

Danny snorted, pushing her along the path. It wasn't too much longer before he could hear the ocean- and not much longer after that, they had arrived at the beach. At first, Danny had thought that the Hunts must have decorated the area with extra-faulty lights. It actually took him a moment to realize what he was looking at.

"Wow," he breathed, genuinely impressed. "I didn't think there would be so many fireflies here. I guess it makes sense. Not a lot of room for them anywhere else on the island, with all the lights going off."

<@prinxess>

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Tina watched all the twinkling bugs on the beach. They were gorgeous. They reminded her of the night picnics her family would have in firefly season.

"Be free, little guy!" She said to the firefly in her hands as she released it into the sky to be with all its firefly friends.

"Looks like we made the right decision to bring the little guy over, or he would've totally missed out on the party!" She laughed.

She quieted down and stood silently watching the fireflies. Mind blank. Just soaking in the sight. She looked up at Danny to say something but stopped. He looked amazing silhouetted by the twinkling lights. It was something truly magical... All she could do was stare quietly with blushing cheeks.

<@snowyrunes>

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Danny spent a moment just taking in the sight. It was really something to take in. Without thinking too much about it, he used the hands on Tina's shoulders' to tug her back towards him, so that her back would be close to his chest. When he realized what he was doing, he looked down at Tina. She was gazing up at him with those big doe-eyes, and red cheeks. Was it from the cold, or was she embarrassed that they were standing so close?

Either way, he wasn't moving unless she said something about it.

"Well, looks like I've kidnapped my own little firefly away from the party," he teased, grinning down at her. "Unlike you though, I don't intend on letting her get away any time soon."

<@prinxess>

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Danny's comment made Tina smile real big and she looked away, too shy to keep staring at him. Why would he say such a thing? Why was he so sweet to her sometimes.... she really liked it.

She leaned back against his chest and crossed her arms across her to place her hands on Danny's, "Don't worry. I won't fly away, I promise."

They were warm. He was warm.

<@snowyrunes>

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The cold winter air seemed to sting just a little less as Danny found himself glancing off to the side, mildly flustered, but trying to hide it. To him, it seemed like she was reiterating the promise she'd made to him when she first found out he was a pirate- that she wasn't going anywhere. And while he'd usually like to tease her, there was something just a little to sincere about her declaration for him to ruin it with something like that.

"Oh. Well, um. That's good," he said.

<@prinxess>

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Tina stood quietly for a bit. Watching the sparkle of the fireflies lights on the ocean. Basking in

Danny's warmth. But a very important question plagued her mind.

"Hey, Danny?" She asked, glancing up at him slightly, "Do you think they put out the desserts yet?"

<@snowyrunes>

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"Wh- Seriously?!" Danny said, snapping to look back down at Tina. So much for having a moment.

"We like, *just* ate. What are you, a buffamoo with multiple stomachs?" He let out a sigh, but really, he couldn't help but be a little amused. That was Tina all right. And it was part of why she was so cute, sometimes.

<@prinxess>

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Tina laughed at Danny's reaction. How could he *not* be hungry when such delicious food existed so close-by!

"Moo!" She said, pretending to be a buffamoo.

She turned around to face him and put her hands on her hips, "But can you imagine if people take all the good stuff before we even get there?! We'll be starved of rich people food and filled only with our own regret!!!"

<@snowyrunes>

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"All right, all right, fair point," Danny said, raising his hands up, before stuffing them in his pockets. "I don't know if I'm all that hungry still, but there's still free booze to be had, and I've never been one to turn that stuff down."

He turned to head back up the path. "Let's get going then. Maybe we can catch a carriage on the way back."

<@prinxess>

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"Be careful, Dannyyy," Tina sang as she looped her arm with his and began walking, "If you keep up that drinking you might get drunnnk. Wouldn't want to do that. Might do something embarrassing!!"

<@snowyrunes>

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"Uh-huh, sure. I'll keep that in mind." He said, trying not to crack up as he humored her. "Well, even if I do, I can just order you to forget about it. I still have that favor, after all."

