

## Chapter 49

A Great Man Regrets His Flippancy  
Moon Pearl's *Guiren* Brings Her a Triumph

It was in September, just before Labor Day. Margaret was in the kitchen when Colman called. The house where she and Johnny were living had only one telephone, on the landing upstairs next to the room where they lived. Johnny called her up to the phone.

"I have a terrific cover role for you," said Colman at once, when she had identified herself.

"Cover? Terrific? Where is it, Colman?" In spite of the fluke at Philadelphia, Margaret regarded cover roles with little enthusiasm. What could be terrific about a cover role? The odds were against you getting a chance to sing.

"It's at the Met."

"Really? The *Met*? Oh! Comprimario?"

"No, principal."

"*Principal*? Oh, Heaven! What role?"

"Romeo."

"Romeo? *Romeo*? I don't know. . . What part is that? What opera?"

"*I Capuleti e i Montecchi*. Bellini. It's the Romeo and Juliet story, you know? From Shakespeare. Don't be telling me you've no Shakespeare in China, now?"

"Of course we have. I know the story. Didn't know there was an opera. But Romeo was the boy, wasn't he?"

“It’s a pants role. Mezzo still, I’m afraid. Juliet’s the soprano. It’s a rare piece for the Met. You know how conservative they are. *Bohème*, *Fledermaus*, *Cav’n’Pag*. But Leo, this new musical director, he wants to do one rare piece each season, d’you see? and this season it’s *Capuleti*. Early Bellini is the management’s notion of ‘rare’, bless their souls. And their cover for Romeo’s gone missing, don’t ask me what happened. And Leo says he can’t find Bellini voices for love nor money, at all. Then I thought of you in *Straniera* at Wexford and told him about it, and he said to send you in.”

“For an audition?”

“Certainly for an audition. Now d’you think they’d be putting a singer on in front of four thousand people at fifty dollars a seat, sight unseen? Wednesday morning at ten, go in the stage entrance downstairs and ask at the security desk, they’ll tell you where to go. They generally audition in one of the rehearsal rooms, but it may be the actual auditorium, so be ready to go full throttle. If it’s the auditorium, Leo’s going to want to hear your voice fill that space, so don’t hold anything back. Give them your Isoletta and some Rossini, nothing that’s not bel canto unless they ask. If they ask, give them Mozart or early Verdi. They’ll only want to hear Italian, I’m sure.”

“Who am I covering for?”

“Dorothy.”

“Blaine?”

“To be sure. How many first-rank mezzos do we have called Dorothy?”

Dorothy Blaine was a large strong black singer from Chicago, possessed of a large strong black voice. Margaret had never actually met her, but thought, from trade gossip and from pictures she had seen, that the woman probably had the constitution of an ox.

“Does she cancel much?”

“Never been known to.”

“So there’s practically no chance that I’ll go on?”

“Practically none.” Colman gave her his merriest leprechaun laugh. “But it’s a marvelous opportunity for you anyway. You’ll audition with Leo Fischel himself, he’d not be trusting anyone else with it, I know. If you can catch his ear—sure there’s no telling what may come of it.”

Margaret thanked him and hung up. Johnny Liu had been frankly eavesdropping, standing in the door of their room with a big grin on his face.

“The Met? Principal role? Wa, Little Sister! Your big break!”

“Only if that big healthy black woman falls downstairs. And it’s a piece I don’t know at all.”

Johnny Liu laughed, clearly delighted for her. “I wonder what’ll be playing at Record Bonanza tomorrow?”

Record Bonanza was the store where Margaret worked, the one Professor Shi had found for her, in which she had PA system privileges to play any music she liked.

