

An Angel Without A Voice

Horns & Halos #2

Author's Note:

Welcome to Horns & Halos, a new Patreon-exclusive series set in the Fur & Fangs universe! Short installments will be provided for my \$10+ Patrons on a regular basis. They will also be offered as short podfics/audio recordings.

Lila is a bisexual succubus, a demon who feeds on the intense emotions of others (especially sexual desire). However, she isn't all that good at interpreting which emotions other people are projecting—or getting laid.

Mikey is an angel. They are genderfluid, using a variety of pronouns. They usually wear a pin to let people know what pronouns they want that day (including one that says 'whatever'). The way they present their gender will vary from installment to installment.

MY EYES WANDER AWAY from my phone, drifting toward the closed keyboard in the corner of my room. A fine layer of dust covers its case, and the afternoon sun streaming in through the window highlights a few errant fingerprints. For the hundredth time, I tell myself that I should really clean my bedroom.

Yeah, right.

I roll over, trying to re-focus on my phone, but I've already lost interest in my idle game. My thoughts are still with the keyboard, accompanied by a heaping side-order of guilt.

Music used to be an important part of me. I played all the time, like I was addicted, because I enjoyed how it made me feel. When I couldn't put my emotions into words, music was there. When I didn't know exactly what I was feeling, music helped me sort it out. But music isn't part of my life these days. All that's left is a dusty keyboard in the corner of my room.

By rights, I should've stored the keyboard in the closet long ago, or sold it at a pawn shop. I haven't played in almost two years. But getting rid of it or putting it away feels like giving up, and I've always been stubborn. Despite my mixed feelings, I always promise myself I'll pick it up again someday.

That's about as likely as cleaning your room.

I decide the bedroom is too depressing and roll off the mattress, dragging myself down the short, uneven hallway and into the kitchen. My apartment is pretty cramped, but the fact that it actually has a separate bedroom and kitchen in New York City is impressive, or so I'm told.

After opening and closing the pantry a few times, I finally decide cereal is an acceptable food to put in my cramping stomach. Bland, but filling. I tell myself it's good that I'm eating

anything at all, and it doesn't much matter what it is. Depression usually means not eating, unless it's an entire pizza at 3AM.

What do you have to be depressed about? You have food. You have a place to live. You even have a date.

Right. The date.

I've been trying not to think about it, like doing so will sabotage me, somehow. I'm pretty much an expert at self-sabotage. But the time and place are in my phone, with an alarm so I won't forget. A big part of me really wants to see Lila again, and the part of me that doesn't is only throwing a tantrum because it's already thinking of every possible way things could go wrong.

Forcing myself to eat cereal helps more than expected. By the time I finish the bowl and chug half a carton of juice, I have enough energy to tackle some of the dishes in the sink. I even manage to brush my teeth and hop in the shower, which I've been putting off for two days despite my increasing levels of grossness.

Being able to telecommute a few days a week is a double-edged sword. I get to work from home on bad mental health days, but it's also an excuse to hole up when I'm at my worst. Things haven't been great for a while now, which is why it's so weird that I managed to snag a date in the first place. Weird, but good.

After my shower, I wander over to my closet with a towel wrapped around my head. Choosing which clothes to wear and which physical traits to manifest from the wild, wacky gender buffet is one series of decisions I don't mind making. It's a type of creative expression that doesn't come with the same baggage as music.

Eventually, I settle on a sundress, which shows off all of my arm tattoos, but no boobs to go in it. Sometimes it's fun to manifest breasts, especially to go with certain outfits, but I don't feel like dealing with the hassle today. Besides, bras constrict my breathing, which isn't helpful when I'm stressed or anxious.

I study myself in the bedroom mirror, smiling at my reflection. Not bad. Freshly scrubbed and dressed, I look like I belong in civilized society again. Maybe I'll even manage some grocery shopping so I won't have to live off cereal and take-out until Saturday.

After putting on some eyeliner and a tiny 'she/her' pin on the strap of my sundress, I head out the door. My destination is the bodega down the street, but instead, I find myself walking in the opposite direction, toward the *Johnson & Bzorgnax* where Lila works. Not to be creepy or anything, I tell myself. Just because it's a soothing atmosphere, and my therapist says I should get out of my apartment. I can pretend it's work-related if I answer some emails on my phone at the café.