<@prinxess>

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"Would you *really* waste it on something like that? You only have one favor! Better make it a good one," Tina informed him. Though maybe it would be good for him to waste it on something tiny.

<@snowyrunes>

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"Well, if you're sooo insistent about it, I guess I'll just have to make it something worse for you," Danny said, nudging with the arm she was clinging onto.

Honestly, he didn't have any plans in mind yet. He was just gonna keep it in his back pocket until he needed it- or until it was funny. <@prinxess>

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"Knowing you it's going to be terrible for me! You always know how to make me suffer." Tina complained. If Danny was good at anything, it was making her suffer.

She squinted up at him, "You wouldn't happen to be a sadist, would you?"  
<@snowyrunes>

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"Oh you bet," Danny said, grinning.

"And I'm no sadist. You're just exceptionally fun to torment," he said, poking her cheek with his free hand. "You wanna stop being bothered so much, stop looking so cute when you're bothered." <@prinxess>

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"Aw, I'm only cute when I'm bothered?" Tina whined playfully, grabbing onto the arm she was already holding, with both her arms now.

She let out a dramatic sigh, "I wish I could best you, but you always end up out-bothering me. I'm not going to stop trying, though! One day I'm going to win and you won't one-up me!"  
<@snowyrunes>

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"Mm... Not *only* when you're bothered. But you're *extra* cute when you're bothered," he said with a grin.

Danny let out a laugh. "Ha! Good luck with that. I'm pretty much a champion at being terrible. It's a natural talent, so you're not about to beat me any time soon." He went to tap her on the nose with his free hand, just to drive the point home.

<@prinxess>

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"Well, you're pretty cute too, Mister" Tina giggled as she tapped Danny's nose in return.

<@snowyrunes>

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"Oh, so you think I'm cute, huh?" Danny said. His tone was playful, but he could feel a small stripe of warmth across his nose and cheeks. That was kind of promising to hear... Of course, she *had* been drinking a bit. Those words could have meant anything.

...Maybe he should find out.

"So tell me, how exactly am I cute?" <@prinxess>

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"Hmmm," Tina stopped walking and thought. She looked up at Danny seriously, trying to pinpoint the exact things that make him cute.

She brought her hand up and ruffled his hair, "Your messy hair is super cute."

"And your smile," She added, poking the sides of his mouth with her pointer fingers.

"Very cute."

<@snowyrunes>

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Danny's face began to turn red, as Tina began to list things that seemed less and less platonic, the more he thought about them. Not that he needed to think about them much, to feel warm enough that he almost had to check that he wasn't steaming in the cold winter air.

Huh. *Huh*.

That was something worth questioning her about tomorrow morning.

As they slowly left the beach and came up the path and the red carpet entrance, Danny stopped in front of the door. "You'd better walk in before me, unless you wanna get caught under the mistletoe," he said, pointing up. "I hear that for some parts around here, it's supposed to be bad luck if you don't kiss the person you walk under it with. And quite frankly, I don't need any more bad luck."

"...Or, you could always just kiss me," he teased. <@prinxess>

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"Ah, ah, ah!" Tina said waving her finger.

"Wanna kiss me? Gotta catch me!" She said before she took off down the red carpet, zig zagging under each piece of mistletoe she could spot.

<@snowyrunes>

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The newly acquired Christmas-themed gift bag swung on his wrist while he kept his hands in his pockets. Though the mansion was massive and impressively festive, the real attraction was the island itself -- or, at least, that's what Neil appreciated the most. The door was held open for their exit by a lock, as there seemed to be no worry of heating costs for the owners of the manor, and a rush of chilled wind greeted the pair of blondes when they finally stepped out. Fresh snow crunched beneath their feet, and Neil looked toward the sky to see that there was a light amount of snow drifting down from the heavens.

