

Origins

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The flames consumed my life, but I'm back on my feet and I shall never cease to search for the right course down the road of destiny, but in the end will I have the strength? OC comment?porfavor:]

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1 - a dance with red death

PLEASE READ THIS : D !!!!!

Hi!! This is my first story so your feedback would be wonderful! I'm so sorry but I really don't know any French at all so please if you find any mistakes tell me! This is a post-disaster story, but Ebony wasn't a ballerina in the dormitories beforehand. She's sort of new I guess, but she was there on the night of the disaster. Lastly and most importantly Erik's intentions were not of attraction, but an entirely different matter that will come up later in the story. That's all I can tell you right now!! Thanks for reading this it means a lot to me:D Enjoy! Oh and I don't own the Phantom of the Opera!! OO P.S. my goal for this story is to make sure Ebony isn't or doesn't turn into a Mary Sue!!! Thanks again:D

Chapter One

A Dance with Red Death and a Rather Red Rose

There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death." Edgar Allan Poe, The Masque of the Red Death

This is so awkward! What am I doing here? I bite my gloved fingers nervously. Henri's desperate eyes follow me as I slip away from the crowd. His blonde hair slicked to its finest and normally grubby face is squeaky clean. Those sad puppy dog eyes pleading me to dance with him. I feel guilty, but I must be on my way!

Tension runs down my spine as the music plays and blissful couples dance merrily together. Agony shoots down my legs. My hands fly about trying to find something to grasp anything for support. I look up at the laughing faces. The colorful dresses dotted in the grand hall swirl in my vision like dancing flowers.

Nobody seems to even notice me, as I back up slowly to the fringe of the Grand Masquerade Ball. My mind whirls round and round. I don't know any of these people! Where's Meg? I'm lost in sea of masked faces!

I search for the exit door as I walk at the brim of the party. Music swims through the air, poking my ears in every corner. Sweat is painted on my face as I inch towards the way out. Before I can take another torturous stride a firm grip pulls my wrist back.

"Let go!" I gasp, whipping my body around. My gaze falls upon two piercing emerald eyes beneath a skull shaped mask.

"Mademoiselle, surely you'd entertain me with one dance," he says in more of a command than a request. He wears a crimson coat embedded with golden designs around the cuffs of his sleeves with an ominous sword lingering at his side. A sword!

"I really must be going!" I cry, trying to tug myself free of his grasp. Shut your eyes and count to ten. Pain drills my legs worse than before. I feel my bandages loosening beneath the layers of my dress. It is too late though. This bizarre stranger leads me towards the center of the dance floor as I clumsily trip over my feet in pursuit to follow. I gaze at his face once more. Though the top half of his face is covered I see he's remarkably handsome from his well-shaped chin and smirking lips. It all seems quite familiar somehow...

"Who are you? Have I met you before?" I ask. I bite my lip trying to ignore my screaming limbs.

"It's a secret," he replies cryptically, his emerald eyes sparkle in the dim light. I hold my breath as a crimson blush covers my pale face. I must look like an overripe cherry! "This is your first masquerade I take it, Mme. Valette."

Oh! How does he know my name? "Well yes," I cough trying to avoid his eyes. Those eyes that read me like I'm a book...

He grins for a split second, flashing perfect pearls. His hands feel tense and strong over mine, which shake uneasily. When will this godforsaken dance be over?

My feet ache as they falter about the marble floor. I spin, and turn, and twist with as much grace as an elephant. I hear the music start to slow. Please, please, please!

"Please tell me who you are! I simply must know," I try again, but I fail to pay attention to my feet posture and succeed on stepping on his booted foot. This is rather embarrassing, as I'm making an utter fool of myself!

"That defeats the purpose of the masquerade all together. The idea is that appearances deceive," he smiles grimly ignoring my small faults.

"I'm sure that's not true," Breathe. Twist, draw out, and pay attention to your feet.

"Oh but it is, more so than you know. Sometimes appearances can even be deadly,"

Deadly? My face flushes as I take another cautious look at the sword he's carrying at his side. Twist, turn, swirl, and move left, left, right.

"I do not understand," I gasp for air. Sweat pours down my neck like droplets of liquid ice. My knees shake awkwardly.

"You will. In time," he smiles. His emerald eyes hold an untold secret. "You know that boy over there has been watching us,"

I look over to see Henri staring appalled at me. "Don't mind him," I sigh. From beneath my thick dress I can feel my legs just at the brink of giving out.

"It seems he's taken a liking to you. Pity," Huff, Huff, Huff.

“Excuse me?” I gasp, confused at the man’s words.

“All in good time,” he grins, but the grin falls and his eyes change. He looks at me like he’s trying to figure something out.

That’s when my limbs finally give up. I twist on my toes and find myself collapsed on the cold marble floor. I hear murmured whispers and sense eyes pinned on my pathetic form. Great... Make a scene of yourself.

“Thank you, Ebony,” pure beauty tickles my ears. I whip my head around to find the source. Nothing. I fall to the floor, catching my breath. A woman dressed like a peacock helps me up. I mutter an inaudible thank you.

“Monsieur?” I whisper dumbfounded. He’s gone. Whoever he was...

As I return to the dormitories my eyes cast a gaze at the wall mirror. Lines of exhaustion run beneath my lower eyelashes, my façade a more ashen hue than the moonlight. I peel off my gloves and untie the loose bun that is nestled limply in the back of my head.

“Oof” I cry carefully ripping the too-tight shoes from my throbbing feet. The bandages are practically off my legs revealing the twisted charred skin beneath. I look away in disgust, grabbing an ointment bottle from my small nightstand. I can almost feel the flames licking my skin once more. Shall the nightmares of that wretched night ever cease to haunt me?

Applying the balm delicately I reach under the mattress to grab the roll of gauze. I pull my legs onto the petite bed. Unfurling the white linen I wrap it firmly over and over until it is tight enough that it will serve its purpose. As I shove the remaining gauze beneath the mattress I hear a soft crushing sound ringing quietly in the silence.

“What on earth?” I say, jerking my legs aside, “A rose?” My fingers grasp the tiny flower as my nose relishes the sweet perfume it sprays into the air. “Who could this be from?” I ask bewildered, searching the covers for a note of some sort.

The tint is a flawless fresh scarlet. I can’t help but think of the mysterious man’s crimson red costume. The untold secrets held firmly in those emerald eyes...

What could this rose possibly mean?

“Ebony!” Meg smiles, rushing over to sit next to me. I gasp quickly in surprise dropping the bottle of ointment in an open drawer and shooting my legs into the blankets before Meg can see.

Her golden tresses bounce merrily, eyes glittering with delight. I hide the little flower beneath my pillow. All my little secrets are safe and sound.

“Are you quite alright Ebony? You look dreadful,” she asks, her chestnut eyes filled with concern.

“Just dandy,” I smile.

“You’re not going home with your family tonight are you?” Of course all the ballerina girls from the dormitories have gone home with their families or lovers tonight. Only Meg and I remain.

“And leave all alone? Certainly not,” I tell her reassuringly. Besides, what family do I have to come home with?

“What a relief!” she laughs, plucking stray bobby pins from her hair. “Where were you tonight? I was looking for you!” Meg slides a sterling silver ring from her slim finger, twirling it round and round.

“I...I’m not sure. It’s quite complicated,” I try not to think of my humiliating tumble.

“You’ll never guess what happened!” Meg exclaims, a mischievous grin plays on her lips.

“What happened?” I laugh. Meg always is informed of the latest and greatest gossip hovering about the Opera Populaire.

“You know the handsome new manager, Monsieur Bellamount? He asked me to dance, and to call him by his first name!” she giggles, her mahogany eyes lighting up.

“How forward of him!”

“Jacque,” she sighs dreamily, “How was your first masquerade Ebony? Did anyone ask you dance? Oh I know! It was Henri was it not? He fancies you!”

“Goodness no!” I gasp, “I had a most frightful experience!”

“Do tell,” she giggles awaiting my horrendous story.

“Meg! You must not jest, I was truly embarrassed!” She stifles a laugh and fakes a serious face.

“Alright, alright I shan’t laugh at you. But you simply must tell me everything! Who did you dance with?”

“I’m...I’m not entirely sure,”

“You didn’t ask?” she asks kneading the ring between her hands.

“Believe me I did, but he refused to tell me!”

“Well what was he dressed as?” the ring rotates on her nails.

“To be perfectly honest... I believe he was dressed as Red Death,”

Clunk. The sterling ring drops to the floor.

2 - a forgotten mask?

“Is something the matter, Meg? Have I said something wrong?”

I stare at her in awkward silence, completely aghast.

“Surely you jest Ebony... You must have mistaken the costume,” I say in a hushed tone, going to my knees in search of my dropped ring.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, “Is everything alright?” She looks at me worriedly, frightened of making a mistake. So eager to please.