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Margaret hiked over to Lincoln Center in her lunch break, but the library had no score for *I Capuleti*. The store next to the ticket office, she noted, had a single recording from the late sixties, with Renata Scotto as Juliet, and the pants role transposed to allow a male tenor to sing it. She did not buy this. Contrary to Johnny Liu’s guess about her choice of PA music, Margaret was a strict adherent of Professor Shi’s dictum that one should not prejudice one’s approach to a new part by listening to other people’s interpretations, at least until you had settled on your own. At Patelson’s, on her way back to the store, Margaret got a vocal score and picked up Weinstock’s biography of Bellini in a second-hand copy. She had been using “Ah! se non m’ami più” for auditions, when it seemed appropriate, but had otherwise given no further thought to the composer since Wexford, ten months before. On her way home that evening she stopped in at Barnes and Noble on Fifth to buy a small paperback edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, and arrived home feeling that she had equipped herself for a decently good start.

She called Professor Shi, who was thrilled.

“The audition of your life, Little Han. Mr O’Toole is a wonder. We must do a complete preparation. I am at your disposal.”

Margaret spent all her free time that holiday weekend with Professor Shi. They worked over the vocal score, singing through the whole opera.

Professor Shi's expertise in singing was entirely theoretical, but he had a house guest, an occidental boy of no more than twenty, with delicate looks and a high tenor voice, who made a fine *Giulietta*. Together the three of them managed a complete cast, joining their voices to make the chorus. Margaret found that the music came easily to her—she remembered thinking the same of *La straniera*.

"Why do people say Bellini is difficult?" she asked Professor Shi during a break for dumplings and green tea. Professor Shi made his own dumplings in steamer boxes, using skins he bought in Chinatown and a vegetarian filling of his own concoction.

"Very. . . *individual* composer," said Professor Shi in his fractured English. They were speaking English for the benefit of the boy, who spoke no Chinese. "Hard to put in category. *Bel canto*? Traditionally so said. But stands one foot in romantic style. If live long life, will more, will over, . . . what? *Chaoguo*."

"Surpass."

"Yes. Will surpass Verdi. Die too young. So unfortunate. Like Mozart same. But not so fertile Mozart. Genius not always fertile. Shallow soil sometimes fertile, deep soil often not."

"I think it's the most beautiful music," said the boy, putting a hand flat against his breast to indicate the strength of his feeling. "Those long flowing lines."

"Yes," said Margaret. "That's what everyone says is so difficult. But I don't find them difficult."

Professor Shi chuckled. "Perhaps Bellini is your *guiren*."

The literal meaning of "*guiren*" is "precious one"; but in the superstitions of the Chinese it refers to a person whose fate is benevolently linked to one's own, every encounter with whom brings good fortune.

"Then I shall have a poor career," said Margaret, remembering Vinnie's offer of the same theory across the dinner table talk at Wexford. "He is not much performed."

"Oh, Miss Han, with your voice I can't believe you will ever be short of roles!" The boy smiled at her sweetly, his adoration obviously quite sincere. Looking at the boy, Margaret thought of Baoyu. From his manner he might have been Baoyu's younger brother, if he were Chinese.

“Miss Han will be big star,” said Professor Shi through a mouthful of dumpling. “This one her first time big chance.”

“It’s only a cover role,” said Margaret. “I probably won’t even sing.”

“You will audition for Mr Fischel. Is enough.”

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Fischel was tall and distinguished, with a proper conductor’s mane of white hair, sharp, interrogating features, and a slight Hungarian accent. He sat beside a utilitarian tube-metal table with a middle-aged woman he had not bothered to introduce while Margaret sang “Ah! se non m’ami più”. This was to piano accompaniment in one of the Met’s rehearsal rooms.

“An interesting voice,” said Fischel when she had finished. “Have you sung much Bellini?”

“No, Sir. Only *La straniera* at Wexford, as Mr O’Toole told you.”

“Your top floats very well. I don’t really believe it’s your top at all.”

“That’s right. I can sing soprano, any fach. I can sing fioritura, coloratura. I have an E flat, good and strong in tenuto.”

“An E flat indeed!” Leo Fischel laughed, freely like a child, his body rocking from side to side in the chair, making the rubber-shod feet of the chair squeak on the bare floor. “An E flat! We had better put away our glassware then!”

