

1st Soprano 1

START

MARIA. ~~What's your name? Eh? You'll have to speak up, darling. You're on a stage now. People are listening. Hundreds and hundreds of people. They want to know who you are. Don't disappoint them. God gave you a voice. Use it.~~

FIRST SOPRANO. Sophie De Palma.

MARIA. *Brava!* See how easy that was! Sophie De Palma. It's not an ideal name for a career but it's good enough. I can see it outside a theatre. Sophie De Palma as ... what? ... Sophie De Palma as Frasquita in *Carmen*. Sophie De Palma as The Third Norn in *Gotterdammerung*. Italian?

FIRST SOPRANO. Greek/Italian.

MARIA. *Po po po!*

FIRST SOPRANO. My teacher says that accounts for my temperament. I'm very fiery.

MARIA. Are you?

FIRST SOPRANO. That's what my teacher says. I was making a little joke. I don't believe you can be a great artist without temperament. Neither does she. We're working on it. Everyone said you had. I mean have. Great temperament. I'm hoping to get some from you, frankly. Am I saying the wrong thing?

MARIA. Do something fiery.

FIRST SOPRANO. I can't. Not just like that. No one can.

MARIA. WHERE IS MY FOOTSTOOL?

FIRST SOPRANO. Well, I guess some people can.

MARIA. You thought that was fiery? Wait. Just wait. My fire comes from here, Sophie. It's mine. It's not for sale. It's not for me to give away. And even if I could, I wouldn't. It's who I am. Find out who you are. That's what this is all about. Eh? This isn't a freak show. I'm not a performing seal. "I'm hoping to get some from you, frankly!"

FIRST SOPRANO. I'm sorry.

MARIA. So. What are you going to sing for us? Sophie De Palma?

FIRST SOPRANO. *Sonnambula?* "Ah, non credea mirarti."

MARIA. *Brava!*

FIRST SOPRANO. Is that all right?

MARIA. Into the lion's den, eh? I salute your courage. Be

END

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ACCOMPANIST. From the top?

MARIA. Yes from the top. This is music, not piece work.
(*Accompanist begins again. First Soprano begins again. This time Maria looks for something in her purse while Accompanist and First Soprano continue.*)

Go ahead. I'm listening. There it is! I thought I'd lost it. Continue.

FIRST SOPRANO. "*Oh! se una volta sola*"

MARIA. Diction, Diction. *Volta*. Bite into those consonants. I want to hear them. There's an "L" in *volta*, there's a "T."

FIRST SOPRANO.

"*Volta sola,
Rivederlo io potessi!*"

MARIA. *Rivederlo!* Where's your "R" in *rivederlo*?

FIRST SOPRANO.

"*Rivederlo io potessi,
Anzi che all'ara altra sposa
Ei guidasse! ...*"

MARIA. I'm not hearing any consonants. You're singing in Sanskrit. I'm only getting vowels. Words mean something. Vowels are the inarticulate sounds our hearts make. "Oh." Consonants give them specific meaning. "Oh! se una volta sola." Hear the difference? I just made that up. Vowels, consonants. But I think I'm on to something. Eh? You. I like you. You nod and smile at everything I say. (*To Sophie.*)

START

What are you saying?

FIRST SOPRANO. You mean.

MARIA. The words.

FIRST SOPRANO. I'm saying.

MARIA. Translate them.

FIRST SOPRANO. "Oh! Obviously, "Oh!" means "Oh!" "If one time alone. Or more. If one more time. See him again, I could." No, wait. "If only I could see him one more time again." Something like that.

MARIA. "*Oh! se una volta sola*" — "One more time!" That's all she wants. "*Rivederlo io potessi.*" She's never going to see this man again. "*Anzi che all'ara altra sposa ei guidasse!*" — Before he takes another bride to the altar. "*Vana speranza*" — what a

terrible expression. "Vain hope." Her life is over. "*Io sento suonar la sacra squilla*" — She hears the wedding bells. They don't ring for her. "*Al tempio ei muove*" — They're on their way to the church! "*Io l'ho perduto*" — I've lost him. "*E pur*" — this is important — "*E pur*" — and yet, and yet. "*Rea non son io.*" I am not guilty. I wasn't.

FIRST SOPRANO. This is hard.

MARIA. Of course it's hard. That's why it's so important we do it right. "This is hard." Where am I? I thought I was somewhere where people were serious. This is not a film studio where anyone can get up there and act. I hate that word. Act. No! Feel. Be. That's what we're doing here. "This is hard." I'll tell you what's hard. What's hard is listening to you make a mockery of this work of art. "Mockery" is too strong a word. So is "travesty." I'm not getting any juice from you, Sophie. I want juice. I want passion. I want you.

FIRST SOPRANO. I'm not that sort of singer.