“Yes I’m fine, but what I want to know is, are you fine?”

“Well of course. A bit sore from dancing, but nothing terrible,” a blush covers her pale face.

“Ebony... Did the man say anything strange to you?” I ask. She looks down, like she’s searching for the right words.

“No, nothing.”

I hardly believe her, but I don’t wish to press the topic any further.

“Good. Well I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted,” I yawn dramatically. A small smile plays on her lips. I peel off my velvety gloves, folding them neatly upon my lap.

“It is rather late, is it not?”

“Yes, would you give me a moment Ebony? I should like to get out of this gown,”

“Yes, yes of course,”

“I’ll be right back,” I say as I walk to the dressing room.

Surprisingly this dress comes off with ease, unlike most dresses. I slip into my nightdress and tie my hair into a loose braid. I stand before the mirror, gazing into my reflection. Same blonde hair. Same brown eyes. Same small thin stature. Little Meg Giry, the girl who always looks the same.

After the opera house reopened, only Maman and I returned. My fellow peers had found a new life, perhaps even a better life. Of course dancing is my life, and I’ve made an oath to practice this art so diligently that one day I shall become a great prima ballerina. Yet I can’t help but wonder if even then people will still look at me as Little Meg.

I button the last of the little white buttons firmly and return to the beds. When I come back I find Ebony heavy with sleep, with...a rose in her hand?

Quietly I blow out the candle on the nightstand. The room filled with its smoky perfume.

I lay awake my face nestled in the cool pillow. My eyes plead for rest, but my pounding frightened heart simply shall not allow it! He's alive! He's alive!

The memories I've tried hard to forget come and knock on the front door of my mind. I remember how I had lost my home, but how pleased I was for a new beginning to the Opera House. Maman and I had waited 3 painfully long years, but now the world seemed a shade or so brighter.

But Ebony... Poor creature doesn't even realize she's danced with a madman! Perhaps it is true that maybe it wasn't him. It could be a poser. Just a simple jest created from a poor taste in humor. Certainly the Phantom perished as the Opera House did.

Or perhaps he is alive and shall have vengeance upon us all! How foolish I was to steal his mask. That beautiful piece of snowy porcelain was much too curious an item not to take. Temptation had gotten the better of me!

Now he probably wants it back!

I remember as a child the stories of the Opera Ghost had always thrilled and frightened me. How the smallest of creaks in the hallway or the unexplained noises had drained our faces of color.

I lie in the itchy sheets feeling my heart thump hard in my throat. Sleep shall not come tonight for I am much too worried of things I ought not to be.

"Ebony," I whisper to the thick darkness. Only silence answers me. The pitch-blackness of the room feels like it's throbbing and swelling. I fear it shall swallow me whole!

"Ebony, are you awake?" I retry, longing for the comfort to know that she is awake if something dreadful should happen. Nothing.

A sharp stripe of moonlight dimly illuminates the dormitories. I quietly crawl out of my bed and grab a small chest from beneath it. Inside of it lies the stolen mask. I began to list the possible ways of returning it. Something inside me wants to know if he's really still alive.

I knew the route. I could go. Sudden heat painted itself on my face. I couldn't go alone of course! Yet this curiosity would certainly eat me alive!

Yet it would quite impossible. Even after the construction, that dressing room had been boarded up. Apparently the door to his realm was bricked up. Closed off, so that hopefully the legends of the Opera Ghost would just die out. Well they wouldn't for this ballerina.

"I could break the boards maybe, but the bricks might pose a problem," I mutter to myself.

"Meg?" Ebony yawns, "Who are you talking to?"

“What! Oh nothing. I wasn’t talking,” I laugh halfheartedly. She gazes down at the white mask in my trembling hands. I quickly hide it from her view seeing the inquisitive stare in her eyes.

“What were doing with that?”

“Absolutely nothing!” I push the chest back in its place beneath my bed. “I... I’m going to go for a walk.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Yes, it’s really the best time for a walk!”

“If you say so... I’m going back to sleep,”

I walk cautiously through the darkened hallways. A single candle as my only light.

The cold air wraps its freezing blanket around my shivering body and exposed hands. I fear my candle shall soon burn out.

What am I doing? What am I doing? I try to shut the noise off in my mind, but the worried side of me begins to take over. My feet glide on the floor. Small steady and quick little steps.

Where is everyone? Surely not everybody is asleep. I creep down the corridor. I have the worst sensation of being followed.

Frequently I find myself turning my head around or speeding my pace. I walk with one side of my body touching the wall. Strange shadows play in the little spot of light.

I swear I hear breathing that is not my own. I’m sure I’m being followed. This was probably a bad idea, but it could be just a stagehand. I’m near the theater’s entrance. There’s probably some small after party in session. Yet the little hairs on the back of my neck stand stick straight.

“Is...Is anyone there?” I whisper. My eyes look back in the almost complete blackness. I hold my candle up.

A figure! There is a figure coming towards me! I gasp and start to hurry to the theater’s entry.

“Wait! Meg!” I hear my name and turn around. I know that voice, “Meg, hold on!”

I know that voice. “Monsieur Bellamount? Goodness you gave me a fright! What are you doing here?” I ask nervously. How embarrassing!

“Why Meg- I own this place. It’s I who should be asking you!”

“Oh I’m terribly sorry! I just...needed a walk,”

“Well don’t apologize, it’s quite alright by me,” he smiles, “Though I think you ought to be getting your rest. Shall I walk you back to the dormitories?” My face instantly flushes.

“No!” I say at once. He looks at me oddly, “I mean...I’ll just be on my way! No need to trouble yourself, Monsieur Bellamount,”

“Formalities are useless, Meg. Call me Jacques. Please,” he says in a velvety voice.

“Then goodnight... Jacques,” I grin.

“Goodnight Meg,” he takes my ice-cold hand, brushing his lips gently upon it. With that he leaves. What a curious man!

I make my way back to the sleeping quarters, the bubbly sensation lingering in the atmosphere.

I suppose I’ll have to wait for another night to find entrance to the old dressing room.

3 - slight regret

The Illustrated French News

Attempted robbery in France's world renowned Louvre!

A mysterious burglar clad in black came into the night trying to steal the manquant clé Faberge. The beautiful egg encrusted in gold adorned with rubies and emeralds rumored that inside lies a most magnificent treasure. Yet the long lost key has never been recovered. Police believe the thief was out to break the Faberge open. Luckily guards took notice of this and rushed to the scene. The man had oddly vanished. Leaving only a silver ring. Detective Walters and fellow policemen are keeping a very close eye on the precious Faberge, assuming this robber may appear again.

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I lie restlessly on the fancy headrest, beautifully stitched together with small tassels coming from its sides. My husband lies in silent slumber besides me with one protective arm firmly around my waist. He looks like such a sweet little child.

My thoughts wander back and forth. I hate nights like these. When the air feels dryer than dead leaves. These are the nights when my mind backpedals to things I really regret.

Gingerly I lift Raoul's limp arm from around me. I press my fingers to my temples, feeling the headache just on the brink of emerging. Sliding from the bulky elegant bed linen I step onto the silken carpets. It feels like showers of coldness dripping over my body. There's a warm housecoat lying on the nightstand. I pull it on and slip my chilly feet into the white slippers.

Quietly I walk out from our bedroom to the powder room. I tie my hair into the loosest of buns and run the faucet until the water is lukewarm.

"What a mess you've become," I sigh at my reflection. Three years have certainly taken the toll upon me. My once fresh beauty now seems like a thing of the past. Frequent headaches, distant memories, and forgotten feelings that lie dormant inside of me.

I splash the water onto my face, feeling it wash away all my faults and insecurities.

"Mama," a small squeaky voice calls to me from the entryway. I dry my face quickly with the green hand towel.

"Hello there sweetheart," I smile at my little Julian, "Why aren't you in bed?" I suddenly wonder how long he's been standing there watching me.

He looks down awkwardly, fiddling with his tiny fingers. He walks to me and tugs on my nightgown. His face is hidden in a mess of dark cinnamon hair. I bend down and brush the bangs from his olive eyes. My face saddens at him. His only words are limited to "mama" and "papa". Other than that he refuses

to speak. He pouts sourly like an upset fish.

I grin and tickle his sides. A laugh breaks out as he struggles to fight my fingers off. After another round of silly laughs and tickles I take his small hand into mine, "Come now, let's go back to bed."

The smile falls into a frown as he follows me to his room. I tuck him into the bedding. I kiss him on the forehead and bid him goodnight.

I feel those olive eyes on my back as I turn to leave. When I return to the bedroom I find Raoul still fast asleep. Not even a blast of the most clamorous thunder could wake that man!

I sigh and pull out the bun from my hair. My tresses fall in a swirling motion, covering my back. I kick off the slippers and untie the housecoat.

Did I make a mistake? I had a wonderful clean healthy life, with a loving spouse and a gorgeous child. Yet was I happy? Did I make the right choice?