The middle-aged woman looked embarrassed, taking off her spectacles and cleaning them somewhat too vigorously with a handkerchief.

Margaret wondered why Fischel found it so funny that she should have a high E flat. Something in her wondering communicated itself to Fischel, and he stopped laughing at once. He even apologized.

“I meant no offense. I hope to hear your E flat one day, Miss, ah . . .” he checked a yellow notepad on the table in front of him “. . . Miss Han. It’s just that mezzo thing. The mezzo who yearns to be a soprano, you know? Not one in ten will admit to being a natural-born mezzo.”

“Not so bad,” said the woman, rubbing away at her lenses. “Perhaps one in four will admit it.”

Fischel nodded. “One in four. Yes, one in four will confess to being a true-born natural mezzo. The others all want to sing Tosca.”

“Well, I can sing Tosca. I can sing ‘Vissi d’arte’.”

Leo Fischel was a man who budgeted his time with utmost care. He would not normally have wasted a full ten minutes in this way, indulging the conceits of an unknown voice. Perhaps he felt a little ashamed at having mocked Margaret’s E flat. At any rate, for this or some other, unknown, reason, he asked Margaret to sing “Vissi d’arte” then and there. There was a pause while the pianist went to fetch a score, and Margaret desperately ran through the words she had not sung since a time two and a half years before, in the thin high air of Tibet, knowing now that it must be right first time or the great man would tire of his sport. Score in place, the pianist played some introductory bars twice through. Perhaps sensing her nervousness, Leo Fischel raised his hand then dropped it to give her the entrance. Margaret sang, coming in precisely on tempo, filling the room with the lovely prayer.

When she was finished, Leo Fischel was leaning back in his chair, arms folded across his chest, watching her face. He was obviously pleased. Still Margaret left without any certainty in her mind of having got the part, and she did not believe it until Colman called to tell her.

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Margaret dutifully carried out all the responsibilities of a cover singer, attending all rehearsals, being fitted for wig and costume, going to the house for the first performance to be on immediate call. She watched most of the opera from the wings, murmuring the words for all the parts, which by this time she had committed to memory, in conformity with another of Professor Shi’s dictums: Try to learn the whole of an opera—every part, every note and word of every part—not just your own role. It was of course a thrill to be on stage (or just off stage) at the Metropolitan Opera House, but she wished she could have been singing, and thought herself a better actor than Dorothy Blaine, who seemed not to know what to do with her hands, nor how to rise gracefully from a sitting position.

Dorothy Blaine declined to fall downstairs however, and was as invincibly robust as she looked. Even when that fall’s epidemic of Shanghai flu hit New York she was unaffected, striding in to rehearsals looking

as large and invulnerable as an outcrop of brown gneiss. Not so the soprano, who went down with the flu two days before the second performance, along with three members of the chorus, the first violinist—and then her own cover!

“I need a *Giulietta*,” said Leo Fischel to Margaret on the phone—(Leo Fischel! calling to the phone on the landing! in the very house where she lived!)—“and I want to know if you can do it.” This call was made at two in the morning, the night before the second performance.

“But I’m covering for Romeo.”

“I know that, child. Romeo is not the problem. Dorothy would sing her way through all the plagues of the apocalypse. The problem is *Giulietta*. She’s out, and her cover is out, and the only house singer who could do it is out. And the question is: can *you* sing it? Or do we have to ship someone in, one of the three point five singers in the entire fucking world who knows this stinking motherfucking godforsaken opera? Listen, Margaret: do you know the part?”

“Yes. My training was, to learn all the parts of an opera, not only the part I’d be singing.”

A pause. Fischel was taking a huge gamble, Margaret knew. Not that he had much choice. A *Butterfly* or a *Carmen*—you could get someone from one of the music schools to do it. Someone? To sing the *Met*? You could get a dozen, any of whom would do it for nothing. But an opera like this, a little-known piece. . . He was right, the only people who knew it were in Italy, probably.

