Chapter 41

When the Lips Are Gone, the Teeth Are Cold
Signor Cinelli Honors the Privileges of Royalty

The week after the visit to Xining Margaret fell ill. At first it was just fatigue and dizziness. She went to the station clinic for some Chinese medicine. The medicine helped for a while, then the fatigue came back, and she began to have cramps in her belly. One morning she woke in a fever. There was no hospital at the station, nor at Nakri itself, so she was put on a pallet and carried in a truck back to Xining.

By the time they got to Xining Margaret had actually rallied a little. The doctor diagnosed colitis and prescribed a Western medicine which did no good at all, and Margaret fell into fever again. She lay in the hospital for four days, staring at the patterns of damp on the bare concrete ceiling. It was the height of Qinghai's summer, and the hospital was full of flies. The flies crawled on her face, on her bare arms, and she exhausted herself brushing at them hour after hour.

Then it was discovered that the IV they had put in her arm had not been properly sterilized. Her arm came up red and furious to twice its size. The pain was very intense. Margaret fell into fits of uncontrollable screaming until the angry doctor, shouting back at her screams, filled her with painkillers. "Shut up and keep still. Do you think you're the only patient in this fucking hospital?"

By the time she was fit to return to Nakri the middle school had begun summer vacation, and Margaret decided to go directly home to

Beijing instead, there being nothing among her belongings at the station she could not manage without for the summer. Her arm in a sling, she rode the trains back across China. Mother was shocked at her appearance.

"So thin! Whatever happened to you?"

Margaret told her.

"That damn place! It's bad food and bad air, that's what it is. I'm going to speak to your father. You can't possibly go on living out there!"

Margaret was irritated by her mother's fussing. "Plenty of people live there," she said, mildly astonished to hear herself rising to the defense of Nakri. "You know what Father will say, and he'll be right: Our life here in the capital is a life of privilege, we have no divine entitlement to it."

This was not what Father said, however. He had been away at a conference in the seaside town of Dalian. When he came home, Mother had persuaded Margaret to take to her bed, and was building her up with hot porridge and chicken broth with herbal medicine cooked in. Father shook his head to see her. He sat on the bed and put a hand on her brow.

"You in this generation are not as strong as we were," he said. "No early training in hardship, that's what it is."

"Never mind that," said Mother from the doorway. "You have a good position, you can get her out of there. Get her a transfer and a new Beijing residence permit. There must be some sort of assignment she can be given in the capital. Put her on your own staff, if necessary."

"Easier said than done. This affair is still on people's minds. It was only a year ago. Give it a few more months."

"A few more months! The poor child's choking up there in that thin air. All the Chinese people who go there get sick, I've heard it spoken of many times. You told me yourself, when you were in the far west, one in four of the soldiers had to be sent back because of altitude sickness."

Father got up and stepped away, embarrassed. "All right, all right. I'll see what I can do."

Whether Father spoke to anyone about her case will never be known. Just three days after this, in the middle of the night, Margaret was woken by a crashing sound from the living room, a breaking of glass and Mother screaming. She jumped from her bed and went in. The electric light was on. Father was at the window. He had broken the glass of the window with

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his forearms. The sleeves of his pajama jacket were shredded where the broken glass had cut them, and Father's front was covered with blood from cuts on his arms. Father was trying to lean out of the window. Mother was trying to pull him back.

"Help me!" screamed Mother. "Yuezhu, help get him away from the window!"

As she spoke, Father turned to Margaret. At once she saw what had happened. His face was a terrible gray, his lips blue. He couldn't breathe, and had broken the window in a desperate effort to get near to fresh air.

The face Father turned to Margaret saw her for three or four seconds; then the eyes rolled up and he fell over backwards, knocking down Mother.

"Dingguo! Dingguo!" sobbed Mother, pulling herself out from under her stricken husband, calling him by his personal name.

"It's a heart attack," said Margaret. "That's why he can't breathe. We must get a doctor."

