste and touch.

"She kissed me. Christine kissed me."

The words sounded so strange said aloud, like the lilt of an unfamiliar language. The first kiss of his life, and given freely by his Angel! Nothing less than a miracle! Christine had given him a gift more precious than gold and he would treasure it until his dying day. His words in the sweating aftermath had been for her honor, and his sanity. Erik needed room to breathe, to think. Utterly impossible when her sex kissed his thigh with its humid warmth, with those huge, sleepy brown eyes staring at him as if he had hung the moon. Reality hit him like a punch in the gut. Christine was still young, innocent, and in Minette's stern charge.

Then Christine blurted her knowledge of his drawings and the encounter slid into focus. In her generosity of spirit, would Christine not think to offer her poor lovesick teacher a scrap of affection? A kiss was so negligible among humankind. A kiss in greeting, in parting, in the showing of both sisterly and lover-like affection. How was he to discern its nuances? True, flying apart in sobbing pleasure was not the act of a compassionate student, but was she perhaps swept away in it, delighted by the novel pleasures of a man's touch? Erik laughed bitterly at the thought.
A man? When had he found the audacity to think of himself as such? A monster wearing the mask of a gentleman, a crude pantomime of what Christine deserved.

Erik was reeling drunkenly in unfamiliar territory. Sweating and wrecked from their encounter, what was he to do now? The faint jangle of keys caught his attention. He rose to his feet, adjusting his trousers, tightening the laces of his shirt, finger-combing his hair and retying the mask. He stepped out of his sanctuary to find Minette standing just inside the portcullis, head cocked to the sound of Christine's weeping and her hazel eyes blazing into his. Erik managed a stiff bow.

"Good afternoon, Madame Giry."

---

Christine's body acted quite without her consent, joints loosening and heat blooming at the soft purr of Erik's voice outside the door. How had she endured the beauty of his voice? Now, it seemed as warm and tangible as the touch of his lips, his hands, stroking and caressing. The cool, clipped tones of Madame's voice were antidotes to the sweet cloud of Erik's influence.

"Madame!

Here?

And Christine sniveling behind a locked door, disheveled with the evidence of desire dampening her nightgown. She leapt to her feet and within minutes was dressed in her dove grey gown with her hair respectably pinned. Her eyes were probably swollen and bloodshot from weeping, but there was no helping that. Madame rapped gently on the door.

"Christine?" her mothering tone brought another rush of tears to her eyes. A small, shy part of her longed for the childlike simplicity of days long gone. What she felt for Erik was too foreign, too wild for her to understand.

"M—Madame?" Christine quavered, unbolting the door. Madame's beloved face, so similar to her daughter's, filled Christine's vision and Christine flew into her arms.

"Are you all right, my dear?" she murmured, stroking Christine's ringlets.

"I'm fine. Just fine," she replied. Christine pulled back.

"What are you doing here, Madame? The production doesn't begin for another two days." Christine darted a swift glance at Erik and found him staring dispassionately out at the lake. Hurt anger flared to riotous life. He didn't even have the decency to look her in the eye? Had she repulsed him . . . when she . . . Madame Giry arched a brow.

"It was a part of mine and Erik's agreement that I was free to come whenever I wished to see how you were faring. I am long overdue."

"I've made excellent progress on Ill Muto," Christine mumbled, acutely aware of Erik's potent charisma sucking all the air from the room. It grazed along her skin even beneath the chafe of her clothing, the roots of her hair. Madame smiled gently, cupping Christine's chin.

"I have no doubt of that. In fact, if you are so confident in your progress, I would like for you to accompany me back aboveground. There is much work to be done: practice with the chorus, dress rehearsal, fittings for your costumes and the like."

"That depends entirely on the opinion of my Maestro." Christine glanced at Erik. His gaze alighted
on her, as cold and distant as an Arctic sea. Her heart rose to her throat, tears threatened.

Say something! She willed him.

"I am perfectly amendable to Madame's suggestion. You shall do splendidly, my dear. All of Paris shall be eating from the palm of your hand." While the words were warm and polite, the tone of his voice was like a rush of icy air from an open window. Christine reeled in hurt confusion. He loved her! Why was he pushing her away? From miles away, she felt herself offer a brittle smile and heard her voice reply: "You are too kind, Maestro." Madame's keen eyes darted between them.

"Very good. I will help you gather your things, Christine."

Dazed, Christine allowed herself to be shuttled and herded, like a frail little lamb. She griped her bundle with white-knuckled hands as Madame led her through the door hidden in the stone near the portcullis. All under the remorseless blue-grey gaze of the wolf.

Say something! Call me back! Keep me with you. I belong with you. She thought, looking back at him.

Erik held her gaze for a heartbeat, then turned his back to her. The soft, maddening notes of his music trailed after her like the lingering scent of wildflowers.

The world only seemed real again when Christine crossed the threshold into Madame's rooms. These humble rooms where she had spent her childhood, before she graduated to the ballet dormitories at the age of twelve. Even after she and Meg moved to the dormitories, they often supped and argued and whiled away pleasant hours reading on that worn rug. Meg emerged from her room and uttered a squeal. Christine replied in kind and soon they were whirling around the room in an exuberant embrace. The bruise on her cheek had mellowed from purple into an ugly green, barely noticeable under skillful application of cosmetics.

"Oh Christine! I've missed you!" Meg whispered in her ear.

"I've missed you too. How has practice been? Outshining the rest of the corps like always?" Meg shrugged, a smile flirting with the corners of her mouth.

"Perhaps." She glanced slyly at Madame, who set Christine's bundle of clothes into the hamper to be taken to the launderer's in the morning.

"Not that Maman could ever give me a solo. The junk men wouldn't stand for it. Not when Adele and Jacqueline lift their skirts for-

"Meg!" Madame interrupted sharply. Meg glared mutinously at her mother.

"We all know it's true," she muttered. Madame's mouth thinned.

"Then it doesn't bear mentioning." Madame made for her office.

"I have some work to do, but after supper we must get to work on your costumes, Christine."

"Yes, Madame," Christine murmured. As soon as the door shut behind her mother, Meg grasped Christine's hands and tugged her towards the low couch.

"How was your week with Monsieur Erik? Tell me every detail!" Christine bit her lip. What she felt for Erik was so confusing and wonderful and terrible. Christine wanted time to organize her thoughts and feelings into some semblance of normalcy before she described them. Canny Meg
would know if she was lying. Christine squeezed Meg's hands, so small and wiry in her grip.

"It was . . . interesting," she began cautiously. Meg's brows rose.

"Interesting? Oh, with such florid descriptions like that how can I not be absolutely green with envy? Come on, Christine! It's me you're talking to. What was he like in his home? Did he ever take off his mask? Did he kiss you?"

"That's none of your business," Christine snapped, hating her prim, snobbish tone almost as much as the images and sensations the word 'kiss' brought to mind. Meg sank back against the couch, disengaging their joined hands.

"Pardon me for wanting to know more about the man who saved my life, for wanting to know if you'd finally kissed the man you're so madly in love with."

No. She wasn't in love with him. She couldn't be. Love didn't mean despair, desperation, this almost savage longing. Whatever she felt for Erik, it wasn't love. Christine laid a hand on Meg's knee.

"I'm sorry. I'm very tired and Erik and I had a . . . a quarrel." Meg's expression softened immediately.

"Oh Christine, I'm sorry." A heartbeat's pause, "Do you want to talk about it?" Christine shook her head mutely. Meg shrugged, a devilish gleam entering her dark gaze.

"Very well then. Perhaps I won't tell you about the chat I had with the Vicomte de Chagny yesterday." Christine shot up straight, eyes flying wide.

"What? Raoul was here? What did he say?"

"Tit for tat, Christine," Meg said with a smug grin. And Christine could only laugh at Meg's devilish mischief.

Two days flew by in the bustle and cacophony of rehearsal, the poking and prodding and tugging of fittings, the venomous glares of fellow ballet rats and the constant chatter of the managers and La Carlotta, squawking like noisy jays. Amidst this frenetic activity, Christine congratulated herself on how little she thought of her dark Maestro. She refused to call him by his name now, a vain attempt to purchase distance from him. Despite her will's steady resolve, her dreaming mind presented her the brief moments spent in his arms and woke her gasping on the cusp of pleasure. Left bereft and unfulfilled, Christine prayed she had not cried out for him in her sleep.

Rumor circulated that Christine had followed the path of Adele and Jacqueline under the tutelage of La Sorelli. None but the nastier few believed them in Christine's case, but curse her yearning body for betraying her in this manner!

Christine's voice rose in crystalline purity over the untold rows of velvet seats:

*Poor fool, he makes me laugh*

*Haha haha*

*Time I tried to get a better better half?*

*Poor fool, he doesn't know*
If he knew the truth, he'd never ever go!

The notes were perfect, the lyrics crisp and easy, but the tone rang false. *Drat!* Christine thought, scowling as the dancers pirouetted gracefully around her. Between the incident with the morphine and their encounter, there had been little time for her *Maestro* to tackle the intricacies of the Countess's inner motivations. There were only a handful of people who could find any fault in her performance, but unfortunately, she was one of them. Without perfection, the core of the narrative was ineffective.

Monsieur Reyer scrutinized her through his round spectacles, his long, foxy face pinched in a sour expression. He tapped his baton on the back of the music stand and Madame corralled the ballet rats. The discordant cacophony of the practicing orchestra died down.

"Is there some problem, Miss Daae? Are you displeased?" Sarcasm laced the conductor's words and Christine flushed under the feeling of hundreds of pairs of eyes trained on her—most of them hostile. She looked down at the scuffed boards beneath her feet. How she longed to seep between the cracks and disappear!

Didn't her *Maestro* realize that catapulting her into fame would step on a great deal of toes, ruffle countless feathers, and not just La Carlotta's? Of course not. His word was law in his kingdom, his will a blistering force that could twist the world into a shape that he desired.

"N—No, Monsieur. There is no problem," Christine whispered. She darted a quick glance around. Madame and Meg were gone. Called aside by the managers? A pinched smile touched Reyer's thin lips.

"A new diva cannot afford any sour looks, Miss Daae. Especially when your lauded *Maestro* is a wanted criminal." The shame and embarrassment melted under a sudden blast of anger. What had she done to deserve such treatment? How could Raoul do such a thing in pursuit of her?

Words welled up and spewed forth before she could stop them: "On the contrary, Monsieur, since my premiere in *Hannibal*, I have earned my keep a thousand times over. I may look as I please. The charges against my teacher are false and will be dropped soon enough." A small inward part of herself watched from far away as this strange Christine's eyes blazed into Reyer's, uncaring of the titter and murmur of conversation rippling behind her.

"Now you call our esteemed patron a liar?" Reyer said incredulously, his sagging jaw revealing several rotten molars. Her heart slammed against her ribs, as stunned as everyone else by her audacity.

"In this matter, he is mistaken." her voice was cool, her tone mild, as if remarking on the price of a bolt of cloth. The press of their eyes was hot, stabbing. Christine repressed the urge to squirm.

"You have a very high opinion of your teacher, Miss Daae." How did Reyer make those words sound insulting?

"I do," Christine said.

Rehearsal continued after that, stilted and awkward. No one expected the shy Swedish songbird to voice protest.

*XXX*

The Daroga's steady brown gaze followed him as he paced in restless turns across the cramped space of his study. Christine had become a ghost that haunted every corner of his home. Erik could
find no rest there, not with her scent lingering in his bedclothes, with the echo of her angelic voice ringing in his ear, with the memory of the velvet heat of her mouth making his dreams a fiery hell of tormented longing. A fire crackled in the grate, flickering in golden tongues through the golden depths of the Daroga's brandy. Erik realized from a faint faraway place that he was being terribly rude, barging into Nadir's home at an ungodly hour without a word of explanation. Daroga's thick skin made him an invaluable companion. When he said as much, the Daroga let out a throaty laugh.

"Oh my friend, you are in a rare mood if you offer compliments without the slightest shred of sarcasm. Please sit, and tell me what the little Daae has done now to throw you into such a fit." Nadir gestured toward the wingback chair across the chessboard from him, but Erik was possessed by a crackling energy, not to be soothed by the temptations of a stimulating match and lively conversation.

"Christine's effect on my mood is none of your business," Erik snapped without heat. The Daroga responded with an arched brow.

"Is that a fact? I would make it my business when these moods bring unannounced guests to my home at one o'clock in the morning."

"Old men such as yourself never sleep and enjoy hearing the sound of your own voice, especially when raised in lecture."

"And lovesick fools such as yourself pace around like madmen all because of a slip of a girl."

"Lovesick? More definitely. But it is more madness with dignity, I think," Erik said softly, too dazed to rise to the bait.

"Christine kissed me," he blurted.

"Or I kissed her. I'm not sure which."

His fingertips grazed his lips, still incredulous over the fact himself. Nadir's other brow rose to join its fellow in such a complete expression of surprise that Erik chuckled. Nadir rose with a creaking slowness that reminded Erik that he was no longer the spry, resilient chief of police he had met so many years ago in Russia. The image of mortality pierced him a sudden rush of affection for the poor, beleaguered Nadir.

"Erik, my friend," he began, "I know you love the little Daae, but... but is she... did... Allah forgive me, but did she leave your home still a virgin?"

Affection froze; anger was more comfortable and familiar. When he spoke, the words were thick with venom.

"Since I have the face of a monster, I must invariably act like one, no?" Daroga's dark eyes widened.

"Erik, you misunderstand me. It is custom for a young woman-"

"We are not in Persia, you senile old fool!"

"I realize that. But even in cosmopolitan Paris, I believe it is preferable for a young lady to be wed a virgin, is that not so?" the Daroga countered, unperturbed by Erik's show of temper.

Erik dragged in a long breath, striving for calm. The Daroga had an uncanny talent for scenting out
all that Erik felt guilty for. Did their searing, passionate kiss count towards the loss of her honor? Entirely ignorant of such matters himself, he was too mortified by embarrassment to ask Nadir's opinion on the matter.

"Yes. Perhaps it would ease you to know that Christine escaped the beast's lair with her honor intact. By the grace of God and His angels, surely," Erik snapped. The Daroga nodded, unsurprised.

"Good. I had hoped that your love for her would overpower your lust." Erik grunted and threw back a shot of brandy. He sank into the chair across from Nadir and attempted in vain to order the wild strands of his hair.

"When she kissed me, I felt . . . whole," he whispered.

"So the little Daae is aware of your affections?" The Daroga probed.

"Yes. Unfortunately." Nadir's brow furrowed, sipping his brandy.

"What part of this is misfortune, Erik? She knows the secret you've been dragging behind you like a lead weight these past few years. How is that not good news?" Erik bit his tongue to stifle mocking words. It was a straightforward question, after all. The combination of brandy and agitation made him a blade-tongued adder.

"Because, Daroga, Christine has a very kind heart." His Persian friend nodded impatiently.

"And?" he prompted.

"And is it not plausible that a soul as kind as Christine's would bestow some meager morsel of affection upon her poor, lovesick teacher out of pity?" the last word came out as a low epithet. Worse than scorn, worse that cruelty surely! His pride would not tolerate it. To his surprise, the Daroga uttered a bark of laughter, then seeing Erik was deadly serious, swallowed any other expression of mirth.

"Erik, surely you don't think-"

"Why else would she, Daroga?" Nadir heaved a heavy sigh, raking his fingers though his hair, now more grey than black.

"Yes, there are some women who would stoop to kiss you out of pity, out of spite. But the little Daae is not one of them. Have you ever considered that she might return your feelings?" Erik surged forward in his chair, knocking over a few chess pieces as he leaned over the table.

"I have never known you to ask stupid questions. Don't force me to revise my opinion of you." The Daroga grunted low in his throat, but said nothing.

A tense, contemplative silence filled the next few moments, the fire murmuring to itself in the grate. Nadir pushed his chair back on its hind legs, leaning back far enough to snag the brandy decanter from its stand. Erik muttered a word of thanks as he was poured another drink, grasping the proverbial olive branch.

Now was one of the rare times when he did not feel the itching urge to melt into the shadows and seek the frigid solitude of his home. Perhaps it was because Nadir had seen every atrocity he performed in Persia as the khanum's Angel of Doom and still called him friend. However naïve and foolish that decision might be.
"You risked much to come here tonight. I don't know whether to be honored or annoyed." Erik snorted.

"You are mistaken, Daroga. I risked nothing coming here. Despite the dubious legality of the Vicomte's warrant, I could evade the emperor's gendarmes in my sleep."

"The gendarmes do have one advantage, perhaps the most important one in catching a fugitive: they know where to look for you. At the premiere tomorrow night, will you not be in Box Five?"

"I will not leave Christine," Erik replied, frowning. The old policeman leaned back comfortably in his chair, folding his hands over the small mound of a thickening paunch.

"There will be a trap set for you there. That's what I would do to catch you."

XXX

"Five minutes, Ma'amselle," murmured an errand boy's voice through the door of her dressing room. Due to Madame's careful planning, there was no frantic rush to don her costume and thanks to her Maestro there was no fear that she had forgotten the lyrics or notes. They were engraing in her bones. A faint warble of sweet apprehension gathered in her stomach at the thought of his grey-blue eyes watching her, the pulsating thrill of his presence surrounding her. Christine pressed a steadying hand against her belly, unconsciously mimicking Madame Giry's nervous gesture of touching her crucifix.

Dread gathered in her belly as she stepped out of the dressing room and tottered toward the stage, impeded by the billows of her skirt, the heavy wig on her head and the five inch heels on her feet. After her little tantrum during rehearsal yesterday, the general resentment hidden just under the surface was bursting into full-grown hostility. Words like 'slut' and 'criminal' flew like darts at her from all sides, and more than once a set piece 'accidentally' came close to injuring her.

Fame was a double-edged sword, she thought wryly. Why had she ever wanted it in the first place? Christine could hear Piangi singing the opening number, the theatrical lilt of his laughter booming from the stage, loud enough to reach the farthest box. It was a full house, from what she heard. Twenty-three hundred seats. Forty-six hundred eyes trained solely on the capering dancers, the heavy-set Piangi looking like a painted characteriture in his stage cosmetics, and her. The scene ended with a flourish from the orchestra.

She felt the prickle of unfriendly eyes and glanced over her shoulder to find La Carlotta's dowdy maid—whom she affectionately called 'Mother'—standing behind her, watching her. Christine offered a tentative smile, only to be met with a sullen glare. The thin mouth on her florid, puffy features looked like a pinched purse-string, her eyes the flat, black shine of a button. Christine shrugged off the unsettled feeling in her belly and watched the opera through the narrow aperture of the curtain.

A small tray of gargling water sat tucked in a niche and Christine took a draught, swilled the tangy mixture of water and lemon around in her mouth and thriftily swallowed two gulps for good measure. She took a fortifying breath and stepped on the stage.

Halfway through her opening scene, Christine felt . . . strange. The garish spotlights danced drunkenly behind her eyes, her lips felt numb, garbling the last line of the aria. The scene dragged on for a small eternity. Christine struggled against the leaden dread, creeping fear. The part of herself tied to Erik yearned, grasped at his fleeting shadow presence.
He wasn't there.

She couldn't feel him.

She was alone. Meg, who was dressed as one of the Count's maids, sidled close.

"Christine? Are you all right?" the words reached her from far away. Meg's face swam in and out of focus. All she could see was the maid's black button eyes, the flat, unfathomable look. A word floated through the ether.

*Drugged.*

The stage reached up to swallow her.
Erik heaped curses on Raoul de Chagny's golden head as the Vicomte sat immured comfortably in his box, waiting for his student to emerge in all her glory. He uttered a stream of epithets aimed at the three gendarmes guarding Box Five and the four more placed strategically at the theater's entrances. Erik hunched in the dry darkness of the mirrored torture chamber under the landing and pondered his options. The orchestra's music bled through the walls and he faintly heard the boom of Piangi's stage laugh. Christine was due on at any moment! He had to be there. It was a necessity, like the need for air.

He could force his way into the theater. Not deadly force, of course—much too messy and troublesome—but to simply tighten his Punjab around a fat neck until the unfortunate gendarme slipped into sweet Morpheus's embrace . . . No, that would not do. He promised the Daroga, and Minette. It was his own blighted luck that his few friends were afflicted with such nagging consciences. Erik grinned into the darkness. It was a wonder why they tolerated his moods.

While Erik would have vastly preferred to walk across the Populaire's marble floors and plush crimson carpet like any other respectable patron of the opera, he was forced to use his considerable powers of stealth to slip from one tunnel to the next, worming his way into the narrow passage above that gaudy chandelier. The natural acoustics of the theater allowed him a perfect vantage point. Christine's voice was a drink of water after an eternity of choking dust and rasping sand. Sublime perfection. His spirit quickened within him, yearning to reach out and embrace its mistress.

Erik froze.

Something was wrong.

A terrible sense of doom hovered over him, a jagged fear bordering on panic. Erik kicked open the door onto the catwalk above the theater, eyes fastening on Christine's slender form drowning in the Countess's frivolous costume. The crystalline purity of her voice warbled, soaring up and up . . . then shattered into winking shards. Erik moved without thinking, the image of Christine's body sprawled like a limp doll across the stage burned in his mind. His insides were a confused muddle, a palpitating heart, a lurching gut, lungs that couldn't take in enough air.

Christine! Christine! Christine!

Dimly, he heard the orchestra grind to a halt and the nervous murmur of conversation. Erik exploded through the hidden door on the ground floor and started in the direction of the stage only to be halted by a sharp prod in the ribs. A faint click raised the hairs on the back of Erik's neck.

A pistol.

"Hold it right there, Monsieur, if you please."

Damn!

"You must have mistaken me for someone else," Erik rasped, wiggling his Punjab into his waiting hand. The gendarme grunted.
"Not likely. Not many masked madmen wandering about. Now let's see your hands."

Erik made a show of lifting them, choosing the second where the gendarme reached for the crude restraints to burst into action. He twisted away from the pistol and let the Punjab fly in one smooth motion. It snagged on the bill of the man's cap, but a quick flick and twist settled it in perfect position around the man's throat.

"Your timing is absolutely rotten, Monsieur," Erik muttered, almost apologetically.

The gendarme's pale eyes darted this way and that, searching for help, yearning for the breath to scream. He was young, and strong. When he raised his pistol, Erik snatched it out of his weakening grip, tightening the Punjab by a fraction. Any tighter and Erik just might crush his trachea. Precious air was failing to reach his brain. Erik watched in a remote, clinical fascination as the man's skin rapidly progressed from red to purple to blue. At last, the gendarme crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Erik retrieved his lasso and turned, his cape flaring dramatically behind him. Urgency gripped him, a frantic voice in his ear.

"Halt there, Sir." snarled a smoke-thickened voice.

Erik could count on one hand how many times any living being had caught him by surprise, and all three of those occurrences had been when he was a young and fumbling novice in the ways of stealth. This, unfortunately, marked a first in Erik's rather eventful life. The screaming urgent voice escalated in volume.

Christine! Christine! Christine!

The sound that hissed from behind his clenched teeth was unrecognizable as human.

For the second time in one night, Erik turned on his heel to face his opponent, grasping for equanimity. A captain and four gendarmes arranged themselves in a wary circle around him. Erik noted with an acerbic flattery that the Vicomte had spared no expense in arranging for his arrest. He glanced wryly at the unconscious man at his feet.

"The officer and I had a . . . disagreement," Erik drawled, pouring all of his hate for humankind into one brutal glance, enunciating the words with grim relish.

The captain shuddered visibly and stammered a little when he spoke, "Y—You will accompany us to the managers' office, Monsieur Rousseau. Now." Erik's jaw and teeth ached from clenching, a cramp gnarled his left fist. He could not incapacitate them all without killing them with nothing but his Punjab and the dagger hidden in his vest. A gentleman did not carry saber or pistol to the Opera, after all. There was no need to add profligate murder to his growing list of sins. He forced a gracious nod, resisting the savage howling voice with a titanic force of will.

"Of course." Even the beauty of his voice had deserted him; the phrase emerged in a hoarse rasp.

The gendarmes tightened around him. None dared touch him, or even look at him. Did they think madness was catching? Erik was not in the mood to delight in their stupidity, not when Christine lay lifeless on the stage, beyond his reach. The urgency in his bones and organs without blessed relief of seeing his soul's mistress whole turned its desperate, jagged energy inward until Erik yearned to leap out of his skin. He wanted to snap necks, scale buildings. A low snarl rose in his throat, but he choked it down. The best way to assure the world that he was sane was not to make inarticulate animal noises under his breath.

André and Firmin were waiting, smug smiles painted on their fat faces. The force of Erik's hate
was a living thing, mauling and howling in him. He saw again the laughing faces beyond bleak iron bars, pelting him with stones, greasy bones, shards of glass. All eight men filed into the managers' office. The captain made an expansive gesture to the chair and Erik simply stared, stubbornly defiant. The captain shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat.

"Ah, well. Monsieur Rousseau, I'm certain you are aware of the warrant of arrest posted against you?"

"I was not, Monsieur. What charges are laid against me?" the words cracked like the lash of a whip.

No matter how desperately he sought the cool, detached center of himself, he could not erase Christine's slender body swallowed by her costume, he could not contain with wild, screeching fear the shred his nerves. The world without her was unfathomable, a desolate void. The captain stroked his iron grey mustache, sweat darkening his high navy collar.

"Insanity, Sir," he whispered with quiet delicacy. Erik uttered a sharp bark of laughter.

"Insanity? A difficult charge to prove. How can one define what is rational and true within another man's mind? Enlighten me, Captain. What titillating evidence is there against me?" The captain waved a hand to encompass the two managers.

"I have the testimony of these men. They say that you threatened them with bodily harm. They say you admitted to years of extortion and terrorism under the name O.G. and," the captain paused and pulled a small black book from his coat.

"'Acted with unprovoked, unreasonable violence when your wishes were respectfully denied.' Does that sound about right, gentlemen?" the captain asked. Both voiced their agreement. Erik's gaze darted to Firmin who touched his throat discreetly, no doubt remembering the grip of his Punjab. Erik's thorny, violent mood wanted to watch the pulse in the presumptuous manager's throat slow as the lasso squeezed . . .

Erik threw his considerable force of will around these fractious, wild emotions, seeking the role he needed to play. He had masqueraded as a man for so long, he could speak and act like a gentleman even when he wanted to spit and curse and kill.

"I can assure you that I did no such thing, Captain. I am a humble composer. I simply told these esteemed gentlemen that my student and I would seek employment elsewhere if the management mishandled the casting after the success of Hannibal.

Perhaps I overstepped my bounds in my zeal for my student's success, but no harm came of it, certainly no permanent damage. The managers André and Firmin certainly have not shared their concerns with me. As to the unfortunate misunderstanding of this Ghost character, I can assure you, my finances are perfectly legitimate."

Erik reached within the depths of his coat. Six pistols swiveled in his direction. He blinked innocently at the captain, who motioned for his men to lower their arms. He pulled the perfectly harmless folder from his coat and handed it to the captain.

"You may peruse these at your leisure, Sir. The copies of my financial ledger, including the thousands of francs I have spent in patronage of this Opera House. I am hurt and offended that the managers would ever-

"Wait just one minute! We both know that you've been bleeding us dry ever since we bought the
Populaire! For the sum of twenty thousand francs a month!" Firmin blustered, shoving a gendarme aside to peer over the captain's shoulder.

"Is that not your signature, Monsieur?" the captain said, the rap of his finger on the piece of paper making a sibilant whisper.

"Of course n-" Firmin started to say, then broke off, eyes wide and jaw swinging uselessly. He gave such an accurate impression of a dying fish that Erik almost laughed. Instead he faced his accusers.

"Under our emperor's law, is it not illegal to hold a man without evidence?" he asked the captain. The man's drawn, pale features bleached to the hue of old bone at Erik's words, his Adam's apple bobbing. He coughed.

"Ah, yes, that's true, Monsieur Rousseau. But I must take you into custody after you assaulted one of my men. I do hope you will come quietly."

xx

Hours of teeth-gnashing, fist-clenching rage and stifling the insane impulse to snap every male neck within sight left him drained. The tedium of successive bribes to grease the rusted cogs of justice left his bank account drained as well. Erik shoved his way through the throngs of people outside the gendarme station and hailed a brougham cab. Being trapped in a rolling box would do little to improve his mood, but it didn't matter. He had to get to Christine as swiftly as possible.

The chill of autumn's wind ruffled his hair and stirred his cape as he flew from the cab, tossing a few of his remaining bills over his shoulder. He ducked around the corner of the building and slithered down the drain grate Minette had urged him into the night he escaped from the gypsy fair. A flight of stairs and a loose panel released Erik into his own realm, the twisting tunnels that had been his playground and domain for almost two decades. The only thing that barred him now was Minette's door and it was purely symbolic. Minette had made it abundantly clear that the door was always open to him, especially after the Buquet fiasco damaged little Meg. Erik froze as he heard the low murmur of an unfamiliar male voice from within.

Whose is that voice? Who is that in there?

It took Erik a handful of minutes to circle back outside, crouched near a small, dirty window. Through the warped, grimy glass, he saw the outline of Christine's form, the dark spill of her curls on the pillow. His eyes welled in passionate gratitude.

Alive. Thank God!

Erik leaned his forehead against the cool brick, exhaling in joint-loosening relief. Good, Minette and the doctor were tending to her. Now all he had to do was wait until . . .

The man spoke again and the ground crumbled into nothing beneath Erik's feet.

The Vicomte Raoul de Chagny.

Raoul de Chagny's lean form sat hunched in little Meg's bedroom, crouched over Erik's protégé. God, Erik's complete and utter focus had been for Christine. Erik widened his gaze and saw the shine of the boy's golden hair through the window, a sliver of yellow light spilling over their joined hands. Raoul's voice softened to a husky murmur, though Erik could not make out the words. He leaned forward and . . .
Erik stifled a wounded cry as the indistinct blobs of color through the glass ordered themselves into a kiss.

*A kiss.*

He watched for a small eternity, the faint ghost of hope thinking that perhaps she was still drugged, that he'd stolen an unwilling kiss. Madame's crisp voice shooed Erik's golden rival, and with the dreadful clarity of life's awful moments, he saw Christine's slender hand grasp for de Chagny. Christine's speaking voice was perfection to Erik, as mellifluous as her soaring soprano with rich, whispering low tones. He could pick out her voice from among thousands.

"Don't go. Stay with me, please. I'm afraid."

Erik felt as if he'd supped on broken glass. Afraid. Afraid of the mad Phantom coming to steal her away from her golden lover. He cast one last longing look at the porcelain curve of her cheek, the rich chocolate spill of her hair.

"*I gave you my music . . .*" the words emerged in a garbled rasp, choked with tears.

*Oh Christine.*

*XXX*

Christine's lips were slack and unresponsive beneath his, but Raoul relished even this stolen kiss. She was so beautiful, pale and fragile like a sleeping cherub without the heavy stage cosmetics. His poor darling, *drugged!* A fierce, righteous anger pounded through his veins. He would find whoever was responsible and see them brought to justice!

Raoul exhaled a low breath, the anger mellowing into tenderness as he looked at her. He stroked the white velvet of her cheek, marveling at its softness. Could it be her mad professor—slipping her a tonic to bind her ever deeper in his thrall? Philippe's warning rang in his ears.

"Stay away from this Erik. He's dangerous."

Dangerous, yes. But he styled himself as Christine's teacher. He would not harm her on purpose. Raoul was mildly surprised that Monsieur Rousseau had yet to make an appearance. Perhaps the gendarmes he hired had deterred him. This was the opening he needed, space away from his suffocating presence to purchase freedom for Christine!

"Monsieur." Madame Giry's censorious voice floated over the warm air, broken only by the soft exhalation of Christine's breaths. He turned to find her in the doorway, a cupped palm shielding the soft glow of a candle. Golden light bled through the sieve of her fingers and warmed the pale skin to a red hue. The shadows cast by the candle made the Madame's face look ancient and unfathomable.

"She needs her rest, Monsieur. You should leave now." The firm candor that she shared with her daughter was faintly refreshing after the sycophantic managers and cooing aristocracy. There was something to be said about blunt honesty. Raoul bestowed a parting kiss on Christine's hand and his heart leapt to his throat as she stirred, fingers tightening and a whimper escaping her lips. A slight frown marred her brows.

"Don't go. Stay with me, please. I'm afraid . . ." Raoul longed to reassure her, but the Madame was implacable.

"You may visit her when she recovers. Now go," she hissed, grasping his arm to propel him
forward. Raoul submitted to her urging, carrying the image of his sleeping angel close to his heart.

XXX

It was just as it was when her father died. She woke from a drug-addled snarl of frightening nightmares to a world changed. When questioned, Carlotta's maid admitted to drugging the gargling glass, but only in the attempt of scaring Christine away from the lead role.

Carlotta blustered and ranted and raved in her maid's defense, but the managers—at the threat of losing Raoul's patronage, and not any concern for Christine's well-being—had no choice but to dismiss the pudgy woman. Christine herself suffered no harm beyond several days spent in a drugged stupor, during which she waited patiently for a visit from her *Maestro*. Had it been her wishful heart thinking he had been there? Was it that fickle heart that called out to him, fearing his disappearance?

He didn't come.

Days, *weeks* crept by. And still he did not come.

A deafening sense of finality eddied around her, pain as if a part of herself had been severed. His rejection of her years ago paled in comparison. Then at least, she held some vague whisper of hope at his forgiveness. Now . . . she had failed her Angel, shame her *Maestro*. And the lover who kissed her with such blinding passion . . . he had simply left.

He was truly gone. Vanished like a wisp of smoke in the wind. The cozy lair beneath the Populaire was dark and empty. After days of browbeating, she at last persuaded Madame to guide her to his lair. Oh, that tangle of dread and hope that carried her down the five levels separating their worlds! In the end, hollow agony resounded like a gong through her. She had stood on the bank of the lake, peering through the holes of the portcullis hungrily. The light of her lamp revealed the wall—the wall that had once held countless pictures of her as naked rock, yawning like an open wound. Christine wept then, crumbled into a sodden heap, knee-deep in the frigid lake.

Even as the effects of 'Mother's' opium faded from her system, Christine still felt as if she wandered through a dreamworld. Christine felt smaller, paler, a shadow of herself. The fey, vivid creature that defied Reyer and dared to seduce a Phantom was gone. The managers had tactfully removed her from the role of Countess, consigning her to silent simplicity of the pageboy. Not that the managers lost a cent in demoting her. The Opera Populaire was experiencing a revival of sorts, fueled by the whiff of gossip and scandal. For her part, Christine was pathetically grateful. How could she explain that her voice wilted without the presence of its master?

Through the blank grey slag of depression surged a hot rush of confusion and anger.

*Where did you go now? Why did you leave me again? Why?*

*Why*?

Her only consolation in this time was Raoul. Her childhood sweetheart, he courted her with unflagging gallantry and charm. Rides in his phaeton through the Bois, companionable strolls through the shopping districts, salons and parties at the de Chagny townhouse. With him, she could dance and laugh. The love that sprang in her heart for Raoul was sweet and simple and wholesome. Christine basked in it, took shelter in the comfortable refuge he offered.

Only her dreams tortured her.
His voice, his hands, his mouth . . . God, the vividness of memory and imagination left her drenched with sweat and trembling. Christine fisted her hand in the damp lawn over her heart, cupping the ripe weight of her breast.

Erik.

Not only her voice's master, but her body's as well. It rejoiced under his touch, regardless of her gallant white knight's words of devotion, of her own bloody will. Christine buried her face in the damp pillow and bit down until she tasted the fluff and grit of down. Six weeks had passed since the night of *Ill Muto*. When would these feelings cease?

"Raoul," she whispered into the chill of a November night, an attempt to banish the looming ghost of her teacher and sometimes beau.

It worked.

Anchored by the unflagging love of her childhood sweetheart, Christine felt her heartbeat slow beneath her palm and the gray misery that crept upon her in these unguarded moments ease. Damn him and his black moods, his consuming pride, his mysterious past and the thrice cursed *mask*! Christine's hot gaze glared out at the sleeping forms of the other ballet rats.

*Hear me, Erik? I hope you never come back!*

XXX

The Persian was there. Minette glimpsed his somber black-clad form through the gaily colored cluster of Parisian high society gossiping like old women about the scandal at the Opera. As Minette slipped through the crowd, she was repulsed but not shocked to find that most of the gossip was of a rather malicious bend and was directly solely at her young Swedish ward. Aristocrats were always sneakily vicious in their gossip, poisoned lies whispered behind the flimsy protection of a fluttering silk fan.

"Monsieur!" she called after the broad line of his retreating shoulders.

After his inquiry about Erik, Minette had made a point to study his habits. A season ticket holder at the opera—the cheaper seats on the floor, not a box—the Persian arrived on time, rose only to stretch his legs during intermission, then left after the final bow. Quiet, tidy, and utterly mysterious.

The foyer was nearly deserted, save for the attendants dressed in their crisp, pseudo-militant finery. The rap of the Persian's cane struck the marble tiles of the central landing with a delicate *ping*.

"Monsieur!" Madame said, her voice reverberating off vaulted walls. At last, he turned, his swarthy complexion sharply contrasted by the silver in his hair and mustache. There was more silver there than in their previous meeting, a small voice noted in dismay. The Persian's sable eyes softened and a faint smile touched his lips. He made a courtly bow.

"Madame Giry. A pleasure, as always." Minette waved a terse hand as if to physically discard his polite words.

"Where is he?" she said without preamble. The momentary confusion that clouded the Persian's angular face cleared with a wave of—what was that? Fear? Worry?—as he darted forward and grasped her arm. His breath smelled pleasantly of coffee as he leaned close to whisper, "Perhaps we should continue this conversation away from prying ears, hmm?"
Minette flushed. This man had a talent for making her foolish and flustered. Minette nodded and gestured toward an alcove beneath the staircase. As the red velvet curtain swung closed, Minette observed that perhaps the alcove was a trifle small. Little larger than an upright coffin. This unwelcome thought sent a brief shiver up her spine. The Persian adjusted his cravat as if it were choking him, clearing his throat.

"I don't know where Erik is. I haven't seen him in weeks. I had thought he would make some sort of spectacle of himself when the little Daae fell ill--"

"She was drugged. And her name is Christine," Minette put in tartly, mind whirring at Erik's absence.

Where was he?

The Persian exhaled a deep breath.

"Forgive me, Christine. I am Nadir Khan, by the way, Madame. In all the back and forth between us, I quite forgot to tell you my name." He made an abortive attempt at another bow. Monsieur Khan was tall, of a similar lanky height as Erik, and consequently, she saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. Minette offered her hand.

"Minette Giry, a pleasure." He pecked a delicate kiss on the back of her hand. When he released her, she discreetly wiped her hand on the folds of her dress to erase the maddening tickle of his beard. A cold feeling settled in her belly. Day after day, watching Christine fall deeper in love with the Vicomte, day after day knowing only Erik held the key to her soul.

"Erik would visit me at my home with some regularity... until six weeks ago, that is. I don't know what the devil he's up to now. I was hoping you knew."

"Merde," Minette muttered, startling a choked laugh from the Persian—Monsieur Khan.

"No, I have no idea where he is."

That knowledge stretched between them, laden with all that couldn't be said. At last, Monsieur Khan shrugged.

"He couldn't have gone far. Not when his heart beats here."

XXX

Don Juan devoured him in a wild-eyed frenzy. Unspeakable music flowed from his ravaged soul, ink-stained fingers scribbling across the page.

The red ink looked like blood.

It was blood; his heart's blood ebbing from the wound she left in him.

That cruel, feckless little child! She knew of his love, she knew and had stomped on it with both delicate feet. Was it spite? Oh, her and her boy must've shared a merry laugh recounting his pathetic affections, the feeble overtures of his twisted, self-flagellating love! Perhaps they snickered behind their hands at the differences in sensual skill. Erik slammed his hands on the pianoforte's keys at the sudden vision of Raoul and Christine twined in a de Chagny bed.

A vicious, gnawing rage ate a hole in his stomach. Or maybe that was the brandy. How long had it been since he'd eaten? Erik dismissed such a trifling thought. It didn't matter. Music was his
sustenance. He denied himself morphine to urge his body into a writhing agony to match the one that engulfed his soul. Even sleep offered him no solace. No, image and sensation and inarticulate longing were given free reign there. Christine. Always Christine. Her voice raised in song or sitting quietly, those haunted dark eyes staring into the past. Her slow, shy smile, the taste of her mouth. God, he was obsessed. Sweat dewed on his brow and made the mask itch and chafe. Erik tore off the mask and slammed it flat on the bench beside him.

*Don Juan Triumphant.*

It had begun as a mockery. His Gypsy master Javert had made a caustic remark that the Devil's Child could draw more skirts than Don Juan himself. In his typical style of self-mockery and storyteller's liberty, Erik had christened his opera so with himself cast as the lonely and tragic Don Juan. And his Aminta . . .

