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Liebestod

*Zu spät! Trotziger Mann! Strafst du mich so mit härtestem Bann?
Ganz ohne Huld meiner Leidens-Schuld?
Nicht meine Klagen darf ich dir sagen?
Nur einmal, ach! nur einmal noch! -
Tristan! - Ha! - horch! Er wacht! Geliebter!
Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, Act 3*

1.

The day of her sixteenth birthday found Talia feeling despondent, as her life was slipping away without accomplishments. As she readied to blow the candles of the cake, her mother encouraged: “Make a wish, dear. I have the feeling it will come true.”

Talia shot back, perhaps a little harshly: “You know what I wish. I have said it a million times. I want to be an opera singer. But that’s never going to happen.”

Her mother gave a tired smile. “Yes, we’ve heard it often enough. When you were only a six-year-old pipsqueak, you heard someone on the radio doing the Bell Song from *Lakmé* and were hooked.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to snap. You and Dad have done all you could to help me with my dream. You enrolled me in a school for children interested in the arts. You paid for my acting and language lessons. You found me a voice tutor, who trained me. Now I’ve reached a dead end. All of that seems to have been for nothing.”

As everyone retired for the night, Talia snatched a bottle of apricot schnapps and absconded with it to her bedroom, intending to get drunk. She did not like the apricot brandy, but she soldiered on, filling one shot glass, downing it in one or two gulps, and refilling it.

Before long half of the bottle was gone, Talia's head was spinning and her grip on the glass was loosening. "One more shot," as she poured another measure into the glass. She never finished it; the glass and the bottle dropped on the carpet and she fell backwards onto her bed and passed out.

Her stupor was not peaceful. Confused images kept drifting in and out of focus before her eyes. One figure kept coming back to her, each time more vividly: an odd woman, veiled, all dressed in black. Talia finally realized that a lady was there, disapproval showing on her wrinkled features.

"Who are you?" queried Talia. The response was puzzling: "Some call me The Queen of Spades. I am your secret godmother."

"I didn't know I had a godmother," said Talia dreamily.

"I said it was secret. Your mother and I have had dealings for years, and she asked me to come to you on your special day."

"What do you want from me?"

"Why, I have come to give you a present, since you became of age today." Are you ready for your gift?"

"What's it?" The old lady was not holding any parcels.

"It is the gift you have been craving for: a career as an opera singer, if you want it."

“It would be a great gift, but nobody can give it to me” replied Talia, disconsolate.

“I can” said the Queen of Spades. “But before I do, I must be sure that this is what you truly want. Did I hear you say that your life is to sing, and singing is your life?”

“Yes.”

“Are you certain you want your life to be like that? Such a gift cannot be returned, and comes with a price.”

“Yes, that’s what I want.” replied Talia without hesitation. “But what’s the price?”

“Your life will be ruled by the gift.”

“Well, that’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

“Then it shall be as you desire. Go to sleep. In the morning, call the office at the Juilliard School and inquire whether there are any scholarships available for you to apply. The answer will be yes. If you apply, you will be admitted.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Just give it a try. And now, try to sleep off that disgusting inebriation.” Without more, there was a swish of fabric, and the old lady was gone.

2.

The following morning Talia was terribly sorry about her drinking bout. It was not until early afternoon that she remembered being visited by the Queen of Spades and receiving her birthday gift. She smiled ruefully at being so stupid as to get drunk on apricot brandy and dream up such garbage. Later in the afternoon, however, she decided to call Juilliard. What did she have to lose?

When she was connected with the admissions office, she was told that yes, due to unexpected resignations, there were openings in the Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts. Registration was already closed for the academic year, but because of the vacancies they would consider new applications. Talia begged to be sent an application immediately. The admissions officer agreed to forward the forms to Talia by overnight mail.

That was the start of what turned out to be a remarkable three-year course of study at Juilliard, which led to a graduation with honors and a successful audition at the Metropolitan Opera House, where she was hired to become a member of the chorus until an opportunity as a soloist became available.

A year later, Talia was home cooking dinner when her phone rang. She was dumbfounded when the suave voice on the line identified its owner as the Met's principal conductor, who she had met during her successful audition. After greetings, he asked: "Tell me, *cara* Talia, do you by any chance know the role of Rosina, besides the aria that you sang so well at the audition and won you a place with us?"