There was a telephone in the apartment—one of the privileges of the military—but Margaret could not raise the operator, only a distant unknown voice saying irritably *hello? hello? hello?* Margaret ran down to the security desk on the first floor. The army man at the desk made several calls on his phone, but the problem seemed to be systemic, and he could not raise anyone either. Burning with frustration and desperation, Margaret ran out into the street. She ran along the street under the trees, through the hot Beijing night in her pajamas and slippers, the city all deserted. At last she saw a policeman riding a motorcycle-sidecar combination. The policeman had a radio. He called his station, then took Margaret home.

By the time they got back to the apartment Father was quite dead, lying on the floor next to the window where he had fallen. There was surprisingly little blood, though great gashes were visible on his arms. Margaret supposed his heart had stopped before much blood could flow. Mother was sitting in one of the armchairs with a blank expression on her face. She was holding a handkerchief, and presumably had been weeping; but now she was not weeping, just sitting quiet and still, watching over the body of her mate.

Margaret knelt by Father, a terrible emptiness beginning to open

inside her. Father's face was unnaturally white, but his lips were no longer blue, only waxy pale and yellowish. Bending over and placing her cheek next to his, she was astonished to find him already cold. "Father, Father, dear dear Father," she whispered; and through the haze of grief the magnitude of her personal tragedy began to dawn on her.

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"It means I have no way out of that place," she said to Half Brother. "Father was going to get me a Beijing residence permit and some kind of job. Now I have no way out."

She could not keep the beseeching note from her voice. What Father could no longer do, Margaret naturally hoped Half Brother might accomplish in his place. Immediately after Father's death, when they were waiting for Half Brother to come home for the funeral, she had hardly dared to entertain this hope. She had not seen Half Brother since his wedding two years before. In particular, she had not seen him since the business with Mr Powell. She knew Half Brother had been investigated as a result of that matter, and thought she had gathered from something Father said that Half Brother's career had suffered. It was therefore with some apprehension that she had gone to meet him at the railroad station.

Half Brother had come with his wife, leaving their infant son in the care of the wife's mother. Margaret had met the wife only once, at the wedding, where she had found her pleasant and well-mannered, though somewhat reserved. At the station, when Half Brother had helped her down the steps from the train, she came forward at once and embraced Margaret, calling her "poor sister". At once Margaret knew things were all right. She would not have been so forward if Half Brother had been bearing a grudge. In fact (Half Brother told her that evening, the evening before Father's funeral) the investigation of him had been perfunctory and seemed to have had no negative consequences.

"I got the impression they were just going through the motions," said Half Brother. "It was a strange business altogether. I doubt there was any actual espionage involved. In a music conservatory? Really!"

Margaret was of course pleased by his skepticism.

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"But if there was no espionage, what was all that about secret papers in Mr Powell's room?"

"Well, certainly such things as spies exist. The strategist Sunzi spoke of them at length, and gave instructions for employing them. But now, suppose your enemy has captured one of your spies and wants to exchange for one of his. And suppose you haven't got one of his, or have one but don't want to admit it, or" —he laughed— "suppose you have one, but you have temporarily misplaced his head and internal organs. What can you offer the enemy in exchange?" He laughed again.

"Do such things really happen?"

"Certainly they do. Don't worry, little sister. I doubt anyone at the important levels really feels you are guilty of anything."

The funeral had gone off very well. More than a hundred people had come to the funeral parlor for the ceremony. Father's chief, Marshal Ho Pinghui, had given the eulogy. He had had to give it from his wheelchair, being more than eighty years old and crippled with arthritis, but he was still a power in the land, one of Comrade Deng Xiaoping's most trusted officials on the military side, and the family regarded it as a great honor. In fact, Marshal Ho had read a brief message from Comrade Deng Xiaoping himself as part of the eulogy, praising Father's courage and dedication, and his contributions to the revolution. Hearing this—Comrade Deng Xiaoping himself praising her father's memory!—Margaret's spirits rose. Surely the daughter of this hero would not be allowed to waste out her life in the far west! Surely some way would be found! Perhaps she should write to Comrade Deng himself. But first she tackled Half Brother, when they were sitting round in Father's apartment late that evening.

