

If someone had asked Jesha to recall the last time she had felt *this* terrible, she wouldn't have been able to give an answer. Truth be told, this was the absolute worst Jesha had felt in ages. Harsh coughs jolted her body, matter stuck in her throat as she broke out into a clammy sweat from struggling to cough it up for so long. Everyone had taken note of how reclusive she had been lately, trying desperately to drag her out of her cabin and into the world outside.

But Jesha politely refused every single time.

The only person who really knew what was up was her best friend Mika - of course. She came to try and invite Jesha out to the lake with everyone else one night, and her rambling kept Jesha in front of her long enough to where a couple bright red petals flew out of her mouth in the student nurse's presence. Mika let out a frightened squeak, stuttering through remains of now lost sentences as she ushered Jesha back inside her cabin for the night. "Please, please don't tell anyone what I have, Mika. I'd rather die than have my feelings outed to everyone."

Mika swallowed, her eyebrows furrowing together. "But if you don't confess...!" She began, tears beading in her eyes.

"Shh. I know. But there's nothing I can do about it. He'll never feel the same." Jesha whispered, trying to clear her throat of the tickling sensation from the petals.

"Can you at least... tell me who it is...?" Mika asked, preparing herself for the answer.

Jesha sighed; eyes cast downward. "...Finn..." Her voice broke as she began coughing again, harder this time. The force was causing fiery pain to spread through her ribs, tears streaming down her face as she struggled to cough up the bane of her existence. Mika rushed to bring her a garbage can, placing a reassuring hand on Jesha's shoulder as she leaned into it and began to vomit. This time, the heads of the roses were intact, only bringing her more pain as they left her esophagus. Frightened noises continued leaving Mika as she started to cry, worried for Jesha's wellbeing.

She simply told everyone that Jesha was already asleep, and didn't want to bother waking her.

Days upon days passed with no confession from either side - in fact, Finn didn't seem to notice that Jesha was even sick. He went on with life as normally as he could, unaware of the turmoil that *he* was the cause of.

To everyone's amazement, Jesha showed up at breakfast one morning. She didn't look... *great*, per se, but she was alive and everyone was thrilled to see her out and about. Some began showering her with questions, Mika's girlfriend Sierra going so far as to pour Jesha the last of the orange juice that was out. She accepted it gratefully, taking a small sip and

hiding her wince as the liquid passed through her torn throat. However, the coldness relieved just a bit of the sore, achy feeling, so she continued sipping at it. Jesha briefly explained that she had been feeling sick for the past few weeks, and it wasn't getting any better. People immediately turned to start prodding at Mika with various questions, only stopping when Jesha urged them to. Mika stumbled and explained that there was nothing to be done about the disease Jesha had, that it would eventually go away in due time. However, they both knew deep down that living wasn't the only option.

Jesha could very well die, too.

So... she convinced herself to sit at Finn's table near the end of breakfast. He hadn't been present when she explained she was sick, so he was still acting standoffish, as usual. As soon as Jesha sat down, he rolled his eyes. "What do you want?" He sneered, looking Jesha over, a look of mild surprise washing over his face.

"I... I dunno. I just wanted to sit by you, I guess...?" She murmured, realizing the hole she was digging with every word. Jesha sat, preparing for the worst things to come out of his mouth-

"...*Fine*. Just don't be annoying." He huffed, starting to dig into his breakfast. Jesha was taken aback by his unexpectedly timid response, stuck staring into her orange juice. "What the hell are you doing? I doubt a glass of juice is that interesting." She gave a sheepish smile, taking another sip while pondering whether or not to say anything further. Before Jesha could even think of a topic, a cough bubbled up in her chest. Almost instantly, tears started to pour down her face – a callback from the pain of other ferocious coughing attacks. The coughs only devolved, and she placed her glass on the table with a trembling hand. She eventually stumbled over to the trashcan in the corner of the restaurant, leaning over the brim and finally coughing up the head of another rose, this one yellow with red tips. She... hadn't seen one this color before. Just red ones, the ones that just meant 'romance'.

"Woah, shit! If you're that sick, why the hell are you even out of bed?! No one else wants to get sick, you know!" Finn hollered from across the restaurant. Hot tears kept streaming down Jesha's face, dripping into the trash can as the soreness of her throat came back in full swing. Wiping saliva from her mouth, she turned around to walk back to the table.

