

Raoul's Cold Feet

Raoul de Chagny let go of Christine Daaé, his best friend and dance partner. She looked ethereal as she twirled, her light blonde locks and billowing light pink skirts spinning alongside her. He grabbed her waist once she was facing him, took a step to the side...

"*Ouch!*" Christine exclaimed.

Raoul jerked his foot away from hers. "Whoops, sorry. I thought I was clear."

"It's alright." she replied.

But it *wasn't* alright. Not if that thin smile was anything to go by. Raoul could almost feel the

throbbing of her foot. It was a sensation they had both experienced tonight... Christine especially! She sometimes forgot how to place her feet, but his mind went blank on entire steps! There was so much to remember. Following her lead often resulted in sore toes.

As the song came to a sweeping end, Christine and Raoul spun around and joined back together.

"Oof!" Raoul exclaimed, feeling her shoe press down on his foot.

"Oops! I'm sorry." Christine apologized.

"Hey, at least we're even now."

Raoul suddenly caught sight of Christine's friend Meg Giry. Even though the music had temporarily stopped, she was still dancing with her fellow ballerinas! Her moves were effortless.

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She makes dancing seem like breathing or walking. Raoul thought enviously.

Christine chuckled. "Let's go somewhere more private."

"Yes, so I can mess up in peace." Raoul added.

Christine's gloved hand took him away from Palais Garnier's auditorium, which was packed with people. On this first day of February, the second of four balls for 1890's masquerade season was taking place. It the first one Raoul and Christine had been to. He hoped it would be the last!

The Glacier Salon was far away from all the hustle and bustle. Christine leaned against one of the round room's many doorways and took off her flats. Raoul sighed as she rubbed her sore toes. "What's wrong?" Christine asked.

"I feel bad about stepping on you all the time,"
Raoul leaned against the doorway's opposite side.

"And I can barely remember all the steps!"

Christine smiled. "We can still dance without
moving our feet. Mine need a rest, anyways."

She went over to Raoul, prompting him to his
arms around her as she gently took him in. They
held each other close.

"We'll just sway," Christine said. "You can't mess
that up."

Raoul moved back and forth alongside her. He
closed his eyes, taking in the feeling of her silky
bodice and the soft lace of her berth, and the
floral scent of her hair. The guilt over not being
able to dance melted into blissful serenity. It was
as if there was no one in the opera house but him
and Christine.

"*Eek!*" Christine squealed.

Raoul jerked out of her arms upon feeling her shoulders jump.

I didn't step on her feet again, did I? he wondered.

Christine put her hands on her hips. "*Erik!* You scared me!"

Just behind her was Erik Carrière-Destler. He was usually The Opera Ghost, but tonight he was dressed as The Red Death.

...Or, just Erik in a flowing red robe.

"I can't believe you two aren't wearing masks to a *masquerade!*" Erik said, tsking them. "For shame."

"We'll wear them on Mardi Gras." Christine replied, making Erik roll his eyes.

"Where's the skull mask?" Raoul asked, noticing that Erik was wearing his usual white leather mask.

Erik waved a hand. "That thing's too stuffy. A- And it's hard to see out of."

"*And* it would've scared me even more," Christine added, raising her head. "A shoulder tap is bad enough!"

Erik cracked a smirk. Then he shyly said, "I- I know the perfect dance for you two."

He held out his hand. Black fabric mingled with pink as Christine took it.

"Ready?" Erik asked.

"Ready!" Christine replied with a smile.

Her bare feet slapped on the marble floor while Erik's sharp boot heels clicked as they slid, skipped and twirled. That stab of jealousy

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returned as Raoul watched them. He expected disaster, but their feet avoided touching each other completely!

"The Opera Ghost Waltz!" Christine declared after she and Erik curtsied. "I probably shouldn't have done that after barely resting my feet."

Erik stepped aside. "N- Now *you* try."

Raoul's stomach flip-flopped. Yet he pushed past his unease and took Christine's hands. He stepped to the right and spun around alongside her.

This isn't too bad. he thought while sliding leftward.

Just as they were about to turn around again...

"Ouch!" Christine yelped.

She slapped a hand over her mouth as it echoed around the salon.

"Geez, I'm so sorry!" Raoul exclaimed.

He led her to the closest doorway, where she slipped one of her shoes on.