Aminta had chosen her golden-haired lover.

He would show them. At the masquerade, he would show them all what it meant to anger the Phantom of the Opera!
"As soon go kindle fire with snow, as seek to quench the fire of love with words." -William Shakespeare

New Year's Eve- 1870

The crisp black soldier's costume Raoul wore made him look older somehow, remote and serious. He was a very handsome man, even compared to the sensual dark looks of his brother Philippe, who was dressed as a priest, complete with high stock and rosary. His grey eyes flashed with irreverent humor at his younger brother's censorious glare and Christine couldn't help but giggle at his rakish wink. Philippe's charm was irresistible.

Christine saw how women's eyes looked and held as he strode, more like a man of action than a man of the cloth. His broad shoulders were soon lost in the surge of gaily dressed aristocracy. Neither of the de Chagny brothers wore masks—Raoul out of consideration for Christine's history with masked men and Philippe out of his usual contempt for authority.

The colors of this year's masquerade were gold, silver, black and white, but Christine bucked tradition and dressed in the perfect confection of pink roses that Raoul had chosen for her. She smoothed the rose-hued silk, Raoul's diamond engagement ring twinkling fiercely on her fourth finger. His warm hand engulfed her arm above her elbow and squeezed gently.

Her fiancé.

Warm love washed over her, as gentle and sustaining as sunlight. Raoul, a good man, a man of position and wealth with a heart of gold. He shone so bright among the twittering flock of Parisian high society, all the more precious for his rarity. Tonight, among the glitter of the Bal Masque on the arm of her white knight, Christine resolved that she would not think of him. She sneered inwardly. Fat chance of that at a masquerade ball, where the favored mask of the evening was half black and half white.

"Would you care to dance?" Raoul's lips brushed the shell of her ear as he leaned close to whisper over the din of music and the dull roar of chattering voices.

Christine cast out her hearing for the measure of the music. A waltz.

"I would love to." She beamed at him, her heart softening at his sunny smile in return. Christine glided onto the floor on Raoul's arm as the night's champagne slipped into her blood, making her warm and giddy. The Opera glowed with color and laughter. Three months of Elysian peace, as the managers called it.

Three months.
This was supposed to be a celebration. Why did the laughter grate and the barbed glances sink deep? Over Raoul's strong shoulder, she glimpsed Madame Giry, beautiful and severe in a tailored gown of ebony satin. The sight of the one who had been her anchor and guide for most of her life loosened the knot of tension in Christine's belly. She yanked away her gaze from the Persian, who stood next to her, sipping champagne from a flute, garbed in the extravagant turban and tunic of his home country. He wore it far better than Piangi, who looked like a bloated caricature of a sultan, Christine thought uncharitably. She couldn't think of anything that reminded her of . . . she stumbled a little, but quickly regained her footing.

"Christine? Are you all right, my dear? You look pale." Raoul was the picture of loving concern, blue eyes as guileless as summer skies. Christine grasped for a plausible lie and spoke without faltering. She had become very good at hiding her true feelings in the long months of a barren autumn.

"I'm fine, Raoul. The champagne's just made me a little dizzy, that's all."

"Then you should sit down," he replied firmly. Raoul's arm draped gracefully across her bare shoulders. He gently steered her off the dance floor to the row of velvet chairs along the wall. Christine sank awkwardly into its embrace, hampered as she was by the full layers of petticoat and overskirt. It was on her tongue to placate Raoul, but he stopped her by the simple expedient of pressing his lips to hers. Startled and pleased, Christine relaxed into the kiss. Pleasure bloomed in a slow, graceful unfurling of crimson petals. There was no darkness or savagery in it and Christine floated through the soft, tranquil air of his kiss. Dreamy-eyed when he pulled away, Christine was gratified to see he was no less affected.

"Stay here. I'll fetch you some punch," he whispered huskily. Christine started to say that the punch from the Populaire's kitchens probably contained more alcohol than the champagne, but Raoul had already darted off, lost amid the tangle of chiffon and the dazzle of gold.

She sat back, content to watch the milling couples. She saw Meg in her white swan costume whirling in the arms of a dark older gentleman, whom Christine recognized as the wealthy Baron de Castelot-Barbezac and patron of the Opera before Raoul. As they swept past, she heard the music of Meg's laugh at something the baron said. Joy mingled with relief swept through Christine at the sight. After Buquet's attack, she had feared that Meg might never again be whole. It was good to see her enjoying herself. Christine bit her lip. There had been a time where she could catch Meg between dances and pry out the juicy details of her about the dapper baron. How had they drifted apart? So many things had changed since that dreadful night of the *Il Muto* premiere.

As her mood, buoyed by the sort of forced cheerfulness that had carried her during the months following her father's death, now began to sink towards depression, Christine struggled to her feet. She cast a glance around for Raoul; she felt bereft without his presence. The water was so deep and dark around her, dragging her under . . . oh Raoul, she couldn't swim!

Christine exhaled a heavy breath. Even now, on a night of beauty and happiness, she couldn't see fit to feel anything but wilted depression and the hot coppery taste of betrayal.

"Ah, Miss Daae!" Firmin's brash voice broke into her morose musings and Christine mustered an expression of banal politeness.

"Monsieur Firmin, good evening," she murmured, bobbing a quick curtsey in greeting. The manager was well into his cups, his cheeks flushed and brow dewed with perspiration. He made a clumsy attempt at a courtly leg and very nearly fell on his face, the golden horns of his ram costume wobbling on their precarious perch. Christine buried her grin in her cupped palm, stepping
back as he regained his faculties.

"This is quite a grand spectacle, isn't it, Miss Daee?" Firmin slurred, gesturing toward the dancers pirouetting along the grand marble staircase.

"It is," she replied, feverishly thinking of ways to politely extricate herself from this conversation.

"It's such a relief now that that blasted Phantom is gone. Oh, pardon me, my dear. I forget that he is your teacher." That welter of anger and sorrow and betrayal rose up again, and Christine repressed the desire to clout Firmin across the face for reminding her of what she was trying to desperately to forget.

"Not any longer. He severed our acquaintance," she said, a little sharply. A fugitive gleam of speculation entered Firmin's liquor-glazed eyes.

"Is that so? I am very sorry, my dear," he drawled.

His eyes darted low to ogle her cleavage, his thick tongue darting out to wet his lips. Christine suddenly felt very exposed and somehow filthy. A prickle of warning slicked her skin like dirty ice.

"It's quite all right," she breathed, her stays suddenly very tight, "I should go, Raoul will be looking for me." She moved to step past him, but he blocked her path. How had he edged her into an alcove without her noticing?

"Ah yes, the good patron. You moved on quickly, didn't you, you little minx?" Firmin chuckled at his own joke. His hand attached to her arm like a limpet, his callused thumb stroking the crease of her elbow.

"Please let go," she whispered. Firmin waggled a finger in her face.

"No, no, I don't think so, Christine. Since you're so generous with your favors, maybe you would give me a taste, hmm?"

His dark head darted in as if to kiss her, and Christine acted quite without thinking. She watched the arch of her hand as it flew and struck him across the face, so hard that little pins and needles stung her palm. The golden horns, already wobbling, lurched at this fresh assault and dangled absurdly off Firmin's round head. Christine stifled hysterical giggles. Any vestiges of hilarity faded as Firmin's grip tightened to brutal proportions on her arm, yanking her close, his black eyes glowed with the promise of retribution.

"You little bitch!" he growled, lifting his hand to strike her.

"Think very carefully before you act, Monsieur."

Cruel hope lanced her heart at the sound of that unbearably beautiful voice. Both Christine and Firmin turned toward the voice and a gasp flew from Christine's lips. He had dressed for the ball. Amid the muted pallet of gold, silver, black, and white, he stood out in startling bloody scarlet.

"Erik!" she breathed.

Those glacial blue eyes, glowering from kohl-rimmed sockets in a grotesque death's head mask, flicked over her in curt dismissal before fastening with blistering intensity on Firmin. A knife-thin smile touched Erik's full mouth, eloquent with poisoned courtesy.

"Is it your habit to solicit sexual favors from those in your employ, Monsieur? I'm sure the
authorities would be quite interested to hear that, especially in light of recent events. Mademoiselle Adele's commission has been resigned in consideration of her . . . delicate condition, has it not?" Beneath the wine's flush, Firmin paled. His hand dropped, hanging limply at his side.

"Ah, that's not necessary, Monsieur. I was just um, ah . . ." Firmin scuttled past Erik, the end of his sentence left to dangle.

Christine quickly dismissed the entire Firmin interlude, latching hungrily onto the crimson god standing before her. Garbed in a blood red coat in the military style with gold stitching, tight embroidered leggings, high black boots buffed to a mirror shine, with a sword at his side, he looked . . . magnificent. Something clicked in her head. The Red Death. Humph. It suited Erik's macabre sense of humor. Her erstwhile teacher was looking at her as intently as she him.

Gooseflesh stippled her skin under his intense scrutiny. The skin that had gone clammy under Firmin's gaze now bloomed with heat under Erik's, welcoming the intimate touch of his eyes. Christine kneaded her arm where Firmin had grabbed her. Raoul's ring flashed and Erik's eyes fixed upon it. An absurd surge of guilt washed over her, and stiff pride as it ebbed. She didn't owe him anything! The same ruthless look he'd given Firmin entered his eyes.

"I have written a new opera that Firmin will have no choice but to air. You will be the lead." The words were cold, inanimate things, all the more hideous spoken in that terribly rich voice. The realization of their shared dream, garbed in a nonchalant comment. Damn his unfathomable moods!

"What is it called?" she said stupidly. A small, bitter twist to his mouth.

"Don Juan Triumphant."

Christine reeled under the words. Don Juan? The music he refused to let her touch, or even see, because it was dangerous? Was this an act of trust or punishment? Punishment, she decided, judging from his stiff manner and scowling face. Holy Virgin, he was so beautiful and terrifying behind that mask! Erik gestured toward the ballroom behind him, that same hypnotizing, graceful gesture that had her so mesmerized when she first met him face to face.

"May I have this dance?"

Christine watched from miles away as her voice floated through clenched teeth and stiff lips.

"Yes."

The air of unreality that Erik clothed himself in trapped her in its web and together they floated onto the floor. He was the only thing real and solid; the rest was a blur of ghostly faces, specters in an eternal ball. He could twist the world to suit himself; the Opera bowed to his whim. Now, it trembled in wake of the anger pouring off him in waves.

His body's heat blazed through the red cloth of his costume, the leather of his gloves was supple and butter soft. Erik's lean arms were solid, but unlike Raoul, Christine did not feel safe in his embrace. No, with his eyes blazing, he looked like a wolf regarding the tender morsel of a fluffy sheep. Christine, a dancer since the age of seven, was now unaccountably clumsy, though Erik never misstepped. He must have seen the question in her eyes, for a grim smile touched his lips.

"I watched and learned the forms. I have never had an occasion to warrant a dance partner." The bitterness in his voice yawned like an open wound. A warm cloud of his spicy scent rose up to embrace her, as intoxicating as champagne. Christine worried her lower lip with her teeth.
Where was Raoul?

"I see that congratulations are in order, my dear. You must be overjoyed." There was the faintest savage underlining of the last word, an echo of mockery. Christine’s chin jutted defiantly, fingernails digging into the thick fabric covering his forearms.

"You left." Christine shot back, his cool tone blowing on the embers of her own anger.

Erik stopped abruptly, in the middle of the dance floor, his grip hard and tight around her. Every lean inch of him was pressed against her, not the slightest bit muted by the yards of fabric between them. She hoped he wouldn't notice her trembling.

The cocoon of dreamy abstraction was beginning to wear off. Christine was only too aware of the watching eyes behind the masks, the whispers. A quick glance out of the tail of her eye saw the Persian, Madame and Meg staring open-mouthed. Erik's voice insinuated its silken tendrils into heart and soul. The soft mouth was contorted with fury.

"Yes, I left. I left because your fiancé wanted me arrested! You seemed happy enough in his company—especially with his tongue down your throat!"

Arrested? An errant sting of betrayal from Raoul floated through her mind before the full intent of his words struck. When it did, her anger crackled and blazed.

"How dare you!" she whispered fiercely. Erik glanced aside and seeing their audience, grasped her hand.

"Come with me."

XXX

A stumbling oaf struck him from behind, sending Christine's punch in an elegant arc across a hapless reveler's silver costume. Raoul let out a string of very bad language and hastily apologized to the soaked young lady, setting the now empty glass on a passing waiter's tray. A limp wedge of lemon clung to her bosom and Raoul bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a laugh.

"My apologies, Madame," he murmured, pulling the handkerchief from up his sleeve and offering it to her.

He turned to face the one who bumped him. Philippe sat sprawled in a lounge chair, La Sorelli draped across his lap. Chastising words rose in his throat, but he stifled them. The Comte de Chagny would embarrass himself however he pleased.

"Ah, Raoul! Good evening, my gallant compatriot. Have you any sins that need confessing?" his brother slurred, already well on his way to drunkenness. Raoul tried not to notice the crimson smudges of lipstick marring the pristine white stock of the priest's costume he wore.

Heat rose in Raoul's cheeks.

"None that I would confess to you, you drunken sot!" Raoul jibed. Philippe laughed, twining a lock of La Sorelli's chestnut brown hair around his finger.

"You just missed him; André came staggering through here babbling about a ghost. He said the Opera Ghost had returned that he left the score of an opera on his desk. Funny thing is, all the bolts have been changed twice. This Erik is a very interesting fellow." Raoul's blood ran cold.
"Christine!" he breathed and began to dash off.

"Raoul!" Philippe shouted after him. Raoul skidded to a stop, turning to look. For once, all traces of humor or mockery were gone from Philippe's face. He looked so much like their father that Raoul's posture straightened unconsciously.

"Fetch your sword, little brother. You're going to need it."

XXX

Erik's heart was pounding. He didn't know if it was anger or fear or lust that spurred its fevered pace. Perhaps it was a mix of all three, or the residue of bloodlust. He would never forget the sight of Firmin's pudgy hand lifted to strike Christine, or the burn of diamond's fire on her finger. His hand tightened around her wrist and he dragged her the remaining steps down the hall and into the musty darkness of a storage room.

He slammed the door shut. The flimsy wooden thing bounced off its jamb and creaked open a crack in sullen defiance. The ribbon of yellow light from the hall illuminated a narrow strip of Christine's hair and cheek, her fist clenched in a handful of pink silk.

A formless flood of emotion rushed through him—too pure for him to name.

Too violent for love, too deep for lust.

Perhaps it was this instinct that urged him to grasp and cling, to possess her in whatever way he could. Erik moved without thinking, without speaking. His boots made deliberate thuds as he closed the distance between them.

The kiss was a savage thing of parted lips and thrusting tongue, his hands plunging deep into the silky fall of her hair. The pins fell to the floor like tiny hailstones. Christine stiffened in protest, whimpered into his mouth, her small hands shoving at his chest. Erik muscled her back, pinning her against the wall. He slanted his mouth across hers, sweet pleasure and gloating triumph swelling when he felt her soften. God, he could do this forever, lost in the warm, moist pleasure of Christine's lips and tongue and breath. But alas, his lungs screamed for air and he pulled back, lost in the dark pools of her eyes.

Desire roared through his body, a deep, throbbing ache pounding in time with his heartbeat. His skin felt thin and hot, only a lean membrane containing violent, contradictory emotions. Christine's hand floated up and brushed the mask. Erik stiffened, retreating into instinctive mistrust and anger. He grasped both wrists together and pinned them above her head. It satisfied a primal impulse to have her stretched out, immobile under his power.

Then her lips sought his and he was lost. This silent assent released whatever bound him and he broke the kiss to swear savagely.

"E—Erik?" Christine whispered.

She looked too young and innocent, the cloud of her dress as fragile as a bridal gown. Erik flinched away from such a thought. Chaining her wrists within the grip of one hand, Erik bit the middle finger of his glove, pulling his hand free. The black leather glove fluttered to the floor to join her hairpins—and his dignity.

"I must touch you or die." His voice was raw with need.

Erik's lips crushed hers, tongue plunging into the warm cavern of her mouth, mimicking a yearning
he dared not indulge. His free hand grazed the warm column of her throat, relishing the incensed throb of her heart and the small helpless sound that vibrated against the sensitive pads of his fingertips. So soft . . . so warm . . . white velvet livid with heat.

His questing hand dipped lower, cupping the ripe fullness of her breast. A cry vibrated against his lips. Wild greed burned in his belly. He wanted more! Erik grasped the silk of her bodice and yanked down. Her breasts popped free from the scooped neckline of her gown. That sliver of light illuminated the perfect white curve of her breast, adorned with its dusky pink nipple.

_Perfection._ A painful cramp of arousal clawed at his innards, his leggings constricting.

Gently, reverently, he touched the soft curve, the ripe under swell, the firm nipple. A shudder raced through her body, breaking the kiss. The sound of their frantic, mingled panting was harsh in the stale silence. Wallowing in the secrets of her flesh eased the ache and made it worse.

Erik rested his cheek briefly against hers, relishing the warmth and softness of her, then dropped a trail of soft kisses along her throat, working unerringly lower . . . the firm bud of her nipple held a faint sweet tang, different from the soft, salty dew of sweat glistening on her skin. Erik lost himself in suckling and nuzzling and licking, lavishing careful attention on both breasts. Her whimpers and stifled screams were music to his ears. Erik paused his labors, peering up the narrow valley between her breasts.

"Look at me, Christine. See who has you." her eyes remained clenched tight.

"Look at me!" he snarled.

Christine's eyes flew open, kohl-stained tears running down her cheeks. Those beautiful brown eyes, dark and limpid. One tear glistened like a diamond in her lashes. Diamond. Like the ring. That thought shattered the illusion of mutual passion Erik had deluded himself into believing. No, perhaps that was unfair. He held her body, at least, in his possession. Her voice and her body were irrevocably his. But not her heart. Not her soul, or her life. A lover, maybe, but never a wife. There was a time when pleasure in her body would have been enough. Now Erik grasped for a more elusive prize.

He dragged his tongue over one nipple, then the other, feeling the long, delicious shiver race through her, watching her teeth clamp on her lower lip to stifle her cries. A small voice marveled in her reaction to him. For so long he considered himself diseased, tainted, unfit for even the simplest of human contact. Now, this magnificent creature was writhing in his arms at the pleasure he had given her.

So beautiful.

Erik thrust one knee between her thighs, and scrabbled through the yards of skirt and petticoat for the slender length of her leg. At last, warm flesh. Gloating power buoyed him as he listened to the increasing tempo of her breathing, watching her heaving bosom as his warm, bare hand slid up her calf, the back of her knee, her thigh. When he found the tight curls shielding her sex, he stopped. The smile that touched his lips held an edge of malice.

"What would your fiancé think, Christine, if he found you with my hand between your legs?" he murmured, cupping her sex.

A low, animal groan left his lips. Tight, wiry curls gave way to hot, silken flesh, the evidence of her arousal wet and slick. Erik wagged his head, clucking in disapproval.
"Naughty girl," he rasped.

The pain and humiliation that twisted her face did something in his chest, but he shoved away any gentler sentiment of love. No, this is what she wanted. A quick fuck in the closet while her husband went to fetch her coat. How pathetic that he would take any scrap she would give him.

"Erik, please. I didn't mean to-"

Erik cut off any sweet lies she would tell—and he would undoubtedly believe, sop that he was—with a marauding kiss. It took him a moment to realize the hiccupping motions she made were sobs. Regret pierced him and his touch softened. Erik explored the terrain of her most private flesh, making love to her with tender circling strokes of that pearl of flesh at the apex of her sex. Christine writhed and bucked against him, struggling mindlessly toward the promise of release.

"Easy, love. I'll take care of you. Trust me. Oh God, Christine," Erik groaned against her mouth.

Their eyes locked and Erik saw the instant ecstasy overtook her, felt it in the wild spasms of her body. It seemed to last forever, long, shuddering tremors that left her limp and exhausted.

Christine would have fallen, had he not caught her about the waist. Erik pressed his face against the crook of her neck and shoulder, not brave enough to meet her gaze. He couldn't even understand himself. One minute he wanted to punish her for choosing the boy, the next he begged for her trust as she climaxed all over his hand. His body had some very urgent desires at the moment, but he ignored them. This was too perfect, breathing in the scent of her skin and the faint savor of perfume, tasting the salt of her sweat. Freed from his grip, her soft hands stroked his hair, his shoulders, his back, soothing him even after he had been such a perfect beast.

Erik didn't know how long they stood that way, clinging to each other, unable to speak and break the tenuous peace between them.

"I love you, Erik." He flinched as if she'd shot him. He crushed the betraying surge of joy under his boot heel. Erik pulled back, glaring down at her.

"Don't," he choked, "Don't say things you don't mean."

Hurt flashed across her face, more tears sliding down her cheeks. How many tears had she shed because of him? Erik recalled vividly when he had left her the first time upon realizing the truth of his indecent affections. Shaking hands clutched the gown, dragging it over her breasts. The diamond ring winked on her finger.

"H—How can you say such cruel things? Is loving me so terrible?" Erik folded his arms over his chest, the dense, earthy scent of her pleasure wafting up from his hand.

"Once again, my dear, I am the pupil and you the master in the art of cruelty," he snapped, ignoring the latter part of her question. Yes, he wanted to shout, loving you is a destiny of pain!

"What do you mean?" her voice was clogged with tears. That endearing furrow to her brow nearly made him smile. God, how he cherished her! Erik expelled a breath through his nose in irritation. How could she not know?

"It doesn't matter. If you cannot even remember what monumental action would have torn me from your side, then we have nothing more to speak of."

God help him, he had to be harsh. When she touched his hair, he was seconds away from falling on his knees and begging for her to love him forever. Erik knew he would perform any degrading
manner of groveling to keep her, subject himself to servitude more binding than his slavery under Javert. Where was his dignity? His pride? They would sustain him longer than the fickle affections of an adolescent girl. It was blind self-preservation. He took a step toward the door when a small hand grasped a handful of his crimson cape.

"I'm not letting you go!" she said, with a pugnacious thrust of her chin. She looked like a kitten that pounced on a tiger's tail. Erik laughed. He made a dismissive flick with his hand.

"Run along, Christine. Run along to Prince Prospero. When his fumbling attempts at pleasing you fall short, I will gladly step in to perform at your request."

Sex. Pleasure. Those he would give with alacrity. He could not offer his heart on a silver platter again. No. He wouldn't survive it.

Christine remained rooted in place, her eyes pleading holes. Erik yanked open the door, blinking at the sudden rush of golden lamplight. Christine squinted, her hand shielding her eyes. Heart and belly both ached at the sight of her. Her hair a glorious snarl, flushed, tearstained, lips puffed and red, pink gown in disarray, she looked like a woman who had been thoroughly had. A vicious pleasure filled him at the thought of de Chagny finding her this way.

*Mine, boy. In a way she can never be yours! She's mine!*

"So . . . so you don't love me anymore, Erik?"

The words were quiet and soft, so like a child that Erik weakened under a sudden flooding of tenderness. This poor child. He had twisted and broken her into a semblance of himself, in an attempt to make her heart beat in time with his. Now the poor girl thought she loved him when he gave her body pleasure. The scathing words that would definitively push her away died on his tongue. Erik heaved a sigh.

"I will love you until the day I die. You're twisted up in my heart and soul, Christine Daae and I don't know whether to bless or curse you for it."

Snapping his cape close to his body, he shouldered his way out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Sexy, angsty Erik is my favorite.
Either Way You Choose

Christine's knees gave out and she slid boneless to the floor. Disappeared. Gone. Again. Oh God. She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes sockets, a soundless screech clawing at her throat. She would never understand that man! He kissed her and rejected her, he gave her pleasure and called her a whore. She was a whore. Raoul, oh Raoul! The thought of her panicked fiancé searching for her only deepened her misery. Her guilt was compounded further by the tingling in her lips, the sweet heaviness of her breasts, the residual tremors of pleasure between her thighs. Erik's hold on her body was absolute.

Christine let the tears run freely, knowing she would find no cleansing in their flow. No, misery was her just penance. Christine touched the ring, its central diamond surrounded by a sunburst of smaller ones. Her betrayal of Raoul was worse than if she had given herself fully to Erik. This betrayal was of the heart, the soul, some ephemeral place that Christine couldn't even name. But Erik knew it, and held it possessively. He dominated her.

She didn't know how long she sat huddled there, weeping in a wilted heap of rose pink silk. At the heels of her shame and misery came anger. A welter of muddled emotion built, pressing against her breastbone. Why did he do this to her? Why? Did he find some sick pleasure in winding her up like a toy and watching her bump into a wall again and again?

'I will love you until the day I die.'

"Liar!" she said, slamming her hand on the grimy floorboards. Her hand closed on the soft leather of his glove. The glove he had torn off so he could touch her—flesh to flesh. She held it in her fist. Erik's glove and Raoul's ring. A soft groan left her lips. No matter what she did, someone would get hurt.

The thud of footsteps urged her to swipe away her tears, gather her skirts in some semblance of order. It wasn't Erik. More often than not, his steps were soundless, light and nimble like a dancer's. These were heavier. A turban-clad head stood silhouetted and for one hysterical second, Christine thought it was Piangi. No, too lean to be Piangi. The Persian. He half turned, sweeping aside the drape of his crimson sash.

"I've found her! Minette, she's here!" a light patter of steps and Madame Giry appeared in the door. Her fingers clutched her rosary, her lined face relaxed into a look of beatific relief. At the sight of Christine's miserable form, the look was replaced with one of compassion.

"Oh Christine. My poor dear." Those gentle words were enough. Christine crumpled into a sobbing heap. Words flew over her head without comprehension. Gentle hands guided her. One sentence penetrated the fog.

"I'll find the Vicomte," the Persian said.

"No!" Christine shouted, "don't! Please don't tell Raoul. Please. I've been bad. Please." The Persian shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, dark eyes fixing on Madame.

"It's all right, Nadir. I'll take her to her bed. The Vicomte may see her tomorrow. Go now. Go and tell him that she is safe."
Madame's cool voice was an antidote to the fever, the misery. Christine clung to her, smelling the familiar savor of perfume and starch. Madame guided her back to her apartments, tugged and plucked the finery from her and patiently washed her with a cloth and basin as if she was a child. Christine stood staring into nothing, barely noticing Madame's ministrations. When Madame slipped a clean nightgown over her head, Christine summoned speech.

"Where is Meg?" the ghost of a smile touched Madame's lips.

"Warding off her many admirers, I expect. Last I saw, she was entertaining the Baron de Castelot-Barbezac, Monsieur Obert's son, and two of the Marquis de Lamar boys." Christine offered a wan smile. Seeing Meg dance with the Baron and enjoying the masque on Raoul's arm seemed like it belonged in another lifetime. Erik ruled her thoughts.

Madame led Christine to her tiny office and poured cold tea. It was strong enough to sear her taste buds, jolting her from her apathy. Madame's hazel eyes were soft, her stern mien tempered by compassion.

"What happened tonight, Christine? Why did you not want to see the Vicomte?"

"Erik," she whispered, yearning for some tangible remnant of his presence. She had lost his glove somewhere . . .

With some prodding, the story tumbled out in spurts and trickles. Christine realized there was a sort of morbid relief in confessing even the darkest of sins. At least now she wasn't alone in the burden of its knowledge.

"S—So you ah, you and Erik were . . ." the sentence trailed off in embarrassed silence.

Madame's beloved face was drained of all color, as pale as bone beneath the cosmetics.

The moving light of the flickering candle made her eyes deep with shadow and Christine recalled Erik's death's head mask, his eyes burning like the heart flame of a sapphire. Christine squirmed in her chair, unable to meet Madame's watchful eye. Whereas Madame blanched with shock, painful red color stained Christine's fair complexion. She could feel the blood stinging in her cheeks.

"Um . . . he . . . we just . . . k—kissed. And he ah . . . he touched me and I-" she broke off, unable to finish. Her eyes sought the worn floorboards, wishing she could melt into a puddle. Madame cleared her throat valiantly.

"You . . . ah . . . found fulfillment?" Madame phrased delicately, a faint distasteful moue marring her features. Christine nodded, studying the dark whorls in the floorboards with great interest.

"Then what happened?" From the tone, Christine was quite sure Madame didn't really care to know.

Here it was. The truth. The whole painful truth.

"I told him I loved him, he called me a whore and left."

Thirteen words summing up the most miserable moment of her life, barring her father's death. Silence reigned for a small eternity. At last, Christine dared a glance at Madame. Hazel eyes simply blinked, set in a face devoid of expression. Her mouth opened and closed around words, but no sound emerged. A fugitive stab of amusement reached her. At last she had unseated Madame's supposedly unflappable calm.
"I see. Are you having second thoughts about your engagement to the Vicomte?"

Christine laughed at this, a hollow sound devoid of music.

"I have made quite a mess of things, haven't I? I love Raoul, I really do. But . . ."

Christine bit her lip to keep it from quivering. How could she face him now? Erik had showed her how much her promise was worth. He was right. She was cruel. Especially if she continued with this farce of an engagement. Terror clawed at her soul. What would she do without them? Strong men had always been there to protect her. First her father, then her Angel, then Raoul. Without the warmth of their presence around her, surely the world would freeze her to death!

"But you love Erik too?" Madame prompted. Christine managed a mute nod. Madame Giry reached across the table and laid a cool hand on top of Christine's knotted fists. Her smile was wry.

"You have a knack for making trouble for yourself, my dear. But would you like a bit of advice?"

"Yes please!" A ray of light in any direction would be a Godsend. The reply was quick and merciless.

"Break off the engagement. Quick and clean, at least until you come to better decision. This boy is absolutely certain that he wants to spend the rest of his life with you. He gave you his mother's ring. It would be the height of cruelty to give half measures." Christine nodded, watching the candlelight dance within the facets of the diamonds on her finger.

"I know. I'll tell him tomorrow." Madame leaned back in her chair, sipping her tea.

"Good."

It took a moment for Christine to pluck up her courage.

"What about Erik?" Madame exhaled a breath through her nostrils.

"I cannot speak for Erik, or even attempt to understand his moods and whims. But what I do know is this: He loves you more than anything else in the world. With his temper, I'm sure he said things in haste. Especially if he knew that you and the Vicomte were engaged."

He had said something about something that had torn them apart. What did he mean? When she was drugged? He was the one to leave her! Raoul was the one to be there for her when she needed him. Christine shied away from such thoughts. To stand at the fulcrum of a balance with two very different men standing at either end . . . it would only end in pain, for all of them. A glance at the clock said it was past four o' clock in the morning. Christine set down her tea, only now realizing how tired she was.

"Thank you, Madame. For everything." Madame rose and embraced her, kissing her hair.

"Of course, my dear. Now go get some rest."

Even exhausted as she was in body and mind, Christine's sleep was fitful at best. Every moving shadow was Erik, every glimpse of starlight was Raoul. She finally gave up on sleep as grey dawn light began to seep through the windows. Christine rose from her bed in the dormitories and splashed ice cold water from the ewer onto her face, rinsing gritty eyes. She was no closer to any semblance of a decision than she was the night before. Loneliness draped over her in a familiar sodden blanket. Her longing for her father was visceral. He would have a joke or a song to cheer her, wise counsel to guide her.
An idea sparked to life and Christine immediately felt cool peace settle over her, like a damp cloth to a fevered brow. Settled in her decision, she garbed herself in a widow's black and took the precious bouquet of Erik's dried roses. Her heart melted when she opened the door and found Raoul sleeping against the stair's railing. Her white knight. Oh, he looked so young with his face relaxed in repose, a silver cross shining from the opening in his loose white shirt. The gallant boy who had rescued her scarf from the sea so many years ago.

Tenderness moved her to comb aside a wayward tendril of his golden hair. She considered leaving the ring in his hand, but thought better of it. What if it was lost? No, she would find the courage to tell him to his face what she felt. And what did she feel, a snide voice pointed out? Her emotions were wild and fickle things. No, let him rest for now. They would speak later. Maybe visiting her father's tomb would give her clarity.

XXX

Damn her! he thought viciously. What was she doing up at this god awful hour, and venturing out alone? After their encounter—a moment of frenzied madness, he assured himself—Erik resolved to speak to her with remote courtesy when the occasion demanded. And his own damn machinations had assured that it would demand, once production of Don Juan Triumphant went underway.

What would he call her? Not Angel, or even student. He could no longer claim her as that. Her Christian name was too intimate, after glutting himself on her pleasure at the masquerade, her name a prayer on his lips. Perhaps 'Vicomtesse de Chagny' was the proper title! A hard knot rose in his throat and he swallowed hard to dislodge it.

Her eyes haunted him through the night as he sat huddled in the dripping dark of his home, costume discarded, body doubled up in an agony of desire. Those rich brown eyes, full of the wounded pain of a kicked kitten. They gave him hope. Had there been some misunderstanding? Had it been him that she called for after she was drugged? He had never known Christine to use deceit or manipulation, perhaps it was all just a misunderstanding and she really did love him . . .

Was his hungry heart playing tricks on him?

"Of course it is," he said aloud, his voice reverberating in mocking echoes from the confines of his hiding place in the wall.

"She chose the boy. She wears his ring." That had come to him in his lustful madness too, the flash of diamond in the sliver of light. The ring Erik chose for her glinted innocently in its nest of dark silk. Erik was tempted to throw it into the lake. Now, he rose to the surface, obeying the tug of whatever bound him to Christine.

A dog coming to heel.

Erik moved from his place in the wall, and heard the clink of coin in the greasy palm of the stable master, bits of hay in his tangled hair and last night's ale sickening his breath. A visit to her father's tomb. Be it to the chapel to light a candle, or to the tomb outside the city, Christine only visited when she was troubled in spirit, seeking the comfort of a ghost that had long since been laid to rest.

Another Ghost would gladly comfort her, he thought with a faint smile.

In any manner she required.

Gustave Daae. Perhaps Christine was ignorant to the way the world worked, but a poor violinist who couldn't even scrape together a decent dowry for his beloved daughter would not have had the
funds to provide for such a lavish sepulcher. Erik had his remains exhumed from the squalid hovel where he'd spent his final days and brought to Paris. A maudlin impulse said that Gustave would have liked to be close to her. And it seemed to bring her comfort. The expense was negligible and the challenge stimulating to craft a final resting place to the one Christine loved so well.

She looked so like the curly-haired moppet who first wept in the chapel, clad in a mourner's black, that Erik's heart softened. He could not let her go alone, so bravely fragile. He would be there, if she needed him. As ever. But why was it not the de Chagny greys that stepped proudly before the carriage? Had they quarreled? The thought spurred him on.

When Christine stepped indoors for her coat, Erik leapt from the stable's rafters with barely a rustle of his cape. The stable master didn't even see the blow that brought him down. Erik nudged the man's flabby shoulder with one toe. When he didn't so much as twitch, Erik swept on the stained, moth-eaten excuse of a cloak. A slouch hat concealed the mask's snowy glow. He finished harnessing the horses and urged the buggy into the cobbled square. His disguise was completely superfluous, as it was. Christine appeared like a wraith in the cold mist, eyes blank and faraway. He could have been clad as the Red Death for all the attention she paid him.

"To my father's grave, please," she whispered, her voice a faint thread of sound.

The merry glint of diamond shone on her finger as she climbed into the buggy. The force behind the crop flick was a tad too hard. The horses snorted in surprise and lurched into a jerky trot. Christine scarcely noticed. Erik snatched careful glances as they meandered through the deserted streets of Paris, wreathed in ghostly mist that blurred shapes and muted sounds.

Never had he been so close to her and so utterly ignored. Even when he watched her as her Angel, she always knew he was there. A chasm yawned between them now and Erik felt bereft and lonely. He didn't like the glassy appearance of her eyes, her shocking pallor. That flimsy cloak wasn't enough! It was January for God's sake! Outside the city, a long, tree-lined lane led to the cemetery. Beams of sunlight pierced the naked skeletons of the trees, gnarled hands raised to the sky in supplication. Had it been any other circumstance, Erik would have enjoyed the feel of the reins in his hands, the cart horses' jaunty step, the cold air filling his lungs.

By the time Erik pulled up at the cemetery's gate, the soupy clouds had thickened into a flat sheet of grey, and downy snowflakes were beginning to fall. Christine didn't give him so much as a glance as she disembarked a bouquet of red roses in her hands. His roses. The knot of anger and confusion tightened. What was she doing? She wore the boy's ring and cradled Erik's roses next to her heart? Erik pulled the buggy around and hobbled the horses at a patch of weeds. Shedding his stable master's disguise, he scaled the cemetery wall and leapt nimbly across the tops of graves and statury to the lordly Daæe tomb. The song that floated over the snow hushed hallow ground was of bleeding grief and longing.

Too many years, fighting back tears,

Why can't the past just die?

Wishing you were somehow here again

Knowing we must say goodbye

"Give me the strength to try," Erik murmured to Gustave's ghost.

Would her father bless Erik's attempt? Her raw grief illuminated the fact that she was simply a frightened, confused child. How can you be angry with a child for running away from the monsters
in the dark? Erik's heaved sigh curled in the air like smoke. He was a fool and a masochist, eager for another round of punishment. Erik reclined on the cold, snowy arch of the tomb's dome, transfixied by the image of her approach—so small and frail, buffeted by wind and snow. Her vulnerability irked him. He wanted to cover her with his body, protect her.

No more memories, no more silent tears

No more gazing across the wasted years

Help me say goodbye

Help me say goodbye

The gilded beauty of Christine's voice, captured moonbeams and the star's tears, faded into silence.

I love her, Sir. More than my own life.

A snowflake landed on his cheek, a cold benediction.

XXX

Papa couldn't help her. Christine realized that now. In Heaven with Mama, could he even see her struggling on Earth? The snowflakes melted on her cheeks and joined the watery trickle of her tears. It was a mistake to come here. Instead of peace and clarity, being reminded of just how alone she was in the world pushed her farther into depression.

"Christine," a soft voice sang, high and sweet and clear. Christine leapt to her feet, searching for him.

"A—Angel?"

Erik emerged in all his dark glory from around the corner of her father's tomb. It was so strange to see him outside of the Populaire. In so many ways the Opera was like an extension of himself, a realm where he stood as king. But he was not the least bit diminished standing in winter's cold light. No, he seemed bigger somehow, tall and lean-bodied. Christine squinted at his face. The left side was as unreadable as his masked right, but his ice blue eyes were gentle. A sweep of his dark cape and Erik bowed with his usual remiss elegance. Christine found her tongue.

"What are you doing here? Did you follow me?" a faint smile tipped the generous line of his mouth.

"I drove the carriage, my dear." A flash of fear raced through her veins and she spoke without thinking.

"Did you hurt the stable master?" A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"When he wakes, his headache will be no worse than if he'd spent the night in his cups. I am not a complete villain, Christine." She bit the inside of her lip at the faint edge of censure in his words. What was it about him that made her so nervous, so fumbling and inept? She never felt that way with Raoul.

"I—I didn't mean to suggest that you were. I'm sorry."

Erik made a terse motion with his gloved hand. Had he found the one she lost last night? Christine stiffened and took an involuntary step back as memories of the night before rushed through her
mind's eye. Heat sang through her veins. Frantically, Christine reached for her anger and found it, hefting it against the subtle persuasion of his presence. It helped push away her nervous energy, hold her helpless love at arm's length.

"Why did you leave me, Erik? Why weren't you there?" Her anger and grief coalesced in a hot, pulsating ball in her belly, spreading up and out, consuming every inch of her. She advanced on him.

"How can I trust you when you just disappear whenever the whim strikes you? Do you enjoy making me melt and surrender, then shoving me away? It makes me feel . . . worthless! How dare you!" all of a sudden she was shoving at his hard chest, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"How dare you! You made me love you!" with one last desperate shove she glared up into his eyes, daring him to deny it. Anger tightened the square, masculine angle of his jaw. Erik exhaled a heavy breath through his nostrils. A keening wind lashed at cape and gown. Both of them clad in mourner's black.

"Your boy had me arrested. Do you know what hell I suffered in the thrice-damned station, not knowing if you were alive or dead? And what do I find when I return but that same boy with you. And you reaching out for him, saying you were frightened. What frightened you? The dreadful Opera Ghost? Does he haunt your nightmares? Of course I left!" Christine wondered faintly at the both of them, shouting at each other in a cemetery's snowy yard.

"So . . ." she began slowly, trying to untangle the threads of misunderstanding and pain, "you saw Raoul? I was drugged, Erik! I don't even remember what I said. Did you ever consider that maybe it was you I wanted with me, holding my hand?"

Erik's mouth twisted in a sneer.