"There's always a way out," said Half Brother. "Let me see what I can do."

Marriage had sobered and solidified Half Brother. He looked smarter than ever, in a well-cut and crisply-pressed uniform, with polished brown leather belt and shoes. His hair, though still a proper military crew-cut, now had enough length to show a simulated parting. He had taken up cigarette smoking, using a lighter, though with no evidence of excess. Altogether he looked very capable, very professional. Seeing him like that, and in the afterglow of hearing Comrade Deng Xiaoping's words of

praise for her father, Margaret thought Half Brother was surely right: impossible that there not be a way out!

Half Brother's wife came out of the main bedroom. "I think your mother will sleep now," she said. "Best not disturb her."

"Poor Mother," said Margaret. "Without Father, I wonder if she will be allowed to stay here in this apartment."

"Oh, I don't see why not," said Half Brother, and made another little laugh. "I guess that's another thing I'll have to make representations about."

Margaret felt embarrassed at the trouble she was putting him to. She put her arms round his neck and kissed his cheek—noting from the corner of her eye as she did so that Sister-in-Law did not look altogether pleased about it.

"Dear Half Brother," she whispered. "I know you'll help me again, as you helped me in the past."

"Why not?" Half Brother looked at his wife as he spoke. "Blood is thicker than water."

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However things may stand as regards the relative viscosities of blood and water, Half Brother hit a dead end with the Beijing authorities. He was bewildered and frowning when he reported back to Margaret, the day before he and his wife were to go back to his unit in the northeast.

"Strange," he said, "it is so strange. It's a Foreign Ministry matter, they kept telling me, and the Foreign Ministry seems to take the whole thing very seriously. Perhaps there was some deception of the kind I spoke to you about, and the Ministry fears it becoming known. I don't know. Not only were they not willing to reconsider what they call your 'administrative punishment', they told me that if you stay in Beijing unlawfully you will be arrested and returned to your unit by force. As if there were personal animosity towards you!"

"Can't we speak to Father's old chief, Marshal Ho?"

"I think that's what we must do. I will try to get an appointment. I wish I had had the presence of mind to tackle him at the funeral, but I

thought things could be done through the city authorities. The military has no direct jurisdiction in these matters, you know. It may take some time to get a result. You had better go back to your unit and wait. Don't worry, I'm sure we can do something. It may take a few months, that's all."

A few months! Margaret thought of the dismal station, most especially of the station without Norbu, and wept herself to sleep, in the apartment without Father. Love, life, happiness, could be broken more easily than a blade of grass, it seemed.

As the time for departure approached, Margaret resolved that she would at least equip herself to maintain her voice training. Supposing, at the worst, she had to spend a whole year before coming back to the capital. Well, it should be a year well spent, cultivating her gift. She bought the cassette player she should have bought at Spring Festival, and such opera tapes as she could find in the Beijing stores. One of the tape sets was a complete *Traviata* featuring Mr Cinelli singing Alfredo, with the Australian soprano Barbara Bacon as Violetta.

As well as tapes to listen to, Margaret knew she should have some aids to voice training and sight reading. For this purpose she went to the music store in Haidian District, near the Conservatory, to get some vocal scores and tuning forks. She was browsing the very limited selection of scores for opera when Professor Shi came in.

Professor Shi recognized her at once, and called out to her.

"Han Yuezhu! You've come back to the capital! Wonderful, wonderful!" He grabbed her hand with his two and pumped it, bowing up and down from the waist like a Japanese and chuckling with pleasure.

"It's only a visit," said Margaret, and explained her position.

Professor Shi clicked his tongue and shook his head. "That foolish business! What nonsense! Mr Powell, a spy indeed! Nonsense!"