I bite my chapped lips, huddling in the covers. Raoul did take good care of me, but I always feel like he's gone when I need him the most. Tomorrow he's leaving for some trip in London. He'll be gone for almost two and a half weeks!

"Darling, is something the matter?" Raoul finally stirs from his sleep.

"Just tired I guess..." I smile, holding his hand. He leans forward and gives a playful kiss. "Must you leave tomorrow?"

"I have no choice..." he says, stroking my hair.

"Will you come back soon?" I murmur.

"I'll be here before you know it," he promises. I smile sadly, pressing my head against his chest. His chin rested in my curly hair. I feel like laying like this forever. It almost seems that long...

There's a crack in the window where the curtains meet. It lets in morning's first light. The sun plays on our faces.

"I have to get dressed, my love," he tells me getting out of the bed. I remain nestled in the sheets. He leaves the room and I feel so alone. Even in the company of another I still feel somewhat lonely. Shall I ever find my missing half? Or am to remain feeling like I'm not whole?

Even though I hate to say this... There truly was only one man who made me complete. And I'm sure he's long dead and gone.

Yet it's only a passing thought that I forbid myself to dwell upon. Never again will I fall upon the grace of my hideous...yet beautiful Angel of Music...

I know I ought not to think of such foolishness, but the thought still lingers.

4 - the mysterious Faberge

It's 5 in the bloody morin'! But work calls... I still need to finish building the wall. It's like a whole lot of wood planks stickin' together, but then we going to make it real pretty-like. I pick up my tools and start to pound the little nails into the splintery wood.

"Hey Henri! Heard your girlfriend got herself another man!"

"Ah, shut it Luc!" I yell waving the 'ammer into his face, "I swear if you mention that one more time..." Leave to old Luc to make me miserable about that bloody night...

"Sorry! Sorry!" he laughs, backin' up.

"Yeah, you better be..." I mutter, continuin' to strike the nail into place with the 'eavy 'ammer.

"No hard feelings, Henri! Here let me help you out," 'e says grabbin' another 'ammer and pounds in some more nails.

"Yeah whatever," I grumble, patting the wood dust off my pants. Boy I look sloppy with my greased up hair and grubby clothes.

"So what was the guy dressed as? Maybe it was that new manager. He's a curious character,"

"Dahm it Luc! I don't want to talk 'bout it!" I shout, throwin' the 'ammer to the ground.

"Don't get all worked up!" he says, 'ands up.

"I'm real fragile right now, don't go 'round 'urtin' my feelings," I sniff.

"Ah, suck it up Henri, that's girl's not that good looking. How about Suzette? She's a real looker," he winks.

"Like I'd even dream 'bout Suzette! She's a bloody goddess!" But an evil goddess. I don't even like to even think 'bout Suzette. She might be the beauty of this place, but she sure as 'ell frightens me!

"Ha yeah. Heard she slapped Mitch at the Ball,"

"Why?"

"Kept bothering her to dance, I guess," he laughs. I stand up, dropping the 'ammer to the floor, dusting off my trousers.

"Need more nails," I sigh. You got to take the stairs to get the tool room. There are no lights there. Gives me the creeps.

“Heh... Be careful the Phantom doesn't get you,”

“What the bloody 'ell is that supposed to mean?”

“Ah come on Henri, you know the stories,” he laughs, “Hurry back, this little pile of nails isn't going to last long,”

“Whatever,” I roll my eyes and walk away. My neck tenses as 'urry up the steps. I practically trip over my own feet in this bloody dimness.

This part of the backstage is a real mess. No one bothers to clean to up or make it nice. Just a whole lot of tools and stuff scatted about. You have to search 'round to find what you want. There's some spare 'ammers resting on the cutting table. A couple planks leaning on the wall. Crooked screws busting from them. Buckets of overflowing paint sit in the corners. Got to be careful 'round here. Never know what you might step in or on.

Nails... Come on where are the blasted nails? I lift some sheets of spread out papers. Sometimes you'll find the smaller things under the documents.

...What's this? News paper clippings?

The Faberge manquant clé featured in the Louvre. Most beautiful decorated egg in the entire world and perhaps the most mysterious. 14 karat gold, with rubies and emerald rooted in the outer shell. Apparently inside lies real pirate treasure according to its finder Pierre Lombard. Before he would open it to the eager crowds, he was tragically murdered by an unknown source. The key that unlocks whatever precious treasures was never recovered. The mystery of what this egg contains will perhaps always remain a mystery, but its beauty shall forever attract audiences.

I leaf through the parchments of paper. It's all on this Faberge manquant clé and Pierre Lombard. What on earth would this be doin' 'ere? I find sketches of keys in the back of the paper stack. They all have a very precise shape, like whoever drew it knew what the lock looked like. Suddenly I hear 'eavy footsteps coming up the stairs. I throw down the papers and quickly look for some nails. Come on... Ah, there are some! I take a couple 'andfuls and shove it down my back pocket.

A man clad in fancy clothes smiles smugly at me. It's that weird new manager. Bellamount or something like that.

“Good morning, Sir,” I say. He nods. I hurry past him and fly down the staircase.

“Hey Henri what took you so long...” Luc asks pointing at the empty space where the last few nails had been.

“Sorry, just saw something funny,”

“The ghost?” he laughs.

“Alright what’s with you and this whole ghost nonsense?” I ask hotly, spilling the nails from my pocket. We began to ‘ammer in the last few spots.

“You’re kidding me, right? You don’t know the whole Phantom thing?”

“No, I’m not a loony like you Luc,”

“You crack me up, kid!” he chuckles, patting my shoulder, “Well he isn’t really a ghost... Or according to the newspapers at least. He’s just some madman who pretended to be a ghost and he kidnaps this really pretty singer, right? Now get this...he cuts down the chandler during a performance! That’s how this place got wrecked in the first place,”

“Wait a tick. Everyone knows ‘bout the fire and all, but I ‘eard it was all just an accident,”

“Nah, that’s what they want you to think. He was a genius though, he tricked the managers into doing what he wanted,”

“How do you know?”

“Old friend of mine used to work here. Told me everything,”

“Weird,” I say, inhaling the new information. Strange how I’ve been ‘ere maybe for five months, but I’m still not sure I know much about this place. It’s like one big secret that everyone seems to know. ‘Cept me of course.

“That new manager seems really desperate to give this place a good reputation,”

“I’ve noticed. Mr. Prim and Proper. Big snob if you ask me,”

“Ahem,”

Both of us turn our heads around to meet the hard gaze of Monsieur Bellamount.

Dahm...Dahm...Dahm...

“Now I’d really appreciate if you boys wouldn’t spread such rumors,” ‘e says in an ice-cold voice with arms crossed ‘round ‘is chest. Wonder ‘ow long ‘e’s been standin there!

“Yes, Sir,” Luc and I say in unison. He gives us a solemn nod and walks away.

Luc and I sit in silence for a few awkward seconds before going back to work. Creepy.

5 - nightmares

There's music. More beautiful than angel's voices. Entranced by the scene before me. A man. In a black domino. His voice is inhuman.... There's a girl. She looks frightened. Her face is snow.

'Brother...' Tug on brother's sleeve. 'Brother is this part of the performance?'

'Hush, Ebony...' Brother holds a finger to his lips. 'Be silent and you will understand.'

My eyes are captivated. Brother's ocean eyes are captivated too. I shall not bother him though.

The two actors come together. Touching. Holding each other. The voices cease singing, yet the emotion holds still in the theater.

He breaks into a new tune. His voice...less demanding, yet seemingly more desperate.

He pulls her close. She looks up, confused. Her hands clutch the sides of his face. Trembling.

Suddenly before he finishes the verse she rips the mask off. I shut my eyes and hide my face in Brother's arm.

Loud noises fill the air. I hear screams and gasps. The chandelier shakes ominously. Slowly falling. More screams. Falling to a nightmare.

Brother! I cry. People moving and pushing. Brother where is Brother?

Flames everywhere. Blistering heat. So scared. 'Brother help me!'

'Ebony! Take my hand. I'm here. Just take my hand. '

'I'm stuck! Help!'

'Oh God!'

'Brother! My dress! My dress is on fire! It hurts. Please make it stop!'

Patting out the fire. Yet it burns. I can't move. 'Brother...' Hot tears pouring like waterfalls.

Flaming parts of the theater rain down upon us. Face nestled in Brother's shoulder. He smells of cinnamon. So much pain. Everything is blurry.

Something has crashed. I hear a shriek of pain. Brother's pain. Someone grabs me. Where is Brother?

Flames everywhere. Falling into darkness.

I awake in cold sweat.

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A Week After the Masquerade Ball

“Suzette, you have the most gorgeous hair,”

“It’s simply divine,”

“Yes I know,” Suzette smiles with perfectly white teeth. She sways her locks of midnight. Shinier than crystal clear waters.

