

The Hum Podcast

Episode 21: “We Feel Like We’re Invalidated For Our Service”

[Theme music fades in]

Laila: At the end of that two-hour session, she slid me this Post-it note that said one word on it, and it was "transgender". And she said, "Go home and do your homework. Come back to me next week and we'll talk about it." So I started my transition in 2012, and when I told her that I wanted to start it, she said, "Well, here's the thing," because the year before, "don't ask don't tell" repeal happened. She said, "The 'don't ask don't tell' repeal did not include transgender people, so you cannot be trans in the military."

[Music increases in volume]

Speaker: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Simona: This episode today is generously sponsored by the good people at Boxcar Social, a café and bar that offers a curated, rotating menu showcasing the world's best coffee roasters, wine makers, craft breweries, and whiskey distillers, and also one of my favorite places in Toronto to chill in. With four locations in the city, be sure to check them out in person or visit them online at www.boxcarsocial.ca.

[Music fades out]

Simona: Laila is a retired combat medic and served for 12 years in the United States Army. She served two combat tours in Iraq and her final duty station was at Trickler Army Medical Center in Hawaii, where she was honorably discharged in 2015. Laila was the recipient of the Military Spouse Leadership Award in 2016, and she is the 2017 Military Spouse of the Year on the Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado. Laila's activism began in 2012 with the LGBT military advocacy organization, Out Serve Trans and SPART*A. Through these groups, she talks about the intersection of being transgender, female, and a person of color while actively serving in the military.

Gilad: How are you doing?

Laila: I'm doing fucking great. I'm in fucking Canada.

Gilad: I love it. For context, we said to Laila, we told her that, "You can swear as much as you want," so now every fucking word is a fucking swear word. I love it.

Simona: This is my element.

Gilad: So, guide us through ... I mean, there's so much to talk to you about. We have half an hour for these episodes usually. I feel like it could go longer. What does it mean to be a service member in the U.S. Army? Let's start right there. You're in the U.S. Army. What's it like?

Laila: Being a service member is just like being anyone else who is in ... Being a trans service member is just like being anyone else in the United States military. We put on our boots left or right, however we start, we put on our uniform, and we go to work and we do our job. So it's no different. The only difference is that we identify differently from someone else, but I think uniquely we are all individual people that identify differently. No one person is the same. And so what I try to do in the work that I do now is to let's not demonize our differences. Let's celebrate them. Underlining of that is that if you're a service member, you're a service member. That's pretty much it. I don't know. Right now, people are trying to define trans service members as different and we're not. We save lives just like anyone else. We protect our country. We're just as brave as anyone else who has rose their hand and sworn to protect the country against foreign and domestic enemies.

Simona: So, with that being said, being trans in an institution like the Army is not a walk in the park. While you may say that we are all the same, there's still people who believe that you are a detriment to the Army, that it's unsafe to put you in front lines because at the end of the day, being trans equates to some type of mental illness. So what do you, how do you kind of reconcile that?

Laila: Prior to my transition and prior to 2016 when the lift on the ban of trans service happened, there wasn't any vocabulary, any language to really go off of for transgender people. We just knew, "I am not this gender. I identify as the opposite." And because of that, it has created this stigma that the old medical pamphlet, the DSM I think five ... The old DSM and the medical pamphlet states that being transgender is a mental illness. But really it isn't, because if you look at the service members that are serving now, like myself, or veterans like myself or people who are serving like my husband and Captain L. Cook and Captain Peace, who are featured in our documentary, feature-length documentary *TransMilitary*, we are doing jobs with flawless records, right? We are doing the jobs, we're carrying out the missions, we're protecting our country, we're protecting our troops, so how does that make us mentally ill, right? And so yes, the conversation has been going on for years. There was no language to really identify or really solidify what was going on, and now that we have that

language, now we can say, "See, I told you. It is not a mental illness. This is just the perspective for me, how I see myself, and I want you to respect that, because shit, I'm doing the fucking same job as you if not better so get on my level. Don't tell me that I can't do it because I'm gonna do everything in my power to prove you wrong, and people, trans people, trans service members have been doing that for years upon years, breaking down doors, shattering glass ceilings by continuing to put forth great productivity above their peers. Why are you questioning that?"