"And you an engaged woman. The Vicomte should keep you on a tighter leash."

Christine's hand darted out, slapping him across the face to the surprise of both of them. The imprint of her hand was red and angry against his pale skin.

"I suppose I deserved that. But I do not take kindly to being struck. Never do that again." The words were quiet, and all the more deadly for their soft tone. A shiver having nothing to do with the weather crept up Christine's spine.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

The quivering, angry energy gathered in the air around him softened. A ghosting caress wiped the tears from her cheek. Christine dared a glance at his face, finding an unbearable tenderness there. It blew on the smoldering ember of hope and it flared into joyous flame.

"I am too," he replied in a voice like the sun's kiss.

A fragile peace settled between them, as improbable as a soap bubble, destined to end.

It did, with the sound of a gunshot.
Order Your White Horses

"But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commandments."

-Exodus 20:6

Instinct overtook Erik—sent him lunging forward, flinging his body over Christine's. They tumbled together in a tangle of limbs, clods of snow flying. All the while his mind tore apart the fragmented seconds. The shot came from a pistol, of decent caliber. The shooter was nearby, from the sound and smell of gunpowder. Neither of them were hurt. Christine's brown eyes were wide with shock. There was no sticky wetness of blood or pain singing through her muscles. God, she felt so good beneath him, soft and feminine and fragrant. His to protect and shelter.

'You made me love you.' Love him? Did she? Could she? No time for that now.

Shattered fragments of stone pelted his shoulders from where the bullet had destroyed a stone angel not two paces from them. So, the shooter was not only a dead man, but an incompetent dead man.

In a flash of a second, Erik leapt up to face his enemy. The righteous, protective anger was like kerosene to the fire of rage within him.

"You," Erik snarled, his voice a vehicle for his hate.

Raoul de Chagny held a smoking pistol, looking every inch a highborn aristocrat with his white horse, billowy white shirt and the elegant rapier at his side, glinting with silver. It was a credit to Christine's hold over him that he failed to notice de Chagny's approach. Erik's own armament consisted of a dagger and his Punjab. His hands and feet could also be considered deadly weapons, in a pinch.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, de Chagny? You could have hit Christine! Did that thought even enter your empty skull?" the boy's golden brows snapped together, blue eyes glinting, holding Erik's unwaveringly. Erik hated him and his easy confidence so much that a metallic taste coated his tongue.

"I'm an excellent shot," was the boy's flat rejoinder.

Erik snorted, unlacing his cape. A casual flick of his wrist sent it fluttering over Christine, who sat with shock-glazed eyes on the ground. Its weight would hamper him in a fight. Raoul tossed aside the spent pistol and drew his rapier.

"So what was that? A warning shot? How honorable. It will be your last mistake, boy. You should have killed me when you had a clean shot."

The boy was finished talking, handsome face set in a mask of concentration. As de Chagny took
his initial position, sweeping his blade in a mocking salute, Erik felt the faintest stab of foreboding. His opponent was younger, strong, and as the son of a great house, had no doubt been trained since boyhood with the sword. His first formidable adversary since the khanum's assassins in Persia some ten years prior.

"Raoul, please don't! Don't hurt him!" Christine said, staggering to her feet. Erik threw out a hand to bar her. One side of Erik's mouth tipped up.

"I appreciate your confidence in my skills, love. Stay behind me. The boy might decide to thrust and impale you by accident." The boy's blue eyes narrowed, both at Erik's casual endearment and at the insult. Hope surged through him. The boy doubted his hold on her!

"You've a glib tongue, Sir. We'll see how you like it when your blood is on my blade."

"Stop this! Erik, Raoul . . . please!" Christine's voice grew higher, shrill with fear.

"My my, aren't we ambitious?" Erik shot back, ignoring her. The sound of the gunshot so dangerously close to Christine kept him from attempting reconciliation for her sake.

A flutter of movement caught his attention. Christine shoved aside Erik's restraining arm and planted herself firmly between them, arms stretched out to each of them.

"Please, don't do this. I couldn't bear to see you hurt," she pleaded.

"Who, him or me?" Erik snapped. She said she loved him? Let her prove it against the man whose ring she wore!

"Either of you!"

"This man, this thing, is not worthy of you, Christine! He betrayed your trust; he's a liar, a murderer and a madman! Don't plead mercy for his sake!"

Something snapped, his vision blurred red. With an inarticulate shout, he lunged for the boy. A thing! This boy presumed to judge him as something less than human? He was the same as the faces beyond the bars, the men who laughed as Javert beat him over and over again!

Erik led with a hard cross, feeling a vicious pleasure when his fist connected with the boy's jaw. He drew his knee up, catching de Chagny in the gut. The boy stumbled back but recovered, flicking out his sword in a quick slice. Erik was ready for it, jumping back. The blade whistled as it cleaved the air. His Punjab slid into his left hand, thin and black and eager. He drew the dagger as well. De Chagny swung a hard diagonal slash, aiming for the vulnerable juncture between shoulder and neck. The boy was trying to kill him. Erik observed this from far away, as he bent backwards to avoid it.

Both of them were possessed by the same fear: neither could countenance a rival for Christine's heart.

You made me love you.

De Chagny slashed a horizontal sweep and Erik was a half second too slow jumping back. A bright line of pain sliced across his belly, the hot trickle of blood cooling in the snowy air. His grunt of pain was swallowed by Christine's thin wail. He couldn't spare her glance, or de Chagny would gut him. Through the tatters of coat, vest and shirt, Erik glimpsed a wound across his heaving belly. The boy tilted the blade, as if admiring the tainted steel.
"How do you like it, Monsieur? Even monsters bleed red." It hurt to take a deep breath, but Erik found the air to growl, "You'll regret that, boy."

The dance began again, and continued for what seemed to be a small eternity. Each swing and miss increased the boy's frustration and ate at his energy. At just the right moment, Erik loosed his Punjab, catching de Chagny's free wrist and twisted it straight behind his back, elbow locked. A kick knocked the rapier from his weakening grasp. Erik knew from experience that this lock torqued the muscle and tendon in the shoulder and was particularly painful.

"Coward! Face me like a man!" de Chagny challenged, spitting the words from behind clenched teeth. Christine's plea fell on deaf ears.

Maybe this was the opening he needed. Force her to a choice. It fueled him.

Savage delight filled Erik at the fetid stench of sour sweat, exhaustion and the first whiff of fear. The sight of de Chagny on his knees in the snow was sweet. Erik leaned close and whispered in his ear, "Ah, but by your own words, I am no man at all. Why should a man's honor bind me?" A hard yank on the captured arm. This time, de Chagny could not contain his cry of pain. Tendrils of spittle dripped from his yawning mouth. Christine's pleas were as repetitive and inconsequential as a barking dog.

"Your boy called me a thing, Christine! A creature! Even creatures have the right to defend their own lives!"

Suddenly, the boy twisted, and threw a rock into Erik's face. His grip loosened on the Punjab and the boy wiggled free. Rage severed his link to reason as blood filled his mouth. Rocks! Like the rocks that killed Sasha, like the rocks children threw at him. The boy had found his rapier, but Erik was intent incarnate, an Angel of Doom. He dodged a wild blow and struck, swift as a cobra, the dagger opening a long gash down his opponent's sword arm. Erik evaded a blind thrust, caught his sword hand and twisted the wrist. A wet crunch announced a breaking bone. Erik grasped a fistful of golden hair and set the bloody tip of his dagger at the leaping pulse. Erik grinned, knowing what a macabre thing it was with blood-reddened teeth and the bone white mask. Fear mingled with disgust and hate filled his eyes. Erik had seen that expression a thousand times before. Each before the final blow descended.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance."

"Erik! No!" he heard her footsteps, whispering thumps of sound in the snow. She dove forward, grasping his forearm.

"Stop! Please, for the love of God, stop! Please!" she sobbed, face contorted in agony. For one flash of second, Erik considered burying the knife in the boy's neck, feeling the red-black spurting of his heart's blood, and watch the light die in those blue eyes. Only then would his heart be safe—safe from the pain of her leaving. It was all right to kill when you were afraid, wasn't it?

You made me love you. So this was love then, was it? Christine, her brown eyes wide in naked appeal for mercy. If he killed the boy, she would be forever lost to him. Erik released the boy with a shove. He felt curiously numb at this crossroads. Erik swayed, feeling the trickle of blood down his belly and thighs. She had chosen in the clearest way possible: begging for his life over a blade. Erik dismissed the stinging moisture in his eyes as sweat.

"Oh Raoul!" Christine cried, hands hovering over his mutilated right arm. God, it was salt in his wound to see her fawn over the boy's injuries! The boy's blue eyes were dazed with pain, but he still was valiant enough to shelter Christine with his body. As if she was in any danger from him.
"I wish you well to each other. Consider this my wedding gift." Erik's wrist flicked. The dagger flew and stuck, quivering, between de Chagny's spread fingers.

XXX

Gummy eyes opened to find his rooms at the Château de Chagny, clean, warm and redolent with the scent of cologne, brandy and leather.

*Philippe.*

A hot throb in his upper arm, echoed by the dull ache in his broken wrist. His body remembered every landed blow clearly. A small sound must have left his lips, for there was the creak of a chair and the rich murmur of his brother's voice ordering the maid. Then Philippe's handsome face filled Raoul's vision. Even to Raoul's cloudy appraisal, his elder brother looked wan and tired, hair unkempt and cheeks dusted with stubble. For once, the smug tilt of his mouth was gone, the jaded amusement in his eyes replaced with sincerity.

"Where is Mother?"

"With Father. He took a turn for the worse last night. The doctor is still with him." Raoul digested this with a sparse nod. Father, now nearing seventy, had been battling a stubborn illness, a tumor of the stomach, for nearly ten years.

"And Christine?" He felt slightly bereft that it was his brother to greet him when he woke and not his bride to be.

"She left soon after the doctor dosed you for the night." Raoul was not too weak to hear the implied judgment in his brother's voice, but he had neither the energy nor the words to defend her. He had already spent too much defending her. A bubble of sadness floated toward the surface of his thoughts. All that effort and he was still unsure in his hold on her heart.

"How are you faring, little brother?" Philippe's voice was gentle.

Raoul tentatively wiggled his fingers and winced as the pain crept up his arm. The family doctor had fashioned an immobilizer of flat splints and wound Raoul's forearm with cloth stiffened with starch. It itched abominably.

"I've been better."

"You're lucky he didn't kill you, you idiot!" Philippe snapped, for the third time. Raoul closed his eyes, letting the scolding words wash over him.

"I *told* you to stay away from the man, Raoul. I warned you."

A headache gathered behind Raoul's eyes, pounding in time with his hurt wrist. His laudanum-laced nightmares roiled with images of Erik Rousseau, his half face twisted in demented glee as he smiled with blood-reddened teeth. He had never seen anyone move that fast, as if he had seen the move before Raoul made it. Armed with a dagger and a piece of rope, he had bested Raoul—who prided himself on his skill with swordplay and aspired to become a solider.

"What do you know about him? God, I'm sick to death of being treated like a child who cannot be trusted with the truth! Who is Erik Rousseau?" he demanded, thumping his good arm on the downy nest of pillows where he was situated. Philippe merely raised a brow, leaning back and
lifting the front legs of the chair off the floor.

"Are you quite finished? Would you like some more laudanum? A temper tantrum will make the pain worse." Raoul shook his head, compressing his lips against a surge of nausea.

"Answer the question, Philippe," he said, grimly intent.

The Comte de Chagny sighed, steepling his fingers beneath his chin in one of Father's gestures. There was a long, breathless pause as Philippe considered Raoul. At last, he said, "You shouldn't excite yourself, Raoul. I'll tell you when you have recovered." Raoul sank back against his sweat-dampened pillows, grinding his teeth in frustration.

"The next time we meet, I'd like to know what I'm facing. The man fights like a demon, Philippe. He had a knife to my throat. He would have killed me, if not for Christine."

A discreet shiver raced through him. It was just now sinking in how close he'd come to death. A cruel hand in his hair, the cold prick of a knife against his skin . . . and a demon's single-minded intent behind it. Philippe's grey eyes were serious.

"I will tell you this: I know he murdered a well-respected mason's daughter in Italy—he was one of Father's contacts in the area, remember? Giovanni, I think his name was. Anyway, this Erik killed his daughter when she wouldn't consent to lie with him. Pushed her off a balcony. He's a villain."

Hot-cold fear washed over Raoul. Terrible fear for Christine's sake. A madman, a liar, an extortionist, and now a lecherous murderer! Was there no end to this man's list of sins? Whatever his words of acceptance in the cemetery, surely a madman would consider honor a trifle!

"Philippe, send for Christine. Please. She's in terrible danger. This villain thinks himself in love with her!" Raoul said, grasping his brother's sleeve. Philippe raked a hand through his hair.

"God love you, Raoul. You certainly know how to pick them."

XXX

Christine couldn't get warm. Despite the heaps of blankets and flannel nightclothes, despite the warmed bricks placed at the foot of her bed, nothing could penetrate this chill. Shock, Madame said. Whatever peace she and Erik made was gone, shattered by Raoul's bullet and soaked in their mingled shed blood. She couldn't bear the sight of Raoul so still in his bed. He looked so much like Papa as life eased out of him. So she fled. Neither could she face the betrayal in Erik's ever-changing eyes when she pled for Raoul's life.

A dry husk of a laugh left her lips. She had been right: it would end in pain for all three of them. Oh, why didn't Raoul see that in thrusting the sword to slay what he thought was a monster, he impaled her in the same stroke? Why couldn't Erik see beyond his own pain?

"It's a bloody mess, is what it is," Meg observed, leaning against the doorjamb. Her dancing step barely made a sound as she crossed the worn carpet.

"You, the Vicomte, and Monsieur Erik," she clarified.

Christine managed a wan smile, remembering a very similar conversation with Madame two days prior.

"You can't think about that, Christine. Stop worrying about what everyone else wants. Maman, the Vicomte, Monsieur Erik. Forget it all! What do you want? Who do you love?" When Christine didn't answer, Meg prodded her shoulder chidingly.

"It's simple, Christine." An irrational surge of anger filled her.

"Oh? And you're the great authority on it, are you? Are you in love?" Christine snapped nastily.

"I am, actually," Meg replied primly, "Had you even cared to look, or ask, I'm engaged. To Marcel. You know him as the Baron de Castelot-Barbezac. He proposed on the night of the masquerade."

Christine's jaw fell, and she glanced down at Meg's left hand. A sizable square-cut diamond shone on her slender finger, flanked by twin rounds, both slightly smaller. Even in the warm, semi-darkness of the room, Christine could see the glint of their luster. Fine quality all of them.

"If you hadn't been so bent on self pity, you would have noticed," Meg said sharply. Christine's misery deepened. Add 'horrible friend' to her list of character flaws. Tears welled and fell, quickly swiped with cold fingers.

"Oh Meg! I'm so sorry! I've been completely wretched." Meg's reply was quick and merciless: "Yes, you have." Holy Virgin, she was so much like her mother! Christine grasped Meg's hand, peering at the ring.

"It's beautiful. The Baron is a very lucky man." A faint rosy blush stained Meg's cheeks.

"Isn't it? He really overdid it. He's poor, you see. His fortunes fell apart when he lost all his ships in a storm. He said he spent his last franc on a season ticket to the Opera so he could see me dance. I don't know where he found the funds for a ring." Christine treasured these details. Maybe they meant forgiveness. Without Meg and Madame, Christine would be truly alone in the world. Nothing frightened her more.

"Should I have told him you aren't one for trinkets? A new pair of ballet slippers or a box of chocolate would have sufficed?" Christine ventured a tease, hoping for the easy flow of giggling and happiness that had flavored their friendship. It worked. Meg's smile bloomed like a rose.

"This type of trinket I like!" she nudged Christine's shoulder. The smile faded a bit.

"Christine, I've missed you so much! I haven't had anyone to talk to about all this!" Christine laughed through her tears.

"I've missed you too! Do you forgive me?" Christine ventured.

"Of course I do, you ninny!"

They moved in a sobbing embrace, new and shining in forgiveness. Christine relaxed into her embrace, clinging to the comfort and camaraderie she offered. This, at least, was clean and pure and hers. The ice in her veins was melting. Meg pulled back, sniffing, and held Christine's shoulders in a firm grim.

"Now I mean it, Christine. You can't go around moaning about how difficult this choice is. You have to make it for yourself."

They sat together chatting about Meg's wedding plans when Madame entered the room. She surveyed the scene of soggy forgiveness with a gleam of approval in her gimlet gaze. Christine's hot gaze implored. Upon returning bedraggled from the cemetery, she had begged Madame to seek
out Erik, both to assure that his wounds were tended, and to prevent his leaving. Too much of a coward to face him herself, she also could not allow him to slip through her fingers again. Madame gave a small shake of her head and Christine's heart sank to her toes.

"Christine, mon cherie, there is someone here to see you."

Whoever their guest was, he didn't wait to be introduced. The thud of boot steps behind Madame made Christine scramble beneath the covers to preserve her decency. Her heart hammered at the sight of a tall, dark-haired form . . . then the guest stepped into the light. The Comte Philippe de Chagny lacked his usual brash charm. Now, his face was lined and grey. The snow still dusting his wide shoulders, he looked like he'd aged twenty years overnight.

"My father is dead. Please come, Christine. My brother needs you."

XXX

Nadir dog-eared the page in the heavy tome across his lap and rose with a joint-creaking stretch. He relished the pleasure of a roaring fire in a warm study as the wind howled outside, spitefully flinging snow against the leaded glass and rudely thrusting its cold fingers through the cracks and crevices in his old house. After a sumptuous supper of rice and lamb roasted in the Persian style with saffron and spice, Nadir considered himself very well content.

He banked the fire and took his taper, about to ascend the stairs and retire for the night. He was interrupted by a furious pounding on his door. Nadir muttered a curse in his native tongue, knowing without a doubt who stood beyond the door. Erik had an uncanny talent for interrupting his sleep. Mustering scolding words, he set the taper on the banister post and unlatched the heavy locks. Icy wind stole Nadir's breath and snuffed out the taper.

"Erik, you really must learn to-" the words died on Nadir's tongue.

Erik leaned against the stoop, doubled over, eyes dark with pain set in a naked face. Where had his mask gone? A shocked curdling in Nadir's stomach told him that years had not improved his wrecked visage.

"Merde," Nadir muttered.

With a curt gesture, Nadir ushered him inside, kicking the door closed behind them. When Erik staggered, Nadir drew his arm across his shoulders. Together, they lurched drunkenly up the stairs. Erik's breaths were shallow and tight. The very fact that he lacked the wherewithal to jibe Nadir was enough to frighten him. His housekeeper appeared in the doorway, clad in nightgown and cap, bleating "Who?" like a fat owl.

"Fetch hot water, bandages, brandy and clean clothes. Now!" Nadir roared. The woman disappeared with a distressed flutter.

Nadir half walked, half carried Erik the remaining steps to his bedroom. Erik merely grunted as Nadir helped him onto the bed, clots of mud and snow flying across the clean coverlet. It was only when the housekeeper returned with the things he asked for and a helpful gas lamp that Nadir saw the damage. He was also suffering from early stages of exposure: he wasn't shivering and the skin around his mouth was a frightening shade of blue. His fine suit coat was in tatters, an assortment of bruises and cuts marring his person. The main worry, however, was the deep gash running across his belly, still seeping blood. That looked like a saber slash!
"Come, sit up. We need to get these filthy clothes off you." Erik stood passively as they shucked off coat, vest and shirt. Nadir made no comment at the sight of the scars marring his back.

"Mary, Joseph and Bride!" the woman muttered, crossing herself.

"Be gone woman!" Nadir shouted, dismissing her with a curt gesture. Erik sat on the edge of the bed, dazed and staring.

"Erik. Erik!" Nadir shouted, until those blue-grey eyes fixed on his face.

"I need to clean your wound. Lie back and try and stay still."

Erik lay as still as corpse until Nadir poured the brandy on his wounded belly. The scream that tore through the air was like a dying wildcat. Following that was a virulent stream of curses in five different languages, all aimed solely at him. Nadir rejoiced in the profanity, anything except the blank stare of a dead man. The necessary disinfecting took several more excruciating minutes, and once it was over, they were both limp and damp with sweat. Erik collapsed back in a weak heap and Nadir raked a hand through his hair.

"Allah above, Erik! Is there no end to your foolishness?"

The duality of Erik's unmasked face was unnerving, as used to seeing him in his mask as Nadir was. A sick fascination trickled through him as his eye wandered over the twisted red flesh, the throb of blue veins, the sagging eyelid.

He was truly hideous.

"I'm afraid not. But at the moment, I would happily expire to oblige you, Daroga," Erik replied through clenched teeth. Thank Allah, he was feeling well enough to be sarcastic! Nadir wound bandages around Erik's middle, all the while debating on whether to fetch a physician. The wound probably needed to be stitched, but that was beyond Nadir's scope of healing. The bandage would prevent any further blood loss, at least.

"Are you going to tell me how you came across the wrong end of a sword, or do I have to guess?"

Something like a smile flirted with Erik's mouth and he regarded Nadir through one slitted eye.

"Your conjecture could be amusing. Fire away." Nadir snorted, washing his hands.

He soaked a cloth and began patiently dabbing at the smaller cuts and scrapes dotting his torso. Erik endured these ministrations with scarcely a peep, though Nadir could tell some spots hurt from the twitch of his muscle. Saving face after unseemly screaming, Nadir supposed.

"If you must continue to douse me with such fine brandy, would you at least give me a sip?" Erik complained. Nadir obligingly poured a healthy tot. His bedroom would smell like a distillery for quite some time, he mused.

"Now to my guessing. Hmmm. A brawl with the emperor's personal guard? Aspirations to govern, eh Erik?" His troublesome friend began to laugh between swallows of brandy, but when it hurt his wound, he tapered into a weak cough. Nadir continued his monologue in tandem with his doctoring. Distraction helped.

"No. An assassin from Persia, perhaps? Difficult considering both the khanum and the shah are dead."
"They are? When? How?" Erik asked, brows raised. Or, Nadir supposed the right brow lifted, having on a few sprouting hairs along the upper curve of his eye socket. A deformity of the muscle gave him a perpetually quizzical expression on that side. He was feeling well enough to shiver now, gooseflesh stippled his torso, his sparse chest hair bristling.

"Oh, some years ago. Of typhoid. The khanum died first and the shah, never one to disobey his mother, followed a couple weeks later." Nadir paused, then added, "A rather gruesome end, typhoid. Its victims die consumed alive by fever and in a puddle of their own shit." Divine justice, Nadir thought to himself. Erik peeled off his gloves and attempted to order his tousled hair. He did have such a peculiar sense of vanity.

"So all the ones who sought to kill us are dead. We've survived them all, Daroga." His tone was quietly amazed. Had he truly expected to die by violence? Nadir's mouth twisted in wry amusement. He gestured to Erik's wound.

"I'd say you still have at least one would-be murderer left, Erik. He did try to gut you. The poor fool doesn't know it would take an act of God to do you in." Erik's mouth tilted in reply and he offered a mocking salute of his brandy snifter.

"God has been trying since the day I was born. I imagine my existence is a blight to His credibility. But I'll not make it easy for Him. Do continue with your guessing." Nadir bit his tongue. Matters of faith always divided them, despite their abiding friendship. His professed atheism was much the same as his habitual mockery—it hid a deep well of hurt. Nadir cleared his throat.

"Let's see, then. What else could it be? A duel with a Duke? Did he step on the hem of your cape, Erik? I know how that irks you." Erik grunted in amusement. Nadir grinned, trying one last time.

"Simple clumsiness, maybe?"

"Wrong on all counts, Daroga. You've lost your detective's touch." Nadir's patience frayed.

"Erik!" he snapped. His friend sobered.

"It was a duel, of sorts. But a poorer cousin to a Duke . . . a Vicomte." He saw Nadir's horrified expression.

"Don't worry. I didn't kill him. Christine stopped me. I gave him my favorite dagger as a wedding gift. I took his horse, though. I broke the boy's wrist. Have you ever broken a man's bones, Daroga? I suppose not. Your mercy would give a man a clean death. It's much like snapping kindling for a fire, but . . . juicy. A wet sort of snap," Erik illustrated his words with a snap of his fingers.

"Anyway, he couldn't manage riding, in that condition. So I left the carriage. A small courtesy to the bride, you see. The carriage horses would respond nicely to a lady's touch." Pain and brandy had the same inebriating effects, Nadir noticed as Erik babbled. It was his style to minimize the pain with mockery or humor. He did neither now.

"The horse was flighty thing. Had trouble seeing, as most greys do, and spooked. I would have managed just fine without the wound, but . . ." Erik gave a tight little shrug of his shoulders.

"It's a long walk to Paris." Nadir glanced out the window at the snow swirling in the wind and saw all too easily Erik's proud figure trudging through the snow, red drops of blood trailing behind him.

"I can imagine," he said faintly.

Nadir left Erik to finish his ablutions and padded downstairs to rummage up the remnants of his
supper. It was a testament to what he endured when Erik fell upon the food like a starving wolf.

"Is it a great imposition to ask for more, Daroga? I find myself terribly hungry." Erik said this with a slight abashment and faint surprise. A ghost and phantom he professed to be, Nadir found it oddly gratifying that he would succumb to a need as basic as hunger.

"No, not at all! I'll fetch some more." Nadir leapt to his feet, hiding a smile. Apparently dueling roused quite the appetite.

Chapter End Notes

I always had a problem with the '04 movie's fight scene in the cemetery. For one, Raoul, however well-trained, has none of Erik's experience with hand-to-hand fighting and would lose nine times in ten (at least in my mind and with Kay's history in mind). Second, however awesome a fighter Erik may be, he would NOT fight in his cape. He even gets caught up in it a couple times in the movie! (steps off soapbox) All right, that's all I have to say about that.
Raoul's eyes were like the facets of a sapphire, chips of hard stone burnished to a shine. They shone now with tears, every hard line of him quivering with suppressed pain. The three of them, Raoul, Philippe, and their mother Elise, formed the points of a triangle around the massive bed. Christine pressed against the wall, trying not to be seen standing awkwardly where Raoul bid her. Such naked grief deserved a modicum of privacy.

The wasted body in the bed looked very much like an older version of Philippe beneath the ravages of disease and pain. The old Comte would have thought it unmanly to weep at his deathbed and his sons honored his wish, but the Comtesse would not be denied her tears and sobbed into a handkerchief. Her nimbus of golden hair was piled in an elegant coiffure, the dress a black brocade. Ever conscious of her position, the Comtesse was ready to receive visitors offering their condolences.

Raoul bent and kissed his father's forehead. Christine remembered with startling clarity her father's own deathbed. Madame Giry had had to pry her out of her father's last embrace. Raoul approached her, cradling his hurt arm. Christine felt a guilty pang at the sight of it, all the while hoping passionately that Erik's injuries had been tended. The thought of him in the dripping cold of his home, hunched over in pain struck her very soul.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured.

Raoul's chin quivered, but not a tear fell. Instead, he embraced her, an exhaled sigh sounding suspiciously like a sob. Christine held him, stroking his back soothingly. He smelled strongly of laudanum and sweat. Poor Raoul, dragged from his sickbed to his father's deathbed.

"Thank you for coming," he murmured into her hair.

"Yes, thank you, dearie. That was very kind," the Comtesse offered her own embrace as Raoul pulled away.

Christine received this with as much grace as she could muster. Elise de Chagny had made her opinion on her son marrying an opera singer abundantly clear within scant minutes of meeting her, so Christine was taken aback by this show of favor.

"O—Of course."

"Raoul, darling, why don't you escort Christine to the sun room for some tea? Philippe and I will settle your father's last details." Beneath the tone of expansive generosity, Christine heard the dismissal. Raoul heard it too, and stiffened beside her.

"Raoul has as much say as I in matters of estate, Mother. Perhaps you and Christine would like some time to grow better acquainted." Philippe cut in smoothly.

A stab of irritation broke the tranquil Comtesse's facade, but it disappeared quickly. Christine herself would have preferred a moment alone with Raoul, to relinquish the ring along with her promise of engagement. She could not remain bound to him while her heart wavered. Of all the damnedable timing! There was no time to waste, though. Christine could not wait one second more. She couldn't bear the weight of this indecision!
"No, Philippe. It's all right. Christine and I have matters to discuss," Raoul said, folding Christine's hand in the crook of his good arm.

Christine offered a tremulous smile and followed his lead through the clean, halls of the Château. They found a quiet corner near the fireplace. Raoul eased into the deep wingback chair, his handsome face creased with pain. Christine clenched her nervous hands on the table, her mind blank of the right words to say to break his heart—or any words at all. Her wrists looked so slender and frail, she thought abstractedly. The bones as delicate as a bird's. Raoul broke the awkward silence.

"I should apologize for what happened in the cemetery. It was my fault as much as . . . as his. I was angry. I shouldn't have shot at him. That wasn't honorable." Christine blinked at him. Of all things she expected him to say, that wasn't one of them. Oh Raoul.

"I'm sorry too, Raoul. About so many things. I never wanted it to come to this, you have to believe that." Raoul frowned, leaning across the table to grab her wrist with his good hand. So small in his grip, his fingers overlapped.

"What are you saying? Come to what?" The grief naked in his face nearly broke Christine's courage.

"I—I can't marry you, Raoul. I'm so sorry," she blurted in a rush. Shock rippled over Raoul's finely cut features.


"Oh Raoul, I'm sorry! I do love you, I do."

"But?" Raoul prompted, his grip tightening. The bones ground together painfully.

Oh God, how could she tease apart which she loved more, or how she loved them?

"But I love Erik too. I couldn't bear to marry you knowing that I might not be able give you all you deserve!" She crossed the perilous distance and laid a hand on his wrist.

His entire manner changed subtly. The expression on his handsome, mobile features was the same, a curious mixture of confusion, surprise and pain, but it looked frozen there. The thick wrist beneath her fingertips, exuding a male's pungent heat and stiff with wiry blond hairs, went rigid as his fist clenched.

"You . . . you love him?" the word swung up at the end and Christine was horrified to see tears in his eyes. Oh, why couldn't love be simple and clean? Why this wretched pain ensnaring all of them? Why hadn't Raoul met a sweet girl who deserved him? And Erik. He deserved a lioness, not a shrinking violet.

"Yes," Christine whispered, "I do. He understands me in some profound way that I cannot even name. He holds my soul." There was catharsis in releasing those words that had been bottled in her throat for so long.

"And I, Christine? What do I hold as your fiancé? Is this ring a chain to you?" he snapped, wrenching his mother's ring from her finger. Christine uttered a soft cry of pain, snatching her hand away.

"That hurt, Raoul. I told I was sorry." Raoul leapt to his feet, bristling with fury.
"Yes, you're sorry," His voice took on a nasty mocking tone.

"Is that supposed to take the pain away? My arm slashed and broken and you're sorry? I fought for you. I protected you. I was there for you when he ran away. Me!" he pounded an emphatic hand on his chest. Christine watched from far away as Raoul used good arm to yank her chair away from the table. He caged her with his braced arms, glaring down at her. Next to Erik's dark, pulsating rage, Raoul's temper was mild in comparison.

"I won't let you go back to him, Christine. I can't. Whatever hold he has over you, we can break it together, if we try!" Tears stung her eyes. Oh Raoul! Her sweet knight, trying so fiercely to protect her!

"I'm not under some . . . spell, Raoul! He does not hold me captive! I follow him willingly," she said. Passion bound her to Erik, for music and each other. And companionship—a genuine pleasure in each other's company and delight in their shared labors. And what was that, if not love? Raoul was shaking his head, chin jutting in stubborn defiance.

"No. I refuse to believe that you are in love with a murdering villain, Christine!" Christine flinched, cold fear prickling her skin. For who or what, she wasn't sure.

"Murder? How do you know about Buquet?" Raoul stepped back, his eyes narrowed to flashing slits of blue.

"Buquet? The scene-shifter? Your Erik had something to do with that, did he? I'll bet he used that damn rope of his. Well, the gendarmes will have something to say about that!" Christine leapt to her feet, clutching his arm.

"Please don't, Raoul! It's not what you think! Erik, he was trying to-

"I don't care what his motives were! Now he's killed a young girl and a drunken old man and God knows how many others in between!" Christine's fingernails bit deep into her palm.

"What do you mean a young girl? Where? When?" her voice emerged in a high whisper, almost inaudible. Raoul grasped her shoulder with his good hand, drawing her close to him. The compassion in his gaze unnerved her.

"Philippe told me yesterday. Some twenty years ago, in Rome. Erik killed a young woman for refusing to share his bed. The girl was fifteen years old. The daughter of a mason my father knew. A man named Giovanni." God help her, she entertained the notion for a handful of seconds. A man of Erik's passion and rages, if this girl denied him, then maybe . . .

"No! No. No. Erik wouldn't do that. He couldn't." Christine hated how her voice quavered. She hated that tiny seedling of doubt. A girl, even younger than she.

"You're not safe at the Populaire, Christine. Come and stay here with me. Forget about the wedding. We can wait as long as you want." He loved her with every particle of his gallant heart and Christine's heart broke to hurt him.

"I can't leave. The Opera is my home, Raoul. The new production begins soon and-

"The new production? Are you truly going to perform in that madman's opera?"

"Yes."

How could she explain? She must prove herself faithful to someone, to something. Erik had labored
for over a decade on this opera. She must see it through! A muscle fired in Raoul's jaw. Betrayal emanated from him like a bleeding wound. He stood there, cradling his wounded arm, studying her for what seemed like forever. Christine groped desperately for words to say. She found none.

"So be it. If you insist on throwing your life away, I cannot stop you." With that, he pulled something from his pocket. He slammed it hard onto the table and stalked off.

"Raoul. Raoul, wait!" she called after him. His pace didn't slow. Christine sank into the chair and glanced at the table. Stuck deep in the wood was Erik's dagger. At the sight of it, she fell quietly to pieces.

XXX

Pain greeted him like an old friend when he broke the surface into consciousness. It was a soft pain, a healing pain, and he welcomed it. Amber patterns moved idly across his eyes. His entire body ached. Memory eked out slowly. Christine? Where was she? He saw again the snowy cemetery, the golden boy and his sword. Felt the hot bite of it. Gone! She was gone! Christine. The boy. The Daroga. Nadir.

"Awake now, my friend?" came a familiar voice. Erik turned his head and found Nadir sitting in a pool of sunlight, sipping coffee. The light glinted in his black and silver hair, his black eyes.

"Yes." His voice was rattling bones in the wind.

"Thirsty?"

The Daroga had a mug ready, full of the rich bounty of buttermilk. It sang on Erik's tongue, washing away the dregs of pain and sleep. He drained it gratefully.

"Thank you, Nadir." Warm air from the furnace caressed his face and Erik stiffened. Even fully clothed, he felt naked without his mask. The Daroga saw his need and offered a mask of black silk.

"Bought it from a costumer's shop for a franc." Erik tied it, reaching for his dignity.

"I imagine the sight of my face scared off your housekeeper." The Daroga heard his oblique apology and accepted it with a smile.

"Madame Bijou is an excitable creature. I shall find a replacement made of sterner stuff." Erik's mouth tipped in a faint smile.

He began to sit up when pain stopped him cold. He looked down through the loose tails of one of Nadir's old shirts and found bandages wrapped thickly around his middle, adorned with a thin red stripe. Erik uttered a string of curses in Persian that would make the meanest of beggars blush. Nadir grunted in amusement.

"That shouldn't trouble you too badly. The wound is already scabbing over when I changed the bandage last. You were lucky." It was Erik's turn to snort.

"Lucky. Not the first word I would have thought of." He sighed.

"How long was I asleep?" Erik asked, attempting to order his tousled hair. Tailored suits and impeccable grooming was another sort of armor, and Erik felt absurdly vulnerable without it. Nadir consulted his pocket watch.

"Sixteen hours, at least." Erik studied his hands, long-fingered and pale, smeared with blood with
dirt rimmed underneath his nails.

"Thank you, Daroga. Once again, I am in your debt." Nadir offered an eloquent Oriental gesture.

"It's nothing. After all these years, I find myself growing quite accustomed to any manner of interruption. Your masked friend appears on Death's door in a blizzard? Keep bandages and brandy on hand." Erik chuckled, ignoring the pain in his belly. Erik watched the laugh light die in Nadir's eyes and girded himself for scolding words. He was caught off guard when Nadir only said: "What will you do now?"

Erik leaned back against the comfortable nest of pillows and realized with a jolt that he had usurped Nadir's own bed. He recognized the bedspread as one from his home in Persia. His beloved wife had sewn it herself. A hot knot rose in his throat and he swallowed several times before there was room to speak. The words scarcely registered, he was so caught up in his sudden rush of emotion.

"Breakfast sounds excellent," he quipped. Nadir had lost the trick of inscrutability in the intervening years since Persia. Erik clearly saw surprise, amusement, and consternation dance there.

"Breakfast later. What I meant was: what will you do about Christine?" Erik clenched his jaw. The wound on his belly did not come close to the one on his heart.

"What is there to do, Daroga? She chose the boy," he snapped. Nadir arched a brow. "She stopped you from killing him. Perhaps you left out a few details. I fail to see how that constitutes a choice in the Vicomte's favor." Erik exhaled a breath through his nostrils. Why did he insist on torturing Erik with the shadow of hope?

"What more do you need? An invitation to the bloody wedding?"

"Normally, I wouldn't dare to voice an opinion on the little Daae, but all this foolishness has begun to involve me, so I will speak."

Erik grunted. The Daroga loved sticking his curious Persian nose anywhere it would fit. Erik's affairs were always a favorite topic of debate, no matter what he said.

"Did you know that you sometimes talk in your sleep, Erik?" He went rigid. God, what did he say? Nothing too embarrassing, he hoped.

"No," he whispered. Nadir's weathered face held his usual mien of watchful kindness. A hint of a smile touched his lips.

"It might have been pain and brandy talking—Allah knows you drank enough to fell a large horse—but you kept repeating the phrase, 'You made me love you.' Did Christine say that?"

"Yes," Erik said, frowning. Hope was a greater tool of torture than any he had produced in Persia. Nadir eased back in his chair, sighing in an irritatingly superior way.

"There you have it. Her choice isn't as sure as you think. Allah, you aren't making it any easier on the child, Erik. She's terribly young, and through accident or design, now has two men vying for her affections. If you hadn't left in a huff a couple months ago, this new relationship wouldn't have had time to blossom."

"So you're saying it's my fault?" Erik said sharply, his temper beginning to rise.
“Yes. She was drugged. She could have said anything. You certainly do, whenever you’re taken with whatever god-awful substance you’ve pumped into your body,” Nadir said with infuriating logic, "But your pride and your stubborn belief that the only goal of anyone alive is to hurt you pushed you away from her. Say what you like about him, but the Vicomte was there when she needed him.”

Erik slammed a fist on the bedside table, making the ewer jump.

"My stubborn belief? It is reality! And the Vicomte? Where was he when Christine would have died of starvation if not for Madame Giry's kindness? Where was he all those years when she was my student? No, the boy is opportunistic and arrogant."

The Daroga folded his hands over his belly and waited as Erik's tirade spent itself.

"What will you do?" he said at last. Erik clenched his jaw. His life without Christine stretched before him, a barren road with no end. Cast adrift, rudderless.

"I don't know." He hated the bleak emptiness in his tone. Weakness, even in front of Nadir, was unbearable. The Daroga was relentless.

"What will you do?" he repeated.

"I don't know!" Erik shouted, making the laborious, effort of standing. Pain radiated from his protesting stomach, and a faint trickle of warmth said he had broken his scabs.

"You have to fight for her." Erik snorted, gesturing eloquently toward his bandaged middle.

"How do you think I earned this, Daroga? Needlepoint?" Nadir stood and glared at Erik. The Daroga was one of the few people tall enough to look him eye to eye.

"Try again. And again, if necessary. I know you, Erik. You love this girl, and I know you will never find peace until the matter is decided. Now as your conscience, I order you to make this right.” The barest edge of humor lightened the last words and Erik smiled, pouring himself a tot of brandy and throwing it back.

"An order, is it? We shall see."

XXX

Minette's eyes wandered over the stage arrayed for Erik's opera and marveled at the architecture of his thoughts and desires articulated there in bold strokes. Crimson, black and gold slashed across the stage, as beautiful as a rose and as terrible as hate. Ten years of Erik's unadulterated genius channeled into this one work.

*Don Juan Triumphant.*

She was perhaps the only person who knew the meaning of that particular title. Early in their acquaintance, Erik had told her tonelessly that his Gypsy master had taunted him with the name Don Juan. It was so like Erik to twist what the world told him was a flaw into a strength, into another sort of allure. *Don Juan* was alluring. A potent sexuality filled every phrase and gesture, every provocative color and costume. Floating pristine above the carnality of the work was the heroine Aminta who was so startlingly, blindingly a caricature of Christine. The purity of his love for her was distorted only by the bleeding pain he wrote so eloquently in the third act where
Aminta betrays Don Juan to her lover, Argento.

