Song 23

Song 23∫ Courtesy Wake Up Call

The first band finished and they turned on the weird electronic rock in the venue. The crush of people relaxed and I felt like I was able to breathe again when I had enough space to get away from Ashton. It had grown hot and humid and I was sweating everywhere. I didn't dare to look at him and see if there was a Vera shaped wet spot in the front of his clothes.	đ
"Phews," Leti half screamed. "That was pretty intense."	
"You don't say," Addy piped in. "And that was just a cover band."	
"Yeah, but what you don't know is that these are the best cover bands in the country right now." Link had our attention as he explained, that today was the final of a year long competition that engaged bands from all over the country, and today the champion cover band was going to be chosen. "I'm going to be pretty disappointed if anybody but the Queen cover wins."	
"What's their name?" I asked.	
He grinned. "Yas Queen."	d ⁵
Ayrton laughed. "What are they? A gayer version of the original?"	5
"You'll see."	
That colored me intrigued.	ਕੋ
Leti slid up to me. "Your friends are pretty interesting."	5
"They're not my-" but I didn't finish that sentence. I looked as Ayrton teased DeAndre about something, and as Ash, Link and Addy were engaged in conversation as though there hadn't been years of barely talking to each other between them, and I realized that well, I didn't hang out with anybody else at school. And when they weren't giving me sass, they were pretty nice to me. So I guessed it wasn't a wild stretch of the imagination to say they were my friends.	
Ashton's eyes shi ed to me and I looked away.	
Except him. It was stranger with him.	a
"Yeah, I guess," I told Leti at last.	
"That was amazing," the older guy said back in the microphone suddenly, drawing our attention back to him. "But we have a lot le in store for you all. Up next, let's welcome these guys from Seattle, Washington. They're called E ervescent."	ď
Ashton gasped so loud that we all looked at him.	
"Vera, you gotta see these guys."	
I was about to tell him that yes, I was short, but I could still see them. But all that died in my lips when he grabbed my hand and led me through the throngs of people all the way up to the front. I stood by the barrier and felt him slide behind me. I turned with di iculty and glared.	a
"Why did you bring me out front? Do you want me to die crushed by everybody?"	a
His eyes were wide and fixed on the band members as they walked up stage. But he still replied, "Don't worry, I won't let that happen." His eyes shi ed down to me. "These are the guys I brought you to see."	
I turned back to them and the only thing I found remarkable was that there was a girl among them.	a
"Why?" Lasked him.	

But then the first notes of a song I recognized came up and I froze. When the girl grabbed the mic and started singing, I felt a shiver run through my spine. I felt the tension coiling Ashton's muscles tight

