

MUSIC & MAYHEM

“I hate music,” Dax replied with a forced smile.

“Wait, what?” Alex raised an eyebrow.

He loathed this topic and trying to explain it even more. Dax brushed back his dark hair and tried to focus on something else. The faint hum of jazz haunted out from the nearby coffee shop and intermixed with the thrum of passing cars. Every fiber of his being urged him to get the hell out of there, however if he left now, he might blacklist himself to the entire female student population. It didn't help that Alex was his first date in quite some time now and jinxing his reemergence into the dating world might kill any hope he had at a normal life. Dax would not have agreed to meeting at Java Joe's, except that when he asked her out, she insisted he try it. The hoard of college students proved her boasting true, but this didn't ease Dax's tension. He adjusted his coat and wished more than anything to have worn something of than the bright green shirt given to each of the college freshmen this semester.

Dax shrugged and brushed back a few dark strands of hair. A soft, winter breeze blew his hair back and he sighed. They sat at a small table at the far end of the outdoor patio. He had arrived first and picked a spot furthest from his nemesis. He forced a smile, but his eyes hardened. “Yeah, I don't have a favorite song or singer or anything. It's not my thing.” The understatement of the year right there. She still held a puzzled expression, so he tried to explain.

“If I were an old Japanese movie, saying that Godzilla was ‘not his thing’ would be on the same level.” Not to mention, it held about the same destructive potential, which is what worried him the most.

Alex blinked, still unsure. “Um, I'm not sure what you mean, but everyone likes music. Maybe not the same type, but everyone likes something.”

He cringed, “Not me,” and forced a smile.

“Oh,” she paused and chewed on her lower lip.

Well, this is going super, Dax thought, but restrained himself from banging his head on the table. The girl, Alex, was his first date in a long time, a really long time and it already didn't look good. However, Dax had learned in his twenty-something years that lying to women about his quirks got him into more trouble than not. Well to be honest, he had never thought to try this tactic until he met Alex. She had asked him to coffee and he had offered to meet somewhere else, anywhere else in fact. But, she had insisted that he would love the coffee and the chill college atmosphere. Everything inside him screamed 'no' and he would unavoidably come into contact with the dreaded music. But, Dax wasn't thinking at the time. He wanted this to go well, but the odds stacked against him before the date even began. He didn't even like coffee, or care for the roasted smell of coffee beans, which wasn't a big deal. The real problem would be surviving his curse.

His nerves twitched with every intermittent tune that hung in the air. Dax thanked his luck for the passing cars to distort the music for the time being. He had to think of something, fast. They couldn't stay on the patio much longer. Being late February and all, despite the fact that they lived in Texas, the weather had decided to freeze over. He didn't know how long she would last before asking if they could go inside.

"So," Alex eyed the large white Bose headphones that rested at his neck, "if you don't like music, then what are those for?"

Dax smiled. "It's for books. I like to read or listen to them when I'm busy."

He adjusted the headphones on his neck. They had an additional function as well. As the expensive noise-cancelling style, they allowed him to block out sounds in an emergency. Just like the situation that he worried shown on the eminent horizon. This had also helped him to learn to read lips rather well.

Yet, the fear didn't stem from the music, but himself. As a teenager, he had loved music as much as the next person. But, he couldn't quite explain it. When he heard music, things happened that couldn't be explained. Most of the time Dax didn't have a problem, but when it affected other people, the guild would almost devour him.

The only way he knew to counterbalance any disasters was to ensure that he never heard music, ever. Movies, restaurants, and grocery store tunes plagued his nightmares. Every time, shopping made him feel like Rambo with all of the planning and gear he needed. However, the little things helped each day feel more bearable, like his date with Alex.

Yet, Dax could see it in her eyes now. They lingered on the door to the coffee house, seeking shelter from the cold. Dax eyed the glass. Each time the door opened, it allowed a few seconds of soft jazz to flutter out. Not enough to do any damage, but enough to send a tingle down his spine and leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

“So,” Dax scrambled to revive their conversation, “do you like to read?”

Alex glanced back at him and rubbed her gloved hands together. “Hey, do you mind if we go inside? It's kind of cold out here and we still need to get our coffee, right?”

