

Castrato

They brought the cub to me when he was five. Even one such as I was skeptical. I demanded a demonstration. He looked to his father, a destitute, grubby thing, embarrassed to be in the presence of one such as myself. In my fine home, amidst portraits and instruments furnished by the school. His father nodded, told him to sing. I held my tongue. Timidity has no place in my world, but he was – is yet – a cub. Nerves occupied his voice. Wobbled. Shrank. Caught. But it was there. True talent. A born singer; unrefined, immature, inexperienced, but under my tutelage he will become the best of us.

No. He will be better. For he will not be one of us.

They say it is cruel, what they've done to us. And oh, but it is. Before we have any idea who we are our fates decided with surgery. But the cut is just a cut. You forget the pain of it, given time. If you survive it. How many died, I used to wonder. Under the knife, from the fever that could come in afterwards, as it did for me. I remember the dreams, much better than I remember the operation. My father, his feathered face twisted by strange colors amidst unknown places, but always that scowl. He knew what he was making of me. He was a connoisseur of the arts. He was delighted to have produced me. So I was told. He never spoke to me much. Eventually he stopped altogether. I hardly noticed when it happened.

The boy's father, though. He was not an artist. He couldn't tell me a glissando from an alto, but he knew of my kind. Knew I am one, one of the greats. I could see it in his eyes, the silent revulsion, the pride swallowed. How I hated him in that moment. And how I hate the boy for having him. As I regarded the cub, his impromptu rehearsal concluded, tail meekly between his legs and eyes downcast, his father came to me and said to me, direct, if he had a chance. I sneered at him, the implication clear. He couldn't stand the thought of his seed becoming like me.

I do not blame him.

We are not like the rest of society. And though we keep the scar hidden, everyone can tell. We're different. We're false. We're created. Man-made yet non-men. How they despise us. Mock the way we walk, the way we're raised. They spread lies about how we carry on, how women's virtues are not safe with us in the room while their wombs are, and how we value the touch of men far higher. Farcical. If only they could feel the truth as we do, as I do. How I cannot feel my own touch but incinerate with the heat of desire, all in the name of their entertainment.

How they love us when we perform for them. Kicked like dogs in the street and praised on the stage. Called abominations to the sight of God yet angelic of voice. Every moment of fame, every ounce of gold, every word of adulation we take, for it is thrown at our feet. Their applause is genuine, for in the ecstasy of the moment they forget the consequence of what they've done to us. They forget the dead and the mutilated, they forget the lineages broken, and they forget the scar they know we carry. All they see is their creation. The praise they give is to themselves, for we are not natural to this world, but

products of man's will. The fulfillment of man's desires, the very pinnacle of the arts. I am not an artist, no, I am the art itself.

Were that the cut the only scar I carry. My life would be so simple. But I will never be free of my nature. Raised by musicians and librettists, I was to be their voice. It fell on me to grow the fruit of their vision. The irony is not lost on me. I was educated harshly, trained rigorously, always kept at the very limit of what they said I could handle. My torso was considered too fragile to strike, lest my lungs be damaged, so my limbs were whipped horribly whenever I did not meet their expectations. Even today I can feel the sting on my long elbows, my scaly knees. But I took every blow to heart. I channeled every sting into my practice, felt the pain of the switch on every missed note or weak trill without a professor there to strike it. All it amounted to was a harsher beating when I did disappoint my teachers. I believe if they could have found a way to throttle me without damaging my throat, they would have. They had become resentful of my skill and my talent.

By the time of my premiere, they had discovered a way to usurp even that. I sang a garish aria of a love and longing I have never known, but I threw the full weight of my training into my performance, effortlessly hitting high notes, singing nuanced graces, flying trills into the air like wings. I received a resounding applause I would become accustomed to. But before I could leave the stage, my teachers were shaking hands with the writers and dignitaries, accepting congratulations for my work. "We trained this one very hard;" "it was very difficult to teach the details of the style;" "this premiere is a testament to the skill of the professors." And among them, my father. The scowl ever-present on his beak had been replaced by a grin. He shook hands with patrons, telling them how proud he was to produce such a specimen, and with each word his smile grew. I did not believe he had the ability. My feathers bristled as I watched. How very proud he was of me, how very, very proud. Not of the son I could have been, but of the walking art he saw fit to make of me! I clenched my fists and stalked away, unable to witness the comedy before me any longer. I realized then the true nature of what I am, the futility of any struggle I could raise against my own existence. The only thing I will ever be is what they wish to see.

It has been some years since the cub was brought under my tutelage. I have not been a kind master. As I was whipped, so has he; as I was pushed to excellence, so has he. I see no reason to spare him that. I intend to mold him into greatness, and – if unsavory – this method has proven itself. And he will need rigorous training to preserve his talent as he changes, as he grows. I would envy him, but he is as much an experiment as I. His timidity will be boiled out, for I have no need of it. The priests tell me the meek shall inherit the earth – but if I am an abomination to His sight, I have no need of His blessings, have I?

