



The Guardian of the Opera

OVERTURE



Cheryl Mahoney

Overture

A Guardian of the Opera Prequel

Cheryl Mahoney



Also by the Author

The Guardian of the Opera

Book One: Nocturne

Book Two: Accompaniment

Book Three: Dawn Melody

The Beyond the Tales Quartet

The Wanderers

The Storyteller and Her Sisters

The People the Fairies Forget

The Lioness and the Spellspinners

Contributing Author

The Servants and the Beast

After the Sparkles Settled

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First Edition

Cover images courtesy of brickrena/Shutterstock (girl) and pio3/Shutterstock (masked man). Cover design by Cheryl Mahoney.

This book is a work of fiction. Resemblance to any persons living or dead is coincidental, with the exception of Charles Garnier, who is used fictitiously. His Opera is a real place in Paris, but it too has been fictionalized. Box Five is real, but the author can make no guarantees about what's located on the other side of the underground lake.

I offer apologies to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar; though he lived in the right time and place, I'm sure he's not the Shah referenced by Leroux in his stories of Erik's time in Persia, stories which I have picked up here.

Dedication

For Cate, Panda and Meaghan

A three-part novella deserves a three-part dedication, and it's only fitting to dedicate the story of the Phantom's beginning to the people who were there (and essential to!) the beginning of my story with the Phantom.

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Author's Note

This prequel to my *Guardian of the Opera* trilogy is itself a trilogy, three short stories, each focused on one of the principal characters in the books. Here we see episodes from the earlier lives of Erik, before he was the Phantom of the Opera; of Meg Giry, before she danced at the Opera; and Christine Daaé, when she was a girl on a beach with a red scarf, hoping to meet the Vicomte de Chagny.

In the books, Erik and Meg alternate the narration, and in many ways that story is about what happens when Christine comes into their lives. This collection is about before their paths cross, while each is still dreaming the dreams that will eventually bring them together at the *Opera Garnier*.

The stories are also linked in time. The books begin in 1875, with the bulk of the story taking place in 1881-2. Today, come back with me to 1874, seven years before the events you may have heard of regarding the Phantom of the Opera. In seven years Christine will meet an Angel of Music, the Phantom will crash a chandelier, and Meg will try to make sense of it all, but in these stories, that is all still in the future.

First Movement: Erik

Erik was one of the chief contractors under Garnier, the architect of the Opera, and continued to work by himself when the works were officially suspended, during the war, the siege of Paris and the Commune.

Gaston Leroux

1.

He returned to the Opera in darkness.

He had left through the darkness of the tunnels and catacombs beneath the half-built building's foundations, and he returned three years later through the long shadows of night-time boulevards, to stand at last across the street and look at the great edifice rising against the starlit sky.

He let his gaze linger on the marble pillars and the copper dome, with its statue of Apollo, god of music. On the line of masks already in place decorating the upper edge of the building's frontispiece. His mouth twisted in a self-mocking smile at the sight of the masks. So appropriate.

Mostly he felt a kind of relief mingled with almost incredulous wonder. Part of him had never thought he would come back. Many times in the past few years he had given up any hope at all that both he and the building would survive the turmoil around them, enmeshed as they were in separate crises in separate countries, but both surrounded by people who thought they had no right to exist.

Now he was back, and his opera house was still here, waiting for him, silent in these dark hours before dawn. From the outside it looked all but finished, but he knew that was an illusion. The outermost of many illusions in this building that was filled with mirrors and trap doors, as per the architect's design—and with secret passages and hidden doors, not per any design but his own.

He crossed the wide plaza in front of the building, glanced at the main doors above the front steps. They'd have them locked, during these hours when the construction crews had gone home. No matter. He knew other ways in.

He circled around the building, studying it with the eyes of both an architect and an artist, to stop at last in front of a space between two pillars that looked quite unremarkable, on this building so covered in pillars and decorations. A little pressure applied to the right stone, and his own private door opened for him.

It felt good to step inside his opera house, to let the welcoming shadows embrace him. They would put Charles Garnier's name on the building, and that was as it should be—but it was his opera house too.

It was a good place, a fitting tribute to art and achievement. It would be a good and fitting place to die.

2.

He spent the remaining hours of darkness exploring, reacquainting himself with this building that had been so familiar to him a few years ago, that had remained so clear in his memory. They had both changed in the meantime. The work still to complete was far more obvious from the inside: the half-finished rooms, the areas still under scaffolding. Finishing would be a huge undertaking yet, larger than he had hoped, not so big as he had feared. Final work to do, before he was done with it all.

The building bore signs of growth, of change and advancement in the previous three years. He himself bore only scars.

He was inspecting the trapdoor mechanisms and complex machinery beneath the stage when he first heard sounds of stirring elsewhere in the building. From the obviously in-process state of affairs around him, it was no surprise when the tramp of boots came closer, and a crew of several workmen arrived beneath the stage.

Nor was it a surprise when one of them called, “You—what are you doing there? You don’t belong here.”

“On the contrary,” he said without turning away from the counterweights he was inspecting, “I belong here more than I do anywhere else.”

The workmen didn’t understand, but they weren’t meant to. Besides, once he turned around, their attention was all for the ivory mask covering his face. The mask always attracted attention, of course, but it was better than the attention his true face, his distorted features, would inevitably provoke.

One man muttered a curse, while the apparent leader of the little group glowered at him from beneath his brown cap. “You’re not part of the crew. You’re trespassing in here.”

“I am here to see Monsieur Garnier,” he said evenly, drawing himself up with all the grace and dignity he could muster, considering he was still wearing the rumpled suit he’d been traveling in. “He will want to see me.”

“The master architect has no business with a masked man poking around in the shadows,” Brown Cap retorted. “Come out of there before we have to throw you out.”

“Do you realize this counterweight isn’t heavy enough?” Erik asked, tugging lightly on the relevant rope. “Another five kilos at least would be needed for reliability. As it is, it could kill someone.”

“Grab him,” Brown Cap said succinctly, and though some of the men were shuffling uncomfortably, two still moved forward to comply.

He didn't bother putting up a struggle. It would only create more trouble in the end, and this wasn't entirely unexpected. Though perhaps some little part of him had thought that *here*, of all places...

Brown Cap stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Let's get that mask off and we'll see who—"

"Touch the mask," he said, voice low and cold, arms newly straining against the tight grip the other two men had on him, "and I will kill you."

Brown Cap hesitated. "You're bluffing."

"Are you *sure*?" he asked, pitching his normal tenor voice towards a proper villainous baritone.

Brown Cap was unlikely to appreciate the operatic implications, but the effect worked whether one understood it or not. He licked his lips uneasily and said, "All right, keep the mask then. But if you won't tell us who you are and your business here—"

"I have told you already, I am here to see Monsieur Garnier."

"You have a strange way of requesting an interview, then."

"My methods are my business, and..."

But they were ignoring him, hauling him along towards the stairs that led to the stage above. He walked, because that was better than being dragged. They outnumbered him five to one, and these were all large men accustomed to physical work. That didn't mean they outmatched him in skill, of course. But it would be better if he kept this peaceable.

He was less certain that would be possible when they came out into the comparative brightness of the auditorium, and the much larger crowd of workmen beginning the day's tasks. They were eager enough for something to put off beginning another long day of hard work, and he was soon at the center of a curious crowd that felt free to ask questions and make comments and wonder aloud about the mysterious mask. They were smiling, joking, and that made them feel no less dangerous to the man in their midst. Crowds turned into mobs so easily, and the mood of a mob could shift in an instant from jovial to angry.

He squared his shoulders, and said again, "I am here to see Monsieur Garnier, and you would do well to send for him at once."