“Sing me the *romanza*,” said Fischel at last. “‘Oh quante volte.’ Not full blast, of course, just give me the words and the melody, *mezza voce*.”

Margaret sang it down the phone, feeling foolish. Johnny Liu had put his pants on and come to the door of their room. His face was there at the door, watching her.

“I can sing the original, if you like,” said Margaret when she had finished.

“Original?”

“Bellini took the tune from a previous opera of his, a student piece, and just changed the words.”

She heard Fischel chuckle. “No need to try so hard, young lady. You’ve got the part. And God help us both. Now listen carefully. I want you here at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. We’ll go over the entire vocal score. I won’t make you sing much. The last thing we need is for you to tire your voice before tomorrow night. But Dorothy is coming in too, and I can tell you for sure she will want to sing through some of the duets with you. Not full voice, but she’ll want to get the measure of you as a partner. The unison cantilena at the end of act one—she’ll certainly want to do that. Probably the other duets too. The romanza and aria I am ready to take on trust, and we can prompt you through the recitatives if necessary. I’ll get Janet in, she’s our most experienced prompt. Who was your répétiteur for Romeo? Good, he’ll be there. We’ll go through stage positions and work out some signals in case you get lost. Then there’s wardrobe of course—you’re half the size of Anna. And the wig—Oh Lord. But I’ll leave you plenty of time to rest up in the afternoon.

Johnny Liu stepped back from the door to let her back in to the bedroom. He had not put on the light. In the dim glow from the street lamps his bare chest and arms were smooth and contoured.

“It was Mr Fischel, musical director of the Met,” said Margaret to his query. “I am to sing lead soprano there tomorrow night.”

“Soprano? *Lead* soprano? At the *Met*? Ai ai ai ai ai, Little Sister! Heaven is smiling on you at last!”

“A role I have never sung, even in rehearsal,” said Margaret, and burst into tears.

Johnny Liu put his arms around her and pulled her into the bed. He held her in his arms for a long time, alternately laughing with delight at her good fortune and cooing to soothe her tears. After a long time, still wrapped in his arms, Margaret fell asleep.

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And so Margaret became a soprano. When the shock of Mr Fischel’s request had worn off, she was perfectly confident. She knew the whole opera, every word and note, every performance and recording, everything about it. In the six weeks since the audition she had immersed

herself in this opera, thinking of nothing else. Not just for the role; for the beauty of the thing, and the conviction—confirmed now by Professor Shi—that her voice was made to sing this kind of music, that the “sweet Sicilian” was, indeed, her *guiren*.

When she got in that morning Fischel had people all over the stage—all the stage hands and chorus members not felled by the epidemic, others she did not recognize who perhaps he had just called in off the street (“There’ll be all hell to pay with the union if he did,” said Colman, laughing, when she told him about it later)—writing out the libretto with black marker on large white sheets of card for sight-prompts he planned to place everywhere they could be seen from the stage but not the hall.

“Not necessary,” said Margaret, when she grasped what was happening. “I know the libretto, all the roles. Really, Mr Fischel. And the score. It’s all right.”

Fischel frowned skeptically at her a moment, then began leafing through his score.

“Capellio setting his men on Lorenzo, act two scene four. The words, please, just the words.”

“Qual turbamento io provo! Quale scompiglio in cor! Taci, o pietade . . .”

“Romeo’s last words.”

“Più non ti veggo; ah! parlami—un solo accento ancor . . .”

“Scena to romanza, act one scene four.”

“Eccomi in lieta vesta, eccomi adorna . . .”

“The andante from Tebaldo’s cavatina.”

“E’ serbato a questo acciaio . . .”

“Not bad at all.” Fischel nodded approvingly. “All right, I am ready to believe you are word perfect. Now let us go through the score. Can you read music?”

Dorothy Blaine came in at ten thirty, in a foul mood, loudly cursing the missing soprano and her cover, and Fischel, and the general management, and (it seemed to Margaret) every other living creature she could think of except the humble oriental virus that was causing all their problems. Her mood was not much improved when she left an hour later, by

which time she had made Margaret sing through the unison cantilena three times, once at full throat.