"It's... *ow*..." Christine rubbed her big left toe with a wince. "It'll be alright once I get some ice," She mustered up a smile. "That dance was still fun." Erik gave Raoul's shoulder a quick tap as he said, "Take the night off, okay?"



The disastrous dance replayed in Raoul's head as he wandered through the de Chagny mansion the next afternoon. Christine had insisted that all was well, but he knew it wasn't.

I'm a terrible dancer, he thought. I mean, I always knew that, but I thought I could handle it! I was born with two left feet that can't straighten out anymore.

Meg and Erik's Not Romantic Day

Meg stood alone on the stage of Palais Garnier. She curtsied to the shadowy audience members, their applause swirling around in her ears. Then she straightened herself with a deep breath... and launched into a flip!

"*Oooh, ahhh!*" the audience breathed in delight. Meg lunged and twirled, spinning and leaping for her dazzled audience. Just as her legs geared up to take one final jump-

BAM!

The floor jolted upwards, sending Meg crashing down. When she opened her eyes, she saw her shelves of trinkets. She wasn't in the opera house, but in her bed at home! And the shaking wasn't from an earthquake...

"Sorry about that." Christine said through a groan, her voice sounding sore.

"It's alright. Just a little sneeze! One that's not as little as your usual sneezes," Meg sat up. "Wait, that was a *big* sneeze. And your voice sounds funny."

Christine swallowed with a wince. "My throat *feels* funny."

"Do you have Larry Jeet again?" Meg asked, remembering when Christine had laryngitis last year.

"No, I can talk just fine," Christine coughed. "It's just a bit tickled."

She rose from the bed, stumbling a bit. Meg went walked through the flat with her to make sure she was stable. She gave Christine a cup of water, which looked like it relieved her.

"Bonjour, mon amour, Christine," Madame Giry nodded at the girls before noticing Christine. "You look so tired. Did you get enough sleep?"

"Oui. I..." Christine stepped back as she prepared to sneeze, muffling it into her hands. "I'm not feeling too well."

Madame Giry stepped away from making her bed to set a hand on Christine's head. "You feel warm. Please get the thermometer, mon amour."

"And toilet paper for my hands." Christine added.

She's sick, Meg thought with dismay as she trudged to the bathroom's medicine cabinet. *I don't need mercury to tell me that!*

Christine was sitting on Madame Giry's bed a minute later, the thermometer in her mouth. Meg watched as the little strip of mercury inside rose higher and higher. Her stomach twisted with worry.

"Thirty-eight degrees." Madame Giry reported before giving the thermometer a good shake.

"I guess you'll have to stay home." Meg said to Christine, her heart sinking.

"I should've known I'd get sick. A lot of seamstresses already have," Christine fell back onto the bed. "I definitely need some rest."

Meg took the thermometer, giving a little hop while saying, "I'll stay here and take care of her!"

Meg and Erik's Not Romantical Day

Madame Giry winced as Meg nearly dropped the thin glass tube. "I think it would be best if *I'm* the caregiver, mon amour. You can have fun with your dancer friends. I'm giving them a reprieve today." It was Thursday, so the ballerinas didn't need to perform. Now they wouldn't need to practice! And Christine wouldn't need to be at the opera house.



It was strange for Meg to walk to Palais Garnier by herself. She shivered, not because of the cool March air, but because of how *lonely* she was. She was more than happy to spend her practice hour with her fellow dancers. They did general ballet moves and gossiped.

"What was *that* about?" a voice asked as the ballerinas left the auditorium.

Meg spun around. A shadowy hand moved Box Three's curtain aside...

"Mr. E!" she exclaimed. "I-"

"You're supposed to be practicing for A- A- *Ascanio*! The premiere is just over a week away," Erik pointed out. "I heard there's a quite long ballet scene."

"There is! Twelve whole dances. But we've been practicing a lot lately. I know them by heart now! And... well... Mama can't make it."

"I never took her as the type to be taken ill."

"She's fine!" Meg hesitantly bit her lip.

"*Christine's* the ill one."

Erik's fingers slipped from the velvet curtain. Meg didn't think it was possible for his already pale face to get even paler, but it did.

"...She is?" he asked in a near whisper.

Meg and Erik's Not Romantical Day

Meg nodded. "She's all sneezy and coughy and weaky."

"...*Oh*."

Erik plopped down in his chair, nearly missing the seat. He had a distant, frightened look in his icy blue eyes.