This was met with laughter, and no efficient sending of a messenger. The men holding his arms had tightened their grips, standing taller and more confidently, and the crowd was pressing closer with every passing moment. Someone was going to go for the mask soon, and then he would have to act, with little chance of turning this away from a full-scale riot. And if this went badly enough, it would destroy all his plans, render his return utterly pointless folly.

The bravest of the crowd were a breath away from reaching for him when a familiar voice cut through the clamor.

"What is all this disturbance? Don't you realize the amount of work we have to get done today?"

The crowd parted with remarkable speed, wearing the guilty expressions of men caught slacking by the unexpected arrival of their boss. Swiftly he found himself looking at the familiar face of Charles Garnier, master architect. The man looked more haggard than he had three years earlier, more gray in his untidy hair, his thinner cheeks making his bony nose more pronounced.

“We found an intruder, sir,” Brown Cap announced, tugging on the edge of his hat and tone taking on a far more respectful note than it had so far.

“So I can see,” Garnier snapped, “which does not explain...” His voice trailed away, and he squinted as though looking at an apparition he wasn’t sure was real. “Erik? Where the devil did you come from?”

The workmen might not be friendly, but they were quick enough to judge the direction the wind was blowing. Erik found himself abruptly freed, everyone backing up a careful step or two.

He kept his gaze on Garnier and shrugged languidly. “Under the stage. And before that, Persia.”

“Of course. Why not?” Garnier said dryly. “Is this a social call, or are you here to work?”

Erik smiled, because that meant he hadn’t misjudged the other man. The depth of his relief surprised him. “What do you think?”

Garnier nodded briefly, then turned to his assistant who stepped forward to be at his elbow. So Louis Louvet was still with him, these years later. “We’re forming a new crew. Arrange to have a few men pulled off of each of the existing units. Try to get ones with a good amount of sense, who don’t mind long hours.”

Louvet glanced at Erik, gave a slight nod in recognition. “Yes, sir. You’re hiring a new foreman then?”

Garnier glanced again at Erik, and smiled. “Of course.” He crossed over to Erik, clapped him on the back. “It’s good to see you back. Maybe we’ll get this place completed on schedule after all.”

That was the plan. Complete the building. Complete his work. And then there would be no need or reason to go on.

3.

Charles Garnier knew he was gambling by hiring Erik back on. But what was this entire venture but a mad scheme, right from the start? Everyone knew he was never meant to win the Emperor’s contest to design the imperial opera house. Now, fourteen years later, the building efforts had been plagued by flood, famine, war, siege, revolution, and ultimately the fall of the government that had sponsored them to begin with. Perhaps it was fitting that they were only back at work because of a fire—not at his opera house, but at the Salle Le Peletier, rendering the new opera house necessary even to a republican government that looked askance at anything echoing the imperial past.

And so here they were, under orders to finish building as quickly as possible, with a half-built building and not nearly enough money. After everything else, part of him wasn't the slightest bit surprised by the sudden reappearance of this former foreman, this too young man who was too prickly, too mysterious, too impatient, and yet too stunningly brilliant to let go.

Another part of him was entirely amazed.

"You know, there were times when I was sure you were dead," Garnier remarked amiably, as Erik sat down in the extra chair in the architect's office. 'Office' was a term to be used loosely, the room as unfinished as most of the building, but there were chairs, a makeshift desk, an endless stack of papers ranging from architectural designs to bills, and a locked cabinet with wine bottles—so an office it was. He considered sending someone for coffee, then reached for a nice white wine instead.

"Do you always start the day with a drink now?" Erik asked, raising just the one eyebrow that showed beside his half-mask. His tone was exactly as Garnier remembered, half-mockery and yet, somehow, never quite as harsh or as uncaring as it was likely meant to sound.

"It's not every day a man comes back from the dead," Garnier replied, pouring out two glasses and pushing one across the desk.

Erik accepted it, held it up to the light. "Surely you didn't think I'd die that easily?"

Garnier smiled, and sipped his own drink. "I never said I thought it was *easy* for anyone to kill you." Though sometimes it seemed a wonder that anyone had survived those dark days in 1871. "How long did you stay here?" he asked quietly.

Erik was silent for a moment, looking at his wine. "May 19th," he said at last. "I left May 19th of '71."

So he'd got out before *La semaine sanglante*, the Bloody Week, but only by two days. Garnier had wondered if Erik was one of the 17,000 dead in the final violent days of the Paris Commune. "Cut it close, didn't you? I didn't think anyone was still getting out of Paris by the middle of May."

Erik shrugged, the elegant, dismissive shrug that was also familiar. "I have my ways."

Not everything was familiar about Erik. Garnier watched him covertly over his wine glass, trying to pin down what had changed against his three-years-old memories. The young man might not have lived through the Bloody Week, but he had been through something that had marked him. He had always been intense, but there was a new, coiled tightness to him, a spring that might break at any provocation. There had always been shadows in Erik's green eyes, but they had multiplied. For a man perhaps in his mid-twenties, his eyes were too old.

"Anyway," Erik resumed eventually, "someone had to stay to keep an eye on this place."

Garnier felt the familiar prick of survivor's guilt. He had left Paris himself in March of '71, health ruined by the siege in the months before, and spent a pleasant three months on the Italian coast, while Paris' boulevards ran with blood and revolutionaries kept prisoners in his opera house. "You didn't need to stay."

Erik waved a languid hand. "I only did what I could. To stay any longer would have been madness, but as it was...well, we each did what we could." He threw back the last of the wine, pushed the glass across the desk.

Garnier would have liked to ask how Erik had got out of Paris during a war, or what had happened before he left. But Erik was very capable of not answering questions he wasn't of a mind to answer. Eventually Garnier had learned to pick up the cues when a subject was being dismissed, and move on. He tried a different direction, a subject that had at least not been rejected yet. "Where did you go after you left?"

"Oh, here and there," Erik said, shrugging again, voice entirely too casual and at odds with the tension visible in the curl of his fingers, the set of his feet against the floor. "East, mostly. Went to see what music they play there, what buildings they build. Fetched up in Persia eventually."

So he had said earlier. "And what did you do in Persia?" And was the answer there, to those new shadows in Erik's eyes?

Erik smiled, but the smile did nothing to dispel the shadows. "I built a palace for the Shah."

From anyone else, Garnier would have been sure this was mere fancy, or a joke. But from Erik—it could be. "Oh?"

"Oh yes, a marvelous palace. An absolute labyrinth, with all sorts of clever tricks and secrets to it. They throw real money behind projects there; no expenses spared if the Shah wants something."

Garnier smiled slightly. No expenses spared—surely every underfunded architect's dream. "So why leave Persia?"

Something in Erik's face abruptly closed off, a barrier as solid and absolute as his mask. More so—the mask merely hid half his face. "I hear you're fantastically overbudget," he said abruptly. "And under a deadline."

So that would be all for Persia for now, perhaps for good. Garnier moved easily enough into the more familiar topic of his opera house. "The government wants everything done quickly and cheaply, and don't want to hear that the two are rarely synonymous."

"Do you have any prayer of finishing by the end of the year?"

Garnier shrugged, spread his hands. "One can always pray. So it depends if you believe in miracles."

"No," Erik said succinctly, leaning back in his chair. "Give me the update. There are no ceiling murals in the Grand Foyer yet?"

"That is under control," Garnier said. "The artist is exhibiting them before we install."

"Did you ever find a place for the ninth muse?"

Garnier smiled slightly. “For the sake of symmetry, no.” This was a familiar debate they’d had years ago, and it wasn’t surprising when Erik merely shook his head and moved on.

“The ceiling panels over the Grand Stair?”

How much had Erik explored already? “The artist has been ill. The work is progressing.” He thought about mentioning that he had doubts about the design; what he’d seen so far looked a bit harsher, more intense than he wanted. But it was impossible to say before seeing the panels in place.