"Yes, maestro, I studied the role because my voice coach said it fitted my voice well."

"How would you like to sing *Barber* at the Met?"

"Well, that would be wonderful. When would it be?"

"How about tonight?"

"Why me? I am only a singer with the chorus, barely a year off graduating from Juilliard."

"The soprano who is to sing Rosina in the Met's new production of *The Barber of Seville* was injured in a car crash this afternoon. The Met is caught in a bind, because the understudy for

the part of Rosina has quit after an argument with the stage manager and is on her way to the West Coast. Many substitute singers are potentially available, but none can come on a few hours' notice. They were about to cancel the premiere of the show when I had an idea: bringing in, just for that night, the young singer who had provided that stunning rendition of Rosina's aria, *Una Voce Poco Fa*. That's you."

A long silence ensued. Talia hesitated:

"I never performed the part onstage, and wouldn't know what to do."

"The other singers will help you out. Plus, you are supposed to be an ingénue and acting a bit clumsy would not be out of character."

"I may not remember my lines."

"Just give a quick read to the score. We have the best prompters in the business."

"But, sir, this is a monumental gamble for me."

"I know, but I have a hunch that it will all work out well."

"O.K." she sighed. "I'll do it. Wish me luck."

"Be at the Met no later than seven so you can get fitted for a dress, made up, and meet your colleagues."

"I'll do it," she said again, trying to hide the tremor in her voice. "Thanks for all you have done for me."

"You are welcome. I'm doing it for the Met as well."

At seven o'clock, Talia emerged from a taxi, score of *Barber* under an arm and a ratty coat on the other. She was greeted at the opera house by what seemed like the entire company.

At ten minutes to eight the conductor came into the dressing room as Talia was donning one of the gowns she would wear that evening. “Are you ready, my dear?” he asked breezily.

“I’m scared stiff, but am as ready as I will ever be,” she assured him.

* * *

The conductor entered the pit and bowed. Before the applause had died out, he turned to the orchestra and launched into the overture to *Barber*. Seven minutes later, the curtain was raised.

Soon it was Talia’s turn to make her appearance. There was an expectant silence as the doors to the balcony opened and Talia, radiant in a silk nightgown, came forward. Her initial lines were short and unremarkable; the action then moved to the mansion’s living room, where Talia burst into *Una Voce Poco Fa*. If anything, her performance that night was even more brilliant than in her audition; at the end, she uttered very loudly a sustained high C and made a graceful pirouette as the music died down.

A stunned silence followed, and then all dykes burst and an ovation the likes of which was seldom heard at the Met resounded.

3.

The Met offered Talia a contract to perform in *Barber* for the rest of its run, alternating with a recovering Madame Dimitrova. People flocked to hear her the few days where she had the lead, and she did not disappoint her growing fan base. The success of that season was crowned when a European label offered her a contract for her first solo album.

Her professional happiness, however, was not matched by harmony at home. After being hired by the Met to be a member of the chorus, Talia had met Sergio, a handsome Argentinian

tenor who was also with the chorus. Their friendship blossomed into romance and one night he proposed and they became engaged. Marriage followed and Talia and Sergio moved to a modest apartment in Brooklyn.

Sergio became resentful of Talia's overnight success, and began looking elsewhere for entertainment. One night, Talia returned home unexpectedly because her flight had been cancelled, only to find Sergio curled up with a pretty blonde.

After a bitter divorce, Talia was free again, reflecting that she was not better off than the Rosina of the *Barber* for, like Rosina's husband, hers had also showed himself to be a lecher.

4.

Talia's voice eventually matured and she began taking on dramatic soprano roles. She also met and fell in love with Armand D'Escoubet, a French journalist who was foreign correspondent for a news agency. They married and settled for a domestic life in which both traveled frequently and only saw each other when their schedules permitted.

The San Francisco Opera decided to mount a new production of Wagner's Ring Cycle, and invited her to sing the part of Sieglinde, the tragic lover of her brother Siegmund, in *Die Walküre*. Staging a new Ring cycle is a complex affair, and the preparations for all four operas extended for almost two years. At the end, the production was ready and Talia was scheduled to appear in the second opera of the cycle when it opened the following spring.