Meg and I sit in the corner, eating stale dry buns. Like eating a crumbly rock. All the ballerinas have returned from the short vacation. Our ears filled with endless chatter and giggles.

“Ebony... I have to tell you something,” Meg says, brushing off some crumbs from her mouth.

“Alright,” I say, stilling dizzy with exhaustion. I yawn and wipe my dewy eyes. I haven’t had a decent night’s rest since the masquerade; bad memories keep invading my dreams.

“I... I want to return that mask,” she whispers quietly, glancing over at Suzette and her followers.

“What mask?”

“Shh, keep it down. I don’t want anyone to know, I’d be in big trouble,” she says playing with folds of her dress.

“Sorry,” I mumble, picking up another doughy bun.

“Ebony, remember the fire that wrecked this place?” she asks. I stiff up at mention of it.

“What of it?” I inquire, feeling the blood rush from my face.

“It’s...It’s just I was there that night. There was a crowd of people going to go find him, I went with...”

I sit silent, but wonder who “him” refers to. A man in a black domino...

“I... we ventured into this underground world. It was astounding, like a little realm all to it’s self. But it looked so far away and lonely,”

I raise my eyebrow, questioning where she’s going with this. A little realm all to it’s self?

“Why’d you even go?”

“Well I had to! He had taken...my friend. Well she used to be anyway,” Meg looked down, upset.

“Taken? I don’t understand,”

“I guess you wouldn’t understand since you weren’t there, but they were on stage. Then...this hole on stage opened and they fell through,” she says, like she’s reliving the memory. I was there however, but I was in too much shock to notice people falling through holes.

“I still don’t see how the mask has to do with anything,”

“I stole it...”

“You stole it?” I gasp. From who?

“Yes,” she looks frightened, “I stole a mask from a madman, and now I feel the need to return it,”

“Are you serious?” I ask, still wondering who “he” is.

“But the thing is Ebony, the only way I know to get there has been blocked off. The old dressing room was boarded up, that’s where you come in,” she explains.

“How can I help?”

“I don’t know the stagehands very well, but I know your friends with Henri. Could you ask him to help-”

“No way Meg!” I blush. No way was I going to talk to Henri after that awkward night.

“Come on, please you have to!” she begs, “Or at least accompany me there, please,”

I sigh. I didn’t want to go chasing the past or unlocking secrets, which I didn’t want to know.

“Fine...” I groan, “But I think this is a bad idea. You said he was a madman!”

“Don’t worry, I doubt we’ll even be able to get in,”

“It could be dangerous!”

“Shh, Suzette’s coming over,” we look up at Suzette and all her glory.

“You’re going to be late to practice Valette,”

I avoid her demeaning stare, “I...can’t today. Madame Giry offered me a private practice later on,”

She glares at me, “You can’t dance at all, can you? You shouldn’t even be here,”

“Yeah, when’s the last time you even showed up to practice?” her followers chirp.

“Leave her alone,” Meg says shyly. Suzette laughs.

"You're both pathetic," she sneers, "Come on let's go." She gestures to her group to follow. Like little ducklings...

"You're not coming to practice again?" Meg asks.

"I can't... I have a private lesson later," I explain.

"Well I probably should go, I'll see you later. And please don't mention what I told you earlier. It's just something between you and me, promise?"

"Of course,"

.....

Meg's POV

It's slightly bothersome that Ebony never shows up at practices. I've tried asking Maman why, but she explains it's a private matter.

I make my way to the theater where practice is being held. Out of the corner of my eye I see...why Monsieur Bellamount!

"Monsieur- I mean Jacque, what a pleasure to see you," I grin.

"Why the pleasure is all mine. How are you faring, Meg?"

"Fine thanks, yourself?" a little blush tickles my nose.

"Very well," he returns my smile. His sapphire eyes lure me to come closer. He wears elegant garments with raven black hair flattering his face. "A little late to practice are we not?"

My face is practically painted scarlet, "No...well yes, but-

"Ah Bellamount. We meet again," I turn to see a well-built man in a long grey coat coming towards us.

"Detective Walters. It's been too long," he looks over at me, "I'm sorry Meg, but I have business to attend to,"

"I understand,"

"Good day,"

"Good day,"

6 - a visit from an old friend

[/"That'll do Ebony. I think you're improving a great deal. You ought to feel proud," Madame Giry comment, twisting the key on her necklace with tense fingers.

But Ebony didn't feel proud. She felt slow and pathetic. Her limbs were aching and sore, but not because of her burns. Perhaps more out of sheer exhaustion and embarrassment.

"Thank you Madame..." she pants, wiping sweat from her brow. The mirrors are evil creatures. Revealing her miserable state. I'm shall never be a dancer. Brother can never be proud.

"Recovering takes time, child," Madame Giry says in a soft voice. "Now be on your way."
"Yes Madame... And thank you," Ebony puts on a fake smile to please, limping out the doorway.

Madame Giry rubs her temples. That girl tries so hard, but with legs like those I wonder if it's worth it... Her movements were sloppy and ungraceful, yet that determination she has was something to wonder at.

A shift of action is heard in the silence.

Shadows cast upon the older women's face as she looks into the mirrors. Feeling a familiar presence. There's nothing there... There never will be anything... He's gone.

Yet something deep inside her wonders if he truly is gone. She hadn't heard anything from him since that night, but still...it was like he was here. Watching from the shadows, silently and carefully.

"Is... Is someone there?" she whispers quietly. I'm going quite mad... Her eyes search the room. It suddenly feels a great deal smaller. The silence is pressing, like when you're speaking to someone who can't find the right words to say. "Erik...Is it you? Have you been watching us?"

"Have you missed me?"

She stands in shock. Never did she expect an answer. He was alive! He didn't bother to tell her, but she didn't blame him. After that night he probably never wanted to speak to anyone again.

"I...I can't believe it," she nearly laughs, "How is this possible? I thought you were dead,"

"No, but perhaps death would have been more pleasant," his voice sounds edgy and harsh.

"I'm sorry," she whispers gazing thoughtfully into the glass. It was a thin piece of glass but the barrier between them felt huge, "I'm sorry for everything, but you have to understand I acted on what was right. I was frightened for that girl's safety."

"Is that so? Well I'm not here to dig into the rights and wrongs of the past,"

“Then what have you come for?” her voice quivers slightly.

“That girl... Mme. Valette, I don't think she's fit for the opera's ballet. She ought to be removed,”

“Not fit? Have you any idea what she went through? Do you?” she gasps, appalled.

“She's a horrible dancer... It'll ruin the performance,”

“I can't believe you...” she mutters, “I can't believe you'd ask such a thing,”

“I'm not 'asking',” he snaps. She glares at the mirror.

“Why are you hiding?” she asks.

“That...That is none of your concern! You know my requests, work it out with the manager.

She sighs, “I wouldn't promise you anything... She can't help the way she is. I believe with more practice she could exceed,”

“Not likely, but you would know more of this art than I,”

“The next performance isn't for a few more months, give her until then,” she explains, but his response is only silence.

“Madame... That's a very interesting necklace,”

“That is quite irrelevant, Erik!” she exclaims.

“Do you realize what that key's worth?” his voice sounds surprised.

“This old thing? I found it lying in a puddle on the sidewalk when I was little. I doubt it has any worth at all!” she says staring at the little key dangling from her necklace. True it was very beautiful, a goldish color with a most peculiar shape for a key.

After a few long moments of silence she guesses he must have left. Her heart pounds in her throat. She clasps the head of the cane tightly.

“It's true... I missed you,” she whispers.

color]

7 - behind the mirror

“So this is the room?” Ebony asks, shivering from the cold.

“I guess, it’s supposed to be boarded up though...” I mutter looking at the scattered planks before me. The spaces are big enough for someone to get through...

“I think this is a bad idea, Meg... We could get hurt,” she says nervously, the candle light shakes.

“Hold that steady, and hold this too,” I give her the small bag with the mask inside of it.

“Meg! You’re not going in there are you? It’s so dark you could step on broken glass or worse!” she cries.

“Now don’t be silly! I’ll be fine as long as you hold that candle steady!” I tell her in a harsher voice than I intended. She looks down sadly. “Alright here I go...” I decided for such an occasion as sneaking into an underground lair, wearing trousers rather than a dress would have been more proper. Clad in stolen man’s garments I stick a booted leg through the opening. Something soft crushes beneath my foot.

Ebony holds her eyes with her hand; “This is going to be a disaster! I never should have agreed to come!”

“Oh stop complaining, you’re not the one who’s climbing into this broken down room!” I sigh, turning my body and slipping my other leg into the space. Another weird crushing sound.

“What’s that noise?” she asks.

“I don’t know...” I admit, quite curious myself. Now to get the top half of my body in... With little effort I slip through, landing awkwardly, things crushing beneath me. A sweet fragrance invades my nose. The scent is strong, making me a little lightheaded.