“And what on earth is going on with the Glacier restaurant? It doesn’t appear to have even been started.”

“Canceled,” Garnier said briefly. “No room in the budget.”

A frown crossed Erik’s face. He had never taken well to money being put above artistic intent. But then he sighed, and said, “Well, whoever said an opera house needs to serve food anyway? It’s not as though the clamoring hordes don’t have enough to distract them from the performances without giving them food too.”

Garnier tried to swallow a smile. The young man might be too intense in some ways, but there was also something refreshing about the complete devotion to art, above politics and gossip and social concerns.

“What about the Emperor’s Entrance?” Erik continued. “When are the carvings on the walls beginning?”

Garnier’s half-smile disappeared. “Also canceled. No money.”

This frown was deeper, as Erik straightened in his chair. “Now that’s different than leaving out a restaurant—what are you going to do, just leave the walls blank?”

“That appears to be all we *can* do, with no time or money—”

“That damages the integrity of the entire design! The Emperor’s Entrance was a crucial component from the beginning, and to simply leave it incomplete—”

“The emperor was deposed, exiled and has now died. There is no point to a private entrance for an emperor when we have no emperor.”

“That is not the issue. It was never about the emperor—”

“The emperor commissioned the building!”

Erik waved a hand, as though that was quite immaterial. “Yes, all right, he had a role to play, but this is bigger than an emperor. We are not building an emperor’s palace; we are building a palace for *art*.”

Yes, there was something refreshing about Erik’s attitudes. After the desperate politicking and penny-pinching... And somehow it was good to see that Erik hadn’t lost *all* his idealism, though he would no doubt deny that accusation hotly. “There’s still no money,” Garnier answered aloud. “Apollo doesn’t fund buildings.”

Erik’s frown did not disappear, but he relaxed slightly. “We can discuss this later. For the moment – what do you need me to do?”

Magical words to any overworked architect's ears.

4.

It was disconcerting to Erik, being back at the opera house, working on the construction. Memories kept overlaying themselves. Building here before. Building in Persia. Building long ago in Rome when he was first learning how to take the solid substances of stone and beams, and create artistic fantasies with them.

It took some adjustment, taking on the leading of a crew of workmen. Louvet, Garnier's assistant, was discreet enough not to assign to his crew any of the men who had accosted him under the stage, which helped. He had even found a handful of men Erik had worked with years before, also returned to the construction crew. That smoothed the situation somewhat, though it didn't do away with every suspicious glance and every curious question. Especially about the mask.

It had been easier in Persia, where his reputation at the court had been established before he ever began building the Shah's palace, where the men assigned to follow his orders looked at him with awe and fear from the beginning, and whispered about sorcery and curses instead of about his mask. Or maybe in addition to the mask. He had tried not to listen too closely.

Here, there were no questions on the first day. The master architect's evident approval was enough to ensure an initial degree of caution from the workers. He was unsurprised when the questions started on the second day. Where was he from, and how had he met Garnier, and what brought him to Paris. He answered with the minimum of information, the minimum of civility.

They asked him why he wore the mask on the third day.

The old hands, the ones who had known him in the work before, shook their heads and concentrated on the tasks in front of them.

Erik leveled a stare at the brash young man who had dared to raise the question. "My mask is my business. It does not bother Monsieur Garnier, so it should not bother you." He turned his head slowly, delivering the warning in his eyes to all five men clustered behind the one who had been bold enough to ask. He raised his voice for all present to hear. "And if you wish to continue working here, you won't ask that question again."

They muttered and got back to work.

He knew it wasn't going to be enough. He wasn't certain Garnier would back him, if he did try to have someone fired—and if he wasn't certain, they wouldn't be either. He was a master at using his voice just right, at intimidating in word and look. But it wouldn't be enough.

So he wasn't at all surprised on the fourth day, when he was looking over a set of plans and heard a stealthy step behind him. The barest brush of cloth across his shoulder as a hand reached forward—but by then he had dropped the

plans, was turning with arm raised to face the brash young man of the day before. The briefest glimpse of the man's widening eyes, and then Erik's forearm connected solidly with his chest, shoved him back two steps to crash against the wall, and Erik slid his arm up to press on the man's throat.

"I told you," he said, voice soft but carrying in the suddenly crystalized silence, "to leave the mask alone."

The man gulped and squirmed and tried not to meet his gaze.

Erik knew that if he pressed a little bit harder for a little bit longer that the man would black out. And that if he kept up the pressure much beyond that, he would die.

He waited just long enough for everyone present to realize it too, then stepped back, letting the man cough and rub his throat and mutter an apology.

Erik very deliberately turned his back, picked up his dropped plans, and resumed what he had been saying about the day's work.

His voice was steady and no one else needed to know that he was wondering if Garnier was going to fire him for this. He had nowhere to go if he did—but what else could he have done? He couldn't have them keep poking and prying and getting into his secrets.

There would have been no problem in Persia. Not even if he *had* kept pressing until the man slumped to the floor. But what did it matter if the architect killed one workman, when they were all dead men walking anyway?

If he was thrown out—there would be no need to go anywhere and no reason to wait, then. No more work to do. Nothing more to accomplish. No more point to it all.

He waited the rest of that day and the next for a summons to Garnier's office. But it didn't come. Possibly Garnier was backing him, but he suspected the truth was that Garnier knew nothing of the matter at all. The workmen had assumed a more respectful tone, answered questions more promptly, followed orders without complaint, and he imagined that he had passed some kind of test and they hadn't gone to Garnier to complain at all.

Instilling fear. That was what it took to keep himself safe.

He tried to shrug the matter off, to accept that the work could now continue, and not think about why. And so they got down to the business of building the Opera, assigned to the simultaneously delicate and physically demanding task of hanging the chandelier in the auditorium. A multi-ton bronze and crystal affair, it appeared as the embodiment of airy fancy, while in truth being solid and tangible and incredibly heavy. It was an illusion that delighted Erik.

The chandelier was one of the most crucial elements of the design, and there would have been a much longer argument if Garnier had told him it had been canceled for budget reasons. One cannot build a world without a sun.

Very deliberately, he set out to lose himself in the work, to put all his efforts into building this temple of art. One last work, the work he was meant to do.

He worked on the chandelier by day, and by night he continued the diversion he had begun so many years before, adding a secret door here and a spyhole there, layering on his own modifications and making his own secret mark on Garnier's opera house.

5.

As the days passed, Garnier became more and more sure that something wasn't right with Erik. He had little time to think about it, head full of too many plans and too many details, as they hurtled on through the countless final pieces of building an opera house. But still he noticed that Erik was even more aloof from the rest of the workers than he had ever been before. This was even despite the fact that Erik was always the first one at work, the last one there at night, and Garnier strongly suspected he was sleeping somewhere in the building. He noticed too that Erik never talked about his past, and never talked about any plans for the future. It was as though his entire life was building the opera house, with nothing after.

Though Garnier could appreciate and relate to an obsession with the project at hand, could understand the love of this one, remarkable building—still, something there wasn't right. He kept telling himself that when he had a moment, when things eased for even an hour, he'd bring Erik back into his office again and try to get better answers. Even if he had to bodily haul the other man away from the work.

Of course, the work never eased and Garnier never had a free hour. But another mysterious arrival at the opera house forced him to confront matters all the same.

Louvet appeared at his office door one afternoon, sounding uneasy as he said, "Monsieur Garnier, there's a gentleman here asking to see you."

"I don't have an appointment right now," Garnier said, without looking up from the bills he was trying to make sense of.

"He's somewhat...unusual," Louvet said, and Garnier finally paid attention to the troubled tone in the other man's voice. Louvet was a good assistant—he stopped the people asking to see the master architect without appointments or sufficient reason long before they got to Garnier's door. If he was even bringing this up, he thought it was worth Garnier's attention.

