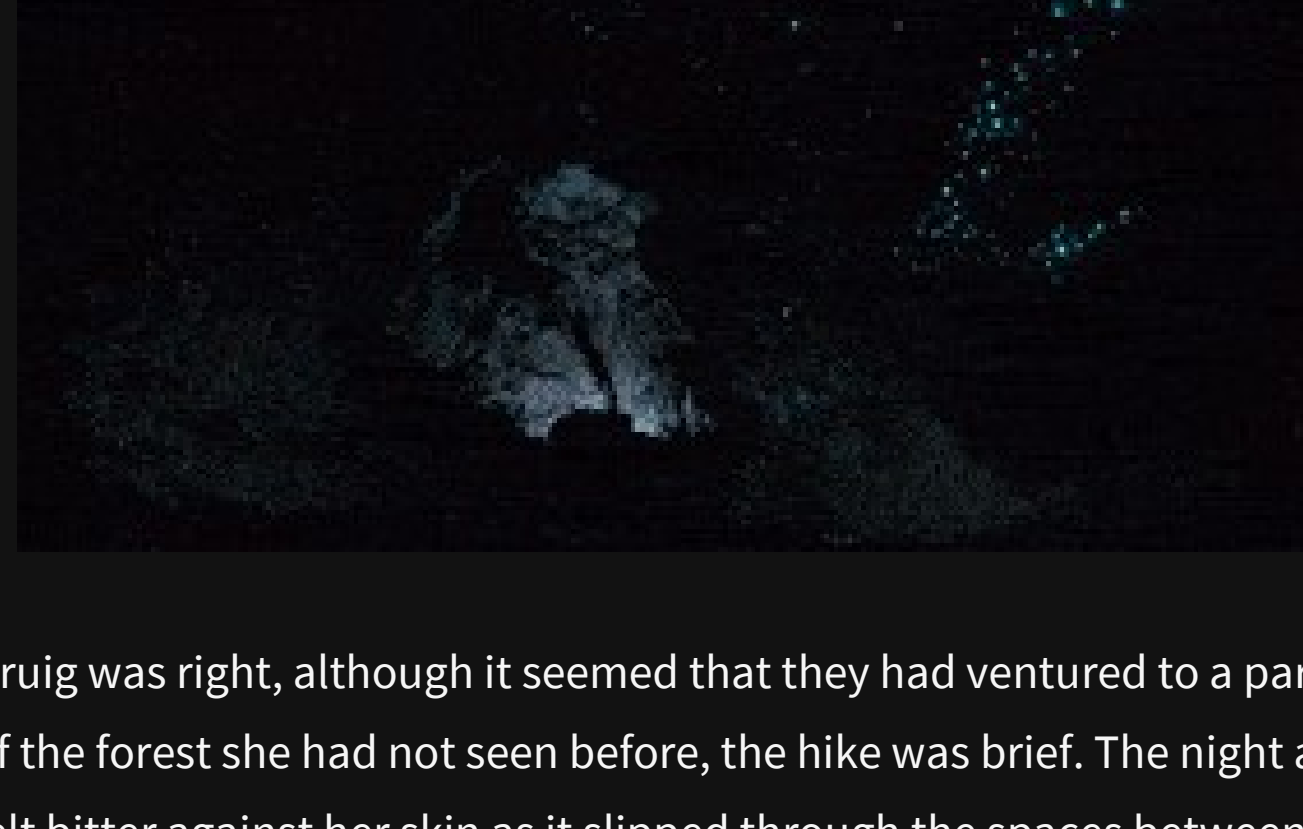


SECRET



Druig was right, although it seemed that they had ventured to a part of the forest she had not seen before, the hike was brief. The night air felt bitter against her skin as it slipped through the spaces between the trees. The only guidance for their journey being streams of moon light pushing its way between a lattice of leaves.

Gabriella had let go of Druig's hand some time ago as she grew curious and slowed down to take in her surroundings, each new thing stealing her attention. The sound of insects humming and the earthy scent almost felt captivating as Gabriella wished to linger from the path, the rustling of fallen foliage under her feet.

Noticing her placing a hand so ly on a large tree which felt like it grew ten feet taller with each step towards it, Druig finally spoke up.

"Every few yards, must we stop," Druig comments teasingly as Gabriella looks to him, her hand staying put, "just so you can touch every tree?"

"I haven't touched...every tree."

"Fine, almost every tree," Druig replies with a chuckle leaning his shoulder against a tree, his arms crossed against his chest, "should we just wander in the forest instead?"

Pulling her hand from the tree and holding it to linger in mid air, Gabriella turns as she exhales before moving towards Druig while he continues to lean with a smile. Although the darkness engulfed the forest the moon followed them slowly, giving them moments of clarity before disappearing again as if someone was fiddling with a light switch. As Gabriella stops short of him, Druig tilts his head slightly before leaning himself towards her to gently run his fingers through her hair, placing a strand behind her ear.

"Well?"

"Well, what," Gabriella hu s as he chuckles, placing his finger under her chin and his thumb gently below her lips.

"Are you done exploring the forest," Druig questions his lips parting slightly as he keeps his hand against her face to keep her from looking elsewhere, "I've always found it interesting that humans get distracted so easily."

"I wasn't, I just find nature fascinating."

"How endearing," Druig whispers keeping his eyes locked with hers, before slowly letting go of her chin to reach for her hands to pull her with him, "but we are running out of time my dear."

