

## Song 28 J Freaks Without A Leash

It occurred to me that if I was going to do this thing I better be prepared. In a way, I've always been behind schedule. Born without a regular family, in a country with customs that were foreign to my mother who has basically trialled and erred throughout my life to learn how to play by the local rules. With no health insurance, no benefits, no solid education. We've never spoken about it, it was too risky, but I was sure that ma had married the gringo, not because he was a prince who arrived to sweep her o her feet, but because he was the first American man who liked her enough to marry her and secure her permanent stay in this country.

This wasn't normal. I was not normal.

I was the daughter of a failed singer who got knocked up at 19 by her business manager. A man who disappeared from her life soon a er. a

And I inherited one thing from both of them. My desire to be on stage.

A er the auditions, my head was dancing with the understanding that I lost the battle. That this band was happening. And that I was going to give it a try. Not just because I gave Ashton my word, but because I'd never been, until that night, closer to living out my fantasy. Sure, Leti, DeAndre and the others from my barrio liked it when I sang salsa and merengue songs at parties, but that wasn't anywhere close to the euphoria I felt in the crowd at that rock concert my friends took me to.

I wanted that. I craved to see if I had it in me to cause that kind of reaction. I needed to know if I could be anything more than the short, fat Latina girl with the untamable curls and a penchant for squirming under attention.

I went back into my dorm room, put on my headphones and looked up that band on Youtube, the one that had the only rock song I even knew how to sing. At first the music was too strident for my taste, it didn't make me want to shake my hips. But then I started to weed out the details. The dark lyrics. The overlapping melodies and the emotion coming from each instrument. Drama. Pain.

I fucking loved it.

I didn't sleep a wink that night. Listening to di erent songs on repeat, then going down the rabbit hole of Youtube's next recommendations. Some were from the same band, but somewhere around 2am I begun listening to other bands. đ

If anyone asked me, I'd never have described this music as soothing, yet I eventually found myself dri ing o to sleep, and as Youtube kept suggesting one song a er the next, I had the most amazing dream. a

Pitch black. A single spotlight in the middle, the light broken by wisps of curling smoke. My feet were moving, compelled by something I couldn't explain. As I walked closer to the light, I could see that there was something under it, just within my reach.

## A microphone.

I saw my hand reaching for it, as though I was outside of my own body. But I still felt my lips part, I felt the breath going into my lungs. And then...

"Are you ready?" I asked. In my more conscious mind I wondered who I was asking that to. The nothingness in front of me? Myself?

And then a million voices replied all at once. What I thought was pitch black lit up like the sky at night, full of stars. But they weren't stars. They were the flashes of cameras, of flashlights.

## I was the star.

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I jolted awake so hard that my torso sprang forward. And then I saw a di erent set of stars as my forehead collided with something.

"Agh!"

The voice was a strange one in my room. I tried to rub o the throbbing ache from my forehead and saw Madison standing next to my bed, clutching her head like she was trying to keep it from splitting open. a

"Do you have bricks for a head?" she asked me, glaring through teary eyes.

I fell back on my bed and curled into a ball. Through gritted teeth I asked her, "It's your fault for doing whatever it was that made you stand so close to me. What the hell are you doing here?"

Had she been about to shave o my eyebrows or something?

That was when I realized that the commotion had woken up Addy, who also had tears in her eyes but from trying so hard not to laugh. a

"What?" I asked her, fiddling with my face. "Did she do something to me?"

"Okay, stop. I'm not a cartoon villain." Madison sighed and put her hands on her hips. "I was just trying to wake you up and take you to our very first band practice."

My heart jolted. I looked at my roommate for some sort of comfort but she was sliding out of her bed.

"Awesome, you guys tell me all about it on Monday because I'm going home today."

"Gee whiz, thanks for the support."

Addy laughed. "You don't need me, all you need is your lungs."

Some half hour later, even without having any breakfast first, I somehow found myself jogging on the same treadmill that Ashton used to torture me when we were first meeting a er class.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, waving my arms around with what little strength I had le . The band looked at me but o ered little sympathy. By the looks on their faces it seemed stranger of me to ask them this question, than it was that all four of them were just casually lounging all around me as I panted and dropped buckets of sweat. "Are you all implying I'm fat and you're not?"

The boys had dragged a mat from the gym and were all sprawled on it. Ashton put his hands behind his head, his eyes glinting in a way that I did not like at all.

"Li your heels," he said as I made sure that my t-shirt was covering my mu ing top. I paused the motion enough to flip him the bird. "Rock 'n roll attitude, I like it."

Link snorted. "I think she's very plainly telling you to fuck o ."

"I," I started, and paused so I could gulp in some oxygen. "Am."

Cross legged an arm's length away, Madison looked all around her with her chin resting on her fist. "Okay, so what are we doing here?"

Ashton tore his eyes away from my torture device to look at her. "We're helping Vera to gain some stamina so she can sing for an entire concert."

I gritted my teeth. I wanted to say that I doubted all singers did this, but then again I did remember my ma working out like an athlete when I was young. And she did go on singing for hours.

"Yeah, but a er that, what?" she asked. "Do we even have a band name?"

"Casual Friday Funeral," Ash and Link said in unison. I groaned. "What? It rolls o the tongue," Link said.

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The only other person who was also drenched was Quinn. He was still wearing his baseball uniform from this morning's practice, stained with mud front and back. He drank from the biggest water bottle I'd ever seen and did give me something of a pitying look for a quick second. I didn't know if it was caused by my sorry state at the moment or the shitty band name I came up with by accident.

