



SIREN
QUEEN

NGHI VO

"Nghi Vo is a master."
—NPR on *The Chosen and the Beautiful*

SIREN
QUEEN

~

NGHI VO



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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for Grace

ACT ONE

I

Wolfe Studios released a tarot deck's worth of stories about me over the years. One of the very first still has legs in the archivist's halls, or at least people tell me they see it there, scuttling between the yellowing stacks of tabloids and the ancient silver film that has been enchanted not to burn.

In that first story, I'm a leggy fourteen, sitting on the curb in front of my father's laundry on Hungarian Hill. I'm wearing waxy white flowers in my hair, and the legendary Harry Long himself, coming to pick up a suit for his cousin's wedding, pauses to admire me.

"Hola, China doll," he says, a bright red apple in his hand. "Do you want to be a movie star?"

"Oh sir," I'm meant to have replied, "I do not know what a movie star is, but would you give me that apple? I am so very hungry."

Harry Long, who made a sacrifice of himself to himself during the Santa Ana fires when I turned twenty-one, laughed and laughed, promising me a boatload of apples if I would come to the studio to audition for Oberlin Wolfe himself.

That's bullshit, of course.

What halfway pretty girl didn't know what the movies were? I knew the names of the summer queens and the harvest kings as well as I knew the words "chink" and "monkey face," hurled at me and my little sister as we walked hand in hand to the Chinese school two miles from our house. I knew them as well as I knew the lines in my mother's face, deeper every year, and the warring heats of the Los Angeles summer and the steam of the pressing room.

The year I was seven, my father returned from Guangzhou to stay with us in America, and they built the nickelodeon between our laundry and the Chinese school. The arcade was far better than any old apple, and from the

first, I was possessed, poisoned to the core by ambition and desire. The nickelodeon took over a space that had once sold coffins, terrible luck whether you were Chinese, Mexican, or German, but the moment they opened their doors and lit up the orangey-pink neon sign overhead, COMIQUE in the cursive I was having such trouble with, they were a modest success.

Luli and I were walking home one hot day, and we would have kept walking if the tall woman lounging in her ticket booth hadn't tipped an extravagant wink at me. Her skin was a rich black, and her hair was piled up on her head in knots so intricate it hurt my eyes. It wasn't until we got a little closer that I could see her eyes gleamed with the same orangey-pink of the sign overhead, and even then, I might have decided it was too late.

"We're showing *Romeo and Juliet* today," she said with a wide smile. "If you hurry, you can still get seats."

"I don't have anything to pay with," I muttered, ashamed to even be caught wanting, but the woman only smiled wider.

"Well, it's a nickel if you're ordinary, but you girls aren't, are you?"

Up until that very moment, Luli and I would have given absolutely anything to be ordinary, to live in one of the pastel boxes off of Hungarian Hill, to have curly blond or brown hair instead of straight black, and to have pop eyes instead of ones that looked like slits carved into the smooth skin of a melon.

The way the beautiful Black woman spoke, however, I started to wonder. If I couldn't be ordinary, maybe I could be something better instead.

Maybe I could get into the nickelodeon.

Luli tugged at my hand fretfully, but I squeezed tighter, comforting and bullying at once.

"We're not ordinary at all," I declared. "And we don't have any nickels."

The woman touched a neatly manicured nail to her full lower lip, and then she smiled.

"An inch of your hair," she said at last. "Just one inch for two of you."

"Sissy, let's go home," my sister begged in Cantonese, but I scowled at her and she subsided.

"Just one inch," I said, as if I had any control over it. "And why do you want it, anyway?"

She helped me climb onto the spinning chrome stool with its red vinyl cushion; I remember the way the heat stuck it to my thighs where my thin dress rode up. I was already tall for my age. She swept a neat white cape around me, and as she snipped at my waist-length hair with a flashing pair of shears, she explained.

“An inch of hair is two months of your life,” she said. “Give or take. An inch ... that’s your father coming home, your mother making chicken and sausage stew, skinning your knee running from the rough boys...”

It made sense, or at least I didn’t want her to think that I didn’t understand. She wrapped an inch of my hair into a little packet of silk, tucking it into the antique cash register, and then she handed my sister and me two grubby olive-green tickets. I still have my ticket in a small box with some other mementos, next to a smooth lock of butter-gold hair and a withered white flower with a rust-red center. My sweat made the cheap ink go blurry, but you can still see the COMIQUE stamp as well as its sigil, the sign of the wheel of fortune.

The nickelodeon was full of muttering patrons, the darkness waiting and full of potential. We were small enough that no one cared if we squeezed onto the edges of the front-row seats, and in a moment, the flicker started.

