Exchange

by HoorayImUseful

Summary

When the opportunity arises to get Fang the perfect gift for the holidays, will Lightning finally reveal her GODDAMN FEELINGS?
One-shot AU, consider it similar to the FtWH AU where the events of FFXIII-2 didn't happen, Fang and Vanille woke up, yadda yadda.

Notes

Merry Xmas here's a trope-ridden one-shot to get you through the festive season. I wrote as a present for my cherished friend and beta reader who's been keeping me sane and updating over the last year. OBLIGATORY XMAS FIC. I'm going to go drink rum-spiked egg nog and pass out HAPPY HOLIDAYS.

Vanille looked up from her magazine as Serah flopped down on the couch next to her with an angry sigh. The young pinkette looked frustrated and exhausted, and she cocked an eyebrow in her direction, quietly closing the magazine and placing it on the table next to her. "Soooo, you going to elaborate on that noise you're making there or just continue to huff?"

Serah looked over and leant over to rest her head against Vanille's shoulder. "Trying to organize this festive season is giving me a headache. It's like herding cats. There's so much to do, to plan…"
The redhead laughed at the lengths Serah was going to. "What about it is hard, Serah?" Vanille asked, ignoring the outraged glare she received. "Tell everyone the date and time, make everyone bring a plate or something so it's less cooking you have to do, Lebreau will usually bring half the bar with her so beverages are sorted, get Snow and Fang to build a fire in the back yard and keep your sister away from anything that requires rampant amounts of festivity. Simple. Sorted. Can I go back to reading my magazine now?"

"Vanille!" Serah yelled, sitting up and smacking her on the arm. "Why do you insist on simplifying the issue?"

"Because it's simple? At least it is where I'm from. I grew up in a communal village, Ser'. Our traditions weren't as… heavily fixated on the finer details like Cocoon seems to obsess over."

Fidgeting in her seat, Serah scratched the back of her hand nervously and sighed. "I'm.. I'm sorry. I don't mean to bring up that stuff for you, I know it must be painful."

Vanille shook her head, putting an arm around the young pinkette's shoulders. "Fang and I see the past differently. I know she gets a little… ornery over the reminders sometimes, and I wish she could look back and find something meaningful from her memories that brought her joy instead of pain. But that's not how I look at it. I know what you're trying to do, Serah. Given this is our first festivus since we woke from crystal again, I gather you're trying to make it perfect."

Serah gave a small, shy nod and looked at the Pulsian's vivid jade eyes that held a wisdom far beyond her years. "I don't want you guys to feel alone."

"But we're not alone. We have you. We have Lightning. We have Sazh and Snow and Hope. We've got Lebreau and Gadot and Maqui and Yuj. We've got Rygdea and Amodar. We have a whole village of people here in New Bodhum to call family, to call home. You just need to…. Maybe embrace some of our traditions to lessen your stress."

Giving her a beaming smile, Serah reached up and held her hand. "Tell me about some of your traditions? Please?"

Vanille laughed and rolled her eyes. "I just rattled a bunch of them off earlier. Everyone brings something to the table. You work as a community throughout the year, why burden one person at the most important festival? It seems ridiculous. However I think I could have a solution for your other issue, which is the gift giving."

"Oh?"

Sitting forward and reaching for a glass of water on the table, Vanille grabbed it and took a sip. "Mhm. The whole village would get involved with the festival, but getting gifts for everyone wasn't feasible. Furthermore, if only some people got gifts for certain people, it could lead to favouritism and drama. So, everyone took a name in secret, and they were to be the debek si'ota.. the uh.. hmmm it roughly translates to festival's hidden gift. To be someone's si'ota was an honour, but you kept it a secret and didn't tell them. That way everyone got a gift from somebody, and nobody would have to miss out."

Serah stared, wide-eyed and smiling at Vanille's story. It was brilliant, took the stress off of everyone, much less herself, and would give Fang and Vanille the perfect Yule, which is what she had set out to do all along. "That's amazing and so are you!" She squealed, hugging the redhead so tight she spilled the water. "I'll get everyone over to Lebreau's this afternoon so we can run through it."

Leaping from the couch, Serah ran from the room leaving Vanille watching her departure with a loud sigh.
"Could you at least get me a towel? Freaking water is all over me..."

Lightning leant against the far wall of Lebreau's establishment, taking a break in her afternoon patrol after getting a message from Serah. She eyed off the group that had shown up, nodding in greeting towards Sazh and Hope as they entered the main bar. The old pilot walked over and stood next to her, giving her a lazy salute.

"Afternoon, Major Farron. Any word from the front lines?"

"Are you going to make that joke every time I see you?" Lightning sighed with a roll of her eyes. Sazh laughed and gave a shrug, watching as Hope sat down with Maqui and Yuj, enthusiastically talking to them about whatever he was working on.