"You're sort of starting to look sick, Mr. E. Did you catch a cold, too? I sure hope not."

Erik faintly shook his head. "No... I- It's the thirteenth, right?"

Meg nodded and realized, "*Ooh*, it's unlucky! Beware of ladders and black cats, Mr. E."

"Yes, beware of a pompous princess!" Erik said, referring to his own black cat before adding with a frown, "Today is our a- a- anniversary. We met on this day two years ago. Christine and I, I mean."

"What's so sad about that?"

"Christine isn't here to celebrate! She's sick..."

Erik ran his hands through his hair. "I had a whole day planned."

Meg watched him lean forward, his elbows on Box Three's rim and his fingers messing up his usually neat raven locks.

He looks so sad... Meg thought before an idea sparked in her mind. *I can't help Christine, but I can help Mr. E!*

Nadir's Daffy New Year

Swipe, swipe went the feather duster as Nadir cleaned the frame of Monet's *Sunset on the Seine at Lavacourt*. He smiled at the painting, a peaceful scene of the Seine River sparkling under a pastel sunset.

Then he turned to another painting, this one far smaller. It stood on his bedside table, resting in a golden frame. Within was a painting of Nadir at the ripe age of thirty-eight, his dear wife Miriam and his little son Reza at his side.

"Nowruz Mubarak, my delbaram, my little azizam." Nadir said, his voice low and his smile

sad.

He wiped his eyes. Today was March 20th, the first day of spring in 1890. But to Iranians, it was the first day of 1249! Two decades had passed since Miriam and Reza had celebrated the new year with him. They had passed away just before Nowruz a year later due to The Great Famine.

A knock suddenly pulled Nadir out of his grief. He took the portrait with him, setting it on the living room coffee table beside the feather duster.

"Azizam!" he exclaimed upon opening the door.

"What brings you here? Oh, and salām, Christine."

Christine smiled. "Salām to you too, Nad- *oh!*" She was pushed to the side by Erik. "Don't you want to say hello first?"

"I do, just not in the doorway." Erik said, rushing into the living room.

Nadir's Daffy New Year

Nadir chuckled while closing the door. "And hello to you, azizam. You're usually not one to stop by." "I'm wishing you a happy new year. Isn't that the tradition?"

"Âré. It's customary for young people to visit their elders for a short time. I'm glad you remembered."

"*Christine* did, a- actually."

"I didn't want him to forget like last year."

Christine chimed in, giving a sniffle as she sat on the couch.

"Are you still sick?" Nadir inquired.

"No, not much. My nose is just runny." she replied, draping her red scarf over the couch.

"Would you like some mint tea? It's perfect for easing colds."

"Oh, I'd love some! Wouldn't you, Erik? *Erik?*"

Nadir chuckled. His azizam was gazing out the window, something he had done often back in the day.

"Wha- huh?" Erik jerked his head away, fully listening to Christine's re-ask. "Oh, sure, I'll have some tea."

Before long, three cups of mint tea were being sipped.

Christine set her cup down to take the portrait.

"What's this doing out?"

"Oh, I was just reminiscing," Nadir replied, fiddling with the red bracelet he always wore. "It's been twenty years since we last celebrated Nowruz together. What an adventure that was!"

"This will be good." Erik said to Christine, who had raised her eyebrows curiously.

"It all started the day before Nowruz..."

Nadir's Daffy New Year



"Another successful day!" Nadir declared, wrapping an arm around his wife as they walked home from their trinket stand. "You have a charm that no one can resist."

Miriam smiled as he gave her a quick kiss. "Many people will have wonderful gifts this Nowruz."

While walking, they saw a small figure run towards them. Nadir's five year old son, Reza, stumbled slightly because of his bowed legs, but he was fast on his feet. He called out, "Baba! Mama! I welcomed the sheep home!"

Miriam chuckled. "They're back from the mountains already?"

"Âré. The herder said I can ride one next time."

Nadir picked Reza up, causing him to laugh.

"You're getting to be a big boy, my little azizam!

Are you sure you'll be able to handle it?"

"I can handle *anything*," Reza said. "My legs won't stop me."

"I hope your legs won't stop you from going inside."

Reza giggled. Nadir set him down and the family went to their little home. All the houses in the Iranian village of Kandovan were carved from the cliffside rocks. Most sat on hills, but Nadir's family lived closer to the ground so Reza didn't have to climb as much. Once inside, he plopped down on the rug.

