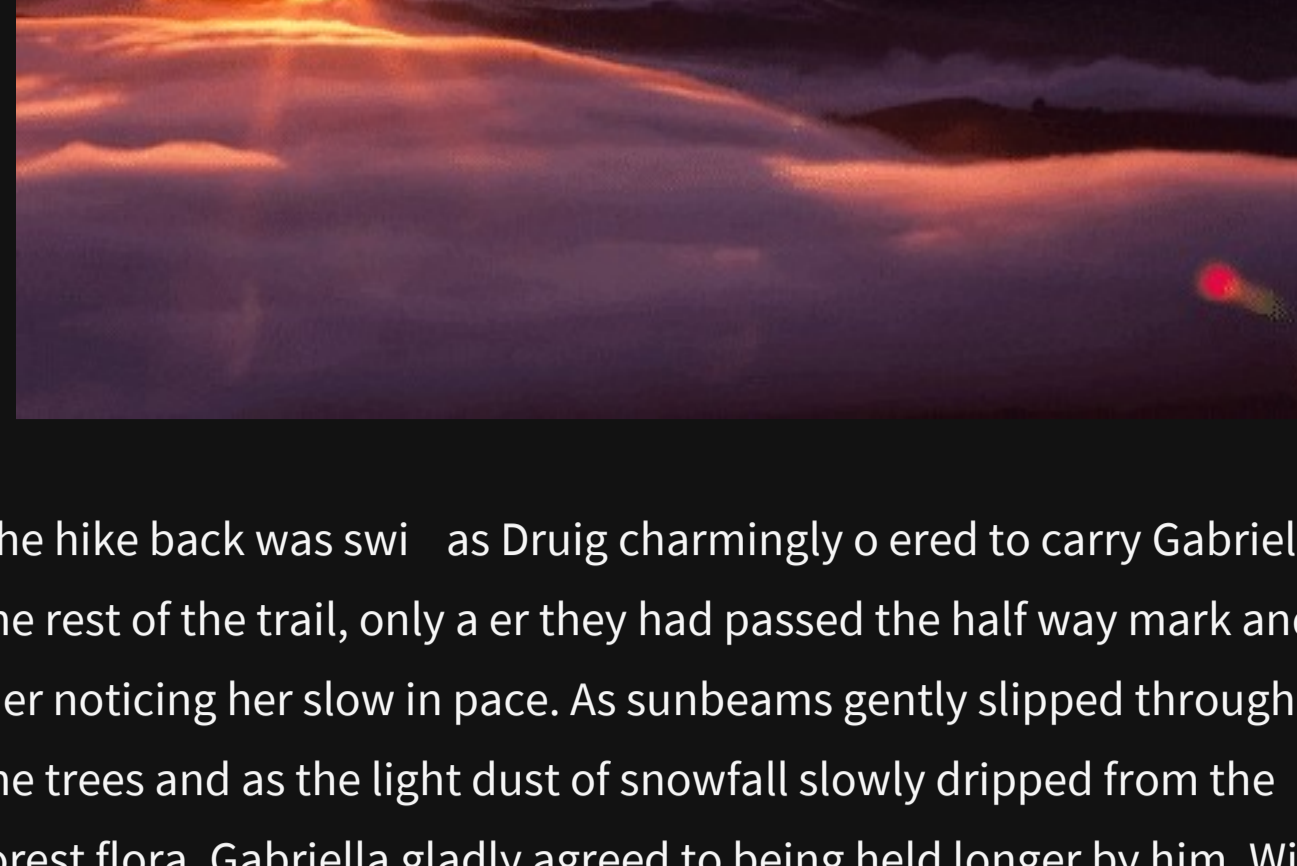


## DEVOTED



The hike back was swifter as Druig charmingly offered to carry Gabriella the rest of the trail, only after they had passed the half way mark and after noticing her slow pace. As sunbeams gently slipped through the trees and as the light dust of snowfall slowly dripped from the forest flora, Gabriella gladly agreed to being held longer by him. With a sweet chuckle, changed as if knowing he loved her made his voice seem sweeter, Gabriella gasped as he swept her into his arms with little hesitation.

"Druig!" She cries out with a half-suppressed laugh before turning to see him looking at her as his grip tightens around her with little effort, "a little warning, please!"