It's midday, so the store isn't too crowded when I arrive. There are a few shoppers wandering the aisles, and I draw some glances, a mixed bag of curiosity, approval, and disdain. With the halo and ethereal glow, I'm pretty obviously an angel. There aren't many of those in the city, and angels who have defiled their bodies with tattoos are even rarer.

The café is slightly more crowded than the store itself. Several people are scattered amongst the tables, eating, chatting, and working. I head to the short line in front of the counter, savoring the scent of coffee and baked goods, but slightly disappointed not to see Lila. Either she's off, or stationed

somewhere else. The worker at the counter is familiar, though: a pooka with frizzy red curls, velvety rabbit ears, and intense green eyes. I think she's friends with Lila, because I've seen the two of them joking and whispering together.

When I arrive at the front of the line, she raises an eyebrow. "Ah. I see Lila's angel is back. What can I get you?"

My face heats up, but although I'm embarrassed, I'm not entirely displeased. *Lila's angel?* "Uh, hi? I'll just have a green tea, thanks."

The pooka, whose name tag reads Maeve on closer inspection, shoots me a knowing smirk. "Coming right up." She turns, making my tea with impressive speed and efficiency. Whatever they're paying her, it isn't enough.

Soon, I have a steaming hot paper cup in front of me. The warmth feels good as I wrap my hands around it. "Lila's working intake today, if you're wondering," Maeve says. "In the very back."

"That's okay. I don't wanna bother her at work."

"I hear you're dropping by Saturday," Maeve continues, as if I haven't spoken.

I rub awkwardly at the back of my neck. "Yeah."

"She likes poetry."

My mind whirls. What does Maeve expect me to do with that information?

"And cats, but I suppose you can't bring one of those into the store."

Finally, it hits: Maeve's giving me something to talk about with Lila. A wave of gratitude overwhelms me. Having a predetermined starting point for the conversation will probably make things a lot easier. "No cats, unfortunately, but I have an

aquarium.” I leave out the fact that my fish have names like Big Chungus, Pringles, Sushi, Sailor Uranus, Sailor Neptune, and Bubba. She’d probably think I was crazy.

“Fish?” Maeve flashes her wickedly pointed teeth. “Yum.”

“Guess I won’t be asking you to pet-sit, then.”

“Probably for the best.”

Maeve glances over my shoulder, and I realize a short line of customers has formed behind me. I mumble a sheepish thank-you-goodbye, scurrying away with my drink in hand to sit by one of the windows. The sun feels good on my skin, so I bask for a moment before pulling out my phone. Instead of opening my email inbox, like I promised myself I would, I do some Googling about poetry.

Saturday arrives well before I’m ready. A charge of electricity crackles through me as soon as I open my eyes, and the usual weighty fog I feel in the mornings is drowned out by restless energy. It’s not all bad, though. There’s excitement amidst my anxiety, a fluttering sort of hope my stomach can’t quite contain. When my brain asks questions like, *What if I fuck up?* I try to replace them with my own alternative. *What if it goes really well?* In some ways, that’s almost scarier.

Once I scramble out of bed and shower, I fuss over my appearance for longer than I probably should. I grow my hair to my shoulders and back at least six times before deciding to keep it short, spiky, and tousled, though I don’t change the trademark

purple color. I say yes to eyeliner, but no to another dress. Today feels like a pants day.

Eventually, I settle on a tank top, a well-loved denim vest with various patches, and loose shorts. I fiddle with the pronoun pins in my jewelry box before deciding on 'whatever'. That way, Lila doesn't have to worry about messing up. Not that there's much messing up with me. I tend not to care most days, although I have mild, shifting preferences.

After one last look in the mirror and some more fussing with my hair and lip ring, I grab my wallet and keys and head out the door for... whatever this is. I've been thinking of it as a date in my head, and I'm pretty sure that's what Lila thinks too, but there's always the lingering fear that I'm wrong.