Minette rapped her cane on the stage, marking the time as she shouted instructions for improvement to her *petit filles*. Meg floated through the steps with ease, though she glanced to the other side of the stage where the chorus and principle actors practiced every couple seconds. Piangi's voice warbled dangerously through the powerful baritone pieces. Then Christine's voice filled the theater like a rush of clean air, like the shine of the sun on clean snow.

*No thoughts within her head but thoughts of joy*

*No dreams within her heart but dreams of love*

"*Brava,*" Minette whispered breathlessly.

Her heart ached at the sight of Christine's slender form, bearing the hard stares and whispered taunts of the others. La Carlotta fluttered about the wings with her entourage, stewing at the thought of playing second fiddle to the Swedish slut. Even Reyer and the managers despised her. Only the very real threat of the loss of Erik's pen and the stream of wealth that followed it kept this production going. Had anyone cared to look and see that her finger was bare? Minette breathed a small sigh of relief. That piece of the puzzle could be set down for now. Another, thornier problem waited on the other side.

**Erik.**

Not that Minette had seen hide or hair of him since the masquerade. His home was as dark and foreboding as a tomb when she visited the night of his and the Vicomte's little duel. Thank God for Nadir. He had sent a note this morning saying Erik was safe and tucked tidily in his bed beneath the Opera. Between the two of them, maybe their charges would find their way to each other. God, what could she do to guide them together when both insisted on being stubborn and blind and foolish?

"Once again from the top, if you please," Reyer ordered, glaring sourly at the group from behind his spectacles. His dry voice jolted Minette from her reverie and she returned to work. Don Juan's triumph was to begin tomorrow.

XXX

Christine scrutinized her dripping form in the Giry's full length mirror. She was alone; both the Giry women were occupied with last minute preparations for the production tomorrow night. Her own preparations were few: the maddening notes of Erik's music sank into her blood and bones.

*Dangerous,* he had said. Dangerous they were. Passion bloomed in her blood as she sang the scorching, sensual arias. But then, they also articulated his pain most acutely, stripped her bare and forced her to watch him bleed. She could not forget them even if she tried. Her costumes were made and fitted, dress rehearsals complete. Through the mire of confusion that she struggled through, one thing was absolutely clear.

She had to see Erik.

Christine's skin glowed pink with the blush of heat and scrubbing, soaked tendrils of hair dripping fat, cold drops onto her shoulders and breasts. She scrutinized her body, seeing only a pale, skinny young woman with too much hair. Violet smudges cupped her eyes from little sleep. Would he still think her beautiful? Fear hollowed out the pit of her stomach at the thought of Erik's black temper. She had to see him, to prove Raoul wrong, to quiet the gnawing doubt. Erik could never kill a girl.
It was lie! She had to see . . . to see if he still loved her. The last time she had spoken to him, she was shouting and shoving at him, wild with grief and love.

Christine took particular care in creams and lotions for her skin, the long whispering strokes of the comb through her hair. She dressed in white nightclothes and stockings, like a virgin bride. A shudder ran through her at the thought. An instant's doubt freezing her blood.

Christine buried her face in her hands. Shame and fear warred with a very real hunger deep within herself. She loved Raoul, and she loved Erik. That thought had haunted her waking and sleeping hours for days. Raoul, her protector, her knight, her friend. Erik . . . oh, what she felt for him defied description! But how many times had he pushed her away?

Was she really contemplating this? Going to him, begging for his forgiveness, offering him her virginity? It was desperate and wretched and . . . and sinful as well. There it was, staring her in the face, as clear in the mirror as the hints of red glinting in her ringlets. She wanted him. Erik held her in a deep, powerful way. The maddening notes of *Don Juan* swirled around her head, rousing her body. Christine swayed, at edge of precipice, grasping for the courage for that fateful plunge . . .

For the trek to Erik’s kingdom, she armed herself with solid shoes, a cloak and a gas lamp.

She was ready.
The pain was more irritating than anything else, as long as he didn't strain himself too badly. Unfortunately, 'strain' was a term that encompassed riding, walking, or even standing completely upright. As such, he was forced to move slowly and hunched like an old man around his home. Erik raked his fingers through his wet hair. A long soak in his tub had gone a long way towards restoring his sangfroid, his wound reduced to a long, ugly scab slashing across his middle. A faint smile touched his lips. A broken wrist would take much longer to heal. It was awkward business trying to wrap bandages around his own stomach, but he managed.

When he reclined in his bed sipping a mug of hot broth, redolent with Persian spices, Erik considered his mood very much improved. That was, until he looked up and found Christine standing beyond the gossamer curtain. Erik blinked, waiting for her specter to disappear. She was part of the architecture of his thoughts, so completely grafted into the fabric of his mind that to see her caused him no great alarm. Being without morphine for a couple days induced hallucinations, among other things. This was particularly elaborate, he mused. She was garbed in gauzy white that clung and billowed in all the right places. She looked like a virgin goddess . . . like a bride.

"Damn you," he whispered, his voice catching, "why do you torture me with your beauty?"

"Erik," she said softly. As the dulcet tones of her voice reached his ear, Erik jerked upright, sending a blinding stab of pain through him.

"Oh bloody hell!" Erik bellowed, hunched over in agony.

Curled in a ball around the core of his pain, he dimly realized the curtain was rising and the faint shift of weight as Christine sat beside him on the bed. Erik was thankful that even in the solitude of his home, he wore a mask—the one he wore to sleep of soft black silk. Also, he gluttonously enjoyed Christine's warm fingers combing his hair.

"Oh Erik. Oh my poor Erik."

*My poor Erik?*

Erik loosened his tensed joints by force of will and sat up. Christine's beauty was a formidable weapon in its own right, smiting him with the impression of supple white skin beneath tantalizingly sheer satin, a cascade of rich brown curls, the pouting softness of her lower lip begging for a kiss. Erik caught her wrist to stop the distracting touch, noting that her fingers were bare of rings—save for her only heirloom from her mother on her little finger. That she never removed. This fact combined with her very presence in his home stifled the hurt, angry words that rose to his lips.

"What are you doing here?" he asked softly. Her teeth worried her lower lip, her slender brows drawn together.
"I... I came to see you. T—to see if you were all right."

"I've been better," Erik said dryly, gesturing to his wound, "your boy came within a hair's breadth of spilling my entrails all over the ground." A gross exaggeration to the dimensions of his wound, but Erik couldn't stop himself.

She was here. She was with him. How or why didn't matter. His defensive anger had only served to push her farther away and both of them deeper into misery. Perhaps another tack was warranted. The sound halfway between a groan and a gasp answered him. Her white fingers brushed the gauze around his belly with infinite gentleness.

"I'm so sorry. It's all my fault." Her eyes shone with a sheen of moisture. God, he couldn't stand her tears! Erik lifted a brow, forgetting she couldn't see the expression with the mask.

"Did you ask the Vicomte to shoot at me?" he asked gently. Horror bled across her delicate features.

"Of course not!"

"Was it you who sliced open my stomach and snapped the boy's wrist?" A flicker of tentative understanding warmed her brown eyes.

"No."

"It wasn't your fault, Christine. The blame rests with myself and the Vicomte."

Silence reigned for a moment, broken only by the faint lap of the lake against the rocks. Somehow, Christine's hand had wiggled free of his grip and Erik was distracted by the dance of her fingers combing his hair behind his ear, plucking fussily at the coverlet, stroking the back of his hand. His heart picked up a swift pace, uncaring of his mind's busy words of caution. If she left him again, he wouldn't survive it! His tension must have registered, for Christine said, "Are you in pain?"

"A little," he lied. The pain was a distant afterthought.

"Can I fetch you some laudanum?" Had she come to be his little nurse? God help him. He couldn't bear the humiliation.

"No," he said, "laudanum has no effect on me. My body is used to something far stronger." Christine twisted her mother's ring around her finger.

"C—could you not take some, then? Of the morphine?" A faint smile touched his mouth. Her hesitance and near superstitious dislike of his morphine was amusing.

"I could, if I wanted to kill myself. The dose required to obliterate the pain would probably stop my heart," he replied.

"Don't do that," she said swiftly, taking his hand in both hers, "I want your heart to keep beating." Erik's fingers tightened.

"Do you?" he whispered. Christine held his gaze, though a faint rose's blush touched her cheeks.

"I do." It was those solemnly spoken words—the same words of a wedding vow that urged him to abandon this odd game for a more direct route.

"Why are you here, Christine? Not simply to see to my welfare. Minette could have told you that.
Where is your boy?" Erik strove to keep his tone gentle, but hope clawed free and made him trembling and desperate. Christine's eyes skittered away from his face and wandered around the room.

"I broke off my engagement to Raoul," her tone was soft and distant, as if remarking on someone else's misfortune, "I . . . I just couldn't do it. I couldn't marry him when . . ."

"Yes?" Erik prompted, heart in his throat. Though that soft, shy blush clung to the curves of her cheeks, a sharp glint entered her eyes.

"I can't say it."

"Say what?"

"You always act rude and horrible when I say it." Erik frowned. He squeezed her hand.

"I won't be rude and horrible," he said solemnly. Christine's brow quirked dubiously. The expression roused a low laugh from him. For the first time in a long time, a rapport of simple camaraderie existed between them.

"Promise?"

"I promise," he replied. Christine exhaled a breath.

"I couldn't promise to marry Raoul . . . when I love you."

On some level, Erik had expected that, but to hear those coveted words, spoken not in the heat of passion without another man's ring on her finger, but in the cool quiet of conversation lit a raging fire in him. Hope, love, desire, all mingled into a white-hot ball of emotion.

"Oh Christine," he breathed.

He didn't know who moved first, but in a blur, they were tangled in a kiss. The velvet caress of her lips was intoxicating, tentative at first, then growing bolder. Erik plunged his hands into the silky fall of her hair, cupping the cherished solidness of her skull as he had so longed to do. Christine uttered a soft sound and climbed astride his lap, clutching fistfuls of his hair. Erik lost himself in the moist smacking of their lips and the secret pleasure of jousting tongues. All too soon, she broke away for air. His own lungs gasped hungrily.

"Christine, oh my love, my only love," he whispered. Joy gave his heart wings. Was this real? Was she really here, in his arms, saying she loved him, kissing him?

Erik slanted his mouth across hers, plunging deep. What followed was a drugged madness of quiet heat and mingled breathing. His heart thundered, desire's molten heat surging through his muscles. Words bubbled up and he peeled back.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry-" Christine darted in for another kiss and the next words emerged staccato between the feverish seeking of lips.

"For everything. I never meant to-" Christine slid lower, kissing his chin and jaw.

"To hurt you. I-"

"Ssshh," Christine whispered, pressing a finger over his lips, then dropped a peck on the tip of his nose.
"Hush, love. We both said and did things without intending to harm. It doesn't matter now."

Tears stung his eyes. The healing balm of forgiveness, the sweetness of reconciliation . . . he had almost given up hope of ever earning it. Christine! His beloved, his goddess!

"I love you," he murmured.

A soft sigh escaped her lips, wafting warm and moist over his face and she whispered against his mouth, "I've dreamed of this for so long . . ." The idea was almost unfathomable, even after their encounter during the masquerade. She wanted him? Christine desired his touch?

Silken arms linked around his neck, delicate fingers threaded in his hair, her mane of delightful curls fell around his face, shielding him, enveloping him in its scent and texture. Limbs tangled, their bodies ground together in a fever of desire. His hands stroked her back, plucking at the buttons of her gown. Hers parted the loose tails of his shirt, dancing along his chest, pushing the cloth from his shoulders.

Somehow, through the blinding passion she roused in him, Erik found his sanity.

"Christine, wait," he said, trapping her hands against his chest as the heart that was lost to her thundered beneath her fingertips.

"No!" she hissed. Her mouth demanded, and Erik could only answer.

Nearly howling in frustration, he gently disengaged from the kiss. And very nearly plunged back when Christine's tongue darted out to trace her lips as if savoring his taste, eyes dilated to pools of midnight. He breathed in deep through his nose, seeking calm, but only earned a lungful of her scent of violets and musk. A savage groan tore from his lips.

"No, love. No," he panted, as if by repetition he could subdue the raging passion. Hurt clouded those intolerably bright eyes. Her fingers traced ticklish paths on his skin, driving him insane.

"What is it, Erik? Don't you want me?" had he breath, he would have laughed.

"Of course I do. I need you like I need air. I have spent the past few years in an agony for wanting you." Erik closed his eyes, shutting out the devastatingly gorgeous portrait she made—all the more delectable sprawled across his lap, her breath a soft tickle of warmth on the side of his neck. He strove for composure, cupping her cheek.

"I . . . I don't want it like this."

He was lying. He wanted it. Badly. His body didn't care about romance or propriety. All it wanted to do was wallow in the offered delight of her body, plunge deep and make them one with blood and pleasure.

Erik cradled her face between his hands. God, his heart felt fit to burst free from his chest with all the love he held!

"Believe me, there is nothing I want more than to make love to you, Christine." A rich blush stained to her cheeks, a faint shy smile touching her lips.

"But?" she prompted.

"But once won't be enough for me. I want all of you. Forever. I want to share our lives and our music. I want you in my bed every night. I want to give you my heart, my body, my life, the work
of my hands until the stars fall out of the heavens."

Christine uttered a soft sound, moving close to kiss him. He was drowning in kisses. The one wish of his childhood was now showered on him in ridiculous largesse. He pulled back and smiled.

"I had a more elegant proposal prepared, the night of Hannibal's premiere. But you caught me at a bit of a disadvantage." Christine stilled. Close enough to share breath and warmth, Erik could see the tears swimming in her eyes.

"That's why you didn't come for me the night of the premiere? You were preparing to propose?"

"Yes," he said simply, combing a wayward tendril of hair behind her ear.

"Oh Erik!" He had never heard that tone from her, thin with pain and rich with every misunderstanding and slight that pushed them apart.

"It's all right." And it was. With her in his arms, every pain of his life was erased. He felt invincible!

"What did you think of this one?" he asked.

"It was wonderful," she assured him thickly.

Erik gripped her shoulders. He couldn't very well fall to one knee with her astride him, but he could still look adoringly up into her eyes.

"Marry me, Christine. Make me the happiest man alive." A breathless pause.

Then the most beautiful words in all of creation floated through the air. Tears shone in her eyes, but her stunning white smile erased any trepidation.

"Yes. Yes, I'll marry you," she said huskily. Erik's heart soared and he yanked her down for another kiss. Joy and pleasure mingled into a brew more potent than wine and Erik tasted the salt of tears and didn't care if they were hers or his.

The shackle of his half-discarded shirt prevented him from holding her as he wished. Erik shrugged it off, never breaking the sweet seal of their mouths. Quite of their own will, his hands roamed down her back, over the ripe swell of her hips. A primitive refrain hammered in his head: his, his, his. Every supple inch of her. The stern voice in his head that commanded that he desist immediately was growing fainter by the second, drowned out by the shy, sweet strokes of Christine's tongue against his, her soft gasps and sighs.

"Christine . . ." he breathed, the words holding a note of pleading. Erik gasped for air and the will to stop her as she dropped kisses everywhere she could reach. Was this his shy little rose that blushed when he mentioned the words 'love-making?' This bold angel grinding her body against his would rend him into pieces.

"Erik . . ." she panted in his ear.

"Christine!" He said, surging up, away, before he did something they would both regret. He stood panting and bare-chested, entirely hypnotized by the sight of Christine rumpled and glowing in his bed.

"Tell me you understand why," he rasped, panting as if he'd run a mile.
"I do. I'm sorry. It . . . just feels so good. I never want to stop," she addressed the coverlet, cheeks afire, unable to meet his gaze. Erik hid a smile in his hand.

"Nor I," he whispered. Silence fell, and Erik shifted from foot to foot, at a loss.

Struck by sudden inspiration, he rummaged around his dresser and found what he sought. Erik sank to one knee beside the bed, prying open the box.

"Will you wear this ring, Christine? As a token of our engagement?" he asked softly. Her smile was like the sun rising.

"Yes."

XXX

The ring suited the man and the engagement, so completely different from Raoul's simple words and formal kisses. The band was white gold fixed with a square-cut diamond at the center. A half circle of round rubies increasing slightly in size were draped around the diamond. Christine was hypnotized by the sparkling beauty of it, the almost sensuous curve of the rubies around the diamond. Red, like his roses. Was she the diamond, sheltered by their glittering embrace?

"If you are unhappy with the design, I can modify it to suit your wishes." Erik's voice held an anxious edge that she had never heard before. Christine blinked, realizing she'd been silently staring at the ring nested in its box of dark silk.

"No! It's perfect. I love it," she said, beaming. Some of the tension left the stiff set of Erik's shoulders. Christine's eye wandered from the ring to the broad expanse of Erik's bare chest, mesmerized by the taut, sinewy muscle and velvet skin, lightly dusted with hair. Her lips tingled with the memory of his kisses, a deep ache permeated her belly.

Erik, the complex, passionate, dangerous man that she loved. She said yes to him without a moment's hesitation, as she had hesitated with Raoul. She could have been happy as the Vicomtesse de Chagny, if she had never tasted a love that could burn. A smile split Erik's face, so incredibly radiant that Christine swallowed tears. He looked so happy! Christine scooted to the edge of the bed so Erik could slide the ring on her finger. Erik grasped her proffered hand and dropped gentle kisses along the sensitive skin. Abruptly, he stopped, staring intently at her hand.

"What happened, Christine? How did you injure your finger?" he crooned.

Christine looked down at saw that her knuckle was swollen, a purple bruise streaking the inner side. She bit her lip. That was from Raoul yanking his ring from her finger. Drat! She didn't want to spoil this beautiful moment explaining!

"Oh that. It's nothing. I hit it on a door." Erik's grey-blue eyes, now the silver incandescence of moonlight on the sea, narrowed in suspicion.

"Then why is this the only finger bruised? What happened, my love?" Christine squirmed, cursing Erik's acumen. Best get it out quickly.

"When I broke our engagement, Raoul was angry. He pulled the ring off." Erik's narrowed eyes flew wide, so bright and beautiful set in the black mask.

"He hurt you? I'll kill him for that," he growled.

Christine could see the anger building in him, the tension ringing from his tall, lean form. So
Christine did the only thing she could think of to subvert it. She kissed him. After a moment’s resistance, he melted into the caress. Christine loved the texture of his lips, his rich taste, the spicy cloud of his scent. By the time she pulled away, they were both dreamy-eyed and breathing heavily.

"You make an excellent point. Let's not let the boy tarnish this moment, hm?" Erik purred.

"Agreed," Christine murmured. Erik kissed her bruised finger.

"Perhaps you could wear it on the other hand."

"No," Christine said stubbornly. "Erik, I want to wear your ring. It doesn't hurt."

Erik's frowned dubiously, eyes glinting.

"Promise?" Christine giggled at the shared joke.

"I promise," she said.

The ring fit perfectly, of course. Christine admired the sparkle and its cool weight.

"It's beautiful."

"It is overshadowed by the loveliness of the wearer, my dear." Erik dropped a kiss on her forehead as he rose and donned his shirt.

A nagging thought surfaced through the miasma of joy and love.

Giovanni. The girl.

Christine had never known Raoul to lie. Maybe he was misinformed. He had to be. A pall fell over her euphoric mood. The man she agreed to marry held so many secrets. The scars written on his skin. Rome. Persia. How far had he traveled in his life? But just now, tangled together in his bed, he had pulled away to save her honor. Heat bloomed in her face. She had been more than willing. So Erik couldn't have . . .

Christine locked the thought behind a heavy door. She wouldn't think of it now.

She was happy. Erik was happy. Everything would be fine.

For now.
"Where did he take her?" Raoul shouted, slamming his good hand on Madame Giry's desk. His bandaged wrist rested in a sling draped around his shoulder and complained after the long carriage ride from the Château. The slam rattled up his arm and registered as a dreadful throbbing. Try as he might, Raoul could not leave Christine to whatever fate she had chosen with him. Visions of the masked demon hurting her filled his waking and sleeping hours.

He holds my soul.

Her words haunted him.

The ballet mistress regarded him through her half moon spectacles with an ironic lift of brow. She waved a piece of paper under his nose.

"Erik has not taken Christine anywhere, Monsieur. Of that I can assure you. Look at the note she left."

Raoul snatched the scrap of paper and hungrily devoured Christine's neat, slanted hand. His stomach dropped with each read word.

"'Madame, don't worry for me. I've gone to see Erik. Pray that I have the courage to say what I must,'" he read aloud.

"Does that answer your question, Monsieur le Vicomte?" There was no hint of mockery in the Madame's voice . . . it was almost gentle. Raoul shook his head as if to clear it. The edges of his vision were blurred, pain throbbed like a second heartbeat in his arm. The truth of it stuck in his throat, filled his mouth with a bitter taste.

"Tell me all you know about him." Damn the quaver in his voice! He wanted to sound calm, authoritative—like Father. But Father was gone and Raoul's courage with him. He sank into one of the Madame's chairs, his legs too weak to hold him.

"Monsieur . . ." Madame cooed, handsome features set in discomfort.

"I have a right to know!" Raoul said. Madame spread her hands, offering an eloquent little shrug.

"Even if I wished to, Monsieur, I could not. He is a very private man." Raoul sneered.

"I imagine so, being a murderer tends to dampen one's social circles." Damn the woman, she was all wide-eyed innocence, the expression augmented by the magnification of her spectacles.

"Murder, Monsieur? That is a very serious accusation." The gentleness was gone from her voice, replaced with something steely with warning, belying the guileless look. Raoul narrowed his eyes. He would find his answers. He had one last card to play.

"I know about Josef Buquet."

If Raoul expected her to capitulate, or babble inane excuses, he was sorely disappointed. Madame Giry's poise was a thing to be reckoned with. The same fierce loyalty as her daughter. Their misbegotten affection for that monster repelled and worried him. At this accusation, Madame Giry
simply lifted a brow.

"Oh? What is it that you know?" A muscle in Raoul's jaw fired. Raoul knew he was cornered. In a verbal spar with Madame Giry, he often was. He opened his mouth to confess what Christine told him, when the door opened behind him.

Raoul was gifted with the singular pleasure of hearing Christine's soft laugh, like distilled joy. An answering joy rose in his heart, a big, stupid smile spreading on his face. God, he loved her laugh. He turned, desperately trying to smooth the golden hair that escaped his formal queue, a desperate thought chanting: Please be happy to see me. Please. Please. Raoul found only the hard blue gaze of Erik Rousseau glaring at him from behind a black mask.

XXX

Christine's fingers dug into Erik's forearm, feeling the tension ripple through him. Her emotions roiled through her in successive waves. First was fear, its sharp, cold prickle along her skin for both of her men, infernal as they were. She couldn't bear having them hurt each other. The second was pain at the sight of Raoul's bravery despite the trembling in his limbs. The third was anger.

Oh God, Raoul, why? She thought. Why would he chase after her when she had been so clear as to her wishes, and he had made his anger a wedge to drive them apart? Was her grip to hold Erik back or cling for support?

The silence in the room was leaden, heavy and hot. It seemed to score her lungs. Erik's taut stillness was unsettling. The fine hairs on the back of her neck rose. Her fiancé had become a stranger. The effervescent tang of his energy, so soft and enveloping as they strolled through the Populaire's darkened halls, laughing together at a shared joke had been replaced by something pulsating and dangerous. A panther, all savage power and rippling grace, ready to pounce. Raoul, her erstwhile golden champion, looked pale and wan in comparison to Erik's dark glory.

"Raoul," she breathed, breaking the deadly silence. Raoul's gaze flickered over her and she saw the joy die. Hurt welled up, then she realized just how she must look: hair tousled, nightclothes—already less than conservative—gloriously askew, lips puffed by Erik's kisses—

"You bastard! What have you done to her?" the words burst from Raoul like gunfire, fierce red color flooding his face. His blue eyes snapped and crackled with fury, anger radiating from his lean form. Of all things, Erik laughed. The sound was unbearably beautiful, as was every sound that left his lips, but this was rich with scathing mockery. It was almost an indulgent sound, like a teacher amused by the antics of a precocious student.

"Ah, are we to begin with the tedious accusations again, Monsieur le Vicomte? How very predictable. What is it now? Rape? Assault on Mademoiselle Daae's most delectable person? What would it take to appease you? Sworn statements before witnesses? Or perhaps something a bit more concrete."

With that, he draped Christine's hand over his forearm. Raoul's eyes fell and Christine imagined she could hear his heart breaking as he saw the ring. Something inside her writhed with terrible remorse for being unable to love this wonderful man as he deserved.

"Perhaps you should leave now, Monsieur," Madame Giry suggested, very gently. Raoul jerked free from whatever reverie he'd fallen into and looked dazedly around the ring of faces.

"Yes. Yes, I think I should." His bow was stiff, inclined in Madame's direction. The subtle snub was enough to show the depths of his contempt. He brushed past Christine into the hall.
The tension did not ebb with Raoul's exit, no, it was like a held breath, waiting . . . waiting. The focus had shifted to her. Both her dearest guardians regarded her with something like suspicion and Christine tried not to shiver under their scrutiny. Erik's eyes were hard, his posture stiff and ringing with tension. It dawned on Christine that they both expected her to run after Raoul, try to mollify him with gentler words. Christine stifled the surge of betrayal with the knowledge that she had been tempted to go after him. Regardless of the depth or timbre of her love for Raoul, she still would go through considerable lengths for his comfort. Christine mustered a wobbling smile for Madame, forcing her feelings for Raoul into a separate place, far from Erik's jealousy.

"Madame, Erik and I have very happy news."

The baited breath exhaled and Erik ducked his head. The gleam of lamplight caught the overbright sheen in his eyes. Christine's heart cramped with a painful rush of love. This dear man, hiding tears of relief that she had chosen him! Her throat closed at all of her thoughtless actions stemming from bewildered hurt.

No more, she vowed to herself. Erik reached out to her, and Christine saw also the timid expectation, as if unsure of his welcome. Christine fitted herself against his side, marveling at his warmth and how she fit, just so. Like she was made for him. Erik's hand cradled her cheek and drew her close for a kiss. Christine melted eagerly into his caress, reveling in his taste. When he pulled away, his grin seized her viscerally.

"I hope you weren't planning on a long engagement, my dear."

Everything would be all right.

This was where she belonged.

XXX

Her voice drew him from his prayers in the evening, before he sought his rest. Devout Muslim that he was, he logged away the particular amalgamation of frustrated affection tinged with reluctant lust that she evoked in him for later examination and repentance. Nadir rose to his feet with a faint crackle in his less-than-young knees. He combed his hair from his forehead, damp and cool from his bath.

"Nadir!" The syllables of his name sounded quite exotic and rakish on Minette Giry's lips, though as he shrugged on a robe and hurried downstairs. Even spoken through a barrage of very rude knocks, like an insistent woodpecker. Nadir threw open the door, catching her mid-knock. The hour was late, and the street dark, and bitterly cold. He could discern nothing of her features, only her shapely silhouette.

"Minette, do come in," he murmured. He ushered her into his study and brightened the lamp in silence, struggling to collect his equanimity.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Minette?" he said.

There. Cool, polite. Nevermind that his heart was racing and his blood pooling in embarrassing places. Why was she calling on him in the middle of the night? Surely nothing had befallen the little Daee or Erik! Nadir faced her and the breath rushed from his body at the sight of her flushed cheeks, sparkling eyes, the golden tendrils of hair escaping from her elegant coiffure. At that moment, lust and affection didn't begin to encompass what coursed through him.

Base desire had pestered him on occasion in the long years since his wife's death. When these
hungers plagued him, he healed the hurts of his soul and sated the desires of the body in the embrace of a prostitute. But never, in over fifteen years had he felt anything like this. Fluttering heart, sweating palms, a special awareness of her presence, the notes of her scent . . .

Nadir Khan was infatuated with Minette Giry. His wife and son were dust and ghosts, lost to him along with his home and position. There had been a time when Nadir swore he would never again love. But, miracle of miracles, Allah saw fit to soften his callused heart.

Unaware of his epiphany, Minette made a restless circuit of the room, her movements lithe and supple like the dancer she was. Nadir gripped the edge of the desk with white-knuckled hands. Inwardly, he grasped for a shield to these disquieting feelings. She wore a widow's black. The European tradition was to wear the mourner's color for a year. The fact that Minette had worn no other garb in over a decade spoke volumes to how much she loved Pierre Giry. It was impossible for the two of them to find happiness after they lost their great loves.

It had to be.

"You'll never believe what's happened, Nadir! Never! I certainly didn't expect it, not after how they were both carrying on with that infernal Vicomte, but it happened!" Nadir had never seen her more animated, or more beautiful. Nadir shook himself, focusing on her words.

"Erik finally summoned the courage to say his piece, then?" he said, with his usual dry good humor. No trysting, then. Only this bizarre three-cornered way of speaking regarding their shared charges. Nadir hid his mingled relief and disappointment behind a brittle smile. Minette stopped before the bookshelf, joy suffusing her features.

"It was Christine! She marched down to Erik's home and told him how she felt." Nadir nodded, quietly impressed. It had been his longstanding opinion that Christine Daae was an inconstant piece of fluff that didn't deserve the singular gift of Erik's undying love. In this instance, he was quite glad to be proven wrong.

"Erik didn't stand a chance," Nadir chuckled. Minette's closed-lip smile was full of promise and it struck him hard in the chest. Damn these newly awakened emotions!

"No. He didn't stand a chance," she agreed softly.

The moment warmed and stretched, parting into sweet filaments like pulled caramel. Hope rushed through him. Nadir coughed discreetly, distracted momentarily by the leap of her pulse at the base of her throat.

"So they're finally engaged?"

"Yes. Erik wants the ceremony to take place within the week, after Don Juan's premiere." Her hazel eyes softened into tenderness and Nadir was unsure if it was for him or Erik.

"He spoke of having you as his best man."

Islamic marriage practices being what they were, Nadir only had a vague notion of the duties of a 'best man,' but he knew it was a high honor, and, for Erik, an ultimate gesture of trust. Only a privileged few were permitted to look upon his beloved Christine on her wedding day. Unexpectedly, a knot of emotion rose in his throat. Infuriating, blasphemous and mercurial as he was, Erik had a talent for making one feel cherished and valued.

"He will no doubt come to ask you himself, but I wanted to be the one to tell you." There was something in her tone that touched and stirred him, a mixture of shyness and flirtation.
"I'm glad you told me," he said huskily. Again, that delicious warping warmth stretching the moment between them. Were his feelings reciprocated? He dared not voice them and loose her friendship. Nadir shifted from foot to foot, at a loss for what to say.

"So... Don Juan? What was Erik thinking?" he said at last.

He moved across the room to the brandy decanter and lifted an inquiring brow. Minette nodded. He could feel her gaze fix upon him as he poured two modest drinks. Her cool hand grazed his as he handed off the drink. A pleasant frisson of warmth rushed through him. Allah, he felt sixteen again! Minette grimaced as she took a sip and Nadir laughed. She was unused to drinking anything stronger than tea.

"Yes. While the ah... carnality of the work is repellent, Erik's score is beautiful. And Aminta was made for Christine," Minette said.

Nadir nodded in wholehearted agreement. While Christine's silver-hued voice would no doubt elevate the score, Nadir was certain a lifetime's worth of frustrated lust, unimaginable anger and all the other twisted leavings of a passionate soul and an incomparable intellect existed between the staves of Erik's life work. He was not sure what mad impulse spurred him, but in the next instant, the words were rushing from his lips: "Are you not amenable to a reasonable amount of... of carnality, then?"

A rush of blood crept up his neck to color his face and he had to force himself to hold her gaze and not scuttle away like a bashful boy. Minette's eyes flew wide, he saw her grip tighten on her brandy glass. So she had caught the none-too-subtle innuendo couched in his words and tone.

"You shock me, Monsieur," she murmured, glancing up at him through the veil of her lashes. Nadir chose to play along with the coquettish gesture and not the face value of her words. A big, stupid smile spread across his face.

"And I believe you quite like it, Madame," he whispered. Her slight smile fell away into an expression of glowing warmth and cautious hope.

Yes, her eyes said. Nadir knew what to do as he cupped her cheek and drew her close. As his lips touched hers, he felt maybe she had been leading him all along.

XXX

The day of Erik's wedding dawned cold and clear, the sky like a shard of blue glass without a wisp of cloud. As Erik looked out into that endless expanse of blue, he knew the first moment of true happiness in his life. Christine, his beloved, his student, the unreachable and mercilessly beautiful goddess he so ardently worshipped, had succumbed to a moment of madness and agreed to be his wife.

Wife.

Was there any word more beautiful in the world's languages, any word more laden with promise?

The ecstasy that propelled him to this cold perch atop the Opera filled his chest, his limbs, tingling in his fingertips. He was willing to throw out his arms and embrace the world that had spurned him for its simple serendipitous miracle of creating Christine. If the humiliation and pain had been part of Fate's design to bring him to her, he blessed it. If she was his, he could bear the wind's caress on his naked face, stare down the sneering men beyond the cage's bars. She made him brave.
The wings of his cape flew behind him under the bracing push of bitterly cold wind. Erik gripped the stone railing, wind-whipped tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

"Today, I could perhaps entertain the concept of deity, Daroga. For had I not endured the hell of Persia, would I have come here, to heal the wounds of my wanderings in the sanctuary of my childhood?" The notion staggered him. If he had not returned here, they would never have met. A life never knowing Christine? That would have indeed been the very definition of Hell!

"I do not know, Erik," replied his conscience, and today, his best man, "Perhaps you would have returned by a different route. Perhaps Christine would have crossed oceans to find you. Fate is strange." Erik turned to his good-hearted friend, an expansive rush of affection rising in his smile. He tilted his head and regarded Nadir through narrowed eyes.

"Fate. A very European notion, Daroga." Nadir's smile lit his tired face with mischief.

"'Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has decreed for us,'" he quoted.

"'He is our protector.' Ninth surah, fifty first ayah," Erik finished.

"Not bad for an infidel. I thought I would phrase my 'tiresome faith' into more palatable terms on this day, my friend. Bridegrooms are meant to be humored, after all." Erik laughed.

"My thanks," he said dryly, "all is arranged, then?" Nadir nodded.

"Madame Giry found a père to suit your particular need."

"Bribed him, you mean." Yesterday, a surge of bitterness would have washed over him at the thought that no man of the cloth would look upon him with anything but suspicion and revulsion. But that was yesterday. Nadir's dark eyes shone with triumph.

"No, Erik. The père presides over Mass at the church Minette and Christine regularly attend. It is his delight to marry Christine." Through the gallant defense of another man of faith, Erik scented a deeper meaning to the casual use of Madame's given name. A hot, angry ember sparked to life.

"How touching," he drawled, "Minette, is it, Daroga?" Nadir bore up under Erik's glittering stare as only he could. His careworn face had been handsome in his youth and was now distinguished with grey at his temples and in his mustache. Friend or no, if he had seduced Minette, not even his Allah would be able to save him! Erik swept his cape behind him, glaring at his best man with all the menacing patience of a snake waiting to strike.

"Yes, Erik. Minette and I are—" He moved quite without thinking, lost in a blaze of red. In the next instant, Nadir was dangling from Erik's grip against the stone rump of Pegasus.

"Are what, Daroga?" he enunciated carefully, with a suggestive squeeze. Strong brown hands chopped at Erik's elbows, breaking the hold. Nadir's empurpled face was livid as he coughed and rubbed his throat.

"Damn it all, Erik! Surely you have more trust in me, and in her! She and I are . . . courting. We do not need your permission to do so." Erik snorted, folding his arms over his chest. The seething anger was receding, as it always did, leaving him slightly abashed.

"Forgive me, Daroga. I . . . overreacted," he said softly.

Discomfited, he raked a hand through his hair. Pompous words rose in his throat, lectures on propriety, appeals to Nadir's sense of decorum. Instead, Erik looked out into Paris's skyline and
said, "Minette is the only family I have. She rescued me from a Gypsy cage when I was thirteen." Nadir's face was carefully blank, no doubt struggling to internalize this heretofore unprecedented information of Erik's past.

"A . . . cage? And the marks on your back . . ." For the first time, Erik could discern the difference between pity and compassion and he blessed Nadir for it. A bitter smile touched his lips.

"Javert had a worse temper than I and was vindictive as well. I would say he rivaled the khanum in petty cruelty." Prudent and circumspect as he was, Nadir did not offer platitudes or homilies. There were no words to assuage the atrocity his life had been before Christine.

"Treat her well, Nadir. Or you'll have me to answer to." Erik said with all seriousness. Nadir bridged the gap between them with a rare hand on the shoulder.

"I would never dream of treating her otherwise. Now come. While your bride is too gently reared to say anything, as your groomsman, I am allowed to say that your home is in serious need of cleaning."

The next hours saw Erik and his best man in the quiet camaraderie of shared labor as they tidied and organized his home. Their paltry efforts still wouldn't make this rocky home carved from a sewer a fitting bower for the holder of his soul, but it would do for now.

As they worked, Erik recalled Christine's strange request the night before. They had shared their happy news with Minette and accepted her joyful congratulations and the warning of the Vicomte's threat. It wasn't until Madame excused herself to rouse Meg and share the news that Christine turned to him, an expression of pure flirtatious mischief on her sweet features. God, what a stunning creature!

He thought. Dazzled, dreamy and dazed, he could have happily floated on pink-tinged clouds for the rest of his life.

'Erik, I have something to ask of you. For a . . . a wedding present.' Her shy tone matched the charming blush staining her cheeks.

'I'm mad about you. Because he couldn't stop himself from touching her, he wove their fingers together and pecked a kiss on the back of her hand.

'Name it, my dear and it's yours.' Christine chewed on her lower lip, bringing his attention to her lips and tongue. He remembered the sweet battle of their tongues as they kissed, her wandering hands . . .

'I want you to sing with me tomorrow night. On stage. As Don Juan.' Erik shook himself from his lustful reverie and tried to summon his formerly formidable powers of reason and logic.

'You want me to sing with you?' he repeated slowly, unsure if he had heard her correctly. In the grieving madness of the masquerade ball, he had forced Don Juan into the managers' laps, intending on punishing Christine and the Vicomte and most of all himself for daring to hope, to love. God, was that really only two months ago? It seemed he had lived lifetimes since then. Hopeful expectation shone from Christine's face as she earnestly gripped his hands.

'Oh Erik, it would be so wonderful to sing together, sing your words . . .' she trailed off, lost in dreams. Erik found himself transported along with her. He hated to conjure the boy's ghost, but caution whispered.

'Christine, by now, the boy has probably gone to the gendarmes again and told them of the murder of Buquet.' Christine began to voice her apologies, when Erik stopped her with the simple
expedient of a kiss. Soft as a whisper, sweet as honey. He could kiss her forever and never tire of it.

'We'll attend that later, darling. But to appear on stage seems to be an invitation for trouble.' Christine nodded.

'Of course you're right. I would never want to put you in danger.' He could sense her disappointment.

'Maybe I could talk to Ra—him. I—I could explain . . .' Erik stifled the surge of irrational, jealous anger and pecked another kiss on her hand, as if to reaffirm that she had indeed chosen him.

'I fear that wouldn't help, my dear. Regardless of the circumstance, the bo—the Vicomte will not call off his quest for justice for my sake. The Vicomte and I will always dislike one another. We share the misfortune of loving the same woman.' Christine's face twisted into a curious conglomeration of regret and sadness. Earnest brown eyes feverishly clung to his face, vainly searching for a hint of his expression.

'I'm so sorry, Erik. I . . . I didn't want to hurt either of you. If I had only . . . ' a charming blush stained her cheeks, 'if I had only had the courage to tell you how much I loved you when you touched me the first time, I would have saved us all grief!'

Animal lust surged through his veins even as the words pierced his heart with joy.

'That long? You loved me that long?' he breathed. A dazzling smile broke on her face.

'I've loved you since I was eight years old.'

Minette arrived with their noon meal, startling him from his reverie. Erik obeyed Christine's insistence on not seeing each other until the ceremony and was desperate for details of her day, her feelings. The hours they'd spent apart since their engagement seemed longer than the twenty-six years he'd spent alone. He sat at Minette's feet, devouring her words as he devoured the simple fare of spread cheese on toasted bread. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"What of a gown, Minette? Can one be procured on such short notice?" Erik demanded. What a bridegroom he was, forgetting such vital details! Minette grinned, wiping a smudge of dirt from his chin.

