

THREE NIGHTS AT THE OPERA

Heather Rose Jones

(From *Daughter of Mystery*)

...for a brief time, intrigued and flattered by the interest and starved for the human touch that she was denied in the ordinary way, Barbara had let things go further than had been wise. Her cheeks still burned at remembering that glorious imprudence.

This is the story of that glorious imprudence.

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ISBN-10: 1942794002, ISBN-13: 978-1-942794-00-4 (pdf)
ISBN-10: 1942794010, ISBN-13: 978-1-942794-01-1 (epub)
ISBN-10: 1942794029, ISBN-13: 978-1-942794-02-8 (mobi)

ONE: *Barbara*

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. She does nothing but mope around the house.” Barbara heard the voice of Mefro Charsintek the housekeeper clearly through the open doors where she sat on the small balcony overlooking the garden as it spilled down to the river. Traces of the spring floods still lingered in the paths and flower beds where the gardeners hadn’t ventured, but it might be worth wandering down to examine the small wharf. Just to see if there were any damage, not to get away from the fussing. With the other upper servants away attending on the baron in Vienna, Charsintek ruled the house and sometimes forgot that a baron’s *armin* didn’t properly fall within a housekeeper’s domain. And Charsintek’s complaint wasn’t true, Barbara thought. Strictly speaking, she wasn’t even in the house at the moment. Every morning she went out riding and to practice her sword-work at Perret’s *salle*. More days than not there were lectures to attend. She was hardly around the house at all except afternoons and evenings. The housekeeper’s voice drifted out again. “I’m sure she’s taken a fever from the damp, but you know there was no persuading her to leave the city during flood-tide. Talk to her. You’re the only person she’ll listen to.”

Barbara cared very little for being discussed like a lump of furniture but she cared even less for trying to explain what lay under her mood. When the baron had left her behind in Rotenek for the winter she’d steeled herself to obedience. Perhaps he was right that the respect she’d earned in his service wouldn’t travel well to foreign lands. In Vienna, a woman as *armin* might serve more as a distraction than as a bodyguard. But that service was her life, her purpose. And she couldn’t help feeling cast aside. The longer his absence, the more it wore on her. A second voice came drifting out: LeFevre, the baron’s estate manager. “I doubt it’s as dire as a river-fever. Have you forgotten entirely what it is to be eighteen years old?”

Barbara sighed as she heard LeFevre’s footsteps coming through the doorway behind her. She continued staring silently at the play of light on the river.

“Is there anything you care to talk about?” he asked at last.

She shook her head but shifted on the bench to make a place for him.

He broke the companionable silence at last with, “I would have thought you’d take the baron’s absence as a chance for a real holiday. I know you have your studies and practices, but have you considered doing something purely for your own pleasure?”

“Oh, yes,” Barbara answered, hating the bitterness that crept into her voice but unwilling to take the effort to conceal it. “I shall fill my evenings with dinner parties and dancing, with musical salons and opera and theater. And when have I ever had entrance to those things except carrying a sword in attendance on the baron?” It spilled out before she could stop her mouth. “Why did he teach me to enjoy things I’m not allowed to have?” She stared down at her feet, knowing what would be in his face: that look half mixed of secrets and pity. LeFevre had served the baron since before she was born. If there were any other who knew her past, it was he, but he would never reveal any scrap of the secrets. All that remained was the pity. Yet when she raised her head, his look was thoughtful instead.

“Why *not* go to the opera?” he suggested unexpectedly. “The baron’s box has sat empty all season. You need no one’s invitation or permission to use it save his and I think I can stand deputy for that. I’ll let them know it will be occupied and see that it’s unlocked and cleaned. Go. Enjoy yourself. The season will be over soon enough and it’ll be a long summer before the baron is expected back.”

TWO: *Jeanne*

The problem with having a reputation for bringing together entertaining guests, Jeanne sighed to herself, was that one was rarely invited to join a party with a mind toward one's own enjoyment. This would be Giulitta's last performance in the role of Ippolita and it would be pleasant to be able to listen without the Greek chorus of gossip from the other guests in Mesnera Penilluk's box. They had started up as soon as the overture faded away and, as they were rehearsing all the stale *on dits* of the entire season, there was little hope the topics would be exhausted soon.