"Unusual how?" he asked.

"He's from Persia," Louvet said. "And he's trying to find someone." From the careful way he said it, Garnier felt sure Louvet had already made the connection he was now making himself. Persia. Where their most mysterious foreman had been recently.

"Show him in," Garnier said, straightening in his chair and setting down the sheaf of bills in his hand.

A few moments later a dark-eyed man with tanned skin was entering the office. He took off his top hat and inclined his head slightly. "Monsieur Garnier, thank you for your agreement to see me." The words were soft, the inflections foreign, though the French was perfectly clear.

"I understand there is something I can assist you with?" Garnier said, waving the other man to the chair in front of the desk.

"Perhaps. My card, sir." He extended a small rectangle of pasteboard across the desk.

Garnier glanced at the foreign name, attention focusing on the title attached to it. "You are from the Persian police?"

"Formerly, yes. I am retired."

Curious. The Persian gentleman was older than Garnier, but not greatly. "And what brings you to Paris?"

"I am looking for a...friend," he said carefully, and Garnier didn't miss the pause. "A rather unusual young man."

Garnier spread his hands. "I am building an opera house. Many young men join our construction crew. It's the nature of the work."

"This young man spoke very fondly and very knowledgably of the architecture of this building. You would certainly have known him in the past. I am hoping he may have returned here."

"As I said, many young men—"

"But not many wearing masks, I should think."

The words hung in the air, in the silence that followed. "And why," Garnier said at last, "are you looking for this masked man?" Why had Erik left Persia? Why was that past now coming after him?

"I am his friend," the Persian gentleman said, with no tell-tale hesitation this time, but a half-smile. "At least, as much as he allows me to be."

This was no proof at all of good intent. It was still entirely possible that the true motive here was to haul Erik back to Persia for crimes against the Shah, or something equally unpleasant—and yet, Garnier knew *exactly* what the other man meant by the words.

"You're looking for Erik, of course," Garnier said bluntly.

Another incline of the head. "I wondered if he would continue to use that name."

"Let's say he used it before. Because I think you had better tell me exactly why you're looking for him, and why neither of you are in Persia anymore, and *then* I'll tell you if he's come back here. Because I am also as much of a friend to Erik as I can be."

There was a slight gleam in the Persian gentleman's eyes. "He always spoke highly of you. That, as much as his fondness for your opera house, made me suspect he would come here." He steepled his hands together above the top

hat resting in his lap. "The story, then. I met Erik when we both served the Shah in Persia. Erik was quite the fad of the royal court for a time, with his music and his tricks of illusion. Has he shown you his walking skeleton?"

"No. We don't have time for all that; we have an opera house to build." He meant the remark as a kind of rebuke, in part because surely a walking skeleton was an exaggeration. Though he had seen the sleight of hand tricks Erik could do, so that much added up.

Another incline of the head. "Well, suffice to say they are still trying to determine how he did that trick. And then he was also commissioned for...certain other jobs."

Garnier had the sudden sinking suspicion that he didn't want to know this story after all. It was something in the way the Persian gentleman said those words, something in the new bleakness in Erik's eyes. "Architectural jobs?" he prompted, because if they were of another kind—no, he probably didn't want to know.

The Persian gentleman seemed to assess his words, to study his face, then make a decision. "Yes. The Shah commissioned a palace, such as had never been seen before. A labyrinthine palace of secrets and illusion. And when it was complete, the Shah decided he wanted to be the only one who knew its secrets." A moment's pause, then the flat statement. "He executed all the workmen, destroyed all the plans, and ordered Erik beheaded."

Garnier inhaled sharply. Revolutions and riots he had had to contend with, yes, but nothing like *that*. "But you believe Erik escaped?"

"I know he escaped. I helped him to do it. The Shah believes he is dead, and Erik disappeared into the night."

A good sign about the man's intentions—if true. "Well, that seems neat and complete. But that still doesn't explain why you're here."

"There is an old Eastern saying. When you save a man's life, you become responsible for it." The Persian gentleman spread his hands slightly. "I wished to know what Erik was doing with the life he has been given. I did not know where he went—but I recalled that he was quite struck by the news reports that your opera house was being completed, against all expectations."

"The news spread that far?" Garnier said in some surprise.

A slight shrug. "If someone was looking for it, yes."

It fit together. It all added up with what little he knew and what additional information he had surmised about Erik. That, of course, proved nothing. But on some level, it didn't matter. His choice was going to be the same anyway. "That is a very interesting story," he said carefully, gaze steadily meeting the other man's. "And if I see Erik, I will be sure to tell him that you're looking for him."

The Persian gentleman nodded slowly, as if he understood perfectly. "That is all that I could ask of you." He rose to his feet and, with a slight smile, added, "After all, if you told me definitively and with assurance that he was not here, I would not believe you."

“And if I told you he was?” Garnier asked, genuinely curious.

“I would no longer believe you were his friend.” A slight bow, and the Persian gentleman left as quietly as he had come.

Garnier leaned back in his chair, idly playing with the pasteboard card. There was no doubt that Erik brought more mysteries with him than the rest of the crew combined. If he wasn’t so very good at what he did...but then, perhaps the mystery was all part of the very strange charm the young man seemed so unaware he possessed.

6.

Erik was walking through the hall outside the box seats when he heard Garnier call his name. He slowed, but didn’t break stride. “I need to get up above the auditorium—we’re working on the mechanics for the chandelier’s counterweights.”

“And I appreciate the dedication,” Garnier said, catching up and falling into step. “But I need a word.” He handed him a small card.

Erik glanced down, uninterested in the social machinations of Paris’ elite, and came to an abrupt halt. The Daroga. He knew the man’s name, but he had always thought of him by his title, his designation as police chief. What was the Daroga doing here, now? If he had been sent by the Shah—no, the Shah wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. If he knew Erik was alive, the Daroga wouldn’t be anymore. So he had to be here on his own. “Why?” he asked, knowing that was not in any way a clear question.

Garnier seemed to understand regardless. “He said he wants to see what you’re doing with the life he saved. Or something to that effect.”

Erik smiled mirthlessly. Yes, that sounded like the Daroga. Here to make sure he was all right? No, probably the Daroga was here to make sure he wasn’t wreaking any havoc, murdering any innocents. “And you want a word?”

“Yes,” Garnier said, and glanced around the corridor. Enough people were passing, busy at work, that this was no place for a private conversation. “How about there?” he said, nodding to the nearest door.

Erik glanced at it. No label yet, but he knew the details of the building and knew this was Box Five. One of the more secluded boxes. That would do.

The inside of the box was shadowy and dim, the curtains on all the boxes pulled close to minimize the inevitable dust of the ongoing work in the auditorium. Erik dropped into a velvet-lined seat, and waited.

Garnier sat down more slowly, didn’t look directly at him. After a moment, he asked, “Do you want to tell me about Persia?”

“No,” Erik said flatly.

Garnier nodded. “Do you want to tell me why you came back here?”

Erik hesitated. He’d have to give *some* answers. Besides, he knew the sound of a question that was being asked by someone who had already deduced

the answer. He leaned back in his chair, stared at the closed curtains, said in his most conversational tone, "Did you know, they had this charming notion at the Shah's court. After a truly impressive work is completed, especially one involving secrets the Shah would like to be the sole possessor of, they kill the architect. There's something in it, you know. Sort of an acknowledgment that your work is finished, and so..." He shrugged expressively.

"The work is never finished," Garnier said quietly. "There are always new buildings. New opportunities, new projects."

"Oh, I don't know. When it's *the* project, there's something to the idea."