As the premiere of the Ring approached, Armand was detailed to Africa to report on hostilities between warring factions in South Sudan, so he was going to miss this important musical event. "Fear not" consoled Talia, "we have a contract for the video of the entire cycle. I'll give you a copy of *Walküre* so you can see your wifey in action."

She had a dream the eve of the opening of *Walküre*. An old woman in black was sitting in one of the boxes at the Opera House watching her perform. Then, the lady was in her dressing room, offering her a large square box wrapped in gold leaf paper with a scarlet bow encircling it. It was beautiful, but had a sinister aura. “It is a present to celebrate your accomplishments.” “Can I open it?” “Of course,” replied the old woman with an enigmatic smile.

Talia tore the wrapping to reveal a black wooden box. She lifted the lid, only to find that the box was empty, yet did not feel empty. A cold draft emanated from the box and a wet smell, like that of turned earth, filled her nostrils. “What is this?” she asked, bewildered. “You will know when the show is over.” With that, Talia awoke, feeling an unease that stayed with her through the day.

After the performance of *Walküre*, Talia returned to her apartment and went to bed almost at once. She was asleep when the telephone rang. She could barely discern the voice, heavily accented, that once she acknowledged her identity, stated: “Madame, I’m with the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Juba, South Sudan.” There was a pause and when Talia was getting ready to say something, the voice continued: “I’m afraid I have bad news.”

Talia clawed at her pillow. “There was an attack by a mercenary band on a U.N. outpost in the Jonglei region. The attackers launched incendiary bombs and burned the building to the ground. A number of people were inside, both U.N. peacekeepers and foreign reporters. Your husband was among them....”

“Oh, nooo!” screamed Talia. “Is he ... alright?”

“I am sorry.... No. Everyone perished in the fire.”

Talia exercised the self-control her training had given her, and asked tightly: “Who do I need to speak to in order to have his remains flown here for burial?”

Again, there was a silence. Finally, the voice replied: “I’m sorry. The attackers used thermite, a substance that burns through even solid steel. Only cinders are left of the people who were in the building.”

Talia realized that Armand was gone forever and she did not even have the consolation of mourning him properly. Like Sieglinde in *Walküre* All of a sudden, she recalled the gift she had received and its terrible price, and shed bitter tears. She addressed her benefactor in desperation: “Wherever you are, I don’t want your gift any more. It has cost me all too much!” But her pleas remained unanswered.

5.

Talia resolved to leave the stage, but her passion for singing was too strong to give it up at once. Instead, she agreed to appear infrequently, only in comedies or dramas with happy endings. Her passion for the stage started to wane and at the end she took an early retirement.

One evening, her old friend the lead conductor of the Met – now an octogenarian approaching retirement himself – came to visit her and broached the subject of a new production with which he intended to close his career. Would she be interested in singing the leading role of Isolde in a forthcoming staging of *Tristan und Isolde*? The Met had succeeded in retaining the great Wolfgang Neiderhaus to sing the Tristan role. Would she please consider it?

Talia’s initial reaction was to reject the idea, but then she remembered the immortal love duet in Act 2 of the opera and realized how empty her life had been since Armand’s passing.

What did she have left to live for? What else did she have to lose? She gritted her teeth as she assented: "I'll do Isolde for this run. But then I'll sing no more."

The night before the premiere Talia was having dinner at home with friends when the telephone rang. She almost did not pick the receiver up: she had the presentiment that another dreadful call was about to change her life again. Ultimately, she answered, and a very American voice greeted her. "Mizz Suárez, please." "Speaking" she replied. "I'm Dr. Norman Weinberg calling from the Burn Center at New York Presbyterian." Talia's heart skipped a beat. "How can I help you?"

"We have been treating a patient that was flown here from Paris. He asked us to contact you."

"What's his name?" shouted Talia.

"Armand D'Escoubet."

"That's impossible!!!" shrieked Talia. "He has been dead for years."

The voice replied: "Well, he is here and is near death. He wants to say goodbye to you."