"Jeanne, you haven't attended to a word I've said," her hostess scolded. "I wondered if you'd heard anything more on the Ovinze betrothal."

"I'm sorry, Helen. The music had me entirely in a trance."

"You and your singers!" She lifted her opera glass to gaze at the tall, stately woman on stage. "Wasn't she one of your lovers several years back?"

Jeanne only smiled. It was always better to let people guess at such things than to answer them. "The Ovinzes? I think we'll hear no more of it, but I couldn't venture the slightest guess why. They've sent young Rikerd off to the country for the summer, and they wouldn't have done that if there were an announcement in the offing." She turned back to the stage. The next aria had always been her favorite; it was the one she had fallen in love over. Please let Helen find other distraction for five minutes!

"They say the princess has a new favorite, Iohenrik Feizin," Charluz confided from her other side in a whisper too loud for discretion. "Jeanne, you simply must see that he attends my dinner next week."

"I'll see what I can manage," Jeanne replied absently, turning in her chair and giving up entirely on the aria. A part of her mind turned to the question of what plausible means she could contrive to introduce the said Iohenrik to his aspiring hostess. Hers was a talent, like any other. And it provided the means for maintaining a far larger presence in society than her own income could support. But there were times...

"Whoever is that woman in Baron Saveze's box? He's surely not back from Vienna yet!"

"No, my husband says the delegation isn't expected back until late summer. Is it his sister's girl perhaps?"

"Not her! She never comes unless Mesnera Chazillen drags her here and whoever's there is alone."

Jeanne turned her opera glass to the indicated box. No, definitely not Antuniet Chazillen, but there was something familiar about— “Oh! It’s *la petit Barbre*, that foundling Saveze had trained as an armin.”

Marianniz said shrewishly, “If that’s his taste in mistresses, I wonder he didn’t just find himself a boy.”

“Don’t be vulgar,” Mesnera Penilluk admonished. “I’ve never heard that Marziel had a taste for boys or children.”

“And there’s nothing boyish about this one,” Charluz added, peering across the distance.

Nor was she a child any longer, Jeanne thought. That was why she hadn’t recognized her at first. It had been—what?—a year or more since she’d last taken notice of the girl. In that time, she’d left far behind any remaining traces of gangly—never gawky—adolescence and entered the first bloom of womanhood. She wasn’t what anyone would call pretty in the usual way. With a little care she might be striking, if you looked past the old-fashioned, mannish clothing and the severely practical way she dressed her hair. But even more than that was the transformation in her expression. In place of the impassive watchfulness of the armin was a rapt attention to the performance. Reactions passed over her face in waves: breathless anticipation as she leaned forward against the rail, her lips moving in the lyrics of the aria; amusement at a play of the words; delight in the interplay of voices. Watching her was like seeing the show for the first time again.

A fan tapped lightly at her fingers and Jeanne lowered the glass.

“You haven’t been listening for the last ten minutes.” Charluz glanced over at the object of her attention. “A new interest?”

Jeanne shrugged. “The world is full of doors I have yet to pass through. Who can say?”

The interval was spent flitting from one conversation to the next, wandering through the corridors and in and out of boxes. When the restless sound of the musicians heralded the approach of the second act, Jeanne found herself standing outside Saveze’s box, without a conscious decision. She knocked, then entered, leaving no time for a response. The inhabitant rose, startled. The brief flash in Barbara’s eyes suggested that surprise might not have been the best tactic. If she had worn a sword that evening, it might have been drawn. The look faded instantly.

“Vicomtesse,” she said hesitantly, “have you mistaken the box?”

“Not at all,” Jeanne replied, closing the door behind her. “My friends have been doing nothing but chatter throughout the entire performance. And then I looked over and saw how you were transported by the music, and I thought, ‘This is the woman in whose company I want to enjoy the rest of the opera.’”