After prayers, he watched his father cook a quick meal of chicken and rice while his mother counted

Nadir's Daffy New Year

their earnings and put away her remaining jewelry stock.

"This matches your eyes," Miriam said, slipping a green bracelet next the red one she had made for Nadir. "You should wear it for our anniversary tomorrow."

Nadir smiled. "Of course, my delbaram."

But once she turned back to her jewelry box, a frown crossed his face.

I remembered to give her a gift, but not daffodils, he thought. It's been a tradition for twenty-two years, long before we married. I can't possibly skip it!

"Would you be willing to season the food?" he asked. "I must pick something up at the market."

"Even though it's closing?" Miriam asked, giving her husband a curious look as he put on his dark

red astrakhan cap.

"Âré. It won't take long at all."

Reza rose from the floor. "Show me how to season, Mama!"

Miriam smiled. "Alright. First, we'll need..."

While she showed him the right spices, Nadir hurried away. Men were carrying rugs and wheeling away carts of fruit in the village square. Only the flower seller still had his stand up.

"Salām, Nadir!" the seller greeted him.

"Salām, Feyz," Nadir looked over the baskets of colorful flowers. "Do you have any daffodils left?"

"*Daffodils, daffodils...*" Feyz looked through the blooms. "No, I'm afraid I don't have any more daffodils. You'll have to wait until my supplier in Tariz ships some more after the new year. Could I interest you in marigolds or hyacinths?"

Nadir's Daffy New Year

"I'll take a hyacinth." Nadir said, trying not to let his disappointment coat his voice.

The honeycombed tan cliffs watched Nadir walk up the winding pathway to his home, the hyacinth's stem in his hands. His mind was drowning in worried thoughts.

Hyacinths are for Nowruz, not anniversaries. I must get daffodils. I could travel to Tariz and return with a whole bouquet! Nadir thought. *No, that's a ridiculous thought. It would take far too long. But how else can I-*

Raoul and the Opera Star

"Don't smile, just pretend I'm not here." Raoul said, holding up his camera.

Christine looked away from the boxy Kodak, returning to her sewing. The needle darted to and fro on the sleeve she was making. Raoul could tell she was fighting with her neutral expression.

"*Oh*, I can't help it!" Christine exclaimed, looking up at him. "I want to smile whenever I see that."

"Then smile, but make it subtle. It needs to be as authentic as possible."

"Alright." Christine said with a nod.

She looked down at the shirt, slowly stitching around the arm hole. Just as the camera clicked... "Tee hee!" Christine giggled. "It's so hard to keep a straight face!"

"You kept it *mostly* straight. Can't resist a cute smile," Raoul looked around embroidery room, which was filled with all sorts of sewing knick knacks. "What else should I snap a photo of?"

"You already took a picture of me picking out some thread. Maybe you could get the thread display by itself."

Raoul went over to the little wooden cubby holes that housed spools of thread. They came in all colors, but they'd only show up in shades of sepia! *The photo with her is just fine.* he thought. *I need to conserve my film roll. There are plenty of other unique things to capture!*

Raoul and the Opera Star

As he held the camera below his chest, Christine began humming *Auprès de ma Blonde*. Raoul wished he could capture her sweet voice!

"Is it not focusing?" Christine asked, pausing her stitchery to see Raoul standing in front of the work station.

Raoul looked over his shoulder at her. "No, it's fine. It's just..." He sighed. "It's a bit weird to be here."

"What do you mean? You've seen me work before."

"I'm not useful here. Or, *anywhere* in the opera house, really. I can't sing or dance or sew and the opera house doctor doesn't need an assistant," Raoul sighed. "All I can do is watch in the background."

"You're doing an amazing job with taking pictures! Capturing our lives is *very* useful. Fifty years from now, it'll be a joy to see these memories. And people will know what it was like back then!"

"Back now in the good old modern days of 1890." Christine chuckled. "When I'm done with this sleeve, I'm going to sing at the ballerinas' practice. You could take photos of that."

Raoul gave a thin smile, wishing he could do more than just pull a string and a key.



The ballerinas loved having their pictures taken. But it was hard to capture shots since they didn't stay still most of the time!

Raoul and the Opera Star

"That camera sure is remarkable," April remarked. "You don't have to hire an artist to capture us!"

"Poor Degas is out of business." Julie added.

"I'm sure you could get something fancy out of him." Raoul said, shrugging.