"Probably. At least until I get punched." He answered, eyeballing her fists as she began cracking her knuckles in an over-exaggerated manner. "You know what any of this is about?"

Lightning saw Fang enter the bar with Vanille and her heart skipped a beat. She scowled at herself for this ridiculous infatuation with the Pulsian she had been developing over the last while. Every time she thought she was over it, and was content to continue their friendship, Fang would do something, or say something, and send her thoughts spiralling and heart racing all over again. Lightning folded her arms and looked away with a huff. "Not a clue."

"Ok everyone take a seat please," Serah called out, meeting eyes with her sister across the room, "or be like my sister and grump over by the wall there, either way pipe down! Now, I suppose you're all wondering why I brought you here today…"

Snow slammed his hand on the table, startling everyone. "Because someone in this room… Is a murderer…" He clipped sharply, before breaking out into a fit of laughter at his own amusement. A salt shaker flew at his head, courtesy of Fang and Lightning had to hide her laughter behind her hand. The two made eye contact and Lightning then had to hide her blush by burying her head in her hands at the sight of that charming smile. Damn this stupid crush.

"Uh, no. I mean not that I'm aware of anyway." Serah drawled, rolling her eyes. Fang went to say something that Lightning could only assume was a smartass reply but she was stopped by Vanille smacking her and glaring intensely. Serah shook her head and continued. "I know that Yuletide is coming up, and that we were going to have it at ours, but Vanille gave me a better idea. Back home in Oerba, they do things a little differently to us when it comes to the traditional Pulsian festivals, and I thought it would be a fine idea to have an Oerban Yuletide, to welcome our friends home to our family."

Lightning watched for any reaction from Fang, but the brunette was stone-faced. The only tells she gave away were a hard swallow and a tightening of her jaw. She watched as Vanille took her hand and held it, trying to ease the tension. Lightning knew theirs was a close but not intimate relationship, but it still didn't stop the flare of jealousy from rousing her hackles. She sighed and wondered if it would be noticed if she excused herself to go dive into the sea.

"So," Serah continued with a firm stare, "Lebreau has kindly offered to have the day here, so that we can invite everyone. And, to save the headache of gift giving, we're going to participate in another Pulsian tradition of debek si'ota."

Fang winced at the accent and pronunciation, stealing a quick glance over at Lightning. The pinkette could only shrug at the foreign sounding words, not knowing what direction this was heading in. Lightning didn't know whether this was some sort of gift exchange or a battle to the death. It was
anyone's guess from what she knew of Fang, anyway.

Vanille stood up and let go of Fang's hand, walking over to stand next to Serah. "Rules are simple. Everyone takes a name out of the bowl and don't show anyone- I'm looking at you, FANG- And you only need to give that person a gift. This way nobody misses out, nobody goes broke or mad agonising over what to get everyone, and it fosters togetherness and community to learn about someone if you get a name of someone you don't know very well!"

*Right. Simple.* Lightning scoffed, catching Fang's eye. The brunette shrugged and rolled her eyes at Vanille, Lightning unable to catch whatever the huntress was muttering under her breath. Serah walked around the room with the basket of names, everyone joking and laughing as they pulled pieces of folded paper from the basket.

"Everyone is joining in. EVERYONE." Serah threatened, staring pointedly at her sister as she approached. Lightning sighed loudly and pushed off from the wall, reaching into the basket and ruffling the paper around for good measure. Not breaking eye contact with Serah she pulled the paper out and immediately tucked it into her pocket on her jacket. "Would it kill you to be festive for once in your life, Claire?" Serah complained, exasperated.

"It might, you can't say for certain. So it's best to not challenge the status quo." Lightning drawled, folding her arms and leaning back against the wall. She watched as Fang got out of her seat and made her way over to come to a stop next to her. Lightning held her breath and kept her gaze forward, trying not to take in the form of the Pulsian beside her.

"I've yet to figure out if your sister and Vanille being friends is a great thing, or a terrible idea for us both." Fang sighed, leaning forward to get into Lightning's line of sight. The pinkette glanced up and away, laughing quietly.

"Who knows at this point. Are you… Ok with us doing this tradition?" Lightning asked, unsure if this move was thoughtful or offensive. Fang gave a shrug and pressed her back against the wall, watching the others talk amongst themselves while staring idly at her nails.

"Eh. I get the sentimentality of it, and it's sweet. Even if it isn't exactly my thing. If it makes Vanille happy, then that's fine. I don't really care."

Lightning tilted her head at the curt answer. It wasn't entirely expected. She had spent far too much time around the huntress to know when she was hurting, to know when she was lying. And she wasn't telling the truth about this. Fang glanced up at Lightning's searching gaze and snapped her eyes away.

"I can put a stop to this if you want, Fang. I'll just have a quiet word with Serah and-"

"No! No. It's fine. I couldn't do that to the others. I'll just grin and deal with it. Like I always do." Fang interjected, trying to shake off the concerned look Lightning was giving her. She looked at the jacket pocket where she'd seen the pinkette stash the note and smiled slyly. "So who'd you get?"

