Song 35♪ Enter Sad-Man

We remained in lockdown for a month, just as the nuns promised. It was a fucking blessing. My ma did a lot of screaming over the phone, but it was easier to cope with it when I was surrounded by a group of people I felt I could really call my friends, as we did a lot of cool things together. We wrote more songs together as we watched the view count of our amateur music video escalate by the day. Link was quick to appropriate the credit for that after he posted the song on his Spotify account and directed all his social media followers to the Youtube link.

He rubbed his shoulder off for show one day. "What? You thought I was just the pretty, Asian token boy in the band? Bitch please. You're all gonna make it because I want it that way."

To which our collective response had been to sing Backstreet Boys' I Want It That Way because we knew it'd piss him off. Also because we knew he was probably right.

Another thing that also annoyed the whole hell out of him? When Madison flipped her now jet black hair and said, "Puh lease, it's because of how sexy I look in the video. Those views are all for me."

And she also had a good point. I was stricken by her the first time I saw the official cut of Ayr's video. She moved fluidly with the melody, her body swaying in a way that was almost artistic as she played her bass and flipped her hair around like a goth siren. Like she was an expert at working the camera and this was not her first rodeo.

Our favorite pastime between lessons and at the cafeteria was reading the comments that people were leaving. There were generic ones that said cool songs as well as others that said u suck. But a few in between were more substantial and those were the ones we lived for.

"The dude in the guitar is super talented and hot," Ashton read with a shit eating grin that I wanted to smack off his face. I rolled my eyes and he latched on to that to ask, "Are you jealous, V?"

"Of your self esteem, yeah."

He scooted closer with his iPad. "You got some good comments, too. See? This one likes your hair."

I sighed. I guessed it was a compliment, but I was actually pretty annoyed that I wanted more.

I could see why my ma upended her entire life back in Venezuela to see if she had a shot at living off of this feeling of being seen and loved.

By the time we were finally allowed to have a weekend outside of the school, we'd arranged to go to a couple of underground places that Ashton had checked out online, but actually never been to, to see what the Orlando rock scene was like.

"For research purposes," he explained as we were on the way to the venue, crammed in his Jeep. "Most likely some of these bands will be part of the contest too."

When we walked into the place, there was a band playing on stage some kind of fast rock with high pitched guitars that was making my teeth rattle and my brain melt. I felt the sudden need to listen to some old school merengue or even Selena songs to cleanse back my palate. I heard Ash and Link talking about it, some heavy duty progressive metal type shit, they said, but the only two words I latched onto were the latter two.

"This is horrible!" I shouted at them and even they had to agree.

Unfortunately for us, the three other bands we saw that night were a lot better. I couldn't put my finger on why because I didn't have the jargon to describe it. In one band the drummer was an absolute beast, it seemed like he was hitting all the drums at once. In another one the combination of the singer and the lead guitar was what carried the entire show. They had so much chemistry that I felt jealous one second and flustered the next, when Ash leaned down to me and promised that we could replicate that. I spent most of the night glued to his side, his arm around me and I was surprised with how comfortable it was.

At one point I excused myself to the restroom and Madison and Ayrton decided to tag along. There were a couple of girls in the women's bathroom grading the looks of the different guys they'd seen on stage and it struck me that, not only hadn't I even noticed that, but I also realized I hadn't seen a single girl on stage that night.

"Just you wait," Madison told me as we washed our hands and I mentioned this. "Once we walk onto that stage at the battle of the new bands, we'll be a sensation for being a band with two girls who can kick ass."

"I know you do, but me?" I asked, scoffing.

She rolled her eyes as she drew her hands with her jeans, since there were no paper towels available. The picture of seeing a super rich girl doing this with ease made me smile.

"Fine, if you're fishing for compliments I'll give you one." She paused and flicked my forehead. "You need to give better credit to yourself because you do kick some fucking ass."

I stared at her back as she left the bathroom. Then I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Chub brown girl with a mass of curls and an uncertain dimply smile. I wiped it off and painted on a fresher, more confident look on my face. I'd never really thought of myself as a person who needed external validation, but at that second I understood that I was. It was always me who was beating myself down. I was too short. I was too fat. My hair was too curly. My muffin top was too visible. And yet I had people in my life who told me I was good at something, valuable to them, in their own little ways and I was reluctant to believe them.