"But beautiful, where's the fun in that?"

Watching his lips pull into a toothy grin as he observed her quietly, Gabriella could only roll her eyes before placing her arms gently around his neck pretending he needed the support as he continued walking through the quiet forest. As Druig moved through the trees effortlessly and with more speed than before, Gabriella could only admire him as he focused on the way ahead. It felt surreal to her as she thought back on the past few hours, her mind reminiscing back to the moment he truly kissed her. She smiled softly at the thought of the kiss, and how it was not just a simple 'I care for you' kiss but felt more like an 'I would die for you' kiss. Feeling her cheeks flush with heat, Gabriella nervously laughs as she notices Druig glance to down at her.

"What are you thinking about?" Druig questions still moving with a quickness that made Gabriella's hair swish lightly against her face, "you're blushing, so my guess is that you're thinking of me."

His confident grin makes her hum with laughter as she removes a hand from his neck to poke his cheek, her finger lingering slightly before pulling away so she could place it around his neck once more.

"Look at you, assuming things," Gabriella replies biting her bottom lip as Druig chuckles, "I don't always think about you, you know."

"Well now, that's a lie."

"Excuse me?" She adds with another hum as he ruffles his shoulders to show his amusement, "cocky much?"

Druig lets out another short laugh, slightly louder now as he looked from her and back to the path in front of them. Feeling his grip tighten as he pulls her closer, Gabriella watches silently as she waits for him to explain himself.

"I suppose I should tell you, now our relationship has deepened," his voice lingers slightly as she watches him more curiously, "I might not have mentioned everything when I told you about my abilities."

"What does that mean?"

"Now hear me out," Druig continues as he feels Gabriella tense slightly in his arms, "I didn't do it because I didn't trust you, I mean I told you everything else. But, I guess I just wanted to keep one thing to myself."

Looking back towards her with a nervous chuckle to stop her from saying anything, he puts out a quick breath as she continues to watch him, curiosity turning to unease.

"I can," he mumbles out slightly worried for her reaction as her eyebrows furrow slowly, "I can read minds."

"Sorry," Gabriella utters out with a short laugh clearly shocked as Druig looks away for a moment before looking back to her, "you're telling me, this whole time, you knew and correct me if I'm wrong, you knew everything I was thinking?"

"I mean, that's the definition of mind reading, so, yes," Druig's voice lingered on the last word trying to find some humour as Gabriella hums again before going quiet, "are you, mad?"

"Mad?" Gabriella comments her eyes distant as they look forwards, her mind racing back to past thoughts before feeling the heat flush to her cheeks again, "God, I wouldn't say mad, more like embarrassed...Does that mean you have always listened to my thoughts..."

"No, not always." He responds a little calmer as he continues to watch her, "I normally found myself listening when I mediated, I suppose it was because you were, always a big distraction."

Feeling her mind swirling with the new information she was given, Gabriella's eyes linger to his before she feels herself sighing and dropping her head against his chest. Although the news was shocking, Gabriella felt her eyes shut tightly humiliated as she could only think back to the amount of times she thought about him kissing her, holding her.

"Don't feel humiliated," Druig comments suddenly as she pulls her head away from his chest, her eyes narrowing.

"Druig!" She blurts out as he chuckles and pulls a hand up to tap himself gently on the head, positioning her on one arm before returning the hand under her, "just because I know about this new 'ability' of yours, doesn't mean you can use it! I want you to stay out of my head, okay?"

"It's not that simple."

"Make it simple," Gabriella replies back, her arms finally letting go of his neck and crossing against her chest, to show her seriousness as Druig simply chuckles, "okay?"

"Okay, okay, I promise," he declares as he gently shakes her looking to her arms crossed as she follows his eyes before suppressing another soft laugh. Although it felt nerve-racking knowing Druig could read her thoughts, Gabriella couldn't help but to forgive so easily.

Removing her arms from their tight hold against her chest, Gabriella gently places them around Druig's neck once more making him hum with happiness. As the silence returned, Gabriella gently leans her head against his chest as she listened to his heart beat slowly, the sound comforting her as they continued towards the compound. Counting the thumps in his chest quietly, she found herself take no notice of the fact that they had arrived back at the entrance of the clearing.

