

Songbird of a Thousand Eyes

The stage was brighter than she remembered. Spotlights were trained to follow her every movement, and all eyes were focused on her. Under no circumstances was she allowed in shadow, her manager warned. If the audience couldn't see her, there was no point.

As she glanced up, she eyed the stage lights beaming down at her, and they seared her sight. She blinked, trying to rid her eyesight of the tell-tale blotches of black that occurred when one dared to stare at the sun. When those in the crowd looked too, didn't they, with their hopeful eyes, also face the effects of desiring the unattainable?

Stage crew notified her it was time to begin.

"Ready to go in three..." the voice started.

It sounded friendly. When she first started, she would have smiled in response.

"Two..." the voice continued.

Back then, she saw everything through rose-tinted glasses.

"One." The click of a microphone turning off left a large gap of silence.

Click

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She knew better than that now.

"How are you all doing tonight?" She asked, the pit roaring at her feet. "You see, I was feeling kinda down this morning. I think I remember complaining to my manager. But you know what she said?"

"What?" The crowd urged.

“You can’t be sitting around like this when you have a whole army of people waiting for you.’ And you know what?”

“What?” They encouraged her.

“She was absolutely right.”

She harnessed a few giggles from a friend group in front of her.

“Now this next song is for all of you! You, who keep me creating! Thank you, and I love you all!” She spoke, pointing to the assembly before her.

All the best lies are mounted in truth.

“Five years after stumbling, they let me down.

Now I wonder, staring at my breakdown:

What am I to do?

There’s no room for me anymore.”

She sang the song that first lifted her out of the depths of the internet and crowned her a singing sensation. Of all the people that threw their content into the void, *she* was chosen. “Luck and a decent voice,” critics said. *Was* it luck? When she whittled away her fans and the favor of the algorithm, what was she? She faltered and flinched. No one noticed.

How long would it take for them to notice?

She scanned the crowd, locking eyes with a fan positioned in the middle of a row. He stared at her with a worried expression; if he knew or if it was in response to something his friend said she couldn’t decipher. Unable to turn her eyes away, she gazed at him back. But someone passed in front of him, and he morphed into another faceless being in the swarm. Eyes widening, she searched for him frantically. She wanted to hold onto that one person; he saw her as human, just as he was. The others were phantoms: they weren’t truly there, truly noticeable.

“Someday, searching for that one day.

We all feel the same.”

The lights glared down at her, each one from a different angle, trapping her in a single circle of sun. It formed a cage fit for a little songbird.

“We all have that desperate feeling.”

Starting the next note, her breath caught on an unfamiliar tune. She strained to recover, but with each verse the lights on the stage grew dimmer, and with each second her voice followed suit.

The stage, once an inferno of neon lights, felt colder now. Her microphone was icy to the touch, so cold that she wanted to let go because it was intolerable. Her surroundings lost their shine as the colors transformed into a rainbow of grey. Every beat she struggled to maintain caused a lost hue, vanishing not into the ears of the crowd, but into her drained surroundings.

So she stopped.

She heard stage crew and her manager yelling into her headset, their voices distant and echoey as they were muffled by static. She stood there among the chaos, frozen until she was ushered offstage. Her tears mixed with her sweat until the difference between the two was indistinguishable. There was crying and shouting and voices and running and silence.

“Silence.” She hadn’t noticed she had spoken until they all turned to face her. Each one, with their eyes the only pinpricks of color around. She looked up, and there were the security cameras with the same tiny red dots.

“Ha,” she laughed, a bitter illusion of a smile on her face.

The mob just stared, thinking she had lost her sanity. After all, only a lunatic would throw away her whole career in an instant.

A tall, sharp woman pushed her way through the assembly. She was dressed in a black suit—classic except for the fact that it was covered head to toe in glitter. The woman’s shine contrasted the severity of her height and bluntly cut bob of hair, she thought. “What were you thinking?” The woman demanded, rising to her full height before the burnt-out star.

The star didn’t answer. She just stared and stared, tears running down her face and ruining her makeup.

The woman, the manager, sighed. “We can fix this.”

“No, we can’t,” she responded, as if on autopilot.

The woman ignored her. Turning to the crew, she issued orders: “I want you to contact the press—create a statement by tomorrow—we can’t have her destroyed by the critics—you, over there.” She pointed left and right, all the while occasionally muttering, “We can fix this. *I* can fix this,” in denial. As if the more she repeated it, the more likely it was to be true. But the truth remained: this little songbird had lost her song.

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The next morning she woke up to the hum of a TV. She must have been watching the news and, at some point, fallen asleep. Her vision was blurry from the slumber and the aftereffects of tears, but beyond it she could see smears of red, pink, and yellow. She blinked the grogginess away to better view the screen.

White words scrolled on the bottom edge of the TV: “SINGER GOES SENILE.” The anchors’ voices were turned too low to hear what they were saying, but she could guess at the words. They were talking about her, no doubt. Clips of her meltdown played one after another, captured by shaky footage from audience members’ phones. Each had a different angle and a new take on the incident. The main man reporting, a middle aged newscaster with a receding

hairline, seemed to sympathize with her. His partner, an attractive woman in a red dress, did not. Their banter was hastily scripted, she noticed, reaching for the remote. The anchors dissolved into black once she hit a button.

When her gaze left the TV, she realized that she was in her dressing room. She hadn't even made it home last night. She rose off of her couch and wandered to the mirror. It wasn't the fact that her hair was a mess or her now streaky makeup looked like it belonged to a horror movie that troubled her, but the way that even here she was haunted by fluorescent lights. The lights watched her like eyes. They framed her reflection like they were cramming her into a box. She left the mirror with lipstick words scrawled onto its surface.

"...yes, and that would be perfect, thank you," her manager's voice sounded through the cracks in the dressing room door. A lock clicked, a yellow light tumbled into the room, and an imposing woman slipped through the opening. "There you are," she said.

"I don't know what to do," the girl inside the room admitted.

They both noticed the other's charcoal rimmed eyes.

After a minute: "Me neither."

Silence ticked on between the two.

She remembered her manager's chant of the day before and understood that those words must have taken a lot of bravery to admit. And all of a sudden, she was tired. So, so very tired. In that moment, she wanted nothing but to run away from all this and fast forward to a time when no one knew her. She wanted to live in a forest under the canopy of trees where no light could ever hit her. There would only be birds, and no birds would catch her in a cage because there were too many tweeting their own melodies to care for hers.

She whispered meekly, "Do you think it'll ever be the same?"

“No,” the woman answered, “but you’ll move on.”

“How do you know?”

“I know you.”

The door closed gently, the light from the hallway fizzling out and being swallowed by the darkness. All that was left in the dim dressing room was the girl and her manager, the songbird and the woman. The lights were gone, and the thousands of eyes that were watching her blinked slowly out of existence.