"Don't worry, Erik. Meg found one in the costume storage that will suit splendidly." Erik persisted, exacting a thorough report of the plans for flowers, rings and setting. Their hasty nuptials would not give his beloved a second of regret, if he had anything to say about it! His home ordered to his exact specifications, Erik found himself with a moment alone as his best man and his fiancée's guardian made their way to the surface, mooning at each other.

He tried not to think about the fact that in a scant handful of hours, he would be returning here with Christine in tow—as his lawfully wedded wife. And . . . and then, together they would sample the joys of the flesh. A joy forever denied him and one he was terrified of being entrusted with. What if he disappointed her? A cold sweat broke on his skin. How could she find him desirable?

This repulsive carcass?

Erik ripped one the covers from a mirror and stared at his naked face and bare chest. He gazed with an artist's intentness, searching out flaws in the stroke of nature's brush. Erik flinched away from the horror of his face, hearing the demons jeer that Christine would go running when she saw it.
His body . . . well, it was nothing special. Too thin, too pale, laced with scars. His hands were adequate, long-fingered and graceful. There was certain breadth of shoulder that was perhaps pleasing, tapering to narrow hips. He winced at the sight of the Vicomte's wound slashing across his belly. Scabbed and on the mend, it was still hideous. Miraculous really, that Christine made the pain a distant memory. The nerves of his body were too busy thrumming all the delicious pleasure messages from Christine's touch to register pain. Erik heaved a sigh, surrendering the effort. The least he could do was honor his bride with a decent wrapping, even if the gift itself was riddled with flaws.

One thing was for certain: every aspect of his lonely, miserable, solitary existence would change.

*Tonight.*
Before We're One

Forever is not a word…rather a place where two lovers go when true love takes them there.

Unknown

Christine hated Aminta with a violent passion. More specifically, she hated what the character represented to the man who wrote it. The pure maiden goddess adored and coveted for years by the tortured Don Juan, who in turn only spurned him to run away with Argento. Christine hated Aminta! She hated her selfishness, her casual spite, her singular blindness where Don Juan was concerned. Holy Virgin, who did that sound like? Reading the script for the first time, she had barely made it to her dressing room before she collapsed in a sobbing heap.

Christine loathed herself for hurting Erik. The taste for fame was purged from her body every sodding night she had to perform this self-flagellation and endure the general dislike from everyone in the Opera. The only thing that would alleviate her suffering would be for Erik himself to sing the words with her. His voice stirred and soothed her, and in her mind, if he sang Don Juan with her, it was a final gesture of forgiveness.

Tonight, she sang for Erik alone. A flush of warmth surged through her. Tonight, they would be married.

Tonight.

The promise of it tingled in her skin, the roots of her hair, settling between her thighs. Anticipation, fear and longing twisted and writhed like incense within her. A clueless virgin, how would she begin to please him? She remembered vividly the way he wielded such devastating sensuality. He at least knew what he was doing. Christine tried—she really tried—to crush the shoot of jealousy in her heart for that nameless, faceless woman who had the honor of knowing Erik's ardor. It didn't work.

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she was riddled with insecurities and fears.

Christine gave a mental shrug. Frantic enthusiasm had to count for something. She was a quick learner. And a more pleasant tutelage she could not imagine.

Oddly, the prospect of physical intimacy with Raoul had never truly entered her mind during the tenure of their brief engagement. His kisses were chaste and gentlemanly, each casual caress filling her with a sense of safety and comfort, not passion. Her interlude with Erik during the masquerade and before that in his home... Christine gripped the edge of the vanity in her dressing room.

Those moments were a revelation. She knew now why men and women were so mad for each other. Pleasure and unity like that became a craving—a need. Christine now recognized the ache in her belly for what it was: pining for her mate. She wished she could see him, talk to him. Why had she insisted on this tradition? What about their courtship and engagement had ever been traditional?

A firm rap at the door. Probably one of the errand boys telling her to shoo before La Carlotta heard
that Christine was in her dressing room. Nevermind that the Italian cow had frequently said that this particular dressing room was too small and too drafty. They both knew Carlotta wanted it because Christine wanted it. She sighed and opened the door. Madame and Meg stood there, wearing twin mischievous grins. Christine smiled back uncertainly.

"What are you doing here? I'm due to go on in-
"

"There's time, my dear. If we hurry," Madame said, eyes alight. It took a moment for the words to sink in. Time. Time enough to marry Erik. To sing on the Populaire's stage as the brittle-hearted Aminta with the sweetest secret in the world . . . Meg seized my hands in hers.

"Come on! It's time to get ready for your wedding!" And, because they were both young women, they allowed themselves to squeal and twirl with excitement.

xxxx

Christine's heart was pounding so hard it felt as if it would burst from her chest at any moment, impatient to find its master. Meg's eyes were moist as she looked over Christine's shoulder into the mirror.

"Oh Christine, you look lovely. Erik isn't going to know what hit him when he sees you!" She squeezed Christine's shoulders in a cozy, familiar gesture. Sweet Meg. She was the best friend Christine could ever hope for. Christine reached up and gave Meg's wrist an appreciative squeeze.

Meg was right. The reflection that stared back at her bore little resemblance to the thin, wild-haired woman-child she usually saw. No, this woman was positively glowing and . . . she was pretty. The dress was perfect, courtesy of a couple hours' alteration in the hands of the ladies Giry. The gauzy sleeves swooped off the shoulder, the bodice creating pleasing patterns of flowers in lace, the skirts full and swaying. Her hair was gathered into a loose bun, a few loose tendrils framing her face and tickling her neck. Christine's bitten nails—no help for that at the eleventh hour—plucked at the crisp folds of her skirt.

"You think so?" she said anxiously.

"He'd be an idiot not to want to ravish you on the spot!" Meg said with a flirtatious wink.

"Mind your tongue, Megara Giry!" her mother scolded, plucking fussily at Christine's hem. Christine giggled, oddly reassured by Meg's crass words. The crest and trough of hers and Erik's more intimate interactions had riddled her with doubts. He did want her, he was marrying her, wasn't he? . . . Why did she feel so uncertain? Madame breathed a kiss on the air over Christine's cheek, hazel eyes shimmering.

"Here, my dear. I have something for you." She produced an exquisite necklace on a delicate silver chain, the charm a rose wrought of silver with a curving stem of tiny diamonds.

"My Pierre gave me this on our wedding day. I would like both my daughters to wear it on theirs." Love sang from Christine's heart. She turned and flung her arms around Madame and Meg, capturing her only family close to her overflowing heart.

"I love you both so much!" she choked. They were all sniffling by the time she pulled back.

"Don't cry!" Meg said wetly, "You'll ruin your cosmetics!" Christine uttered a breathless bark of laughter as Madame clasped the necklace. Cool at first, it quickly warmed against her skin, resting just above the dip of her cleavage. Christine touched the tiny talisman gently. She had her mother's ring on her little finger, the Giry heirloom around her neck. The only thing she lacked was a vestige
of her beloved father.

"Will you escort me down the aisle, Madame? You were Papa's friend. He would have liked that." Christine watched in dismay as Madame's face crumpled and she began to sob in earnest. Meg stroked her mother's arm soothingly until she mustered her control.

"I'd be honored, my dear," she said at last, cupping Christine's chin fondly. Meg glanced at the clock and muttered a foul word, earning a censorious glare from her mother.

"We've got to go! The pére will be arriving any minute!" Linked between the two Girys, Christine made her way down to the chapel where she had first met her Angel.

XXX

The Opera Populaire's chapel was most ill-suited for pacing. Scarcely three by seven paces from wall to wall. So Erik channeled his nervousness by plucking at his finest clothing, adjusting the white cravat as if it were trying to strangle him. Nadir had also bedecked himself for the occasion in a traditional Persian tunic and turban. He looked calm, contained and irritatingly amused at Erik's antics. The pére was annoyingly serene in his simple robes as well, but thankfully refrained from offering any consoling comments to the fidgeting groom, or any mention of the white mask covering half of his face. His bride would hardly look upon him with favor if he was throttling perhaps the only sympathetic pére in Paris. Erik stilled his hands by force of will and breathed deeply to calm himself. The heady scent of the rose garlands strewn everywhere made Erik's head swim.

Where was she?

If he didn't see her soon, he'd surely jump out of his skin!

Mercifully, the door opened to admit the beaming, dancing Meg Giry, her eyes alight. The girl looked very lovely in her cream-colored gown, though the maid of honor's staid step was marred by her skipping eagerness. Erik quickly dismissed the younger Giry and hungrily sought his bride. The sight of her on Minette's arm struck him hard and square in the heart, knocking breath and thought right out of him. The day's dying light seeped through the panes of stained glass and washed her in its colors, augmented by the soft glow of candlelight. Minette looked stunning as well in a cream gown to match her daughter's. It was the first time Erik had seen her out of a widow's black in over a decade. The effect made her look years younger, and lovely, if Nadir's slack-jawed expression was any judge. But my God, surely there was nothing more beautiful in all of creation than Christine!

Every feature, every curve and plane of her body he knew from years of reverent worship, but it was the radiant happiness seeping from every pore, shining luminous in her eyes that mesmerized and enamored him. This glorious creature was consenting to be his—to let him adore and cherish her forever. Touched by the miracle of it, tears filled Erik's eyes. Angry that anything dare obscure this splendid vision of his beloved, Erik mastered himself with some effort.

Christine. Heart, mind and soul sang the name with wild joy. A thrill raced through him as her lips parted in a singularly beatific smile. The part of his soul that was tied to her heard her answer: Erik.

The pére greeted Christine and Minette warmly, but it wasn't until Christine's small, warm hand slid into his that Erik emerged from the spell of beauty. He gripped her fingers tightly; afraid he would completely disgrace himself by doing something ridiculous. Like fall at her feet and kiss her hem. Like climb to the summit of Apollo's lyre and shout his joy to all of Paris.
"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses . . ." the priest's reedy voice began, with ceremony befitting a man of the cloth. God. After all these years of cursing and snubbing Him, it was the ultimate irony that Erik would enter His presence now.

Anything for her, he thought, we are in agreement on that at least, hmm?

The words ran together in a cadence of holy precision. Erik scarcely heard them. He was lost in his bride's shimmering brown eyes, the graceful sweep of her eyelashes, the charming virgin's blush staining her cheeks. So inconceivably beautiful. Then at the père's prompting, Erik spoke his vow: "I will." Those simple words touched her, he could see tears gather in her eyes, watched the elegant column of her throat shiver as she swallowed.

Oh my love, he thought, squeezing her hands.

The priest turned to Christine and intoned the same list of promises of love, health, prosperity and fidelity that Erik had sworn. Her voice clear and strong like the sweetest song, Christine said, "I will." Erik's heart felt fit to burst.

For the first time since she entered the room, Erik was obliged to tear his eyes away from Christine's, only long enough to take the wedding band from Nadir, who was sniffling into a handkerchief like a dolt. Erik slid the band on her finger, saying the words as the priest instructed.

"With this ring, I thee wed." The soft, glowing look in her eyes warmed into something living and molten, sweet as honey as she gripped his hand and spoke the same words. Desire wakened and unfurled lazily, like the sun wakening the earth with dawn's kiss. Would the damned man hurry up so he could kiss his bride? The père's rheumy blue eyes—not without their own film of tears—looked at the radiant bride and the lucky fool she'd chosen and took their joined hands in his.

"By the power vested in me by the Lord God, I pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together as one, let no man tear asunder."

One sentence that changed the world. One sentence that irrevocably altered his life for the better.

Wife. His. Forever.

The kiss was as powerful as a thunderclap and as soft as a sunrise. Infinite it its promise. Utterly sacred.

Christine. His. Forever.

When they broke away, the small assemblage broke into applause and well-wishing. Dazed, Erik offered his hand to accept the père's congratulations, nodding dimly at Nadir's teasing words. Minette led the priest out in a circuitous path out of the Opera to avoid opera patrons, managers and gendarmes. It was best that the doddering old père didn't know that he had just wed one of his flock to a wanted man. All of this Erik noticed with a strange apathy. The only thing real was the memory of Christine's lips, her hand in his, this soft look. It would be pure murder to have to relinquish her hand and the ghost of her kiss so she could rejoin the upper world.

The thought must have occurred to her as well, for in the next instant, his arms were full of his new wife and her hot, eager kisses. Ravenous, Erik plunged deep into the wet warmth of her mouth, plucking at her hair until it fell like a living veil over his hands. He loved her passionate little sounds, a soft, purring hum accompanying her tightening clinch around his neck. God, this was wonderful, to be draped in her, cloaked in her . . . He drank deeply of her taste, storing up the
pleasure of her touch for the long lonely hours ahead. So sweet . . . oh Christine . . .

At the discreet cough, Erik suddenly remembered they had an audience. A soft sound of protest left her lips as he peeled back, only enough to look into her eyes. They clung, foreheads pressed together, sharing breath and warmth. God, this was torture! Damn the boy and his gendarmes circling the building! Had it been anything less than a damned battalion, he would have cursed them all and taken his wife home.

"Christine, I'm sorry. We must go. Any longer and there will be questions," Meg pointed out, tugging at her arm. Christine uttered a distressed little moan, giving him four or five more open-mouthed kisses. He would never tire of this! The thought that he could keep kissing her, and do more than kiss her—tonight—sent a surge of blind animal lust through him. An instinct that howled at the thought of relinquishing a mate so newly won. The cold light of logic won out, by some miracle.

"Love—you—have—to go," he said between kisses. The ripe bounty of her body pressed against him wasn't helping. Mine!

"No!" she said fiercely, fingers woven into the hair at his nape. Erik reached behind him and gently disengaged her grip.

"You must. Go. I'll see you after." Where was this equanimity coming from? Heart and body were in a writhing mess. A snarl of frustration emerged from Christine's throat. She actually stamped her foot.

"Raoul de Chagny!" she spat the name like a curse, "I should march right up to Box Five and give him a piece of my mind!" Erik laughed, kissing her hands because he simply couldn't bear not to be kissing her skin.

"I am in complete agreement, my wife. But for the time being, we must perform our roles." There it was again, that soft glowing look! Her delicate hand cupped his cheek.

"Say it again," she murmured. A knot of emotion clogged his throat. He dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Wife," he whispered in his most silken voice.

"Husband," she said back like the most precious endearment. Erik exhaled a breath, scarcely believing he could be this happy. With an incredible force of will, he turned to the little Giry and laid his bride's hand in hers.

"Go Hermes, and guard my Persephone well." The words were meant to be light and teasing, but emerged choked and desperate. What this woman did to him! Meg blinked at him, all the laughing joy gone from her eyes. She looked like her mother, solemn and competent as ever. She even gave a little curtsey. Cheeky little girl.

"I will return her safely, Lord Hades."

"Earlier than six months, if you please," he rasped. Fatuous fool, he chastised himself. Two hours without her won't bloody kill you! Christine heard the grief in his voice and her face crumpled. They shared one last fierce embrace.

"I love you," she whispered in his ear, then was gone. Erik turned and faced the wall, fighting tears. The door closed behind the two women and Erik sank down to a crouch.
"Forgive me, Daroga. I feel like a fool . . . blubbering like this." Nadir rested a hand on his shoulder.

"We are all fools in love, my friend."

Together he and Nadir left the chapel and stepped into Erik's world secret passages and trap doors. When they emerged again, it was in the cramped attic above the theater. He'd be damned if Raoul de Chagny would keep him from watching his wife perform! It was a full house tonight, as it had been every night since the premiere. Erik was of too jaded an opinion to take it as a compliment to his work. Rather, it was the typical Parisian appetite for scandal and the tang of far-off danger.

The fop and his wanton of a brother were in attendance, guarded by a trio of gendarmes, the managers even more heavily protected. Were there any men near the stage? Erik exhaled a frustrated breath through his nostrils. He would have to content himself with watching that fool Piangi murder his lyrics and paw his wife.

Or did he?

The germ of an idea sprang to life in his fertile mind.

"Daroga," he said, "I have an idea."

XXX

H ere's my hat, my cloak and sword, conquest is assured!

If I do not forget myself and laugh! Piangi chortled on the stage, cackling darkly as he stepped behind the screen of red and black silk.

Christine stepped on stage, panning her eyes over the crowds of people, noting the gendarmes with rifles posted at every exit. Anger clutched her as she peered up at Box Five. Raoul was there, with the elderly chief of police standing behind him. Why wouldn't he stop this mad pursuit of her? Her presence on this cursed stage was a token parading, telling the world she was of sound mind and whole body, that all was business as usual. But it wasn't. Her wedding rings jangled on her bracelet, a small defiance.

She knelt on the stage, plucking the thorns from the roses with perhaps a trifle more force than was necessary. She wanted her husband, not this stage and its hollow promise of glory. What was taking Piangi so long?

A smoky, ethereal, unimaginably angelic voice floating across the stage.

Her hands froze on the roses. A ragged gasp left her lips, echoed by the thousands of the audience. Erik! The tight knot of anger dissolved under a rush of cold, churning fear. A hideous vision of rifles trained at her husband tore her equanimity to shreds. What was he doing here?

Christine longed to turn and face him, but she forced herself to continue acting in this mad role. Her breathing quickened, her hands shook around the roses. Erik was joining her as Don Juan himself! The audience noticed the change from a balding, fat, aging lead tenor to Erik's lithe, sensual form, judging from the low murmur of conversation. A glance at Raoul said he recognized his rival.

You have come here

In pursuit of your deepest urge
In pursuit of that wish
Which till now
Has been silent. Silent.

Erik held his index finger to his lips as if telling Christine to keep his presence a secret. It was as mischievous and it was thrilling. Christine shivered at the timbre of his voice and at last, looked up at him with her emotions plain in her eyes. Oh, what his voice did to her! She felt it deep within every cell of her body. Beneath the fear, an insistent pulsating lust rippled through her.

He looked like a veritable bandit in his costume: the rakish, dark figure of her dreams. He was devastatingly attractive and knew it by the proud tilt of his chin, the calculating saunter. This was not the tender man who had pledged himself to her in the chapel, no, this was a seducer, each glance and gesture a promise of the delights in store. Don Juan indeed.

Oh Erik . . . she thought, her heart quivering a little. Mischief and delight sparked beneath the mask, a devilish smile tugging at his smooth mouth. Christine's breath was stolen from her body. His step was fluid and graceful as he circled toward her.

On he serenaded, his voice wrapping around her soul like the gossamer threads of a spider's silk. It was made all the more strange and exciting that he meant to seduce her in front of an audience—including her erstwhile fiancé. He beckoned her with an artful flutter of his cape and she nearly rose to go to him.

In your mind
You've already succumbed to me
Dropped all defenses, completely succumbed to me . . .

Christine was helpless against this melodic onslaught.

Now you are here with me, Erik continued, a slight smile tugging at his lips.

No second thoughts
You've decided.

Decided.

Again, he beckoned with a flick of his sable cape. Christine obeyed, rising to her feet, mouth agape. Her soul was seeping from her into him. And what a sweet draining it was! If he asked anything of her now, she would obey. His elegant musician's hand lifted and fell in an entrancing motion. Christine stared doe-eyed and slack-jawed at Erik as he subtly danced close to her. She could have reached out and touched the fine fabric of the sleeve of his costume . . .

The languor of his song was abruptly shattered when he seized her from behind and sang almost gutturally, his voice thick and rough with passion. The same elegant hand seized her throat in mock violence though Christine could feel the power in those hands, his mouth moving in her thick, curly hair.

What raging fire shall flood the soul?
What rich desire unlocks its door?
The harsh grip softened as he released her, sliding his hands down her arm and pressing her captured hand to his mouth, near the jangling weight of her bracelet. Her sweet secret. He saw, he knew, and the look in his eye made her want... made her want.

She looked up at Box Five and saw Raoul's hard, empty eyes. Oh God, what would he do now, so hurt and humiliated? She quickly dropped her gaze, almost ashamed. Christine looked out over the audience, noticing the gendarmes again in despair. Let me go, she bade Raoul silently. I belong with him.

In both symbol and truth, Christine showed her back to Raoul and sang on to Erik. She smiled at the completely dumbstruck expression on his masked visage. Her sleeves slipped down her shoulders and left them bare and vulnerable. Erik was nearly panting and Christine grinned.

Past the point of no return

No going back now

Our passion play

Has now at last begun

She stepped toward the twin staircases. Erik followed her lead, eyes hot and hungry on her form. Look, worship, yearn as I yearn, she thought almost savagely. Erik was in her thrall, following her voice like a man suddenly struck blind and dumb. Christine paused on the stairs and Erik stopped opposite of her, still and focused on her. She leaned to him, aching to be closer. She could see the tempo of his breathing had increased and saw the anticipation flash in his eyes. Smiling now, she continued their matching ascent.

When will the blood begin to race?

The sleeping bud burst into bloom?

When will the flames at last

Consume us?

They reached the bridge; passion stoked high, the words pouring like a torrent from her. Erik flicked off his cape in a careless gesture, an enticing prelude to disrobing. God, how she wanted this!

They began a measured pace toward each other, drawing out the sweet pain of separation. They forgot the audience, forgot Raoul and the gendarmes. Only each other existed. Erik's rich baritone crashed with Christine's pure soprano and soared together in an exquisite melody.

Finally, they were within arm's reach. Erik large hands grabbed her waist and she touched the warm cloth of his ruffled white shirt covering his stomach. A jolt of heat surged up her arms, engulfed her body. He was so close. She could feel the heave of his breath, the throb of his heart. His mouth hovered near her forehead, singing with rough purity and painful beauty.

The bridge is crossed,

So stand and watch it burn

He whirled her around and held her to him. His strong hands over hers, together they skimmed over her body. Shivering pleasure surged through her nerves. His smoky voice embraced her as surely as
his arms. The scent of him filled her nose. Like a sigh, they finished the duet with a contented air.

We've passed the point of no return

Christine didn't know or care how long they stayed like that. She would have basked in his arms forever.

XXX

Erik took a deep breath of Christine's scent. The thundering crescendo of \textit{Point of No Return} had gentled into this languid, pulsing silence. There had been no thought but her and music in the past few minutes. Now, like rising from a warm bed to the frigid day, Erik was reminded unpleasantly of where they were and the danger. The boy was not only snubbed but humiliated now. It wasn't safe for them in Paris tonight. He had get Christine out—away. If he could only stop . . . touching her. He slid gentle fingers down her face and cupped her head. In quiet, explicit trust, Christine leaned to him. The song began soft and caressing, like a lullaby.

\textit{Say you'll share with me}

\textit{One love, one lifetime}

He touched her face, cupped her chin, and stroked her neck, gorging himself on the pleasure of touching her. Deft fingers moved aside the delightful, bouncy curls from her ear. He thought he saw a slight smile touch her mouth as he sang. Like a child, she lifted her hand and captured his, clinging to him in blind trust. His voice quavered with emotion. He didn't deserve such faith. Not when he led her into danger.

\textit{Lead me, save me}

\textit{From my solitude}

\textit{Say you want me with you}

\textit{Here beside you}

Erik felt her stiffen, as if waking up. His voice gained strength as she moved, trying to face him. She turned, her liquid brown eyes luminous, utterly gorgeous. He cupped her small hand in both of his and sang from his heart, startled and pleased when her voice rose and tangled with his.

\textit{Anywhere you go}

\textit{Let me go too}

\textit{That's all I ask of you!}

The silence in the theater was deafening. He would use their paralysis to his advantage.

"Hold on to me," he hissed. Without question, Christine wrapped her arms around him. With one last glance at Box Five, Erik kicked the lever and the darkness swallowed them both.

XXX

Raoul lunged for the railing of the box, eyes fastened to the two falling figures, hearing the screams of horror from the crowd. He whirled around, shouting at the gendarmes to go, to hurry, to catch that thrice damned man and string him up by feet and bare his hideous face for the whole
world to see! The gendarmes scurried away from Raoul's wild-eyed emotion. Murderous rage filled him as tears filled his eyes.

*Christine, Christine,* wept the broken voice in his heart, *Why? Why? Why?* He strode toward the door, wanting the feel of a sword in his hand, to see the monster's red blood stain the steel . . .

"Raoul, no." Philippe's cool, serious voice reached him from some distance. Raoul moved without thinking, and struck his brother across the face with his good hand. Philippe fell back, blood seeping from a cut in his lip. Raoul swayed over his brother's prone body.

"No? No? Don't you dare tell me no!" he shouted. He dashed the tears from his eyes, shamed by his sniffling. Father wouldn't have had that. Philippe dabbed his mouth, a familiar wry smile twisting his lips. So odd, with all the chaos seething around them.

"No, Raoul," Philippe said again, "call them off. Don't risk more people's lives for this."

'This' encompassed the love of his bloody life, Raoul thought, as well as any hope of a future.

"Why not? I want him dead! I'll kill him!" The words sounded childish and reactionary, but Raoul didn't care. The Comte de Chagny rose to his full height, grey eyes glittering with compassion.

"You can't kill him, Raoul. He's our brother."
Christine was still trembling as she and Erik made their way through the tunnels.

"You could have warned me!" she hissed, her breath misting, recalling the sick sensation of falling and the undignified squeal that left her lips. Erik's smile was mischievous, his grip warm on her hand. He stopped, the gas lamp washing half his masked visage in golden light. No man had a right to look so handsome in a simple costume of a black coat, white shirt, and black breeches. Lean, strong, virile. And he was all hers.

"I had scant seconds to act. Hardly enough time to brief you." he leaned close, so close she could smell coffee on his breath.

"Besides, I loved that adorable little squeak you made," he purred, before kissing her softly. Christine grinned despite her embarrassment. She loved Erik's lighthearted mood. When had they ever been relaxed enough to tease each other?

"I do not squeak," she said primly. Erik cocked his head in a playful, speculative look.

"Is that so? How about . . . now!" he draped an arm around her and tickled her sides mercilessly. Christine did utter a few squeaks interspersed between gasps of breathless laughter and half-hearted attempts at fighting him off.

The play ended when Erik abruptly stopped all manner of teasing, tickling and touching and shoved her unceremoniously behind him.

"Someone's coming," he said coolly.

A flick of his left arm and Erik's thin, deadly lasso slid into his hand. Every ounce of his mind and body dedicated to defeating his enemy. She had seen it only once before, and the awe hadn't slackened with repetition. Heart in her throat, Christine strained her ears but only heard the lap of the lake against the canal walls and the hollow plop of faraway dripping. Then, faintly, she heard the stomp of footsteps. Erik called out something in another language. A voice answered in kind and the tension rushed out of Erik.

"It's only Nadir," he threw the words over his shoulder, then noticed her shivering. He set down the lamp and turned to her. His large, warm hand cupped her cheek, regret shining in his eyes.

"I am sorry, my dear. This was not how I imagined our wedding night. Here," he shrugged off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. Christine clutched the remnant of his body's heat with a wobbly smile. It was terribly cold down here, and miles from how she'd pictured this night playing
out. At least they'd found a pair of slippers to shield her bare feet.

Presently, the Persian emerged from around the corner, his wedding finery traded for his usual somber black garb.

"How goes it above?" Erik said, his beautiful voice warm, but terse. The Persian's face emanated patient understanding.

"It's a madhouse, as to be expected. But the Vicomte . . . he, ah," he coughed, with an uncertain glance at her, "he called off the gendarmes. There is no sign of them in the Opera or the streets outside." Christine bit her lip, fighting the flare of hope. Maybe Raoul understood, maybe . . .

"What is the boy planning now?" Erik said, heavy with suspicion. The Persian shrugged.

"That I do not know. But he seemed very . . . upset. A sour conversation with his brother the Comte, it seems." Erik snorted, but refrained from commenting.

"Whatever he does, I would say you two are safe here tonight. You won't have any . . . ah, outside interruption." Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Christine thought she saw two spots of color burning on the Persian's cheeks.

"Thank you, Daroga. I have ascertained as much," Erik said acerbically. The Persian smiled.

"Then I will bid you good evening. Blessings to you both." He shook Erik's hand and bowed low in Christine's direction.

"Thank you for your help, Monsieur Kahn."

"My pleasure, Madame Rousseau." The first mention of her married name, and it gave her a soft thrill to hear it.

The rest of their journey to Erik's home was spent in contemplative silence, hands linked. When they reached the portcullis, Christine gaped. While still cluttered in a glorious jumble of art and furniture and other bric-a-brac, his home was . . . clean, tidy and lit with soft bubbles of golden candlelight. And . . . the lake and the path leading from the moored gondola were carpeted with crimson rose petals. Transfixed by this vision, she scarcely heard Erik use the strange metal object in his hands to open a door hidden in the stone.

"Your home awaits, Madame Rousseau," he offered with a gallant sweep of his arm. Christine's gaze skittered over his lean torso, the downy linen unable to conceal the lithe power of his form. Her hands twisted in the folds of her beaded skirt. In all of her imagined scenarios, she had never seen herself in Aminta's costume. She wished for something softer, more the virgin bride than the brazen seductress . . .

Christine swallowed hard and stepped past him, through the short tunnel and emerging into his home, near the gondola. Christine hobbled on one foot then the other, peeling off the slippers so she could feel the silken caress of the rose petals on her bare feet. The floor was startlingly cold, but she didn't care. Christine clutched the tails of Erik's coat, more to cover herself than preserve warmth. Without the blinding passion of Point of No Return, how did one conjure that sort of intimacy? How did these things begin? Erik must have sensed her awkwardness, for he cleared his throat.

"You must be hungry. I have bread and cheese and wine. Shall I fetch some?"

Christine nodded, grateful for anything to fill her fumbling hands, hide her graceless eagerness. He
disappeared down the hall and Christine peered into one of the mirrors, yanked the silk rose from her hair, finger combing her wild mane and scrubbing the last of the stage cosmetics from her face with the hem of her skirt. Her reflection wasn't the radiant bride or the sultry seductress now.

It was just her. Pale, scared, naïve Christine.

When Erik returned laden with foodstuffs, Christine stirred the petals idly with one toe.

"I love the petals, Erik. Thank you." His smile was shy.

"You are most welcome, my wife." his gaze wandered critically over his home and he shrugged.

"It's not much, but I hope it's . . . adequate."

They sat shoulder to shoulder on the organ bench. Her skin tingled, every inch of her aware of his thigh pressed against hers, the warm solidness of his shoulder, his warm hands. Christine was distracted by the play of muscle in his forearms as he cut hunks of bread and slivers of cheese, the grace evident in his beautiful hands as he poured the wine.

"More than adequate, I think," Christine murmured, nibbling on a piece of tangy white cheese. Erik's hand brushed hers as she reached for her wine glass, her wedding rings glittering on her finger. Her hand brushed his knee as she adjusted her skirt. These small, almost accidental touches flavored their conversation with a delicious subtext.

"Is Rousseau your family name?" she asked, when conversation stalled. The generous curve of his mouth thinned.

"No. My—My mother . . . when she wasn't cursing my father as a demon, said that my name was of no consequence since I was such a . . . a disappointment. 'Rousseau' is a name I chose for myself." Choking on anger and tears, Christine groped for his hand. He took it, lacing their fingers together, but refused to look at her. She sensed the burden of shame behind the words.

*I hope you burn in Hell for hurting him, you wretched witch!* Christine swore against this woman she'd never met.

"Erik, I don't care. Names and titles mean less than nothing to me. The names that matter are Angel, Friend, Husband . . . Lover." He did look at her then, with such honest desire that Christine felt something quiver inside her. His hand floated up to cup her cheek.

"Christine . . . oh I love you so," he crooned, his velvet voice caressing every syllable. The brush of his lips against hers was so sweet, so gentle.

*Oh Erik . . .*

Christine fisted her hands in his hair, dragging him closer, deeper. However clumsy and rough, he seemed to appreciate the sentiment. His low growl vibrated against her lips, enflamed her. Mmm, he tasted of sun-ripened grapes and the faint sharp tang of cheese. She blazed a trail of kisses from his mouth, across the hard angle of his jaw to his ear, where she nibbled along the upper curve gently.

"*Take me. Teach me.*" she whispered in his ear.

XXX

A savage groan emerged from his chest, both at the words and her playful, teasing kisses. Every
instinct urged him to haul her to his bed and take her, but he forced himself to find tenderness. He
would be the thoughtful lover, the tender seducer she needed him to be. Never mind that he was as
inexperienced as she when it came to the act of love. Erik grasped her hips and drew her astride his
lap. Christine gasped at the feel of his erection pressed against her thigh, dark eyes wide. He saw
the flash of fear, of uncertainty and groped for the words to coax his shy little songbird from her
 perch.

"Christine, Christine," he chanted her name, layering every seductive tone in his vocal repertoire.
Silk, honey, velvet and chocolate, each syllable designed to torture and entice. He gently peeled
aside the tails of his coat, his breath catching at the feel of her shoulders bare and warm under his
palms. He would savor this. Unwrap her like the precious gift she was and worship every inch of
her flesh. He could be patient for her.

He bloody well could!

Anything for her.

Christine's submission was in her flushed, rapt gaze, her hungry hands that pulled his shirt from his
breeches, and shakily plucked at the ties. Her touch on his bare chest felt shockingly intimate, her
questing fingertips finding the puckered nub of his nipple. The cool metal of her wedding rings
was a shock, but one he welcomed. He gasped for breath, the sensitive nerve endings going mad at
that one delicate caress. *His.* She was truly his.

God, he wanted to *consume* her!

Erik growled, planting open-mouthed kisses along the snowy column of her throat and loving
her salty-sweet taste, the hot throb of her pulse, her soft exclamations. His hands spanned her back,
tangling in her hair, drawing her close. The loose white shirt, black corset and golden skirt of
Aminta's Gypsy garb was, however stimulating, off-putting to Erik, who wanted his Christine. He
 wanted *his* woman, his wife, not the caresses of a fantasy woman.

The only way to remedy that is to get her naked as soon as possible, he thought.

Erik worked his way back to her lips by his wandering near her ear and stroked his tongue
against her lower lip in silent entreaty. She opened eagerly to him and Erik lost himself in the hot,
tingling pleasure of tangled tongues and shared breathing. He grasped her hips, stroking the length
of her thighs, drawing her legs around him. Sensation muted by layers of cloth, Erik growled in
discontent and stood, carrying her with him.

Not breaking the kiss, he made his way back to his bed and gently deposited her on its downy softness.
The coverlet and sheet were thrown back, gossamer curtain lifted. Erik's eyes roved over her
hunggrily, seeing her hesitation. Candles washed the bed and the woman in it in soft golden light,
the undulating flames creating hypnotic patterns of light and shadow in the hollows of her body.
Erik closed the door behind them, locking them in a cocoon of warmth and privacy.

"Erik?" she asked, her voice quavering slightly. Erik pried off shoes and socks, then knelt beside
the bed, insinuating himself between Christine's knees.

"I'm going to undress you, Christine," Erik rasped, "If you wish me to slow down, or stop entirely,
you must tell me at once." *There was scarcely enough blood left for his brain to function. All of it
had been diverted to his throbbing cock, desperate and selfish. But he would stop, if she wanted
him to. Her 'no' was his 'no.'*

"Don't stop, please. I—I want this. I want you," she said, stroking his hair, his jaw, his lips. Erik
surprised her by parting his lips, drawing the tip of her index finger into his mouth. Her sharp little
gasp pierced him. Lost in the depths of her chocolate brown eyes, he suckled her finger, caressing it
with his tongue. He released her finger with a soft kiss and worked his way up her arm to take her
mouth. His hands busied themselves with the ties of her corset. Erik broke the kiss, sharing that
humid space where their breath mingled.

"Tell me. Tell me again," he pleaded. Finally, the wretched thing was loose, he yanked the corset
off and threw it away. He could see her nipples pert and hard through the gauzy white shirt . . . he
touched them, the lightest of swirling strokes through the fabric.

"I want . . . I want . . ." Christine whimpered, feverishly tugging at his shirt. Erik pulled back far
enough to shuck it off and crawled over her, pressing her flat on the bed. God, the feel of her
beneath him . . . better than any of his fantasies!

"What is it that you want, Christine? Tell me." he kissed her, worming a hand beneath her shirt,
stroking her warm, soft belly, the dip of her navel. When his hand cupped her breast, they both
uttered a helpless little sound. Hers of surrender, his of wild desire.

Erik helped her shed the shirt, leaving her pert breasts gloriously bare. With a feather light touch,
he petted the angry red lines the boning of the corset had left in her skin. Christine sat up and
wiggled out of the skirt as well.

The force of his lust winded him at the sight of Christine completely naked. He sat staring slack-
jawed at her for a small eternity. Never had there been any woman as beautiful as she! Creamy
white skin, slender, nubile limbs, ripe curves of breast and hip, dusky pink nipples, the dark thatch
of curls shielding her sex . . . and amid this sumptuous feast of feminine beauty, there were the tiny
features that made her unique. The small mole high on her forehead, almost hidden by her hairline,
the crooked line of three freckles adorning the upper curve of her left breast, the shadow of an old
bruise on her knee. Each was as precious to him as a diamond.

"Tell me what you want," he gasped, suddenly the supplicant, the slavering, worshipping slave.
His heart was beating so hard it felt as if it would burst from his chest. Sweat dewed on his skin.
His cock was painfully hard, yearning for the sweet haven of her body. Her voice drew him back.

"T—Touch me. I want . . . I want your m—mouth on me. Please," she stuttered, soft rosy color
staining her cheeks. Even as her polite shyness filled him with tenderness, he found his power as a
seducer. Hmm, drawing the passionate words from his virginal wife was more arousing than he'd
thought. Erik's smile was wicked.

"As you command, my queen." He bent, pressing his mouth to her forehead, her cheeks, her chin.

"Does that satisfy?" he drawled. Her eyes, heavy with desire, blinked up at him, a faint frown
tugging at her swollen mouth.

"Erik, please." Her hands threaded in his hair, tugged at his head.

Erik obeyed, loosing himself in the taste of her skin. The hollow of her throat, the curve of her
shoulder, the inside of her arm, all that warm, silken skin covered in downy hair. Christine writhed
beneath him, breathing little whimpers and chanting his name. The impassioned soliloquy grew
feverish and fragmented when he lavished his attentions on her breasts, nuzzling and licking and
suckling. Erik wrote his adoration on her skin, inscribed it with stroking fingers and worshipping
lips. It was only when he nibbled the curve of her hipbone that she roused from her torpor.

"Erik?" she asked, confused. His hand dipped, long sensitive fingers parting her, stroking her
entrance. Her cry was sweet, lost in his own guttural groan. So hot and wet . . . Erik kissed the soft skin below her navel.

"Please, love. Let me taste you. Let me . . . let me . . ." he begged, his mouth watering. Erik settled between her thighs and set his mouth to her. Christine screamed.

XXX

The pleasure defied description. Christine writhed in its grip, drugged by Erik's hands and mouth on her skin. An aching throb, soothe and made worse by the darting flicks of his tongue . . . oh . . . oh, his tongue! It was inside her . . . moving in and out and up, circling that unbearably sensitive nub . . . the pleasure crashed over her, the tightening coil snipping. Her fingernails dug into his scalp, and broken in two, she sobbed with the pleasure he'd given her. After what seemed like an eternity of distant lightning flickering through her body, she returned to herself, her pounding heart slowing, aware of the warm currents of air licking at the trails left by Erik's saliva at her breasts, her belly, the moisture of her own arousal slicking her thighs.

Erik rose over her, wiping his grinning mouth, eyes glittering behind the mask. The mask . . . he was still clothed? The haze receded at a fresh wave of desire. She wanted the wonderful silken slide of his skin against hers, the rub of his body hair, she wanted to make him beg and weep under her touch as he had done with her to such devastating effect.

Christine shoved him back on his haunches and rose to her knees, floundering a little in the soft nest of sheets and pillows. Holy Virgin, he was so beautiful. Gleaming black hair in wild disarray, mouth swollen, bright eyes flashing . . . his body looked dipped in gold as the candlelight burnished his sweat-dewed skin. He sat still, letting her admire him.

Muscle and tendon rippled fluidly as he moved, veins making pleasing patterns beneath his skin. She wanted to lick the sweat from the contours of his whipcord muscles, she wanted to suck and kiss and bite, claim every inch of him as her own. Here and there, she saw the memory of violence, thick scars roped around his wrists, the wound from his fight with Raoul slashing across his belly. Time to taste them later, time to draw his pain into herself and abolish it forever. He gave a tight, uncomfortable shrug, a wry quirk to his mouth.

"It's not much, but I hope it's adequate," he breathed. Moved by tenderness, Christine cupped his jaw and kissed him. Her hand, tingling with delight, followed the meaty curve of his shoulder to the flat shelf of his chest, tangling in the faint dusting of his chest hair, over his thundering heart.

"You're beautiful, Erik." Another lingering kiss.

She couldn't get enough of kissing him. But she wanted more.

Now.