“Mesnera, I think—”

“Oh, I know,” Jeanne interrupted. “You think it wouldn’t be right because we haven’t been properly introduced, only met each other in passing—but we have! It was four or five years ago, at Marziel’s summer place in Chalanz. And so you are

Barbara and I am Jeanne and the proprieties have been done. Now the music is starting and let's sit."

The nature of her entrance had left no time for an awkward silence or any easy way to be refused. It was entirely unfair of her, but fairness had nothing to do with the matter. Barbara gestured toward the one chair that had been pushed up to the edge by the rail and stepped back, but that wouldn't do.

"No, no, that's your seat. Help me bring another from the back." There were no servants, of course, but the delicate chairs were light enough and Barbara took it from her hands to place it near the other. "Closer, so we needn't raise our voices," Jeanne urged. She laid a hand on Barbara's arm to guide the placement. There was the slightest movement under her touch: not a flinch, merely a response.

In a quiet, tight voice, Barbara recited, "*Like two doves couched upon a single branch, whispering secrets.*"

It took a moment for the words to trigger memory. "Pertulif!" she exclaimed in delight, completing the stanza. "*No feather's-breadth between the two was seen.*" Oh yes, the evening had improved indeed.

The second act was more contemplative, with the characters weaving a complex structure of attraction, mistaken identities, and betrayals. Jeanne kept mostly silent, watching the animation return to Barbara's face and only occasionally leaning closely to point out a bit of byplay among the minor characters. When the lights came up for the second interval, a threat of returning shyness was forestalled with questions.

"Have you heard Giulitta sing before?"

"I think so," Barbara answered slowly. "That is, I haven't paid much attention to the performers—which one is which. I only come when the baron chooses. Before this, I mean. So it doesn't matter who's singing."

"But you knew the arias," Jeanne countered. "I saw you before following on *Alzatevi Amazoni* and I thought I heard—"

"I'm sorry," Barbara said hurriedly. "I didn't mean to—"

"No, don't apologize! It's delightful to see someone enjoy the music so much."

"I love Tessoro's work, although..."

Jeanne leaned one elbow on the rail to watch her more closely. "Although?" It was quite a game to tease out her reactions.

"Although I think he would have done better to use only the two main stories. I know it's all the rage to have the comic echo of the heroic romance, but on top of that he's muddled things up with the alliance allegory and then the minor characters were all meant to be satires on the court at Turin, so they really have nothing to do with the rest of the story."

"Were they really?" Jeanne laughed in surprise. "I never knew that. I suppose you could write something similar for the court of the Atilliets, but where would you stage it?"

Barbara let a hint of a smile escape. "No one in Rotenek would dare and no

one elsewhere would care.”

What surprising depths she had. It was like watching a flower unfold. Did no one else ever talk to her like this? Jeanne thought of Baron Saveze. Marziel was an old friend, but she had no more familiarity with his home life than any other might. He had plucked this girl from who-knows-where, lavished an education on her, then turned her into a silent attendant on his comings and goings. But try as she might, Jeanne couldn't imagine him sitting with Barbara in the parlor discussing opera or quoting poetry. What a strange life she must lead!

When the music swelled at last for the finale and dissolved into a wash of applause and the rustle of leave-takings, Jeanne turned impulsively and asked, “Will you be coming again? They start a new work in a few days and that's the last of the season.”

“I don't know,” Barbara began slowly.

“Invite me to join you here Tuesday next,” Jeanne urged. “They're performing *Cendrillon*—a piece of swan's-down compared to this tangled knot. I want to know what you think of it. And I need you to save me from the tedium of my friends discussing their summer plans. Do invite me, please?”

She was still hesitant. “I don't know if I can. I would enjoy your company, but... *A falling leaf takes its path as the wind chooses.*”

“I'll take that as a promise!” Jeanne gathered her things before any protest could be made. She turned just before the door. Barbara had followed close behind to open it for her. That brought them suddenly face to face. Jeanne raised her fingertips to her lips and kissed them then touched them to Barbara's mouth. “I'll be devastated if you fail me,” she said and slipped through the doorway, holding the gaze between them until it closed again.

THREE: *Barbara*

“Again.”