Before them was a short path that led to the island's edge where undoubtedly frigid waters kissed the seashore. The beach itself was dotted with white mounds, speaking to the snow that froze on the sand's surface. Neil sucked in a cooling breath, alleviating the heat that had built up within him from the warm mansion. "... I run the Brownie Ranch on Leuda -- you heard of it?" He slid a glance her way before continuing on. "Also make a few trips a week to Arcadia to help out at the Pet shop... It's a damn hassle to make the trip, but it's worth it." He sighed aggravatingly before turning his attention to her, knocking her elbow with his own. "What do you do when you're not risking your life for the guild?" <@owlfawn>

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The weather outside was, as expected, frigid and cold, but Holly didn't mind it one bit. It was refreshing, really, as was the vast emptiness that existed outside of the main party attraction. As they drew closer to the sand, Holly reached down and pulled off her heels, holding them in one hand so that walking on the beach was easier. The snow hadn't yet made itself its own layer atop the sandy beach, so the cold didn't bother Holly's toes too much. At least, not enough for discomfort.

"I have heard of it! Claire told me about all the other farms on Arcadia when I moved islands." At the prompting for her to say her piece, Holly shrugged her shoulders with a sheepish smile.

"Well, I *was* living on Leuda until pretty recently. Maybe a month or a month and a half ago? But now I'm on Arcadia and I work at Fleur Farm. I live there, too! Claire was nice enough to take me in." She sent Neil a 'look.' "She called my job on Leuda *boring*. She wasn't wrong, though."

<@roundfrog>

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Neil cocked a brow in curiosity at her answer. It was usually unheard of to move islands if an occupation and living arrangement had been settled, and he wondered silently as to what reasoning she may have had for picking up her life so suddenly. "Is that so..." He had heard of the other farmer's in the area, but since he mainly dealt with animals, there was usually no need to cross paths -- but he breathed in a snort at the mention of the farm owner's reasoning for Holly to quit her job, and at the look exchanged by the other blonde. "Is that right? I guess if you thought it was too, then there was a pretty good reason that it wasn't the most exciting thing in the world."

He looked toward the shoreline as the waves kicked into the sand. It wasn't difficult to see Holly's naivete, and yet, she had dropped her entire life in a second to move across the islands and live with someone else, not to mention work for an *explorer's guild*. It was as if she were trying to prove the assumptions people made about her wrong; as if she had some personal reason for warring against them. The feeling of admiration crossed his mind. "That's a big

jump... What about before all that?" He scrunched his nose as he tried to pull memories of childhood from the back of his mind, though they were foggy with certain past events. "I've met nearly every local... I think I would've remembered you if I had." <@owlfawn>

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"To be fair, it was a desk job. So, of course it was boring." Holly chuckled as she held her hands behind her back, her heels hanging off of her fingers as they walked along the beach. "I was also working as a waitress at a cat cafe, so that was pretty fun! But it wasn't what I was looking for. I was living in a hotel, so it's nice to be living in a house now, even if it isn't my own." Holly turned her head to send a teasing grin Neil's way. "Buuut, you want to know about *before* that, right?" She turned her head back to face the path they were walking. "Well, before that I lived with my parents and my younger sister. I was supposed to go to college, but my dad and I got into a pretty big argument and I left, and that's when I came to Leuda." She shrugged her shoulders, as though the incident she had just mentioned was of no true importance. "And now I'm on Arcadia having a ton of fun farming and going on adventures!" She turned back to Neil, eyebrows raised. "You said you knew all the locals, so that means you grew up on the islands, right?" <@roundfrog>

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Her sly smile sent an unexpected spark of electricity through him, and though her gaze fell back to the sand before them, Neil hesitate to remove his own from her face. In any other circumstances, with any other person, he wouldn't have been so inclined to learn more about them; the only other person he could really say he knew about was Candace, and he wasn't so keen on making nice with everyone. But as he listened to Holly explain the events that led to her move, he couldn't ignore the undivided attention he held for her.