Dax forced a smile. “Yea, you're right. Let's go get coffee.” He stood, trying not to wobble. His legs wanted to go in the opposite direction and the hairs prickled on the back of his neck in anticipation. He didn't know what to expect.

“Are you okay? You look pale,” Alex said and grabbed for her bag.

Her worried look mirrored his own. “Oh, no. I'm fine, really. I'm probably cold too.” Dax forced another smile, thinking geez, I am such an idiot.

He slipped on the headphones over his ears. He knew it would probably upset her, but what choice did he have. This was the lesser of the evils for now. “I’m going to finish this one part in the book while we order. It’s very intense.”

She pursed her lips, but nodded. Dax followed her into the depths of Java Joe’s. It hummed with the low terrifying beat of jazz music. He couldn’t hear the words and the sax whispered behind the borders of his headphones. Nothing caught of fire or turned into a frog, yet.

So far so good, Dax thought. Thank goodness. Most of the time if something strange happened, it would occur within the first ten to fifteen seconds.

One time, Dax decided to walk home from school and an ice cream truck drove by. Being chased down a few blocks by animated stuffed animals kind of makes one skeptical of their cute and cuddly nature. Another time, when he had moved to his current apartment, the neighbor above them wanted to test the base on their new stereo system. The manager, to this day, cannot fathom how walls can crumble into dust, especially in only one unit of the building. Poor guy had to be relocated to another place. However, those incidences rated as minor annoyances compared to the first time he became aware of his curse.

Scorching fire blazed up behind his eyes, covering his body in a cold sweat. Dax dare not recall that time in his mind so lightly. Charring heat and screams haunted his mind, haunted him enough to have his mother send him away. They can help you, she promised behind the veil of doubt. He shivered.

A hand touched his shoulder and Dax jolted out of the mist of his memories.

“Sorry, what?” he asked. He almost reached for the headphones, but remembered their use for the moment.

He read her lips. “It’s your turn.” She pointed at the register. She had the look of a person who had to repeat herself to him. He got that look a lot. It was not a pleasant look.

“Sorry,” he answered and peered up at the large black chalk board full of today’s specials. “I’ll have a, uh,” he paused scanning, “apple cider, please. Medium.”

The register girl smiled and gave Alex a sympathetic look before accepting Dax’s money. He despised being a jerk, but he didn’t want to put anyone in danger, nor did he want to completely annex himself from the rest of humanity either. He already tried that soon after learning what caused all of those unfortunate events in his teen years. It had cost him months in a special hospital with lots of pills, but that didn’t help. It only showed him that if he wanted a normal life, then he would have to take measures into his own hands. It had taken some convincing, but everyone deserved a chance at life.

Dax stepped aside and Alex stood next to him while they waited for their orders.

“I’ll grab our drinks, if you want to find a table,” Dax said.

He tried to prove that he could in fact be attentive. Alex exhaled a little before turning away to find a seat. Dax grimaced. She’s probably regretting asking me to out by now, Dax thought. He rolled his shoulders feeling the tension gathering in his back. Not only was his date going poorly, but the muffled hum of the music continued to send tiny tingles down his spine. It reminded him of a circuit of energy that couldn’t find an outlet. He had learned about it in ‘Physics I’ last semester and it described the best way he could think of for the weird sensation. Being a science major, the college pushed him to try out all of the basic sciences classes before pursuing a more specific field, despite his interests geared more towards the environment.

The barista placed two cups on the bar. Dax smiled grateful to return to Alex. She sat at a table near the windows. Thank goodness she was still here, Dax thought with a sigh. He sat the drinks down. The flutters in his stomach grew with the odds of his date ending in disaster. He sipped his drink, trying to remain calm.

“Can you even hear me with those on?” She mouthed and Dax could feel her annoyance with him even without hearing her speak.

“Of course. I’ll prove it, ask me anything?”

She drummed her fingers on the table, still not touching her coffee. “Can you take those headphones off? They’re kind of distracting.”

Dax began to sweat. “I would, but,” he sighed, “I have, uh, I’m at a really good part right now.” Smooth, Dax thought, this time I was supposed to not lie to the girl.

Alex raised an eyebrow.