"I'll be right there." Talia slammed down the receiver, grabbed a coat, and rushed out of the apartment.

At the hospital, she was ushered to a private room at the end of a hallway. A man, his body covered with tubes, IV drips, and other devices rested in bed. His features were all covered with sterile gauze, but his eyes were open and his regard was anguished.

A doctor came into the room and led Talia to the corridor outside. "I am Dr. Weinberg. We spoke on the phone."

“How’s he?” asked Talia, barely able to articulate her questions. “And how did he get here?”

“We don’t know all the details” began the doctor, “but this is the information that was given to us by the hospital in Paris. Mr. D’Escoubet was the victim of an act of war in Africa. The house where he was staying was fire bombed; luckily, he was outside smoking and escaped the death that visited the others. However, he was severely burned. He was driven by jeep to the nearest village, and then transported to the capital, from where he was flown to Paris and taken to the Hôpital Cochin, the central burn treatment center of that city.

“His employer wanted to contact you but he forbade it. He was burned beyond recognition and wanted to spare you the pain of seeing him in that condition. They reluctantly honored his wishes, and in the meantime the staff at Cochin did a marvelous job keeping him alive.

“He lingered for the next three years, experiencing progressive multiple organ dysfunctions -- but he has a strong constitution and was able to cling onto life until a few days ago, when it became clear that he was soon to die. He then asked to be flown here and held until the end was at hand, at which time you were to be notified.”

Talia went back into the room and gingerly took hold of her husband’s hand. She could count the fragile bones as she pressed it close to her chest. No longer capable of holding back, she questioned him bitterly: “Why didn’t you come into my arms when there was still time?” There was no immediate response, but at length he uttered hoarsely: “Talia, please forgive me. I’ve always loved you.” The effort was too great and he collapsed on the bed.

A few minutes later, he expired.

6.

Friends took Talia back to her apartment, undressed her and put her to bed. One of them started to call the Met to advise that Talia would not make it to the opening night, but she raised herself from the bed and cried: “NO! I *must* be there. I *will* be there! I’ve paid too high a price...!!”

The Talia that arrived at the opera house before the performance was pale, disheveled, her face puffed from crying and lack of sleep, her hair a wild tangle of graying curls. She would talk to nobody, but allowed the staff to make her up and dress her.

She sleepwalked through the first act, and it was only in the love scene at the end of the second act that she came to life and responded wildly to Neiderhaus’ ardent declarations. The tenor was taken aback by the desperate tinge in her voice, but matched her cries with his controlled voice, passionate yet full of lyricism. When their love tryst was discovered and Tristan was gravely wounded, there was an audible gasp throughout the audience; people remained in their seats after the curtain fell, stunned.

During intermission, Talia went to her dressing room and collapsed. She could not bear the heaviness in her heart, as Armand’s loss continued to sink in. She woke up to the sight of an old woman in black standing silently by her side.

“I told you I don’t want your gift!!” she shouted at the apparition. “It has given me nothing but grief!! Please take it stop messing with my life and let me die in peace!!”

The old woman shook her head: “I’m very sorry, child. I warned you that the gift you desired could not be called back. Once it was set in motion, it could not be stopped. I left you

alone since *Walküre*. It was not I, but Fate, that put the temptation before you. It was your own choice to accept it. Now it's all done.”

Talia buried her face on her hands and wept disconsolately. When she looked up, the Queen of Spades was gone.

7.

In the third act, Isolde arrives at the castle where the wounded Tristan awaits her. When she arrives, Tristan tears the dressings from his wounds, staggers and dies in her arms. Talia played the scene with quiet desolation, revisiting the sight of Armand dying in her arms just as they rejoined. Soon thereafter, she bent over Tristan's corpse and began singing the Liebestod: “Mild und leise wie er lächelt ...” When she approached the aria's climax, a feeling of completeness set upon her soul, for she finally understood that her life and her music were meant to be one and the same: the joys and tragedies in one would have to be the same in the other, with or without the help of a witch. And that was fine.

As the final notes of the aria faded away, Talia folded herself over the body of her lover and died as she always had wished: departing life, quite fulfilled and in peace with herself, a great artist done at the completion of her final role.

THE END