Ebony sticks her head in the opened space, “Here take the candle,” she whispers. I greedily take it from her shaking hands and light up the floor, “What’s that smell?”

“Why...Why I can’t believe it!” I gasp astounded staring at the floor.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Roses! Hundreds of them!” I laugh, picking one up. It turns to dust in my fingers, “Dead roses...”

“That’s bizarre... Meg this was a bad idea, I have a very bad feeling about this...” she cries.

“Here hand me the bag, Ebony... It’s your turn to come in,”

“What? You said I only had to accompany you here!” she practically yells.

“Shh, you’ll wake the whole opera house up!” I scold, grabbing the bag, “Come on! We don’t have all night!”

She sighs, “How do I even get in here?”

“Just stick your legs in first, and then the rest of you follows,”

“Easy for you to say,” she mutters, placing a leg in gingerly, “Ow, ow, ow” she groans.

“I could do it, so can you!” I cheer. Shakily she sticks her other leg in. Her thin frame practically falls through the crack.

“Ah,” she moans, landing in a bed of dried roses. I help her up.

“Ok, are you ready?”

“No!”

“Good, let’s find the mirror,” I say, shedding light on the walls. Both of us gasp at how tattered it is. Paint peeled off like from a knife. Strips of it dangle from the sides. Everything is thrown around and completely destroyed.

“My God Meg... What happened in here?” she murmurs quietly.

“I... I haven’t the slightest idea,” I whisper back. I remember this room was so beautiful and elegant, now it was in total ruin.

“Meg I think we ought to go, I’m scared!”

“As am I, but I simply must do this,” I reply, shaking slightly. “There! There’s the mirror!”

The surface is covered in a thick layer of dust, beneath lies deep cracks. Yet it still stands with an air of mystery, looming over us ominously. I touch the faded gold frame.

“This is it,” I can’t believe this! My fingers tug the sides of the mirror. Please open...

It opens with a bloodcurdling screech. No bricks... Just pure darkness.

“Oh my God! You weren’t joking,” Ebony gasps, “There... There really is a passage. I thought you were mad!”

I take a step into the darkness, blood runs from my face, my pulse quickens. My eyes are stuck wide open. I shiver with fright.

“Meg we don’t know what we’re getting ourselves into! This is a catastrophe waiting to happen!”

I’m starting to agree with her. What was I thinking? But I was a girl possessed. I never give up. Never.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought you... If you’re frightened I understand...” I explain, “You...You can leave me. I wouldn’t mind,”

“Leave you? Are you mad? You must come back with me!”

“I cannot! This is something I must do!” I cry, “You don’t understand... But this is important to me!”

She stares at me long and hard, then breathes in slowly. Her eyes shut tightly, “I...I’ll go with you,”

“Thank you Ebony,” I smile, patting her arm.

.....

Christine’s POV

“Driver are we there yet?” I ask, rubbing my gloved fingers together. The cold air licks my face even through the thick walls of the carriage.

“We’re real close, Missy,” he says, in a gruff accent. I close my eyes, picturing the Opera House. My mind eye sees the grand entry, the marble floor, and the long staircase. I think of the theater, with the golden sculptures. Always watching... Unseen eyes.... Everywhere!

It had been just a week since Raoul left, when my mind came crashing down. I had left my warm safe house and little child, to return to the world I thought had been erased permanently from life. Would they welcome me back with open arms or glare in suspicion? Shall I be embraced by old friends or shunned by new faces. It didn’t matter. I loved them all, but it didn’t matter what they thought of me. Not now...

It was he... That’s whom my heart longed to see. My eyes were watering with fatigue. Would he recognize me? The worst question dwelled in the deepest part of my mind... What if he wasn’t even there? Perhaps he died of a broken heart or worse.

A tear rolled down my cheek. For three years I lived under my husband’s protection, but I longed secretly to visit my poor Angel...

“‘Bout another ‘alf an ‘our, Missy”

.....

Meg’s POV

It feels like an eternity of walking through this thick darkness. Ebony trails closely behind me. Never do we dare say a word. Just the sounds of our footsteps and soft breathing fill the air. The candles had

already died out, but luckily deeper into this labyrinth dim torches were propped into the walls. Still it was so dark and gloomy down here.

This blackness is consuming, even in the dim light. I feel it dancing in my hair, running down my throat. My heart rams against my chest.

“I think we’re almos-” I gasp, falling down what feels like a flight of stairs. I yelp in pain as my head strikes something solid.

“Meg!” Ebony cries rushing down the flight of steps, “Oh Meg!”

“I’m fine,” I lie, delicately touching where I got hit. My fingers are covered in a warm liquidity substance. Blood! The pain envelops me, but it feels more numb than anything.

Ebony is kneeled at my side; “You’re bleeding! I told you this was a bad idea!” she sobs.

“Don’t worry about me,” I tell her, “It’s not that bad, let’s keep going...”

“No way! Are you mad? We’re going back right now!” she yells, but then softens her face revealing how frightened she is, “Here let me help you up.”

She offer a hand that a gladly accept, “Are you ok?”

“Just dizzy, but it’s a small cut, nothing serious,” I explain, “We’ve come to far to go back now!”

She bites her lip nervously, “But you’re hurt...”

“Really I’ll be fine,” I say firmly, “I think we’re really close... Look down there,” I point to the glossy lake beneath the staircase. I find myself lucky I didn’t fall into that murky water!

“Why Meg- a lake! How can this be?” she exclaims, edging closer to the wall. I grasp the rail, letting the disorientation pass.

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Christine’s POV

I stretch my head out of the window, not believing my eyes. There it is! The Opera Populaire stands as magnificent as I remember. The driver hops off and politely opens the door.

“Well here we are, Miss, that’ll be a franc,” he says, extending his hand. I give him a small bag of money, “This is more then-”

“Please... Keep this a secret, don’t tell anyone my whereabouts. Please,” I beg him, with pleading eyes.

“Alright then Missy,” he smiles greedily taking the pouch. I depart from the carriage and gaze at the nighttime sky. I gaze at the scene around me. Lights everywhere. Even though it must be past midnight

people stroll the streets of Paris. I'm home.

.....

8 - across the lake

Henri's POV

All right, I realize sneakin' 'round the manager's office at night isn't the smartest thing to do, but there's somethin' fishy 'bout that man that doesn't sit right with me. Boy, this office sure is tidy. There isn't one little thing out of place.

I keep glancing around my back, scared someone's goin' to show up. There's not much 'ere... A fancy chair, with an expensive looking desk.

I try opening a drawer on the desk, but they're all locked, "Figures," I mutter, sitting in the fancy chair. It's one of those chairs that spin 'round. I try opening a few more compartments, but no luck.

Wait a minute... Hello! Keys! There's a whole bunch them at the side of the desk. They must open every door at the opera house.

I start trying different keys into the locks on the drawers. Nothing... I suddenly here something shuffle behind me, I spin the chair 'round scared.

"Who's there?" I ask, standing up. It's just your nerves, gettin' on you! I gulp. Maybe I ought to go now... Nah, c'mon you just got 'ere!

My curiosity gets the better of me... I keep trying different keys until finally one fits! Got it!

Inside lies a black notebook. I take it out and place it on the desk. It's... It's a date book? Not very interesting...

"Wait a tick... August 13th..." my eyes widen at the words before me.

"You fool," I whip my 'ead 'round towards the angry voice. Fading... Fading into nothing.

.....

Meg' POV

We enter a dock where we're greeted by a long murky lake. No boats! I bit my nails nervously. We've come too far just to back out now...

"Meg... Now what?" Ebony asks. My eyes meet the pillars... I remember how the crowds of people had walked through the water. The water didn't look too deep, but it was dark and murky.

"We could swim over to there," I explain pointing at the sides of the skinny line of lake.

"Swimming? This is madness! You've wounded your head, you're not thinking properly," she cries,

rubbing her temples.

“I doubt this water is very deep,”

“No way Meg! I simply can’t do this... I’ve come this far, but I can’t believe that there’s somebody living down here in this gloom! I can’t,”

“Ebony, look at all those candles! Surely someone must have lit them and put them there!”

“But Meg... Look at that water! It’s looks like ink,” she objects.

“Fine... Stay here, I’ll go by myself,” I tell her. She bites her lip, and glances around at the creepy surroundings. I already have stepped in the water. It’s cold to the bone, but it’s fairly shallow. Only goes to my knee.

“Wait Meg! Wait for me!” she exclaims, jumping in after me. I hold my finger to my lips.

“Shh, we don’t know what we’re dealing with,” I hiss. We walk till we reach the pillars. By then the water is up to our thighs. I climb onto the ledge and swing my legs up.

Ebony follows my example, only with a little more effort on her part. The floor beneath us is damp. I pick myself up and began to walk further down this soggy corridor.