It was magic. In every world, it is a kind of magic.

Silver light painted words on the flat, dark screen in front of us, and I didn’t have to read for Luli because the immigrants around us were sounding out the words quietly.

It was *Romeo and Juliet* as performed by Josephine Beaufort and George Crenshaw, two of the last silent greats. She looked like a child compared to the man who had loved the Great Lady of Anaheim, but it didn’t matter, not when she filled up the screen with her aching black eyes, when his lip trembled with passion for the girl of a rival family.

Their story was splattered over the screen in pure silver and gouts of black blood. First Romeo’s friend was killed, and then Juliet’s cousin, and then Romeo himself, taking a poison draught that left him elegantly sprawled at the foot of her glass coffin.

When Juliet came out, she gasped silently with horror at her fallen lover, reaching for his empty vial of poison. She tried to tongue the last bit out, but when no drop remained, she reached for his dagger.

It wasn't Juliet any longer, but instead it was Josephine Beaufort, who was born Frances Steinmetz in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She might have been born to a janitor and a seamstress, but in that moment, she was Josephine Beaufort, bastard daughter of an Austrian count and a French opera singer, just as much as she was Juliet Capulet.

The entire nickelodeon held its breath as her thin arms tensed, the point of the dagger pressed not to her chest where a rib or her sternum might deflect it, but against the softest part of her throat.

Her mouth opened, and a dark runnel of blood streamed down her unmarked white throat. She paused, long enough to build empires, long enough for a dead lover to marvelously revive. Then her arms tensed, her fingers tightened, and the dagger disappeared into her flesh, all that white destroyed with a river of black blood. It covered her breast and her white lace gown, speckling her round cheeks and marring her dulling eyes.

She slumped over the body of George Crenshaw and the camera pulled back, back, back, showing us the spread of black blood over the chapel floor before finally going dark itself.

My sister set up a wail that was lost in the chatter of the other patrons.

"She died, the lady died," Luli sobbed.

I took her hand, squeezing it like I did when I was trying to nerve us both up for another day beyond the safety of our bedroom, but my mind was a thousand miles away.

"No, she didn't," I said with absolute certainty.

II

You might say my family is in the business of immortality.

My father came from a long line of apothecaries and sorcerers. There were no imperial appointments, nothing as grand as a jade seal or a French house in Beijing, but they did well for themselves, ensuring a kind of small immortality for magistrates and county governors.

Even after he came to the United States, he kept with him a tortoiseshell cabinet that was second in reverence only to the family altar. It gleamed black and calico with thirty small drawers on the front and at least fifteen secret ones hidden throughout. It contained a continent's wealth of dinosaur bones, mercury captive in small vials, powders and tinctures of all kinds.

Once in a while, an old man would come from Chinatown, bent and with all of his weight carried by the two hands clasped at the small of his back. There would be a hurried conversation with my father in the alley in back, which we shared with a Polish tailor.

These old men sat stoically on the rickety wooden chair we kept in the back while my father reached for his cabinet. He would grind and pour, slice and drown, and at the end, there would be a little green paper packet of immortality for the old men, cunningly folded to be tucked into a sleeve or a jacket.

My father spoke often of our ancestor Wu Li Huan, who had given the governor of Wu eight hundred years.

“Not a speck of gray in his hair, not a tremor in his writing hand,” my father said.

The old men came for my father's potion two times, three or even four, but they never came after that. My father was no Wu Li Huan, and instead of centuries, he sold months and weeks.

My mother was the second generation to be born to the golden mountain, her English perfect, her Cantonese stilted. Her people hadn't even hoped to serve regional officials while they were in Guangzhou, which my father called home and she never did.

Her immortality, what tiny scraps of it she could claim, was in the trains that raced from coast to coast. Her father worked on the Chinese crews that broke ground for the iron tracks, sometimes only six inches a day through the frozen mountains. She told us he was an enormous man, bearded and broad with a face that was turned red by the cold of Montana.

He bellowed and bullied and coaxed so well that he sent money home, and in return was sent the ambitious village beauty.

To everyone's surprise, they loved each other and would have kept going on together forever if a premature blast had not dropped a mountain on his head, his and his crewmen's.

Forty men, and by then the exclusion acts had barred the way, so she was the only widow.

With her little daughter in tow, she went to live in Los Angeles where there were other Chinese, but she had had enough. When my mother could take a job at the Grandee Hotel at fourteen, her mother left for China, ready to be home.