against my frame, and at that second I didn't have to guess why. It wasn't because of the crowd. It was because of the music. That electricity coming out of the band was passing through to us and I felt my body respond to the call. My mouth opened and the lyrics poured out of me. Ashton's body and mine moved together as if taken by the music. I felt his voice vibrate against me as he sang along to the man's lyrics.	
It was like we were submerged in our own concert.	
It was like my blood was running through my veins for the first time.	a
I thought the singer was looking at me as we sang the last few notes together. It felt like she was challenging me.	
The roar around us was deafening once the song ended, but I ignored that and pivoted to look at my companion. My eyes were wide as I looked up at his grin. It was wide and fierce. Predatory, even.	
With my heart racing I told him, "I can do it better."	a
"I know." He leaned his forehead against mine. His eyes burned me. "And I can give this to you. All of it. The crowd, the music, the magic. You just have to want it, too."	2 ⁶
The next song started. I didn't know it, so I couldn't sing it along. Without ever having heard the original, I knew I could sing it better than the girl on stage. I knew I could put more emotion into it. More intensity. More.	~
By the time this band was done and we were able to find the rest of the group again, I was positively bouncing. This feeling. This precisely, was what my ma had chased all her youth. It was what I craved and never felt myself worthy. Ashton thought I was. He wanted to give this to me. And at that second, between screeching	
guitars and the swaying crowd, I wanted him to.	a
I lost track of time as one tribute band a er another appeared on stage. Yas Queen really was the best. Even the most brown people in the place, Leti, DeAndre and I knew a lot of Queen songs that we could sing along to. But without being an expert I could tell that these guys had a domain on their instruments that went beyond just	2
imitating. It was a shame they didn't have their own songs.	a
They won the contest by a landslide, and when we finally made it outside Link gloated about it.	
"Well, at least I didn't waste having to pay for seven tickets for that."	
I looked down at my hands in the glow of the a ernoon sunshine. They were shaking. My breath was coming out shallow and rushed, as if I'd ran.	;
"I feel the same way, too," Ashton said out of the blue. We all looked at him like he'd grown crazy. But his eyes were on me and I felt a zap of electricity between us. My skin crawled into goosebumps. He gave me the wolfish grin again. "I know just what can take the edge o ."	
DeAndre took a step forward. "Just wait a second, Vera's a clean girl."	a
My eyebrows crashed into a frown and it took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. I nearly jumped out of my skin.	
"No, DeAndre. He's not talking about drugs!" I stopped waving my hands in defense and narrowed my eyes at Ashton. "Right?"	a
He touched his chest. "I'm wounded." His Caribbean blue eyes rolled. "But definitely not. I have something way better in mind."	
Sex? But I didn't say this because there were so many people coming out of the venue at the same time that we had to get out of the way, so we started heading back to the strip club. Which was the weirdest thing I'd done all year, in what the past couple of months had already proved to be the quirkiest of my short 17 years so far. I ended up bundled back into the Jeep, and Ashton drove without a peep of where the destination was. DeAndre followed behind us and I felt relieved that whatever it was, at least he'd have my back.	
All questions vanished once we parked, got out of the cars and saw a gigantic neon sign that read karaoke.	
I whirled toward the evil twin. "Really?"	
The good twin, the one who didn't give me crap all the freaking time, clapped a couple of times. "This is a great idea! We used to come here all the time with Madison and Quinn, didn't we?"	2
Ashton ignored that. He folded his arms and li ed his chin, looking me dead in the eye. "I challenge you to give me a better show than those bands."	
Leti cleared her throat but I knew how perverted her mind was and chose to ignore her. It was the best way I could devise to not end up embarrassing myself in front of everybody.	a
I li ed my eyebrows and imitated his stance. "Oh yeah? What's in it for me?"	
The corner of his lips li ed. "A whole night of rough, hot-"	ສໍ
I punched him in the shoulder at the same time as I, very loudly, said,	

DeAndre's eyes shot daggers as he pulled out his car keys, but I was distracted by Ashton's laughter. "Okay, okay. How about I make your homework for a week?"

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"DeAndre, can you please take me home?"

Addy snorted. "V's a way better student than you are, why would she do that?"

"V?" Leti asked me, hearing the nickname for the first time. I just shrugged.

"Good point," Ashton said as he rubbed his nape. He looked around for help and when no one gave him any suggestions, he said, "I'll owe you one?"

I looked o in thought. That could be interesting. I smiled a little at	
the glimmer of fear in his eyes.	đ
"Anything?" I asked.	

He swallowed hard. "Deal?" đ

I tried to give him the same evil smile he'd given me earlier as I grabbed his hand and shook it. "Deal."

As we walked into the karaoke bar I had a thought that these rich kids probably had better stu to do with their lives on a Saturday night. While I was supposed to stay at home in my barrio, doing homework and babysitting the insatiable ball of energy and malignant gas that was my little brother, I was sure there was some fancy gala in town or some sort of wild party with famous DJs o of a nearby island that they skipping. Instead we were all together at a dinghy karaoke bar, in the middle of nowhere in Orlando, too far removed from anything fun to capture tourists, and too in the middle of the mundane life to even attract the locals.

Ayrton ran to the stage and grabbed the microphone. He tested that it was on and looked around him with a wide smile. It was just us, the bartender and a waiter.

