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Song 7♪ Stairway To Who Even

**Knows** 

"Is there any alcohol in here?" I asked Addy as we had lunch on the same table. "I think I'm going to need it." She flipped the pages of Vogue with one hand and held a pizza slice with the other. Without looking up she said, "You'll be fine. Ashton will give you one lesson to get the teachers o his back and then go o to do whatever his thing is. Girls, I guess." "I don't care about that." But I lied. I did care. I just didn't care to share that the reason I was dreading himwas because he forgot about me cleaning his bathroom. "I didn't sign up to this school to... sing. That wasn't even on my admission letter." Her eyes dri ed to mine for a second. "Seems to me like that's what they admitted you for, though." She took a large bite of food and, with her mouth full, said, "You must be something else for that kind of praise from Mr. Burlington. Did you know that our school has won awards for small chamber pieces before?" My eyes were wide as saucers. "I don't even know what that is." And this. This was the thing that distracted me. I spent the rest of the a ernoon surreptitiously looking at my phone, googling things like what is a chamber piece, what is an orchestra, what does a singer do in an orchestra. And the answer to the last question was terrifying. If Google were a smartass it'd have replied they sing, duh, but instead a bunch of opera singers came as result. I was hyperventilating by the time the last lesson was done. And I hadn't made good notes on the lessons. I jumped at Addy and held her by the arm. "Help." She patted the top of my head. "You're gonna be fine." I gaped as she le . Our friendship was still new but I felt betrayed. Someone cleared their throat and I turned to find the perfect guy standing there with his guitar case. I pursed my lips. It was becoming a reflex every time I saw him. "So, Vera," he said, running a hand through his annoyingly silky hair. It wasn't right that his hair was that smooth and shiny and mine was the next best thing to barbed wire. "I'm Ashton, you can call me Ash. Or Ashton. Whichever's fine." I was going to call him never that was for sure. Even though I didn't like him, I was still trained by my ma's chancla to be polite. "Nice to meet you, I guess." But I couldn't help adding that last little passive-aggressive tag there. I avoided looking at his face because it made me nervous, so instead I zeroed in on his guitar. "So, um. What is it that we're doing?" He waited until the last few people le the room until he replied. "To be honest, I don't know yet. I don't know where you're at." I shrugged. "I can't read music or play fancy instruments or sing in other languages." A true smile escaped me. "Aside from Spanish. But I don't really think Miss Prissy would like to play the violin for a Selena song." His lips slowly stretched into a smirk that lit his blue eyes up in amusement. "I'd pay to see that." I cleared my throat and looked around me. I picked up my backpack because that was better than focusing on how that little smile made me feel. Like I was watching porn. I tried to remember that this was a Catholic school and that worshipping a boy was probably a pagan thing, and that I shouldn't go down that path. "Okay," he said, sparing me from my thoughts. "Let's head out to the music room." I looked up again. "There's a music room? I didn't see it in the map." "Just follow me." He turned around and I looked at his broad back with a strange feeling. It was clawing at my throat, and I couldn't explain it. But I did. I followed him and I experienced secondhand what it was like to have people step out of your way in admiration. I was completely puzzled by how a single person could command a reaction like this. I didn't think even a celebrity did. Didn't they tend to draw people in instead? I'd only seen people get the hell out of someone's path when they were bad. We had a few rotten apples in my barrio that had this e ect. But the looks this boy got from students and faculty members alike was nothing like that. They didn't move away because he smelled rotten. It seemed like people didn't think they deserve to share the same space. "Wow," I muttered under my breath. He looked at me over his shoulder. "What?" I opened my mouth. Closed it. There was no point in me drawing attention to something that was probably obvious to him. Maybe even uncomfortable. I could see how someone like him could also get isolated by their own reputation. "Nothing." It turned out the music room, or auditorium, more like, was also in the same building as the library. I pulled out my map and read this portion of it in more detail. Graphic and visual arts were also there, so if everything went to shit and I ended up running out of the music room in tears of humiliation I might be able to find Addy. He walked into the room with the ease of someone who has treaded the same path over and over. Uncaring by his surroundings. Confident. This room was terrifying to me. So, okay. The earliest I remembered singing in front of strangers was when I was six at some other kid's birthday party. I was sure I sounded like a chipmunk, but all the adults in the room had praised me. I still remembered feeling fuller from that than from all the candy and cake I'd eaten. I craved to feel like that again. Every. Single. Day. But it was exactly like eating candy. It was not good for me. Because ultimately by standing in the limelight I showed everybody everything I wanted to hide. The rolls of fat and sweaty pits. The acne marks, the wild hair, the extra hair. The short height. The old clothes that didn't fit very well because they were secondhand. The lack of confidence. The shame of being, well, me. "What happens if I don't do this?" I asked, so ly, but my voice still traveled all around the room. He'd been getting his guitar out of its case when he stopped and blinked at me. "I... guess the school probably won't like it very much." God damn it, he was right. Just like during the interview, I had to do whatever it took to keep my position, graduate and get the hell away. I steeled my spine and stepped into the room. My steps echoed around me. Great acoustics. As soon as I opened my mouth and sang a note there was going to be nowhere to hide. I sat across from him and li ed my chin. "Now what?" Ashton, Ash, whatever, set his guitar on his lap and looked at me but didn't look at me. It was that look that people who were bored out of their wits carried, even though they tried to be nice and polite. "And now," he said. "You show me what you got." I blinked. "I'm going to need a bit more than that." "Okay." He looked down at his guitar and played a note. "Sing it. That's a A minor 7 chord." "A what, what?" I drew in a shaky breath. I was so out of my depth. He gave a tight smile and played it again. "Sing it." I did. Blue eyes narrowed slightly. "Let's do the classic do re mi. I'll play a note and sing it, so you get used to how your voice should sound next to an instrument." I nodded. He played and sang the notes. His voice was clear, deep and I felt it all the way to my bones. I rubbed my arms to hide the goosebumps. As the second do note came, I sang along. He looked at me this time. For real. "So you have no training at all?" I scratched my le elbow. "My ma was a singer. Well, not professionally. But she taught me how to sing since I was a kid." He bit his lower lip and I tried not to focus on the motion. "In Spanish?" "Mostly, yeah." I shrugged. "But I can sing in English too, of course. I just don't know any of that... like, reading music sheet and stu . My previous school didn't even have music lessons. I knew a kid who would rap in the cafeteria during lunch break, but that was it." Oh, I was blabbering and I couldn't seem to stop. It was like he'd dislodged my tongue with that little bite of his lip. Shit. Why wasn't there anybody else in this room? He hummed low in his throat, assessing me. "Why don't you sing whatever impressed Mr. Burlington so much?" "I..." I dragged the word. "Don't really think you want to listen to that." "Why not?" This time I smirked. "I sang Let it Go from Frozen." I motioned at him for emphasis. Hot guy? Check? Guitar? Check. Black Nirvana t-shirt under his uniform shirt? Check. Although probably poser fashion. What did a rich, white boy have to complain