Gilad: You're the subject of a documentary called *TransMilitary*, which we screened back in our festival a while back, and there's a part in the film where your husband says, "When I'm here in Afghanistan serving, it's actually easier for me to be out here in the middle of warfare," essentially, and I'm paraphrasing, "Than it is to be a trans person back in the U.S." Does that resonate at all with you?

Laila: Absolutely. So, being deployed really, the only thing that you have to worry about is staying alive and doing your job. That's it. You don't have to wake up in the morning and decide what clothes you're gonna wear for the day. Essentially, you're paying bills from out there unless you've stopped all bills that you're paying back in the States.

Simona: Is that possible?

Laila: Girl, trust and believe, I'm telling you. So you can stop people from-

Gilad: I know people.

Laila: -yeah, because once you get these orders to deploy, it's a stop at whatever bills you're paying, right, or you can still continue to pay it but why if if you're not home? But yes, I do agree with that. That does resonate with me, and other service members as well who identify as trans and are deployed, because we don't have to deal with the worldly shit. We just have to deal with staying alive and doing our jobs. And in doing that, we find this comfort in being able to just be, and aside from that, if they have that much of a problem to judge you while you're in country and bullets are flying in your direction, I guarantee nobody's gonna stop and say, "Oh my gosh, we're receiving fire. Oh, you're trans. You go in front." Nobody's gonna do that. That's a stupid idea that has been bred in these thoughts back in the United States that that's what happens. No, it's not. All I have to worry about is if you're gonna have my back once fire is coming our way, and if you don't, you don't belong in this military. Get out.

Simona: So you mentioned, and I want to kind of back to just the timeline you mentioned. So in 2016, the Obama administration essentially said that there had been previously a ban that you couldn't be openly trans, you couldn't join the

Army and it was essentially under the "don't ask don't tell". So you could essentially be trans, you just couldn't be open about it, just like you could've been gay, you just couldn't be open about it. So, tell me about your feelings that you are starting to see in 2017 that the Cheeto in power, one of his first orders of business as president of the United States is that he is going to reverse that Obama administration era and again put the ban back in place. It was only because three federal court judges were listening to three different cases and all unanimously said that this ban is unconstitutional, yet people are still finding trouble with trans people who still can't essentially join the Army right now because the papers aren't being processed. So in 2017, you kind of had this moment of elation maybe in 2016 that you're finally being recognized, and then in 2017, that shifts. What was that like?

Laila: So I joined this movement for Open Trans Service in 2011, 2012, and so we had been working on Open Trans Service for about four years before the ban was lifted. Currently, transgender people can enlist into the military, but there's stipulations to that, right? You have to be 18 months in real life experience and be in that targeted gender that you want to present. But first of all, hearing, being a part of the "don't ask don't tell" repeal and knowing that it did not include transgender people, that was the drive to be a part of this movement, and then when it was lifted in 2016, we were ecstatic and elated because of it that now we can really just be our authentic selves. The Obama administration has done so many great things, not just for the LGBT community but for the United States altogether, for all countries actually, because it was like a good brotherhood with the Obama administration. But during the elections in 2016 when Trump talked about LGBT people really support Donald Trump, like, we really don't.

Simona: It is not, period.

Laila: Yeah, and so the LGBT community, specifically the trans military community saw this and we were like, "Okay. We're heading into this direction. We have to vote," and it turned out that he won the election and it was just like a blow, like, "Okay, we got to work. What's gonna happen next? Where are we going? We have to try to stay 10 steps ahead of him and this administration." They have been constantly contradicting themselves and saying, "LGBT people love Trump," and then once he was elected, every possible anti-LGBT law has been introduced to our government, and it's crazy because he's backing it. There was a segment in the news where he talked about he's doing the military a great favor by wanting to enforce this ban on trans military folks. We are, Americans are living in a very dark time. We really are. The world is living in a very dark time. Specifically, because I'm American, we feel like we're invalidated for our service to this country, for our service to protect the commander-in-chief of the free world. If you can't appreciate the shit that we do for you, why are you even in

this seat? Furthermore, how can you sit up there and say, "You're invalid because of how you see yourself, but you still need to do your job and protect me"?