"Don't know. Haven't looked yet."

Fang stepped in front of Lightning and leant in dangerously close. Lightning could feel her breath against her cheek and her heart hammered in her chest from how close the Pulsian was. Fang gently trailed her fingers along Lightning's shoulder and began to move them down towards her pocket. "Well I can always take a look for you if you li-HNGK"

Her meddling was cut off when Vanille grabbed her by the back of the sari and yanked hard, almost
sending her toppling over. "Oerba Yun Fang! You've done this every. Year. Behave! I apologise for her, Lightning."

Vanille dragged the brunette off, ignoring all protests and complaints while Lightning remembered to breathe. Maybe she just needed some space for a little while. Give herself time where she doesn't have to think about Fang, get a transfer to a project on the Steppe. Maybe she'll talk to Amodar after Yuletide.

She sighed and slowly removed the note from her pocket when she was left alone. Gently unfolding it like it was made from brittle, ancient parchment, Lightning cast her eyes across the scribbled name and looked up, watching the huntress argue quietly with Vanille in the corner. Her thumb drifted softly across the paper, tracing out the letters of Fang's name as she closed her eyes.

"Shit."

"If you tear that paper any more you're going to forget who you're meant to buy a gift for." Serah observed, watching her sister from across the dining room table. Lightning had come over looking mildly stressed a few days past the meeting at Lebreau's, but yet hadn't elaborated on what the issue was.

"Huh? Oh. Right. Yeah. No chance of me forgetting that…"

Serah narrowed her eyes and watched her sister carefully. It was a dangerous play but she felt like she could risk it. "Are you nervous because you got Fang as your s'iota?"

Lightning's eyes snapped up and looked… Almost fearful, if Serah was being honest. Jackpot. "N-no. That's not it at all." The response was a little too defensive, a little too quick. Serah wasn't blind. She'd seen the way her sister had been looking at Fang when the Pulsian wasn't looking. Just as much as Fang gave her the same look when Lightning wasn't looking.

"You… Really like her, don't you?"

"Of course I like her, Serah. I wouldn't be her friend otherwise."

Serah shook her head in wry amusement and moved to the kitchen counter to boil water. Her sister's favourite tea was always kept in stock in case she ever needed it when she visited, and Serah hoped the sweet fruit tea would be enough to calm her nerves and get her talking. "That's not what I meant and you know it, Claire."

"Shut up, Serah."

Knowing she'd struck a nerve, it was a very delicate balance from here to see if the elder Farron would either open up or shut down. Fortunately for Serah, she had played this game since they were kids. "So what are you going to get her? Something romantic? Something to profess your undying love?"

"Stop it. I don't have a… A thing for Fang!"

"What? Come on sis, it's obvious." Serah teased, wiggling at that impenetrable armour a little more. Lightning scowled at her as she placed the tea down in front of her, Serah watching the grumpy expression falter as the aroma of the sweet fruit filled the small space.

"It is not obvious." Lightning grumbled into the cup as she carefully took a sip of the tea. Serah sat down with a cup of her own across from her with a triumphant smile.
"Aha! But you admit there's something there by that answer. Guilty by omission!"

"I... Stop reading my work notes." Lightning muttered, her defensiveness still evident on a surface level but the barbs were no longer behind her words. Serah knew she was winning.

"You should get her something sweet."

"I'm giving her a scarf."

"Don't you dare. This is obviously something that is important to her, whether she'll openly admit it or not. Even if you don't have feelings for her, which you absolutely do, you need to make the effort. She's worth the effort, isn't she, sis?"

Lightning opened her mouth to deliver a scathing retort but seemed to think the better of it, clamping her jaw shut. She looked away with a long exhale from her nose, her expression looked defeated, despairing, and it made Serah's heart ache for her sister. She only wanted to see her happy. Reaching for her sister's hand, Serah took it and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Come on, Claire. Talk to me."

For a moment, Serah had a feeling she had lost the battle, with her sister's tension she could feel through her fingertips. But then, there was a loud sigh as Lightning resigned herself to the discussion, and gently took her hand back to hug the cup of tea. "Fine. I care about her. I don't plan on doing anything about it though. It'll pass."

"Why not?"

"She's... Well she's Fang. She's a Pulsian. From Gran Pulse. She's made her stance clear with all the viper comments over the time, and her constant discussions of how she is a mighty warrior huntress from the Yun clan and could only take the best... I... I don't think I'm good enough. For her."

Serah's heart broke for her sister and she tried to reach out to her again, only to have the elder Farron move back in her seat. "Claire... You really believe that?"

Lightning sighed, fidgeting with the cup in her hands. The tea normally soothed her frayed nerves, but not today it would seem. "I don't really know what to believe anymore." She said quietly, pushing the cup away and standing from the table. "I'm sorry I've taken up your afternoon."