Sometimes, when the wind blew just the right way, we could hear the trains whistling to each other from the yards, shrill cries of *I am here*, and *do not stop me*. When my mother heard them, her hair blackened slightly from ash to soot and the lines on her face grew just a little less deep.

Like we understood to make wide circles around the drunks on the streets and how calico cats were the luckiest of all, we understood immortality as a thing for men. Men lived forever in their bodies, in their statues, in the words they guarded jealously and the countries they would never let you claim. The immortality of women was a sideways thing, haphazard and contained in footnotes, as muses or silent helpers.

"But things are different here," my mother always said.

She had never set foot in China, would pass all her life on American soil, but she knew how different things could be. She clung to that, and so did we.

III

I ran back to the Comique as often as I could. When my mother gave me a nickel for my lunch, I would go hungry, feeding myself on dreams in black and silver, and then much, much later, miraculously and magnificently, in color. I ran errands for the neighbors when I could get away from the laundry, and when it had been too long since I had last sat on the painfully hard pine benches, I sold another inch of my hair.

The movies on the marquee changed every week, but the ticket taker, gorgeous, smiling, and sly, never did at all. I grew like a weed, but she remained a fixed twenty, which she told me once was just the perfect age for her.

“What about being twenty-five or thirty?” I asked once, while she clipped my hair. There were probably ages beyond that, but at the age of ten, I couldn’t quite imagine it.

“Fine for some people, but not right for me. Forever’s a long time, you know, and it’s no good if you can’t have it like you like best.”

What I liked best was the movies, and for the day the actors opened their mouths and spoke, I gave her a shade of darkness off of my eyes. It was worth it to hear the first tinny voices spilling to the enraptured crowd. It was a revolution, new stars in and old stars out, but in a year, we took it for granted. Movies were a cheap magic, after all, never meant to be beyond our grasp.

I started pinning my hair up to hide how short it was getting, and my father and mother, exhausted by the steam and the weight of so much silk and wool and rayon and polyester on top of us, never even noticed.

Luli noticed. She went with me sometimes into the Comique, wrinkling her nose as if she had smelled something bad, holding her breath as if the vapors would somehow contaminate her.

She liked some of it. She liked the romances, the ones that ended happily with a kiss. There was even a Chinese actress, Su Tong Lin. She always played the daughter of a white man with a painted yellow face, and she always fell in love with a handsome chisel-faced hero who loved another. Luli loved Su Tong Lin, and I think I did too, but I couldn't love her without a twisting in my stomach of mingled embarrassment and confused anger. I went home angry every time she threw herself into the ocean, stabbed herself, threw herself in front of a firing gun for her unworthy love.

It was different from Josephine Beaufort's turn as Juliet, as different as wearing wet silk is from dry. It was Juliet that earned Josephine Beaufort her star, set up high in the Los Angeles firmament. The darkness of the Los Angeles night receded year by year from a city fed on electric lights, but no matter how orange the sky paled, those stars never dimmed. You can still see hers up there, enshrined for her Juliet, her Madame Bovary, and her taste in fast men and even faster cars.

I wasn't thinking of Josephine Beaufort or stars or immortality the day I accidentally wandered into fairyland. One moment I was crossing the invisible border that separates Hungarian Hill and Baker Road, and the next, it was as if the very air turned sharp and chemical. I dodged around a group of people who were standing stock-still on the sidewalk, wondering as I did what was going on, and the next I was nearly rushed off my feet by a man carrying an enormous box over his shoulder.

"Outta the way, asshole," he growled, not stopping to look.

I was twelve, and my startled eyes took it all in at once, the tangle of cords that connected the cameras to their generators, the shades that blocked out the harsh sun, and the lights that gave them a new one. Everyone rushed around so quickly that I thought for certain that there would be some terrible crash, but instead it was as if all of them, cameramen, grips, script girls, and costumers, were on rails. They ruled over their own thin threads, weaving in and out to create a setting fit for ... Maya Vos Santé was what they called an exotic beauty, not quite white but not dark enough to frighten an easily spooked investor. There were rumors of rituals performed in the basements of Everest Studios, peeling away her Mexican features, slivers of her soul and the lightning that danced at her fingertips, leaving behind a face they could call Spanish alone. Rumor had it she held a knife to John Everest's balls until he signed off on passing her

contract to Wolfe. She was so powerful, just beginning to understand how to wield her new glamour, and they would never have let her go otherwise.

She has no star, so you will have to settle for what I saw that late afternoon in 1932.

She was born short but lofted herself high in perilous heels, and her dark hair, piled with artful abandon on her head, made her taller still. She was all hearts: heart-shaped face, pouting lips, round breasts pushed high, and round hips pushed low.

