

Stealing Vacuums, Breaking Hearts:

A Penny flash story

Author Note: Takes place within the HELGA novel timeline (and contains mild spoilers). This can be read as a stand-alone story.

Penny had seventy-eight unread emails and sixteen missed calls, most of which were related to work. Her phone was buzzing in her bag while she browsed one of the mini-mart's pantry aisles. "Be quiet," she told the object sternly, not that it helped.

She couldn't turn off her phone—her boss at the Institute would undoubtedly throw a fit if she did. The last time she had her phone off, she'd gotten a five-paragraph message from the doctor that tersely addressed her as *Penelope Lihua Zhang* and then went on to mention her uncle, her responsibility to the scientific community, and how the younger generation was sorely lacking.

There was also the matter of her boss's daughter. It was hard enough grasping the girl's sudden birth. It was a whole other ordeal to let her sleep on Penny's couch every night. Helga snored an awful lot when she wasn't screaming from nightmares.

Penny glumly surveyed the rows of canned red beans. She put three of the cheapest option into her plastic shopping cart. Through the empty space in the aisle, she locked eyes with another broke customer.

Shit. It was *Fen*. Her ex, browsing the same cans but from the other side of the aisle. "Well, well, well," they said, their dark brown eyes gleaming. "If it isn't my vacuum thief."

"Hello, Fen," Penny replied darkly. "I hope the music's been going well?"

They looked good—even better than she remembered. She had to admit the new buzzcut was hot. What was *not* hot was having to deal with them coming in from gigs at the same time she set out for work every day. Their vastly different work schedules had caused breakups number one and three.

Breakup number two was Penny's fault. She was big enough to admit this now.

“Still busy at the Institute, huh?” Fen nodded at Penny's bag, where her phone continued to vibrate. “You're killing yourself at that place, you know.”

If only Fen had any idea how much more extra work she'd accidentally taken on. Helga was still in her apartment, probably waiting to be fed. Penny felt like one of those dads who barked “absolutely no pets” and then somehow ended up being held the most responsible for it. Helga was kind of like a big, burly puppy. Or baby.

She's very cute, Penny thought begrudgingly. That was her problem. Penny was a total sap for anything cute, which meant she ended up doing everything from fixing old electronics and helping lab-grown teenagers, to somehow—despite their long and wretched history—now flirting with her ex over the bean aisle in a Downhill mini-mart.

“You're a great singer, Penny,” Fen said, crossing over to Penny's side of the aisle. They toyed with the strap of Penny's black bag, smirking while her phone continued to ring. “With Hayden back in Beijing... we have a new opening in the band. You should get out more. Live a little.”

No, no, no. They'd already had this conversation before. Penny had no time for Downhill gigs. She couldn't date anyone, especially not any *musicians*. Not with her work schedule.

But despite herself, Penny was a little curious. “You've still got that old synth, right? Did you get the new patch you were obsessed with?”

“We could talk about it more in our new practice space,” Fen said, eyes brightening while they followed Penny to the check-out aisle. “It’s right by Club Underground, just a few blocks away from the Entertainment District bus stop. An easy commute, as you know.”

Penny paused, noticing bags of imported White Rabbit candy by the register. She knew a certain someone who would love it a lot—maybe even enough to momentarily pause her requests for a very illegal personal project. Penny sighed and asked the cashier to add a bag of candy to her order, even though they were more expensive than anything she’d bought for herself.

Fen watched her make the additional last-minute purchase like a hawk. “Who’s that for?” they asked. “You never eat sweets. Are you *dating* someone?”

“God no,” Penny sputtered. “I’m...”

She trailed off. This wasn’t a good conversation to start. No one could know Helga was staying her apartment. No one could even know the girl *existed*, period. Plus, given the size of Penny’s living quarters, it was probably borderline criminal to house more than one person inside.

“Who *are* they?” Fen asked again. They popped open an umbrella once they were outside the mini-mart, shielding both themselves and Penny from the afternoon drizzle. Gallant as always.

“I’m allowed to eat candy,” Penny said defensively, skirting Fen’s actual question. “I can try new things, too. You don’t know *everything* about me, Fen.”

“I know you work too much. Typical Virgo. Your talents are being wasted on those Uphillers, Penny. Come on. Just one practice session won’t hurt. You want to sing; I can *see* it.”

Penny was going to explode soon if Fen didn’t stop pestering her. “Maybe someday,” she said begrudgingly. “I’ll do a session with you in the future, I promise. I just have a lot on my plate right now. Say hi to Kai for me, all right?”

“Sounds good.” Fen smiled, apparently mollified. “Ice Bear is going places—I can *feel* it. I just wish you’d be there with us when we finally make it big someday.”

“You will definitely make it,” Penny said, and meant it, too. Ice Bear played great music. They had an awesome look—*wintry*, not that anyone living in Amaris City knew about the cold season, given the resources it took just to keep the island from boiling over...Penny pushed the thought away, and focused on the matter at hand.

Fen was a fantastic songwriter. They meant every word they sang and knew how to get the audience to dance along with them for the entire setlist. She wouldn’t be surprised if Ice Bear started getting off-island gigs soon. Penny could see them playing globally and selling out stadiums someday. They were that good.

Fen tucked a strand of Penny’s hair behind her ear, their expression suddenly wistful. “I’ll let you get going, then. It was nice running into you, Penny.”

In return, Penny squeezed their hand. “You know I’ll always be a fan.” *Just not your girlfriend anymore*, she thought, feeling a slight pang in her chest. There was no way it could work out. The two of them were on such different paths now.

“For the record, I’m jealous. Whoever they are... they’re very lucky,” Fen smiled and waved goodbye.

Penny chuckled and pulled up her hood, covering her hair from the rain. She made her way back Uphill while her phone continued to ring in her bag. Fed up, she answered it.

“*Hey.*” It was Fen’s voice on the line. “I still need my vacuum back!”

“Oh, definitely.” A smile crept onto Penny’s face. “Someday soon, I promise.”