He chewed his cheek at the mention of her father, a bitter taste catching in his throat. "An argument, huh?" He clicked his tongue at the fact that no father figure seemed to fill the role that was assigned to them -- and at how quickly Holly skimmed passed the fact. "And it was so bad that you wanted to leave? What, was he angry you didn't want to go to school, or was it some other bullshit reason?" His temper was slipping into his tone, accenting the gravelly nature his voice held.

Her question that sounded so easy cause Neil to fall silent. It was not often that he took the opportunity to talk about his childhood, unless it was about the bravery of his mother. He reached up to pull on a few strands of his unkempt blonde hair, choosing to follow the sight of the waves instead of the ocean that called to him in her eyes. "...Yeah, on Leuda." He wasn't apt to mention any time spent *before* he moved to Leuda with his mother, but felt Holly deserved a bit more explanation after nearly giving him her life's story. "... With my mother. She's a huge gossip, so she knows just about everyone on Leuda whether or not they're a local." He breathed a fond laugh through his nose, a soft smile pulling at his hard features. "Since I work at the ranch, I'm in Arcadia mostly, but... Mom gets pretty pissed if I'm not around in Leuda for long." <@owlfawn>

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Holly bit the inside of her cheek as she contemplated over whether or not to reveal more information about her relationship with her father to Neil. For some reason, Holly felt that she could trust the man walking beside her, and something in his tone as he asked her about it told her that perhaps he knew a thing or two about asshole fathers. "Something like that, yeah! He didn't think I was cut out for being on my own and that I needed to live under him for longer. He was always really strict, so I just... had enough. I wanted to live my own life, not the one he told me to live, if that makes sense."

She sighed and gently kicked up some sand as she walked. Talking about her dad always put

her into a mood, irritation eating at her a bit. However, the conversation switched to Neil and she listened attentively as he said his piece.

"So your mom still lives on Leuda? I wonder if I ever ran into her! I worked at city hall and the cafe, so maybe!" She smiled at Neil, wondering if he and his mother resembled one another, but all she could picture in her mind was Neil with a long wig and it made her giggle. <@roundfrog>

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Neil's brows knitted together as Holly elaborated on the situation with her father. His own father was never overly concerned about what Neil did or where he went, and his mother had let him become independent at a young age by being leaving him to his own devices while she worked to supply the household income; however, with the spunky petite blonde beside him, he could definitely identify why her father may be over-protective. Nevertheless, it was no excuse to hold someone back, especially when they wanted to choose an entirely different path for themselves. His attention gathered to that same blonde when she kicked at the sand, gaze hovering at her face to study the expression she wore. He could tell there was underlying aggravation playing in her mind while she spoke of her father, and it only caused his skin to prickle more. "Can't stand controlling people." He tilted his head down, a snicker unfolding his lips as he thought about Holly defying his wishes. "Pretty badass that you stuck it to him like that."

Neil rubbed his nose as a flush came to his face at the thought of Holly meeting his mother unknowingly. She was in town often as she still liked to work even though Neil could provide for her, and she would have surely stopped by the city hall or had lunch at the cafe. He pressed his lips together to try to quell his embarrassment. "Geez, it would've been a pain if she had." The thought of his mother sitting him down at the kitchen table to ramble on about a cute, *single* girl that he just *had* to meet played in his mind, and he ran a palm down his face in attempts to force the scenario away. "She probably wouldn't shut up about you — she's a bit too into matchmaking for my taste." <@owlfawn>

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Holly laughed, the sound of it ringing into the night air and sounding above the softly crashing waves nearby. "Oh, my mom was *totally* the same way! I think she did it just to make my dad mad, though, because every time she brought up a 'nice young man' she talked to, my dad would *lose it*." She laughed again shaking her head. "Moms are funny like that, I guess. I'm glad I at least had her to talk to. She always heard me out and encouraged me to do what made me happy, even if it wasn't what my dad wanted."

