

It's late, and Leia looks stunning. We're at a bar tonight- locally owned and familiar- and she is practically incandescent.

She deserves it. It's her birthday, after all.

She wears a shimmering and sheer blue dress that goes down to her ankles. I bet that the dress would be smooth as silk under my fingers. Her hair is tied up, exposing a smooth neck and bare shoulders. Her dark eyes are positively glowing.

Leia is- well.

I didn't like her at first. I thought she was loud and dramatic and rude.

She was always making fun of me, trying to get under my skin. She made fun of my hair, and my round-offs (we both did gymnastics), and always seemed to be watching me in the halls at school.

But now we're good. Time heals all wounds, or at least makes them seem stupid. She apologized in freshman year of college and we bonded over terrible essays and terrible roommates.

Now it's our junior year and she looks good. I can feel the familiar heat in my cheeks when I look at her, whooping and laughing and grinning.

I've had a crush on her since the start of last year. She showed up, somehow even taller, her skin glowing and freckled. She'd pierced her nose; it gleams when she laughs. On the first day I saw her, when we met up for coffee, she was wearing a crop top and I nearly choked on my drink.

And ever since she's been plaguing me, having me over for movie nights and sending me texts at odd hours. She makes me laugh at the worst times in class and goes out with me for drinks once a month. So now we're here, enjoying a night out in late November for Leia's

birthday. She's beautiful and fun and there's still a trace of frosting on her cheek from the cupcake I gave her earlier.

I like her so much more than I thought I would.

I'm standing at the bar, beer in hand, when she stops by.

"Hi," I say. "Having fun?"

"Of course," she says.

I smile when she wraps her arms around my neck in a spontaneous, intoxicated embrace.

I can smell her perfume and under that, her deodorant. There's tequila on her breath and heat radiating off her skin from dancing.

I hug her back (as platonically as possible). She's laughing and her hands curl around my back, and I feel myself ascend. *Just a friend*, I remind myself, *don't make it weird, she's just a friend*. It almost hurts, how much I adore her.

Then she kisses me.

Which is so rude if you think about it. I mean, here I am, ~~suffering~~ having a good time with my ~~crush~~ friend, and then she has the nerve to kiss me as if she's not shattering my world and rearranging all my vital organs in a way that cannot possibly be healthy.

She's smiling when she pulls away and melts back into the crowd.

"See you, Atasi."

I think I'm smiling, too. I also may be blushing. I can't really... feel my face? Is this what a heart attack feels like? Oh god, I'm gonna die.

Thankfully, my favorite bartender Francis arrives with my second beer to distract me.

"Here you go, Atasi. What was that all about?" he asks, failing to distract me.

So much for that.

“Leia... just kissed me,” I admit, knowing he’ll understand why it’s such a big deal.

We’re regulars here, and he’s seen my longing stares more times than I can count.

“Ugh, couldn’t she have waited until Christmas?” Francis groans.

*Wait. What?*

“Wait, what are you-” I try to interject, but Lilith (another wonderful, but in this instance unwelcome bartender) cuts me off.

“Pay up, loser,” she demands, grinning. Francis glumly hands over a wad of money.

Lilith cackles.

“See y’all later. I’m gonna put my winnings somewhere safe.”

“Hey, Francis?”

“Yes?”

“What was that?”

“That was me losing a bet.”

I’m confused, and I tell him as much. He sighs and explains further.

“Lilith and I kind of had a bet going on how long it would take you and Leia to get your act together. I said neither of you would make a move until Christmas, but I guess I didn’t account for Leia’s birthday bash, and this is just-” Francis sighs again. “Lilith’s gonna be so rich. She got the other bartenders and a few of the regulars and waitstaff in on it, too.”

It’s ridiculous but absolutely something they would do. I roll my eyes as I try to hide a smile.

“I can’t believe you bet on my love life, you traitor!” I playfully accuse. “You didn’t even tell me about it so we could cheat the system and split our winnings!”

“I have more integrity than that!”

I snort and cross my arms. “But you’ll make bets about my relationships?”

“You’re right; I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” he admits. He does seem remorseful, but he also seems like he’s struggling not to laugh.

“...Do you wanna talk about it?”

I glance at him and decide to see how dumb I can play it. “Talk about what?”

He just raises his eyebrows and waits. I relent.

“Ok, ok, I know what you mean,” I acquiesce. “But I don’t want to talk about it because it’s probably not a big deal.”

“She kissed you.”

“Yeah, but she’s- she’s drunk.”

“Atasi, buddy, she’s had like one shot of tequila. She’s tipsy, sure, but she knew what she was doing.”

The thought sets my heart soaring. I try to squash it down and meet with mixed results.

“Ooh, here she comes,” Francis teases me before sauntering off to serve the man leaning on the counter across from me.

I spot Leia through the general crowd of dancing, drinking, cheery people, empty shot glass in hand. There’s a singular mark on it- an imprint of her mouth, traced in red lipstick- and she’s still smiling.

I take the glass from her because frankly, I’m a little worried she’ll drop it. She shoots me a reproachful look but it’s gone in a second, a blinding smile replacing it. My stomach flutters and I smile shyly back.

“Hey, Atasi.”

“Hi.”

“Your eyeshadow’s smeared.”

“Oh crap, really?” I drag my fingers under my eyes and frown at the powder on my fingers. Leia brushes her thumb across my cheek, collecting stray eyeshadow, tongue poking out in concentration.

“Did you mean it?” I ask before I can talk myself out of it.

“Hm?” she asks, glancing down at me.

“Did you mean it,” I repeat, trying to breathe.

“Mean what?” She asks, tilting her head to the side and removing her hands from my face. There’s a familiar teasing raise in her eyebrows, a taunt in her tone, but there’s playfulness too.

“You know what I mean.”

“Mm, don’t think I do,” she tells me, leaning in.

“The-the kiss.”

“*Oh*. That.”

“Yeah.”

She takes a deep breath, and she seems to sober. She’s not looking at me but off to the side, focused but awkward. She looks like she’s gathering her courage, and I want to ask if she has enough to share.

I bite my lips. I’m afraid of what she’s going to say. She takes a trembling breath in and then slowly releases it.

“Yeah, uh, I meant it,” she confirms in a whisper.

I reach out, take her face between my hands. It’s warm and soft, and a stray lock of hair has escaped her updo. I lean in.

“Good,” I tell her, and then we kiss for the second time that night.