"You don't believe Mr Powell was a spy?"

Professor Shi laughed his eccentric high-pitched laugh: "He he he he he! Who believes it? He he he he he!" Then: "I am glad to see you are not neglecting your studies. Who is your voice coach?"

"I haven't got one. There are no voice coaches in Qinghai Province."

Again Professor Shi laughed his ridiculous laugh. "No voice coaches in Qinghai Province! He he he!" Suddenly he stopped, and frowned. "But

this is a tragedy. You have a most exceptional voice, Yuezhu. Even if you cannot sing, you should be vocalizing every day, keeping up your exercises."

"It's difficult. The air is very thin, it's difficult to get the voice to do anything. Every vocal effect needs twice the effort. I have no pianist, never mind a voice coach. I don't even know where the nearest piano is. A hundred miles away at least, I would guess."

"Dreadful, dreadful." Professor Shi was shaking his head, frowning.

"That's why I came here. To get some vocal scores, so that I can sing from sight reading."

"Ts! What use is that? You will only teach yourself bad habits, with no-one to correct you. Now listen, young lady. What is your address at that ridiculous place? Here"—from his shirt pocket Professor Shi produced a little diary with a pencil in the spine—"write it down for me. My address at the Conservatory you know very well. Do you have a tape player? Does it have a microphone? Get one, get a microphone, the best one you can afford. I will send you some piano accompaniment suitable for your voice. You will record your exercises and send them to me. Understand?"

"You are very kind, Professor Shi, but I can't think of giving you so much trouble. Besides, I shall be spending all my money on tapes and postage, and batteries for my cassette player."

"Is it a problem? I will send you tapes and batteries. I will send whatever you need."

"Can I really make progress like that?"

Professor Shi laughed. "I doubt it. But 'if you don't row the boat it goes backward'. At least we can try to prevent you going backward."

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Old Bolmo told her about Norbu a few days after her return.

"Five years reform," he said. "They post it in Laptok." [Meaning a public notice of recent criminal cases had been stuck up on the wall outside the police station in that town.] "He mother, I know her, she very upset. Missy you want see he mother?"

Norbu's mother lived in Nakri, in a single lightless room in one of the old Tibetan houses in the town center. She was a small dark-skinned woman with oiled hair, wearing a heavy black dress with numerous strings of white beads at the throat. There was something anxious and fearful in her eyes, and Margaret got an impression of great wariness. She offered milky tea to Margaret, and bid her sit in the room's only chair while she herself sat on the bed. Old Bolmo sat between them interpreting—Norbu's mother had not a single word of Chinese.

"Can I write him a letter?" asked Margaret of the old woman.

"They won't allow," interpreted Old Bolmo. "Only the mother, they will allow."

"All right. If I give her a letter to put in with hers, is that allowed?"

"No. They will open and find it. Anyway, she has no letter. Can't write the characters. This lady can't read, can't write."

"Will she go to visit him?"

"Yes. Is allowed. Three times every year, can go. She been once. Next time, twelfth month."

"When she goes, I want her to tell him I am still waiting for him."

"Do you think she will tell him?" Margaret asked Old Bolmo, riding back to the station in his truck.

Old Bolmo sighed. "Hard to say, Missy. Many the Tibet people, they don't like Chinese people. Excuse me say that, I believe you can understand. Maybe she will say some bad thing about you. I try to explain to her, I don't know if she will do it. Missy only like that one guy? You want Tibet-guy husband, I find for you, no problem."

"Thanks, Old Bolmo. But I only like that one."

After so many weeks in Beijing, the station looked even smaller, dirtier and lonelier than before. Margaret had never loved the place; but she thought that if nothing had happened she might, in a spirit of sheer fatalism, have gone on living indefinitely there as she had that first fall and winter. But having once been given a reason to be at the station, only to see that reason snatched away almost immediately, the squalor and boredom of the place were now almost more than she could bear.