MARIA. Well try. Just once in your life, try.

FIRST SOPRANO. I'm not that sort of person either.

MARIA. What sort of person are you then?

FIRST SOPRANO. I just want to sing.

MARIA. Am I stopping you?

FIRST SOPRANO. No. You're.

MARIA. We don't have to finish this. If you're unhappy.

FIRST SOPRANO. I don't know what you're talking about.

END
~~MARIA. Yes, you do. You just don't want to do it. Everyone understood what I was talking about when I was singing. They simply didn't want to listen. Too difficult. Too painful. Too controversial. At my final performance at La Scala in *Pirata* in the Mad Scene when I came to the words "*il palco funesto*" — "the fatal scaffold" — I pointed to the general manager in his box, the same man who had said my services in his theatre were no longer necessary, and hurled the words right at him. I don't know what came over me, I was possessed, like a Fury, and I went right to the stage apron, just meters from where he was sitting, and I sang "*il palco funesto.*" The audience gasped. Ghiringhelli reeled from the force of it. They say it was the greatest ovation in the history of La Scala. He ordered~~

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them to ring down the fire curtain to stop my applause. Why deal with someone like me when you can have Tebaldi or Sutherland or Sills. I don't blame them. I did but I don't now. They said they didn't like my sound. That wasn't it. They didn't like my soul. Too. What? Too. Something. You have a lovely voice, you know. A charming sound.

FIRST SOPRANO. Thank you.

MARIA. Much lovelier than mine ever was. And no one ever accused me or my voice of charm. That was my sister. She was the charming one. The pretty one. The one the boys. Wanted. Anyway. *En tout cas*. All that got her wherever she is, I don't know, we don't speak, and got me where I am, sometimes I think the whole world knows where that is, or was, and which is right now up here with you talking to you about your voice, your sound. Who you are. Who are you? Sophie De Palma, you've told us your name but who are you? Tears will get you nowhere, darling. Not in the theatre, not in real life. Certainly not with me. No one cares how many nights I cried myself to sleep. I sang *Norma* better than anyone had in years and I interpolated a high F at the end of the first act. That's all people cared about. When you're fat and ugly (and I'm not saying that you are either of those things) you had better have a couple of high F's you can interpolate into your life. No one cares about your damp pillow. Why should I? Did you care about mine? Did anyone? But that's another story. I can cry all I want now (don't worry, I won't. Tears come hard when you're me) but you can't, Sophie De Palma. You've got to sing for your supper. Sing for your salvation. Shall we try again?

(*First Soprano nods. Maria gives her a tissue and glances at her wrist watch.*)

Did you know one of my baptismal Greek Orthodox names was Sophie?

FIRST SOPRANO. No.

MARIA. Cecilia Sophia Anna Maria Kalogeropoulou. December 2, 19. But that was in another life. *Allora. Cominciamo. Ricominciamo*. Again.

FIRST SOPRANO. Again? I haven't. Once. I'm sorry.

MARIA. Remember to use the words. From Gran Dio.

START

FIRST SOPRANO. "*Gran Dio.*"

MARIA. What are you doing?

FIRST SOPRANO. I'm sorry?

MARIA. What does it say in the score?

FIRST SOPRANO. I begin on the C above middle C and.

MARIA. I'm not talking about notes. There's a direction from the composer.

FIRST SOPRANO. There is? (*First Soprano goes to piano and looks at music Accompanist is playing from.*)

MARIA. This is what I've been talking about the entire time. This lack of detail. This sense of nothing matters.

FIRST SOPRANO. You mean, "*inginocchiandosi*"? (*She has difficulty with the word.*)

MARIA. I mean, "*inginocchiandosi.*" (*First Soprano doesn't understand.*)

FIRST SOPRANO. It's important?

MARIA. It's life and death, like everything we do here.

FIRST SOPRANO. I don't know what it means.

MARIA. We can see that.

FIRST SOPRANO. It's a reflexive verb, I know that much. It means I do something to myself.

MARIA. Don't tempt me to tell you what that might be. Kneel.

FIRST SOPRANO. Kneel?

MARIA. It means, kneel. *Così!* (*She drops to her knees and opens her arms wide.*)

END "*Gran dio!*" This is how we speak to God. On our knees, *a terra*, our arms open to Him.

"*Non mirar il mio pianto.*" Do not heed these tears I shed.

"*Io gliel perdono.*" I forgive him them. The orchestra is sounding like an organ here. A church organ. What is Bellini up to?

"*Quanto infelice io sono, felice ei sia.*" Let him be as happy as I am unhappy.

"*Questa d'un cor che more e l'ultima preghiera.*" This is the last prayer of a heart that is dying. That explains the organ. It's all in the music. "*Ah, sì!*" She says it again. She has to. "*Questa d'un cor che more e l'ultima preghiera.*"