Holly smiled up at the stars, wondering what her mother was doing right then. Perhaps she was baking some holiday cookies with Holly's sister. Maybe she was putting on the final Christmas tree ornaments. Certainly she was doing something festive. <@roundfrog>

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Holly's laughter was contagious, and Neil found himself covering his mouth to keep his chuckles from spilling out too loudly in the night. Despite Holly's father wanting her to follow a certain path and being overbearing, he saw a resemblance to what his life was like in his early years — a mother who loved teasing both her son and husband. He could definitely agree with her gratitude toward her mother, as he felt the same for his. "For some reason, I think our moms would get along *too well*."

Another snicker escaped him while they walked. Neil's longer legs tempted him to walk faster than Holly, but he stayed mindful of her pace, and allowed for a pause whenever need be. The stars above danced in their flickering, and occasionally a firefly would try to make its place among them, blinking brightly. The night was beautiful, and yet his mind was pulled away from the scenery and back to Holly.

Looking ahead, Neil spotted a horse-drawn carriage covered in winter ornaments and snow.

There was a couple seated in the carriage making eyes at each other as if they were the only two people in the world, and the blonde looked away flustered as they dove in for a kiss. "Damn, just how rich are these people?" <@owlfawn>

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The two continued to walk along the beach, and a cold gust of night air sent a shiver running up Holly's spine. She looked around wide-eyed at the vast amount of decor on the island for the holiday. As they walked passed the carriage rides, Holly raised her brows at it. When had she last seen an *actual* horse and carriage ride? And, just as the other had done, Holly too averted her eyes from the couple in the carriage.

"Waaaaay too rich, I'd say." She turned to Neil to flash a grin, a giggle on the verge of bubbling up. "Maybe they'll give everyone a ton of money as a Christmas gift. What do you think?"

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<@roundfrog>

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Though Holly's idea was tantalizing (some extra money was never a bad thing to Neil,) he had a feeling the owners of the manor wouldn't be foolish enough to let go of their finances so easily, especially when there were this many guests. His chortle was gravelly in its tone in response to her. "For some reason, I don't think we'll get so lucky."

He adjusted weight of the bag on his wrist, reminded of the thoughtful present the blonde gifted him. He couldn't think of anything he wanted, nor needed, but somehow she had dug right into his subconscious and gave him something a bit... perfect. He stole a glance her way as they walked, and the glistening snow began to fall a little heavier. Her high ponytail had been a surprise to him, but the new fashion suited her and allowed her face to be seen in different angles. His eyes trailed down in appreciation at her burgundy dress, and he felt a blush rise as he reached his legs, all before noticing...

He paused in his steps for a moment, finally turning his full attention to her. "Are you an idiot?" He pointed to her feet, her toes already noticeably pink from the weather and ice they'd been stepping in. "You're going to lose a few toes by the end of the night if you don't put your shoes back on, dumbass." He sucked in a sharp breath before exhaling a large cloud of warmth, as if proving his point to how cold it was. Looking around, Neil spotted a rounded gazebo, roof and floor intact as a small shelter from the heavy falling snow. He gestured toward it, before rolling his eyes and grabbing Holly's wrist to pull her toward it.

"C'mon, we can at least save your feet from frostbite under there."

<@owlfawn>

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Holly pursed her lips in disappointment, but she had to agree with Neil's thoughts. There was no way these rich folks would just hand out their money all willy-nilly. After all, they didn't get to having their own personal *island* by just handing money away. It wasn't until Neil's likely rhetorical question to her that Holly turned back to Neil with wide eyes.

"Huh?" She looked down to where he was pointing and realization dawned on her as he spoke.

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't even notice they were that cold!" Perhaps she had been so distracted while talking to Neil that she hadn't even noticed her own feet growing icy. She looked down in surprise again when Neil grabbed her wrist gently, his fingers wrapping around the lithe wrist easily. His hands were warm against her skin there and she felt her face grow redder as she dutifully followed along towards the gazebo.