Barbara took a calming breath and returned her blade to a ready position. Perret had an entire language in the word ‘again’. One said, *I want to be certain that wasn’t just luck*. Very rarely, there was the one that meant, *Everyone take heed: this is how it should be done*. And then there was the one she had been hearing for the last hour that meant, *Repeat the movement until either you do it correctly or I lose patience*. Her sparring partner attacked. She countered.

“Again.”

It wasn’t a particularly difficult move but it ran against all her instincts, and when her mind was troubled, instinct was stronger than will. But you didn’t say to Perret, *I’m sorry, my thoughts were elsewhere today*, or *Tomorrow would be better*. Today was the day he’d chosen to teach her this pass. Tomorrow he might change his mind. She concentrated on the sequence of movements.

“Stay.” Perret stepped in and grasped her wrist and shoulder, once more guiding her slowly through the desired path. He stepped back. “Again.”

That was what had sent her mind spinning off sideways earlier. Last night could have stayed shut in its box for examination later, but in the midst of Perret’s deft impersonal guidance through the new pass it had struck her how rare it was that anyone touched her.

The swordmaster’s cane reminded her to keep her elbow in. “Again.” She thought she’d done better that time, at least by a small amount.

When had it changed? She could remember as a small child there had been a nursemaid who petted and cosseted her and slept in the bed beside her. But then there had come a parade of tutors and instructors and one day she was told she was too old for nursemaids and must do for herself and the woman had disappeared. If she’d had more experience of the outside world at that time, she would have known to find it strange. Later, when it had been explained to her why she was set apart from everyone else she knew, all the strangeness had long since

become ordinary.

Perret signaled a break and took the practice blade from her sparring partner. “Perhaps some other time.”

Barbara’s heart sank. She knew she’d been inattentive but she’d never before received that dismissive phrase.

With no warning, Perret made the attack. She returned the counter without thought. It wasn’t perfect but it was correct.

“So you’ve learned something this morning after all,” he said, tossing the blade back to the other man. “Again.”

There were places to ride in the city if you wished to see and be seen, or simply to shake the fidgets out of a horse’s legs and keep it fresh. But there was nowhere within the old walls where you could give a horse its head while you pondered the contents of your own. After her lesson was finished, it took the better part of an hour for Barbara to guide the mare across the river, through the crowds around the wharves, and out the old west gate into the hills beyond.

She hadn’t meant anything by it, Barbara thought. *The Vicomtesse de Cherdillac*. She’d watched the noble ladies often enough with their tapping of fans on shoulders, the hand on the arm, the leaning so closely to whisper secrets that the lips brushed the ear. She felt a shiver run down her spine, remembering. It didn’t mean anything. It was just what they did.

And she might have been one of them, had matters been different. If the father she had no memory of hadn’t devastated the family’s substance so thoroughly that their very name was erased. If his last thought for her had been to see to her future rather than to sell her to the baron for the price of one last game at cards. No, she might move through society in the baron’s wake by virtue of wearing his sword—the one choice she had ever been given to make—but she watched them as if through a glass. And, for the most part, they didn’t see her at all.

She gauged the angle of the sun and turned the horse back, letting it take its own pace once more. *She hadn’t meant anything by it. It was just her way*. Barbara knew a great deal about the vicomtesse. It was part of her duties: to know everyone the baron might encounter. She knew that she wasn’t any more French than the baron was. The affectation was a legacy of her late husband, a penniless but titled émigré. She knew de Cherdillac was famous for her wit and her charm—and how strange and delicious it had been to have that charm directed at her! Famous, as well, for

her flirtations with women. And whispered, more discreetly, to go beyond flirtation.

It was just her way. They all played and teased with each other like that. Except for that kiss. Barbara touched her lips where the vicomtesse's fingers had rested. The very chasteness of the gesture had been profoundly intimate. She shivered again.

And why not take the opportunity to enjoy that charm one more time? There would be no harm in it. Summer was hard on their heels and like everyone else in Rotenek who could, the vicomtesse would soon leave to spend the warmer months at someone's country estate. Barbara hadn't realized she'd made a decision until she returned through the old city gate and found her path leading within a block of LeFevre's office. Before she could change her mind, she turned the horse down Lamsiter Street.