"I-It's a disease. It's not contagious, Finn. You don't have to worry about getting sick..." She paused, taking another soothing sip of orange juice and studying his expression. His eyebrows were furrowed together in a mix of confusion and doubt.

"A disease, huh? Can't that clumsy-ass friend of yours tell you how to get better, or whatever?" He scoffed, his fork making an unceremonious *clink* against his plate as he put the utensil down. Jesha held back a sympathetic smile.

“I know the cure. It’s just... improbable. I can’t get better unless-” She shook her head once more, closing her mouth before anything more revealing about her condition could escape. “I’d better get back to my cabin. That fit took a lot out of me.” Jesha stood from the table, her voice growing rougher by the minute. Before she could leave, Finn pushed his glass across the table toward her. She simply looked down at it, head tilted in confusion.

“...I didn’t drink out of it. Just take it. You sound like hell.” He murmured, focusing on his food more than Jesha. She beamed, taking the glass in both hands.

“Thanks, Finnie.” Disregarding the last part, she took a sip before starting the journey back to her cabin. Her bed. *Sleep*. Rest sounded good right now.

Jesha failed to note that Finn didn’t dispute the nickname she gave him.

She managed to stay awake long enough to finish the juice Finn had offered. By the time she reached the bottom of the glass, she was nearly half asleep. Taking the now empty cup in one hand, Jesha set it on the table near her bed. Afterward, she shifted to fall on the comfortable, cool mattress. Her head sank into her pillow, the fatigue of her disease overtaking her almost instantly.

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Jesha ended up sleeping all day. People tried knocking, hollering, to no avail. She was in a coma-like sleep. However, when she finally woke up, her body retaliated with a fierce fit - one worse than any previous. She could feel a sharp, stabbing pain taking up her entire esophagus, the fresh coppery taste of blood coating her tongue. She gagged at the metallic tang, spitting a mix of blood and saliva onto the rug in front of her bed. Tears were clouding her vision once more due to the harsh coughs rattling her - causing her to stumble as she headed toward her bathroom. She leaned over the sink, retching and gagging until the offending matter finally left her body. When the tears finally cleared and she could see once more, she wished that she wouldn’t have looked. In her sink, amidst a pool of saliva, bile, and blood, was a wholly intact pink rose. She heaved into the bowl again, a couple loose petals floating out of her mouth before she fainted onto the tile below.

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Finn had been pacing along his living room rug for a few minutes now, unable to keep his mind off of Jesha. God, she wasn’t even that important. Just another person at this stupid flowery ‘summer camp’. Even though he tried to convince himself that she was unimportant, that she didn’t matter, that she was just another obstacle in his way - he couldn’t accept it, no matter how hard he tried. The images of Jesha from this morning, pale and sickly, leaning over the trashcan and making those disgusting noises as she forced *something* out of her body - something he later discovered was the head of a rose - had stuck with him.

He had immediately stormed over to Mika's cabin after breakfast, and *demanded* to know what kind of stupid disease that was, because as far as he knew, coughing up flowers was some sort of made-up fairy-tale garbage that he had no interest in believing was real. But Mika, stuttering and sobbing throughout her whole explanation, managed to instill a new fear inside of Finn's frozen-over heart - a fear that Jesha might die.

No matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he wasn't afraid she'd die because he *liked* her, or because she was *enjoyable* or something - that was exactly the reason he was afraid. Everyone he seemed to take a liking to was eventually ripped away from him by the cruel hands of the world as some sort of payment for who he was. He'd be damned if Jesha died because some dumb person didn't like her back. That would be a pathetic way to die, and he believed that no one deserved to die like *that*.

Right after the nighttime announcements, he headed over to her cabin. Once he arrived, he stood idly by the mailbox, a million ideas running through his head. The ideas dissipated once he realized that all the lights were on, but there was no sound coming from inside. Finn let out an indignant huff, walking up to the door and rapping his fist against the hardwood. He stood in silence for a moment, rolling his eyes and knocking again - his impatience growing with harder knocks. After another few moments of absolute silence, he began to bang his fist against her door, adrenaline pushing him to the edge. The pit of fear that Mika had opened up inside of him was starting to grow, fed by his anxiety as he continued banging on the door with no end in sight.