“Careful you don’t slip,” I say, glancing behind. She nods, but her eyes are glued to the sculptures emerging from the depths of the lake.

“I can’t believe this is real...” she mutters in wonder.

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Christine’s POV

“Are you lost?” I turn my around to see a handsome man staring curiously at me.

“Why no, Sir,” I start, “I... I wanted to pay a visit to the opera house,” I stutter, sounding rather foolish.

“In the middle of the night?” his grin widens. I suddenly realize I’m probably breaking an entry!

“Look I’m awfully sorry, I shan’t stay any longer, I-”

“You’re Christine Daaé, aren’t you?” he asks. My face flushes.

“How... How do you know my name?”

“I remember your picture from the papers,” he explains, seeing my confusion. I relax a little, “I’m curious though why you’re here, especially at this hour,”

"I just felt the need to see...my old friends," I clarify to him, "Pardon me for asking, but who are you exactly?"

"Jacque Bellamount, the new manager of the Opera Populaire," he dramatically bows.

"A pleasure, Monsieur Bellamount, do you think I might be able to stay here a night or so?"

"Please I insist you call me Jacque," he smiles, "And yes, I believe there might be a spare room for you,"

"Really? Are you sure it's no trouble?"

"Not at all," he offers an arm. I gladly accept it, but am in a state of bewilderment. If it were odd enough he didn't call guards to arrest me from breaking an entrance, he's letting me stay under no charge whatsoever!

.....

Meg's POV

Each step I take is more frightful than the next. My heart comes to a frozen stop as I gaze in terror of what I see before me. There... There before us stands the huge opening to his world. Yet something is quite amiss... Ebony's eyes are wider than mine. Her face pale as a fresh harvest moon.

"If you'd rather not go..." I whisper.

"Meg... There truly is someone living down here?" her voice sounds painstaking.

"Yes... I wasn't lying," I gaze carefully from the pillar. Peeking at the candles all lit up from inside the grotto. We'd have to walk in the water to reach the shore, but I didn't know if I had the courage to go on.

"Who lives down here Meg? Who would live in such a place?" her voice quivers.

"I told you... The Phantom lives down here; he's the one who destroyed the opera house three years ago! But since then no one's heard from him. We all thought he was dead,"

"I don't understand!" she whispers. But our conversation is interrupted when loud organ music fills our ears. The melody rings harshly filled with sorrow and anger. "Oh my God..."

"I'm sorry! This was a bad idea! I don't know what I was thinking!" I don't know what's wrong with me. This music is eating me inside out. Tears tumble down my cheeks.

This is it... I couldn't go back now, without feeling pathetic for the rest of my life. I had to do this. I simply had to.

"Ebony... I want you to stay here," I say. She nods, in astonishment of this place.

I throw the bag over my shoulder, hoping it wouldn't get wet. The water feels gooey around my body. Sticking to my clothes. Every step makes me shake more. My pulse runs rapid and I have a horrible sinking feeling.

Suddenly the organ music comes to an abrupt halt. My eyes squint at the bright candlelight. Before I realize it... I'm in his home!

The water level touches my ankles, swaying gently over the ruined boots. I look before me. What a sight to behold! Candles high and low, draperies hanging from the walls, and... a grand organ. Upon which a man sits. I gasp, but quickly regret it. I clasp my hands over my mouth.

He suddenly turns around, his eyes glaring menacingly towards me. I try to stand tall, showing that I am confident even in this awkward situation.

"Foolish girl... How dare you intrude my solitude?" he growls, slowly coming towards me. My eyes are fixated upon the skull shaped mask he wears. Emerald eyes beneath a skull shaped mask. Everything Ebony had described to me. She had danced with him!

"I've...I...I" I stutter nervously, the words on the tip of my tongue, but refusing to pass my lips.

He stands dangerously close before me. I take a step back. Splash. His eyes are rooted to the bag I'm grasping in a tight fist.

"I stole something from you!" I cry, sounding horribly pitiful. If I didn't know better I would have thought confusion ran across his eyes for a split moment. Yet he stays in his superior stance.

"I imagine you've come to return it," he says coldly.

"I...Yes...I have," I pull out the porcelain mask. His eyes widen.

9 - drowning

My teeth chatter uncontrollably in this hellish cold. I hear horrible strange noises. Pecking at my mind in this endless darkness.

I'm too frightened to stand any longer. I find myself curled in small ball, leaning upon the dank stones. I never should have come... I never should have come!

What has Meg dragged me into? I wrap my arms around my small shuddering body. My head snugly hidden inside the safety of my arms. The mat of my bristly honey hair is strewn about like a dropped bucket of water.

Voices? Sounds invade my ears. It sounds like speaking. I dare take a small peek towards what I hear. What if Meg was in some sort of danger or trouble? Not likely I could help her against whatever maniac lives down here...

Yet I couldn't just abandon my friend! Besides I couldn't bear to stay in this small dank corner for much longer. I swear I hear breathing other than mine. How many people live down here? Tears of fright splash down upon my wet cheeks. It only takes the sound of unexplained shuffling feet to have me heedlessly hop into the dirty waters. This is much deeper lake water than before!

Meg made her way through it with ease, but I on the other hand began to shake and panic. The water touches the base of my throat. I gasp for breath! Where is the ledge? Where is the shore? Where am I?

The water licks my legs like a thousand needles. I cry out in pain, feeling the polluted water kiss my scarred legs.

"Help!" I cry out, my arms frantically flailing up and down. Splish splash... I am a wobbly fish with no fins nor tail! Black water pours into my open mouth! My hands desperately search for something, anything to grab onto. "Meg!"

.....

Christine's POV

This mysterious man leads me into a modestly charming room, with pale blue walls and a soft looking bed. A thin lengthy looking glass hangs besides the little vanity. My eyes catch a quick glance, but I pull them away... I draw my attention back to Monsieur Bellamount.

"I...I don't know how to thank you!" I tell him eagerly.

"It's really not a problem," he grins, placing my expensive attaché case onto the quilted bed. It wobbles on the yielding mattress. "How long do you plan on staying?"

"Perhaps a day or so," I yawn, rubbing the fatigue from my eyes.

“You’re obviously exhausted, I shall leave you to rest,” he says. My eyes bolt open despite the weariness, my mind screaming “NO!” The realization that I truly didn’t want to be alone struck me feverishly.

“Please,” I beseech him, “Don’t leave me!” He quirks a brow curiously at my outburst. I fleetly regain my composure, blushing fierce.

“Is something the matter?” he asks surprised. I brush a stray curl behind my ear.

“I’m terribly sorry- I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” my words stumble out as awkward as I. He smiles kindly, “If you wish I’ll send a maid to check upon you later,”

“No, don’t trouble yourself,” I say, “Goodnight Monsieur, and thank you again,”

“Goodnight, Mm. Daaé,” he nods politely before exiting. I breathe heavily and fall upon the overly soft bed. My mind racing like a rapid river.

.....

Meg’s POV

He snatches the mask from my quivering fingertips. His eyes a vacant stare. “You were one of them... Before the hideous renovations you were a ballerina,” he says blankly, rotating the mask in the candlelight. It’s like he’s reliving some old memory.

“Yes,” I manage to cough out. His eyes flicker with a strange curiosity. He suddenly comes towards me. I hold my breath.

Oddly enough he passes me looking out in the distant, “How many people did you bring here?” he asks in a fierce growl.

“What...?” I stammer, twisting my body around. Faintly I hear some commotion coming from the darkness.

Abruptly he grabs my shoulders and stares intensely with those emerald eyes. I gasp. “How many of those ballet rats did you bring with you?” he snarls.

“No one!” I lie, recoiling from his touch.

“Then who’s out there drowning?” he mutters. Drowning? Ebony? I stretch my gaze until I see a subtle silhouette of a struggling figure.

“Ebony!” I yell, rushing into the lake, but a strong grip hauls me back, “My friend-Ebony- she’ll drown! She can’t swim!”

“Stop, you’ll only drown both of yourselves,” he sighs.

“What do you propose to do?” I cry yanking my wrist free. He ignores my question, but wanders instead out into the darkness. I bite my nails anxiously. It takes a few moments before he reappears with knocked out Ebony. “What did you do to her?”

“She passed out from shock,” he explains, placing her on the cave’s floor. I kneel besides her. Why couldn’t you stay put?

.....

Ebony’s POV

Everything is so blurry. Again I’m falling. Falling... Safe in brothers arms... Only brothers arms. I breathe in the sweet perfume of cinnamon. My face nestled in his chest. Ear pressed against his always beating heart. Voices. Faintly the light flickers my eyelids open...

My senses adjust to my new surroundings. Meg’s worried face looms above me. “Meg?” I whisper, watering sliding down the side of my mouth. Her tense face relaxes a little. I arise from my position, gazing at the sight before me!

“You’re awake!” she says, but my attention is focused elsewhere. There leaning upon a wall is a man. Upon his face is a skull shaped mask with piercing emerald eyes. Is this the man Meg had warned me of?