Leaning her head slightly as Druig finally comes to a stop, Gabriella smiles warmly as she pats him gently to lower her to the ground. With a small hum Druig complies as he lightly lets her drop until she straightens herself on her feet, slightly wavering at what seemed like a new sensation.

As she leaned up on her balls of her feet before stretching her arms above her head, Gabriella smiles as she welcomes the view of her home. Walking back through the clearing to make their way home, Gabriella giggles softly as she feels Druig place his arms around her waist to slow her down. Letting her walk almost come to a halt, Gabriella peeks over her shoulder as Druig pulls her closer.

"Aren't you afraid people will talk?" She hums out faintly as Druig places his chin into the nook of her neck, making her giggle.

"People already talk, so who cares."

"They do?" Gabriella replies bemused as Druig removes himself, still holding her waist with a hum.

"Is that a bad thing?" Druig comments as he feels her tense shyly before spinning her to face him, "Would you like me to control them to stop? Or possibly, would you like to know what they think?"

"No, it's fine, they can think what they like," she whispers out looking around suddenly to see if anyone was watching them, "but I'm not sure I want to know what they are thinking."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Gabriella replies softly with an anxious smile as Druig chuckles and places a hand against her cheek, "I'm curious though, can you turn it off?"

"Turn it off?" Druig questions as Gabriella leans into his hand slightly, "you mean other people's thoughts?"

"Yeah, is it possible?"

Druig smiles calmly as Gabriella continues to watch him, his thumb moving gently against her cheek as she waited for a response. His eyes shifting from one side of her face to other, making her feel vulnerable as she seemed hypnotised by him.

"It's possible, yes," Druig answers softly as he smiles, "I mean, it's challenging and at times my mind can feel crowded, but I've learnt to silence it. I've had a long time to practise."

"You would tell me, if you were struggling, right?"

Watching his smile widen slightly as she places a hand against his, Druig simply nods before leaning forward to place a kiss against her forehead. Although no words were spoken, Gabriella could sense he was thankful and it made her chest ache as all she wanted to do was make him happy. Pulling his hand from her cheek, Gabriella smiles as she begins to step back walking as she tugs him with her.

"I'm so happy," she mutters towards him as he chuckles and squeezes her hand, "and I'm thankful for you, for this life, for everything. I can't imagine what my life would be like without you."

"What's with the sentimental talk?" Druig's voice is sweet and soft as Gabriella rolls her eyes, continuing to pull him through the clearing, no longer caring if people were looking.

"I just," she replies shyly as he smiles, "I just, want you to know how I feel, that's all."

"I already know."

"I mean from me saying it," Gabriella states a little flustered as she stops swiftly to playfully hit him, "not from you reading my thoughts."

Leaning his free hand up as a sign for surrender, Druig's chuckles as Gabriella rolls her eyes again before looking away. Feeling him step towards her, she can't help but to smile as he pulls her face to look at him once more. Trying to hide her smile, Gabriella's eyes watch purely as Druig gently caresses his thumb over her bottom lip.

"I want you to know," Druig declares so close that even with a whisper, Gabriella felt as if he was yelling his thoughts to the world, "I also couldn't imagine my life without you in it, and you know, I would journey to the ends of the universe, to beyond, for you. I would move oceans for you, stop time if I could, just to show you, how much you mean to me."

"Druig.."

"No, listen to me," he replies as she giggles faintly, her eyes glistening to show each emotion she was feeling, "I will never, never allow any harm or pain to come to you again. You have my word and my heart, forever."

Placing a hand gently against her face to rub her eyes, Druig smiles as he pulls her into his chest before holding her tightly. Everything felt as if it was slowly falling into place and all Gabriella could think about was how incredible it was going to be, spending the rest of her life with him. Pushing back lightly from his chest, Gabriella leans herself slightly to pull his face to hers as she gently kisses him. The kiss was emotional as she wraps her arms around his neck to hold him close, his head moving in perfect harmony with hers.

All Gabriella could think about was how happy she was and as Druig grinned slightly in-between kisses, she knew he was listening though at that moment, she didn't care. Feeling him pull her closer to signify that he didn't want to let go, Gabriella could only continue to look forward to what was to come.

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