"And did you enjoy the performance last night?" he asked, looking up from his accounts when she entered.

She smiled—perhaps too broadly—at the memory. "I think it was just what I needed. And—" she plunged on "—I would like to go again, if it's permitted. They'll be performing the new Isouard. Perhaps Tuesday, if I may?"

He looked at her curiously. "I see no reason why not. But why Tuesday in particular?"

Her mind raced. "I thought...that is, the baron once said that the third performance is always the best. *Nothing of good or ill ever came in twos; the third wave reaches highest on the shore.*" Or was it the second? She hadn't meant it as an invention. He had said something of the sort. She saw LeFevre looking at her sidelong and cursed how she always betrayed her unease with poetry. "It doesn't matter, I suppose, but now I have it fixed in my mind for Tuesday and it's as good a day as any other." He smiled and nodded in dismissal. It was as simple as that. She had an assignation.

FOUR: *Jeanne*

Jeanne leaned over the railing of the grand staircase to peer once more at the figures below. The crowds in the foyer had thinned out and still there had been no sign of her. Doubt began to rise, but a glimpse of a liveried man emerging from a discreetly hidden doorway reminded her that there were other paths. Of course Barbara wouldn't have entered this way. There must be a dozen lesser doors and back stairs.

She hurried along the corridor around to Saveze's box and tapped lightly before trying the door. In the first moment when Barbara glanced up, was that a flash of eagerness? Of relief? It was replaced by a more neutral expression as she rose in welcome and gestured to the chair placed beside hers at the rail.

"Did you despair of me?" Jeanne asked, leaning closer as she kissed her fingertips and touched them briefly to Barbara's lips.

Barbara looked down with a hint of a blush. "I was afraid you'd miss the overture. *Beginnings must be embraced with joy; no marred dawn met evening well.* They say it's the best part of the work."

"Oh dear, that doesn't sound promising," Jeanne said as she settled herself in. She hardly noticed whether the judgment was true or not. It was difficult to focus on the music for the joy of watching Barbara's reactions. They became comfortable together more quickly this time as the music swept them away into the fairy tale. The story held no surprises, but the performance invited enough comment that the act passed quickly.

The first interval had barely started when there came a knock on the door. Jeanne knew what it should be, but in the face of Barbara's sudden alarm she laid a finger across her lips for silence and slipped to the corner out of sight from the opening door. There was a brief murmur and a clatter of glasses as one of the house staff entered carrying a bottle and tray. Just as arranged. She stepped forward and he acknowledged her. "Will there be anything else, Mesnera de Cherdillac?"

Noting that the champagne was already opened she dismissed him and filled the glasses herself, handing one to Barbara who asked in some bemusement, "And what if I hadn't come?"

Jeanne laughed. "That would never occur to me. I always live in hopeful expectation! No need to dwell on disappointments that may not happen." They seated themselves again and Jeanne admired the line of Barbara's hand on the

glass. The way the lace cuff spilled out across the satin of the old-fashioned coat sleeve. Impulsively, she reached out to play with the lace and straighten its folds. "An elegant look, but it would be lovely to see you in more becoming garments sometime," she said. "Or perhaps you prefer to wear breeches?"

Barbara shrugged apologetically. "They're better suited to my duties."

"And which duties would those be?" Jeanne hadn't meant it to sound arch, only to draw her out.

Barbara looked surprised at the question. "When I serve as armin to the baron, and stand as his duelist."

Well, she'd known that, but there might never be a better time for the next question. "Are you Marziel's lover?"

Barbara had raised the glass to her lips again and answered only with a choking sputter.

"I didn't think so" Jeanne added, pretending there had been no awkwardness, "but I would never dream of trespassing in his garden, so I had to ask."

Barbara put the champagne aside carefully. Her face was bright red but that might only have been the coughing. "Is that what people say?"

Jeanne brushed the question aside with a movement of her fan. "Only the stupid ones."

Barbara muttered a few words softly then pressed her lips together and fell silent. It hadn't been a verse this time. Jeanne changed the topic to the weather, but a stiffness had fallen between them.