A few months, a few months. Determined to err on the side of pessimism, Margaret decided it would be a year, and set herself to endure it as

best she could. She asked for—and, with Branch Secretary Zhang's intercession, got—permission to use the auditorium in the administration building for voice practice, and steeled herself to ignore the random workers and peasants who wandered in to stare as she worked through her scales and embellishments. Following Professor Shi's suggestion she concentrated on vocalizing rather than actual songs; but still made a point of learning new pieces, sight-reading from the scores and making up whatever interpretation and coloring the words seemed to require. Until November, when the air became too cold, she climbed up to the old monastery on the ridge to sing free of onlookers, unleashing her voice in a way she could never quite do in the low, poky auditorium, the dirty gawping faces of the station's inhabitants inescapable all around.

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In December Old Bolmo reported back from Norbu's mother.

"She go to Golog, that place, visit your friend. Your friend say he okay, you not think about him, you forget him."

"*Forget* him? That's what he said?"

"She tell me, he say, you forget him."

A darkness opening up again, a void; as when she had knelt by Father's still body.

"Do you think those are really his words, Old Bolmo? Or she just made that up?"

Old Bolmo shrugged his big shoulders and laughed nervously, deeper than he cared to be into someone else's business.

"Seems to me, it's true. She not a bad woman. Very religious, I can see. I don't think she will cheat you."

Margaret tried her best to bury Norbu, but could not. In her many hours of idleness, she nursed absurd fantasies. She would find the camp where he was incarcerated, free him somehow, flee with him to Sichuan, to Beijing, to the West. A part of her hated these ridiculous dreams, yet it seemed that some other part had a need for them. She even found herself making inquiries about the roads into Golog district, not quite understanding that Golog—a place so remote that even Tibetans consider it re-

mote—is the size of an American state, and contains more than eighty labor camps, along with practically nothing else at all but the weathered bones of those who once called it their home.

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All of China is a single time zone; the clocks in the far west run on Beijing time. In the depth of winter in Qinghai Province daylight arrives only in mid-morning, not long before noon. Margaret rose, washed, took breakfast and taught her first classes in darkness. It was on such a morning in January, by the light of an oil lamp—the station's generator was having one of its tantrums—that she read a letter from Half Brother. Father's old chief, Marshal Ho Pinghui, had suffered a stroke before having had a chance to consider her case, and was now incapable of considering anything at all. It was most probable that his posts would be filled by General Li Yi, who had hardly known Father. Things would be much more difficult now. She must be patient. Picking out the characters by flickering lamplight, Margaret could feel the chill and darkness around her seeping into her soul. *When the lips are gone the teeth are cold.*

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More depressing, in its own way, than either of these blows was the go-between.

Margaret had been aware since returning from Beijing in September that a certain Chinese boy from the factory's administrative offices was mooning after her. He had put himself in her way, offering mumbled greetings to her; he had hung around the dormitory; he had stared at her across the refectory. Just before Spring Festival the approach came. The go-between was a woman called Ba'er, who worked in the school administration, and with whom Margaret had had some brief dealings. She was a short, dark, ugly creature with a cast in one eye and grotesquely protruding teeth. She came from one of the southwestern minorities—the Zhuang perhaps—and from an area so poor that she regarded Nakri Agricultural Research Station as a very Sybaris of high living. One day as

Margaret came out of class she encountered Ba'er in the corridor. The woman launched into her sales pitch with no preliminaries at all. Margaret listened politely.

". . .'is dad's just retired from de army. An orficer, he was! Firty years in de army! Now 'e's bin given a position in de Bureau of Prisons in Xining! A *wery* good position! And de young gen'leman'll be able ter transfer ter Xining 'imself soon, no doubt abaht it! Ter Xining!"

Margaret could not help but smile at the woman's uncouth speech and manner, and at her implication that sordid Xining was a metropolis of glittering opportunity. She stepped away as soon as she decently could, shaking her head; but the woman followed her down the corridor, her voice rising in urgency.