Once there, Holly shook the sand and snow from her feet over the steps they'd just gone up,

then she looked around the gazebo they stood under. Green leaves and garland had been wrapped around it, small strings of lights weaved within them to light up the spot in a soft glow. She turned to Neil with a laugh. "Even their gazebos feel fancy. But I guess gazebos are already kinda fancy, huh?" <@roundfrog>

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"They probably would've fallen off without you noticing, too."

Once under the gazebo, Neil took his hands from Holly's thin wrist and shoved them in his coat pocket, relieved to have something to shield himself from the icy weather. The decorations only expanded within the structure, sprawling around the ceiling and railings that etched the gazebo. The lights caused a romantic sort of glow that lit the snowflakes that fell outside, though they were protected within — a snowball of warmth on the icy beach.

He had to admit, it was fancy. Neil's family had a small gazebo when he was young, but he didn't recall him ever thinking of it as something high-class. He rubbed his forehead as his brows knitted together, and turned to Holly, and aggravated gaze latching onto her blue eyes — she had yet to remedy the situation of her freezing feet.

Another aggravated grunt slipped from his throat as he pointed to the bench that wrapped around the gazebo, and looked down toward Holly; he towered over her in comparison.

"Sit down."

<@owlfawn>

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It was hard not to look around in awe at the gazebo still. The white wood was painted carefully and the decoration that covered it was both extravagant and classy at the same time. It truly was unlike anything Holly had ever experienced. In her reverie of the decor, Holly almost hadn't heard Neil's command, but when it registered she flustered and sat down, just as instructed. She set her heels on the ground by her feet, blue eyes trained on Neil to watch for what he did next. Had he asked her to sit down because he was annoyed with her? Or, maybe, did he want to sit too? Had they been walking too long? Questions ran through Holly's mind as she looked up at Neil from her seated spot on the bench. <@roundfrog>

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His tone had been a bit more commanding than he intended, and he felt himself flush at Holly's pinked cheeks, looking to the ground when she sat herself down. Neil felt her eyes trained on him, questioning what his intentions were to be so suddenly commandeering. He paused, the fluster apparent in the way that he ruffled a rough hand through his hair, before he finally knelt down in front of the blonde woman.

He retrieved one of her heels from the ground beside his knelt knee before gently picking Holly's matching foot up by its back, his fingers resting on her achilles as he slid the first heel back over her frozen foot. He was gentle, but adept and swift as made sure her appendage was snug inside the shoe. Just as quickly, he retrieved the other shoe, copying the same motions on the woman's other foot, her cold skin sending shivers up his spine every time he felt a new sliver of it — from the cold, or from the contact, he did not know. He tested the other shoe for its fit before looking up to her, knee still stationed on the floor in his knightly pose as his crimson eyes bore into hers.

"There — the timing was crucial. Didn't know how long before we'd have to amputate." His tone carried a slight hint of mischief, but he felt himself falter at what may have been an awkward thing to do for a woman he barely knew.

<@owlfawn>

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With wide eyes and flushed cheeks, Holly watched as Neil slid her heels back onto her feet with



care and ease. His touch felt like fire, hot enough to warm her cold skin and send shivers through her body. It was an odd feeling that settled in her chest, one that she hadn't felt since she left home.

She felt... cared for.

When was the last time someone looked after her in such a way? The last time she could remember even feeling such a sense of comfort was back home when her mom had brought her soup on a cold winter's evening. The memory brought a soft, genuine smile to Holly's lips and, when Neil spoke, her smile grew wider.

"Thanks. A life saver, once again," she teased right back. Without much thought behind the motion, Holly reached out to brush some snow from Neil's blond hair, her fingers gently tousling his hair, barely touching it. "Wouldn't want you to catch a cold, either," she spoke to try and justify her action with just as silly of a reason as he had given for his own. <@roundfrog>

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Neil had let a sliver of worry tuck into his mind at his awkwardness. Was it necessary for him to help her put her shoes back on? Of course not, she was a grown woman who could reasonably take care of herself. But, still, he found himself compelled to give her aid. His anxiousness turned his eyes into daggers, projecting a defense shield in order to not show his true emotions, but when he looked back toward her —

A heartfelt smile, and a gentle touch to brush away the snow from his hair.