Before she could leave, Serah was already up and bundling her into her arms, hugging her tight. "Any time with you is well spent, Light. Never see yourself as a burden. You're welcome here any time. You know that, right?"

Lightning nodded slowly, swallowing the lump in her throat. Since the War of Revelations and everyone waking from crystal, she had tried hard to make an effort to be in everyone's lives, especially Serah's. But life often got in the way still, and it left her feeling lonelier than ever. When Fang started coming around all the time, often finding the huntress on the porch waiting for her when she had gotten off work, it was the first time that Lightning had hoped that maybe she wouldn't be so alone.

The two had begun an easy, casual friendship that had developed over the last six months to what Lightning was beginning to suspect was anything but an easy, casual friendship. They had often gotten caught drinking cider imported from Cocoon and talking about hunting strategies far late into the night, called each other while on patrols or off on expeditions... Lightning found herself thinking of Fang often, the things she might like, what she would say, what she would taste like when they kissed...
"I know, I know. I just… It gets on top of me sometimes." Lightning sighed, shaking herself from her thoughts. She grabbed her jacket and made her way to the front door before Serah bailed her up again.

"Look. You're going to do what you're going to do, as always. But I just want to see you happy. You've fought long and hard enough. It's time to just take something for yourself. As for the gift, Vanille said something the other day that might help. She said she wished Fang could look back on her past that brought her joy instead of pain. Something meaningful. Maybe that will help you find something that could bring her happiness too."

Lightning stared at her sister for the longest time before leaning forward to kiss the top of her head. "Thanks, Serah. I'll see you at the Yuletide feast on the weekend." She headed out the door and over to her velocycle, immediately heading off in the direction of Oerba.

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The Yuletide festival was in full swing at Lebreau's establishment, with the whole village getting involved. Fang sat at a table in the corner of the main bar, still nursing the same drink someone had given her on arrival. The ice had long since melted into the beverage and watered it down, her hand cradling the glass making the alcohol a disappointing room temperature.

Villagers were coming and going, sharing drinks and laughter and it was all so positively… Festive. Fang for the most part had kept her mouth shut about it all, despite the pain the proceedings were causing her. It was a reminder of what she had lost, the people no longer with her. The devastating reminder that it has only really been a year for her, but half a millennia had passed in her sleep. She was still coming to terms with her grief. While Serah and Vanille had good intentions, the evening only served to bring Fang more pain.

Pushing the glass away with a sigh, Fang stared at the entrance, wondering if it was worth leaving early. Maybe if she paid Lebreau for a bottle of something she could go find a solitary place on the beach where she could drink her troubles away, instead of remaining painfully sober to keep her wits about her. The last thing anyone needed was her going off on a drunken rant about how the Cocoonians have built cities on the bones of her ancestors.

Fang shrugged her jacket off, feeling like she needed some air. Leaving it in the booth to mark her territory so that nobody else would take her seat, she made her way through the suffocating crowds and headed outside to the deck. There was thankfully only a small handful of people sitting at a table on the far side, so it left her blissfully alone. Fang leant on the railing and stared out to sea, grief pulling her soul apart. She let the air hit her bare arms from her sleeveless shirt in the hopes it would cool her anger down.

It was so hard to adjust. She was still reeling from waking the first time to find her once vibrant lands, rich with life and trade and tribe… Barren. Devoid of any human life. Her village rusted and in ruins. The trade hubs just dust on the path. Yet now from that dust, new cities were rising. And the only people that knew anything about the history they were all trampling on were two small voices amidst an emptying nest of vipers.

She knew she shouldn't hate them, especially after Barthandelus and Orphan's revelations. But Fang couldn't help it. New Bodhum was a rare exception to her bitterness, which helped ease her anger. The village was built on new land, untouched by the various clans, and any pathways or remnants of the fishing camps that were down here were preserved, or had memorials built. No doubt Lightning and the others having their very firm say in the matter.

A bottle was placed on the railing next to her, and she sighed, dipping her head. "Thanks but I'm in between drinks at the moment." She said quietly, ignoring the server.
"That's why it's non-alcoholic." Came the response, the familiar voice drawing her attention. Lightning was leaning against the railing too, nursing a similar drink in her hand. The sight of her made Fang's breath catch in her throat. For once out of uniform, Lightning had opted for a loose, red woollen sweater that hung off one shoulder, dark jeans and black sneakers that made her look like the perfect way to spend a lazy afternoon. Her hair was pulled up into a messy bun, exposing her neck and giving her a comfortable yet alluring appearance all the same.

Fang swallowed a couple of times and slowly took the beverage. "I uh… Thanks. You…You look lovely tonight... Light." She said slowly, only just barely catching the blush on the pinkette's cheeks in the dim light.