". . .ninety yuan a month! Ninety! An' 'is own apartment in Xining, once 'e's transferred! No need ter fear livin' wid de fam'ly . . ."

Margaret actually ran back to the dormitory. Yong was in there reading *Red Chamber Dream* for the hundred thousandth time. Margaret could not have cared if Secretary Ma himself had been present. She threw herself on her bunk and wept long and loud.

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Just at the time when Margaret was weeping for her fate, that very fate was being taken in hand by four people seated around an expiring coal fire in the large, cluttered sitting-room of an apartment in the St James district of London. One of these four was Vincenzo Cinelli, the World's Greatest Tenor. Another, seated on the opposite side of the fireplace, was the Heir to the Throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This was his apartment—or to be precise, it belonged to the Duchy of Lancaster, which he held by ancient right. The other two persons present were Cinelli's manager, Giovanni Rocco—the long-jawed lugubrious fellow who had been with him in Beijing—and Sir John Craddell, Bart., the Heir to the Throne's private secretary. Sir John was of that school of royal servant by background and training so discreet as to be well-nigh invisible. If, in defiance of nature, one happened to notice him, he was found to be about fifty, short and dapper, with a head that seemed too

small for his body, and generally armed with a pocket-size, leather-bound notebook.

Cinelli never felt at ease with the Heir to the Throne. That person had not the art of setting people at ease, in spite of having had a lifetime's training. A matter of chemistry, Cinelli reflected, swirling his glass of Pimms. He did not care for Pimms, but thought it not right to ask the Heir to the Throne to open a bottle of decent wine on his account—if, indeed, any decent wine were to be found in this place.

Furthermore Cinelli was feeling somewhat less than pleased with life in general this evening. He had come directly from singing Calaf at Covent Garden. He felt quite satisfied with his own performance, but his Turandot—a Bulgarian dramatic soprano more accustomed to the German repertoire—had succumbed to the role's strong temptation to go way over the top, and the orchestra, normally one of the more reliable, had chosen this evening to play the entire score with boxing gloves on. The Heir to the Throne had come round to Cinelli's dressing room before he had had the chance to shower or wash properly, and he was aware of having patches of makeup still on his neck and hairline. Altogether a state of affairs not conducive to good humor. Still, Cinelli was a man by nature inclined to give rank its due, and he listened with an appreciative expression to the Heir's commentary on the evening's performance.

". . .should always be conducted in the Toscanini style, with a pause at the point where the composer died. 'Here the maestro lay down his pen . . .'" I should like to see that. Very moving, don't you think so, Vinnie? Is it ever performed like that in the Italian houses?"

"Not to my knowledge, Sir."

"Not, hm? Pity. We have all too few of these little traditions. We really ought to try to preserve them. Whatever happened to claques, for example?"

Cinelli laughed. "Oh, *they* are very well alive in Italy!"

"Are they indeed? Are they?" The Heir to the Throne was keenly interested. However, he had been feigning keen interest for so long in things that did not interest him at all—every ship launching, every receipt of an Ambassador, every opening of a hospital, every visit to a factory, a school, an officers' mess—that his interest had an edge of arti-

ficiality even when genuine. Such a life! reflected Cinelli: always playing out one's part, always agreeable, always feigning interest, concern, patriotism. He would not do it himself, no not for the world. He would rather sell insurance—the job he had been doing when his singing career finally took off.

"Have you yourself been the victim of a claque, Vinnie? I mean, actually hissed off stage by some rival singer's partisans?"

"Oh, no, Sir. Our claques nowadays are benign only. They lead and support the happlause, that is all. I do not think we 'ave the 'ostile claques nowadays. Giovan, is it so?"

"Occasionally, perhaps," said Rocco. "In the smaller houses. In the big houses, the loggionisti need no encouragement to make their feelings known."