Laila: It's frustrating. It's exhausting, but I'm super hopeful that moving forward in this movement, what's happening now is really opening people's eyes, not just in social media, but having these conversations. Conversation is very important, and if we are able to have these conversations openly and respectfully and very cordially with other people who oppose the idea of trans people in the military, I really feel like 80% of society is just ignorant, and not negatively ignorant, just ignorant because they've never knowingly met a trans person, a trans person who's in the military, or they've never heard a story, and because of that they lack the education and lack the knowledge of what's it like to be trans in the military. Because of that, it's easy to demonize the difference from something that is different from you. And then, there's the other 10, 20% that is orange. That's just it. It's like, "Okay, so that's all you listen to." That and dare I say, part of that is religion-based, religious biases behind that. So, my job is to just have these conversations and educate people and fill them with all the joy of being a trans person in the military.

Gilad: You were in the military forever, since the dawn of time, right?

Laila: Yes, since dinosaurs.

Simona: Since Jesus, yeah, so-

Gilad: Since Jesus, since Jesus was the commander-in-chief of the military.

Laila: I have my jump wings from when I jumped from heaven.

Gilad: So you've been serving for a while. I'm curious to know, at what point during your service did you realize you were trans and when did you start your transition?

Laila: So, when I was a little boy ... No. As far back as I can remember, there were three things that I wanted to be when I grew up. My mom was a nurse, my dad was in the military, so naturally I wanted to be a nurse or a soldier, and the third thing was Miss fucking America. Well, I'm not skinny, I'm not white, and I'm not tall, so none of that worked out for me, but I get to feel like Miss America every day when I dress up and I present to the world.

Simona: And your eyebrows look fantastic.

Laila: Thanks. Brought to you by Anastasia.

Simona: Ugh.

Laila: I feel that I've always known, but growing up in the family, in the culture that I did, I wasn't able to really express myself in that manner. I had to suppress the idea of wanting to present as effeminate or as a woman. And for the longest time, I was hurting myself physically, emotionally, and mentally. And as soon as I graduated high school and I left for the military, I felt that was my time to really explore myself. Again, at that time, there was no language to really identify with, so the only terminology that I knew was because I was an assigned male at birth and I was very attracted to masculine-presenting people, yeah, I was gay, and that's the only terminology that I knew. So I identified as gay from, I don't know, 2003 to about 2008. So in 2008, a friend of mine had approached me and said, "You owe me a favor. I need you to help me with this fundraiser." And so she tossed me a plastic bag full of stuff and it was stockings, high heels, this corset, and a wig, and I was like, "What the fuck do you want me to do with this shit?" I was in the middle of Alaska freezing cold, didn't know what the fuck was going on, and she was like, "You owe me." I'm like, "Okay cool." And she came and helped me. She dressed me up and everything, and for once in my entire life in that very moment, I felt validated, like, "This is who I am. This is what I want to be. This is how I want to present."

Laila: From there, I kept doing that. I started doing drag shows on my off time. I would dress up in my own room because I knew at that time "don't ask don't tell" repeal was being implemented. I was watching friends get discharged for being gay. At one point, there was a witch hunt for gay people in the military. It was a thing. When I moved from Alaska to San Antonio, I went and spoke to my therapist. A friend recommended her. Her name was Sarah Weiss. I made an appointment with her. I went to her office, sat on her couch for two hours, and she said, "Just talk." She gave me this incredible platform just to tell my story. I told her everything from childhood until that moment in my life, and it was just so refreshing, so validating to have someone who would listen to every word that I was talking about. At the end of that two-hour session, she slid me this Post-it note that said one word on it, and it was "transgender". And she said, "Go home and do your homework. Come back to me next week and we'll talk about it." So I went home and I Googled it, and all these things popped up and it was just like, "Holy shit. This is crazy." There's a lady named Caroline Cossey. I think that's her last name. I may be pronouncing it wrong, but she is a trans woman. She is a model. She's from the UK, and she popped up, and I was like, "Man, this is me." And so when I went back to Sarah and I told her, it was like light bulbs for me. Everything was just clicking, and I realized I've known this entire time. I'm not crazy. I'm not sick. This is a thing.

