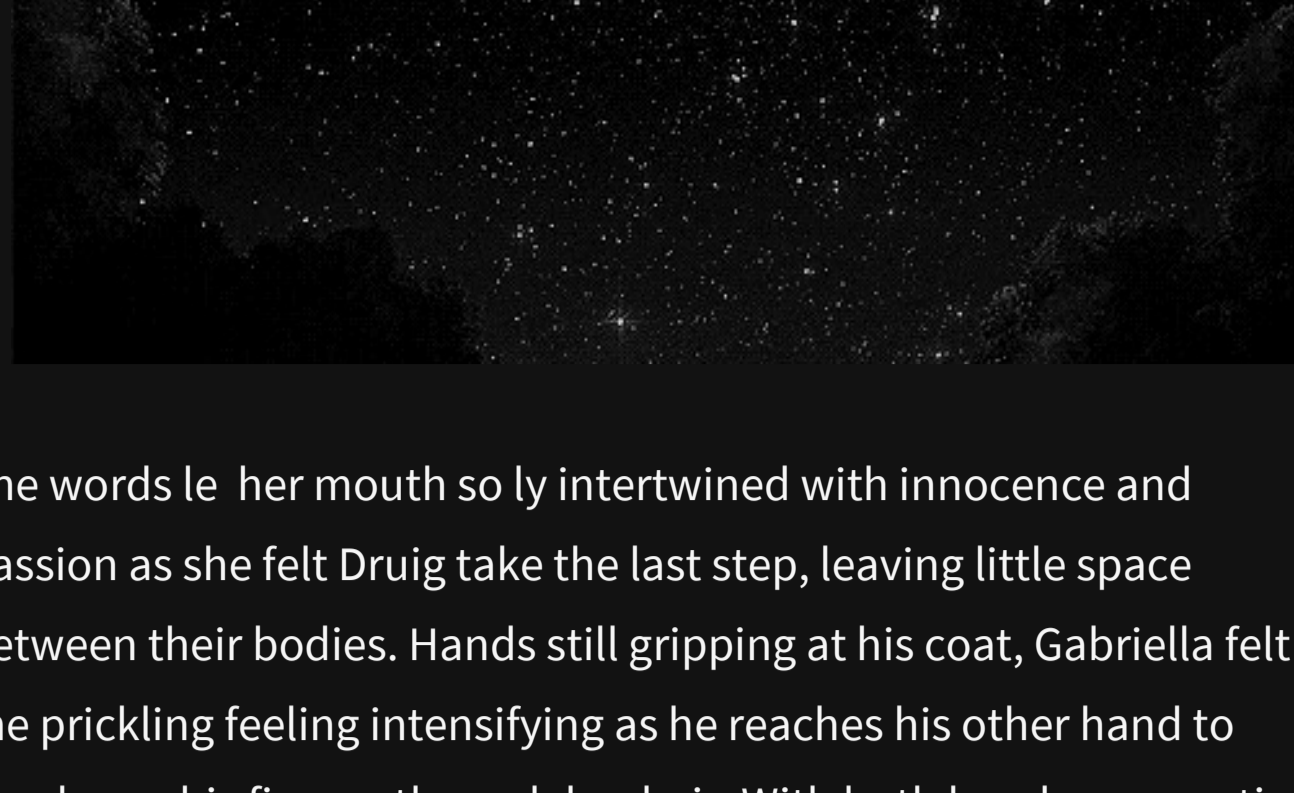


ARDENT



The words le her mouth so ly intertwined with innocence and passion as she felt Druig take the last step, leaving little space between their bodies. Hands still gripping at his coat, Gabriella felt the prickling feeling intensifying as he reaches his other hand to slowly run his fingers through her hair. With both hands now resting lightly on either side of her face keeping her eyes locked with his, Gabriella felt the beating of heart quicken as Druig gently leant towards her.

It felt like everything fell into place when his lips met hers, the kiss so at first, delicate, filled with longing as Gabriella's hands clutched tighter at his coat to pull him closer. With her eyes shut tightly, she felt herself forget about the world around them as she focused on Druig lips, the warmth of his skin against hers.

There was no words to describe how much this moment meant to her, hoping he felt the same, her breath catching as his lips parted from hers only for a second before returning quickly. Feeling his lips again, they hungrily pushed against hers more firmly than before as she happily obliged and allowed him to deepen the kiss, his movements hypnotising.

So focused on his lips, Gabriella had not noticed the loss of one of his hands from her face as she found it had moved to her lower back.

Although his touch usually gentle, the hand now pulling her closer held her stubbornly as if to show he wished her to not leave it again, the other thumbing so ly over her cheek and the corner of her mouth.

She had no idea how long they kissed, before she felt his lips curl into a smile still against hers. Feeling his hand part from her back, Druig leaves a final so kiss against her lips before finally pulling back a er what seemed a lifetime, his smile baring his teeth in amusement. Snapping back into reality, Gabriella's eyes fluttered open as she notices him watching her and she felt the heat in her cheeks return. Without moving from her, Druig chuckles quietly as the hand on the side of her face moves to trace her jaw before dropping to reach for her hand which had slipped from his waist.

"My, my," Druig whispers, his voice waving slightly as he adjusts to ruining the silence, "how interesting."

"Interesting?" Gabriella chokes out so ly, finding her own voice nervous and parched as Druig's smile widens as he hums in response.

"I mean, I am lost for words, I didn't think I could be lost for words. So, it's simply interesting."

Watching him respond so ly as his free hand moves to run through his hair, Gabriella observes Druig as his eyes look distant as he thinks to himself before looking back at her. Noticing that she was looking at him, he places his hand against her shoulder to pull her into his chest, feeling her willingly moving with his touch.