"Thank you. I saw you heading out as I arrived. Figured I'd grab us both something that won't make us say something stupid as the night wears on." Lightning answered, taking a tentative sip of the rich cider she had convinced Lebreau to brew before the event for those unable to, or not wanting to drink. Fang sighed and picked at the small label that had been placed on the bottle, feeling defeated. "Am I that transparent?"

Lightning tilted her head and gave her a long look, before giving a lazy shrug. "I know enough about you to know that you see things a little differently to Vanille, and I'm not a complete idiot to know that this would still be hard for you regardless. So much time has passed for you and yet, not at all. The transition hasn't been easy and I know you've been struggling with it. Why do you think I keep dragging you out on my longer patrols to the Steppe?"

Fang's heart felt like it was starting to slowly mend from the pit of her grief, Lighting's presence acting like a salve. She took a drink of the beverage, surprised at the taste that was similar to the ciders she normally partook in, just without the kick. "Oh. I… I just thought you were needing my help."

There was a light chuckle as Lightning put her drink down and turned to face her. "While I always appreciate any assistance that makes my life both easier and less threatened while we adjust to life on Gran Pulse, I could just as easily get that from posting more subordinates on the route. But…" Lightning trailed off and turned her head to observe the revellers inside. "They're not you." She finished quietly, looking conflicted. "We can go, if you like. I can steal a bottle of something from behind the bar when Lebreau isn't looking, find somewhere quiet if this is all getting too much for you."

It was tempting, to spend a night alone with the soldier, but Fang worried her lip and shook her head. The last thing she needed was to get drunk and profess her undying feelings for someone that wouldn't return them. "No I…" Fang paused, trying to convince herself to throw caution to the wind and leave. But no. There was the gift giving after all, and she at least wanted to stay for that. "Thank you but… I don't want to disappoint Vanille or the others."

Fang squeaked as Lightning seemed to decide something and pull her into a hug. Her body tensed in surprise at the way Lightning's arms slid around her waist, and her head burrowed into the crook of her neck. "You won't disappoint anyone. It's ok to say when you're not ok." Lightning said quietly, her voice slightly muffled. Fang slowly relaxed into the embrace and returned the affection, putting her arms up around the pinkette and resting a hand on the back of her head.

They remained like that for a moment before they heard Serah and Vanille yelling at everyone to pipe down from inside. Fang sighed and slowly, reluctantly let go of Lightning, feeling suddenly very cold after feeling so warm and safe in the soldier's arms. "I suppose that's our cue to go be festive, right?" She drawled with a sardonic roll of her eyes. Lightning gave her a brilliant smile and grabbed her drink, letting her hand linger on Fang's for a moment to lead her back into the main bar.
"We'll do this festive gift stuff, then go. Head down to the beach near my place and just.. You know, just be."

Fang swallowed the lump in her throat, cursing herself for her feelings intensifying towards Lightning. Rarely had she ever seen this softer, affectionate side and gods help her, she needed it like she needed air.

The two entered into the bar as the villagers were all exchanging gifts, Serah ushering them over into the corner where the gang was. "I did a separate draw for the villagers, so that we are exchanging gifts with each other."

Fang gave a wry grin and nudged Vanille as she took a seat. "I thought the idea of the tradition was to not play favourites?" She jeered, receiving a glare and a slap for her troubles.

"Shush! I wanted our first Sankrati to be with our family."

Nodding in acceptance, Fang lounged back on the booth seat, her arm lazily hanging over the back of it. Serah started grabbing presents from the pile, handing them out to everyone in the group. Lightning was handed a small box and she turned it over, looking at her name on the tag. A brief smile crossed her lips as she waited patiently for Serah to give the go ahead.

As Sazh marvelled at his brilliant yellow scarf he had received, the chocobo chick flew about and landed on the woollen material, doing a tiny dance. "Yeah it even looks like you. Don't rest on it for too long, I'll lose you amongst all the colour. Thank you, to my secret gift giver!"

Serah motioned for the others to open their gifts while rifling around in the pile for the rest. Lebreau laughed when she pulled a festive bottle opener from her bag, looking accusingly around the table. "Is that all I am to you lot? Just the glorified bartender?"

"You practically bring the bar to every one of our gatherings, Lebreau." Lightning pointed out, the raven-haired woman giving her a smirk.

"Ok fine fair point. This thing is sparkly! I love it. Thanks!"

Giving her an encouraging nudge, Serah looked at her sister with a warm smile. "Go on, sis. Your turn." She prodded cheerfully, riding the high of the festivities and loving that her whole family was together.

Lightning carefully opened her gift, methodically taking apart the wrapping folded piece by folded piece, unveiling the small box beneath the paper. She held her breath as she opened it, a small woven bracelet that matched the colour of her leather armlet. A hand written note accompanied it, and she slowly traced over the absolutely appalling scrawl as she tried to decipher the writing. She turned to find Fang looking everywhere but at her, and smiled. Lightning leant close so that nobody else would hear her.

"How about instead of me trying to read your terrible handwriting, you tell me what you've gotten me here?"