Laila: So I started my transition in 2012, and when I told her that I wanted to start it, she said, "Well, here's the thing," because the year before, "don't ask don't tell"

repeal happened. She said, "The 'don't ask don't tell' repeal did not include transgender people, so you cannot be trans in the military." And it was like a punch to the gut. I felt like, "Fuck, so how do I do this without getting caught or being put out of the military?" And so I couldn't. I started my transition outside of the military under no one knowing what's going on. As soon as I started to see the transition changes, my father had gotten sick, and I had to move back to Hawaii in 2013. Before that, I had to tell my parents ... It was like my second coming out story, and I did not know how they were gonna take it because when I first came out as gay in 2004, it was not for them to accept or tolerate. It was because I was deploying, and if the chance of me not coming home was possible, I wanted them to know who I was. That whole situation was just horrible with my family, and then in 2013, I have to tell them because I'm moving back to my parents' house, I'm trans, what is that gonna look like? It was a rough time, just a little bit, but the time for them to come around to that was significantly less than it was for them to come around when I was gay.

Simona: So you told them new news-

Laila: New news.

Simona: -in 2013.

Laila: Yeah.

Simona: And you had mentioned it was a very rough conversation. Your mom actually disowned you for a period of time. Did you kind of prepare yourself for that knowing that was a possibility, or was there something else there?

Laila: So the thought was in the back of my mind that my mom would disown me again, because when I came out as gay and I deployed, I didn't hear from them for the first several months of my deployment. That probably crushed me more than having to deploy and leave home, and it took a death in my unit in order for my parents to really talk to me again. So, I was very fearful of that happening all over again when I came out as trans. When I did, it was, "Okay, we'll talk about it when you get here." That's the tone of the conversation that we had. When I got home, they clearly saw that there were some changes, but they refused to use my chosen name or my chosen pronouns. It added to the stress of not being able to be my authentic self at work, not being able to present the way that I wanted to to society, and just being at home, it even added that more stress on. Finally, I had to kind of educate my family, my parents and my sister about the dangers of if I'm presenting as this, this is the reason why you should use my chosen name and my chosen pronouns. It was a very interesting situation where I had explained to them, "If I'm like this, do this because this server, this waiter doesn't want to serve our table anymore because you called me he in front of him, and

you're saying that I'm your son but I'm dressed as a woman. This isn't normal for people to see all the time." The dangerous part of that was they had to understand if I was alone or somebody had called me by my birth name and used my birth pronouns, then if this server did not like me at all and he really wanted to hurt me, he could be waiting outside and once I leave the restaurant, attack me. That's something that was happening very prominently. From 2012 until now, there have been I think 368 trans murders across worldwide, 28 this year in the United States.

Simona: And they were predominantly women of color.

Laila: Yes, yes, and I am a proud trans woman of color. And so I felt like, "You're putting a target on my head." So this was for my birthday. So when I got home from work on my birthday, my dad came to my door and the conversation he and I had, the exchange of words was not normal. He said, "We're gonna take you out to dinner for your birthday. You can dress how you want." I felt like that was coming from my mom and not from my dad, and so I was like, "Okay. Am I being audited? This is"-

Simona: Are you luring me somewhere?

Laila: Yeah, you're gonna-

Simona: Don't put me in a camp.

Laila: This is a fucking joke.

Simona: Conversion camp.

Laila: Right! A conversion camp. He said, "We're gonna take you to dinner for your birthday." So I got a dress. I put on this nice sundress. Whatever hair I had on the top of my head, I curled. I put my \$2 makeup from the drugstore, whatever I can, and we went and had dinner. It was such a pleasant time, and then when we came home, my parents said, "We have another surprise for you." I said, "Okay. This is another joke. Y'all took me out to feed me and now you're gonna poke me, like stop poking [inaudible]." I sat on the sofa and they brought this cake to me and the back side of the cake was facing me, so I couldn't see the front. They sang "Happy Birthday". They even said my chosen name in the song, the "Happy Birthday" song. After the song, you blow your candles out and you make your wish, and I did that. I closed my eyes and I made a wish and I blew my candles out, and the wish that I made was, "I just wish that this transition can go much better, much more smoothly, and more lovingly for my family. I want that support." After I opened my eyes, my parents said, "You can turn your cake around now and see." So I turned it around. It's a chocolate doberge cake. I love

chocolate doberge cakes, by the way, if anybody wants to send me one, and it said, "Happy birthday Laila," and it was just so validating. In that very moment, I knew that the transition did not just include me, it included everyone around me. I had to be patient and understanding that this was going to take some time for them to really wrap their head around. So, while the fear of coming out and telling my parents that I was gay and trans, or gay and then later on as transgender, while the fear was there, my family has become my number one cheerleaders moving forward in this movement, in my life, with my husband. My dad, when I tell him that I'm traveling and doing other engagements, he asks what am I wearing. He'll even suggest stuff for me, and if he says, "That dress is ugly," guess what? I change the fucking dress.