With the return of the music, Jeanne turned conversation back to the stage. Slowly she coaxed a smile back by the time the second act had concluded. When Jeanne stood to unbend her limbs, Barbara asked shyly, "Were you planning to walk out along the galleries to visit?"

"You would accompany me?" It was a bolder move than she'd expected.

"No," was the response. "That wouldn't be..." Barbara seemed to be reaching for a word that would encompass all the impossibilities. "That wouldn't be suitable," she concluded at last.

"Then I will stay," Jeanne said. "But there is one thing I would like to do."

"Yes, Mesnera?"

She shook her head. "No, only if you call me Jeanne." She had noticed how carefully Barbara avoided addressing her when possible. The honorific set entirely the wrong tone.

"What would you like...Jeanne?" She stumbled over the name, as if such familiarity went against every instinct.

"I would like to kiss you." Jeanne held out her hand and waited, her heart racing a little, until Barbara took it. Jeanne drew her into the shadows at the rear of the box. She'd been right in her suspicions. These were lips that had never been properly kissed before. Yet there was no hesitation or coy pretense, only a boundless eagerness to learn. And after a while there was poetry. A great deal of

poetry.

There were any number of stories about what went on in the dark of private opera boxes but in truth, unless one were entirely lost to shame, the limits to what might happen were narrow. When the music swelled as the singers returned for the final scenes, they seated themselves again by the rail only slightly more disheveled than before.

FIVE: *Barbara*

It was a familiar enough sight: the folded square of stiff cream-colored paper, sealed with a thin smear of wax in which a faint impression could be traced. Even the presentation was familiar enough: lying in the center of a silver salver, though when the baron was in residence the footman would not have had the embarrassment of finding the silver unpolished on short notice. Some laxness could be forgiven. There was no one currently in the house who might expect to receive correspondence that merited formal treatment. It was the object itself, not the recipient, that called for such ceremony. The direction, looping across the paper in an elegant copperplate hand, indicated that the message was to be delivered to Barbara. And that had never happened before. She took the note with a nod of thanks but no other response. Curiosity and propriety fought in the man's expression, but the habit of silent service won. Barbara wandered down to the bottom of the garden where she could be sure of privacy before breaking the seal. All the household would know soon enough that she had received a letter but she had no intention of making them free of the contents.

The last traces of the flood damage had been cleared away and the gardeners had even set out new plantings meant for summer blooming. Most years they would have gone ahead to the houses in Chalanç and Saveze to make ready there, for the baron never spent the summer in Rotenek if he had the choice. Barbara settled herself on a stone bench at the base of the small dock where there were no witnesses but the passing rivermen. At the height of the summer when the heat became oppressive this would be the most pleasant spot on the property and she had already started claiming it for her own. She smoothed the paper out in her lap.

It was couched in the empty, flowery phrases that were the currency of society: The Vicomtesse de Cherdillac requests the pleasure of your company at dinner on the first of May. It went on in that vein for several lines but the rest of the words were meaningless except for a more informal scrawl at the bottom margin. *A cozy supper with just the two of us. Let me know that you will come and I'll send a carriage to fetch you at the hour of five.*

There was no mistaking what it meant. Did she dare to answer? It wasn't the first time she'd been approached. Always before she'd been grateful that her duty to the baron provided a polite and unassailable reason for refusal. But it was the first time she found herself wanting to accept. And yet... It wasn't the question of

scandal. For herself, no one would care, and the vicomtesse was a confirmed Eccentric and beyond such concerns. And she knew the politics of the city well enough not to fear that de Cherdillac had ambitions to touch the baron through her. To touch... A breeze stirred the loose hair on the back of her neck and it felt like warm breath and eager lips.

She was still at war with herself hours later when the crunch of footsteps on the gravel warned of another's approach. LeFevre, of course. Someone in the house would have told him, hoping that he'd demand answers that would satisfy their curiosity. They'd be disappointed. LeFevre never gossiped. She didn't wait for him to inquire delicately but handed him the invitation.

He studied it and looked up in surprise. "When did this—"

Not the letter, she knew, but the meeting that precipitated it. She wondered in sudden misery whether he'd blame himself. "The opera. She came to the baron's box. Is it permitted that I accept?"