Fang looked momentarily outraged before slumping her shoulders with a burst of laughter. "Knew I should have gotten someone else to write the note." She sighed, shaking her head. "It's a survival bracelet. I used a combination of Cocoonian and Pulsian tech to make it."

"You made this?"

Fang nodded, beaming with pride at her handiwork. "Yeah, it's one of the things we would gift to
the hunters of our clan. So the bracelet unravels in a pinch, the bulk of it is non-flammable paracord I'd managed to swipe from the GC- with Amodar's permission of course. It's strong enough to hold your weight should you ever need it to climb anywhere tricky or pull yourself out. The steel cable that's woven within it can both carry your gear if a strap breaks, or the coarse material lets you use it like a saw so you can get branches for fire and stuff if they're tough to break."

Lightning marvelled at the design, the knot work intricate and beautiful yet functional, and her finger trailed along a small steel triangular embellishment towards the bottom of the bracelet. A stylised maw in an eerily reminiscent appearance to the tattoo on Fang's bicep.

"Ah, that's the best piece in my humble opinion." Fang explained as Lightning picked it up. "It took some digging from one of our old sites just off of Oerba, but I managed to find this in pretty good nick. It's not only the symbol of our clan, but it's a fire starter as well. Strike it next to the steel cabling on the bracelet and it'll create a spark to start a fire."

Frowning at the design, Lightning looked up and gave Fang a searching look. "The last time you went on an expedition to Oerba was months ago."

_Uh oh. Busted._

"I uh, I was just waiting for the right time to… Look maybe Lady Luck was smiling on me to get you as a Si'ota, hm?" Fang answered, artfully dodging the question.

"Mhm. Well, it's beautiful, Fang. Thank you. Beautiful yet practical." Lightning said quietly, figuring out how to unclip it to put it on. Fang gently took it from her hands and unhooked the clasp, opening it in offering to assist.

"Sounds just like someone I know. Here let me help." Fang murmured under her breath. Lightning stared at Fang as she worked to clip the bracelet on, the huntress letting her touch linger on her pale wrist as she closed the hooks. "There we go. How does it feel?"

Lightning wasn't sure if Fang meant the bracelet or her touch, but her answer would be the same regardless. "It's perfect." She breathed, her eyes not leaving Fang's. The Pulsian gave her a shy smile and looked away while the others were engrossed in their gifts. "Thank you." Lightning whispered as she took advantage of their brief moment of privacy, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

Fang's breath hitched and she turned towards Lightning as the pinkette leaned away, her cheeks flushed red. "I'm gonna… Go get another drink. Refill?" Lightning stammered while pushing her way out of the booth. Fang could only nod mutely as she stared with a gaping jaw. Lightning quickly made her escape while Fang leant up and touched her own cheek like it was possessed.

"Hey, you alright there, Fang?"

Vanille sat down beside her while handing over the present, a large but flat rectangular wrapped gift. Fang shook herself back to reality and took the present from her friend. She smiled at her name written in Pulsian and tore into the present. There was no finesse like with Lightning, just ripping the paper apart until she felt her heart stop in her chest.

It was a framed photo of her and Vanille, just like the broken, faded one they had found in their home in Oerba. But this wasn't damaged like their home. This one had been painstakingly restored, recreated in vibrant imagery that highlighted her home, and her family before everything was torn apart. Her shaking fingers trailed across the frame, staring into a window to her past when life was briefly simpler.
"Fang…” Vanille whispered, reaching over to hold her hand. Fang took it and squeezed it tight, letting the first few tears fall. It was a memory that didn't bring her pain, because Vanille was the only thing from her past that brought her joy. She pulled the redhead into a tight embrace, taking a moment to sob quietly into her shoulder as she burrowed into her. Vanille was startled, but gently held Fang and shooed anyone else away who had come to see if she was alright. Lightning stood off to the side, looking incredibly worried at the reaction.

Taking a few heaving breaths, Fang slowly sat up and rubbed the tears from her eyes before leaning down to kiss Vanille on the forehead. "I'm sorry." She whispered. "Sorry that I've been such an arse about this festival. You're my good memory. You're my family and I love you."

Vanille teared up at the admission and leant back in for a tight hug. "I love you too, Fang. I just want to see you happy. No matter what that happiness looks like for you."

As Fang composed herself and lifted the frame to look at the photo, there was a slight sound from something hitting the wrapping underneath. Curious, she moved the frame out of the way to find a small envelope that must have become stuck to the back of the frame. It too had her name on it in Pulsian, and she slowly opened it and pulled out a parchment that looked like it was pulled from the archives of Oerba itself. The handwriting was exquisitely detailed, and she felt a blush creeping up her neck as she continued to read the words, her heart going a million miles an hour. She turned to Vanille when she finished reading it and kept her voice low.

"I… 'Nille I… You're like family to me but… When I say I love you I don't… I can't mean it like that."