Simona: Aw.

Laila: I really appreciate my parents. I'm very blessed to have family members who are very supportive, because not all LGBT people have that affordability, and so I count my blessings every day.

Gilad: I'm also happy that you have a father with some fashion sense. Whenever I buy any-

Laila: He really doesn't have any fashion sense, but he tries and I see him trying, and I trust his judgment. If he doesn't like a dress on one of his daughters ... There's three girls in my family, me and my two sisters. It was two boys and two girls. Now it's three girls and one boy. My brother feels very lucky just to be the only son.

Simona: He's like, "I finally have my moment."

Laila: Yeah, like it's himself, right? But my father will tell my mom, "Oh babe, wear this," and it really does look nice, so I have to kind of trust his judgment but when it comes to fashion-

Simona: Does he like polo shirts, khaki jeans, like khakis?

Laila: Yeah. My dad is very ... So I'm like, "Dad, this dress does not look good."

Simona: You're not playing golf.

Laila: Exactly, but he tries and that's what matters most to me. I love the fact that he really does want to be a part of everything that I do.

Simona: That's beautiful.

Gilad: I want to go back to the military, because this is all still happening at the same time.

Laila: Yeah.

Gilad: You're now no longer serving. You retired. Can you guide us a little bit through that process of retirement and how you ended up out of the military?

Laila: So, moving to Hawaii, I felt like I'm returning home. I was also helping my mom take care of my dad, but in the beginning of my tour in Hawaii, everything was fine. My first supervisor, she identified as LGBT herself, and she was a woman of color, which was great because she understood the struggles. She was a great mentor, and then they moved her. She ended up getting another assignment, and so she was placed somewhere else. My second supervisor kind of made it really hard for me. They didn't create a space that was very welcoming. Work started to become very ... I dreaded coming to work because I felt like I was being targeted in the workspace. And at that time, there was no guidance. There was no policies regarding trans people, so at any given time, if that came up, I could've been discharged in that moment and 72 hours later I would've been out of the military. But, in saying that, I kept to the rules and regulations, how I'm supposed to present, how I'm supposed to speak, and oftentimes the patients that I would have would always gender me as female. I was told by my leadership that I have to correct these patients on the spot, "No, I'm not a female. I'm a male." That's not what they saw. They saw a female. They saw a female presenting. Even though I tried my hardest not to present as that, they still saw a female.

Laila: So, ultimately, I medically retired from the military, but the underlying of that, and I say this because under supervision from my therapist and my primary care physician, even they agreed that what they were seeing was not entirely true or it wasn't the integrity that they expected from the leadership, and so they told me, "It's best that you take a medical retirement and retain your benefits before they discharge you dishonorably and you lose everything." And so at that time, Logan and I were engaged, and we talked about it and he said, "You can fight the fight from outside and I can fight the fight from inside," and we've become this Superman Supergirl team in the trans military movement, and so that's why I decided to get out because I trusted the guidance from my husband and from my doctor and therapist.

Gilad: You keep bringing up Logan, Captain Plaid.

Laila: Captain Plaid, yes. Look, if y'all come to the house and you look at his fucking side of the closet, oh my god, it's just plaid everywhere. In all my pictures,

there's like three shirts, three plaid shirts that he takes pictures in and it's rotating.

Simona: Is it because it's just an easy item of clothing, an easy pattern to match, he's not putting in effort, or does he truly and 100% connect with plaid?

Laila: I want to say that, but he mentioned when we were on Ellen, the Ellen DeGeneres Show-

Simona: The Ellen.

Laila: The Ellen. Oh my god. He mentioned on the show that he was a bad lesbian. Even as a lesbian, he wore plaid everything. I gestured to his outfit like, "He still wears plaid every day. This has not changed." So, I think the lesbian is still kind of in there.