Finn's breathing was ragged and harsh, his fist throbbing from the abuse it had suffered against the door. Not only that, but his face was entirely red now, one vein making itself prominent in his forehead. He let out an aggravated yell, screaming up into the starry night sky. A cool breeze drifted through the trees, knocking some semblance of sense back into his adrenaline-ridden system.

He was no knight in shining armor, but he wanted to help Jesha. There was no way he was going to run to the counselor's cabin now, not after they'd practically ignored all of them since the beginning of camp. Would they even believe anything that came out of his mouth?

Finn wasn't willing to find out now. Wasting time could mean life-or-death for Jesha, and he wouldn't take that chance. He'd rather get in trouble for some sort of property damage over letting someone die on his watch. With his heart still furiously beating, he took a few steps back from the door. Taking a deep breath in, he charged forward and threw his shoulder into the wood, the air leaving his lungs in one fell swoop. He bounced back, falling to his knees as he struggled to breathe again.

Once he got used to a normal breathing rhythm, he stood back up and observed the door once more. The door was sitting awkwardly now, light streaking through the space between

the door and its frame. Finn still couldn't budge it open - so he readied himself, hollering as his combat boot made contact just under the doorknob. A fierce *crack* sounded, the door flinging open as the knob came loose, along with part of the frame.

Finn jolted forward and propelled himself through the doorway, expecting to see Jesha passed out on her bed - but his eyes fell on empty sheets and wrinkled pillow cases. The only thing of note he could see was a crimson splotch on the rug right in front of her bed.

"*Shit!*" He cursed under his breath, turning around to look over the rest of the tiny living space. There was nothing else around, so that left the bathroom. Jesha was, without a doubt, there. Although he had tried convincing himself earlier that there was nothing to be lost, that she didn't mean anything to him... the sound of his blood rushing as his heart raced in his chest said the opposite. He inhaled - a shallow and shaky sound - before sliding the door to her bathroom open. A choked sound of surprise and shock became lodged in his throat as he surveyed the mess in front of him.

The sink was full of flowers. More goddamn *roses*. Except these were a creamy, delicate pink - a stark difference from the bright red and yellow from this morning. These weren't just the heads, either - the sink was everything from full-fledged roses with blood-tipped thorns and stems, down to just the silky petals now soaked in Jesha's blood and bile. Finn was still gripping the handle of the bathroom door - gripping so hard that his knuckles were turning white - when he let his eyes travel down to the floor.

Jesha's pale, sickly frame was carelessly strewn on the tile, blood streaming from her mouth onto the floor. The front of her shirt looked to be soaked - probably in sweat, bile, or a mix of the two. Finn could feel his breath hitch as he studied her form for any signs of visible life - her skin was pale and beginning to look ashy, she was making absolutely no noise - no gasps of breath or groans of pain - and she wasn't even moving. He stood in the doorway, brain fixing into the panic of the situation and setting into overdrive as he hoped... *prayed* for Jesha to move. A twitch of her fingers, maybe her foot?

Suddenly, he ripped his hand off of the door handle, clenching his fist to his side. The only way to know... was to check. He'd have to get his shit together, put on his big boy pants, stop being a *coward*, and *check*.

Finn stepped awkwardly over Jesha's body, one foot on either side. Once he made it to a less-awkward spot, he knelt down over her. Just being this close to her body made him realize that she was *freezing*. It was humid outside, and the interior of her cabin wasn't cold, so it was enough to strike a bit of fear into him. He settled over her midsection and, with the most delicate touch he could muster, placed two fingers over the pulse point on Jesha's neck. Pouring all of his focus into detecting something, he halted his own breathing for a moment. He could feel his heart starting to sink when he felt nothing, starting to take his hand away. But in that single moment - the fleeting point between his hand moving and his heart taking the brunt of the realization - he *felt* something.

Finn didn't even realize it, but he was muttering under his breath, *"Please, please... God damn it, please! I can't lose you too, wake the hell up!"* Constant murmurs of hopes and pleases left his lips as he pressed his fingers against Jesha's pulse point yet again, this time just a tad bit harder.