I speed walk to *Johnson & Bzorgnax* even though I'm already running early, just to get some of my excess energy out. I make a mental note not to order anything with caffeine. Low energy is usually a problem for me, but right now, I almost feel manic. My heart's racing a mile a minute, and I have to stop and take a breath of exhaust-filled city air before I enter the café.

Despite my early arrival, Lila's beat me there. She's sitting at one of the corner tables, out of the late morning sunlight. When she notices me, her face lights up, and she waves me over with a welcoming smile. She's dressed in yellow, a lovely contrast to her soft, lilac-hued skin.

The butterflies in my stomach melt like candied sugar, forming a warm, liquid pit lower down. I'm suddenly relieved I don't have a dick today. I decided against it to avoid any embarrassing, unwanted erections in public, since I was going to

meet a pretty girl and all. Past-Mikey might've had some sense, but present-Mikey's boxers are ruined.

"Hey," she says, in the same low, husky voice I remember. It sends a shiver down my spine as I grab the open seat.

"Hey to you, too."

There's an awkward beat as both of us search for something to say. We take turns finding each other's eyes, then avoiding them, as though we don't want to be caught staring. I take a deep breath. *If Lila's nervous too, maybe it won't be so bad? At least it isn't just me.*

"I'm a bit nervous," I confess at last, deciding honesty is probably the best policy.

Lila looks relieved. "Me, too."

"It's not you. Being social is just... a lot."

"Yeah. Especially when you can feel the auras of everyone around you."

I'm intrigued. I don't know much about succubi or how they feed, although I've done some googling in my spare time, partially because of Lila. (Or maybe all because of Lila.)

"So you can feel my aura right now?"

Lila nods. "You're sitting close to me, and we're focused on each other, so...yes."

My face flushes. "What are you picking up right now?"

"Are you giving me permission to check?" she asks, looking a little surprised.

I shrug. "Sure."

Her forehead furrows in concentration. It's really cute, and my heart races as I wonder whether she *knows* I think she and the wrinkle in her brow are cute. Whether she can sense my thoughts.

Then I start thinking about how cute she looks in her flowy, yellow-flowered top, and it takes an effort of will not to look at her cleavage. Lila coughs, as if she's gulped a drink down the wrong way. She tries to cover her mouth with her elbow, and I reach across the table toward her, unsure what to do.

"Are you okay?"

Lila stops coughing. Her breathing returns to normal, but her smile fades and her expression closes off. "Fine."

"Are you sure? Do you want me to get you some water?" I'm up and out of my chair half-way through the offer, but Lila grasps my hand, lightly tugging me back.

"No. I'm fine, really." I sit back down, and Lila's face scrunches. She chooses her words with care. "Sorry. I just... picked up on the fact that you were attracted to me. It was a pretty strong broadcast. Most of the time when I feel that emotion from someone, it's... unpleasant."

My eyes widen. "You mean, like, creeps who come into the store?" I definitely don't want to be associated with that kind of person, and my stomach tightens at the thought Lila might see me that way. "I have to deal with that sometimes, too. When I want to dress more femme, or gender-nonconforming. But I recognize I'm lucky. I can make myself look like a dude when I want to be left alone."

"I wouldn't say lucky," Lila says. "If it makes presenting your gender how you want more difficult, it affects you, too."

"I've never thought of it that way, to be honest. I kind of felt like I was cheating the system."

“Well, I don’t think so. You’re just trying to live your life.” Lila chews her lip, her gaze darting nervously to one side. “Some succubi consider that kind of attention a gourmet meal.”

“But you don’t?”

Her expression turns sheepish. “Not so much. It makes me uncomfortable, picking up attraction from someone I don’t know. Sometimes it’s harmless, but sometimes it feels gross. But I’ve met you before, and I want to get to know you better, so it’s okay.”

I’m still uncertain, but I decide to take Lila at her word. “Does it happen a lot?”

Lila shrugs. “Maeve gets it more than me. I appeal to a certain demographic. You know. People who like a little extra...” She makes a fluttering gesture with her hands that encompasses all of her.

I can’t resist. “Cushion for the pushin’?”

Luckily, my joke lands correctly for once. Lila laughs. “Exactly.”