For quite some time, my audience saw fit to bless me. Operas were written just for me to star in, record-breaking Masses were held because I was in an oratorio. The performance almost always left a sour taste in my beak, as I was usually dressed in some outlandish women's clothes with a ridiculous wig. How many times I took the stage amid raucous laughter. But when I sang, the jesters were quiet. As my fame grew, the performances grew. The silence my notes filled became greater, the better to be lit by my voice, the very scion of my fate. There were no more teachers to claim my glory their own. These audiences wanted to hear my power. Supplicants to the product of their own will, certainly, but I

was the aspect of that will. My fate was not my own, but my resignation was to become as great as I could. It was therapeutic, to know even if I could not change my role, I was the best at it. It wasn't true happiness, but it was adequate.

Fleeting as it was.

Time makes a fool of everyone. Even the cut could not prevent all the changes my body has undergone. Though I was considered the greatest, the summit of training and innovation, younger, fresher voices constantly emerged. I never admitted it, but I was envious of their youth, their exuberance, and the fluidity to tackle challenges as they arose. Though they saw me as one of their great influences, deferred to my judgement, I could see the ambition in their eyes. Their bodies still held the ambiguity to play any role, and their voices did not carry the weathering of thousands of performances. Each was a new masterpiece, simply waiting for word to spread. I now felt the festering resentment my own teachers had felt. In time, I was offered less prestigious roles. The reviews of my performances no longer held the glow of unrestrained praise. The writing on the wall was clear, and I saw no benefit to denying it. I retired to a conservatory, where my prodigious talent was spent training the spoilt ilk of nobility.

The cut has never been the only scar I carry. The vicious assault of my educators, the constant hatred of society, the back-handed praise of the audience, the usurpation by the next generation, and above all the knowledge I have never been my own – all have left its mark on me. Each new strike deepened the scar tissue, made me harder, inflexible, until my soul was nothing but callus. Words no longer reach me, pleading falls deaf to me. So, when the boy's father came to me, why did I decide to take the cub? Why did I listen to the begging of a destitute, unclean, uneducated pauper? Why did I allow myself to train the boy; weak, timid, barely past whelping and mewling for his family at every scold, every whip, every demand for excellence? The kindness of my heart? It is as stone.

No, charity is not my intent.

When I was training, there were just whispers, but they are shouts now. End the abominations. Stop the massacre of the young. There are still many who admire the purity and precision of our voices, but the condemnations have begun to seep into the applause, tiny spider web cracks in pristine marble. The nobles and patrons have begun to whisper if the cut is worth the reward. The times are changing, and with them, the arts. I felt myself resigned to my fate, doomed to forever be a masterpiece produced by the will of others. But in the boy, I see the future.

He has not undergone the cut, does not carry the scar. As he grows, the cub's voice will change. It will crack and break, and the high notes he hits so effortlessly now will rise beyond his reach. But the training I have given him, the very same training I was given, will endure. His lessons I have beaten into him. His technique I whipped to perfection. His education I demanded he make paramount to all else. Even as he grows, changes, develops into a man, he will maintain his proficiency. But his voice will be a new one, one never heard before. It will have the depth and resonance natural to the men of the world but with the skill and nuance of those who carry the scar. And I will have been the creator of this voice. It's origin. It's progenitor.

For truly, the cub could never have become more without my guidance. Talent is one thing, and skill another. Without my firm hand at his back, he would still be a pup, whining ceaselessly for comforts the great artists of the world know they cannot have. How he used to cry to me, telling me how much he missed his father, his mother, his siblings. Asking me where they were. Why did they leave him with me? His father explained it all; in letters addressed to him. How surprised I was, that the measly, dirty father of my student could write. In an attachment, he begged me to read all these letters to him until the boy was able to read himself. I saw no merit to it. The cub's weakness needs to be removed, and these pathetic letters will only delay the process. I keep all the letters in my office; sometimes I read them, and feel the warmth of love his father has for his son. It would merely distract my student.

I can already see the fruits of my labor blooming. In the years since he was brought before me, the cub has grown so much, in ways I never could. His premiere is still some time away, for his voice is not yet mature enough. Still, his practice is rigorous, his technique magnificent, and the raw talent I saw in him has been refined into marvelous skill. The weakness, the timidity, has receded. There is a coolness in his eyes that reflects his training, a kind of measured virtuosity showing all he is not afraid of a challenge, or unprepared for any role. His muzzle no longer opens to cry or laugh or even smile, but to sing.

He is glorious. He is first of the new wave, the beginning of the next great period of music. And I have been the one to sculpt him. When his admirers look upon him, hear his performances, they will know it was I who steered him to greatness. I was the architect of his future, as I will be origin to all who seek to emulate him. I had once resigned myself to my fate, to be bereft the gift of creation as long as I lived. I thought all my accomplishments would be on the stage. But no, my greatest accomplishment shall not be a performance but a student – a son. Sons! For all who sing in this style shall be mine! The product of my innovation, my ideas! As those who defied nature created me, so I have defied nature by creating!