Rolling her eyes as she runs her hands up his forearm to tighten her grip on him, Druig smiles as she does. It didn't take long for them to reach a small clearing in the forest, with less stopping, they would have reached it far earlier and Gabriella made sure not to look at Druig in that moment. Feeling him tug her out of her thoughts, Druig led them both into a clearing which was covered in fallen branches and dark flora that looked as if it was dusted with icing sugar from the le over snow.

"Watch your step," Druig's face finds Gabriella's as he supports her through the clearing to the other side, "it's just past the next set of trees, if you're not looking, you'll surely miss it."

"It's a good thing, I have you then."

Smiling at her comment, Druig turns back to focus on leading her safely as they passed the trees and found themselves at what appeared to be a cli s edge. Stopping short with a dust of rocks disappearing into the darkness as they did, Gabriella finds herself leaning forwards to glimpse at what was below. Although there was no trees to hid the light of the moon, what ever was down there was hidden well.

"Don't tell me," Gabriella whispers as she crouches slowly, her hand lowering from Druig's arm to his hand, "we are going down there?"

"What did I say?" Druig questions as Gabriella returns to her feet, "if you weren't looking.."

"You'll surely miss it," Gabriella sighs as he chuckles, "so, then what did I miss?"

Li ing his spare hand Druig points to a dip in the edge of the cli , hidden perfectly with overgrown plants that if it wasn't pointed out, you would take no notice of. Letting go of his hand Gabriella moves towards the camouflaged entrance, her eyes trying to work out what she was looking at. Keeping her eyes forward, Gabriella takes no notice of her footing and feels herself slip slightly. Letting out a small cry, she feels Druig grab her waist quickly as he pulls her back, her body crashing against his own as he leans his head on her shoulder before removing it.

"Please," Druig breaths out so ly as Gabriella can only notice his hands, "be more careful."

"I wasn't watching my footing, I'm sorry for startling you."

Feeling his hands stay on her waist almost to keep her from moving again, Druig moves himself so that he was back standing in front of her. Letting go of her waist slowly, he reaches for her hand as a sign he was unsure if she would fall again before turning to move closer to the hidden entrance. With Gabriella close behind him Druig ru les up the overgrown plants, pushing them to one side as he holds it there to beckon her forward.

"You want me to go first?" Gabriella asks nervously as Druig drops his head slightly with a chuckle before looking up.

"I'm trying to make sure you don't almost fall again."

"I was just testing you," Gabriella teases as she continues to stand still not exactly thrilled at entering what appeared to be a hole in the ground.

"You're not afraid are you?" Druig questions as watches her shu le slightly, "wait, you are afraid."

Watching her hand move to scratch the back of her neck awkwardly, Druig slowly pulls her towards him as he feels her resist a little with a small frown. Inches away from each other, Druig tightens his grip on her hand as she lets out a small laugh.

"Embarrassing, I admit it," she whispers as Druig smiles, "but, it's a totally normal fear to have."

"And that is?"

"The unknown," Gabriella replies so ly as Druig runs his thumb along the back of her hand.

"You think it's embarrassing to fear the unknown?" Druig's eyes observe Gabriella as he continues to question her, "There are so many other embarrassing fears, Gilgamesh though as strong and as powerful as he believes he is, is afraid of balloons."

"Balloons?" she repeats as he nods. She had heard this name once before, only in passing and not because Druig wanted her to hear it.

"It's quite funny actually," Druig continues unaware of himself speaking of the past to her for the first time, "eternals don't o en celebrate birthdays as we don't technically age, but long ago as we honoured the tradition of humans, we held a party for Gilgamesh."

Gabriella smiles as Druig continues, his eyes glistening as he recalls a past memory.

"I might have accidentally made everyone forget," Druig comments with a slight smile, "the look of horror on his face as he entered the domo, filled with balloons was so...."

Druig's smile fades slowly as he suddenly bends down to pick up a rock before throwing it over the cli into the darkness. His eyes are distant as he stares o , his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"What's wrong?" Gabriella asks hesitantly as he turns to look at her, "Why does talking about them, hurt you so much? Clearly you have some good memories."

"Just because I have 'some' good memories doesn't mean it outweighs the bad ones," Druig speaks as he looks away again, "I don't wish to ruin this moment, let's speak no more of this."

"But Druig, we didn't speak at all?"

"Gabriella," Druig says looking back at her with a little force behind his words, making her shrink into her shoulders slightly, "please leave it."

"I'm sorry," she whispers quickly feeling as if she did ruin the mood, her hands clasping together awkwardly as Druig sighs and takes them, clearly annoyed at himself.

"No, I am sorry," his voice is calm again and Gabriella could almost notice a slight pain in it as his grip on her hands tightened slightly, "it has...it has been a while since I thought anything of them. Now suddenly, they keep showing up, hijacking my thoughts. It's confusing, painful and frustrating all at the same time."

His eyes lingering on his hands wrapped around hers, his body slumped slightly as Gabriella pulls at his hands to make him look to her. She felt sad for him, it was if he was unsure how to feel about them, about his past and she had no idea how to help him.

"Druig," she says pulling one hand from under his to place on his cheek, "we don't need to speak of it tonight, I want to know more about you it's true, but not if it causes you pain."

"Gabriella..."

"No," she says looking past him to the entrance and then back to him, her hand still resting on his cheek, "I have the unknown to conquer."

Looking towards her as she smiles panic hidden in her eyes, Druig returns her smile a little before nodding. It was becoming more apparent that his past was coming back to haunt him and one way or another, he was going to have to face it. Moving a hand to pull Gabriella's from his face, Druig turns to the entrance to once again hold the overgrown plants out of the way.

With a deep breath and a poor attempt at being brave, Gabriella slowly moved her way into the hidden entrance with Druig close behind.

[Continue reading next part](#) □