He felt the wall he'd projected fall, a mixture of confusion and amazement scrawling across his face in pure expression before he was able to hide it. He stood abruptly, looking out toward the ocean and covering the lower portion of his face with a large hand. It had felt as though they'd both shared a portion of their soul — of their pasts; it was difficult for Neil to decipher how he felt about being vulnerable.

Finally, he nodded. It was a nice gesture to reciprocate what he'd done for her — a lapse of judgment in a moment that had been swindled by the atmosphere of the event. It had to be. He found himself sitting down next to her, rather than across or a few feet away. Was he catching a head cold? The blonde set his forgotten gift bag beside him before leaning his head down and setting his elbows on his knees, fingers fidgeting with each other while the ghost of Holly's skin evaporated.

"Yeah, yeah... We're acting like we're a couple of elderly folk in the cold." He shook his head, trying to bring back some lightness into his tone. "Ridiculous."

<@owlfawn>

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His joke made Holly laugh, the sound of it bouncing off of the wood of the gazebo and right back to her own ears. "Maybe I should get one of those old person walkers." She motioned holding the handles of an imaginary one, wobbling her hands to mimic being elderly, then she laughed again, letting her hands fall back into her lap. Her fingers found the hem of her dress' skirt and she fiddled with it mindlessly.

Again, her bright blue eyes began to wander the gazebo again, and it wasn't until she looked all the way up at the ceiling of the structure that she noticed something remarkable. Her eyes went wide and her whole face flushed red, the color of embarrassment reaching even her neck. All she could do was stare at the small bundle of mistletoe and holly that hung at the very top of the gazebo.

Oh gods above. Did she say anything? Maybe if she looked away now, Neil wouldn't notice it at all. Oh geez.

All Holly did was keep staring straight up at it, too surprised by its presence to make any kind of move. <@roundfrog>

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Neil breathed a snicker at Holly's mention of a walker, and had to cover his mouth to stop a snort when she made the trembling motion of holding onto the phantom device. She was silly in a way that was more adorable than childish, and it certainly had an affect on Neil. As the conversation trailed off, the air around them didn't feel as awkward as he'd imagined the silence would — instead, it was comfortable and warming in the chilly outdoors. He felt himself appreciating their evolving relationship, and had felt more himself than he had in too long. He was going to remark on the feeling when his glance caught Holly's frozen expression. Her face had reached the hue of a tomato, and the tint crawled down her neck and around her ears. He lifted a brow in curiosity as he followed her locked gaze, trailing up the decorations of the gazebo until he spotted what had caused the surprise. He felt his own embarrassment flush across his face as he gazed up at the mistletoe, the Christmas tradition of such a plant at the forefront of his mind — mocking him and the confusing emotions he'd already been experiencing.

Neil cleared his throat, turning to Holly. His expression was a question, as if he were asking for permission as he looked to her, scanning her face for any sign of "no." Normally, he'd scoff at such a tradition — the implication of having to *kiss* someone when you stood under a plant was laughable — and yet the atmosphere, the gazebo, their gift exchange, the night he'd spent with Holly so far... It felt as if it was all leading up to some sort of moment, and this was just that.

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He bit his lip, and his mind trailed to the fact that it'd been too long since he had kissed someone while his hand raked through his hair. With an annoyed growl, he spoke. "Ah, fuck it." Faster than lightning, Neil's hands gently caressed the back of Holly's neck, taking one last look into her aquamarine eyes before closing the distance between their lips. The immediate contact was electric, and he could feel the temptation of the kiss to dive in and drown in her lips. He couldn't recall if anything he'd experienced felt *like this*. Her skin was hot under his fingertips, and his hands crawled up, begging to thread between the strands of her hair and pull her deeper into him — but he pulled away, disconnecting from Holly and quickly removing his palms from her skin and hair. He felt his hot breath release into a puff of smoke between them, and before he could read Holly's expression, he stood, picking his bag up with a fidgeting fist. "I — It's late, isn't it? We should be getting back."