“You!” I gasp rudely. Meg gives me a look that tells me I ought to stop talking.

“Yes? Would you like to thank me for saving you, Mme. Valette?” he says smugly.

“You’re the Phantom?” I ask appalled. Meg shoots me another warning glance.

“I much prefer ruthless murderer, but I’ll answer to both,” he grumbles, “Still no thank you?” My eyes are opened in a still shock, realization hit me with great force. This was the man in the black domino... From that night...

10 - a hidden anger

This is really bad she's going to anger him! I cast her a warning glance, wondering what's gotten into her. I've only known Ebony for a few months, and in those months I've thought of her as a little quiet mouse. Yet embedded in the depths of her hollow eyes I see a spark of anger. My fingers rub tensely upon my head. He stands cockily, leaning upon the cave's wall. My head throbs painfully, as I run my fingers through my hair.

"We ought to be going," I manager, breaking the silence, "It'll be morning soon." Despite this neither of them take any action of any sort. I stand, trying to pull Ebony along with me.

"How do you know me?" Ebony whispers, her voice low and solemn. Her mahogany eyes pierce into him gravely.

He smiles smugly; "My opera house must be run in complete perfection. As you must imagine, staying here day and night gets horribly tedious," he explains gesturing to his home, "So I make sure I watch each and every rehearsal. Even though you rarely make any of them when you do... well you're rather conspicuous..."

"Am I?" her voice sounds like it's at the brink of breaking. I feel awfully uncomfortable about the news I'm receiving. He's watching us? I imagine he's a genius in all the arts by the look of this place. To think of someone like him seeing our every move, our every flaw, is all together unsettling. But I keep my mouth closed.

"Yes Mme. Valette, I don't appreciate my crew being disorderly or slothful. Which are both significant traits of yours," he presses upon his words.

"Excuse me for interrupting, but we really must go," I interject. I tug on Ebony's arm, but she doesn't budge.

"I don't understand... What do you expect of me?" she cries.

"A great deal more," he replies.

"Come on Ebony! Let's go!" I hiss, yanking her to her feet. I keep eyes to the exit desperately hoping she'll catch on.

Abruptly she bursts into tears, "You...Monster! You bloody horrible beast!" she yells fiercely.

Oh my God! My heart stops as she says that. We're as good as dead! Quickly I tow her towards the way out. I feel his scowl burning into us, but I do not look back.

We run blindly into the dark. The dim torches barely helping us. Water touching our knees. Ebony stumbles behind me.

Our panting echoes the walls. Shadows play on the grey bricks. My eyes glance back only to see that we are perfectly safe. Nothing was there. He hadn't been following us... Thank God!

I lift myself up onto the ledge, assisting my pathetic friend. "What's gotten into you?" I gasp, still in shock at her intensity.

"I'm sorry..." she mumbles, twisting her hair through her fingers. I watch as waterfalls of water leak out of it. "I didn't mean to lose it like that... I just.... I really don't want to speak of this matter."

"But-" I start, but the flash of spite in her eyes interjects. I arise in silence and begin to saunter back to the world above... Ebony following behind, but it feels like she's sinking farther and farther back.

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Christine's POV

"Please... Come back to me... Angel!" soft fingers stroke my arm gently, awaking me from my light slumber. I adjust to the ferocious light blaring from the opened windows. Suddenly I wonder if my Angel is there before me. He came for me! I gasp in a pleased shock. Yet there is no Angel to be standing in the golden mist of morning's first sunshine, only an elderly maid with a ruddy face and stout body. I pout in disappointment...

"Monsieur Bellamount asked I wake you, Miss... Pardon me for startling you," she nods politely, I half-nod in return.

I sit up and lean upon to the wooden backboard of the bed, untying the taut braid. An explosion of curls emerges from my head. I sigh and run my fingers through the thick tresses.

"He also asked if you should like to accompany him for breakfast in his office,"

"That sounds lovely," I yawn. Come to think of it I haven't had a chance to eat a decent meal yesterday! "Please tell him I gladly accept."

"Will do, Miss," she says, while exiting the door. I climb out of bed, feeling my weariness pull on my eyelids. After several more yawns I scurry to my suitcase, and empty the contents onto my unmade bed. I grab a simple skirt and blouse, and a gold necklace. Quickly I rip the nightdress and throw it on the floor.

My eyes catch another glimpse at the wall mirror. It hangs there so sullenly, exposing me in the harshest way.

After living three years in the lap of luxury, I certainly had the appearance of girl who has been well pampered. With expensive dishes placed in front of me at the numerous parties I had perhaps gained a pound or so. My dress had the appearance of causality, but the golden necklace and pure silk blouse gave me away all too easily! I button the blouse up only so a little of my neck line shows.

Sighing I unclip the clasp of the necklace from the back of my neck, setting it aside on top of the night table. I decide to tie my hair in a simple bun. After rotating around in the mirror a few times I decide that I look humbly decent.

But where are my morals? I should be more concerned of little Julian than my appearance... He's been left all to himself with only our servants to tend to him. Then there's Raoul to consider! He'd surely have a fit if he knew I was here! I sure to do miss him, but his being here will mess my plans up...

Was this a bad idea? Maybe this whole trip was one huge mistake... Even if he was here, I'm probably the last person on earth he'd want to see.

"Mme. Daaé?" a soft voice murmurs through the crack of the door. Startled I collect my emotions in a rush of a heartbeat, smoothing my hair with tense fingers.

"Yes?" I say melodically. The handsome manager strolls in, knocking at the wooden door. He smiles kindly.

"I apologize for not knocking," he atones as I flatten my skirt out. My eyes drift to the pile of clothing heaped upon the bed. Yet his eyes are transfixed on my gold necklace lying upon the nightstand.

"Do forgive me.... I'm afraid I've made quite a mess," I remark, looking at the untidiness of the room.

He laughs heartily, "Don't worry about it! I'm sure we can find a maid, who will fix things up," I smile, but inside I feel my nose pinch up. Even though I'm accustomed to having maids and such, I still have a tendency to clean after myself. Before I married Raoul I never had any servants, the idea was so new to me at first. The way he says this so casually fills me with disgust. I'm guessing he sees the distaste in my eyes as he leads me from the room. "My office is only down the corridor, it's not the most appropriate place for breakfast, but I do have a surprise for you waiting in there,"

My brow curves upward as I look curiously at his grinning face. A surprise? He barely knows me, what sort of "surprise" does he have in mind?

"Right this way," he says, opening the door into a sunlit office. I am welcomed with the aroma of pastries and...a familiar face! I gasp as I see

"Madame Giry!" I cry, embracing the old woman kindly. Her appearance is a frightfully unnatural calmness. She doesn't look the slightest bit surprised! Even though three years have gone by she looks just the same as she always did. Just more tired with little wrinkles more significant than before beneath her eyes.

"Christine, dear, how good it to see you," she smiles, returning my embrace. Tear prickle on my lower eyelashes.

"I remember you saying you wanted to see some old friends," Monsieur Bellamount comments, leaning upon the bookcase. His arms crossed, and a strange smile upon his face.

"Yes..." I say, a bit befuddled, "How have you been, Madame?"

“Quite well thank you,” she tells me, “Yourself?”

“Good, very good,” I explain, intertwining my fingers, the clicking of the grandfather clock making me nervous.

“And your husband? How is he?” her words hint something. I look deep into her eyes, wondering if perhaps she has an inkling to the reason behind my visit.

“He’s in good health. I am a mother now,” I tell her proudly. Her face changes just the tiniest bit...

“I imagine he is here with you?” she asks sternly. From the corner of my eye, I see Monsieur Bellamount watching every little detail.

“No, Madame, I come alone,” I tell her. Something flashes in her eyes, but only for a moment. Still she smiles in a mysterious fashion remaining very tranquil.

“Please, ladies, do seat yourselves, and feel free to take a pastry!” Monsieur Bellamount interject, sitting in the grand chair and helping himself to a flaky croissant.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, “Madame, is Meg still here?” I smile at my memory of my oldest and dearest friend. How cruel I have been not to write to her...

“Of course, I would’ve told her of your arrival but she wasn’t there in the morning when I went to take a look,” Madame Giry tells me.

I pluck a small ripe looking strawberry from the side of the pastry dish, plopping it into my mouth. Sweetness coats my mouth as I listen to Madame Giry.

Suddenly I hear a knock at the door. A tall muscular man walks in. His eyes like broken glass and his mouth curved in a cold emotionless line.

“Monsieur, I must have a word with you,” he spits venomously in an icy voice. I shutter inwardly at his abruptness and appearance.

“Well a good morning to you, Detective,” Monsieur Bellamount retorts, “Please excuse me for a moment...”

As the two men leave, Madame Giry turns to me, her face serious. “Christine... What are you doing here?”