"And square-y!" Meg added with a wink. "The photos will just be circles."

Christine squeezed his hand as the dancers left Foyer de la Danse. "See? Even the ballerinas think you're useful!"

"I know another useful person." a voice said from nearby.

Raoul looked up to see Erik stepping out of Box Three. He and Christine went up to the edge of the stage to be closer to The Opera Ghost.

"What might your role in *La Juive* be?" he asked.

"I don't have the singing or acting chops." Raoul replied.

"I was talking about Christine," Erik said, probably resisting the urge to call him silly like Christine would. "Will you be going for Rachel or one of the many villagers?"

"I was just going to help with sewing." Christine replied, flushing when Erik gave her a look.

"Aren't you supposed to lay off on that?" Raoul asked. "That's why you have glasses."

"Oui, but I'm not doing *as much* work. Those shirt sleeves are the biggest thing I'll do," Christine bit her lip while looking up at a silently insistent Erik.

"I promise I'll do *Sigurd* next month! I'll play one of the maids."

"*Hmm*. Well, it's better than just sewing a- all the time."

And it's better than me. Raoul thought with a sigh.



Raoul smiled at the early September breeze. It ruffled his auburn hair as the de Chagny coach drove down Rue Edouard Nortier.

"We've arrived, Vicomte de Chagny." Castelot, the driver, said.

Raoul opened his eyes. Sure enough, the carriage had pulled up to the brown townhouse he lived in with his sisters and aunt. He reached behind him and pulled the Landau carriage's roof, moving it back up. He sat back in the gray seat as Caesar clip-clopped down the stone pathway. He came to a stop once he was in the carriage house.

"Good boy." Raoul praised Caesar inside, petting his gray muzzle.

The snowy white stallion whinnied contentedly. "Come along, Caesar," Castelot said once he had descended from the driver's seat. "It's stable time now."

Caesar instantly turned around, going to the stables in the backyard. Raoul followed him with long strides. He helped Castelot refresh the corner of Caesar's stall with greener hay before leading the horse inside.

"Look at all this food. It's making me hungry!" Raoul said, his stomach growling. "I might be a horse too judging by the sound of that. Mind if I take some oats?"

Caesar snorted.

"Fine, I'll eat human food. ...Wait, oats *are* human food. You enjoy that and I'll enjoy whatever Marie cooks up!"

Raoul and the Opera Star



When Raoul returned to the stable after dinner, Castelot was brushing Caesar's mane. A soft lullaby floated through the air. During his navy days, Raoul had picked up some English from helping British soldiers. He could understand a few of the words Castelot was singing.

*Call up your men, dilly, dilly, set them to work,
Some to the plough, dilly, dilly, some to the cart
Some to make hay, dilly, dilly, some the thresh
corn*

*Whilst you and I, dilly, dilly, keep ourselves
warm...*

Raoul didn't know if Caesar understood English, but he could tell that the horse was calmed by the song. He sank down, closing his eyes.

"I'd take a photo of this if I could," Raoul told Castelot softly. "Maybe I'll write a letter to that Degas guy so he can paint it!"

Castelot chuckled. "It's quite a beautiful sight, Vicomte de Chagny."

Erik Bernhardt

Firmin and Armand left their office for lunch, closing the door behind them. It clicked shut, preventing anyone from going inside.

...Except for a beings that didn't need doors.

A white hand rose past a little rug, making sure the coast was clear. Then it held onto the wooden floor to hoist the body it was attached to!

Let's see what the news is today. Erik thought, striding over to the managers' desk.

There were two issues of *Le Gaulois*, one from today and one from the nineteenth. Erik picked up

the latter newspaper, skimming through the various headlines of the day (or, *yesterday!*). *Edmond de Goncourt, Paris news, province news... The Return of the Rooms? Oh, that's just presidential cabinet stuff...* Erik's eyes widened. *Wait is that...?*

He read through an article on the far right column. His heart rose. Sure enough, it was the person he was thinking of!

Christine needs to hear about this! Erik thought, checking the beginning of the article before setting the paper down and fleeing through the trap door in the floor. (And hardly caring that the newspaper was crooked instead of neat like he found it!)

...

Before long, Erik was rushing through the dressing room hallway. Although most of the company was eating lunch in their rooms, some still walked about. He had to be fast and hidden! He glanced around before knocking on Christine's door.