The red dress she wore—which ironically became something of an immortal thing itself after Jane Carter wore it in *High Over the Chasm*—gave her eyes a peculiar cold maroon cast, and when she saw me, they narrowed thoughtfully.

“Hey, Jacko, is this the kid you wanted?”

A big man with small, pale eyes, a toothpick clenched in his teeth, came to look at me. He dressed as rough as any of the men laying wire or manning the cameras, but through all of the chaos, he was the only one who moved slowly, at his own pace.

“The studio never sent one of the kiddies over,” he said with a shrug. “Think they’re all working on that duster over in Agua Dulce, that big thing with Selwyn and Ramone. *Orphan Train* or whatever.”

Maya made a face, which did not make it less beautiful. She pointed a red nail at me.

“Well, she’ll do fine, won’t she?”

Jacko looked dubious, and she turned to me. Her eyes weren’t cold at all, they were melting chocolate, and she smiled with the weight of a blessing falling over my shoulders.

“Won’t you, baby?”

“I will,” I said instantly. “What should I do?”

“A real trouper, huh?” said Jacko with a laugh. “All right, we’ll give it a try. What you’re wearing will be good enough, but stash your shoes and socks somewhere.”

The moment she got her way, Maya lost interest in me. An assistant came forward to straighten out the ruffle at the hem of her red dress, kneeling down like a supplicant, and I was left sitting on the curb and carefully untying my shoes and removing my stocks, trying not to stub my

feet on the scattered pebbles when I stood up. A nicely dressed woman took pity on me.

“Here, honey,” she said. “We’ll wrap them with paper and put them right here so that you can get them later, all right?”

I’m glad she thought of it. My parents would have skinned me if I came home without my shoes, but I never gave it a second thought.

My dress, which Jacko had declared good enough, was a carefully mended calico that hung limp in the heat. It had been made for an adult woman, and though my mother had sewn in the curves, it still hung on me with an irregular kind of frump.

Orders must have been shouted from somewhere, because an assistant director came up to me, thin as a whip, harried and distracted.

“All right, you start here. When Mrs. Vos Santé says, ‘In all my born days, I never saw the likes of you, Richard,’ you run around the corner. Go up to her and beg for change, all right?”

A shiver of shame went through me at his words. I knew what beggars were, people with desperate eyes and clutching hands, trying to grab for whatever extra bit of life they could squeeze out of the day. I looked down at my dress in confusion, because I couldn’t understand what made it a beggar’s dress, and I could see my bare and dusty feet underneath, stepping on each other shyly now.

The assistant director didn’t wait to see if I understood. Instead he left me on my mark and ran to attend to other matters. Time slowed for a moment, solid like it can get when prep pulls out like taffy.

Then I heard the sharp, dry clack of the clapboard, rendering all else silent, and Jacko called out the magic word.

“Action!”

From my spot on the corner, everything seemed dim even as I strained my ears to hear Maya Vos Santé’s words. She was talking with a man about cruelty and how a woman could expect to find nothing but in a world ruled by men.

The man said something utterly forgettable even in my memory, and Maya Vos Santé laughed. The sound was like drops of cold water running down my spine.

“In all my born days, I never saw the likes of you, Richard.”

My cue, though I didn’t even know to call it that yet.

I ran around the corner, stubbing my heel badly on a rock, but I didn't even stumble.

The moment I stepped into the camera's eye, I had entered some kind of magical circle. The air was thicker and somehow clearer, the colors more vibrant than they had been before. I had to stop myself from looking down at my hands, certain that they would be glowing against the umber light.

I stuttered to a stop in front of Maya and the actor. To me, they were both dressed like royalty. My mouth went utterly dry, and there were no words for them. *Beg*, the assistant director had said, but I didn't know how to do that.

I swallowed hard. The click in my throat was so loud that it should have been audible on the reel. The actor just frowned, but Maya was looking at me with concern and warmth, her face tilted to one side like a gentle cat's, so perfect I could have died.

"Please," I managed, my cupped hand coming up slowly.

"Oh, sweetheart," said Maya sadly. I thought I had ruined it all, that she was disappointed, and I would be sent away from this magical world. My eyes filled with tears, but then Maya was digging in her enormous black handbag.

"Here, baby," she said, crouching down to see me almost eye to eye. She pretended to tuck something into my palm, and then she cupped the back of my head with her hand, pulling me forward and pressing a cool kiss to my brow.

"I think you're the special one, Marie," said the actor, and Jacko bawled cut.

The air snapped back to normal, so hard that I could barely breathe. For a brief moment, I could truly see, and now someone had come along and slid transparent snake scales over my eyes. Everything looked so shoddy and so dirty that I could have cried.