"How do you feel?" His voice is so as she feels his hand draw lines up and down her back as he held her, "you've wanted to kiss me for a while now, right?"

"I," Gabriella feels her words catch at the back of her throat as she shivers at his touch, feeling happy her face was buried against his chest, "did you, I mean, how long have you wanted to kiss me?"

"I asked you first." He chuckles as she hu s.

Noticing her chest feeling heavy and her mind racing, Gabriella thinks back to the first time she wanted Druig to kiss her. Feeling as a smile pulls at the corner of her mouth, she remembers a moment from the first couple of months of her arrival at the compound.

"Do you," she questions pulling back from his chest to meet his eyes as he tilts his head slightly, "do you remember the first time I went exploring by myself? Trying to seem so brave?"

Druig nods gently as she sighs.

"That day, you followed me secretly didn't you?" She questions again as Druig smiles, "I mean, how else did you get to me so quickly?"

"I might," Druig replies stroking her hair again, "I might have been a little curious, so I simply wanted to keep an eye on you."

"I knew it," Gabriella says with a giggle before sighing so ly again, "that day, when I was attacked by that jaguar, you appeared out of thin air and protected me. You put yourself in harms way for me."

"It wasn't anything special," he states with a feeble chuckle as she rolls her eyes, "I have fought far worse. It wasn't going to hurt me."

"That's not the point, Druig."

Watching him focus on her, Gabriella pushes back more so that there was a slight gap between them. Taking his hands gently, she calmly guides her fingers between his before closing them as she keeps her eyes on their hands together.

"It was special to me, because you saved me," she whispers looking up from their hands, "it might have been just another day for you, another simple human doing something stupid, but for me, I got another chance. Another chance to make more stupid mistakes."

Druig's eyes watch closely as Gabriella smiles warmly before continuing.

"That day was the day I fell in love with you. Headstrong and arrogant as you are, I fell in love with it all. So I suppose that's the first time I wanted to...kiss you."

"Love?"

Gabriella's eyes widen slightly as she's made aware of what she said out loud, her teeth suddenly pulling at her bottom lip as Druig chuckles. She doesn't notice her hands tightening their grip on his as she drops her gaze and tries her best to step away, Druig not letting her.

"Wait, I meant.."

"Oh no, you can't take it back now," Druig responds smiling as he watches Gabriella's eyes look anywhere but at him directly, "if my ears aren't deceiving me, you just told me you love me?"

Feeling her words catch at the back of her throat and the heat flush to her cheeks, Gabriella finds herself flustered as Druig gently pulls her face up. Shyly looking into his eyes which were fixated on her, Gabriella feels her lips part slightly as if to speak but no words came out.

"So shy," Druig comments curiously as he continues to smile, "do you wish to take it back?"

"No," she replies ever so so ly but quickly enough to make him chuckle.

"Good, then it means when I say it back, it won't be weird."

"What...?" Gabriella mumbles out her voice still so .

Looking at her with a gentle smile still on his lips, Druig li s his hands to lightly cup Gabriella's face once more before pulling her close. Stopping short so there was a little distance between them, his smile widens as he notices her blush deepen.

"I am completely and wholeheartedly in love with you, Gabriella," he states proudly, startling her as she feels herself giggle at his sudden outburst before watching him lean in to once again kiss her.

The kiss is short and sweet this time, before Druig pulls back chuckling as he notices Gabriella hu in response of him stopping. Keeping his hands against her face, Druig watches as she tries her best to look confident once more but he could see she was fighting a losing battle.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You," Gabriella says a little louder than before as he smiles, "and the fact that you love me. But, don't think this means you get out of telling me the first time you wanted to kiss me? I told you mine, so start talking."

Druig chuckles at her question as she furrows her eyebrows before pulling away completely so that the space between them was further than it had been for a while. Watching his reaction to it, Gabriella grins as his eyes roll slightly before he moves to walk around her slowly. Following his movements, she continues to watch as he places his hands neatly behind his back, looking from her to their surroundings.

"Hmm," he utters out not looking at her as he continues to walk, "the first time I wanted to kiss you, was the day you finally stood up to me actually."

"Really?" she questions surprised as Druig hums in response, still not looking at her but he was smiling as he remembered the past.

"It was the first time, I really let a human do something like that," Druig whispers out looking up and to Gabriella as he moves towards her, "I'm not sure why I let you, but I'm glad I did. I suppose I'm not the best at listening and my abilities well, I guess it's easy to forget it's okay to stop from time to time."

Gabriella watches intently as he stops before her and o ers her a hand, which she took so ly as he smiles.

"You showed me that I can be more than my abilities, more than an eternal," Druig says as he squeezes her hand, "so yes, that was the first time I wanted to kiss you, the moment I thought of you as more than just a loyal follower."

Feeling her heart wanting to burst from her chest, Gabriella smiles warmly as he begins to move towards the way they entered the cave, still facing her returning the same smile. All she could think about was how she had longed for this moment to happen and now that it was unfolding before her, she couldn't contain her happiness.

"Thank you," Gabriella chokes out so ly as Druig tilts his head noticing her eyes glistening with tears making him stop.

"For what?"

"For loving me," she whispers as he moves back to hold her, gently wiping a tear from her cheek, "I just, thank you."

"You fool," he whispers back as she giggles lightly looking away from him before he pulls her face back, "it is I, who should be thankful."

With a gentle kiss to the forehead, Druig begins to pull Gabriella once more as she continues to smile warmly. As they continued to walk to the entrance, all she could think about was how this moment would forever be etched into her memory. Taking one more look back towards the cave, Gabriella bites her lip as she turns to see him watching her.

"Are you ready to head back? I'm positive it's almost daylight," Druig comments running his thumb over her hand as she nods sadly, making him chuckle, "then let's head home."