"Alright everybody let's get some hype going on." He hooted and hollered and only Leti joined in for the fun of it. "We're gathered here together for our very own battle of the greats. On one corner we have Ashton W, king of broken hearts and loud farts." a

We lost it at that and cracked up laughing. It was even better when said king bent down and pulled out a shoe that he threw at his brother with shocking accuracy, socking him in straight in the money maker. The resulting yelp only made me laugh more. ď

When Ayrton recovered he pointed to me. "On the other corner we have Vera With A Very Long Name, queen of curls and sass because, yas, girl." I bowed to the attending applause, not even bothering to hide my amusement. Ayr continued, "Who is going to be our first contender?"

สํ At that moment the waiter walked up to us. He looked nearly bored to tears.

"Y'all can have your fun if you buy something."

Link didn't seem to be a person who could let a chance go past him,	
and he shot his shot. "One round of beers for everybody."	a
The waiter deflected said shot easily. "Good try. One round of cokes coming. Do you want to start a tab?"	ືສ
Link groaned. "Aw, man," but he still gave the other man his credit	

"Alright," Ashton said then. "I'll go first."

He lost some of his coolness as he limped up the stage to retrieve his shoe and put it back on. He exchanged a few low words with his brother who moved over to the console of the karaoke machine. Ayr gave his brother a thumb up as he passed him the microphone. ส์

"Hey V," he said as he pointed at me. And smirked. Which meant that whatever he said next was going to raise my hackles. "I'm going to start easy, okay?"

Bastard.

card.

Ayr jumped out of the stage to join us and Link asked him, "What song did he choose?"

I leaned closer to hear what he'd say, but the waiter came with the drinks at that moment and distributed them among the two tables we'd hijacked all the way to the front by the small stage.

Ayr smirked, and although he looked exactly the same as his brother, he didn't give o the same vibe of trouble.

"Courtesy Call," was all he said.

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Link's eyebrows went up. "Ohh, he's throwing the gauntlet. Frankly, I'm shocked they even had that song."

Ayr shrugged and took a sip of his coke. "Their system's hooked up to the internet, I just went online and found it there."

Without warning Ashton stated with a hey-o

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My attention turned to him. He stood in the middle of the stage looking at me like he knew I was going to get pissed in a second. I kinda jumped when he raised his voice in tune to the music and nearly fell back from my chair as the guitars exploded in the speakers.

I turned around. Everybody, including the two employees, looked pretty una ected at the volume. I guessed the bartender and waiter were used to the noise already, and my friends had grown deaf from the concert.	
But I could feel the petulance in Ash's voice and it made my blood boil.	
I felt the shi as he moved on the stage. I forgot about our surroundings and focused on him. He was a one man show. Moving in tune to the music and his voice as though he were the original singer at his own concert. As though his blood reacted to the music like it was his.	්
It was waking something in me that had me balling my hands into fists.	a
When he was done he spread his arms wide open and our friends clapped and hooted at him. He bowed in thanks and dropped the mic in the universal symbol of killing the game. That earned us a scolding from the bartender.	
I didn't know what it was, but something took me up to the stage. I walked up to him and stood almost chest to chest. He looked down at me with a little smile that made me want to snarl.	:
There was a whistle followed by Leti's voice. "Vamos Vera! Show him what you got, mamacita!"	a
That broke me away from the staring contest. I rolled my eyes at her. "Really?"	
She laughed and gave me two thumbs up.	
I felt his hand on my elbow bring my attention back to him. "Let's give them a show, yeah?"	2
My face flushed because, between Leti's not so subtle jokes and the incessant innuendo spilling out of his mouth, whether he knew it or not. I didn't know what to think. But he walked me toward the karaoke machine and my eyes widened when I saw what he meant. He selected our song and found a second microphone.	a
"Ready for our first stage?" he asked me.	
I felt it again. That frantic tingling like there was something inside of me that wanted to come up. I faced our audience and smiled at their confusion. I suddenly understood Ashton's intentions. It hadn't been to give them a battle of the singers.	
His intention was to wow them.	
The music started. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth.	đ
SONG OF THE DAY: Thousand Foot Krutch - Courtesy Call	d ³