“Here, why don’t I tell you a little bit about myself? I am twenty-six. I live in a two-bedroom apartment near campus with a roommate, Teddy. He’s cool, you’d like him. I am a science major—”

She raised up a hand to stop him. “Look,” she sighed, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but this is a bit too weird for me. Lose the headphones or I’m leaving.” She folded her arms. Alex didn’t even have her coat slung over the chair yet.

It had only been about seven minutes before she gave him the ultimatum, his best record so far for quickest date ever. Great.

Dax took a deep breath. He had promised to try telling the truth this time. Now was his chance. He wouldn’t let it pass by, however the inevitable outcome would always be the same.

“The truth is,” he swallowed, “I suffer from Melophobia. It’s a fear of music. That’s why I said before that I hate it.”

She stared at him. Her eyes calculated his words inch-by-inch, letter-by-letter. “Okay,” she hesitated, biting her lip, “so like, it scares you to hear music?”

Dax exhaled. At least she didn’t think he made up some dumb lie to her. “Something like that yeah. Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve had this aversion to music. My mother and I went to a star-gazing

festival and they had music there. It didn't affect me then, but," the flames crept towards his mind and he shuddered. If he couldn't even think about that part, then he didn't need to speak it yet. "But, after that night, I learned that I don't mix well with music, at all."

Alex continued to stare at him, biting his lip. Skepticism shown on her face as clear as his terror towards the muffled jazz music. She nodded once. "Okay. So, you don't like music. What do you like then?"

Dax perked up. Hope sparked inside of him. Maybe she wanted to give him a second chance? "I, uh," he cleared his throat and smiled. "Well, I game a lot. My roommate Teddy and I just finished Diablo III and I'm about to beat Assassin's Creed again. But, I really want to," he paused noticing her raised eyebrows. He had geeked too far. "Sorry, I rambled a bit. What about you? What do you like?"

Alex blinked and folded her arms, "I'd like to know how you manage without listening to music at all. How do you go shopping, or out to eat, or out to see a movie? Or school? What about at your high school graduation? Didn't they have music there?"

"Oh, I'm sure they did. But, I didn't go. I had to get my GED because..." Crap, Dax thought. I wanted to avoid this part.

"Because?"

"Because, I was in... a place that helps people overcome their fears."

Alex shifted in her chair. "Like a mental hospital?"

"I prefer the term Psychiatric Assistance Facility, but um, yeah."

Alex held in a breath.

He spied the quivering uncertainty at the edges of her face. Imminent disaster on the horizon.

"So," she paused to lick her lips, "what was that like? How long were you there?"

"About eight years."

Alex's eyes bulged.

“On and off,” Dax added and plastered a smile on his face. He knew there would be no recovering from this. “I had a few relapses, but I didn't want to go back. My mother thought it helped, but I didn't. Plus, it wasn't always at the same place. I tried a few different,” he let the words trail off.

Alex had her hand on her shoulder bag and already eyed the door several times. She bit her lip. “Look, this has been nice and all, but I should get going. This is all just too weird.”

Dax sighed. He could get angry. He could say she didn't give him a fair shot, or that she stereotyped him. But in the end, it wouldn't change her mind. It wouldn't change the inevitable outcome.

“I understand.” He lowered his head and eyed the wooden table between them.

Alex stood, leaving her coffee on the table. As she walked by, her bag caught the edge of his headphones.

It yanked it away from one of his ears allowing with perfect clarity the Jazz number to roll out of the overhead speakers. Alex turned to him, mouth open as if to apologize, yet Dax didn't wait to hear her. The all too familiar sparks of energy jolted down his down leaving the damning bitter taste in his mouth. It was too late. He tried to grab at the loose headphone speaker, but his frantic motions flung it to the ground. He dove for them when a series of thumps sounded from all around. Dax shut his eyes tight.

He let out a heavy breath and forced himself to look around. Not a soul stirred in the café. Everyone lay across tables, chairs, or even sprawled out on the floor. Dax's mouth went dry and he licked his lips. He sighed and picked up his headphones. To his horror, he saw Alex slumped on the floor, her body limp. Her purse had spilled out with books, cosmetics, and her thin pink wallet. Dax froze, staring at the girl. What had he done?