“Just to visit some old fr-”

“You came to see him, didn’t you?” she whispers hoarsely. I shut my eyes and nod. It was true after all. If anyone would know of my dear Angel’s whereabouts I could trust Madame to point me in the right direction.

"This is extremely foolish of you," she says sternly, "Did you leave on your own accord? I trust that Raoul knows not of this?"

"No he doesn't, I left on my own will! Raoul is busy in England," I explain, giving her pleading eyes, "Please... Is he... alive" I cough the last word out. Her expression is very difficult to read. My heart throbs in my throat. Did I want to know the answer?

"Do not chase the past down... You already made your choice, and you can't go back," she says almost sadly.

I put my hand over her cold one, "Please... I must know what has become of him!" I cry desperately.

She sighs, "For...three years... Not one word," I hold my breath, "I thought he must have withered away in his solitude... All by himself," she says, the pain written clearly in her words. "After the opera house reopened I was curious if the notes would start to come, but nothing! I had asked this new manager if any suspicious letters had been sent his way, but still nothing,"

"What happened?" I ask eagerly.

"Well one day, just out of the blue, he spoke to me,"

"In person?" I feel a small joy of his existence.

"No... He remained hidden away, behind the studio mirrors... It was very strange,"

"What did you speak of?" I question, my heart beating fast, tears of gladness dropping on my cheeks.

"That's the strange part, Christine," she says, "The matter of which he spoke was about one of my ballerinas,"

A blush forms on my face, "What of her?"

"Don't get the wrong idea," Madame Giry tells me, seeing the look on my face, "He asked I remove her from the ballet courses. She's a very poor dancer, true, but only because of her injuries. Three years back she was a member of the audience at...the performance. I don't know the whole story, but her dress caught fire. It burned her legs badly,"

"How awful!" I remark, not even wanting to imagine such a horror, "But how can she dance?"

"She's lucky I suppose that she's recovering, but I don't know if she'll ever be a true ballerina,"

"I'm sorry for the long wait!" Monsieur Bellamount says, rushing back to his seat, "Is everything all right?" He looks at our expressions in confusion.

"Yes," I mutter as confused as he is, "Please excuse me, but I must go," Quickly I gather my skirts and rush from the room.

“Was it something I said?” I hear Monsieur Bellamount ask in wonder.

11 - official return

The Illustrated French News

Another Attempted Robbery!

Yesterday at the stroke of midnight, the mysterious robber appears again at the Louvre. Despite that the manquant clé is heavily guarded, this thief cleverly and inconspicuously passed our watchmen soundlessly. If it weren't the notable Detective Walters noticing this criminal, the Faberge may have been long gone. In spite of this, the robber was not caught, but police are beginning a very serious and thorough investigation. Detective Walters assures the public and the management of the Louvre that no harm will come to the precious egg.

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Meg's POV

"Ebony have you seen my ring anywhere?" I ask, lacing my ballet slippers on. She's still in bed, claiming that her private lesson holds later this day. Again with another excuse! Today she complains of a blistering headache.

All the other girls are already at practice, but I remain behind. Even though Maman will not approve of my being late I feel I must speak to Ebony privately and at once.

"No," she mumbles, wiping her sleepy eyes. Her wheat-colored hair falls carelessly around her shoulders sticking up at all ends.

"Are you not feeling well?" I inquire, tying back my hair with rosy red ribbon. A gift from Monsieur Bellamount...

"I don't really know," she mumbles into the pillow.

"Um... About last night," I begin, staring at her seriously. She lifts her gaze up to me. Her eyes look slightly more alert. I bite my lip nervously trying to put this nicely.

"What of it?" she asks, sitting up strait. Her words sound somewhat harsh. I wish to be tender with the subject.

"What happened is a secret! No one is to know of what happened. Swear to me you won't tell a living soul," I explain gravely.

"Of course! Who would I tell, Meg? Who?" she says, her fingers clasping tightly around the pillow with that frightful flame of anger in her eyes.

"I know... But I do feel rather bad about bringing you along. It wasn't my proper judgement, and I shouldn't have pulled you into something as awkward as... that. We were both in a very dangerous situation," I tell her recalling the tension in the air.

"I understand," she whispers, "I... I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have... Well react in the way I did," she says looking down at her ghostly white hand clenching the sheets. Temptation told me to ask her a bit more about what exactly happened. Though prudence tells me to keep to myself even if bizarre thoughts were bubbling in my mind. What if she holds secret affairs with the Phantom?

"You must not tell anyone of his existence," I warn her.

"I've already told you, I shan't say a word!" she cries. I bite my lip and turn to leave, but quickly glance back.

"Thank you," I whisper, but she does not respond.

Ebony's POV

Angry tears run down my face, sloshing into my mouth. I wipe them away fiercely with my arm, but what's the use? It burns me up that some lunatic would remark about me in such a hardhearted way. If he didn't think me a good dancer, why on earth would he have bothered to ask me to dance?

It's as if they're all mocking me. Not just him, but everyone! They all treat with disdain because I do not attend the normal practices. Even Meg acts like she doesn't trust me about what happened last night.

I wish to dance more than anyone could possibly imagine! A yearning I've had since I was a little girl! Of all the bad things that could happen to a person, losing your hopes, dreams, and loved ones is possibly the worst. I can still remember how I watched all that I cherish be snatched away from me in a flicker of a flame.

Brother... I run my fingers across his portrait. He had the kindest eyes and the sweetest smile. Such silky gold hair and Always ready for a good time or laugh.

It was my fault he was dead! If only I had moved faster! No, I was completely frozen stiff that night as I looked at everything falling apart. It was like some horribly vivid nightmare you couldn't escape.

"Be strong Ebony, and keep trying. Once you have determination nothing can pull you down!" Brother's words ring in my remembrance of him. That'd be something he would tell me to do.... I can't let this obstacle of my disability allow me to give up. All I need is to clear my mind of all this negativity and rise to brighter thoughts! Sucking in a large breath, I muster my inner strength.

So instead of moping the whole day I decide I ought to make use of myself and perhaps explore the opera house a bit. With one last swipe at the tumbling tears I slip my feet into my worn boots.

It's an awfully gigantic building, and I feel I've only seen a small portion of this place. Everything is so silence and still. Other than a few scattered maids, there's hardly anyone around. My guess is that they're all in the theater or the studio.

I stroll down a shadowy hallway, my fingers glazing the walls with a feathery touch. It's eerily quiet here, so irregularly motionless. The walls are painted an ugly deep green with little gold designs decorated into the tops and bottoms of the walls. Beneath my fingers the textures feel rough and jagged. I snatch my hand away in fear I the skin might break.

Suddenly a woman with dark brown curls falling from a loose bun rushes through the hallway. She stares at me curiously, her wide doe eyes boring through me.

"Pardon me," she says in hushed tone. She appears frantic to get into the door I stand before. Why does she appear so familiar?

"Do I know you?" I ask, gazing into her face. I suppose on my part that's rather rude, but I swear I've seen her before...

"No," she whispers passing me, "We've never met." Her voice sounds silvery and soft. The door opens briskly smacking the ugly green wall with a shrill thud. Before I can say anything else, the door is shut at my face. I hear the lock click.

Meg's POV

My slippers grace the floor with swift poised brushes as my arms daintily moves upwards. Maman surveys us with hawk-like eyes. I try to imagine myself as a swan floating upon a lake, but I keep glancing around wondering where he is.

Truly is he watching us? The thought is rather unsettling... Even though I do consider myself a good dancer, I'd hate to imagine someone like that just inspecting us or something...

"Meg, keep your chin up!" Maman says sharply over her shoulder as she strides down the row.

"Yeah Meg," Suzette whispers, "Loosen up a bit, you look like a stiff old maid!" She snickers, but I ignore her. My mind is focused elsewhere.

I sigh and stretch downwards, thrusting outwards. My eyes pinned to the new blood red chairs in the theater. Everything about the renovations seems amiss. It's almost too new. I miss the old fashioned feel the old theater had...

All of a sudden I find myself face flat on the brutally cold ground. I glare up at Suzette who had stuck her pointy little foot out.

"Oh...I'm every so sorry," she cries, "I do have such long legs!" In the background I hear the girls giggle amongst themselves. She offers a hand, but I gladly refuse it.

"Alright, what's all the commotion?" Maman asks bitterly.

Before I reach my feet, a shrill scream is heard as a heavy sand bag lands with a thwack! Right where Suzette had been! Luckily she moved out of the way in time!

Maman whips her head up as do we all. Nothing... A few stagehands rush to the scene, trying to figure why that happened.

"It's the Phantom!" someone whispers loud enough for us all to hear. Maman looks nervously towards us all with grave eyes.

"Girls, practice is over for the day!" she tells us. The ballet dancers scatter away from the scene, but I remain. I keep my eyes glued to the ceiling, attempting to find him with my searching eyes.