“That can definitely be a positive. But mostly, I’m interested in you for your incredibly sexy *Johnson & Bzorgnax* employee discount. How much is it again? Asking for a friend.”

Lila laughs again, and my heart flutters. Two hits in a row! Maybe I’m not so useless at this flirting thing after all. “I don’t know about sexy,” she says. “I’ve been through a fair amount of books in the romance section, and found most of it lacking.”

I remember what Maeve told me the day before, about Lila’s interests. “What about poetry?”

Her eyes light up. “I *love* poetry.”

“So I’ve been told.” At her confused look, I clarify: “Maeve told me when I came for coffee the other day. Nothing weird, I promise.”

Lila scoffs. “Why am I not surprised? Maeve’s always sticking her nose in my business.”

“But,” I say, pulling out my phone, “I did find a cool modern poet you might wanna check out.” I type ‘Andrea Gibson’ into the search bar and pass it over. “They’re a genderqueer slam poet. I watched them recite on youtube.”

“Slam poetry? That’s new to me.” Lila takes the offered phone and starts scrolling. I expect her to pull up a poem and read, but instead, I hear the quiet sound of a video being played at low volume. Recognizing the guitar at the start, I scoot part-way around the table to listen.

Lila doesn’t seem to mind my closeness. She smiles as the guitar gives way to Gibson’s speaking voice. I try to pay attention to the words, but I can’t. I’m much more interested in the look of enthusiasm on Lila’s face, and the faint floral smell of her shampoo, caught in the wavy locks of her hair.

It’s a magical two minutes. I feel strangely connected to Lila, sitting there in silence, both of us watching the same thing. Having someone else do the talking while we simply exist in each other’s presence is strangely comforting. *Is this why people go on dates to the movies?* But that thought reminds me of other things people do at the movies, so I push it from my brain. *No. Don’t make Lila uncomfortable. Don’t ruin the moment by being horny.*

More of my willpower fades when the video finishes and Lila passes my phone back to me. Our hands touch, and the contact is electric. I actually suck in a breath when our fingers brush. *Come*

on, focus. Think of something else to talk about. “Do you write any poetry of your own?”

Lila’s eyes widen, as though she’s surprised I asked. “A little. Not for a while, though. What about you? Tell me if I’m wrong, but you seem like a creative soul.”

“Well... that depends on whether song lyrics count as poems.”

“Definitely,” Lila says. “You write songs? Do you sing, too?”

“Used to. Was even pretty good for a while, but, you know. Life.”

Even to my own ears, it sounds like a pathetic excuse. Lila must realize I’m not telling the whole story. I wait for the inevitable follow-up questions, but they don’t come. “If you ever play anywhere, let me know,” she says, with a gentle and encouraging smile. “I’d like to hear you.”

Suddenly, I’m more interested in dusting off the old keyboard than I’ve been in the past two years.

Later that afternoon, with orange sunlight slanting through my bedroom blinds, I do end up sitting on the small cushioned bench in front of my keyboard. I stare at my hands for a while, like I’m not sure what to do with them. It’s been years since I last played, maybe too many years to recover what I lost.

I think of Lila. I remember how her voice sounded as she said, *I’d like to hear you*. She sounded so genuine. I don’t want to disappoint her.

I flip open the cover and switch the keyboard on, but predictably, I've forgotten to plug it in. Once I crouch down to fix that problem, coming up dustier than before and making yet another mental note to clean and vacuum my bedroom soon, I settle back on the bench.

This time, the chord rings clear and true. A first inversion in C major. Simple, satisfying. I move through the tonic and dominant a few times, feeling the pull, and then I start playing from memory. One of the few songs I still remember. Chopin's *Prelude in E minor*. A little mournful for my mood, but it's what I can recall best without music.

I'm surprised by how easily the notes flow under my fingers. I miss a few, and take some extra time between bars to remember where the melody goes next, but my muscle memory is still there. A smile spreads across my face. Maybe I've missed this more than I realized.

When I reach the end of the piece, I don't want to stop, so I start playing something else. One of my songs. I carry the melody in my right hand instead of singing. I'm not quite ready for that yet. But for now, playing again is enough, even if it's only for a few minutes in the privacy of my bedroom. It's a start.