Rocco's English was immaculate, much better than Cinelli's—though Rocco suspected Cinelli of playing up the Italian accent because he knew the foreigners liked it. No trained singer could be so indifferent to phonetics as to move the English initial "h" from words it belonged on to words it did not, unless striving for deliberate effect. There had been an incident in the late seventies: a pretty female American interviewer had suggested that it might be true, as someone had said much earlier in Cinelli's career, that God had kissed his vocal chords. *Then 'e must 'ave kissed you HALL HOVER*, had been Cinelli's reply, quickly passed around the world by delighted fans, adding another coat of charm to the Cinelli legend.

"Fascinating, fascinating." The Heir to the Throne gazed thoughtfully into the fire, sipping his Pimms. Cinelli wondered if he should pursue the topic with an anecdote about claques, of which he knew several; but he sensed that the Heir was pregnant with something of importance, and waited it out.

The Heir to the Throne came up in his chair, sitting forward on the edge of the chair to address Cinelli.

"The thing is, Vinnie, I've had an idea. I'd like you to tell me what you think."

Cinelli nodded encouragingly.

The Heir to the Throne made a self-deprecating little chuckle. "I

don't know if you'll think it practical. But if you do, I should very much like to bring you in on it."

"I should be most interested to hear Your 'Ighness's hidea," said Cinelli.

"Well, it's like this. Do tell me what you think. I want to form an opera company. Actually, I'm not sure I mean a company. Perhaps I mean a troupe. Anyway, it's to be just singers, d'you see? No musicians or. . . what else d'you have in an opera company?. . . designers, that kind of thing. Well, none of that, we'll just have singers. Perhaps two dozen singers. *Young* singers. And the thing is—I mean, this is my idea—do tell me what you think—the thing is, they are to come from all over the world. Or at any rate, from every place where they train people for opera. There must be so much talent out there, in countries where opera is hardly known. We could take the best from Asia, from Africa, from Europe and the Americas, and put them together in one company. One world—we'll call it the Royal Youth International Company! What d'you think, Vinnie? Hm?"

Cinelli nodded thoughtfully. "Is a hinteresting idea, Your 'Ighness. But 'ow shall you finance it?"

The Heir to the Throne waved away all financing problems. "Oh, one of the Duchies gets the ball rolling, starts a trust you know. Like that National Architecture thingy I got up. The government coughs up some funds—Arts Council and so on. One leans gently on one's friends in industry. After all, if the thing's a success, it will eventually, one hopes, generate its own revenues."

Cinelli took a sip of his Pimms. He thought it tasted very much like the cough medicine his mother had used to give him as a child in Modena. He considered the Heir to the Throne's suggestion. An opera company that generated revenue! Where did such a thing exist? Like all people born into great wealth, the Heir to the Throne had no clue about financial matters. Nor, Cinelli thought uncharitably, about much in the way of worldly affairs of any sort. Cinelli was in a mood to have agreed with the opinion of Asan—whom of course he had never met—uttered two years before in Shanghai: if you haven't grown up poor, life is nothing but a dream. Cinelli himself had been poor, or at any rate far from rich, until his thirties. His father had been a baker in a provincial town.

No sooner had these unkind reflections crossed his mind than Cinelli's

natural good nature re-asserted itself. The Heir to the Throne was a decent man, sincerely well-intentioned in his own way, of course. It was great good fortune for Cinelli's profession that a personage of such standing and influence should love opera, most especially Italian opera, and most particularly and especially the bel canto style, which was Cinelli's own fach and lifetime love. And the suggestion was not a bad one. Established singers, most of them in middle age, some even past their best, occupied far too much of the collective consciousness of opera-goers. It was very hard for worthy young singers to get noticed—who knew that better than himself? As a result, they sang themselves out in an effort to get attention; or, if they did get it, sang themselves out trying to exploit it before the caravan moved on, and then their voices were ruined before they reached the years of true mastery. Matters were doubly difficult for anyone born far from the centers of operatic appreciation. Cinelli himself took every opportunity to travel to remote places to encourage the enjoyment and understanding of his art. There was not one of these places where he had not heard young singers of great promise. That young baritone in Nairobi—so expressive! That rarest of all birds, a natural coloratura contralto, in Kuala Lumpur of all places! And that lovely angel who had sung "Vissi d'arte" for him in Beijing, with *messa di voce* to make a cardinal forsake his vows! Immature voices, of course, with much affectation and artificiality to be stripped away—but great promise, great promise.