The most important thing at the moment was for him to join her in the vulnerability of nakedness. She clawed at the fastening of his breeches, only to have Erik's hand steady her when she fumbled. The fly fell open and his cock sprang free. Christine swallowed hard. He looked . . . big, rising thick and stalk-like from a crisp mat of black pubic hair. The physical ramifications made her mouth go dry. Hesitantly, she wrapped her hand around it. So hot and hard, encased in silky skin throbbing with the echo of his heartbeat, the swollen head weeping drops of fluid. Erik sucked in a ragged breath, muttering what she knew to be very bad language. A fierce delight rushed through her, a surge of womanly power. His hand clasped around hers, showing her how hard, how fast he wanted her to touch him.
"Yesss," he hissed, "oh God, Christine!" The way he wept her name, his head thrown back, his hips arching against her hand. . . . Christine had never felt more powerful. A sudden thought occurred to her. She slowed her stroking.

"Take it off," she commanded. Passion-glazed eyes popped open and a whimper escaped his lips.

"Wha—What?" his voice was weak and small, almost boyish.

"Take off your mask, Erik," Christine said again. Her hand pumped once around him. Her name sounded like it was being torn from him: "Christine . . ."

"Please, my love," she crooned coaxingly, "Let me see you. Did you think I'd throw down all of my barriers and lie naked in your arms and let you hide away from me?" She kissed his mouth, his jaw, his chin, every inch of skin she could reach. Erik's quivering hand snatched hers away from his cock. He pressed his forehead against hers, bringing her hand up to his right cheek.

"Christine. All my life, this has defined me, marked me a freak, an outcast. Let me be a man in your arms tonight. Just a man making love to his wife. Please." His tender, broken voice undid her. Christine swallowed the rush of tears that threatened.

"Of course. I'm sorry."

Erik forgave her with a kiss, winding his arms around her. She fell back on the bed, and relaxed under the persuasion of Erik's talented fingers dancing down her belly, parting and stroking and teasing her most private place, that nub of flesh. The wet little sounds were evidence of her arousal.

Oh . . . the tension was building again and Christine knew now the sweetness that waited. Her hips arched for more, grasping blindly for what only he could give her . . .

His body pierced hers just as her climax washed over her. Christine screamed, in pain and pleasure both, body arched like a bow beneath him, fingernails digging into Erik's shoulders. Erik remained still and gasping over her, buried to the hilt inside her. It took a moment for his broken words to reach her.

"All right, love?" he asked, kissing her gently, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." He kissed away the tears that leaked from her eyes, combing her hair from her face. She saw his eyes were moist too, and loved him for it.

Christine arched and writhed, feeling invaded, stretched. Her body clutched at his unfamiliar, unforgiving hardness, and, slowly, the pain ebbed into simple discomfort, a feeling of fullness. Erik groaned, poised rigid and quivering.

"So good. Oh God, Christine . . . you feel exquisite . . ." His hips surged and Christine whimpered, unable to identify what coursed through her to be terrible pain or equally unbearable pleasure. Erik showered her face with kisses as he moved inside her.

"I'm sorry . . . I can't stop. I can't stop!"

"Don't! Don't stop. Don't ever stop," she breathed, hands splayed on his poor scarred back, holding him close.

The pain receded like a wave from the shore, replaced a hundredfold by exquisite pleasure, all pounding water and foam as he pumped in and out of her. They shared breath, looking deep into each other's eyes, marveling at the beauty of their joining. His eyes, like the sea, so deep and warm, she could drown in them. One flesh.
Her hands slid down the meaty muscles of his back and cupped the hard curves of his buttocks, drawing him deeper. Christine sensed the tension quivering in his body, felt it in the tempo of his thrusts.

Oh . . . oh, he felt so good, moving like that. It felt as if her body clung and suckled his invading presence, bathing him in her arousal. Suddenly, Erik's lean body jerked above her and he uttered a sound like a sob. He plunged deep and she gasped as a warm rush spread inside her.

He collapsed on top of her, trembling. Christine's body thrummed and shook with arousal, an ache of unsatisfied desire knotted in her belly. She forced tense muscles to uncurl, instead delighting in the feel of his weight, warm and sheltering. She stroked his sweat-dampened hair, loving the bloom of his hot breath against her neck. She didn't know how long they lay like that, linked and breathing the same air, but all too soon he roused, bracing his hands on the mattress to lift himself from her. She gasped as his now flaccid cock slid from her body. Christine stiffened at his hard, flashing eyes, the angry twist to his mouth.

"What—What did I do wrong?" she whispered. An unutterable tenderness filled his face. He kissed her, slow and languid and deep.

"Oh my love, you did nothing wrong. You are perfect. The problem lies with me."

"I don't understand," she said, hating her ignorance. His smile was brittle and self-deprecating. He shrugged.

"It's the way we're made. Women can climax multiple times while a man is spent once. I must . . . rest."

"Oh," Christine said.

The word was so small, so ineffectual. How could she tell him how wonderful he felt, that she loved every second even when it hurt? Christine marveled at herself. She could lie naked in a man's arms, give him her body, but couldn't thank him for the miracle of their love? Christine yanked Erik's head down for a kiss, boldly thrusting her tongue in his mouth. He grunted in surprise, but reciprocated with his usual wicked skill. They were both breathless by the time she pulled back.

"Never doubt how beautiful you are, Erik. You are the best man I know—a—and the most talented lover and . . . and every time I look at you, I want to throw myself at you and beg you to ravish me!" she blurted, glaring at him, daring him to contradict her. Erik responded by stretching his lean body atop her, an insistent knee parting her thighs.

"Ravish you, hmm?" that darkly seductive purr of his fallen angel's voice sent shivers of delight through her. Christine cried out as her swollen, sensitive tissues were parted anew by his hard, hot cock.

"That can be arranged."

XXX

Desire burned and crackled inside him, a voracious wildfire blurring the edges of his vision. His body, weak and spent before now thrummed with life, lust wakening like a lion in a cage. Awake and roaring as his hands and mouth roamed and roved, seeking every sweet inch of her. Gone was the tender seducer, now he was a man raw with need, ravenous and desperate. When she pulled his head down to worship her breast, and spread her legs to welcome his intrusion, he nearly wept.
Christine, Christine, his wife, his lover, his goddess, his life . . .

"Anything . . . anything for you!" he gasped in her ear.

The wet, silken clutch of her body was heaven around him. A heaven of pulsating muscle, liquid arousal and sweet heat. Pleasure quivered and sang in him, but he viciously clamped down on the instinct to pump inside her until he lost himself. No, damn it! He would not disappoint her again! Anger smoldered deep in his belly, hating the depth and scope of his starved, traitorous body that spent itself so quickly like a callow boy.

Erik hooked his arms beneath her shoulders and drew her upright in his lap. Christine drooped, boneless, arms draped over his back, face pressed against the cradle of his shoulder. Erik pressed kisses on her forehead and breathed in the scent of her riotous mane of curls, fingers dancing lightly down her back to cradle her hips as he thrust up into her. Christine uttered a choked gasp, her fingernails digging into his back. Erik relished the sting. He felt so crude and blunt next to this exquisite creature, all coarse, rasping hair, thick muscle and a heavy club of a cock. Christine, his beautiful, delicate wife.

He soon lost himself in the rhythm of their lovemaking, like an orchestra's bass and rhythm, punctuated with the occasional piercing cry. Erik assaulted her with sensation: lips and hands touching and teasing, her nipples rubbing his chest, the sweet pearl of flesh at the apex of her sex kissed and caressed by the root of his cock with each stroke.

Christine writhed in his grip, restless and hungry for the promise of release that wavered like a mirage just beyond her reach. Her lips moved against his skin, soundlessly forming his name. Determined to please her while fighting down his own release, Erik's thrusts grew deeper, harder.

Then there it was . . . ah, that sweet breathless moment, soaring on a violin's high note, before the string snapped and her body convulsed around his in wild spasms, her teeth sinking into the muscle of his shoulder. That, combined with the sensation of her shuddering around him warped and frayed the edges of his reality. He fell on top of her and plunged once, twice, then scalding pleasure struck him like a blow and he was coming violently, almost painfully, spilling his seed inside her still-quivering core.

"I love you," she whispered in the sweaty, trembling aftermath.

"As I love you," he gasped.

Erik summoned his once formidable strength and drew sheet and coverlet over both of them. Her limbs tangled with his and he fell into a sweet slumber with a smile on his face, arms wrapped securely around his Angel.
"The love of a family is life's greatest blessing."

-Anonymous

She broke the surface into consciousness to the hot suction of Erik's mouth on her breast. With a gasp, Christine arched up, hungry, so very hungry for him. Pleasure melted over her like butter. She stroked his head, urging him on with broken fragments of words, cherishing the solid curve of his skull, the flexible curves of his prominent ears. Dream-addled, she imagined the two of them floating together on a blood-warm sea, skin dissolving until their naked souls fused like soap bubbles . . .

Her lover's bright eyes were like shards of gemstones, capturing the moon's cold fire. Candle flame danced across his body and Christine saw her battered Adam, shaped and molded not by his Creator's loving touch, but by the brutal adversity of a hostile world. Christine's restless caressing hands found the scars on his back. She wanted to pull him inside her, hide him from the world and its cruelties. Erik's graceful hand trapped hers against his jaw and her palm tingled at the rasp of beard stubble.

She watched dreamily as his full red mouth mapped a meandering path across her chest to her other breast. Pleasure's burn differed from the tender dance of their first joining, or the blind hunger of the second. This was . . . voluptuous, languid. No need to rush, they had forever . . . Her womb ached, but from use or the yearning for him to fill it, she didn't know or particularly care. The borders that defined the world no longer held sway, swallowed by the magic of love.

A longing for completion rose in her. He saw, he knew, he was in her soul; of course he knew only his beautiful body could complete her pleasure! Christine broke this sacred silence with a low sigh as he filled her. She was made for him, did he feel it in the way her body kissed and suckled every inch of him? They found nature's rhythm, each deep stroke eloquent with the wet sounds of their shared pleasure. Her mewling cries mingled with his hoarse grunts in their own duet.

Time stretched and rippled. Christine soared to heights of pleasure again and again, Erik still hard and hungry inside her. The edges of her vision pulsed as her body gathered, tightened, pleading with him to join her in oblivion. An animal sound of arousal left his lips and the calculated plunge and swivel of his hips changed to wild, pounding strokes charging toward release. A mutual climax blasted through them, shattering her into sobbing pieces, filling her up with hot spurts of his seed.

She lay tucked against his side, her head pillowed on his shoulder. A pleasant ache pervaded her body. For so long, she had reached for her Angel and the fleeting joy of his voice and his presence.
The man Erik had proven to be even more mysterious and elusive than the Angel. Absently, she caressed the pattern of scar tissue roping his wrist. Her scarred Adam, her damaged Angel. His voice, hoarse with sleep and his passionate vocalizations, moved over her like the rub of mink's fur.

"I broke a mirror once. A well-meaning clergyman bound my wrists."

Christine's dreamy, heavy-lidded indolence vanished. She swallowed hard and focused on the rise and fall of his chest, the faint sound of his breathing. Proof that he was alive and with her.

"How-" she swallowed, started again, "how old were you?"

"Six."

The answer was swift and succinct. A brutal commentary housed in three letters. Christine could think of no words to soothe. 'I'm sorry' seemed so weak as to be abhorrent. Instead, she spoke with tiny, adoring kisses along the interior of his wrist, where his pulse beat so strong. Her Erik was so resilient, the beauty of his soul so dauntlessly brilliant. The hand she worshipped groped for hers, stilling her. One grey-blue eye, the hue of a wisp of silver cloud on a moonlit night popped open to regard her.

"It's all right, my love. It doesn't hurt anymore." They lapsed into silence, but far from an uncomfortable one.

Erik rolled onto his side, his graceful musician's fingers toying with the wild curls fanned across the pillow. Christine rolled to face him and they spent several more quiet minutes admiring each other. The candles were dying down, but Christine found she wasn't afraid. As long as Erik was with her, the darkness held no more terror for her.

"How long may I stay here with you?" she asked.

Because she couldn't resist, she leaned forward and kissed him. Barely a brush really, simply delighting in the freedom to kiss and touch him. This segued into another, deeper kiss that she felt all the way down to her toes. A few delicious moments of kissing passed before Erik had the breath or inclination to answer.

"That depends entirely upon your wishes, my love," he said carefully.

"What do you mean?" she asked, frowning.

"A better question would be, perhaps, do you wish to return to the stage? It does not have to be the Populaire, if the meddlesome junk men are odious to you—by the way, remind me to strangle Firmin upon the first opportunity. After his drunken pawing at the Bal Masque, he more than deserves it!—but I digress." Christine smothered a giggle at hint of Erik's protective anger, before mellowing into contemplation. Christine rubbed the sole of her foot along his hairy, muscled calf.

"I do love singing for the stage," she said softly, "but all the scheming and back-stabbing and animosity I could do without. There seems to be quite a lot of that."

Despite her misgivings, something in her quailed at the thought of leaving this opera house, where she had spent so many years of happiness.

"If not the Populaire, where could we go?"

Erik would think her foolish, but even this simple talk, the casual use of 'we' sent a thrill through
her. To plan a future together made the events of the past twenty-four hours more real.

"Any opera house in the world would count themselves supremely blessed to have you grace their stage," Erik said, accompanying the words with feather light caresses along her back, tangling his hands in her hair. Christine squirmed in delight at both the compliment and the touching. It made her want to arch and purr like a cat.

"Thank you," she whispered. Erik's lazy grin could only be classified as smug.

"But I have received specific offers from La Monnaie, La Fenice, and La Scala."

"O—Offers? For me?" Christine stuttered, a smile dawning on her face, "Erik, you're incorrigible!"

Erik grinned.

"Always, my dear. The choice is yours."

"You have a say in this too, Erik. You are my teacher, without you I couldn't carry a note. And your operas, I'm sure there are hundreds of people clamoring for them."

"Nonsense and hardly, respectively. But I appreciate the sentiment. I personally have no preference. France, Italy, England, all the wonders of the world pale in comparison to you."

Christine sighed, basking in the sun of Erik's love. His compliments made her blush and smile. God, how she loved this man!

"La Scala," she whispered with something like reverence.

"Those Italian lessons were not solely for the purpose of torturing you, my dear," Erik teased.

"Point taken, Maestro," Christine said, eyes narrowed in mock irritation, "But whatever my feelings about the Populaire or its present management, I am still under contract. I should return there."

"I doubt our performance during Don Juan has done anything to endear you to our beloved managers. Your honor is commendable, but I think they would be more than willing to sever your contract, if only to appease that Italian cow."

Christine giggled again, sharply aware that his hands had wandered from her back to her buttocks, which he now stroked and squeezed appreciatively.

"Speaking of overweight Italians, what did you do to Piangi? When you took the stage with me?" she said, tracing ticklish patterns on his chest and belly.

"I snagged him with my lasso and yanked him into a closet. The Daroga was kind enough to stand guard at the door." The image drew a shocked laugh from Christine. Mmm, this was almost as good as their physical intimacy, just laughing and talking together.

Almost.

"Now, I noticed you still haven't answered the question, my love. What is it you want?" he purred, nuzzling her hair, burrowing as close as possible.

"I'd like a honeymoon," she blurted.

Erik peeled back far enough to look at her. Suddenly, looking in his eyes was much too
embarrassing. She instead watched the flame of a candle on the stand near the bed. A drop of liquid wax beaded and fell before her gaze. Erik's voice unfurled its smoky tendrils and enveloped her.

"Do you? I must confess, I am sorely tempted to keep you here—in my home, in my bed—forever."

There was the faintest silvery underlining to the last word, hinting at every manner of delicious torment. Heat bloomed under her skin at the thought of spending an eternity as Erik's willing slave. Those warm, callus-roughened hands tugged her close, close enough to feel the evidence of his arousal against her thigh. Christine exhaled a shaky breath, enraptured and excited. His bright eyes narrowed, regarding her speculatively.

"But this is an imperfect home is it not, my maiden of spring?" Christine cast a glance around the rough, pitted stone of his room, imagining the layers of stone and earth between her and the sun. Far from feeling smothered, she felt cozy, safe.

"No, I like it. The quiet is almost . . . sacred. Like inside a church."

Erik halted his gentle seduction, his expression blank. Christine shifted restively in his grip, wondering why her compliment affected him so. As close as they were, she felt the laugh deep in his chest, flowing up and out and filling the air with its rich bounty. He rolled onto his back, mirth shaking his broad chest. Christine sat up, smiling uncertainly. Part of her was in awe of how beautiful he was when he laughed, another part wanted to smack him for directing said laugh at her.

"What's so funny?" she demanded, pouting a little. To his credit, her husband quickly sobered, even as a smile quivered on his mouth.

"Forgive me, love. I don't mean to laugh at you. I've just discovered a rather amusing irony. For the past several years, I have invested no small amount of time, effort and hundreds of thousands of francs building a home—a home I hoped that we would one day share . . . and . . . and you prefer the sewer!" Erik let out another bark of laughter, shaking his head.

"You—you built a house for me?" Christine asked, flattered.

"Of course." he said, frowning with offended dignity, "Nothing less would do. Not for you." A soft sound escaped Christine's lips and she fell upon him, covering his beloved face in kisses. She broke away before he was distracted.

"Tell me about it." With a soft little sigh, he snuggled closer to her in the pocket of warmth beneath the bedclothes and began to talk.

As he spoke, his voice twisted and wove, painting pictures of a graceful country manor, rich with light and promise. Christine lay atop him, chin balanced on his chest. She felt dazzled by how his eyes lit up when he spoke on a subject that interested him, and stunned with gratitude that he would share such a beautiful vision with her.

In so many ways, she was ordinary. She could sing, but compared to the scope of Erik's genius and other, more attractive ballet rats, Christine would always feel small, plain, unimportant. Christine snuggled closer, burying her face against his chest, feeling his fingers toy with her hair. She would happily spin through space, an unremarkable chunk of rock circling this benevolent sun that bathed her in love and light and beauty for as long as he would let her.

XXX
He was far too happy to slip into any sleep deeper than a doze, deliciously aware of her steady breathing and subtle shiftings beneath the coverlet. But, persuaded by the exhaustion permeating his bones, Erik soon fell into a deep sleep and woke disoriented. The candles guttered into useless pools of wax, the cold darkness of his home now breathed deep around the bed. Sleep and pleasure had dulled his mind, and it took him several moments to orient himself. No dream, no hallucination, no exercise in futile longing.

No, this was a delicious reality: a once poor and unhappy Erik now lay in the sleeping embrace of an Angel. The soft caress of her breath against his chest tickled wonderfully. Her hair fanned across his shoulder and arm—warm, living silk woven into the most delightful curls!—not to mention the unspeakable delight of her naked body curled against his side, her leg twined with his. Erik purred, whiling away several minutes cataloguing the novel sensations of sharing a bed with Christine. Erik relished the memory of their passion, breathed deep of its musk permeating the bedclothes. Each moment would be a talisman for him to cherish. The knowledge that no one else had ever or would ever have her this way added fresh dimension to their pleasure. Her presence in his bed bore its inevitable fruit and he was hard.

Erik stroked her arm draped across his belly and sighed. He could not burden her with his fleshly hunger again. From his studies he knew there would be discomfort, and taking his pleasure while she felt pain was utterly out of the question. His thoughts trudged reluctantly from the haven of his marriage bed up and up to the cold light of logic. Erik had been hunted long enough to sense a trap, and the de Chagny boy's abrupt retreat reeked of suspicion. He had thought the boy incapable of guile, but this was surprisingly cunning: to pull back, to wait. Erik allowed a small smug smile to touch his lips. The boy simply had no idea who he was dealing with.

A sudden thought occurred to him, urged him to slither free from his wife's sleeping embrace and grope in the darkness for his breeches. He remembered Christine's childhood fear of the dark, and swore she would not have a single unpleasant memory of their honeymoon.

XXX

Brother.

There was a time when Raoul thought he knew what that word meant. As different as they were, he thought he and Philippe shared a close and loving relationship, based on trust. Lies! Why else would Philippe keep such a thing from him? Damn it, he knew and said nothing! The events of the past months scrolled through his mind. Revulsion rippled through him, nausea clenching his gut in tune with every bump in the road.

The silence in the de Chagny carriage was suffocating. Philippe's words hung between them like a swaying corpse. The macabre notion turned Raoul's thoughts toward the tired track of Josef Buquet, the Giovanni girl, and countless others. Those long, skeletal hands, dripping with blood, were touching Christine. And she welcomed it. Obscene. Revolting. Heartbreaking.

He couldn't sit still. He peered out of the carriage window. Thank God, they were at the de Chagny townhouse. Raoul kicked open the door and jumped from the still-moving carriage, sucking in great lungfuls of cold night air. His coat had been lost somewhere between Populaire and the carriage, but Raoul welcomed the chill down through his vest, shirt and against the fire burning in his chest. Philippe disembarked at a more sedate pace, Raoul could hear the deliberate squeak of his shoes on icy cobbles.

"Raoul-" he began, laying a hand on his shoulder. Raoul pivoted, grasping a handful of his brother's lapel until they were nose to nose.
"How long have you known?" he spat fiercely.

"Raoul-" again, that condescension! That accursed smugness! It made him want to hit Philippe again.

"How long?" Philippe's steel eyes, clear and calm and sober, held Raoul's crackling blue unwavering.

"Since Father died."

An abstract thought marveled at the duality of his reaction. On the one hand, he was overwhelmingly relieved that Philippe had not known this terrible secret for scant weeks, and on the other, he hated that his father and brother had not trusted him with the knowledge. Questions bubbled up and dammed in his throat.

"Come, let's go inside. I believe a nip of brandy is in order."

Shivering, Raoul followed his brother inside and flung himself into the low chair by the fire. Tersely, Philippe dismissed the servants and poured a generous amount. It looked like liquid gold in the wide glass. An arch of an inky brow offered Raoul one. He shook his head. He wanted to be clear-headed.

Philippe tossed aside coat and vest and sat in his shirtsleeves across from Raoul. He heaved a sigh, looking wan and weary. The play of firelight cast half his face in shadow. Presented with half the image, Raoul was smote by the fugitive resemblance between Philippe and his—and Rousseau in the tilt of cheekbone, the shape of his mouth. Raoul dropped his gaze. Philippe threw back his brandy and scrubbed his face with his hands.

"I apologize for the blunt delivery, little brother. But I had to act or you would have burned the Populaire to the ground chasing him down through those tunnels."

"Christine-"

"Made her choice. And it wasn't you," Philippe cut in. Raoul flinched at the casual cruelty of the statement, clenching his good hand in a rigid fist. Philippe arched a brow.

"Am I wrong? I found her performance explicit enough."

"Rousseau had her-"

"What? Hypnotized? The wonderful alchemy that turned sound to liquid gold in my ears? Our brother's voice has that effect." Premonition scraped up his spine like a corpse's fingernail. Where had he heard those words before?

"What did you say?" Raoul asked. Philippe's smile was brittle.

"What's say I start at the beginning, hmm?" Raoul swallowed any further protest and nodded. Seeing his agreement, some of the tension seeped out of Philippe and he leaned back on the couch, arms braced along the back in his usual louche posture.

"I was just a boy when I first heard the name Erik Rousseau. Running like a hellion through the Château, I heard Father whispering to someone. It was odd, I thought, it wasn't in his study where he normally met with friends. So I heard the man talk about a young masked magician, tall with black hair. From the way the man described his voice and even the deformity on the right side of his face, I wanted to meet this magician and have him teach me his tricks, show me his scars.
Father saw me and I earned ten strokes with the belt for just hearing about him." Philippe paused, measuring Raoul's reaction. He leaned forward, hands folded earnestly between his knees.

"Raoul, I swear, all I knew for years was that Rousseau was dangerous and he had a grudge against our family. That is all Father would tell me." The edges of Raoul's anger began to soften and blur. He knew what it was like to bear the crack of the belt and not know exactly what he had done wrong.

"I believe you, Philippe," he said quietly. Relief etched into his handsome features, Philippe cleared his throat and searched for the words to continue.

"Then you told me about Christine's teacher and-

"A masked man named Erik Rousseau," Raoul said, finally understanding.

"Yes. I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to challenge him to a duel!" A faint flicker of his old irreverent amusement lit his tired face and Raoul smiled despite himself. He scratched his arm just above the plaster cast.

"I had little choice in the matter." A moment's pause, with only the fire crackling to itself.

"So, when Father died?" Raoul prompted. Philippe's jaw clenched.

"So Father was dying. Christine had just brought you back to the Château when Father summoned me." Philippe glanced sharply to one side and Raoul knew it to be a gesture meant to hide emotion. Whether the grief of a lost father, or the feelings of betrayal upon learning the secret, Raoul could sympathize.

"He sat me down and told me the whole sordid story." A thought occurred to Raoul, cutting through the grief and anger and betrayal like a knife.

Brother.

"Rousseau can't be legitimate." Philippe barked a quick, mirthless laugh.

"Odd, isn't it, that we would hope our father committed adultery instead of having such a brother!" Raoul acknowledged the irony with a snort.

"The answer is no. Rousseau—Erik—is a legitimate de Chagny heir. Not only that, he is the eldest." The enormity of it dawned on Raoul. By the divine right of primogeniture, Rousseau was the true Comte de Chagny. In one fell swoop, he could strip both Raoul and Philippe of their title and inheritance.

"How?" Raoul whispered. A sort of dark triumph lit Philippe's eyes, a morbid relief in sharing a terrible burden.

"Simple. Father was married once before Mother." Somehow, this made their father's betrayal more heinous. Not only had he hidden away a son, but a wife? Erased as if she never existed?

"Who was she?"

"Her name was Hélène Moureau. God, you should have seen him talk about her, Raoul! And with Mother standing right next to him! He still loved her. On his deathbed he still loved her."

"What happened to her?" God, was she still alive somewhere?
"She died in childbirth. In Father's opinion, it was merciful, before she saw the monstrosity of her son's face. Father was broken-hearted."

"So he sent the child away?" Philippe's stony face spoke volumes. The cold-blooded decision to cut off his firstborn made Raoul passionately grateful for his good looks. He looked at his feared, adored father in a new light.

"He couldn't bear to look at the boy that had killed his beloved Hélène. He regretted it, after a time, he said. But when he contacted the woman he paid to care for the boy, she said he ran away." Philippe couldn't seem to bear the words any longer; he leapt to his feet and began pacing the length of the room. Raoul watched. He couldn't remember ever seeing Philippe so agitated.

"The old bastard! He should have kept him here, or told us about him sooner! We could have helped him, we could have-" Raoul rose. This new, serious Philippe was a stranger to him.

"Philippe! You aren't seriously feeling sympathy for Rousseau, are you? He's a murderer-"

"Despised and unwanted from birth."

"He's mad-"

"A genius."

"He's-"

"Our brother!"

Raoul stared at his brother as if he had never seen him before.

"You would welcome him? After everything he's done to me?" he pounded his chest, "You would choose the shadow of dream rather than your own brother?" Philippe yanked Raoul into an embrace.

"No. Never, little brother. Never him over you," he whispered fiercely in his ear, "but Father wanted me to do this. He wanted me to set right what we took from him."

"It wasn't our fault what happened to him. Why must we suffer?"

Why must I suffer so? He has Christine, why must he take Philippe too?

Philippe pulled back and held him at arm's length, washed in a tiger's gold and black.

"You're right, it wasn't our fault. But it wasn't his either for being unlucky enough to be born first."
Stories Like This Can't Come True

Chapter Notes

A little smut.

Stories Like This Can't Come True

The bed was empty. Her hand reached for the warm, solid feel of his flesh and found only cool satin sheets. Brown eyes snapped open and Christine surged upright, clutching the sheet to her breasts. The curtain had been lowered, the gauzy black fabric rippling idly in wayward currents of air.

"Erik?" she whispered into the room's heavy stillness, lit by a fresh brace of candles.

No answer.

Stifling a surge of hurt, Christine reached for tasseled rope. As the curtain gracefully lifted, she scooted toward the edge of the bed. Pangs of soreness resounded through her, resonating between her legs. Her gaze fell to the downy sheet stretched over the mattress and the small spot of blood adorning it. Her eyes widened. She had heard stories among the ballet rats of their deflowering and was surprised by how little there was. Looking down at herself, she noted similar smears on her thighs. She rose from the bed and found Erik's robe draped over a nearby chair. She shivered in delight at the feel of cool silk sliding over her skin, embraced by soft clouds of his scent. Belting the sash, she wandered around the room, picking up items at random.

It was only after the pleasure-soaked blur of the night receded that she was struck by the enormity of the night. She—Christine Daae—was now a married woman. Wedded and bedded by the man that had haunted her dreams for years. Christine decided she was grateful for this moment of introspection. Erik, so ready to see his supposed inadequacies, would no doubt be hurt by any faraway look. The past was painful, full of too many misunderstandings and hurts, the present was deliciously wonderful, a dream of a honeymoon. Her marriage to Erik was a shining treasure in her hands, she longed to explore its shapes and textures, cherish its facets.

The future, however, was a question mark. To stay or go? Leave the Opera, leave Paris and all its tangled history and begin anew elsewhere . . . the idea had a certain, undeniable appeal. And it seemed prudent to put as much distance between Erik and Raoul as possible. As Erik so adeptly pointed out, they would always hate each other. Because of her. Christine swallowed a pang of guilt, her fingers stroking the delicate filaments of a peacock's feather draped across his dresser. In a new place, free of a resentful diva, two fumbling, blustering managers, and the scandal of an affair with an Opera Ghost . . . yes, she could rediscover the joy of singing for the stage.

The realm of dream and thought lost its appeal when her more urgent, fleshly needs asserted themselves. Namely, a rumbling stomach and a full bladder. It was only after she had finished her ablutions in the privy closet that she saw them. Small votive candles casting bubbles of ruby-hued light lined a narrow path out of Erik's bedroom. Enchanted, she followed them out. The main chamber was utter, inky darkness, with only faint dripping announcing the lake's presence. It was
also noticeably colder. Christine clutched Erik's robe more tightly around her. The path ended at
the bathroom's door. The door creaked opened at her light touch, and a gasp left her lips.

During the short interim of her sleep, Erik had transformed the bathroom into something out of an
Eastern palace. Panels of gauzy white fabric were draped from the ceiling into a womblike tent
around the full tub, steam dancing on its surface like curls of incense. Rose petals carpeted the
floor. The changing screen painted with scenes of cranes and lotus flowers concealed the furnace.
Steam blurred and softened the edges of objects; everything was cloaked in a dreamlike serenity.
Crimson lanterns along the walls seemed to be suspended in midair, candles flickering like
throbbing hearts within.

"Your bath awaits," murmured Erik's voice from behind her. Oh God, that voice layered with every
manner of sinful pleasure.

"What? How-" she began, trying to turn to face him. His arms wrapped around her, his breath
stirring her hair.

"No, love. Not yet. This is our honeymoon. Honeymoons are about . . . indulgence. Let me pamper
you. Let us pretend that you are sultana of a mighty kingdom and I . . . I am your humble bathing
servant. Here to indulge your every whim."

Every hair on her body stood on end at the shivering, naked desire in those words, interspersed
with a few feathery kisses on her neck. He could seduce her so easily. One word, one caress and
she was reduced to a melting mass of sensation. This made her inexplicably angry. He wanted to
play games, hmm? Well, she would play, and they would just see who was begging in the end! Her
spine stiffened as she affected the pitch perfect posture of every simpering aristocrat that had
danced through the Opera over the years. She negligently spread her arms.

"My robe." Her voice held an edge of irritable command, none of the quivering breathless edge of
a willing victim of seduction, she thought. She looked down and saw Erik's deft fingers pluck at
the knot in the robe's sash. Soon, the silk slithered free from her body. Hotly aware of his hungry
gaze, Christine approached the tub. A stool appeared as if by magic, and an offered hand to aid her.
She cut a swift glance at him, noting his black bandit's mask, and Don Juan's ruffled shirt and
black breeches, all the way down to his bare feet. His grey-blue eyes were subserviently downcast.
He was taking his role very seriously.

The hot water felt heavenly. Christine sank gratefully into the silken, rose-scented water, leaning
her head back against the rim with a soft sigh of bliss.

"May I wash your hair, Mistress?" Erik purred. She opened her eyes to find his gaze, so hot and
steady behind the mask. Looking at her. Wanting her.

"Y—You may, Servant." she stuttered. This was wrong. She didn't want some twisting game of
power between them. She wanted Erik.

Then his hands were in her hair, buried to the wrist in her wild locks, massaging her scalp and
patiently washing and combing. All her protests died on her tongue as Christine relaxed under his
ministrations, all but purring like a cat. In a warm, languid silence, Erik offered her tidbits of
succulent filet mignon, juicy chunks of fruit, mouthfuls of bread laden with cheese. It felt so
wonderful being cossedet and pampered. Armed now with a soaped cloth, Erik's hands wandered
down her neck, her shoulders, breasts and belly, feet and calves. When his hand dipped between
her thighs, she snapped out of her drugged indolence. So easy! Cast again into the unfathomable
mystery of Erik. She was putty in his hands.
"I didn't permit you to take liberties, Servant." Even she was surprised by how cold her voice was. He flinched, like it was a blow.

"Forgive me, Mistress."

A knot was in her throat. What did she say? Was this still a game, or had she hurt him? He had more experience than she in these matters. How was she to play a game when she didn't know the rules, or the stakes? She wanted to scream with frustration. An idea rose from the torpid heat. She rose to her feet, swaying a little as her thudding heart tried to bring enough blood to her brain.

"Dry me." Confusion clouded those bright eyes, but Erik rose from his kneeling position and took up a downy towel and rubbed her dry with tender strokes. Swathing herself in the towel, her gaze raked over him, faltering a little at the sight of his erection trapped in his breeches, then peering fearlessly into his eyes.

"Your turn," she said in that remote sultana's voice. He swallowed audibly, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Mistress?"

"My whims are meant to be obeyed. And . . . I want to bathe you. Now." He moved to pull the shirt over his head.

"No. That is for me to do."

His hands clenched around the hem, wringing handfuls of cloth like a bashful little boy. Christine pried his hands loose, dropping a kiss on the center of each palm. She kept her touch light and grazing as she pushed his shirt from shoulders and peeled the breeches down. There he was in all of his dark, masculine glory.

"Beautiful," she breathed, a fierce joy rising in her. Beautiful and strong and hers! All hers. Her hand cupped his silk-clad cheek. He recognized her intent and gripped her wrist.

"No, please Mistress!" he begged.

She rubbed her lips against his, whispering against his mouth, "Erik, my love, let me. Let me see you. Nothing could make me turn away from you. Nothing. Let me . . . let me . . ." It was true. Whatever lingering fear she had vanished. Regardless of a few inches of marred skin, Erik was still the most beautiful man she'd ever known, inside and out.

"Christine," he rasped, shoulders sagging in defeat. Another grazing brush of lip.

"Thank you. Thank you for trusting me, my love." Christine grasped the edge of the mask. His fists clenched, as if warring against the desire to push her away. Eyes clenched tight, his shoulders shook and Christine realized he was weeping.

She removed the mask and clenched her jaw around any foolish noise that would send her husband into a hasty retreat. Yes, it was hideous. The slack, pitted skin was red and angry-looking after years of constant abrasion. Beneath, she clearly saw the snaking shapes of blue veins, and the muscles looked twisted and shortened. His cheek—God, was that bone?—was slightly off-kilter, and a few sprouting hairs peppered the jawline. His right nostril was caved in, his eyelid sagged. Instinctive revulsion quickly ebbed, replaced with compassion—the purest and most selfless form of love. Christine cupped his skull and drew him down to her.

XXX
The touch of Christine's lips on his deformed flesh was a miracle. The moment he had so dreaded and feared had come and . . . and she was still here. Not only here, but touching him! Not only touching him, but loving him! A miracle, a holy blessing of a goddess with curly brown hair! There were no deities in all the world that would be worshipped as he worshipped her!

Christine.

Erik moaned, her homage to his skin leaving him terribly, overwhelmingly aroused. She mapped new paths to pleasure in his brain, searing heretofore unknown nerves. Feather-light, warm, and gentle, her mouth wandered along the crooked curve of his cheekbone to his ear and gently nipped the lobe.

"Beautiful," she whispered. Oh God. Every imagined scenario involving the removal of his mask ended in terror and disgust at worst, and indifference at the very best. Never acceptance. It was exquisitely unbearable.

"Christine," he ground out, vaguely amazed that anything passably coherent left his lips. Her name: his prayer, his sacrament, necessary for his salvation. A mischievous smile curved her mouth.

I'm a dead man, he thought. She'll kill me with that smile.

"Into the bath with you, love."

But dying happy.

Erik obeyed, wide-eyed and needy. She must have sensed his fragile state, for she spent several wonderful minutes stroking and petting him, popping tidbits into his mouth and rewarding him with kisses. She cherished his scars with her mouth and his gasps and moans urged her on. In that steam-clouded bathroom, amid the artifice of a fantasy designed to please and torment her, Erik discovered how little he knew about love or lust, or even himself.

"Oh Erik, I'm sorry! You must be freezing! Come, I'll dry you off." His Angel's face was creased in concern, brown eyes troubled. Dimly, he realized the water had chilled.

He scarcely noticed, but rose meekly, his turgid cock bobbing in obscene eagerness. Christine lavished particular care on drying him, kneeling down to dry his calves and feet. Then, that smile that hinted at all manner of mischief.

"Christine, wha-" whatever he had been about to ask was lost in an inarticulate howl as her lips closed over the head of his cock.

Oh . . . God!

"You'll tell me if I do anything wrong, won't you? I want so much to please you . . ." her husky voice floated up to him, her breath unbearable against his skin. Please him? She pleased him by breathing, by the simple fact of her existence! His fingers knotted in her cool, damp hair, urging her back. Speech was beyond him.

Her mouth enveloped him again and Erik's melted brain could scarcely discern the separate sensations of her tongue cradling and stroking his shaft, or her hands petting the base, or the tickle of her hair on the tender skin of his thighs. The sight of his cock disappearing into the hot cavern of her mouth and her scorching dark gaze was unspeakably erotic. Pleasure built to a thundering crescendo. Too soon, damn it, it was too soon! He wanted more! He gently pushed her head back. An endearing vulnerability filled her expression, sharply contrasted by her lush, swollen lips, her restless hands caressing his thighs.
"Did I do-"

"Any better, and you just might kill me, love," he wheezed with the rueful husk of a laugh, "I'm a greedy man. I don't want to finish just yet."

Eagerness lit her eyes. Her pink tongue darted out for a playful lick. He groaned. When he had calmed slightly, his hips arched and she took him again. How long he stood hunched over her as she sucked and licked and caressed him, leading him with gentle strokes to the very edge of his sanity before easing back, he didn't know. Soon, his release pummeled him with a blast of dark heat and he came shouting her name. Christine was so tender with him. She crooned and kissed away the tears on his cheeks, both the smooth and the twisted one.

"Thank you," he said stupidly. Her answering laugh filled the room.

"You're welcome, love."

XXX

Now that he had finally relinquished his mask, Christine was determined to keep it that way. A sweet melting feeling filled her at the thought of his trust, the reluctant hope of a beaten, enduring soul. She was honored by his regard, and swore she would never give him cause to regret it. So when the flat buzzing of his alarm announced the approach of a visitor, she was disappointed to find the familiar white covering set firmly in place. The visible half of his face was soft with love, embroidered with dry humor. His hand stroked her from shoulder to hip with hypnotic grace.

"As fond as I am of you dressed in nothing but your hair, my love, I find that I am most covetous of the sight. We should dress for our guest." Christine wrinkled her nose, but obeyed.

Somewhere in the night, Erik had found a shift and underthings which Christine now donned. Aminta's costume was nowhere to be found. She turned to find her husband looking devastatingly desirable in his breeches and robe. It left triangle of his chest exposed and Christine wanted to nuzzle that warm patch and feel the rasp of his chest hair against her cheek.

"Where did you find these clothes, Erik?" she asked, smoothing the fine muslin of her shift.

"I bought them for you. What is a new bride without her trousseau?" he purred. With a conjuror's air, Erik produced a gown of deep green satin subtly embroidered with the pattern of roses. She accepted it with wondering fingers and a grateful heart.

"To replace the one I ruined," he murmured.

"It's beautiful. Thank you," she murmured, touched. Erik grinned, his tight little shrug speaking volumes on how often he had been praised. Christine once more wished his mother a merry eternity in Hell. Christine submitted to her husband's deft ministrations as he fitted her corset and helped her into her dress. Christine leaned back into his embrace, gluttonously enjoying the feeling of his arms around her and his chin resting on top of her head.

"Who do you think is coming, Erik?" Christine felt his voice rumble up from his chest.

"Probably Minette or the Daroga, coming to check up on us." Christine twisted, gazing at his strong profile.