I tilted my head at myself and asked aloud, "Well, what happens if I start to believe them?"

It was as if the answer came when I stepped outside of the bathroom and found Ayrton outside.

"I was waiting for you."

My eyebrows went up. "You were?"

"Yeah, I was hoping we could maybe catch a word away from the others."

We moved to a corner by the bar, where we could see the other guys standing in the crowd but were definitely not going to be overheard.

He surprised me by saying, "You know if I were straight I'd be wrestling my brother for you."

" What?"

Ayrton laughed, easy and deep. "I mean, you're pretty extraordinary, you know? Smart, talented and real pretty. Even I can see what he sees in you."

I gave him a wan smile. "Looks like both brothers are blind."

"No, I'm serious." And then his expression did in fact turn serious. "If it weren't for you Ash maybe would never have gathered the nerve to go find me in Sarasota. If it weren't for you standing up to our father in jail — which was fucking metal by the way-"

"Thanks?" I asked.

"You're welcome — if it weren't for that and what you told Mother Superior that night, I'd probably still be in hiding, moping about how nobody accepts me."

My jaw hung for a moment. I looked at this boy who was gorgeous and sweet and friendly and couldn't imagine what he'd gone through. I'd grown up looking at people of wealth as though they had no care in the world, as though they didn't even have a fleck of a problem, but some issues didn't give a damn about wealth or poverty. I didn't know what to tell him. I hadn't set out to be a crusader. I struggled every day with just trying to understand my own place in the world.

"That wasn't on me, Ayr. That was all on your brother." Because credit where it was due, I thought. "Sure, he was slow on the uptake, but he was the one who decided to make the trip to see you and I just tagged along. And after the party, I recall he was the one standing next to you as you faced off with your dad."

"And you were his moral support all along." He rocked on the balls of his feet and added, "And you also got him talking to his old pals again."

"Now you're reaching." My eyes rolled. "That was all on them, I don't even know how they decided to make peace again."

"How?" Ayrton asked me, blinking owlishly at me. "He accepted them in his band just that he could have you in it, too. Don't you remember?"

I pursed my lips. "He told you about that?"

"Oh yeah, he was real pleased he convinced you just as he was mad that he'd have to deal with his ex BFFs."

"Okay, here's the thing." I folded my arms. "You're making it all sound like I'm some great Mother Theresa when I was just standing around throughout all of this, scared out of my mind for one reason or another."

I looked at the others and made eye contact with Quinn. He tilted his head toward me with a cute little smile that made me feel like he was proving Ayrton's point somehow. I wasn't some sort of glue that brought all these people together. They'd just needed a push and things just kind of happened. I was sure it'd have worked out fine if our paths had never crossed.

"That might be so but you're the one who made all of this happen," he said and contradicted everything I thought. I snapped my focus back to him. "We were all here before, making the same stupid mistake of not being honest to each other. As soon as you came in, you shook everything up." He put his hand on my shoulder and looked deep into my eyes. "You need to give yourself more credit, because from where I'm standing you're pretty damn great and I'm thankful you're in our lives."

It took me a surprising amount of time to compose myself after that. I hung out with the guys as we watched the show and drank sodas, but my chest was constricted with the need to cry.

I wasn't used to feeling... appreciated.

I thought about this a lot as the twins drove me home that night. That I'd sought this from my weird family my entire life and instead got it from this weird rag tag group of people who, at a glance, I had nothing in common with.

As Ashton pulled the Jeep to a stop by the curb of the gringo's house, he turned to face me and asked, "So, what'd you think about tonight?"

"Eye opening," I said. In more ways than one.

"I only have one complaint," Ayr said from the backseat. He leaned forward and stuck his head in between Ash and I. "There was nowhere near enough kissing."

Ashton groaned and I gave out this weird nervous laugh I'd never heard come out of myself. Then there was a knock on my window and once I turned reflexively to see who it was, my stomach plummeted.

It was the gringo.

"Who is that?" Ash asked, his voice on edge.

I swallowed. "My step father."

Said man motioned for me to roll down my window. I honestly didn't want to, but I had little choice.

As soon as I did the stench of alcohol wafted into my nostrils. He leaned on the car and looked at the passengers.

"Two boys bringing you home together?" He whistled, and the way he'd said it made bile rise in my throat. "I didn't know you had it in you. Is this what you've been up to in that fancy school of yours?"