There it was.

A consistent - but incredibly weak - thrum of a pulse. Under *his* fingertips. Coming from *her*. Finn retracted his hand, fumbling for a moment to put his hands on Jesha's shoulders. "Hey!" He hollered, soon realizing that his hands on her shoulders would do nothing, instead opting to cup her face, lifting one side off the cold tile floor. Finn was beginning to delve into panic again - her pulse was nearly gone; how long did she have to live? What should he do?

What should he do...?

*"Hey, klutz! Open your door before I open it my own damn self!"* He hollered, knocking furiously. The door then swung open, and he was facing the resident student nurse of the island. *"God, finally! I'm looking for answers and you're the only one who has 'em!"* Finn pushed past the nurse into her cabin, motioning for her to shut the door.

*"Um... What do you mean?"* Mika sounded absolutely terrified - she usually did, but it was more so amplified by the fact that Finn was directing all of his current anger towards her. His face was blossoming red, and there was a vein prominent on his forehead as he continued speaking.

*"What the hell kind of disease makes someone cough up flowers? Huh? Is this a joke? Because it's the most idiotic thing I've ever witnessed!"* He yelled, spitting as he spoke.

*"It's called Hanahaki! It's the result of unrequited love, and basically the person has a crush on someone but hasn't confessed because they don't think their crush will reciprocate so it becomes a disease where the roots of love try to grow into their respiratory system and kill them-!"* Mika paused to take a large breath, noticing the immediate change in Finn's demeanor when she mentioned death, *"...The person starts by coughing up flower petals. Um, then it evolves into bigger and bigger pieces, until it just becomes that person vomiting up whole flowers. If the love goes unconfessed, uh... unrequited... the person affected by the disease will die, because the roots will take hold of their lungs and take away their ability to breathe."* Mika still sounded vaguely scared, but not as much as before. She looked up to study Finn's expression once more, noticing that he was still wearing a deadly scowl.

*"What the hell is the cure, then? There's gotta be one."* He scoffed, crossing his arms and glaring at the girl in front of him.

*“Um... well... the only good cure is requited love. However, there is another cure. It’s a surgery, but when it removes the roots, it removes the person’s ability to feel passion and love for others... entirely...”* Mika finished, anxiety still brimming over her words as she spoke.

That’s what he had to do. The one thing he *didn’t* want to do - the thing that would make him the most vulnerable person in this campsite - is what he had to do. But if it meant saving Jesha’s life... then he’d damn well try.

Finn held his breath as he mulled over the words, a deep anxiety opening a pit in his stomach. Still cupping her face, he glanced over Jesha once more.

*Deep breath...*

“I won’t let you die like this! *I love you, damn it!*”

He nearly screamed it, his voice cracking and every fiber in his body burning red hot as he waited for something, *anything* to happen-

A raspy, wet cough left Jesha’s mouth as she gasped for air, trying to push herself up into a sitting position. Finn’s hands moved from her face to her shoulders, pushing gently just once to keep her from straining herself. Her vision was cloudy, and she was now aware of the fact that she was in immense pain. Her throat was still rough and ragged, sore and burning from the fit that had caused her to end up on the floor - but she managed to croak out one word, “F... Finnie...?”

“*God*, yes, it’s me. Hold on a second.” He spoke, coming off a bit harsher than he wanted to, residual panic rushing through his body. Jesha let her head rest back on the ground, suddenly coming to the realization that she was nearly numb. She clenched her eyes shut to try and gain clearer vision, starting when something warm and soft touched her cheek. A washcloth.

“I doubt you want dry blood all over the place.” He mumbled, turning her face gently to inspect for missed spots. When he didn’t see any more, he set the washcloth over the rim of the sink. Jesha felt the warmth around her midsection grow distant, causing her to begin shivering worse than before. Blinking hard, she managed to restore her vision, bringing her hands up to rub at her eyes. That seemed to do the trick, as she opened her eyes and flinched at the brightness. Once Jesha became adjusted, her eyes flitted around the tiny space to search for Finn. He was kneeling next to her, a focused look on his face. Without much warning, he shoved her up into his arms and stood, carefully carrying her out to the main room. She clutched onto his jacket, gripping at the sudden change in altitude. “I don’t trust letting you walk ‘n’ all that yet... so you’re gonna have to deal with it.” He murmured, concentrated on making it across the room without dropping Jesha.