<@owlfawn>

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When Neil cleared his throat, it was enough to draw Holly's attention away from the hanging plant and she turned to look at Neil without any change in her expression. She was still wide-eyed and embarrassed at the implications of the mistletoe that hung above them, and as she looked at Neil's face, desperately reading it for any hint as to what his reaction to it was, she felt her stomach flip.

The way he was looking at her... Had she ever been looked at *like that*? *Ever*?

And then, suddenly and quicker than Holly could realize it was happening, Neil had kissed her. His lips pressed against hers quickly, and yet the feeling of the kiss was gentle, and Holly nearly melted into it. Her eyes fluttered closed as she moved to kiss him back, to try and show him that she wanted this as much as he seemed to. The hand on the back of her neck moved to her hair and she nearly gasped had she not been so concentrated on kissing him.

And then, just like that, it was over.

Holly opened her eyes and blinked twice in surprise. A moment ago, Neil had been seated right beside her, and now he was standing with his back to her, poised to leave. For a brief moment, Holly seemed to be shocked silent as she blinked at him wordlessly. Then, it dawned on her.

He regretted it. He regretted it and he wanted to leave quickly.

"Um," Holly started, though her voice didn't feel like her own. "Y-You go on ahead!" Her voice was too high, higher than it normally was, and it betrayed her desire to seem calm. "I'm gonna sit out here for a little bit longer to um, cool down." Her choice of words brought attention to her tomato-red face. She was sure she had steam rolling off of her with how embarrassed she felt. Holly smiled at him, hoping to reassure him that she was fine, even if she wasn't. <@roundfrog>

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His stomach flipped in his abdomen over and over again as he kept replaying the kiss in his head. Her lips were so soft, and it felt so genuine and warm, and oh Goddess he wanted so much more in that moment —

Her voice sounded strained from behind him, and his expression dropped. The thought of her being upset by his unprecedented actions spiraled in his head, leading him down a rocky path he'd thought was locked behind a door, never to be reopened. Had he been... forceful? Was there a chance he was becoming his father after all? He couldn't stand the thought — leaving the situation was the only way to escape any resentment Holly may have for him.

Neil couldn't help but look over his shoulder at her, and found her face even more flustered than before — perhaps a mix of anger toward him and embarrassment for the situation as a whole. He cursed under his breath as he looked back toward the sea, exit straight ahead. "... Just don't stay out too long, or you really will have to worry about frostbite."

Neil pulled the collar of his coat up, shielding his jawline from the slight breeze that had picked up and threaten to blow snow on his wounded ego. He hoped to get off the island as quickly as possible as he headed toward the mansion, hoping Holly may forget the rushed interaction.

<@owlfawn>

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Holly watched in silence as Neil made his hasty exit, biting her lip as she held off the tightness in her throat long enough for him to disappear from view. As soon as he was gone, Holly let out a shaky exhale and she felt her eyes sting with tears, the cold of winter now chilling her to the bone. She tried taking deep breaths, hoping that it would calm her down and she *wouldn't* have a full-on cry while sitting in a gazebo on an unfamiliar island.

Alas, the tears fell anyways and Holly buried her face in her hands to hide away from anyone who might see her. She felt so stupid, thinking that Neil could have possibly felt any certain way about her. She was clumsy, careless, reckless, and so many other things that she knew her father was right about, but she hadn't expected *this*.

The care that she felt from Neil was nothing more than him worrying over her safety like a babysitter ought to with a child. How could he not, when she'd nearly died right in front of him with her reckless behavior? Holly sobbed into her hands, embarrassment and shame washing over her anew. She knew she couldn't stay, but she knew she needed to leave and go home. She'd wait until the ship came 'round again, buying her some time to wipe the tears from her eyes. She hoped that Claire was having a better night than she was, at the very least, as Holly would be returning home first. <@roundfrog> (and we end it here 🙄)

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