Link took charge then. "We need to establish the direction of our band. What kind of sound do we want? What is the feeling we want to evoke?" a

"Feeling?" Madison asked, sweeping her blonde hair back and looking at each of us in turn. "I just thought we were banging at some drums until it sounds cool." ď

Ashton's blue eyes rolled and fixed on the heavens, or in this case the ceiling. "Music is art, Madison. Did you spend all your visits to the Louvre taking selfies, or actually dissecting the pieces and finding their meaning?"

I lost my footing for a second. "You've been more than once?"

She shrugged. "I thought the montage I made of the Venus de Milo with my arms holding a glass of a champagne and a cigarette was

pretty cool. Better than my selfies, even."	a
That was too much to process for my oxygen deprived brain.	
In a fluid motion, Ash sat up and whirled to face her. "Let me paint you this picture. You're at a stadium, waiting for your favorite team to come out — the Knights of Trinity, even. You're waiting for your boyfriend here to come out onto the pitch." We all looked at Quinn then and the guy froze midway while taking his water bottle to his lips. Then Ash continued, "And people suddenly start stomping. There's a rhythm to it that you can recognize. Two stomps, one clap."	
"We Will Rock You by Queen," Link said with a nod. "A masterpiece. Simple melody, an ear worm. Gets stuck in your head easily."	đ
"But that's not all." The way Ash spoke was with reverence, like he was at Church and we were his congregation on a Sunday morning. "It's a song that is so engrained into our psyche, generation a er generation, that we might as well have been born with the chords entwined in our DNA. When you hear it, your body reacts. You want to join it, keep the music going, escalate that feeling of"	<b>a</b> °
"Belonging," Link said, a man converted to the cult. "Team."	a
"It goes way beyond coolness," Ash finished o . "So, again. What kind	
of feeling do we want to cause?"	
Before I was able to stop myself, I rasped out, "Euphoria."	a
All eyes turned to me. I wished Ash or Lincoln would explain what I meant, but they also waited for me. I had to put the treadmill on pause and chug some water, at which point my stomach croaked in hunger and I felt like if I spoke, more air would come into it and make me fade away. With wobbly legs I walked over and plopped myself down on the mat. "That," I begun. "Is what I felt at the concert."	
"What concert?" Madison asked, but Ash silenced her with a finger to	
his lips.	a
"Keep going, V." "Is there going to be food a er this?" I asked.	
He smiled. "An all you can eat bu et, on me."	ස්
I produced enough mojo to smack him on the leg because the school cafeteria was for free anyway. But I went on. "I mean, even though I was part of the crowd, it felt like I was feeding o of their energy. And imagine just how much greater that feeling would be if we were the ones on stage instead." "And you only get back what you give," Link added, running his	a
fingers through his long, glossy hair. "So in other words, you want music that is exciting. That makes you feel alive."	
Somehow when he said it my entire body got covered in	
goosebumps. "Yes."	
Ashton's smile touched his eyes and showed all his teeth. "That's a good start."	
"Okay, so we play hard and we play fast," Quinn added then. "We're missing something key. What is it that Vera is going to sing?"	
"Lyrics." Then Link pulled out a notebook from under him. "I have some ideas."	
Ashton folded his arms. "So do I."	
"Me too," Madison surprised us by saying. She flashed a brilliant smile. "What? I have a lot of shit to say."	a
They looked at the other boy and I and we both shook our heads.	ສື
Ashton hu ed out a breath. He got into a discussion with Link and Madison over whether it'd be best to create music around existing lyrics, provided they passed a test of democracy among the five of us, or the other way around. Or at least that was what my starved, non musician brain could understand.	
Quinn cleared his throat until the conversation ground into a halt. "We have another important thing to consider. We'll need practice time."	
Oh, yeah. Small detail. All of us safe him were part of the music club, which meant we have a similar schedule that we could work around, but he was on a completely di erent one. The baseball team seemed to practice every waking moment when it was not away on games. This was going to be tough.	-5
A not so nice smirk drew Ashton's lips up. "So you really think your team stands a chance this year?"	a
I thought Quinn would get mad or hurt, but instead the same expression appeared on his face. "You asked the same thing last year	
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Madison turned her back to them. "Anyway. I suggest we at least meet every weekend."	6
"I'm totally fine with that," I surprised them all by saying. They didn't know it was because I welcomed more time away from the gringo's house. "As long as I can still get my homework done and ace my assignments."	
"Okay, now that we have a plan," Ash said, as if mocking the fact that we, in fact, did not have a plan. He shimmied his hips until he was able to pull a piece of paper out from his back pocket. Then he unfolded it and slammed it in between all of us. "We can start preparing for this."	
Central Florida Battle of the New Bands	6
It was as if the air was sucked out of the room and none of us could breathe. Like a murder of crows, we descended on the paper like it was a piece of meat.	
November 22nd.	6
Open to all new bands who think they can make it.	
1st Prize: Contract with a record label.	6
2nd Prize: Demo session AND pitch with a record label.	
3rd Prize: Professional demo recording session.	6
Sponsored by a local rock radio station that would play all winners songs a er the show.	
"Hell yeah!" Link's scream had me jumping out of my skin. "We're doing this!"	
"Holy" Quinn wasn't able to even finish his sentence.	
Madison leaned back. "So you never gave up on your dream, huh?"	
"Never," Ash admitted. "It's just that now we do stand a chance."	
They'd probably talked about this before the whole drama went down, especially since all three of them used to play together.	
But now I was involved, too.	
Slowly I li ed my eyes. "Do you think we could even get third?"	6
"Third?" Ash put his hands on his chest in o ense. And then he leaned forward, closer to me, his face morphing into that look of a hungry hunter. He said, "I think we can get first."	
In retrospective, that was probably the moment it all changed for us,	

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"Turd."

and these five freaks dared to spread their wings and fly.	a
SONG OF THE DAY: Korn - Freak On A Leash	a