"I thought Madame knew the paths to take to avoid your alarms." Erik's lips quirked.
"She does, but given our circumstances, a certain amount of tact would be warranted, hmm? I'd rather not have her interrupt a delicate moment." His grip tightened, his voice dropping to that particular smoky timbre that always melted her bones.

"I see your point," she replied breathlessly.

When Madame arrived outside the portcullis, she found the two of them respectably clad seated together on Erik's organ bench, sharing morning tea. Her usual thin smile spread into a dazzling one that creased the corners of her eyes.

"Good morning, Minette," Erik said, rising to kiss both of her cheeks, "to what do we owe the honor?"

"Business, I'm afraid. I do apologize for interrupting your honeymoon," she said, spreading her arms to embrace Christine.

As she pulled back, Christine realized that the dynamic between her and her warden and surrogate mother had changed. That nebulous transition between mother and daughter to friends, to equals. Christine felt a pang of regret. Little Lotte was gone forever. While she relished the prospect of making her own choices, there was also that latent terror of mistakes and disaster.

"What sort of business, Madame?" Christine asked. A curious expression flitted across her face, a blend of discomfiture, apology and irritation.

"Unpleasant business."

Erik's visible brow rose.

"Oh? Our friend the Vicomte?"

Christine bit her lip, marveling at her dual reaction. On one hand, the silken menace of Erik's voice filled her with warmth, and on the other, it did not bode well for Raoul. She moved toward her husband and laid a hand on his forearm. A breath escaped his lips and he squeezed her elbow gently. Even now, did he doubt his hold on her? Madame noticed the byplay between them and grinned, her restless fingers stilling from her habitual nervous gesture of touching her crucifix.

"His brother the Comte, actually."

"Philippe? What is he doing here?" Christine wondered the same time Erik said, "The drunken lech? What is he doing here?"

They shared a glance and the three of them dissolved into a quiet laugh. Madame's face creased in seriousness and she pinned Erik with her gaze.

"He wants to see you and refuses to leave until he does. Meg and I checked around the Opera, he is alone." Madame said with an eloquent shrug. Christine eyed her husband and any derogatory quip against Raoul died on his tongue under her quelling glare.

"Well, ermm," Erik coughed, "relate if you would, my dear Minette, that a life of ordering at restaurants and spending your parents' francs does not prepare one for the world. He will wait on my convenience." Christine hid a grin. She would allow this oblique comment against Philippe. One couldn't fault its truth.

"Did the damned man say what he wanted?" Madame shook her head. Erik exhaled a breath through his nostrils and turned toward his pipe organ, bracing his hands on a table.
"Thank you for relaying the message, Minette." Both women heard the curt dismissal in his tone, and both stiffened in affront.

"Erik, aren't you going to even see what he wants?" Christine asked.

"No."

"Erik-"

"What would I want with this man?" he snapped, interrupting Madame Giry.

"His fool of a brother has done nothing but vex and insult me since he breezed into this Opera with his fat wallet!" this was said with an eloquent glance at her and Christine flushed with guilt. Even with the night's intimacies, his anger still made her feel like a scolded child.

"Damn Philippe de Chagny, damn Raoul de Chagny, damn all of the fucking de Chagnys! Do I not deserve even one day of joy with my wife?" Christine suddenly couldn't stand the two steps separating them. She crashed against his chest, flinging her arms around him. His arms snapped closed around her, reflexive and as natural as breathing.

"You deserve all the joy I can give you, my love, and if I had my way, I would lock you away down here and keep you all to myself," she pitched her words for his ears alone, not wanting to scandalize her surrogate mother. Erik's eyes lost their deadly bright edge. He exhaled a heavy sigh.

"He has come in peace. Why not see what he wants?" A wry smile quirked his lips.

"Ah, my prying Pandora. Ever curious," he murmured, softening the words with a gentle kiss on her brow.

"Very well then. Let us see what the entitled chit has to say."
Have You Forgotten?

There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved.

-Unknown

Philippe de Chagny was every inch the lecherous fop Erik presumed him to be with his crisp attire, ostentatious watch and cane, and his perfectly groomed hair. Not a stitch or hair out of place. Erik hated him immediately. The Comte de Chagny's previous escapades, and a supposed bastard child by the Opera's resident whore La Sorelli did not improve this opinion. The only thing that kept Erik's hold on his temper was Christine's hand in his. Now, in the harsh light of day, their intimacy seemed like a fever dream of perfect beauty. How had this miraculous creature consented to be his? He knew he would float through the first few years of his marriage dazed and slack-jawed at his sheer dumb luck.

De Chagny rose from where he lounged in Madame's desk chair. His muddy shoes dripped on the draft of the letter Madame had left on her desk. Uncouth idiot!

"Monsieur Rousseau, how good of you to-" his grey eyes widened as he saw Christine and narrowed again on their joined hands.

Say one word, Erik bade him silently, I dare you. Any shred of an excuse to disappear below forever, the dark dandy and his golden fop of a brother forgotten. On Christine's insistence, he was unarmed as a gesture of goodwill. It made Erik feel vulnerable and fractious without the weight of his dagger or the rasp of his Punjab up his sleeve.

"Christine!" De Chagny said with surprising warmth, moving forward to kiss her cheeks. Erik was assaulted by a wave of his cologne, overpoweringly, eye-wateringly spicy.

"You look well," De Chagny said with his insufferable smirk.

Was it possible for Erik to despise his cheap charm more than his brother's vomit-inducing sincerity? A wealth of censure lurked in what he didn't say. Namely: why are you on the arm of the man who tried to kill my brother scant weeks ago? Christine was poise personified, Erik thought, his heart swelling in pride. Gripping de Chagny's hand with her left, letting her rings sparkle in the light, she replied, "Thank you, Philippe. Erik and I were recently married."

At de Chagny's reaction a sharp, warning fingernail raked up his spine. First, blood ebbed from his face in an extraordinary expression of shock, then his pointedly handsome features transmuted into a look of mixed repugnance and irony. Erik draped his arm around Christine's waist possessively and was gratified by her resting her head against his shoulder. Some of the tension ebbed out of him.

"Monsieur, I may be remiss in my upbringing, but is it not customary for a gentleman to offer congratulations when a lady imparts such news? And do close your mouth. You wouldn't want a fly to get in," Erik said dryly.
De Chagny's jaw snapped shut with an audible click as he shook himself. Humor glinted in his grey eyes.

"Mother was always despairing over my poor manners. Forgive me, Madame Rousseau," he swooped dramatically over Christine's captive hand, "I am grateful your husband has corrected my lapse. I most heartily offer my congratulations and hope for your continued happiness." The words were said with such oozing charm that Erik perceived an insult in them.

What was it about de Chagny men that irked him so? Erik grunted and guided his wife to the only chair and stood with his hands braced on her shoulders, buried in the protective warmth of her hair. The message was blindingly clear: Get on with it.

Madame Giry, who had watched this performance keenly with a hint of merry humor in her eyes, caught Erik's gaze and his nod. She disappeared with a rustle of her full skirts and the faint rap of her heels. She was to return if anything seemed amiss.

"Erm, all right then." De Chagny coughed and fidgeted, adjusting his lacy cravat as if was trying to strangle him.

"Is everything all right, Philippe? You look pale," Christine said softly. Erik noticed her nervous gesture of twisting her ring around and around, the worn silver band glistening in the strong sunlight streaming through Minette's high window. De Chagny coughed out a reluctant laugh.

"We'll see how I am in about five minutes, hmm?" This stab at humor served only to thicken the anxiety in the room and Erik forced himself to stop restlessly kneading Christine's shoulders. She was his. No de Chagny could take her away from him. Nothing else mattered.

"Speak, Sir. My patience is wearing thin," Erik enunciated the words with the crisp authority of one accustomed to being obeyed without question. It worked well on de Chagny, who snapped to attention. He began pacing erratically across the narrow room, and Erik was reminded of a bird flitting in its cage struggling to break free.

"Very well, then. As you both are aware, my father died recently." A pause, a sliding glance over Erik, fixing for a moment on the mask.

"We offer our condolences," Erik said stiffly, Christine agreed with a sympathetic coo. A flare of affection warmed his heart. His sweet little songbird. After the death of her beloved father, she was no doubt a bleeding heart for the poor de Chagny boys. Never mind that Michel de Chagny was considered a right bastard by even the kindest of standards.

"Yes, well," Philippe said with a tight little shrug, "he disclosed some . . . unsettling news on his deathbed that involves all of us." Erik frowned. A feeling like panic rose up sharp and jagged in his chest, every fine hair on his body standing on end.

"Oh? How so?" Erik said, a queer note warping his usually mellifluous voice. De Chagny looked far worse, like a corpse dressed for a funeral, waxy pale and haunted.

"He . . . mentioned the existence of a . . . third de Chagny heir. The eldest born heir to our title. One he entrusted to the care of his former lover, Madeline Laurent."

Erik's ignominious cry was lost in Christine's as she jumped to her feet. At the loss of her warm shoulders beneath his hands, he felt the world start to crumble underfoot. Madeline Laurent . . . his mother. His mother? His hands groped for purchase, clenching on the padded back of the chair so hard his fingernails bit through the cloth. Christine . . . he saw the reflection of his shock, horror
and fear swimming in her brown eyes. She was saying something. He couldn't understand her. His ears felt stuffed with cotton.

He whirled on his enemy, longing for his Punjab to suffocate the cruel lies.

"What did you say?" he said, spearing the hapless de Chagny with his gaze. Those grey eyes were cool, with none of his usual supercilious, mocking affectation.

"The Comte said his eldest son had black hair, with a hideous deformity on the right side of his face. He sent money to this Madeline every month for the boy's care for ten years. It was only then that the wretched woman said that the boy had run away three years prior."

The black-haired, hideously deformed man shuddered at those casual offhand words, as if remarking on the weather. They encapsulated the misery of his childhood and the wretched cause of it. No, it couldn't be true!

He couldn't be . . .

"I do not know what perverse whim prompted you to create these lies, nor do I care. Get out. You're upsetting my wife." Erik was proud of how calmly the words emerged. None of roaring maelstrom of anger that swirled in his tight chest.

"Erik-" De Chagny began. The lying bastard's presumption of using his Christian name was beyond bearing.

"Get out!" he howled, hurling the chair against the wall. The abused wood groaned. His vision pulsed red and it was all he could do to contain the mad, killing rage in his breast.

"Erik-" Christine's hand touched his arm. Erik jerked free from her placating grip, panting like a cornered animal. The walls pressed in on him, their wary, frightened gazes piercing him, leering at him from behind iron bars . . .

Erik surged forward, shoving past de Chagny, Christine's pleas falling on deaf ears. He needed room to breathe, to think! Couldn't they see he was suffocating? He turned out of Minette's office, hurried down a hallway, pressed a hidden panel, and disappeared.

XXX

Both she and Philippe stared at the yawning doorway, as if it could answer the riddle of where he had gone. Christine hugged herself, feeling bereft and abandoned. Erik had sucked all the air out of the room with his anger, leaving her gasping. Philippe stared perplexedly at the chair Erik had thrown as if wondering how it landed there. Christine leaned against Madame's desk to steady her wobbling knees.

"Is it true?" she whispered.

"Yes. There are records to prove it."

The world, so bright and perfect with new love this morning, now squeaked on a jerky axis around one central fact: Erik was a de Chagny. Erik was Raoul's brother. A small sound, like a wounded animal caught in a trap rose in Christine's throat. The mother that Erik had loved and hated his whole life was not his mother at all, but a twisted parasite siphoning off a man's money while she ruined his soul. Gooseflesh stippled her skin. How had the world changed so quickly?

Christine couldn't tear her eyes from the play of light on Madame's good Persian rug, swooping,
arching patterns in burnt oranges and golds with playful hints of blue. She heard the rustle of paper and Philippe slid something toward her. She looked up, blinking.

"This was in the parish register."

The words on the paper read, Registration of Birth with the names Michel Andrew de Chagny and Hélène Arianna Moreau de Chagny. Christine's heart stuttered at the sight of the name below.

"E—Erik Adoré Maxmillen de Chagny," she said aloud, tracing the bold, dark scrawl marking his birth date . . . and death date. According to the parish register, Erik Adoré Maxmillen de Chagny had only lived a handful of minutes.

"Father bribed the priest attending the birth to forge the documents. He wanted to erase even the memory of Erik's existence." He glanced down at the paper and chuckled. It wasn't a nice sound.

"Adoré, 'beloved child.' Father said that her last words were naming her son. She must have been blinded by pain and the blood pouring out of her to say such a thing about-" Christine's hand flew of its own volition, striking Philippe hard across the cheek.

"No, Philippe! You will not disrespect my husband. Not while I'm still breathing," her voice quivered with barely suppressed emotion. Erik was hers, damn it! Hers!

Philippe rubbed his tender cheek, giving her a jaundiced glare. A wry quirk of lip reminded her piercingly of Erik. God, how many of his mannerisms had she seen in Philippe and never noticed?

"You do love him, don't you?"

"Yes. Very much." Philippe nodded.

"You and Raoul would not have made a good match. Raoul needs a woman to stand behind him and adore him. Erik, I think, needs a woman to stand beside him, to lean on and share his burdens. Like what I had with my Marguerite."

Christine's fingers crawled across Madame's desk to rest atop Philippe's hand. Their hands were different, she noted, with something like relief. Erik's were pale, long-fingered and slender, speaking of dexterity and grace in every task he turned them to. Philippe's were blunt and square, like a stone worker's.

"What happens now?" she asked. Philippe snorted.

"Hell if I know, Madame Rousseau. The next move is entirely up to your husband. Not that I'm eager for him to disinherit Raoul and I and throw our mother out onto the streets, mind, but regardless, our family has done him a great wrong. Father wanted me to try and make it right. Odd that a man such as he would suffer from an attack of conscience, but he did love Hélène. Perhaps it was to honor her memory."

"He could disinherit you?" Christine asked, one hand fluttering up to the pulse at her throat. Philippe smoothed the yellowed, crinkled corner of Erik's birth registration.

"He is the eldest legitimate son of Michel de Chagny. As such, he is entitled to the Château, the lands and properties, and ten thousand francs a year. Paltry, I know, compared to his salary as Opera Ghost, but a handsome sum to most." Christine swayed, only just now realizing she had become what she had fought so hard against. She was a de Chagny.

"My God . . ." she whispered into her palm, smothering the panicked little cries that rose in her
throat. Philippe's smirk was droll.

"We could use your prayers, girl. All three of us poor, mismatched brothers."

After an hour, then two, then three had passed without Erik's return, Philippe bid her adieu. Christine pressed the thin leather briefcase to her chest, containing the proof of this wretched truth. Madame and Meg clustered around her, prying out the story in fits and spurts over tea and biscuits à la cuillère. Their shock insulated her, and she took comfort in their camaraderie.

Christine tried to smother her misery with the sweet, spongy cakes and quarts of hot tea, but the whistling hole in her chest refused to close. She didn't want to return to Erik's home beneath the Opera with all the sweet memories of their wedding night pressing on her in its cold, judgmental silence, so when Meg offered her the use of her room, Christine accepted with alacrity.

She was tired.

Philippe's news was like a lead weight around her neck, dragging her down into a world plastered with paper notices and damning words written in stark black ink. She was asleep by the time her head hit the pillow.

A gentle hand shaking her shoulder dragged her up from turbulent dreams. She rolled over to find Erik seated on the edge of Meg's narrow bed. His white mask hovered luminous in the darkness, the rest of him an indistinguishable blur. Her nostrils flared, capturing his rich, masculine scent, as well as the evanescent tang of alcohol. He sat, still as stone, waiting. Through the grey apathy anger surged up like the hot blood of the earth, and she exhaled heavily.

"This cannot go on, Erik," she said, her voice low and rough with sleep.

If he thought he could skulk back and seduce her into forgiving him, she would quickly disabuse him of that notion! She sat up, shaking off the limp grip on her shoulder. Cold air assaulted her sleep-warm limbs, pebbling her skin with gooseflesh and tightening her nipples.

"You can't just leave whenever the mood strikes you! You can't just abandon me for hours at time without a word of when you'll be back, or if you'll be back! Do you have any idea what that does to me? What that makes me feel? I hate that feeling. And I hate seeing you turn away from me!" The last was said when his face turned aside, in utter silence.

Christine rocked forward on her knees and seized his jaw, dragging his face even with hers. Her thumb stroked the dry, smooth warmth of his lower lip, feeling his abrupt intake of breath. Erik struggled onto the narrow bed, kicking off his shoes and grasping her forearms. Christine felt tears well up, tears that she had refused to shed in front of Philippe or Madame or Meg. Holy Virgin, the power this man had over her! He could rend her to pieces with a word, or a gesture, a turned back. She felt so fragile as hot tears slipped down her cheeks.

A wordless croon emanated from his throat, the rough pad of his thumb smoothing away her tears. Needing to balance the scales of vulnerability, she peeled off the mask and petted his twisted flesh. He gasped, and tried to pull back.

"Christine," he whispered, grasping her wrist. Christine held fast, leaning her forehead against his. They stayed like that for a long time, in the chilly darkness, sharing warmth and breath.

"I am your wife, Erik. Your burdens and your battles are mine." A question lingered beneath her brave assertion, a hunger for his affirmation. Was she? Was she truly the partner of his life and heart? His unfathomable heart, so full of secrets and pain.
"Christine . . ." he breathed again, warm hands encircling her throat, feeling the leap of her pulse.

His breath reeked of brandy. He had skulked off and gotten drunk with the Persian, no doubt. An irrational stab of envy pierced her at the thought. The Persian knew Erik better than she did, and it galled her. Erik moved as if to kiss her, then reconsidered, the faint brush landing mostly on her cheek. A sob rose up in her throat, her hands fisting in his coat as if to physical bar him from leaving. It was so easy for him to leave her behind . . .

"I am sorry," his rich voice murmured, "I am sorry you had the misfortune of marrying a coward." The jagged fear in her belly softened slightly, but did not dissipate. The anger was only partly mollified by the real grief in his voice.

"You're not a coward," she said sharply, irritated, "you're not! Philippe's news was a great shock to you."

"Shock or no, you are right. I should not have left. Oh Christine, I . . . I do not cope well with strong emotion."

"I've noticed," Christine pointed out dryly, her caressing fingers stroking his face to alleviate the sting of her words.

The darkness wakened her nerves to new awareness, the dips and ridges of both the smooth and rough sides of his face were sharp and vibrant beneath the pads of her fingertips. Erik snorted. His hand found hers in the dark and brought her knuckles to his lips. Silence filled the space between them.

"I was a coward. I don't deserve you," he whispered, restless fingers caressing her throat. Christine clenched her jaw, warring with the twin desires of wanting to burst into tears and to cling to her anger.

"Oh Erik, how I love you. And you deserve love, you deserve to be happy!" she whispered, kissing him gently. A soft groan escaped him and he slanted his mouth across hers, lips and tongue claiming hers in soul-shaking kiss. Christine whimpered, hands tangled in his hair, holding him close. Had he been unsure of his welcome? Her greeting had hardly set the right tone. The anger transmuted into a molten desire.

"Forgive me," he implored against her lips, kissing her again, "tell me you still love me!"

"Yes! Of course I love you, you fool man!" Christine tugged at a fistful of his hair, dragging him back down to her lips. This time, it was her lips that did the claiming. Heat bloomed through her body and a wild, savage desire longed to tear off his clothes and claim his body as hers. Whatever name he held, whatever family claimed him, he was hers, first and forever. She wanted to peel back his flesh and touch that spark inside his heart that beckoned her with its beauty.

"Don't leave me. Never again," she snarled, clawing at the buttons of his coat, waistcoat, and shirt—honestly, he wore more layers than she!—and touched the warm, hard flesh of his chest. Erik helped her shrug them off, surging forward and pressing her against the thin mattress.

"Never," he growled, grasping the hem of her shift and yanking it up over her head. Christine framed his face between her hands, staring into the formless darkness where his gaze burned.

"Please. Please don't leave me again. I couldn't bear it," she choked, hot tears trickling into her hair. Her legs wound around his waist, his hardness trapped in his trousers pressed to her molten center. A soft groan left his lips. Erik reared back, braced on his hands.
"Oh my love, forgive me! I would never hurt you. Never!" he said passionately.

His kiss was an assault, as if he too was caught in this mad fever to possess, to claim her as his own, to affirm that they were together even when the world went mad.

When he broke away to free himself from his trousers, Christine sought the warm twisted flesh of his jaw, breathing against his skin, "I know, love. I forgive you." As hotly as her anger burned, love came like a soothing rain to extinguish it.

Erik exhaled a shaky sigh, seeking her mouth again. A shudder raced through his body as he slid inside, Christine's own deep moan stifled by his lips. Delightfully stretched, primally satisfied, Christine thrust her hips up for more. Erik's moan sounded more like a whimper as he set a slow, deep pace. Deprived of her sight, the feel of him anchored so deep, the hard muscle of his shoulders moving beneath her hands, the coarse hair of his calves against hers was magnified, perfected.

"I love you. Oh . . . I love you so much!" he growled against her throat.

The thorny passion between them was incendiary and it wasn't long before it burned too hot and Erik's thrusts quickened to a pounding pace. Together, they flew together into sublime pleasure. Her lips sought his blindly in the sweaty aftermath, and he kissed her deep and sweet. He laid his head on her chest, as their breathing slowed.

"It's true, isn't it? What de Chagny said?" Erik's beautiful voice held a shy note that Christine had never heard before.

Still languid and throbbing in the aftermath of their shared pleasure, she felt pleasantly detached from the upheavals of the afternoon. In her present mood, the fact that Erik and Raoul were brothers was no more remarkable than the fact that Erik had a preference for her hair in its natural wild state, preferably knotted in his fingers or splayed across his chest.

Petting his head, she said, "Yes, love. I saw your birth certificate." She pinched the upper curve of his ear gently.

"Erik Adoré Maxmillen," she teased, striving for levity. Erik made a noncommittal sound, nuzzling her breasts.

"My . . . my mother?" Christine tightened her limbs around him, cradling his fragile heart against hers.

"Gone, Erik. She . . . she lived long enough to name you, then she died. Your mother loved you, Erik."

Not that harridan Madeline, who made it her sole duty to erode your soul, was the unspoken counterpoint. Erik stroked her sides with the barest whisper of calloused fingertips in silent understanding. A pleasant shiver raced through her.

"And my father hated me," he said. Christine exhaled heavily. There was no defense of Michel de Chagny's treatment of his sons—any of them.

"He didn't deserve you," she crooned. Erik's exhaled breath tickled her skin.

He untangled himself from her and groped through the tangled sheets for his mask. Swinging his long legs over the edge of the bed, Erik found the candle and striker on the narrow bedside table.

As Christine watched, orange sparks struck illuminating his beautiful hands. The wick caught, and
the angle lit his beloved face in ghoulis effect. He looked both ancient and eternally young, the remote angel lit in his masked side, and the echoes of the lover found in the flesh. Unconcerned with his nakedness, Erik sank into the chair next to the bed. Christine propped her head on her bent arm, watching his lithe grace with absorbed fascination. She found it telling that he felt compelled to don the mask even when bare of even as stitch of clothing. Her husband steepled his fingers and tapped his lips with his pointer fingers.

"What shall we do, my love?" he asked, quirking a brow, "There are most certainly strings attached to the acceptance of a black sheep such as myself into the impeccable de Chagny fold." he said with no small amount of bitterness.

"My . . . my father did go to rather considerable lengths to keep me hidden away and my brothers will indubitably resent being disinherited." She could find no words to soothe. Christine hated her own helplessness to assuage the injustices of his life's miseries.

Erik went on, "The courtly constraints of a Comte are abhorrent to me. I loathe high society." He leaned forward suddenly, capturing her hand in his larger one.

"I can provide for you, Christine. In our whirlwind courtship, I left out a few vital details. I am a wealthy man in my own right. My salary from the Opera was only ever a means of control, though I did use it for the manor. I have skill and wit enough for business, should I ever need occupation. You will never want for anything, I swear it." Christine's heart burst into a glorious song of love for this strong, beautiful, earnest man.

"I know. I never doubted you," she said, squeezing his hand. His eyes, now the deep, pensive hue of a moonlit lake shimmered with emotion. He bent over her hand and folded a kiss into her palm.

"I—I fear I will never welcome either of the de Chagnys with open arms. There is too much bad blood between us. But . . . I would try. For you," he breathed against her skin. The steel of his resolve shone in his eyes, throbbed in the strength of his grip. He would. For her.

"What do you want, Erik? I don't care if I am a Comte's wife, or composer's mistress or a criminal's lady. As long as I am yours, the rest is trivial." Erik's eyes slipped closed. He pressed his lips to her hand fervently.

"You are a miracle, Christine. I will never understand what I've done to earn your devotion," his voice shook and the candlelight caught the shine of tears.

"Likewise, love," she tried to keep her tone light, but a quaver betrayed her. A long, tender moment stretched between them.

"So we're mad for each other," she said, earning a soft chuckle, "but we still have not decided what to do."

"It is quite a conundrum. What's say we take a holiday to mull it over? Say, in Milan?" A shiver raced through her.

"La Scala?" she whispered. Erik grinned.

"Sí."

A romantic adventure with Erik, away from the lure of Philippe's poisoned promise sounded absolutely perfect.

"When shall we leave?"
Chapter End Notes

A note on Erik's deformity: A major flaw, I think of the 2004 Phantom movie is that they made Erik too sexy (Darn you Gerry Butler and your chiseled features!). His deformity is meant to have him shunned from the human race for his whole life, a major pathos for his character. And in the movie he had a sunburn. Really? Imagine mine as something truly gruesome and horrifying.
Erik tucked Christine into the curve of his body, nuzzling her mane of hair draped across his arm. This beautiful, precious woman, his goddess, she accepted him into her heart and embrace. The familiar burn of shame smoldered in his belly, dissipating the sweet languor of lovemaking and chasing away the lure of sleep. He had run like a coward, run and hidden in the warm safety of the Daroga's study from a truth he didn't want to face. And abandoned his wife.

This slip of a woman who was so essential to his existence, he had left her. Granted, he was unused to anyone of earth craving his presence, or wishing to seek him out to soothe his fractious moods, but still. She had bound herself to him by those sweet heavy bonds of matrimony that he thought forever beyond him.

His vow made in the heat of passion hardened into resolve.

Never again.

He would not leave unless she told him to. He nodded to himself, affirming the decision with a gentle kiss on the back of her neck. The proposed honeymoon in Milan was a pure distraction for them both. The lure of a fresh start, with no ghosts or managers or Comtes haunting them was irresistible. He tried not to think of all of his own ghosts that he carried with him, and had hidden from her. A lie by omission was still a lie, he knew that as well as any man. The Daroga's significant glances weighed on Erik's fragile conscience. His exquisite goddess would not appreciate his deception. A soft sound told him to loosen his grip. He forced the quivering muscles of his forearm to relax and soothed her with a hummed croon.

Christine slipped deeper into sleep, leaving her husband to stare hot-eyed and guilty into the darkness.


Skeletons that had each cut out a piece of him with their cold, hard bones. He couldn't forget them. They had knit themselves into his psyche.

Erik imagined bloodlessly telling her that she had bound her pristine soul to a reprehensible murderer and couldn't tolerate the betrayal that would color those beloved brown eyes. For some unfathomable reason, Christine adored him. To see that love die would be to see himself die. Yet lying to her was almost as intolerable. Philippe damn his eyes de Chagny had tidily dispelled any illusion Erik had had about wallowing in the joys of marriage without a thought for tomorrow. Fate and God conspired against him in this. As ever.

It was only as night softened into the grey of dawn that it struck him where they were. His soft laugh woke his sleeping angel. She purred and stretched, turning in his embrace and gifting him with a singularly sweet smile. Her gaze flickered over his mask, then settled on his mouth.

"What a wonderful way to awake, my love, to the sound of your laugher," she breathed, blinking slowly as her sleep-warm hand stroked his cheek. The nerves accepted Christine's ministrations with shivery joy.
"Well, if it pleases you, I shall endeavor to make it so every morning," he purred. Joy danced in her eyes.

"No, not every morning. Wouldn't want to lose the novelty of it."

Erik snorted and pressed his lips to hers. So decadent and sumptuous was that plump lower lip, as was the delicate bowed shape of the upper closing over his own, offering the sweet, hidden delights of her mouth and tongue. He slid his out in a tentative flick of greeting. Her soft sigh spoke of welcome, something so blessedly beautiful to him that he fought tears every time she made it. Gently, he broke contact and smiled.

"I sincerely hope that we did not wake the ladies Giry with our . . . activities last night." The expression of mingled shock and mortification that graced her features drew another laugh from him. She swatted his shoulder.

"Erik, you beastly man! Why didn't you stop me? Oh God, if they heard us-" with an embarrassed squeal, Christine buried her burning face in his chest.

"If I recall correctly, my angel, you were the instigator of our relations last night. To refuse you is beyond my capabilities," he purred, stroking her impossible hair. The temptation to continue this light-hearted teasing was too much to resist.

"And as I recall, you were . . . especially vocal when I-"

"Not another word, Erik Rousseau!" Christine hissed, plucking a few of his chest hairs.

"Ow!" Erik yelped, rubbing the spot, a large, stupid grin on his face. Mischief glowed in her eyes.

"Never fear, love. The ladies Giry are much too well-mannered to mention our indiscretion, even if they did hear us," he soothed, then impishly added, "Meg might wish to sleep elsewhere for a time, though."

Christine groaned.

"Oh poor Meg!" she cried, nestling into the curve of his body with a soft sigh.

Weak sunlight began its slow crawl along the carpet. Erik begrudged the dawn its light, wishing they were in the cool timeless darkness of his home where he could hold her to his heart's content.

"Come, love. We must rise." Christine murmured her assent and they braved the chill of the room as they rooted for various articles of clothing.

In the sitting room, Minette resided over a modest meal, demurely sipping tea with her cane leaning against her knee. The smell of porridge and fresh tea made Erik's stomach cramp with hunger. His wife's amorous attentions roused quite the appetite.

"Good morning, Minette," Erik said warmly. Minette's hazel eyes grazed dismissively over Erik and fixed on Christine. Erik accepted her subtle censure with grace, he deserved as much for leaving so ignominiously.

"Good morning, Minette," Erik said warmly. Minette's hazel eyes grazed dismissively over Erik and fixed on Christine. Erik accepted her subtle censure with grace, he deserved as much for leaving so ignominiously.

"Good morning, Monsieur and Madame Rousseau. I trust you rested well?" though the tone was cool and polite, Erik caught the fugitive gleam of amusement in her eyes. Christine flushed and stammered under her beloved guardian's cool regard.

"It was . . . I mean . . . we . . . Where is Meg?" Christine said at last. Now it was clear Minette was
hiding a smile as she took a decorous sip.

"Her fiancé the Baron arrived this morning. They have gone to begin planning the details of the wedding." Having sidestepped any embarrassing commentary, Christine settled on the couch beside Minette and began dividing portions. Erik's heart swelled as she so casually appropriated him a plate. It seemed like such a domestic, wifely gesture that left him feeling cosseted and cherished.

"Planning a wedding? However are they managing that? Meg told me that the Baron has no money," Christine said, frowning as she handed Erik his tea. Minette glanced sidelong at Erik and he hid his own smile in his teacup. Christine was a dab hand with lemon; the tea was perfect with no unpalatable pulp or seeds.

"The Baron, it seems, has recently come into a large sum of money. A distant relative willed him enough to see the both of them comfortable."

"Quite wealthy if the Baron has any sense to invest," Erik added with practiced nonchalance. One of Christine's fine dark brows rose. She cast a wary glance between Minette and Erik and a smile bloomed across her features.

"A distant relative, hmm? And what was this relative's name? Monsieur Spöke?" Erik snorted into his tea, both at Christine's acumen and Minette's bewildered glance.

"Something of the sort, my love," Erik replied in Swedish. The shining look Christine bestowed on him was worth every franc.

Talk ranged amiably over Meg's upcoming nuptials—planned for June, during a furlough at the Opera and would it be possible for the newlyweds to avail themselves to the manor for a short time?—and danced uneasily around Philippe's de Chagny's paradigm-altering visit, before at last alighting on their impromptu visit to Milan.

"Milan? An interview at *La Scala*? Now?" the words emerged from Minette in an odd staccato, a vexing expression falling over her features. Concern filled Erik.

"Yes, Minette. Is there something I am unaware of? Do you require my assistance?" he asked, leaning forward on the opposite settee, the cushions groaning under him. Trepidation filled him at the thought of another devastating admission. Minette's careworn face softened.

"No, Erik. Nothing is amiss. It's just that . . ." Christine's hand alighted on Minette's shoulder.

"What is it Madame?" she asked gently.

Minette looked from Christine's wide, concerned eyes to Erik's and a single tear eked past her iron will and slipped down her cheek before she dashed it away. Erik rose and settled on Minette's opposite side. In all the years he had known her, he could count on one hand how many times he had seen her weep. Something was amiss. She reached out toward them and both Erik and his wife clasped Minette's cool, strong hands, the same hands that had nurtured and soothed and scolded them through their formative years. She gave Christine a watery smile.

"It's just happening so fast . . . it seems only yesterday that I brought you here as a child. You grew up when I wasn't looking! Grown and mature and wed."

"Oh Madame . . ." Christine crooned, at a loss of what to say. Minette turned to Erik and squeezed his captive hand.
"And Erik . . . you've always been like a bird with a broken wing. I knew one day you'd fly away and never come back. But I thought . . ." she bit her lip, drawing Christine close, "I thought with her here, you would stay!"

"Minette," Erik chose the gentlest tones to inflect, the layers of warm milk and thistle down, weaving in an echo of brotherly tenderness. He cupped her cheek in a rare physical gesture between them.

"Whatever claim the de Chagny men make upon me, in my heart you are the only family I've ever had. You are my sister in the only way that matters." Before Minette could slither into a sobbing heap, Erik added dryly, "Besides, you silly woman, it's not as if we are moving away; we will return in a matter of weeks." Minette sniffed bravely, smiling through her tears.

"You always come back." He felt the warm weight of Christine's gaze, and the forgiveness there.

"You always come back," she repeated.

XXX

Christine threaded her arm through her husband's, relishing the deep sense of pleasure it afforded as they made their way along the train platform. Erik laid a possessive hand on her wrist, eyes shining. The wind ruffled his black hair, catching an odd silver strand. In the harsh daylight, the faint lines on his beloved face were more apparent. He was no less beautiful to her.

The platform was abuzz with activity, the titanic black iron of the train looming, its shrill whistle piercing the air and clouding the clear blue sky with its coal black smoke. The babble of voices rose and fell around them in a sea of sound.

Christine's eye darted this way and that in a vain attempt to take it all in. Christine only left the sheltering walls of the Opera for Mass or the occasional countryside visit with Madame and Meg. Never had she ventured beyond Paris since she was eight. A sharp-edged memory pierced her of her rootless childhood with her father. Her Papa was a fine musician, but Sweden held no joy for him with his wife gone.

So together, they had ranged far abroad, singing for their supper. Though her beloved Papa tried to shield her from the harsher realities of life with his tales and songs, Christine could still remember nights she'd spent hungry and cold. Christine clung tighter to Erik's arm, buoyed by the fission of excitement in their venture. She was young and in love and so happy she sometimes thought she would float into the clouds. That was enough.

But, as it so often did, life intruded upon her innocent happiness. More than once, Christine saw a pair of eyes linger on Erik, followed by furtive whispers. Slack-jawed children gaped, clutching their mother's skirts. A fine tremor shivered through Erik and Christine bit her lip, hating them for spoiling this perfect day with their prejudice. Erik's impetus to retreat underground away from prying eyes made perfect sense to her. She shared the same urge. The sacred quiet and cold stillness felt so safe. She wanted so much to gather him close and protect him from those cold, burning and pointing fingers. The conductor's shivering fear and obvious concern for Christine's safety as Erik bought their tickets darkened his already bleak mood.

"Maman! Maman! Look, a bandit! Shouldn't he be at the fair?" a child shouted shrilly. A barely discernible huff of breath left Erik.

"Angel," she murmured, pulling him to a stop and cupping the rigid strength of his clenched jaw. His grey-blue eyes were stormy, lines carved deep around his unsmiling mouth.
"It doesn't matter. I'm here. I don't care. I don't care," she crooned, pecking several small kisses along the flat line of his lower lip. He melted under her touch, clutching her shoulders for dear life. The whistle pierced the air and they broke apart.

Time to leave.

"Oh Erik! Who will care for César while we are away? I'm sure Madame is much too busy, and she doesn't particularly care for horses. She thinks they're-"

"Clumsy, malodorous and coarse. I believe this opinion stems from a stage pony leaving a gift for her on stage when she was the prima ballerina. A gift that she had smeared all over her new slippers," Erik drawled, his voice slightly muffled as he yanked his shirt over his head. Christine giggled.

Their car was situated near the engine and the pitch and heave of the churning steam engine was muted to a pleasant vibration beneath their feet.

"She never told me that!" she said, watching him in the age-clouded mirror of their car's cramped lavatory as she washed with the aid of ewer and basin. Her eye wandered over the broad, meaty curves of his shoulders bathed in the milky light of a frosted lamp, admiring the shadow's play on the sinews in his neck that she so loved to bite . . . The smile that graced his lips was thin and distracted.

"Ah yes. She avoids them like the plague now. Never fear, my love. I left César in the Daroga's capable hands. I daresay César will enjoy himself. The Daroga has found several very fine mares for César to stand at stud. With any luck, we shall have a foal or two come spring."

As he spoke, Erik scrubbed a soaped cloth underneath his arms and across his chest. The dining car had been abominably hot, the food a congealed mess and the company additionally atrocious. Pointed stares and whispers abounding. As a result, the pair of them returned from supper flushed, sticky and irritable. Their car's windows were opened as much as possible to let in the night's bracingly cold air.

"That is wonderful," Christine murmured, finishing her ablutions and tying the knot in her deep blue robe.

"When I was a child, before we left Sweden, Papa bought me a pony for my sixth birthday. I named her Sugar Lump. That was her favorite treat. Lumpy was such a fine pony." Erik's visible brow arched.

"Lumpy?" he repeated, his silken voice tasting the word like a sweet morsel. Christine ducked her head, smoothing a lock of her unruly hair. Her mane of curls did not agree with the heat either, and was doing its level best to stand on end.

"I was six. Papa always indulged me." Erik's finger curled beneath her chin, drawing her gaze level with his.

"It was not my intention to mock you, love. Tell me about . . . Lumpy." Christine nuzzled his hand and sank onto the padded bench along one wall.

The constant motion of the rail took some adjustment; Christine felt the jellied mess of the **coq au vin** liquefy in her heaving stomach. Erik slid gracefully to his knees, clasping her hands.

"Are you feeling unwell, Christine?" she managed a weak smile. She must look like quite the mess. She bid the thought of lovemaking a fond farewell.
"I'll be fine. A bit nauseous is all." Erik hummed a sympathetic noise. She groped for the thread of the story to steady her.

"We had many adventures, Lumpy and I. At one point, I even dreamed she was my mother and I had been trapped on two legs by an evil spell. My beautiful flowing mane was now an ugly mop and my strong forelegs were replaced with flimsy hands."

"I love your hair," Erik murmured, turning her palm over and dropping a warm kiss on the center of her palm, then the inside of her wrist, "your hands too." Christine stifled a discreet shudder at his casual purring.

"Did you ever pretend that way?" she asked, mesmerized by the damp, velvety caress of his lips on the delicate skin of her wrist. He paused his determined worship of her wrist and looked up at her. This smile was stiff and sad. A large, warm hand cupped her cheek. She nestled against it, steeling herself for another of Erik's heartbreaking stories.

"Christine, before you, my life was . . . difficult. My stories do not have happy endings." Humor darted across his expression, fleeting and precious.

"I would much rather hear of your adventures with Lumpy." Christine snorted.

"I won't press you, Erik. I couldn't stand to be another one of those people, staring and poking and prodding at you. But . . . but I want so much to know more about you. Warts and all." He surged close and kissed her.

"You are different just being who you are. I will tell everything you wish to know. Later."

The next kiss found her smiling lips and Christine floated, fell into his embrace.
Chapter Notes

Smut.

Song Take Flight

One of Christine's stipulations for this adventure was that first they must stop and explore the manor house that Erik had spent so many years improving.

"It's not finished yet," Erik said, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably. In his dreams, he swept Christine into the door in early May, when the trees were in blossom and the wide windows were flung open to let in the perfumes of the gardens . . . he did not envision scaffolding on the main facade where Erik carved whenever he had a spare minute, or the frigid tomb of winter making the gardens a forest of sad brambles. The time he spent here grieving over her supposed betrayal with the Vicomte—his brother! A ghastly thought!—left a foul taste in his mouth and it had been weeks since he had come to work. Christine gifted him with a bright smile.

