

## Song 9. Jog

I stood face to face with Ashton. Well, face to chest. I had to crane my head back to meet his eye. He had his arms folded and was looking down at me like he wanted to start a fight. I li ed an eyebrow.

"Ready?" he asked me.

"Are you?" I asked back.

His lips twitched, but he didn't respond to that. He counted backward form three, and when he hit one we both took a deep breath and let it loose between our lips. The result was a fart-like sound. We repeated it one more time together. Then we did the do re mi scale forward, and backward. We kept doing warm up exercises for a solid five minutes. He'd taught them to me a er it turned out that the Mother Superior had commanded him to work with me, and so every a er school special with him — his words, not mine — had to start this way. It was Friday, our third and last lesson of the week, and I couldn't wait for the weekend so that I could catch up on all the freaking homework I hadn't been able to do because of these lessons. a

I couldn't begin to explain how ridiculous I felt doing the exercises. Or how hilarious it was that this intensely good looking guy didn't give two shits about joining in, too. The whole thing was weird.

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He clasped twice when he thought I was ready. "Okay, I called in some extra help for today."

We both looked at the music room's door as it opened, as if on cue. I recognized the guy from our class. He also sat at the back but on the opposite corner, always wore black Beats headphones around his neck, and his hair was even longer than mine.

## "Glad you could make it." I detected some sarcasm in Ashton's voice.

The other boy grunted as he bee lined toward the piano next to us. He sat by it and looked up at me, as if noticing me for the first time.

"I heard you're good. If you're not, I won't waste my time any further here." a

Well, no pressure then.

I rolled my eyes. "Nice to meet you, I'm Vera."

"Lincoln Choi." He pulled a strand of glossy black hair behind his ear. "I'm the pianist for the orchestra." ď⁵

Ashton leaned his elbow on the closed piano. "Link here has won a few awards for his piano skills. But I wouldn't call him a prodigy because of that."

Link glared at him and my jaw dropped.

"You have a really lousy way of asking people for help if that's how you treat them," I said.

Ashton laughed and Link narrowed his eyes at me. The latter said, "careful, one more insult at him and you may be this close to getting on my good books." a

"What I meant to say is," Ashton continued, waving a hand. "That he's a prodigy at other aspects of music. He's a composer and producer, and he's here to help me find out what your vocal range is." đ

I felt like I was slapped in the face. A composer and producer?

"Professionally?" I asked, but they ignored me.

"I'll play a key," Link said, exemplifying. "You'll sing it. Easy. Three screw ups and I'm out."	
"She won't screw up," Ashton said with much more confidence than I	
felt. He looked at me. "Ready?" "Wait." I li ed my palm up. "What are yougoing to do?"	สื
He folded his arms again. "I'm going to observe."	a
Link played a key with no warning. I realized I was supposed to join in already, so I tried to sing it as best as I could. This went on for a while. With every new key my voice went higher and higher. He plunged me to the low keys all of a sudden, and it became harder to follow along as he switched around between what I felt like low, high and medium. All the while Ashton walked slow circles around me. At some point he pushed my shoulders back, forcing my spine straight. It did ease the knot in my throat and my voice came out clearer. I didn't know how	
long we did this, but I did notice that Link hadn't just up and le . He stopped at random and looked at Ashton. "A solid mezzo-	ď
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I was panting by that point and felt a trickle of sweat down my brow. And I hadn't even moved. I didn't know how my ma had managed to sing for entire shows and dance at the same time.	đ
Ashton nodded. "Figures."	
Link touched his chin and narrowed his sharp eyes. "In the dramatic range, I think."	
The other boy seemed surprised at this. "Really? Well, shit. That explains everything."	
I looked from one to the other. "Care to explain? You're speaking in tongues to me."	a
It was the blue eyed demon who did. "You have the perfect voice for an orchestra. I'm surprised that old man Burlington caught onto that from the get go."	â
Link shrugged. "Well, he did recruit meinto this school."	
The other boy stood in front of me again and stared down at me. "The problem is that your stamina is abysmal. You won't last when we start club next week."	
have much time to prepare before our first recital." Link stood up and grabbed his messenger bag. "As for the stamina, you'll need a miracle	
because all you have is a few days before the first club session." I rubbed my hands on my skirt. My scholarship was on the line. "Um, what can I do to improve?"	
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"Cardiovascular activity is exactly what your lungs need. We'll have to do this every day for it to work, though." ď

"Why do you care?" I snapped. "Who cares if I run out of breath?"

He ignored my questions. "Well? Do you know any rap songs or not?"

My lips turned into a sad frown. "A couple, why?"

Ashton walked to the side and fiddled with the controls, setting the machine in motion at a pace that I could follow with no trouble. If I were less of a pushover, I wouldn't even have followed him out of the music room, but I was half curious to see where he was going with this, and half afraid if whatever this was didn't work that I'd be kicked out of the school. Because ultimately, it was the powers that be whom cared if I ran out of breath.