He folded his arms like he was going nowhere until I went all Elsa on his ass. He was goading me and I knew it, but at the same time I wanted to see him squirm in the discomfort of hearing what was probably the least manly song of the decade. And so without warning I stood up and gave it to him. I dished it all out again, like I was freaking Elsa sending flurries of snow all around me. Just as I'd imagine if I were alone in my room. His pretty face went from amiable at the beginning of the song, to shell shocked by the time I reached the first chorus. I was also a little stunned by my voice bouncing back form the walls of the room but I covered it up by more theatre as I reached a crescendo. I sure as fuck was never going back. The perfect girl I sought everywhere did not exist. It was only me. I closed my eyes and opened my voice until it grew bigger than me, bigger than this room, and let that final high note go along with my breath. I finished the song with a gasp that had me crashing back down into the room. Into the moment. As if I'd flown somewhere else. Ashton sat immobile.

A crowd had formed outside the door. People with overalls and paint

A er the high, the low always came. It was so embarrassing to realize

I scrambled to grab my backpack and Ashton jumped out of his chair.

outside. He stayed there, back glued to the door but his eyes on me.

"Why are you sorry?" His voice sounded raspy. As if he were the one

I fiddled with my backpack straps. "I was probably too loud. They

"Hell no." He snorted. "They came over because they thought Idina

I got hung up on one fact. "How do you know who sings a Disney

"She won an Oscar, of course I'd know." He ran both hands through

his hair like he was having trouble processing the situation. "I'll find

you some books on learning sheet music, but that's not what you

that I had no business claiming for attention so hard. That I was

In a few long strides he shut the doors and kept the onlookers

supposed to be a faceless person in the crowd.

splashes. A couple of nuns.

"I'm sorry!" I said, as a reflex.

He swallowed a couple of times.

who'd gone all Broadway in here.

were coming to complain."

Menzel was here."

song?"

need."

backfired.

matter."

"What?" he asked.

One thing was certain. I said, "you don't seem the type to enjoy

He leaned back in his chair. "Don't judge a book by its cover. Do your

about?

worst."

Disney music."

I needed a plastic surgeon, really, but I doubted he could find me one in the library. Ashton shook his head. "Your voice is dying to come out. What you really need is someone to bring you out of that shell of yours." I opened and closed my mouth. My hands went up and latched onto my hair, trying to brush it. I looked at the wooden floor. I looked up at him furtively. "Yeah, well. I don't think music can get me out of my shell, trust me. It's harder than steel." "Music can do anything." The vehemence with which he said this

rooted me to the floor. Ashton breached the distance between us,

slowly, like I was pray he was stalking. He bit his lower lip again.

"Vera, will you let me help you become who you're meant to be?"

I choked. I kid you not. My attempt at swallowing my own saliva

A er a round of coughs I asked him, "Do you tell that to all the girls?"

This time his smile showed all his teeth. "Only to the ones that

SONG OF THE DAY: Led Zeppelin - Stairway to Heaven