He managed, setting her gently on her bed. She propped herself up into a sitting position, watching Finn dart between the bathroom and her main room. “Finnie, I really hate to bring it up, but... I need to change.” She spoke, voice still rocky from the abuse her throat had suffered.

Almost instantly, his entire face bloomed a bright red. “Well, I’m not helping with that!” He blurted, before turning even more red. “Not that I don’t *want* to help! It’s just-” Finn Cabrera, someone who never had to think twice about his words, was now stumbling over sentences.

Jesha couldn’t help but chuckle - only leading to a wince as her throat rejected the idea. Instead, she offered a small smile. “I know. Just, uh... get Mika.” She suggested, grimacing at the increasing burning sensation caused by her throat.

He only nodded, offering a quiet, “I’ll be right back.” Before dashing out the door and over to the student nurse’s cabin. After a few minutes, Mika stumbled through the doorway looking just as anxious as usual. A small squeak of surprise left her lips as she saw Jesha sitting up in bed.

“You’re... alive! Well, I sort of figured because Finn is the one who got me, but...” Mika’s sentence devolved into gibberish as she sobbed through her words, overjoyed by the fact that her best friend was still breathing.

“I know you’re really glad that I’m alive and all, Mika, but I would really love to change out of these nasty clothes, please.” Jesha smiled sympathetically, and Mika nodded as she turned away. Jesha heard her front door shut (to the best of its ability) and celebrated the fact that she’d be in dry, warm clothes soon. With Jesha’s guidance, Mika grabbed her the exact things she wanted to wear. Once she had finished helping Jesha change, she did a quick check-up to make sure she wasn’t coming down with anything extra as a side effect. Mika came up empty-handed, so she left with a small smile on her face knowing that Jesha was on the road to recovery. Right after Mika left, Finn popped back in through the door.

“So... uh... Your place is sort of messy right now... so, if you want to... you can stay with me tonight.” He mumbled, crossing his arms to distract from the blush falling over his cheeks. A smile blossomed on Jesha’s face.

“I’d like that.” She whispered, keeping her voice low to refrain from damaging her throat further. With Finn’s help, she stood and used him for support as they both made their way to his cabin.

It had a less stressful aura about it, the scent of him bringing Jesha an odd sense of relief. He let her sit down on the edge of his bed before moving to the other side of the room, bringing a teacup over from his desk. “...It’s chamomile tea. With honey. It’ll help your



throat, so... you should drink it.” He explained, still stumbling over his words. Jesha nodded, taking the small cup in both hands. The warmth of it was just as comforting as she imagined. She took small sips at first, enjoying the soothing feeling as it passed through her ruined throat. Finn headed back into his own bathroom, emerging after a couple minutes in his own sleepwear.

The two sat in silence as Jesha finished her tea, feeling more and more drowsy with every sip. A comfortable warmth was blooming in her core, and for once, she felt safe. Safe and comfortable and... protected.

After she took the last sip of her tea, she set the cup down on the table in front of Finn’s bed, sitting back up with a soft yawn. The exhaustion from the past few weeks with her sickness was catching up to her in this single moment, and her eyelids felt unbearably heavy. “Finnie... I’m tired.” She murmured, leaning over onto his shoulder.

“...Then lay down and go to sleep, moron.” He said, his own voice groggy.

“...You’ve gotta lay down with me.” Jesha replied back, grabbing one of his hands with both of hers.

“Jeez, fine.” With that response, the both of them got up to peel the sheets and blankets back, climbing under them together. They laid there on their backs, staring up at the ceiling of Finn’s cabin and letting their minds absorb the events of the night in silence.

After a while, Jesha turned on her side and leaned over to plant a soft, delicate kiss on Finn’s cheek. The tip of her nose rested against his cheek as she spoke in a gentle whisper.

“I love you, Finn.”

He laid still for a moment, letting her nudge into his side and letting his arm drape over Jesha as a deep blush covered his face.

“I... hell, I love you too.”