A er a few minutes of this I realized that I wasn't even breaking into a sweat, so I asked him what the deal was.

He stood in front of me again with his arms crossed over the console and his chin resting on them. He was impossibly cute when he looked up at me, eyebrows slightly raised, hair side sweeping over his brow.

"And now, you sing."

"What?"

"The rap song. Which is it?" he asked.

"The rap song. Which is it?" he asked.	
My brains did a scramble to find the name of one of my usuals at parties. "Shoop by Salt N Pepa."	å
He whistled low. "Hit it, then."	a
I took a deep breath and started the song. By the time I got to the first chorus I felt like I didn't have enough air to keep my brain alive. The words started to twist on my tongue and the verses came shorter and with more time in between. A despicable little twist curved his lips.	
"I hate you," I said as I finished the song and took a breath, pausing	
the machine and panting as if I'd ran to the football field and back.	å
"Good." He climbed onto the treadmill next to mine and started it too. "Let's sing one together, just so you don't think I won't take my own medicine."	a
Ashton fucking winked at me.	đ
I pushed the curtain of my hair back and raised my head toward him. "You're both a sadist and a masochist? Because this is awful."	
He snorted a short laugh. "Link would have loved you for that one."	
"Are you guys friends?" I asked. "I've never seen you with him."	
He glanced at me. "It almost sounds like you've been watching me."	
I looked down and started the machine again just so that I had something else to do other than look like an idiot.	
"Don't twist my words, I didn't mean it like that."	
I could almost feel the smile in his voice. "I know. But anyway, I wouldn't say we're friends. I wouldn't say we're not friends, either."	a
I did a double take at him. "What does that even mean?"	
He looked up at the ceiling, hands in his pockets, as he walked. Which I didn't think was very safe. "Hey, do you know the lyrics to Bring Me To Life?"	ື້
"To what?"	ă
This made him stop. He grabbed hold of the handle bars just before sliding back and climbed onto the sides. Then he gave me a stupefied look. When that didn't get him a reaction from me, he pulled out his cellphone and showed me a video on Youtube. The song was familiar, but I didn't know it enough to sing it.	
I shrugged. "Sorry, this is white people music."	a
"What?" He looked o ended now. That was a first. "Rock is not white people music. As a matter of fact, its early roots are in blues."	้ส
"Oh, I didn't know that." I pushed a strand of my wavy hair behind my ear and smiled at him. "In other words, it's people of color music that white people appropriated."	
He looked away, blinking, but I was surprised that he didn't snap at me for that. He looked almost pensive. "You may be right," he surprised me by saying. "In its early form, yes. But nowadays, rock is supposed to be for anybody who feels like they don't belong."	a fa
A shiver racked my spine, and I had nothing to blame it on but his words.	
Of course I'd heard rock songs. I didn't seek them out, instead they found me at stores or on random radio stations when I was on the car with my friends or my ma and her man. And usually we just changed the station to something a bit more tropical. Something that was	
more about living la vida loca.	đ

I'd never actually thought about rock music in the terms that Ashton did.

My attention shi ed back to him. "Do you feel like you don't belong?"

His blue eyes darkened to a shade I thought was impossible. Here was a person who commanded admiration and parted the people like Moses parted the ocean. Who was gorgeous. Rich. Hot. And for some reason he seemed to think there was no room for him.

What hope was there for me?

He grabbed his phone again and fiddled around with it before he handed it back to me. "Here's a lyrics video. Try to learn the song."

I frowned. "Right now?"

"Yeah, I'll wait."

I looked at him skeptically. "It's not that quick to learn a song, you know."

"I have faith in you."

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That was probably the first time someone had said that to me, and it had his desired e ect. I stopped my treadmill and gave the song two listens without trying to replicate. I read the lyrics and for some reason all I could think about was a vampire and how she was being brought to life by a boy. Maybe the random male singer. I thought it was kind of a strange song but there was some intensity to it that was getting under my skin. At the third listen I forgot that I wasn't alone and got really into it. I noted the low and high points in the song, the inflections of emotion and the releases, those parts where you felt like you were floating back down from a high.

I found myself loving the song.

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Suddenly he joined in, singing the guy's parts. When the song ended we started again. I set his phone on the treadmill so I could read the lyrics and injected as much drama into the words as I could. I felt out of breath and my throat was hurting a bit, but I was determined to keep up the pace. By the fi h attempt even Ashton was struggling. When we both gave up for the day, we were drenched in sweat and I felt like I was about to puke.

He li ed his hand. I just stared at it, so he grabbed my wrist and forced me to high five him.	ď
"Good job," he rasped out.	
"Oh, God." I looked up at the ceiling. "Please tell me this was the first and only time we'll do this."	
He laughed. "No. This won't be the last time I leave you worn out."	đ
I smacked his arm hard. "Pervert."	ද්

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SONG OF THE DAY: Pantera - Walk	a