And in some way it was right, even fitting. After the things he had done, the things he had seen—he had traveled across continents but it was all the same. The Bloody Week, that had been here in Paris, not in far off Persia. Blood and death, and he was clever enough or lucky enough to escape, but why should he? What right did he have over so many others? *They* might have had a chance in life, to belong somewhere, to love someone. He never would, so what was he even doing?

And yet, it hadn't been right to die there in Persia, not when he knew what was happening here, the project that was underway again.

"But you see," he continued, "that palace I built the Shah—that was the wrong building. For me."

Garnier's voice was gentle, and somehow that made it all the more painful to hear. "No one is going to execute you here."

"Perhaps." Not in the same way, no, but how long before looking different, before possessing a face that forced him behind a mask, was going to mark his end anyway? The wrong person, the wrong crowd, the wrong shift in the public mood... "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind anyway."

Garnier nodded slowly. "I had a feeling. You never talk about the future."

"I don't think about the future." This, he knew, was a lie. He *did* think about the future, of the building, of the days ahead when it would be filled with music and life and glorious art. He didn't think about *his* future, though.

"So you came back here, rejoined my crew, with a plan to finish the work and then—what, kill yourself in the basement? Jump from the rooftop?"

It was all Erik could do not to flinch at the flat words, put so bluntly. He tried to shrug it off, to respond with levity, as though this wasn't the most serious topic imaginable. "Perhaps it's the final piece of the work. After all, a building like this would never be truly complete without that ultimate touch of elegance and sophistication—a theater ghost!"

Garnier didn't smile. "We are building a place of art, of music. The dead don't make music. And it's the living that give a building life."

He twisted the Daroga's card between his fingers and didn't answer.

Garnier sighed softly, sounding weary as he said, "Don't do it, Erik. Don't turn our opera house into a tomb."

Erik wished he hadn't put it just that way.

After a long moment, Garnier rose to his feet. "Think about what I've said."

As if he'd be able to avoid it. He waited until Garnier's footsteps had carried him to the door, then asked, "Are you going to throw me off the project?"

"No," Garnier said at once, and Erik could hear a smile in his voice this time. "Who else would I find to hang that chandelier?"

Erik sat in the shadows of Box Five for a long time after Garnier left.

He didn't have to decide anything, not yet. The building would still need months to complete, even with the most ambitious timeline. He ought to push all of this aside and go see about the chandelier.

Or perhaps he ought to see what had brought the Daroga to his door.

He didn't know how to find the other man, but expected that it wouldn't be difficult. The Daroga wanted to be found, after all.

Sure enough, he stepped out of the entrance to the opera house onto the Rue Scribe, into the long shadows of late afternoon, and saw the Daroga standing across the boulevard, dark clothes stark against the pale wall behind him.

Erik crossed the boulevard, nodded to the other man. "Daroga. How unexpected."

"It is good to see you, Erik," the Daroga said, nodding in return.

The polite thing to do would be to say something equivalent in response, but somehow that sort of sentiment had always been difficult for Erik to express. The stronger the feeling, even more so. The Daroga had risked everything to save Erik's life, something that had surprised and touched him in equal measures. Still, all he managed was another, somewhat stiff nod. He glanced back towards the half-constructed opera house, where undoubtedly someone was looking this direction. "Walk with me," he said, and started down the boulevard.

The Daroga fell into step easily. They had walked together before. "You are well?"

"Is that what you came here to find out?" Erik asked.

"Yes," the Daroga said simply. "I saved your life, remember. I feel a certain responsibility for you."

"You don't have to." He didn't need someone looking after him, checking up on him. He had done fine on his own for so many years. Well, if not fine—he had survived, anyway.

"I know," the Daroga said, in his serenest tones. "I did not suppose that I had to."

He didn't *want* to be moved by that. He didn't want it to matter that the Daroga—and Garnier too, he knew it applied just as well there—cared what became of him.

He tried to retaliate. "So you've gone Western now?" he said, indicating the Daroga's top hat.

"Do you like it?"

“No. It doesn’t suit you. And the right clothes don’t help anyone blend in if their face is wrong.”

The Daroga merely shrugged. “Perhaps I should embrace the difference then.”

Erik knew they weren’t talking about the Daroga, and knew that the other man knew it too. He tried again to push back. “How would you do that?”

“I could change to wearing a fez.”

“Fezzes aren’t even Persian!” Erik protested.

The Daroga raised a finger. “But would it not be interesting to see how long it is before anyone but you points that out?”

“I am too busy for nonsensical games,” Erik said with all the dignity he could manage. “I am building an opera house.”

“And then?” the Daroga asked quietly.

“And then...we’ll see.”

They walked on through the lengthening shadows, two men who didn’t belong among the fashionable Parisian crowds, talking of the building of the opera house, avoiding talk of the past or of the future. Erik’s mind was filled nevertheless with memories, and with—not plans, exactly, but a space where plans might be, the need to make a choice about what future he might have. If he was going to have one.

He knew he would probably tell himself for a few more months that he hadn’t decided what he was going to do when the Opera Garnier was complete.

But he also knew that, even while denying a future, he had already been taking certain steps.

After all, as Garnier said, the dead don’t make music. They also wouldn’t need the secret passages Erik had been quietly putting in all throughout the opera house.

A proper opera house might need a theatre ghost. But there was more than one way to provide one.

Second Movement: Meg Giry

...the “little Meg” of the story, the most charming star of our admirable corps de ballet, the eldest daughter of the worthy Mme. Giry...who had charge of the Ghost’s private box.

Gaston Leroux

I.

“We’re not lost, are we?” Gabi asked.

I looked down at my sister’s face, at her eyes that were just the same color blue as mine, and quickly said, “No, of course not.”

Her forehead was still puckered, the pucker that meant she didn’t quite believe me and still thought maybe she ought to be worried. I knew it was my job as the older, responsible, reliable sister to make that expression go away.

The only trouble was that we *were* lost. A little. I knew sort of where we were, somewhere in the wooded area west of our house and fields, and if we walked enough we were sure to come out into some other field soon. If I just knew which direction would take us out close enough to home to not be late for tonight’s party at our uncle’s house—well, then everything would be fine and our mother wouldn’t be angry with us. Only I’d got turned around somehow. And how could I look for the right direction without Gabi realizing I was looking for it?

“What if,” I said in a new burst of inspiration, “we *pretended* we were lost?”

Pretty soon we were going to be too old for games that started with *let’s pretend*, and maybe at nearly twelve I already was—but Gabi had barely turned nine, and when it was just the two of us and the summer day was bright and not crowded with more responsible things, we still liked games that involved flights of fancy into what ifs and maybes.

Her forehead was still puckered as she considered my proposal, but it was starting to turn into her thoughtful pucker instead of her worried one. “That’s a strange game.”

This was merely a negotiating tactic, an encouragement to embroider on something more. “What if we pretended we were lost castaways?” I suggested, snatching onto the first people I could think of who might need to be looking for their way in the wilds.

Gabi glanced around at the tall trees and scrubby underbrush all around us, interlaced branches casting us into deep shadow. “Shouldn’t we be at the shore if we’re castaways?”

I waved a hand. "If we were on an island, sure. But not if we're castaways who landed on, oh, the shore of Africa or India maybe, and wandered into the jungles."

I had read exciting stories just like that and found them thrilling—even if the jungle was not high on my list of the many places I dreamed of visiting someday. Actually, the stories, full of snakes and poisoned darts and other dangers, might have been a reason the jungles weren't high on my list. But pretending was different. The beech trees, spruce and occasional fir might not have been very jungly, but these woods had done good service for us over the years as Sherwood Forest, fairy kingdoms and Paris' Tuileries, so why not a jungle?

Gabi cocked her head, considering. "It doesn't have to be jungles. We could be lost in the basements of the new opera house they're building in Paris. They say the passages go on for miles, and there's a lake at the bottom!"