Vanille crooked an eyebrow at her and stared at the note. "What are you talking about? I didn't get your name, I got Sazh's." She answered, punctuating her sentence with a hard slap on Fang's arm. "Also what the hell! You'd let me down that casually if that really was from me? That's so rude."

"Ow, Etro's Gate Vanille. Come on!"

Fang's mind raced. If it wasn't from Vanille, then who? Her eyes cast around the room, looking at everyone for any sign of anything. Lightning's expression was, as always, an impenetrable glacier as she spoke with Snow and Serah in what seemed to be a somewhat heated conversation. She gave Vanille a small ruffle of her hair before getting out of the booth and began to make her way over.

"-and I told you to drop it. It doesn't matter."

"But Claire, I-"

Lightning held up her hand to silence her sister as Fang approached, shaking her head pointedly. Serah sighed and led Snow away to give them privacy. "Fang, are you alright? You looked… upset earlier."

"Yeah, I'm fine. The gift threw me a little but… Gave me some much needed perspective. What about you though? That conversation didn't exactly look… Friendly."

Fang watched as Lightning's lips thinned and she turned away, folding her arms. "It's nothing. Just… My sister's insistence on trying to give me perspective. I… I think I'm gonna go. Thank you for the gift, Fang. It was lovely."

The sudden shift in mood unsettled Fang, and she put a hand on Lightning's shoulder to stop her from leaving. "Hold up, please? At least let me walk you home if you're gonna go." She said, quickly jogging over to grab her jacket. The spied Vanille showing the others the photo and snagged
the envelope before she could share that as well. "Look after that for me will ya? I'll be back, I'm just walking Lightning home."

"Oh. Is everything alright?" Vanille asked, passing the leather jacket over. Fang shrugged and gave Serah and Snow a slight glare.

"I dunno. Something must have shifted her mood but I'm just gonna make sure she gets home safe." Fang answered, still keeping her eyes on Serah.

"For what it's worth, Fang. I will be right in the end. You'll see." Serah stated firmly and cryptically, before turning her attention back to her drink and the others. Fang frowned at her before rolling her eyes and throwing her jacket over her shoulders.

"Fucking elusive Farrons..." She muttered as she caught up with Lightning, who had already long since left the establishment and was already walking up the path to her house. "Hey! What gives?"

Lightning slowed in her steps and let out a long sigh, before turning to greet Fang as she approached. "Sorry. I just... Needed to get out of there. Figured you might get side-tracked."

"Give me a chance here, Light. I'm always a woman of my word. If I said I was gonna walk you home, I meant it. Besides, you're more pleasant company than that rabble in there."

"Oh." Lightning fell silent after that, merely content to walk with Fang along the path in the cool night air. Fang saw her shiver and took off her jacket, placing it gently around her shoulders. "Th... Thanks..." Lightning stammered, the leather instantly warming her. "What was... The gift you got?"

Fang eyed the pinkette off with a distant smile, her gaze tracking to the sea beside them. "A photo of me and 'Nille from before the war really heated up. It's the one we all found in our house in Oerba when we... When we first arrived after waking from crystal. Fully restored, stuffed if I know how they managed it." She answered, sparing another glance back at Lightning as they walked up the steps to her home.

"Would you... Like to come in? I have some proper cider or beer in the fridge, you can have a drink and rant all you like about the nest of vipers overtaking Gran Pulse."

Giving a rich laugh, Fang nodded and entered the house, helping Lightning out of her jacket. "I really am that transparent, aren't I?"

"No, not transparent. Just... While I can't relate to what you're going through, I can certainly understand the complexities involved when time vanishes in an instant, and the whole world has seemingly changed overnight. I know that this last while hasn't been easy for you. We can't control everyone's actions and choices, but we at least took a stand to build New Bodhum away from any known civilisations."

Fang swooned a little at the care and followed Lightning into her kitchen. "I know, and I appreciate it. Both the concern and the... Level of detail you've taken. For what it's worth, New Bodhum is the only place I've seen that actually reminds me of home. You build with the environment, not against it like other cities I've seen."

Lightning smiled gently and handed her another cider. This one had the familiar kick to it that she was used to, and Fang took a long, much needed drink after a stressful evening. "We wanted to make sure you would be as comfortable as possible, both you and Vanille after you woke up."

"You were that sure we would, huh?"
Giving a non-committal shrug, Lightning took a drink of her own cider and leant against the counter. "Etro's vision told us as much. That we would all be together. There were nights when I worried but… I never had any doubt that you would find your way back to us."

Fang laughed quietly and cradled the bottle in her hand. "Well sorry I hit the snooze button for six months after all that madness. Least it gave you time to plan our welcome home party, right?" She joked, her smile faltering when she saw the edges of Vanille's familiar skirt on a faded photo peeking out beneath a pile of papers. She slowly moved them out of the way to find the damaged photo that sat recreated in a frame back at the bar.