Simona: You're not a bad lesbian, you were just a bad dresser.

Laila: Both.

Simona: Yeah.

Gilad: We need a title for the episode. We'll call it, "The lesbian was still in there." I love it. I love it.

Laila: Yeah. Captain Plaid is so fitting because everything that he has is all plaid, and when I tell him, like, "Hey" ... I showed Gilad our most recent fall pictures, and it's a plaid shirt.

Simona: Is there ever a moment you just want to take it all, just take it all from the closet and just put in maybe a different print?

Laila: Yeah, like-

Simona: Just in a rage, just like-

Laila: Yeah, just take his clothes and do like he did with his engagement shirt that I bought for him. I'm kind of sour about that because I bought him a shirt to take our engagement photos in. We took the photos in the engagement shirt. The next day, he put that shirt in donation.

Simona: How dare you.

Laila: How fucking dare you.

Gilad: The audacity.

Simona: How did you guys meet? How did you both meet, both in the Army? Was it like a night out at a local bar or what was it?

Laila: So, we were on Craigslist. No, I'm just kidding. We didn't meet on Craigslist.

Simona: That's how I meet my guys.

Gilad: That's actually how I met my co-host.

Laila: So in the U.S., they took down the personals from Craigslist. There's no longer a personals in there, so you can't go and meet people.

Gilad: I'm glad you met before they took it down.

Laila: Yeah, right? No, but so we didn't meet on Craigslist. We actually were a part of an online support group for transgender military people, and it was Out Serve Trans, and then when we left that chapter, we were one of the first 30 members of a group called SPART*A, and SPART*A stands for Service Members Partners and Allies for Respect and Tolerance for All. Long fucking winded name, but we're just gonna call it SPART*A.

Simona: Covers everything.

Laila: Yeah, it covers everything. We met online through the support group, and our relationship in 2012 was purely professional. He was dating someone at the time. I was with someone at the time, and then we had our first annual conference in Houston, Texas.

Simona: You just saw that plaid.

Laila: Yes. So, totally cliché. You ever watch those movies when somebody walks through the door and you go to talk to them and it's like everything slows down and he's like-

Simona: You want that moment. We all dream about it.

Laila: Yes, and it was just like that. He came in in this navy blue button down collared shirt. His sleeves were rolled up. He had black suspenders, a black bow tie, and black pants, black slacks with some loafers on. He was everything. He really was everything. In my mind, I said, "I'm gonna marry that guy," never really thinking that I was actually gonna get with him or marry him. So, during that conference, every time he spoke, it wasn't planned like that. He would speak and I would

caveat off of what he would say immediately after it. If I spoke, he would do the same thing. Towards the end of the conference, I said, "Are you always gonna speak after me?" He was like, "No, it just works out like that. I'm listening to everything you're saying. You have the same ideas as me. This is a thing." And then we had the dinner the last night, and he walked in in his plaid shirt.

Gilad: On a horse.

Simona: I was like, "I'm done, I'm done."

Laila: Yeah. He walks in into this restaurant and I immediately walked over to him and I was like, "Hey, where you sitting?" He was like, "Wherever you're gonna sit," and I was like-

Simona: Ah! Okay.

Gilad: Damn.

Laila: Murder she fucking wrote. So he sat next to me, and you know how you're smitten with someone-

Simona: You're gonna be cuter.

Laila: -elbowing and kneeing each other.

Simona: Like knee touch and then you're like-

Laila: Yeah, it was a whole ... Laugh. I did the whole toss my hair laugh, because I was really smitten by him. But Logan and I really became close when he was getting his name change done and he had put out to our group, SPART*A, on Facebook, he said, "Hey, looking at names." At that time, he was going by Luke and he said, "I'm looking at names. Can you guys suggest names for me? I want to try to stick to L and I." So I looked up these names and his middle name is after his grandmother, so he shortened it just to Beck. I looked up some other L names for him, and I found Logan. I looked up all these meanings behind the names and I said, "Logan Beck means little fire by the river." So I messaged him separately from the group. I was like, "Hey, I saw that you're trying to look up names. You're changing your name. It's cool because I don't know if Luke really fits you, but I saw these two names and it means little fire by the river, Logan Beck." He was like, "Oh cool, thanks!" The next day, he messages me and he goes, "Hey, I changed my name, by the way." I was like, "To what?" He goes, "Oh, you didn't see the post?" I said, "No," so I go onto the group page and it was Logan Beck Ireland.

