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A DOZEN CITIES, A HUNDRED PRODUCTIONS, ten thousand slings and arrows sustained; for even a man without esteem for himself, even a man who's been trodden face-down in the mud, even a sadist, has a limit to his own injury. *He* is completely oblivious to what fire breathes inside me—the very embers of which sparked by his own impudence, by his lechery. Tonight, on opening night. Tonight is the night when I shall claim my pound of flesh, and wipe that smug grin clean from his olive, mustached face for the world to see! To send him out on stage . . . an undeserving storybook ending for the *sopranist* virtuoso—yet we are bound by this cup. After they will think me mad, or they'll write me off as such to distance themselves from this bloody business. Yet it's a perfectly rational stroke, a calculated decision. And since when *is* vengeance likened to madness anyway? Would they dare label Edmond Dantés mad for acquiring satisfaction from his transgressors? Should I swallow my pride in exchange for civility? Is honor no longer a thing to be defended? Do our testicles merely hang to serve as decorative ornaments? Relics of manhood? The nature of men has been watered down and disenfranchised so by this culture, engendering generations of cowards and *emotionals* to come. I will take action for the sake of a forgotten age. And I shall keep this confession within the contents of my armoire to be used in court as a memorandum of the conviction I maintain for this act of retribution yet accomplished.

From the soundest of minds and clearest of perceptions,
R.T. MONTICELLO

I endorsed and folded the hand-written letter and secured it in my armoire on the shelf above the laced midnight-blue doublet and velvet cape. I shuffled over to my vanity, the rampart of which was festooned by an array of soft felt caps adorned with long ebony feathers. There were bits and pieces of King Aldones scattered upon the credenza and sofa as well. I regarded my reflection in the mirror: six feet, two inches and diametrically rotund, the necessary girth required for a veteran tenor who's belted arias profound throughout the great opera houses of the world. My face, as you can see, very round with big, ruddy cheeks; though I'm not typically bashful I am frequently mistaken for it. I certainly had nothing to apologize for that day. I pulled my suspenders up over my shoulders and slapped my belly. My white pullover was sticking to my skin (from the steam I partook in earlier) and moist patches were starting to dabble. I picked up a comb and parted my dark, lank hair neatly to the side. I must admit how excited I was at the prospect of the night's proceedings. My stomach was host to the flitting of butterflies; and it brought to mind the same feeling of anticipation I felt before I took that hallowed Viennese stage as Rodolfo in *La Bohème*.

I scanned my modest dressing room. I had my assistant make a dozen copies of tonight's libretto which occupied half the sofa. It was an opera I'd never done before, nor seen; yet I'd heard about it—a very peculiar opera, indeed. Though my gaze was not in search of my script, for I knew the part like the indentions in my palm. It was not the part I'd have chosen for myself; the parts I'd have preferred almost always found *him*, the new *sensation*; he who laid claim to the most dynamic of roles, and much worse, shared the most intimate of scenes with the fairest of maidens, Viktoria . . . No, it was the umbrella stand by the door which I sought. I walked over to it and gripped the gilded handles of the prop rapiers. I fished out the heaviest of scabbards and withdrew it from the brass stand, and then walked back before the mirror to draw the sword. I admired the

sheen of the steel, the latticework and intricate embroidery of the hilt. Apparently it was seventeenth century Castilian — at least that was what the antique dealer told me, a reputable man in town from what I hear. I was practicing my thrusts when I was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Yes?” I called out.

A muffled, petite voice on the other side: “Signor? It’s Kate.”

I sheathed the rapier.

“I know who it is; I recognized you by the timidity of your knock!”

“Sorry, Signor.”

I scooped up the empty Magisso teacup on the vanity and returned the scabbard to the umbrella stand before unlocking the door. Kate stood there clutching her clipboard in both awe and conciliation at my immense stature. She was a mousy creature with thick spectacles, but not without her charms. I imagine she’d even pass for attractive without the Esotropa; and had even entertained the idea of arranging her a fitting with Jezebel, and taking her out on the town one night for oysters at the KGB, and after that to the Blue Nile for Sambuca and jazz.

“What is it, Kate? You know better than to interrupt my solitary block —”

“Yes, and I’m sorry for the intrusion — but, Robardin has penciled-in a meeting with you in five minutes.”

“An impromptu meeting?” I rubbed my chin in contemplation. “And you gave his people a copy of my schedule?”

“Yes, Signor.”

I could hear the echoes of an argument down the hall, though I only recognized the raspy voice of the milliner. There was also the relentless pounding and refurbishing of set decorators two stories above.

“Opening night jitters from our illustrious director!” I guffawed, eliciting a nervous titter from my young assistant. “Fine. Where?”

“On stage, Signor.”

“On stage, eh?” I held her in suspense a moment longer. “Then I accept.”

She smiled and nodded, and before she was allowed to disappear into the

massive honeycomb of the company frantically working to finalize the countless preparations for opening night, I thrust my teacup into her bosom.

“I’d like that *peppermint* tea this time—one slice of lemon as a garnish,—and not so heavy on the honey this time, Kate.”

“Right away—”

“Not right away, my dear. Please allow for anywhere from five to fifteen minutes for the conclusion of this meeting. You know very well what happens when I drink anything cold before a performance.”

“Of course, Signor!”

I smiled. “Good girl; you may run along now.”

And she did scurry off down the hall toward the nearest bulkhead.