"But there aren't *trees*," I pointed out. "And if we were lost in a building, the sensible thing would be to stop where we were and wait for someone to find us."

I dreamed of distant lands, while Gabi dreamed of the theatre, of ballet and music and the artistic world. Usually I was willing enough to fall in with her ideas too, but actually looking for the way out of the woods was going to be hard enough without trying to pretend the trees were walls.

Gabi shrugged. "All right, but only if we can pretend tigers are chasing us."

With that, I knew I had her into my imagined story. We continued adding on new details – a secret temple, a dangerous band of enemies chasing us, tigers and lions and snakes. We stalked through the woods, pretending to spot signs of danger or clues pointing to safety. I looked for real clues too, some sign of which direction we ought to be traveling. I knew we should go east, and that I should be able to find east by the direction of the shadows, which would have worked out fine if we'd been in a field with just one tree. With trees everywhere and shadows all overlapping and combining, sometimes it seemed to me that east had to be one way, and sometimes that it must surely be another.

After wandering about and maybe going in circles for all I could say, and even though Gabi still seemed to be having fun, I eventually realized I had to take more drastic action. The very real danger of missing the evening's party, of Mother being first worried and then angry, were more concerning than our imaginary tigers.

"I believe," I announced impressively, "that we may be approaching the secret temple where we'll be safe from the warriors of the enchanted tiger. But it's crucial that we find the right path, and we can only be sure by looking from above."

“By flying?” Gabi suggested, which would have been a grand thing to pretend, maybe that we could turn into birds and fly, if we’d *only* been pretending.

“No, by climbing a tree,” I said, and pointed to one that I’d already identified as probably climbable. I’d probably muss my dress too, but that wouldn’t be as bad as getting home even later than we were already sure to be.

“Should I climb up?” Gabi asked, studying the tree thoughtfully.

Letting my little sister climb a tree was definitely not something I, as the older, reliable, responsible one, ought to do. “You have to be on lookout down here. I’ll climb the tree.”

It wasn’t the most challenging tree I’d ever climbed, and I’d climbed plenty. That happens when you grow up in the country, even when you’re a girl. It had been a while since my last tree though, and it wasn’t the easiest tree I’d ever climbed either. I worked my way from branch to branch, careful about not getting onto any that looked too flimsy for my weight, but trying to get high enough to see *something*.

In a perfect world, or perhaps in a storybook, I would have been able to get all the way up out of the canopy of trees, up into a new landscape at the very top of the branches, and probably seen home from here. As it happened, my tree wasn’t taller than the other trees, so the best I could do was get high enough to see through the remaining branches to something even higher – the sun.

Fortunately, that was enough to tell me which direction was west, and therefore which direction was east. Unfortunately, that was so easy because the sun was alarmingly low in the sky. It was even later than I’d thought. We were definitely in for a lecture at least when we got home.

I fixed the position of a nearby fir tree relative to the compass directions, to make sure I wouldn’t get mixed up by the time I got to the ground, and scrambled down as quickly as I dared.

Gabi was standing right where I’d left her, but her expression had turned grave. “You climbed farther than you would have climbed for just a game.”

Sometimes my little sister was too perceptive. “You have to treat a game like it’s real for it to be any fun,” I tried.

It didn’t work. “We’re really lost, aren’t we?”

“We *were*,” I admitted. “But I know the way now.” I took her hand, checked what I thought was the right way against the location of the lone fir in sight, and started us off through the trees.

“I thought we probably were lost, all along,” Gabi confided, our hands swinging as we walked.

“Why didn’t you say?”

She just shrugged. “I knew you’d get us home. And it was more fun playing the game. We’re going to be late though, aren’t we?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

The problem had never been that we wouldn't get home, eventually. The problem was that Mother was going to be very displeased with what time we got home.

"We'll still be able to go to the party tonight, right?" Gabi said, face twisting anxiously. "I've been looking *forward* to it!"

"I'll tell Mother it was my fault," I said, even though I wanted to go too. But I knew Gabi wanted to go more. And it *was* my fault. "I suggested going into the woods."

"That's because you always have the most interesting ideas," Gabi said comfortably.

Even though I knew we were in trouble, that still made me smile.

2.

We got home, and we were in trouble.

"You couldn't pick a different day to get lost in the woods?" Mother said, as she dragged a comb through Gabi's blond curls, and Gabi made exaggerated wincing expressions.

"We didn't *mean* to get lost," I said, even though I knew she knew that. Already dressed and combed and with big bows tied into my own hair, I perched on the edge of a chair and tried not to move, lest I rumple my dress and make matters worse.

"You never *mean* to, Little Meg," Mother said severely, "but you never think. Always off on your flights of fancy!"

It didn't seem altogether fair that I was the one with the Little nickname, when I was the older one, but that's what happens when you're named after your grandmother, apparently. I kicked my heels against the chair legs, stopped when I remembered Mother wouldn't like that either, and just said, "I'm sorry." I reached up to twist my little gold necklace, a small disc with an M, because at least that was a kind of fidgeting that wouldn't get me in trouble.

"But flights of fancy are fun," Gabi said. She was already wearing her necklace too, her matching one with a G.

"And *you* stop moving while I tie these bows," Mother continued. "And consider yourselves very lucky you're still going to this party tonight. You are only going because *I* want to go, and I'm not going to leave you at home to get into even more mischief. Be on your best behavior at the party, and see that you don't get into trouble, accidentally or not. And especially not by imagining too much."

"Papa liked flights of fancy," Gabi muttered, and I winced.

Inevitably Mother's mouth thinned. She didn't respond to the comment, only said, "Please hold still," and went on tying off ribbons, a new furrow in her brow that had nothing to do with us getting home late.

I had *told* Gabi not to bring Father up like that, but she still did it sometimes. It didn't seem fair to Mother to use him that way when she was upset with us. Though Father *had* liked flights of fancy. Until he died, over three years ago, going off to Paris during the Commune, chasing a city-sized flight of fancy. He probably would have joined any of the several revolutions of the last eighty years, fired up with the idea of building a new world, but it was the Commune that had happened at the right time. And then he had never come back.

"How late do you think the dancing will go?" I asked, as brightly as I could, after the silence had dragged on too long.

"Later than either of you will be staying up," Mother said firmly, and fluffed up the last bow in Gabi's hair.

"But I wanted to see *all* the dancing!" Gabi said, hopping down from her own seat and doing a twirl, her dress swirling out around her. I knew it was the dancing that had made my sister speak excitedly about this party for the last three weeks. We saw our cousins and neighbors all the time; it was the dancing that made a party special.

"The longer we discuss it, the more likely we will be even later than we already are, and you'll miss the dancing that way. Now get your coats and we'll go."

It was only a short distance to walk, just to our uncle's farm down the road. Their house was bigger than ours, though it needed to be, with the number of cousins we had. We were just in time for the supper, where we ate too entirely too much cheese and sausage and cassoulet but managed to not spill anything on our dresses, which would likely have sent us off to bed in disgrace on the instant. Instead we spent the twilight running around on the lawn with our cousins, admiring the colorful, flowing dresses of the ladies and swapping stories, until the musicians finished tuning up and the dancing began on the beaten earth area prepared beside the house.

Then we were allowed to sit off to the side, a long line of children, watching the couples whirl and turn in a parade of movement and color. Sometimes I watched the moonlight shining on my sister's face instead. I liked dancing, and I liked watching dancers, but not as much as Gabi. She knew endless information about professional dancers, the heroines of ballet who leaped and twirled and made magic on stage. She could rattle off the names of all the most famous ones, dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet and the Imperial Ballet of the Russian Empire, and especially the Royal Academy of Music in Paris. She had been inconsolable for a week when the Salle Le Peletier, the theatre where the Royal Academy danced, had burned down last October. Mother had promised that someday we'd go see them dance, when M. Garnier finished building his new opera house, the one with a lake in the lower levels.