I heard some muttering from Jacko and the man with the camera, and he looked up, nodding.

"We got it! Set up for scene fifteen."

Scene fifteen certainly didn't need me. Maya forgot about me the moment the scene was over, and I was bumped and jostled away from the center of cameras and lights, washing up finally next to the nicely dressed woman who had helped me with my shoes before. I noticed that she wore a

silver cuff around her thin wrist, lovely, but so narrow that it could not be removed easily. The word WOLFE was emblazoned on it, and she caught me looking at her curiously.

“I’m under contract at Wolfe,” she said with pride. “Seven years. It means that I can’t take jobs with any of the other big three, and that they’ll have work for me the whole time. I’m not in scene fifteen, but I’m in scenes seventeen and eighteen, which are being shot right after.”

I was duly impressed. At home, the worst thing you could be was without work, and seven years of standing around in nice clothes seemed far better than pushing a blazing-hot iron that seemed to weigh as much as my little sister over an endless line of white shirts.

“What’s your name?” I asked shyly, and her gaze turned wistful. She had remarkable eyes, one blue and one brown, giving her a cheerful, puppyish look.

“They haven’t given me one yet,” she responded.

I sat with her for the next hour as they shot scene fifteen, more complicated than the one I had been in and requiring more takes. That year, Wolfe put out close to three hundred pictures. Speed was key, and even if Jacko was no genius the likes of Dunholme or Lankin, he got the pictures through on time and under budget, better than artistry any day.

My new friend had been whisked away for a final tug at her wardrobe when my mother came looking for me. I saw her standing as confused as I must have been amid the lights and wires, the people all on their own tracks and us without. She looked frightened, slightly disgusted, and confused, and when she saw me, she stalked over, taking my hand.

“Where have you been? We thought you would be back...”

“Oh, hey, you the kid’s mom?”

Jacko came up behind her like a bear, making my mother wheel around in shock. He looked rough, like a man who wouldn’t bother with clean clothes from the good laundry, no one who came into our place.

He reached into his wallet and peeled out a few bills, thrusting them at my mother. My mother didn’t move to take the money from him, and he scowled.

“English? You speak English? Christ...”

“I do,” she said finally, her words clipped. “I will.”

She took the money, even if she had no idea what it was for, and she never took her eyes off of him. If he was discomforted by her gaze, he never showed it.

“Good, good,” Jacko said, crunching on his toothpick. He glanced down at me speculatively.

“She’s cute. I’m shooting down here again in two weeks, the fourteenth. If you bring her back, she can do that too.”

My mother only stared, and with a sigh, Jacko turned to me.

“I heard you, your English is great, ain’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, proud and oddly ashamed at once. My mother’s was just as good.

“Good. Well, you stick around, you do as you’re told, and maybe someday, well, who knows, right? Could be you up there smooching the sheikhs, yeah?”

Something else called for his attention, and my mother was finally allowed to tug me away.

She opened her fist a block away to reveal two ten-dollar bills. It could be used to patch any number of holes in the laundry, and at the height of the Depression, there were many of those.

“What did you do?” she asked, stunned, and I looked down, suddenly ashamed.

I stammered out an explanation, too anxious and overexcited to lie, and her face turned stony. I could see pride warring with the money in her hand. To my mother, there were things we did and things we did not do. What I had done on the movie set ranged back and forth over that line, pacing restlessly.

To my surprise, instead of scolding me or pinching me, she pulled me into an alley. I could smell the starch and lye of the laundry on her, a clean but oppressive scent. The trains had run the night before, and her hair, hanging over her shoulder in a braid, looked like a strip torn out of the world.

“All right,” she said. The money had disappeared into one of the secret pockets sewn into her shirt. “You don’t have to go back if you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” I said instantly, and she frowned.

Still, she gave me her hand to hold all the way back to the laundry, where I helped my sister fold clothes and wrap them up in crinkling paper. I don't know what she told my father, if anything. The money wasn't mine to keep, it wasn't real in any way that mattered to me. There were more important things.

That night, as I stripped down for a shared bath with my sister, Luli looked at me with some consternation.

“What's that on your forehead?”

I pulled down my father's little round shaving mirror to look. There was the faint silvery imprint of a kiss where Maya Vos Santé had kissed me. She hadn't left a trace of rouge on my skin, but she had left something else instead.

I couldn't scrub it away, and despite my sister's uneasy look, I didn't really want to. Fringes were in fashion, and the kiss was covered readily enough. It was not quite a scar, not quite a brand, but more telling than either.