"Come in!" Christine called.

Erik stepped inside the room. He was surprised to see Christine sitting on the floor with Meg and Raoul, surrounding a black-paged book..

Of course they're having fun without me. he thought with a sigh.

He was well used to Christine hanging out with Meg and Raoul... but even after two and a half years, it still made his heart ache with jealousy.

Christine looked up with a smile. "Come join us!"

Erik did so, knocking into the vanity seat! He awkwardly sat against it, his hands in his lap as he watched the trio sort through pictures and paste them on the pages. Christine was careful in dipping her brush into the glue pot while Meg plunged it right in! He winced as the ballerina offered her brush to him.

"Do you wanna help, Mr. E?"

"No... I'm good." Erik said, leaning back to avoid getting glue on his knee.

While Meg brushed the back of a photo, Raoul asked, "How about 'Christine up in arms'?"

Christine giggled. "Perfect!"

Using a white pencil, Raoul wrote the words under a photo of her stitching a sleeve onto a shirt.

"I- I don't see why you need to write down what it's about. We all know."

"But someday, we might not. When we're eighty years old, these captions will help our fading memories."

I doubt I'll live to see eighty, Erik thought. But seeing the late 1930s would be interesting.

"Oh, here's a photo of you!" Christine exclaimed. Erik still found it strange to be captured on a little piece of paper. His sepia-toned self gave a toothy, lopsided smile as he held a new book of sheet music.

"Do you want to put it in?" she asked.

Meg shoved her brush into his hands.

"I guess I don't have a choice!" Erik said.

He carefully painted the back, making sure to get glue on the whole thing before placing it near the

middle of the page. He gave it a few pats before seeing the pencil at the top of his vision. Raoul was offering it to him. Erik took the pencil and wrote,

Erik's 32nd birthday (23-9-90)

"That's *boring*," Meg said. "It's supposed to be clever!"

"I think you did fine for your first caption."

Christine reassured Erik with a smile.

Erik gave a thin smile back. He fiddled with the pencil in between his fingers before saying, "I have some news. Sarah Bernhardt will be a... a- at Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin on Thursday! She's playing the lead role in a new play called *Cleopatra*."

"Oh! That's exciting!" Christine exclaimed.

"I wonder who she'll be." Raoul said with a knowing smirk.

"We should see her!" Meg said. "See her and say 'Bonjour, Sarah Bernhardt! You're the best singer ever.'"

"*Second* best singer. A- And I doubt we'd go *that* far," Erik smiled. "But I *would* like to see her in person again. I- I haven't done that in... nearly ten years! Not since she sang at Palais Garnier."

"I think it would be amazing to hear her voice. I heard it's just as amazing as someone I know very well!" Christine said, giving Erik a nudge. "Just not on Thursday. There will be so many people there!"

A shiver crawled down Erik's spine at the thought of going into an unfamiliar, crowded theater.

"That's true... But it's *Sarah Bernhardt!* I *have* to see her," Erik took a deep breath, already feeling butterflies in his stomach. "Even if my anxiety doesn't want me to."

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When Erik returned to his house the next afternoon, Ayesha said, "Reh-eh-eh-eh!"

"I got you some ham, princess," Erik crouched down to boop his black cat's nose. "Although you're more of a salami girl!"

"Mmm-hmm." Ayesha agreed, closing her eyes with content as he scritchd the top of her head. Erik thought it was awkward to eat around other people, so he had taken his sandwich with him. After he set some ham in Ayesha's food bowl, he took a big bite of his sandwich.

Knock, knock, knock!

Did Christine follow me here? Erik wondered.

He quickly swallowed his bite (or, as quickly as he could) and rushed to open the door.

"Salām, azizam," Nadir greeted him. "I suppose you'll want to chill your sandwich for later. You can't do that without a fresh block of ice!"

Erik stepped aside to let his guardian stride through the house. "I have great news," he said.

"And what might that be?" Nadir inquired, going into the kitchen.

Before Erik could answer, he heard a voice exclaim, "Erik!"

"Oh, I must've forgotten to turn the mirror's sound off," Erik remarked before turning on the picture and dual sound. "What, Christine?"

Christine's (Not) Perfect Picnic

It was nearly closing time at the Louvre, the world famous sprawling art museum. There was usually a sea of people, but only a small group still lingered among the paintings and statues.

Christine and her friends were among them. Her admiration of a painting was stopped to hurriedly grab Erik's arm.