He read it through a second time and said slowly, "You understand that this is not simply an invitation to dinner."

"I understand," Barbara said quietly.

"And you understand," he said more harshly, "that this is merely an amusement for her. One of many."

She only nodded. "Barbara, this isn't wise."

"I know it isn't wise, but is it permitted?"

He sighed and ran a hand over his chin then turned away to stare out over the river. Would it be that look again? Half pity, half secrets? She almost wished she hadn't shown it to him, but that would mean she'd decided to say no. When he turned back, his expression was troubled.

"Barbara, you aren't a child any more. The time will come..." He hesitated and began again. "You can't always wait for permission or instructions. Do you remember that time on the road by Rokefels?"

She nodded. The sudden hoofbeats out of nowhere. A pistol shot and the chief of the baron's outriders fallen. Chaos and shouted orders, only later realizing it was her own voice shouting and her orders. A clash of steel while the coachman had time to retrieve his musket. A louder shot and the remaining bandits fleeing. It could have gone badly, but it hadn't. She remembered it well.

"There will be times—more and more—when you'll need to make your own decisions and bear with the consequences, for good or ill. I cannot give you permission for this." He held up the invitation between them then placed it in her hand. "But neither is it my place to forbid it." He hesitated as if considering and discarding several thoughts. "I wouldn't advise you to keep this from the baron when he returns."

"How could I? He's the only one who has any secrets in this house." She folded the paper and slipped it into the pocket of her breeches.

LeFevre started back up the path to the house but turned after a few steps. "I hope your heart won't be too badly bruised."

Barbara shrugged. "I get bruised a lot. It's how I learn."

The gown still fit, barely. Barbara had worried that she'd grown taller again and that she'd have no choice but to wear some of the finer of her working clothes. *Something more becoming*. It was almost a command. There was only one other gown in her wardrobe that it wouldn't be an embarrassment to wear and that one was a plain dove-gray walking dress. Not at all suitable for evening. When had she last worn it? It didn't matter. The one she had put on was of leaf-green silk with a border of embroidered vines. The latest of those the baron had provided her for those occasional dinners at home when he asked her to join him at table rather than standing behind. He never seemed to notice that it was always the same gown but he would have noticed if it had been less than the best.

It had been tricky, to close up the laces and buttons without help. She hadn't told anyone yet about the dinner. One of the housemaids would have helped, if she'd asked, but she would have expected to be paid in the coin of gossip. How would it be to have a friend or a sister to fuss over you and do all those little tasks and arrangements that were so awkward by yourself? Barbara finished pinning up her braids in her usual style. There should be an ornament fixed among them for an evening outing. She debated trying to fashion something from flowers but it was too late to gather any without questions. She couldn't bear the thought of questions, in case... Admit it, she told herself. In case it was all a mistake. In case the carriage never arrived. She could change her clothes again and go downstairs and no one would be the wiser.

Through the window left open for that purpose came the distant chiming of the hour. The sound of the bells faded away into silence just long enough for doubt to set in, then she heard the clop and rattle of a horse turning in through the arch to the yard. She looked out to make sure. A small hired fiacre was turning alongside the front steps. She closed the window and took one last glance in the mirror. It would have to do.

Her mind raced down the stairs but her feet took a more sedate pace. She could hear Charsintek in the front hall insisting that there must be some mistake. She recalled a trick of the baron's where his voice became very quiet and calm and you found yourself obeying before you even realized what had been said. She summoned that voice as she approached the doors.

"Mefro Charsintek, I will be going out to dine with a friend." Good. No quaver or hesitation.

She watched two reactions pass over the housekeeper. At the tone, she began to drop a curtsy. Then she checked the reflex in surprise, recalling who stood before her, as the words—and the gown—sank in. "What—"

"I expect to be late," Barbara continued. "In fact, I don't expect I'll return before morning." She could feel Charsintek's stare on her as she went down the steps and let herself be handed into the carriage.