"If, as you say, the funds can be found"—Cinelli shrugged—"of course we should do what we can. Young singers need all the 'elp we can give them."

The Heir to the Throne broke out his practiced, charmless smile. He came up out of his chair—the others instinctively rising as he did—stepped forward and shook Cinelli's hand, holding it in both of his own. "Marvelous! I knew I could depend on you, Vinnie. You will lend your name to this, won't you? The Royal Youth International Opera Company! Your support will make all the difference!"

Rocco cleared his throat. "Ah, Your Royal Highness. This, ah, Royal Youth International Company is certainly a most excellent notion. But,

you know, I am duty bound to be concerned that Signor Cinelli may be over-extending himself. He has so many responsibilities already."

"Oh, yes, yes! Forgive me!" The Heir to the Throne was now holding an invisible brick between his hands. "I'm so frightfully sorry, Vinnie. Of course I wouldn't dream of imposing on you. Your schedule. . . I know, it's fiendish. Very little of your time will be required, very very little." (To illustrate how little, he squeezed the brick, bringing his palms together till they were no more than half an inch apart, hunching his shoulders to emphasize the smallness of the gap.) "It is only your name, he added—your name, and perhaps. . ." he shrugged suggestively. . . "an appearance? Or two?"

Rocco started up again. "Your Royal Highness . . ."

"Is all right," said Cinelli emphatically. The more he thought of the idea the more he liked it. His time was by no means as fully booked as Rocco liked to make out, and, while he did not want to get too deeply entangled in this new scheme, knowing the great carelessness of the rich, their habit of starting things then forgetting all about them, he thought that with very little effort he could get this new company moving in the right direction, from whence it could proceed under its own power.

"'Ighness, allow me to make the suggestion," Cinelli continued. "In my travels these last few years I 'ave 'eard some quite *hexceptional* young voices. Some of those voices must still be singing, still be available. I can heasily find out. Those few, those few that 'ave made such an impression on me, let us use them as, 'ow do you say? the *quadro* of our Royal Youth International Company. For the rest, we can invite winners of singing competitions and so on. Such competitions are 'eld everywhere, all the time. We can put together a company very quickly."

The Heir to the Throne was nodding, keenly intent on what Cinelli was saying. "Marvelous," he murmured, "marvelous." Then, to the secretary: "Are you getting this, Sir John? We must set up a trust right away."

Rocco looked from one of them to the other. "Do I understand we are to begin our, eh, *reclutamento?* Our enlisting?"

"By all means." The Heir to the Throne nodded vigorously. "Any expenses. . . just notify Sir John here. The trust, as soon as it exists, will reimburse."

In the car going back to the hotel, Rocco said: "Signor Tenore, you are a weakling."

"Why? You think I have allowed His Royal Highness to impose upon me?"

"Have you not? Who would say you have not? It is a commitment of your time and probably—if what I have heard about the financing of royal enterprises is correct—of your money. Generate its own revenues, indeed! Do you know any opera company in the world that generates its own revenues, without public or private subscription?"

Cinelli laughed, and patted his secretary on the knee. "Giovan, Giovan. You are too much the businessman. Has my profession not been kind to me? Is it not incumbent on me to put back in some of what I have taken out?"

"You do sufficient of such good works already, Signor. You help finance four competitions, you give charity performances, you do all that can be expected in the way of encouraging young singers. Yes, I am the businessman. And you are who, exactly? St Francis of Assisi?"

Cinelli laughed again, looking out at the dark Thames, the lights along the Embankment. "Never mind, Giovan, never mind. Royalty has its privileges."