"You nearly ran into someone!" she told him.

"I don't care who that was, but sorry to them."

Erik said, his voice muffled to due him covering his face with his hands.

Christine rolled her eyes. She felt a little discomfited at the naked statues and paintings, but at least she could look at them. Erik was taking it dramatically far. He acted like even the merest glance would kill him!

"Is it safe to look?" Erik asked.

"Oui." Christine replied.

Erik uncovered his eyes... and immediately squeezed them shut while turning his head away! He told Christine, "You said it was safe!"

"It *is*! Venus de Milo is covering all the important parts!"

Meg skipped up to Erik. "Oh no, Mr. E, you saw diddies! *You're gonna die!*"

Raoul instantly cracked up.

Christine gasped. "*Meg!* You can't say that at the Louvre!"

Christine's (Not) Perfect Picnic

"There are a ton of..." Raoul paused to snicker. "A ton of *kettledrums* at the opera house, though!"

"Now *I'm* getting embarrassed." Christine said, her face warming.

"I have no idea what anyone is saying." Erik said.

"They're talking about her chest."

Erik's eyes widened and his face turned bright pink underneath his mask! Meg joined in on Raoul's laughter.

Christine took Erik's hand. "Let's go back to the Galerie d'Apollon."

"Y- You mean the copied Grand Foyer?"

"...Yes, the copied Grand Foyer."

Raoul wiped tears from his eyes. "You mean the copied *gold hallway at Versailles*. I've been there, I know."

Erik looked at him with a scoff. "I know it's called The Hall of Mirrors and I've never even *seen* it!" "That's where we should've gone." Christine realized.

"From what I remember, there were a lot of *windows*, not mirrors." Raoul said.

Erik rolled his eyes... and shut them upon getting a glimpse at another statue!



A week later, Christine walked down Rue Auber, a ham and cheese sandwich in her hand as she wondered what group activity she and her friends could do tomorrow.

We could go swimming... but Raoul and I don't like our heavy wool outfits. If we swam how we liked, Meg would just stare and Erik would most certainly die! Christine thought as she waited for

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a carriage to pass. *If we went shopping, Raoul wouldn't find anything and Erik wouldn't like the crowds. We could see a play... but Erik would critique the production and Meg would be disappointed if there isn't a dance! I'm not sure what Raoul would think. And if we just stayed home, Raoul and Meg would think that's boring!* It was late June, but the heat and humidity of summer hadn't taken hold yet. The warmth of the air was just right.

It's the perfect temperature to do something outside, Christine realized. *Something like...*

An idea suddenly came to her. She grinned while running across the street and swung open the gate to the water cellar.

"Erik!" she exclaimed as she ran into his house.

Erik's piano playing stopped mid-note. "Oh! Back so soon?"

"Oui! The café made plenty of fresh sandwiches. I know what we can do tomorrow."

"Stay here and play the night away?"

Christine giggled. "No..." She rushed to the kitchen to grab a couple plates, leaving Erik in suspense before she popped out of the kitchen doorway to say, "Have a picnic!"

"Oh, a dreamery picnic sounds lovely."

"I was thinking of a park picnic. At the Bois."

Erik's smile faded. "...*Oh*. Why do you always have to take me to places with *people*?"

"It's not about the people, it's about the things! The experience. The time spent with your best friends."

"Best *friend*." Erik said, booping Christine's nose.

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Christine rolled her eyes. "It's about spending time with regular friends that you enjoy being around. You can't deny that."

Erik pursed his lips together. "*You most certainly can't,*" He joined Christine at the table. "What will we need for a picnic? Ham? My Auntie Marie made the most delicious ham for picnics with my parents."

"Of course," Christine slowly tore the sandwich in half while picturing the menu in her head. "And chicken... sandwiches... fish... and chouquettes for desert!"

"A- And bananas and popcorn."

Christine and Erik laughed. Her face warmed when her stomach growled.

"It's a good thing we're about to eat!" she remarked before taking a big bite.



Christine worked on getting the menu together. She baked chouquettes that evening and bought food at the market the next morning.

"Can I have just a *teeny* bite?" Meg asked after putting the last food in the picnic basket

Christine took the basket before Meg could take a peek. "At noon! When the picnic has started."

But as they walked to Palais Garnier, she slipped a chouquette into Meg's hand. The girls giggled as they shared the sugared pastry.