I heard a sharp intake of breath next to me.

"Where's ma?" I asked through gritted teeth, reaching out in the dark to grab Ashton's hand.

"Waiting for you inside, or would you like to stay with your little rich buddies here?"

"Maybe she should," Ashton said with a clipped tone that reminded me of his dad.

"Yeah, maybe she should," the gringo said with a nasty smile.

Ma came out of the house at that moment looking like a fury. And here I'd thought it couldn't get any worse.

"Vera Maria, what have I told you about hanging out with these boys?" She swept a nasty look at Ashton, since he was the only one she could see from a couple of paces behind her husband. "They're the sons of a client and not people you're ever going to see after you're through with high school. You should pay more attention to your studies than to your hormones, if that's what this is about."

My face burned and my heart hammered with shame and anger.

I tried to please her for so long that I never raised my voice back at her. I never contradicted her. I tried to be obedient and good and this was unfair.

"With all due respect, ma'am," Ash said at the same time as he laced his fingers with mine and squeezed my hand. "You're absolutely wrong. We are going to keep seeing each other well after high school."

Ayrton said a, "yep."

The gringo threw his head back and laughed and swayed. "Your girl had a way better strategy than you, Victoria. Unlike you at least it looks like she nabbed someone with money."

As I saw my ma's face tighten and turn ashen I realized that the whole reason why this conversation was happening had been because they'd been in a fight and were using me to nip at each other. In front of my friends.

I took a deep breath, let Ashton's hand go and unfastened my seatbelt. I jumped out of the car and slammed the door shut.

"Thanks for bringing me home, you guys. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

Ash's face turned to stone, and his brother asked, "Are you sure?"

I nodded and before I could change my mind swiveled around and headed into the house. I found my baby brother peeping from the hallway. He dashed into his room and I followed him inside too.

"They were screaming," he said, his eyes wide. It wasn't terribly uncommon but that didn't mean we were unfazed when it happened. I felt my phone buzz in my pockets but I ignored it as I picked Victor up and sat him on my lap.

The front door was slammed closed and there was a tense calm for a quick moment. Then the bedroom door was swung open and ma stood there, ready to offload all her anger on me. She'd always said she married him for love but I'd never been convinced that somebody could feel that for a drunk ass who was content on cruising through life with little work, while his immigrant wife slaved away cleaning other people's homes seven days a week. She'd got papers through marrying him but also got him as a reward.

"I didn't send you to that school so that you could be chasing around rich boys and embarrassing me in the process!"

I snapped.

"Embarrassing you?" I asked. "How?"

She pointed a finger at me like an accusation. "Not focusing in school and wasting every moment you can having fun with them."

I rolled my eyes. I was done with tip toeing around her moods and wants. I was done putting myself second.

"You say it like having fun is a bad thing."

"Having fun is what got me pregnant with you!" Even though I froze, she didn't stop there. "Having fun chasing a stupid dream is what got me pregnant and so broke that I couldn't even afford a ticket to fly back home. I had to stay in this country and raise you all by myself, to see you act like a spoiled malagradecida!"

My brother ran away crying and I was glad, because then he wouldn't hear what I was going to say next.

I stood up and even though my heart was breaking into a tiny million pieces, I spoke in the calmest voice I'd ever mustered as I said, "You know what, mamá, I'm sorry your life didn't turn out the way you wanted it. But that is not my fault and I'm sick and tired of you taking that out on me every time you feel bad about yourself." I lifted my chin. "And I reject your notion that no matter how hard I try to be good, a good daughter, a good student, a good freaking person, you seem to think I'll turn out just like you. Because I won't."

I left her standing there, stunned. I walked out of the front door, ignoring the gringo's screams asking where I was going. I was going to crash at Leti's for the night, but as soon as I came outside I was floored to see the white Jeep still parked by the curb, and the twins waiting outside. I took a step forward and then picked up the pace and ran into Ashton's arms, already unable to stop the tears from falling.

"Take me away," I told him as I hugged him tight. I felt him move before he wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my hair.

"Anytime," he murmured.

So they whisked me away and although I came back to the house in the barrio the next day, ma and I were never the same we were before that night. And I couldn't be any more fucking glad for it.

SONG OF THE DAY: Metallica - Enter Sandman