“She tries not to use her voice for twenty-four hours before a performance,” said Fischel when Dorothy had left. “Like a lot of other singers.”

“I’m the same myself,” said Margaret, anxious to be like all those other singers. “It’s odd she didn’t want to try the other duets, isn’t it?”

Fischel chuckled. “If she hadn’t been satisfied with the cantilena, you can be sure she would have done. Dorothy can be tough to work with, but she’s a pro. She thinks you’ll be all right, so she left well alone. And her opinion is worth three of mine. A real pro, Dorothy—a trouper.” He smiled up at Margaret from his podium. “You too, young lady.”

“Me too, what, Sir?” asked Margaret, not quite following.

“A pro.” Fischel was nodding at her, still smiling. “I feel so much better than I did at nine o’clock.”

“I’m sure we shall be all right, Sir.”

“From your mouth to God’s ear, Margaret Han. And enough with the ‘Sir’ already. ‘Maestro’ will do just fine. Oh, here comes wardrobe.”

Fischel stationed the prompts all around anyway—one in each of the wings, one in a vacant box, two in the orchestra pit. The actual prompt girl, in her space capsule at the front of the stage, was reading so loud Margaret thought the front rows must surely be distracted by her, and was pronouncing all of each word, instead of—as is usually done—only the first syllable. The stagehands with their cards, the unceasing murmur of the prompt girl, were distracting to Margaret herself—more of a distraction than a help, since she did not need them. The cards especially were a constant irritating presence in the corners of Margaret’s eyes all the time she was on stage, drawing her eyes from the conductor’s white baton, making her fear that she would lose tempo.

She did not lose tempo. Nor stumble, nor forget lines, nor come in too soon or too late. There was a moment of fear when the front scenery first parted to reveal her to the audience—such a huge hall!—but once she was engaged with the music there was no time for fear. Her character, Giulietta, was active the whole time she was on stage, except for the last scene where she had only to feign catalepsy. This made things easier;

Margaret hated to be on stage for long spells when others were singing. It was easy then for one's mind to wander and lose its place.

There was good applause for the romanza and duet, and for both sections of the aria. Good, but not tremendous. But then (Margaret consoled herself) there were many empty seats, presumably casualties of the epidemic. Still, she thought she had deserved a *Brava!*—at least for the romanza—but none came. Then at the end, when the cast stepped out to take their bows, Leo Fischel came up from the orchestra pit, having a corded microphone handed to him as he passed the wings. He took her by the hand and brought her out in front of the others.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he addressed the audience, “our *Giulietta* tonight was sung by Miss Margaret Han of Peking. Miss Han stepped in at the last moment, as you can see from your program notes. At the very last moment, ladies and gentlemen—at two a.m. this morning, to be precise, when both the scheduled *Giulietta* and her understudy had withdrawn for reasons of health. Ladies and gentlemen, it is no small thing for a young singer to prepare herself for a major role at eighteen hours’ notice. Even more impressive: I must tell you that Miss Han is by training a mezzo-soprano, on our books as cover for Miss Blaine. Tonight was her first performance as a full soprano, though she has been training her voice in that direction for some time. I hope you will show your special appreciation, ladies and gentlemen, not only for a fine young singer, but for a consummate professional.”

Fischel turned to Margaret and bowed. Now the *Bravas!* came, loud and strong, from all parts of the house, and a great storm of applause. People were standing everywhere, smiling at her or calling out, clapping their hands. Margaret curtseyed, bowing low. Coming up she saw Fischel, facing her and applauding with the audience, making look-over-your-shoulder signals with his face and head. Turning, Margaret saw that all the cast was applauding—including Dorothy Blaine, a huge white grin splitting her brown face, nodding approval at her. Margaret curtseyed to the cast, then again back to the audience, and accepted an armful of flowers from the stage director, and thought she might happily die from relief and gratification right there at front center stage of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, age twenty-seven and a half.