"I don't care, Erik! I'm sure it is beautiful. If you had a hand in building it, I know I will love it."

Her honest faith in him stung. Last night's innocent comment about wishing to know more about him sank into his skin like drops of acid. Christine did not know who she had tied herself to and every day that passed made burden more unbearable.

Since the fiasco with the so-called master mason, Erik had dismissed the staff, including the timid and pungent Monsieur Durand. To have the space free of their noise and whispers more than made up for the lack of creature comforts such as hot water or a fresh meal. Despite these warnings, Christine eagerly insisted, giggling like a little girl as they hailed a brougham cab from the train station. Erik found her joy uplifting and watched her adoringly as the cab bumped down the rutted track that had temerity to be called a road. He would treasure every second with her.

"Here we are," he said as they arrived, "the Rousseau Manor."

XXX

If Christine had been hard-pressed to envision the home of her dreams, it would have resided in the dark forests of her childhood home in Sweden. But upon seeing the graceful manor nestled in a cozy grove of trees, the simple, weather-beaten walls of a cottage with a pony munching hay in a lean-to vanished. The smooth columns held aloft a façade alive with carvings. Windows pierced strong walls with light. The whole house breathed of gracious welcome and idyllic beauty. Carved and built and restored with his own hands. Even shrouded in winter's veil, she felt a sense of belonging. Erik's angelic voice sought to fill the windswept silence between them.

"As I said, it isn't finished. I still have to-"

"It's beautiful," she said, breathlessly, fighting tears. She wanted to run inside, surrounded by the tangible remnant of Erik's embrace and stay there forever. Christine hastily dashed her tears, embarrassed by the unnamable upwelling of emotion. There was always something of the child who missed the home in the forest and the tidy plot where her mother was buried. The years and
miles that separated Christine from that moment eased the unsung grief.

This was home.

"Y—you . . . you like it?" her husband said nervously. Christine flew into his arms, kissing him.

"Yes!" he laughed—oh, it was such a beautiful sound, Christine swore the birds stopped singing to listen!—and cradled her face between his hands. The unadulterated adoration in his eyes made her heart caper and dance.

"Would you like to see more?" Christine's answer was another kiss.

They roamed, hand in hand from room to room, Erik's voice filling the halls with its beauty. His chosen words were like poetry, creating a world from the mists of imagination and chaining them to reality. Christine saw as he saw, the room where they would create music together, a parlor where she and Meg would sew and giggle and banter as they had in Madame's rooms, the terrace where they would eat breakfast each morning with the sun washing over them and sip lemonade from the fruits of their own grove. And a whispering undercurrent wove their way into his words that spoke of children. Her heart gave a sweet little lurch imagining a wild-haired daughter with his eyes, or a black-haired son with his angel's voice.

He even guided her up the scaffolding to show her his carvings of roses and nightingales soaring over a sylvan scene. With Erik's arms around her, Christine wasn't afraid. No, today the world was bright and alive with joy and promise. They sat together on the scaffolding, legs drawing idle circles in the open air, Christine with her head pillowed on his shoulder, watching the dancing beams of sun peeking through the patchy clouds. Despite Erik's warm arm around her and the drape of his cape, Christine began to shiver.

"Come, love. I know of an exceptionally large bed where you are always welcome," Erik purred. That sentence made Christine's toes curl in anticipation.

"Hmm. Sounds delightful."

Their bedroom was one of the only fully furnished and completed rooms. Christine had a faint impression of sumptuous appointments and walls papered in a deep, soothing green, but with Erik's lips on her skin, she rapidly ceased caring about the decor. A skylight at the apex of the domed room bathed the barge of a bed in light. Christine attacked the knots at his cravat, then smoothed his coat from his shoulders, loving the strength she found there.

Mouths locked in a delicious, ravenous clinch, Christine snaked her hand beneath his shirt, lightly dragging her nails over his taut belly before yanking the shirt over his head. He was a study in contrasts, her husband, her lover, her Angel. Erik turned her to face the bed, seizing her waist and straining her back against his warm, hard body and straining cock.

"Christine," he breathed. Oh, she felt like a goddess when he said her name like that!

His deft hands plucked at the buttons of her dress and loosened her corset. Even free from that constricting garment, her breaths came in soft pants, hands kneading the dark, downy coverlet of their bed. A study in contrasts. The same man who would scorn humanity and seek a dark den levels beneath the earth, built this open, sunny home.

For her.

At last, the last lace was free and Christine shoved the whole assemblage of gown and corset down. Erik uttered a savage groan finding her still clothed in shift and petticoats.
"I want you," he rasped in her ear, pausing his fevered undressing to grind his cock against her buttocks. Mmm, there was none of the angel now, but a man, raw with need. Christine whimpered, arching back toward him, delirious with the melting heat spreading from between her thighs.

"Take me then," she said, moaning as he pressed damp, open-mouthed kisses to the skin of her neck.

"Up on the bed," he commanded. Christine eagerly obeyed, rolling on her back. She wet her lips in anticipation at the dark god who shoved off his trousers and parted her thighs with one insistent knee.

"Christine," he breathed her name like a prayer, pepperling her face with light, sipping kisses. Erik attacked the laces of her petticoats and sending the layers of flounce to join his clothing on the floor. He rucked up her shift, bunching the muslin above her breasts. Her nipples pebbled in the cold air. Erik stopped all manner of grinding and kissing and simply . . . stared. There was a pensiveness in his eyes that she didn't care for. Christine reached up and peeled the mask from his face. The rough, pitted skin rasped her palm as she attempted to tug his head down to hers.

"Why do you love me?" he demanded, turning his lips into her palm. A low, throaty moan escaped her lips as his long, warm fingers toyed with her molten core. His callused thumb rasped her swollen nub as one finger, then two slid inside. Christine clenched her thighs together around his knee, hips surging in time with those delicious thrusting fingers. What was he saying . . . ? How was she supposed to think or even breathe when he touched her this way? The sun blazed through the skylight, blinding her.

"Why do you love me, Christine?" Erik's hoarse voice breathed in her ear, accompanied by his lips and tongue doing something sinfully wonderful to her earlobe.

"Erik, please . . ." she whimpered. His fingers left her, and in a blur of pleasure-softened motion, Erik rolled onto his back, pulling her atop him.

"Take me," he growled, his fingers wet with the dew of her pleasure cooling on her hip. Desire blurred and frayed the edges of her thoughts. All she could think was that she wanted him. Now. A few abortive attempts of her hips and finally, that long, slow plunge inside. . . they shared a rabid groan of animal pleasure. As she rode him, Christine watched sweat dew on the planes of his face, the rapt expression he wore. A study in contrasts, she thought, his face half twisted, half whole, but altogether beautiful to her. She loved his intelligence, his kindness, the hunger and hope of a battered heart. She loved it all. How could she tell him so and have him believe her? In their lovemaking, Erik had always held a degree of control over himself, a dedication to her and her pleasure. Now he groaned and arched beneath her. The cords of his neck stood out, his trembling hands guiding the depth and angle of penetration.

"Angel . . . Angel . . . Angel . . ." he chanted, mindless in ecstasy, "you're so beautiful. Oh God, I love you! I worship you!" the words combined with the sight of him so undone, so wild with the pleasure she alone had given him soaked her brain in fire and she flew, her body convulsing in paroxysms of pleasure. Christine was dimly aware of Erik flipping her on her back, pumping frantically towards his own release.

"I love you. I love you!" he roared as he spurted his seed. The sensation sent Christine into another earth-shattering release.

They collapsed in a sweaty tangle of limbs. Christine dropped gentle kisses on his throat and
shoulder, luxuriating in his weight and warmth. The cold air soon assaulted them as sweat cooled and Erik guided her under the coverlet. Christine snuggled against his side and breathed in his spicy masculine scent mixed with the earthy leavings of their efforts and considered herself supremely content.

XXX

Erik gasped for breath, feeling as if heart and breath and life had been sucked from him. One thought penetrated the pleasure-soaked fog he floated in.

She needed to hear it. She had to. He resolved to himself.

"I need to tell you something." his voice sounded strange. Choked. Warbling. Not unlike the seventeen-year-old boy who had nearly robbed Giovanni that night in Rome.

"Hmm? What is it?" her sweet voice was sweet and soft, like a frayed edge of silk. Erik sat up and looked at her. God, she looked so beautiful with her mouth red and swollen from his kisses, her hair in glorious disarray, the musky scent of their mingled pleasure rising from the bedclothes. She deserved his trust. He had promised never to leave again. And he wouldn't. Not unless she asked him to.

"It's about . . . what I . . . How I was . . . it's about my past," he stuttered, seeing the concern and apprehension dance across her beloved features. She reached for his hands and squeezed encouragingly.

"Tell me." Erik looked down at their braided fingers, and saw the sparkle of her wedding ring. He heaved a shaky sigh.

"I'm afraid. Christine," he said, breaking off to chafe her hand between his, treasuring it with kisses.

"If you only knew what I have done . . ." His adored wife rocked up onto her knees, an unaccustomed pugnaciousness stiffening her features. Her shift fell back into place, hiding the tantalizing distraction her naked body was to him.

"I don't care what you have done in the past. I love the man you are, and I'm sure I will love the man you were." Her tone was crisp, matter of fact, so like Minette he grinned, despite feeling like he had swallowed broken glass.

Courage man!

His self-loathing rose up.

"I'm not a good man, Christine. Don't you know how I lusted after you when you were no more than a child? Barely bleeding and I wanted you! Is that not the action of a monster?" He raked his hand through his hair, trying to temper his thundering heartbeat. Christine flinched uncomfortably.

"And de Chagny? My brother? I would have killed him. I fantasized about it, a hundred times over. Certainly not the actions of a kind and benevolent Angel!"

He was at war with himself. The selfish, grasping part urged him to keep his mouth shut and wallow in her love like a fat cat in a sunny windowsill. The smaller, louder part berated him for being such a coward and urged him to do his duty and tell the cold, hard truth. The words flew out before a decision had been fully formed in his mind. Christine was composed, attentive, calm, her grip on his hands warm and strong. How was she taking this so well?
"I have killed, Christine. And I’m very good at it." Horrible silence stretched on and on in minutes of tiny agonies. Her calm facade cracked the slightest bit, revealing an edge of raw fear.

"Was it Giovanni’s daughter?" she whispered.

Erik flinched as if she had electrically shocked him. What . . .? How . . .? He blinked at her wide-eyed face bathed in the sun's loving rays.

"Where did you hear that name?" he asked, striving for a neutral tone.

"Raoul. When I returned the ring he gave me, he said Philippe had told him that you k—killed a girl in Rome. The daughter of a stone mason named Giovanni—Erik you're hurting me!" Erik instantly loosened his grip, rubbing her hands in solicitous apology as he dissected the de Chagny whelp's newest slander against him.

"What rumors did he repeat?" Inwardly, he congratulated himself. No childish outbursts or storming out. Perhaps there was hope for him.

"He said that you killed her when she refused to share your bed." Her words emerged in a rush, but no less devastating for the brevity in which they were uttered. Erik threw back his head and laughed, a cold, withered thing that tasted of desolation. He was unsure what he hated more: that the de Chagny boy had concocted such an outlandish story or that Christine had ostensibly believed him.

"What really happened Erik?" Erik watched her through slitted eyes.

"What do you think happened?" he demanded.

"I don't know what to think!" she said, shaking off his grip and clambering off the bed, "You say you are a terrible, depraved person, you won't believe me when I say I love you. What am I supposed to think?" her voice escalated until she was shouting the last phrase, stamping her foot.

"You don't know who it is you think you love," he said gently.

"Because you refuse to tell me!" she shrieked, anguish twisting her features. A similar anguish was gnarled up in his heart, a reflection of hers.

"I'll tell you then. No, I didn't kill the girl. Luciana, she thought she loved me; she wanted to see my face and forced me to remove the mask. She so utterly reviled me that she ran away screaming and fell as the railing crumbled." Erik sucked down a breath of cool air, reminding himself that he was not on that hot roof in Rome. He felt bereft and lonely without Christine's presence in their bed.

"I did not kill Luciana, but I have killed others. Many others. I was the shah's finest assassin and most clever torturer in Persia."

Shock rippled across his wife's features and Erik forged on, driving his point home.

"I am a murderer, a liar, an extortionist, a morphine addict and not entirely sane. God help me, I couldn't bear to tell you. I couldn't stand to see you hate me."

A heartbeat later, Erik found himself pressed against the pillows with Christine sprawled on top of him, pinning his arms to the pillows and stifling any more words with her drilling gaze. Smitten fool he was, he admired how the sunlight caught ruby highlights in her mane of hair. So beautiful.

"I could never hate you," she whispered, before kissing him. With a groan, Erik kissed her back,
stroking her tongue with his. He tasted salt, from her tears and his. It was a sweet, cleansing flow, of acceptance that Erik had never dared contemplate. Hope tantalized him like a ripe peach and he could almost sink his teeth in and take a juicy bite of it. Soon, the kiss tapered in a series of decadent caresses.

"I'm not stupid, you know," Christine breathed, her voice husky and her breath warm on his face, "I knew when I married you that you had a past. An ugly one. I have seen you with the morphine, remember? I've seen your scars and knew how well you can fight." Joy and hope, his enemies for so long, now greeted Erik like old friends. He laughed.

"I'm a right fool, aren't I?" Christine's lips melded with his in another lingering kiss.

"Yes, but I love you anyway."

An indeterminate time later, spent kissing and gazing adoringly at each other, Erik was struck by a sudden thought and tried valiantly to bestir himself from this languor.

"We should go if we want to catch the train to Milan."

"No Erik, let's stay," Christine said, combing his hair back to pay special attention to the skin just behind and below his right ear. Erik sucked in a gasp through his teeth and shook himself free of the passion threatening to overwhelm his thoughts.

"Stay?" Erik frowned at her.

"But what about your career? La Scala? I thought you wanted this." Christine smiled, dropping a kiss on his brow.

"I do love to sing, but I could do without the squabbling and intrigues and strife that goes along with it. I know I can be happy here. With you." She laid her hand over his heart.

"This is home."

"Christine," Erik whispered, drawing her down for a reverent kiss, "I am in awe of you."
Christine broke the surface into consciousness to the sound of birdsong and the steady thump of Erik's heartbeat under her ear. One eye cracked open to take in the sky through their skylight, muddled pink streaked with rust as daybreak approached. At the Opera House, she was used to the soft sounds of communal sleep in the dormitories, or the still, dripping silence of Erik's home. Here, nature reached out and enfolded them. Birdsong, the faint rattle of a tree branch scratching a window, the soft creak and sigh of the house settling onto its foundation, rooted in the bones of the earth.

Home.

Home was in this house, with this man. This man who had lived a dark, lonely life filled with strife and horror. This man who still found the generosity of heart to offer her the world as his solemn promise. After his revelation last night, he had watched her with a sort of restrained desperation, as if waiting for her to suddenly decide she didn't want him.

"Idiot," she murmured affectionately, snuggling closer to him under the coverlet.

She found it telling that Erik did not even stir at her utterance, but snored on in blissful repose, his naked face a microcosm of the life he had led—beauty melded with repugnance, peace married to discord.

In the night he had turned to her and made love to her with something akin to worship, seeking her pleasure with the single-minded focus he usually only reserved for his music. He wove promises of love and devotion together in every language he knew, sealing them with the hot brand of his kiss and the spilling of his semen.

Christine was uncomfortably aware that sometime in the last twenty-four hours Erik had raised her to level of deity, and lowered himself to humble acolyte. Simple acceptance was tantamount to salvation, empathy taken for absolution. It struck a painful chord in her heart to see a man as great and proud as her husband so utterly destroyed by unconditional love. Her thoughts began to soften and fray, Erik's warmth coaxing her back down into sleep. Christine vowed that she would spend every day of their life together ensuring that he knew he deserved it.

XXX

Changes within a heart come slow, like the quickening of sap within the heart of a slumbering tree at the first lengthening days of spring.

Christine. His wife, his goddess, his savior, she was determined to save him with her unique mixture of love, exasperation and sheer stubbornness.

The Rousseau Manor did not stay quiet for long; soon the rooms were filled with the laughter and conversation engendered by sporadic visits from the ladies Giry and the Daroga, not to mention the unobtrusive labors of the assorted staff Erik hired. A sheepish Jacques Durand returned to his position, in awe of the woman who had single-handedly turned the formerly beastly employer into a gentleman.

Erik floated through time and space, feeling like a younger, less jaded man. More than one
morning, he woke his wife with kisses and together they shared a decadent breakfast ensconced in their bed. Their days were spent restoring the manor. Oh, that impossible dream he treasured through long years of isolation had come true! She was here! Not only here, but working alongside him. Though the work would have been completed faster with hired men, Erik scorned them. He wouldn't trade the firm, quiet pleasure he felt in seeing her with her hair bound up and an adorable smear of paint on her nose, or how she bit her lower lip when she concentrated for anything.

Evenings held a quiet meal, bathed in candlelight and the glow of fine wine and conversation. Sometimes they would indulge the deepest craving of their souls and twine their voices into a single entity of living beauty. Sometimes, they would curl up on the couch before a roaring fire and Erik would read aloud to her. Erik loved those moments. He loved the weight of her head against his arm as he toyed with her hair, the soft caress of her breathing against his throat, the press of her knee against his thigh. Years ago, Erik thought the simple satisfaction of his work would be the highest pinnacle of emotion he would ever attain after the twisted spiral of darkness Persia had wrought. Now, he was happy, ebullient even.

Erik marked the page in Hugo's aptly titled *The Wretched*, and dropped a kiss on Christine's forehead.

"To bed, love," he whispered.

Sleepy brown eyes opened, a soft smile touching her lips. Her arms reached for him like a child and Erik scooped her up, the sheer inertia of his love longing to pull her into him where she would be cherished and protected. The fire had crumbled into a heap of glowing coals that radiated heat against his back. Christine hummed softly, nuzzling his chest. His wife reminded him of a cat when she was tired, limp-limbed and purring, twining around him in sleepy affection.

"Dance with me," Christine's sweet voice was deliciously husky with sleep, her beauty made all the more beguiling as shadow and light fought for purchase on her features.

Erik chuckled, obligingly sliding his hand down her arm to drape around her waist, her body warm and firm and slender underneath her flannel dressing gown. Her other hand twined with his, coming to rest under his chin.

They swayed in honeyed silence, washed in the heat of the fire and the solace found in each other's embrace. Erik pressed his cheek against the crown of her head and breathed in the scent of her hair. Violets, linen and a faint tang of clean sweat. A sweet thrill ran through him when her hand wormed into the warm space between his shirt and his back. Long, soothing strokes along his back that sent a fission of pleasure up his spine.

"I'm not perfect, you know," she murmured, after a while.

Lulled into a state of almost somnolent bliss, it took a moment for Erik to formulate a response. He smiled into her hair.

"I would contest that, darling." The intent was to flatter and please, but Christine rested her chin on his chest, looking up at him with liquid dark eyes that seemed to swallow him whole.

"I'm not," she said more firmly.

Erik sobered, drawing her out into an effortless twirl before drawing her back into his embrace.

"What brought this about, love? Was it that maid's blather? That is just petty gossip. They've heard stories of the masked man who owns the manor, and naturally are a bit curious about the lady he
brings home. Especially such a beautiful lady who, by all notable accounts, has utterly changed the demeanor of said masked employer." Christine's smile was nothing more than a token curving of lip and Erik knew he was off the mark. What else could be bothering her?

All trace of sleep left her features and she watched his face with hawk-like intensity.

"It's you, Erik. You think I'm perfect, that I'm some goddess and it's not true. I'll fail you and I'm terrified I'll break your heart when I do!" Erik stopped dancing, gripping her upper arms gently.

"I can't help but worship you, Christine. You, who have accepted all of the atrocities I've committed in my life and still . . ." his voice broke, still shaken and disbelieving that such a thing would be possible for him.

"And still look at me as someone worthy of your love," he whispered, cradling her face between his hands.

"I am not under the delusion that you are indeed a celestial being, but I find your love miraculous, your kisses divine ecstasy and your simple existence a credit to whether or not there is a God." Erik kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her eyelids.

"I know you're not perfect, Christine. You are human, and by definition, fallible. But I worship you nonetheless." Christine twined her arms around his neck, still frowning. Suddenly, her expression cleared into one of beatific radiance.

"Very well then. If you're determined to worship me, I'll just have to worship you back." Erik opened his mouth to protest his own unworthiness when Christine stopped him with the simple expedient of kissing him.

"Turnabout is fair play, hmm?" Erik drawled when they pulled away flushed and breathless. Christine laughed, a husky sound that promised a world of decadence.

"To bed, love," she said, taking his hand.

XXX

The queue outside the Populaire was shaping up to be a fine matinee showing of the evening's performance of Robert le Diable, Firmin thought. His mood, which of late had been shifting between a state of ulcer-aggravating stress and equally disruptive drunken revelry, swooped up into something almost cheerful. Since the Don Juan disaster where he and André had to refund a full house when they found their only lead tenor locked in a closet and their leading soprano refused to go on unprepared, Firmin saw the debts mount and wondered if André's desire to foray into the sophisticated would be the ruin of both of them. But now that both that madman Rousseau and the troublesome Miss Daae had disappeared, things were starting to look up.

Firmin accepted the morning's post from the steward inside the Populaire's door, flipping through the financial notices, newsletters and André's subscription to a wine periodical. He stopped his progress up the main stair at the sight of the hated, all-too-familiar envelope bearing the red wax seal in the shape of a skull. Firmin would have been tempted to rip it into shreds if his hands weren't shaking so badly.

Stuffing the envelope in his vest pocket, he scaled the remaining stairs two at a time, drawing a couple curious glances from the cleaning staff. His breath came in hard pants as he ducked into one of the alcoves and revived the smothered lamp. His heart was thundering and a warning gurgle in his belly told him his bowels weren't willing to cooperate with this nonsense again either.
"What does the bastard have to say now?" Firmin muttered.

As far as Firmin knew, the thrice damned O.G. was a free man. The Vicomte de Chagny had abruptly withdrawn all charges—along with his patronage to the Opera. Heart in his throat, he tore open the silky paper and shuddered a little at the sight of that familiar slanting script. He read the note once in disbelief, then again as disbelief sharpened into suspicion. By the third read, Firmin was tilting the vellum toward the light to search for some hidden caveat, some snarky postscript negating the previous statement.

The black ink remained resolute:

Gentlemen,

I offer my fondest regards and dearest hopes for your continued health. My wife, Christine Rousseau nee Daae, has discovered a change in heart. She does not wish to return to the Opera Populaire for the spring season as lead soprano, or in any other capacity. Therefore, my capacity as composer is also rendered null. Utilize the francs designated for my salary for another equally important task, such as your outstanding debts, Richard. The last tally was forty-thousand three hundred and twenty, was it not?

I remain, gentlemen, your most obedient servant,

Erik Rousseau, O.G.

"I'll be damned," he murmured. The manager carefully tucked the note back into its envelope and grinned. As he left the alcove and made his way to his office, the grin turned into a smile, and then a hoarse, cawing laugh.

"I'll be damned!" he wheezed.

XXX

Winter's grip had begun to loosen when Erik mustered the courage to throw off the last shackle encumbering him. Evening saw them in their bedroom, preparing for bed.

"Throw them in the fire," he commanded, offering Christine a small leather case. Christine unbuckled the case and a small flinch of loathing raced through her at the sight of his morphine, needles and tourniquet.

"I haven't used in thirteen hours," Erik said, offering a trembling hand for her perusal. Her eyes widened in understanding. The reason for his surliness, his agitation and anxiety was suddenly clear. Setting the loathed case aside, Christine stood and took his unsteady hand, kissing the palm. She frowned, that endearing little line creasing between her brows.

"Are you sure you're ready? Should we write to Madame? Or . . . fetch a doctor, perhaps?" Erik smile was more a grimace. His nose had been running like a faucet for said thirteen hours and he paused to sniffle into his damp handkerchief.

"Minette doesn't know. I'm certain she has her suspicions, but I would rather not expose her to this. Modern medicine as yet is woefully unprepared to assist me. If it would ease your mind, we should write to the Daroga. He has . . . experience with such matters." Erik skittered vaguely around the memory of Persia and the khanum's drugs. Christine nodded.

"I would like someone else here. In case . . . in case something goes wrong," she said, a wealth of dread underlining the word 'wrong'.

Erik forced a reassuring smile, all the while howling at the thought of waiting the two days necessary for the Daroga to arrive. Morphine had created a demon inside him and even now it wished to tear the case from Christine's hands and plunge that sweet, sweet relief into his veins. Relief, numbness, peace . . . that was what the white demonness promised, opening her silken arms to embrace him.

"I am sure it's not as bad as all that, love. Chances are you and the Daroga will have time to catch up on your gossip and needlepoint watching me sleep."

Erik knew that was a lie. The few times his supply had been interrupted or he had tried to wean himself off completely, all of his viscous, ugly impulses seemed entirely reasonable in pursuit of his fix. He was torn between the desire to send Christine away to hide this unpleasantness from her and the desire—no, need—to have her near. He needed her to sew the tattered pieces of his sanity, to hold the shards of his heart, to continue existing in any useful fashion.

Beneath the doubt and questioning was the unshakable need to stop. The morphine would kill him. It was poison with an insidious potential to hurt what he loved most. Unacceptable. Erik heaved a sigh and swayed. Christine grasped handfuls of his shirt and together they sat heavily on the couch. Christine's small hands gently pressed at his shoulders and he obediently slid sideways until his head was pillowed on her lap. The headache that rasped against the inside of his skull like waves pounding against cliffs and the ache the pervaded his every muscle eased the slightest bit as Christine gently stroked his hair.

"We will wait for Nadir," Erik murmured, nuzzling her thigh. Christine kissed his temple.

"Thank you," she breathed in his ear, and he knew it just wasn't for waiting.

To the ease of them both, Nadir was all business when he arrived, as somber and competent as a soldier in his black garb and traditional sash. He helped Erik move a pallet into his and Christine's bedroom and spread it before the fire. A puzzled Monsieur Durand had skillfully sequestered the staff at the other end of the manor, at Christine's rather vague request.

"There were many opium dens in Persia," Nadir explained to Christine in his dry, matter-of-fact tone, "as chief of police, I often imprisoned addicts and thus, am very familiar with the effects and treatment of withdrawal." He grinned.

"I must admit I am impressed. I have been badgering Erik for over twenty years to quit that foul stuff, and here you are making it seem easy."

"It was Erik's decision, Monsieur. I had no part in it," Christine said frostily.

Erik arched a brow. He knew Christine held Erik's Persian friend in a strange sort of polite animosity. To what end and for what reason, neither Erik nor Nadir could fathom. For all Erik knew, their interactions had been limited to their wedding, and perhaps a half dozen exchanges since. Nadir had been the soul of kind verisimilitude.

"Of course, Madame Rousseau, and I commend him for finding the courage," Nadir replied, without mockery.

"Enough!" Erik snapped, all but falling onto the pallet. A dreadful weakness filled him, his body rebelling against him. Unified in their concern for him, his wife and friend flanked either side.

"Love, are you all right?" Erik hated the frightened edge to Christine's voice. Erik tried to smile, reaching out to cup her cheek.
"Fine, my love. Just weak. I'll be all right." He slanted a narrow glare at Nadir, whose swarthy face was composed and calm. This relaxed some hidden knot in Erik's belly.

"Make yourself useful, Daroga, and brew some tea. Eastern hospitality and all that, hmm?"

XXX

The hours ticked by at a pace that seemed both agonizingly slow and blindingly swift to Christine. Erik grew progressively weaker and less coherent as the hours wore on, and even as the fire dewed his skin with a film of perspiration, she could see his pallor and the effort he put into maintaining the disguise of his usual urbane, charming self. This was for her sake. Christine threw a hot glance at the Persian—no, he was Erik's closest friend, she should call him Nadir, or Monsieur Kahn, at the very least. Her husband, she knew, trusted this man completely, even more than Madame Giry whose love he cherished with a careful, almost fragile regard.

At long last, after the clock struck one in the morning, Erik slipped into an uneasy sleep. Christine knelt beside him and dropped a kiss on his fever-hot forehead. The unbearably vulnerable skin of his eyelids twitched and rolled in the throes of a dream. His shivering unnerved her and she wrapped the flannel blanket more securely around him. She returned to her chair and her tea, finding the Persian's dark eyes resting on her. She saw empathy, respect and a glimmer of hurt swim there. For all his guarded, taciturn nature, Monsieur Khan had not mastered the full battery of Erik's impenetrable poise. Christine bit her lip.

"I'm horribly jealous of you, you know," she murmured, tilting her teacup to admire the perfect disc of a lemon slice floating like a barge in the center.

"Oh? Why is that?" his tone was even as he too inspected his tea as if it held all the answers of the universe.

"You were there for him in the darkest point of his life when I wasn't. You know him in a way I cannot because he won't tell me. And I hate it," she addressed her lemon wedge. A smothered chuckle roused her attention and Christine looked up to find his amusement disarmingly genuine.

"You mustn't fear for your hold on Erik's heart. I am simply the friend he tolerates, and you . . . you are the wife he adores. Your shared history is no little thing. He was your tutor for what, eight years?"

"Ten," she corrected. Monsieur Kahn forged on.

"Erik spent seven in Persia. You have me beat."

"It's not that," Christine said sharply, "and you're more than tolerated, Monsieur. Erik trusts you more than anyone, even me." Erik trusted the Persian with the truth of his darkness, his face and his past. Monsieur Kahn sobered, setting his teacup on the side table.

"Forgive me for making light of your concerns, Madame Rousseau, however ridiculous they may seem to me. I am aware, and treasure Erik's continued friendship, it was nearly all I had left when we chose to leave Mazanderan. But you must believe me, Christine, when I say that Erik had little choice in trusting me with his secrets. As the shah's chief of police, I was assigned as his guardian and guide during his time in the palace. The morphine, the truth of his deformity, and the nature of his employment to the shah's mother the khanum were all byproducts of a rather dangerous political climate of which we were both pawns."

Christine digested his words, studying her husband's strong profile tenderly. The stone of jealousy
that rested hard and hot in her stomach dissolved.

"I see. Well, I suppose I'll have to learn to like you."

The silence that descended between them softened and stretched into warm camaraderie, but any vestige of good feeling vanished into jagged terror as Erik descended into thrashing, muttering delirium.

XXX

Erik wandered through dungeons of black despair, a prison of his own making, down, down down that path into darkness . . . All his demons rose at once to torment him.

Sir, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do it! I didn't! Christine! Christine, don't leave!

Pain, loneliness, lust, murder, jealousy . . . sin coated him, a curse from the day he was born. Conceived in sin, raised in hate, baptized in blood. That was what he was! Wasn't it? Once, his Master was Death. Killing was like riding a bicycle, one never really lost the knack . . . A voice called his name through the darkness.

Christine? He was hers. All hers. The good, pure pieces of his bruised, tattered soul, as well as the diseased, lustful carcass. The hand that cupped his head was callused and hard, the taste that seared his tongue was laudanum. No! No more! No more would he be imprisoned by the sweet shackles of oblivion. Morpheus would find another slave!

He screamed until he had no voice, wracked with fiery agony. As he lay there, Erik recognized Prometheus as a kindred spirit. It was not his liver that was eaten, but his heart. Ever broken, ever healing. Ever hungry, ever hopeful. Once the darkness had been kind, hiding his ugliness. Now, it tortured him with the shades of what was, and what could have been.

At times, his heart thundered, seeming fit to burst from his chest. Eager to seek its mistress. Not here, in this darkness, but above in the light . . . Hope seared his heart with its unbearable promise.

The pain ravaged through him like a marauding ghost, muscles cramped, his bowels turned to water, his bones felt split open, hot salty marrow seeping into his tissues. Cold washed over him. The lake! He'd fallen into the lake, sinking down into the icy abyss where the demons waited. Try to kill me, will You? I'll not make it easy! He shouted at the God Christine loved. Erik fought, but only mired himself deeper.

Fear sank deep into him.

Such terrible fear!

Erik opened his eyes, and breathed his first breath of freedom.
Rousseau Manor

France

1882

Erik Rousseau sat in the May sunshine, sipping lemonade as he read the newspaper. Beside him, Christine was absorbed in the latest missive from one Baroness de Castelot-Barbezac, her morning meal forgotten and cooling on the plate. Erik arched a brow as Christine periodically broke the morning’s symphony of sighing wind and the twitter of birdsong with a chuckle or muttered exclamation.

"Something amusing, love?" Erik drawled. He was assaulted with the now-familiar pleasure of her brown eyes meeting his, sparkling with humor and affection. Erik indulged in letting his eyes roam possessively over her form clad in a gown of silvery grey, the bodice loose over the swell of her pregnant belly. Christine brandished the fine vellum.

"It's nothing, love. Meg is just telling me of some foolishness Angeline and Charles got into at the Opera."

Erik's smirk spread into a smile of genuine pleasure. Their precocious Angeline, now nine, had inherited her mother's beauty and angelic voice but her father's mischievous streak. Charles, Meg's boy of nearly the same age, had a rather inflammatory effect on said impish tendencies as he studied the violin at the Conservatoire. It made for a potent and dangerous combination, especially on the hapless ballet mistress Madame Villon. Madame Giry, now Madame Kahn, was currently on honeymoon somewhere in Italy.

"Oh? I do not recall such antics in Angeline's last letter home," Erik pointed out dryly. Christine's mouth thinned.

"I will have to mention that to her. I think perhaps she is homesick. I know she misses Gustave terribly."

"Well, she only has another week before the summer holiday. She may return home, where she belongs," Erik said, flicking his paper straight with practiced nonchalance.

His daughter's foolish insistence on following in her mother's footsteps and singing in the chorus at the Opera Populaire both frustrated and delighted him. That the junk men would take umbrage at his daughter's presence was a continual thorn in his thoughts. Angeline's letters bore no evidence of maltreatment, but Erik could read between the lines and heard her relief and happiness when Charles arrived at the Conservatoire.
"I hope so. She only wants to make you proud, Erik," Christine murmured, her wedding ring sparkling in the sun as she stroked her belly meditatively.

"I have been proud of her since the day she was born!" he objected, "I never pressured her to sing!"

"I know that," Christine said, unperturbed, "but does she?"

Erik folded his newspaper and regarded his wife of over a decade. Fatherhood was a prospect that terrified him in the early days of Christine's pregnancy with Angeline. The demons in his mind gleefully recounted all of his faults, and more than one night Erik had risen from the haven of his marriage bed to pace the halls of the manor in an agony of uncertainty. His beloved Christine had been quick to remind him that he had had a large part in her upbringing and, aside from making him feel vaguely like an old lech, also put some of his fears to rest.

A child in Christine's image, with her beauty and sweetness, that he would devote his life to protecting and loving and teaching. Angeline was the fruit of all his hopes, with her mother's wild brown curls and chocolate brown eyes. Jokingly, Erik had remarked that his only contribution to Angeline's makeup was her quick temper and even quicker wit. It had been his delight to teach her music and find her swift, effortless aptitude. This same child now doubted his pride? Had he pressured her?

"I . . . I never meant to push her. Her talent is nearly boundless; the world could be hers for the taking."

Christine's smile was gentle and she leaned over to kiss his lips. Her fingers stroked the rough, pitted skin of his deformity without the slightest compunction. A firm rule in the manor house was that Erik set aside his mask. His face was not something to hide behind in his own home, she told him. Their children were actually more afraid of the unfamiliar mask he donned in public than the horror of his wrecked visage. Erik returned the kiss gratefully, tasting the sweet tang of lemonade on her lips.

"She wants so much to please you. Perhaps we should make your regard clearer when she is home."

"Of course," he replied.

A comfortable silence stretched between them and Erik riffled through the remaining post on the table and groaned at the sight of the characteristic sky blue wax emblazoned with the de Chagny seal.

"What is it?" Christine asked, not looking up from Meg's missive.

"When will my fool brother get it through his thick head? I do not want his damned title!" Erik groused, tossing aside the thick letter unopened.

Philippe, for the first time in his wayward, philandering life was trying to do the honorable thing and repair the breach Michel and Raoul de Chagny had orchestrated. The only problem was, Erik was happy where and as he was. He had no desire to supplant either of his de Chagny kin. Relations had improved over the interim ten years, but even then, Raoul and Erik could scarcely share the same space for more than an hour before degenerating into a vitriolic argument.

"You cannot blame him, Erik. He is trying to do what is best." Christine, the sweet voice of reason, as ever. Erik glanced at her fondly.

"True, my love. But a letter a month is a bit excessive, hmm? Philippe has made it abundantly clear
that he does not intend to ever marry again, and Raoul's wife has yet to conceive in the seven years they have been married. Though I wouldn't doubt that is due to the boy's inability to find her."

"Erik! Please!" Christine interrupted, her face flaming. Erik snickered nastily, preening at the fact that he was the center of her attention again. Erik sobered, weaving Christine's fingers with his.

"What I mean to say is that my dear brother is pestering me because it seems very likely both younger de Chagnys will die without an heir. Who then will this dubious honor fall to?"

"Gustave," Christine breathed, comprehension knifing across her delicate features. Erik nodded solemnly.

"And if I agree to their plan, who is to say that they will not take Gustave so he may be properly groomed to be a Comte? It would be within their rights, since all the lands and moneys would be deeded to him."

"That would never happen," Christine said firmly, "we will not allow it. If Gustave is truly the sole heir, then he will take the title on his own terms, if it is his wish." Erik's heart melted into a molten pool of adoration. He kissed her hand.

"Such a lioness, determined to protect her cubs. I am so grateful our daughter and son has such a mother," he crooned, "Not to mention this little one." He pushed back his chair and drew her into his lap. He didn't know or care how long they stayed like that, foreheads touching, cradling and stroking the mound of Christine's pregnant belly with their joined hands as the sun sank into their skin.

The glass door to the terrace flew open with such force it rebounded against the wall with an almighty crash. Erik and Christine turned in time to see their son Gustave flying toward the table.

"Papa! Mama! Do you know what today is?" he shouted, his high voice squeaking on the last syllable as he hopped up and down. Christine returned to her chair and Gustave promptly climbed into Christine's lap.

"Of course we do, little prince. Today is your fifth birthday," Erik said with a fond smile.

If Angeline was made in Christine's image, then Gustave was in his. Black-haired and already showing the evidence of his father's angular height at a tender age, Gustave had inherited the full measure of his father's genius and Christine's honest good-humor. In the early days of his life, the twisted muscles and crooked bone on the right side of Gustave's face had made Erik's stomach turn with dread. While his skin was flawlessly pale like Christine's own, Gustave's gnarled features were still noticeable. But as it had with the sire, Christine's tenacious love and ferocious protectiveness served as both shield and weapon against any barbs thrown against their boy's appearance. Gustave himself wore the mark as a badge of honor, stating proudly that he was his father's son.

"Yes. And I know what I want as a gift."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I want two. One for now and one the save for later."

A chill fell over Erik, freezing the smile on his face to a rigid mask. Oh God. Christine played along, rocking Gustave playfully on her knees.

"Tell me what it is you want," she replied. Erik was suddenly five years old again—the same age
as his beloved boy!—begging something that Madeline Laurent would never give.

"A kiss."

"A kiss?" Christine repeated. Erik's heart thundered, the fine breakfast threatening to make its way back up. He remembered the dread, the sheer depth of his wanting, thirsting like a dying flower for a single scrap of affection . . .

"Just one? How about this? And this and this?" Christine said, peppering Gustave's face with thousands of adoring kisses. Their son giggled in delight, presenting his chin, forehead and cheek for their turn of loving attention.

Erik watched, breathless and wondering. Christine seemed determined to undo all of his life's horrors with the miracle of her love. Erik watched his wife and son play and felt an indescribable euphoria rise up. This was where he belonged. Tears blurred the beloved image and Erik blinked them away. Gustave slid down and approached Erik. A quizzical frown marred his son's brow.

"Are you all right, Papa? Are you sick?" The boy made a show of checking his father's temperature with the back of his hand. An insatiable reader, he was already devouring one of Erik's simpler medical treatises with great relish.

"No, son. I am happy. I'm happy it is your birthday and I get to give you your present," Erik said, bending and kissing his son's forehead. Gustave accepted Erik's kiss bashfully, hands knotting in the hem of his smock.

"Thank you, Papa. May we ride Octavian?" he asked, naming one of César's colts, coal black and spirited as his sire.

"Of course."

Erik rose from his chair and kissed Christine's forehead. Father and son walked hand in hand awash in the spring sunshine, both entirely content.

Fin

End Notes

My first phanfic. Be kind to 19 year old me's words.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!