SIX: *Jeanne*

Summer was long past and the season well advanced before Baron Saveze returned to Rotenek. Back on a sweltering day in mid-August his household had decamped abruptly on notice that he was closeted with the prince at Fallorek. The first Jeanne had known of it was when her messenger returned with her letter unopened, reporting that the house was all but empty. No chance for a note or a private word. Rumor then had him at his estate in the south. A month passed; the weather turned. Houses were opened and carriages filled the streets in the fashionable parts of town again. The rituals of the year began passing one by one. Jeanne flitted from concert to salon to ball, performing the role she had created.

And then, at the opening night of the new Rossini, she raised her eyes idly from the stage and saw that Saveze's box was occupied. How like him, to appear with no warning or rumor, as if he'd never left. She thought of waiting—of visiting him in private—but perhaps this was better. How much did he know? The affair had gone farther than she intended. She needed reassurance. Would there be consequences? Had there already been? Better to see him first in public. He was too gracious to commit worse than a snub and at least she would be able to see Barbara. There was no guarantee of that in the informality of his own home. Assuming he still kept her at his side. So many things she'd given no thought to in advance. At the interval she made her way through the crowds around Saveze's box with trepidation more suitable to a girl in her first season.

She was not the only one who had noticed his presence and come buzzing about his door. Despite rumors of shifts and changes, his power at the court remained unrivaled for now. His long absence had left the influence-seekers hungry. It wouldn't do to appear too eager to speak with him. Others would misinterpret. She chatted on the fringes, working her way slowly through the press, past the door, and then into Saveze's attention.

Barbara stood there at his back, as always, with the impartial vigilance of her profession. So. That was one relief. Barbara seemed a different person entirely than two months before. Jeanne wanted to touch her, to see her respond, to be recognized as present in her world. Was that a tension in the corner of her mouth? Unhappiness around the eyes? She'd never meant either of them to be unhappy. But no, Barbara's face gave nothing away.

Saveze raised his hand to her. She took it and leaned in for a brief formal kiss on the cheek. The first gate was past. He would acknowledge her. "So you've

returned to us at last!” she said lightly. “But you look tired. Are you well?” No, that was the wrong thing to say. His appearance had shocked her out of her usual eloquence. He had aged ten years during the one he’d been gone.

The baron frowned and waved the question aside. “What’s this rumor I hear that you spent the entire summer in Rotenek? You must have found it tedious beyond belief.”

Jeanne laughed, knowing it to sound forced. “I found enough to entertain myself.”

“So I hear,” he replied sourly.

He knew. Of course he knew. Barbara would have told him. Both honor and duty would have demanded it, no matter what the consequences. She kept her eyes on Saveze with difficulty, even knowing how little Barbara’s face would tell her. For once, she found herself at a loss for conversation.

Saveze released her hand. “I must invite you to dinner some time.” It was a conventional courtesy, meaning nothing except dismissal. Jeanne curtsied briefly in response and began to turn away.

“Barbara,” he said abruptly.

She froze.

He turned his head a fraction toward the figure standing behind him.

“Barbara, perhaps you might escort our guest safely back to her seat.” That went beyond any convention of politeness. What did he mean by it?

There was no privacy along the crowded corridors. Barbara kept carefully one step behind her, saying nothing. When they reached the goal, Jeanne turned, searching desperately for the words. “Is all well with you?”

“Yes, Mesnera.”

Her heart sank. So that was how it would be now.

But Barbara glanced around and leaned closer. “Truly, Jeanne. Don’t worry for me.”

Jeanne smiled wanly and pressed her fingertips to her mouth to transfer a kiss but the gesture was left incomplete. The professional mask had fallen back into place.

“Mesnera, the music for the next movement has begun.”

Jeanne turned away and slipped through the door. Yes, the performance moved on. But one song would linger in cherished memory.

* * *

Further Reading

“Three Nights at the Opera” is a short story/character sketch that precedes the action in *Daughter of Mystery* (Bella Books, 2014). If you have not yet enjoyed *Daughter of Mystery*, you can find it at the publisher’s website (<http://www.bellabooks.com>) or other booksellers. Jeanne de Cherdillac will be a major character in *The Mystic Marriage*, which will be released in 2015.