Lightning stared at the photo in a panic and took a couple of steps backwards. "Shit."

"Light… You were my Si'ota?" Fang asked quietly, feeling the envelope in her jeans pocket. She frowned as she pulled it out, Lightning looking immediately terrified.

"I… Uh.."

"I gotta say, Light… You made a right mess of the translations if it was an ode to a friend. Though I never pegged you as the sentimental type to begin with…" Fang said with a roll of her eyes, her hammering heart in her chest belying her casual, joking tone.

Lightning wore a mask of indifference that hid her devastation at Fang's flippant dismissal. "Oh-uh well… I guess I'll have to study better? You seem upset… Sorry for the… Um… confusion." She replied, vowing never to listen to her sister and her ridiculous ideas again.

Shaking her head and pulling the letter out, Fang gave her a small grin and waved the paper in the air. "I'm not upset, Light. It's just kinda… I dunno. You know what this poem means, right?" There was a brief silence as Lightning folded her arms and stared at the ceiling, before the pinkette finally looked back over at Fang.

"Yes." She finally answered with tears in her eyes before making a quick retreat from the kitchen.

The answer was like a sucker punch to the gut, and Fang found herself momentarily winded before she realised Lightning had escaped. "Hey! Wait!" Fang chased her into the hallway, pulling her up by the Yuletide tree Serah had put up in the house while Lightning was at work.

"I'm… I'm sorry I… I didn't mean to make a mess of everything and I always make a mess of everything and… And I just have these gods be damned feelings that I can't get rid of no matter how hard I try and… I've tried, Fang. I really have. I just.. Needed to get them out somehow, I don't know what I expected to happen but I-"

Fang gently cupped her face, brushing a strand of hair from her face. The action silenced Lightning immediately as Fang took a slow, deep breath.

"Dare I perchance to hope, that I may stay with you at your side until the seas take us. Know that no priest, nor temple, nor throne of the gods itself could ever deny my love for you." Fang quoted the poem on the paper with a shaking voice, Lightning's eyes widening at the words as she leant into the touch of her hand. "Your voice is of a goddess, and it makes my heart pound in my breast. Even a gaze at you in a moment leaves me breathless, falling at your feet. Take my soul, for it is yours, and-

Fang wouldn't get the chance to finish the poem, Lightning closing the gap between them with a soft kiss filled with promise. Dropping the letter in her hand and pulling Lightning in closer, the two kissed amidst the dim light from the Yuletide tree, Lightning sliding her arms around the huntress'
Lightning broke away to catch her breath, leaning her forehead against Fang's. "Wow. I... Wow."

"That's certainly one way to put it." Fang answered, trailing her fingers up beneath the woollen sweater to feel the heated skin beneath. She rest her hands on Lightning's hips, leading her in a slow sway as she danced slowly to some invisible music in her head.

"Fang... I..."

"I know, sweetheart. It's always been you."

"Always?" Lightning queried with a twitch of an eyebrow.

"Yep. From the moment you clocked me in Palumpolum I knew you were the one for me. Only the best for the favoured huntress of the Yun."

Lightning's breath hitched under the praise. "R... Really?"

"Of course, Light." Fang answered, tucking a wayward strand of pale pink hair behind Lightning's ear. "You're my equal. Always have been. Maybe even more than my equal sometimes, but that's alright. I would happily defer to you if it meant giving you my heart."

Lightning leant back in and gently captured her lips, sighing softly against her. "I think you are a better smooth talker than the poem."

"Thanks, I try. Hey, Light? What's the deal with the plant above us?" Fang asked, pointing at the top of the doorway above their heads. Lightning rolled her eyes and buried herself into Fang's neck with a groan.

"It's mistletoe. They hang it up as a tradition and people are meant to kiss under it."

Fang tilted her head curiously and guided Lightning's gaze up with a finger beneath her chin. "You know they're essentially a fertility blessing amongst my people, so I guess it's kind of the same thing."

Lightning snorted with laughter and tugged Fang forward into a more heated kiss. "Well then if that's the case it'd really give the village something to talk about, wouldn't it?"

"Well I didn't have any plans for the rest of the night and-" The witty response was cut off with a slap against her arm. Fang hummed happily and pressed Lightning against the wall by the tree, the lights sparkling in her cerulean eyes as she looked up at her. "I love you, Lightning Farron."

"I... I love you too, Fang." The pinkette responded with a flush of her cheeks, trailing her hand down the side of Fang's face. "Though this absolutely makes Serah right and I'm never going to hear the end of it."

Fang smiled and bundled her up in a tight embrace. "Don't worry about it. Snowfall will come soon enough, and we'll dump a whole heap of it in their house if Serah brings it up."

"Good." Lightning replied, leading Fang towards the bedroom. "But what's snowfall?"

"Oh Light, you are in for a real treat." Fang sighed happily, kicking the door shut behind them.
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