That was a pleasant thing to imagine, but for tonight, even this much simpler dancing seemed wonderful.

3.

It all ended much too soon, Mother and my aunt coming to shoo us all off to the beds prepared upstairs, extra pallets fit in wherever they could be squeezed.

“Oh, can’t we watch a *little* longer?” Gabi pleaded.

Mother only shook her head. “Not tonight. Off to bed.”

I knew from her tone that there was no arguing—and I also knew that there might have been a reasonable chance with arguing, if we hadn’t already used up our limit of indulgence for the day by coming home late. I was still thinking of that after we were bundled off upstairs, after we changed into the nightgowns we’d brought along from home, and were lying side-by-side on a pallet on the floor of our cousins’ room.

“Are you still awake?” Gabi whispered some time after the lights had been put out.

“Yes,” I whispered back, mindful of our three cousins asleep in the beds nearby. I assumed they were asleep anyway, since it had been a while since the last whispered remark or giggle. And they didn’t try to join this conversation now.

“I can still hear the music,” Gabi said softly, voice wistful.

“Yes.” It was such a small thing, but it was rare for us to have the chance to see dancing like this. And it had been my fault we’d been lost, come home late, and missed some of what we might have seen.

I pushed back the blanket covering me, rose to my feet and extended a hand to Gabi. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, already getting to her feet. That was my sister—always ready to follow wherever I was willing to lead.

“Not far,” I said, fingers wrapped around hers as we crept carefully through the dark room.

I had noticed on our way upstairs that the window on the landing looked out over the dancing. Sure enough, in the dark hall with the lights outside, the window seemed almost to glow, making the party scene beyond even more magical than when we had been a part of it.

“Mother won’t like it if she finds out we got up,” Gabi said, but her gaze was already fastened on the lighted festivities.

“I’ll tell her it was my idea,” I said, and shrugged. “Besides, if she wants to punish us later, we’ll still have seen everything tonight.”

That was enough to bring an impish grin to my sister’s face, and to quell any further objections.

For a little while, we stood pressed up to the window, just watching. But soon Gabi was swaying to the music, then tapping her toes to the rhythm, then pulling me away from the window to dance with her.

We twisted and turned and twirled there on the dark landing, the candles and moonlight casting a fairy glow. It felt more like floating than dancing, as though we were magical too, in this secret forbidden moment together.

“Someday,” Gabi said, “we’ll go to Paris, and become real dancers. Ballet dancers, on stage at the new opera house.”

That night, it seemed possible, even inevitable. No whisper of the future told me that, of the two of us, it would be only me who went to Paris, only me who joined the ballet company and danced at the Opera Garnier. That night, everything was magic, and every dream felt attainable.

Third Movement: Christine Daaé

His wife died when Christine was entering upon her sixth year. Then the father, who cared only for his daughter and his music, sold his patch of ground and went to Upsala in search of fame and fortune. He found nothing but poverty. He returned to the country, wandering from fair to fair, strumming his Scandinavian melodies, while his child, who never left his side, listened to him in ecstasy or sang to his playing.

Gaston Leroux

1.

It was my idea to go to the beach. It was only early spring, but such a beautiful day that I hoped plenty of people would be there, enjoying the fine weather and happy to throw a coin into Father's hat. People passing on the street were too busy, too intent on their own business, to pause to listen to a violinist, or to his daughter as she sang. So it had been for several days in a row, perhaps the worst stretch in these seven years we had been wandering, until I had grown desperate to try something new.

I hated being ignored, by all the elegant people with their noses in the air. When I was singing on some windy corner with no one even glancing my way, I liked to imagine that someday, somehow, I would become a great diva at the grandest opera house in the world—perhaps at the one they were building even now in Paris, with the biggest stage in Europe—and all these people would be at my feet.

But dreams wouldn't buy us supper, and no one was inviting me into any opera houses yet. So my best idea was to attempt the beach.

Father was nothing if not agreeable, always happy to fall in with whatever decision I made. I found a spot by the shore convenient to passersby out strolling, and we settled in. Father played his violin and I sang, with the waves and the breeze as our accompaniment. We surely looked charming—I was careful to make us so, keeping our clothes neat as best I could, and always combing my curling brown hair.

Father didn't think about these things. He was happy playing his violin on any street corner in any city, just as he was happy sleeping in whatever cheap rooming house we could afford, or whatever barn a friendly farmer was willing to offer us. It was me that looked out for the best places for us to perform, me that negotiated prices down and wheedled better food and lodging out of people who didn't want to give it, and me who had learned as a mere child that people put more coins in Father's hat if my hair looked nice and I smiled at them.

No one ever imagined that the pretty girl singing on the street corner and smiling so sweetly, or who asked for yesterday's bread with such big sad eyes, might be trying deliberately to influence them. No one imagined that I was actually *thinking*. But I'd learned very young that looking helpless would get me much more help than acting clever would.

I had only hazy memories of a time before all of this became my life. My father was a great violinist, famous and respected once. I distantly remembered applauding crowds, a neat little house, a warm and beautiful mother. But when my mother died, my father gave up the crowds and the house, running away from his memories and taking me along with him. So I grew up on the road, with my father playing his violin to earn us a night's lodging or a meal. Sometimes he'd be hired on at an inn or a tavern to play for a few days or weeks. Often we played on corners or in city squares. And at the port in Lannion, we went to the beach.

At first it didn't seem as ingenious an idea as I had hoped. The beach-goers walked by slower, but they weren't so numerous as the streams of people in the city proper. By the time the morning was well-advanced, we still only had a small scattering of coins. Enough for decent lodging *or* a good meal, but not both. If I found a cheaper option for either, it might be enough to somehow contrive both—I was trying to make calculations in my head, while also singing the folk melody Father was playing, when *he* arrived and I lost track of all my numbers.

He was possibly the most intriguing thing I'd ever seen, a boy of fourteen or so, wearing clothes that I could tell even from a distance were worth more money than had ever passed through my hands. It was something about the rich dark colors of the cloth, the way the jacket and trousers fit him so perfectly. He was out on the beach with a tall woman whose plain dark dress and severe hairstyle instantly suggested a governess, but even she looked more elegant and refined than I could aspire to on my best day.

It wasn't that I'd never seen wealthy people before. Of course I had, often, but there was something about this one—maybe because he was only a little older than me, or because he was handsome, or because he didn't have any parent with him.

And also, of course, I knew that he probably had enough money jingling in his pocket at this very moment to keep us fed and housed for a week, just when I didn't have enough for even that night.

I watched him for the entire hour he was there on the beach, as he threw sticks into the waves and poked about at seaweed and was scolded by his governess for getting wet sand on his pantlegs. He never came near Father and me. Father, of course, never noticed him at all, and only noticed I was distracted when I missed a line in the song I was singing.

I watched the aristocratic boy leave, and resolved to come back to the beach again tomorrow. We weren't doing much worse than we had on the

streets—and an idea was beginning to come to me, an idea that might be worth much more than whatever we could earn from indifferent passersby.

2.

I learned his name the second day. He came back to the beach at just the same time, with the same severe-looking governess. I had tried to get Father and me into a better position to encounter him, but the governess looked at us with a sniff and steered him in a different direction. I made a face at her back that no one noticed.

He wandered farther away from her than she liked that day. *I* noticed that he was exploring out on some jutting rocks long before she did. I was just thinking it could be worth making an excuse to Father and venturing out after the boy when his governess finally realized where he was.

Her voice went ringing out across the beach: “Raoul! What are you doing? Come back here at once, Raoul!”

And he *did* hurry back to her right away. If *I* had a governess, I wouldn’t let her order me about like that. After all, she’d be working for my family.