Simona: Ah! Okay.

Laila: So I was like, "Man, I did this. I created this monster."

Simona: I named you.

Laila: Yes. I really did.

Simona: Now put a ring on it.

Laila: Yeah, that's when we became really close. Shortly after that, we made it official that we're dating. That was in March. No. We started really dating in April and then we made it official in May. This is all in 2014, by the way. Made it official in May. He came to meet my family in June of 2014, left on July 6th, came back on July 9th to Hawaii and proposed. Wasted no time. All in 2014, within seven months, it was, we know each other. You broke up with your girlfriend. I broke up with my boyfriend.

Simona: Oh, you [crosstalk].

Laila: We started dating. It was just like boom boom boom boom. When he showed up to propose in Hawaii at the beach at sunset-

Gilad: Are you real?

Simona: Like are you-

Gilad: Is this real?

Laila: Yeah, it's super real.

Simona: Ellen, make this into a movie.

Laila: So when he proposed, my sister had helped him put this whole plan of proposal together, because I didn't know, because he left and I was like, "Man, I don't know when I'm gonna see him again because he's stationed in Oklahoma. I'm in Hawaii." She helped him pick out the ring and everything.

Simona: That's a gorgeous ring. I'm looking at it right now.

Laila: Thanks! This plan, that day of the proposal, she was like, "Hey, I need you to be my wing man. I'm going on this blind date." I was like, "Who the fuck brings a wing man on a blind date? Just call me and I'll call you if you need to get out of it." She was like, "No, it's gonna be at the beach." I was like, "Oh, like at a

restaurant?" She was like, "No, it's at sunset." I was like, "So you're going to the beach at sunset on a blind date? This is stupid."

Simona: With your sister.

Laila: With my younger sister, like, "This is stupid but I'll go with you." So she tells me we all have to wear these white dresses. So we all put on white dresses and have this denim jacket on and conveniently, she spills something on her white dress, so she has to change. I'm so mad. So we get to the beach. She was like, "This is what he looks like," not knowing ... Now she didn't know what he was wearing at all. She said, "He's gonna be wearing a white tee shirt and khaki pants." So I'm just sitting there waiting and looking-

Gilad: And plaid underwear.

Laila: Yeah, probably plaid underwear. I don't see anybody. Every time I see someone with a white shirt, I'm like, "Oh no, that's not him." I see somebody with khaki pants. I'm like, "No, that's not him." And then finally I hear my niece call out my name and I turn around, because I'm standing at the edge of the reef. I'm looking into the water and I turn around and I see my niece running to me. I'm like, "What the fuck is she doing here?" My sister and my cousin are with me at the beach and we're waiting for this blind date to come. As I turn around, I see her and I look behind her and there's Logan with this big ass grin wearing a white tee shirt and khaki pants.

Simona: Aw.

Laila: My sister said, "I had no idea he was wearing that. Honest to God," and it was just so perfect.

Simona: Everything just fell into place.

Laila: Yes, it really is.

Simona: I feel like you don't hear that part. I think trans stories are always left out of those love stories or romances. You never really hear about them or talk about them.

Laila: It just goes to show that love is love. I never thought I would be married to another trans service member, let alone a transgender person.

Simona: And doing this work of dismantling the system that has been-

Laila: Yeah, breaking down the patriarchy.

Simona: Yeah.

Laila: Yeah.

Simona: And oppressive systems.

Laila: Yes. So I'm really blessed in my life in all aspects, and I have my husband to be my rock and foundation in this.

Simona: Nice.

Laila: Yeah.

Gilad: Thank you so much for joining us, Laila. That was awesome. That was so much fun.

Laila: Thanks for having me. I'm in fucking Canada. This is amazing for me.

Simona: We apologize for the weather.

Laila: It's okay.

Simona: It's the tundra right now.

Laila: It's okay.

Gilad: Thank you so much.

[Theme music fades in]

Laila: Thank you.

Simona: Thank you.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.