But it was interesting, how quickly *he* obeyed her order.

3.

On the third day at the beach, I attempted to take bold, straightforward action. I told Father I wanted to stretch my legs; he simply nodded without even breaking off his music, and I set off across the beach. Not *quite* in a straight line, but definitely meandering in the direction of Raoul, who was busy tossing sticks into the waves.

I tried to look casual, but it wasn’t enough to fool his governess. She saw me coming and promptly hauled him off for a brisk walk down the length of the beach. I stopped in spite of myself, staring after them as they moved away from me. So much for the direct approach.

I had got close enough to see that Raoul had been wearing a different jacket today. He had *multiple* jackets that no doubt each cost enough to feed Father and me for months. It didn’t seem fair, that some people should have so much, and that other, interfering people should try to make sure none of it went in the direction of people who had little.

I trudged back to Father, resumed singing and trying to charm the people going by, but my heart just wasn’t in it. We weren’t doing as well at the beach as I had hoped, and with cooler weather arriving, this third day was the worst of all. When we returned to town we had just enough for supper, but I had to smile and simper and work hard to convince the innkeeper’s wife to let us sleep in the stables that night. I knew I couldn’t smile enough to get us a room inside for free, so the hay in the stables was the best I could manage.

Father never concerned himself about these things, of course.

I lay awake that night in the hay, listening to Father and the horses snore, and tried to think what was best to do. Should I risk another day returning to the beach? Had we better go back to the streets? But there was no assurance that we'd do any better on a street corner.

I was so *tired* of all of this, of never knowing from day to day if we'd have somewhere to eat or sleep that evening. If I could only meet Raoul—I had no fears of his governess if I could just get past her long enough to *meet* him. Surely even the most obedient aristocratic boy wouldn't stand for a dull old governess stopping him from talking to a pretty girl, once he'd had a proper chance to see and appreciate her charms.

And then—I could see it all stretching out before me, everything except the very first step. I shifted and turned over and tried to ignore the wind rattling the tree branches outside. Raoul was obviously from a wealthy and influential family. Money and connections, and a life completely unlike anything I had ever known. His family could hire Father to play in their house—they could decide that a pretty girl who could sing was just the sort of person they wanted to sponsor—they could talk to other artists and musicians about this talented father and daughter they had met—they could do *so much* that would be so easy for them and mean everything to me.

If I could just get a start, meet Raoul and then his family, I was sure I could smile and ask flattering questions and impress them with my singing voice. I'd done it before to get someone to put more money into Father's hat. This time, the opportunity was so much bigger, the potential reward so much more important. But how to get started? It was obvious by now Raoul wasn't going to approach us, even though I'd seen him glance our direction now and then, and boldly walking over myself hadn't worked either. I needed something that would simply bring us together, some excuse for meeting.

The wind picked up a new pitch and I flopped onto my back. Maybe I could think if it was quiet. But then, I hadn't thought of anything in the last few days, so I couldn't really blame the wind—

I suddenly went very still. The *wind*. If it was still windy tomorrow... But what did I own, what would work—and then I thought of my red scarf.

It had been a gift, of a sort. Father and I had been standing on a street corner as usual, he playing away on his violin and me singing with the melody. It had been a cold day, and a woman all dressed in silks and furs had paused to listen. She had looked at me with big sad eyes, and said, "Poor child, you look so tired and cold!" Then she'd taken off a flimsy red scarf she was wearing and handed it to me.

I said thank you, of course, even though the material was too thin to offer much warmth, even though I would have preferred her big fur coat or some money. Even though I'd rather she hadn't made it obvious how pitiable I looked.

I hated that scarf. But I never threw away anything that might be useful and was light enough to carry with us, and now I hugged myself with delight—because the red scarf was exactly what I needed.

4.

The breeze was still wild and strong the next day, and under different circumstances I would have turned my back on the beach. It would be chilly, fewer people would be there, and they'd probably be walking too fast to stop to listen to a violin. But I had a *plan*, one that could change everything if it worked. I only had to hope that Raoul and his dragon governess wouldn't be put off by the breeze either.

We'd been on the beach for over an hour before I finally saw them coming. I'd been keeping a tight hold on my red scarf the whole while, so it wouldn't flap into my face or blow away. I saw them approaching in the distance and it couldn't have been more perfect—because they were directly down-wind of us. I waited eagerly until they were perhaps a hundred meters away, knowing they weren't likely to come closer than that, waited until the governess was looking the other direction and Raoul had wandered a little away from her.

Then I let go of my scarf. Immediately the wind caught the ends, lifting them up and twisting them around. I carefully turned my head, adjusting the angle, and in another moment my scarf had slithered right away and was flying out across the sand straight toward Raoul.

I broke off my singing to shriek out instead, "My scarf! My favorite scarf!" Just in case he wasn't paying attention. I buried my face in my hands as though I was simply overcome (just in case he didn't appreciate the importance of the situation) and watched through my fingers.

The scarf skittered and raced down the beach towards him. When it came near, he made a grab—and missed. It danced right out of his grip, a new gust sent it over the water, and in another moment it had dropped down into the surf.

It was all I could do not to stamp my foot in frustration. I had planned it all, it had all gone *so* close to perfect...

Then to my great surprise, Raoul showed far more daring than I'd observed so far. He plunged straight into the water after the floating, tossing scarf. This caught his governess' attention, of course, and she began shouting rebukes at once. He disregarded this entirely, wading farther out, pushing through rippling waves until he finally stood triumphantly with my scarf held aloft.

"Is something wrong, child?" Father asked absently, finally noticing that I had stopped singing.

"No, Father. It's just my scarf got away."

I darted off down the beach, met Raoul as he came out of the waves, and accepted the wet scarf he proudly handed to me. "Thank you *so* much!" I said in my warmest tones. "It was so brave of you!"

“Oh—not really,” he said, but scuffed at the sand with one foot and I knew he was pleased.

His governess wasn’t—but Raoul was looking at me admiringly now, and as I had thought, all I really needed was a *beginning*. After that, it was easy. We were soon exchanging names and histories and I brought him back to meet Father, who nodded and went on playing, and Raoul spent the rest of the morning listening to me sing, looking at me with big shining eyes. By the time they left, he’d promised to come back tomorrow, and I waved him good-bye with my red scarf and a big smile.

I sat beside Father with a little sigh as I watched Raoul’s figure shrink in the distance. He was wealthy, aristocratic, young, handsome, easily guided even by a governess, and completely charmed by me. He was *perfect*. All sorts of opportunities were opening up in my mind—even more than I had thought of at first, when I only hoped for a wealthy patron for Father. In time, I could do so much better than that.

“Someday,” I announced, “I’m going to marry that boy.”

Father went on serenely with his playing. “If you wish, child. And you’ll have your great singing career, of course.

“Yes, of course.” I hadn’t forgotten that. That was all part of it. I was young, but I’d lived all my life around adults, and I listened. I already knew it would be easier to achieve any dreams if I had money and knew the right people. “Someday, I’m going to marry the Vicomte de Chagny and have a glorious singing career.”

The saga continues in

Nocturne

The Guardian of the Opera, Book One

About the Author

Cheryl Mahoney lives in California and dreams of other worlds. She has been blogging since 2010 at Tales of the Marvelous (<http://marveloustales.com>). Her weekly Writing Wednesday posts provide updates about her current writing, including excerpts and updates on books that are coming soon. She also posts regularly with book and movie reviews, and reflections on reading. She has been a member of Stonehenge Writers since 2012, and has completed NaNoWriMo seven times.

Cheryl has looked for faeries in Kensington Gardens in London and for the Phantom at the Opera Garnier in Paris. She considers Tamora Pierce's Song of the Lioness Quartet to be life-changing and Terry Pratchett books to be the best cure for gloomy days.

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