

she was here (and it was warm.)

Characters - Mio (fish bowl), Jaz (red scarf), Lily (postcard), and Owen (pot).

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"Come ON Mio! We're almost there - it's not like you'll shatter your brains out from the heat!" Jaz let out a chuckle, walking up the hill. She was the sportiest, after all - a real nutcracker.

Mio's eyes rolled, wiping her brow. "Yeah, keep talking - as if you're the one carrying the cooler! Would you mind helping out, just a bit?"

The red scarf chuckled. She grabbed the other handle of the cooler. "As you say, boss." "Real funny.."

Well, on the other hand..

"I don't even know how Jaz is so cheeky when it's so hot out.. I need one of those popsicles from the cooler - now." A damp, tired postcard muttered, her forehead leaning on the pot's back as she groaned, adjusting her bag as it let out a few clinks and rattles.

"Okay, girl. We're already here, so sit down and take a rest." Owen chuckled, patting her head behind him.

CRACK!! HSSSSSSSSS!!

They finally reached it - an abandoned building, but it was something special to them. 3 consecutive summers, they've cleaned it, tended to it, and made some tweaks here and there. And now, it was their hangout spot.

Lily threw the bag on the grass, a few spray paint cans spilling out. Of course, Jaz picked one up, shaking it as she put a hand on her hip, her lips curving into a smile. "What mural do we do? This is one solid wall." She tossed the can in her hand, her index finger just waiting to press the nozzle and wing it.

"Actually.." Mio grinned, pushing Jaz to the wall. The red scarf tensed as her eyelids flew open. "YEEESH! Mio, not here!!" "Ew, and shut up, will you? Your mouth? Zip it. Close your eyes, too."

Shaking the can vigorously, the red spray paint splattered around Jaz, outlining their overall scarf figure. "Done! A little spray on your cheek, silly." Rubbing her cheek with a cloth, Jaz's right eye shut, making a kissy face. As if she didn't like any of this to happen -

Mio didn't feel the same, anyway.

"Alright, Picasso, move OVERRRR." Lily pushed Mio aside, snagging the green paint can. "Do you have any idea?" "Nope!!" Lily beamed, popping off the cap with her teeth as if it were a soda tab. "I'm going full chaos." She spun in a circle, then leaned back, one hand steadying against the wall, the other spraying wild, unpredictable marks.

Green flickers of paint met red, choppy patterns - accidental genius? - or just a frenzied blur. The mark off of Lily's postcard self took form took place next to Jaz's (or, well, what seemed to be.) It was jagged in places all over.

"I- WOW. Wow, that's great, babe.." Owen looked over to the side, stifling a laugh, but a slight snicker had him pouring all out. "Oh my GOD. That's.. Terrifying." Realization hit Lily like a brick. "It's okay, I think it looks fabulous. Unlikeeee.. those two.."

Right there, Jaz's shoulders were shaking as her hand was up against the wall, knees wobbling, shoulders shaking. She was obviously cackling, hacking a spit once or twice, because it got that bad. Mio, on the other hand, kept grabbing her shoulder, trying to attempt to look like she wasn't going to wheeze the hell out of her lungs. Her mouth quivered, curling into a smile, trying to cover snickers with her hand.

"..We aren't buying that whole facade, you two." "SORRY, SORRY!!"

"..Hey, Jaz?" "Hm?"

"Wake up."

Jaz blinked hard. Her head ached, like she had been holding her breath for days. The world came in static: dull colors, the cold breeze, and the sour smell of old spray paint mixed in with dirt.

The three were back at the wall.

She didn't remember them walking there. That happened a lot lately.

"This place... used to feel like something."

Jaz sat down, legs folding beneath her as if they belonged to someone else. For a long time, she just stared at the mural. The mural of the old group. What was left out of it? Red splats, green streaks. The shape of Mio's body, still there. As if it were mocking her presence alone.

"You're too much for me, Jaz." Her voice dropped into a low, dry imitation of Mio's, almost smiling. But that smile didn't meet her eyes, not one bit. Owen and Lily just looked at her, but didn't dare to utter a word. They sat next to her, looking at what she was.

"And- I was so mad at her, y'know? Or I thought I was. I.. I just didn't know what to say, what to do. I was always too much, she said. She wasn't wrong. I just.. wasn't expecting it to come from her."

Jaz wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "She grounded me. Without ever saying to me that.. That's what she was doing. I think she saw the mess in me and figured I would burn out eventually."

Lily's voice was soft. "But she stayed."

Jaz stared straight ahead. The wind frolicked through her hair, and just for a moment, she would've imagined that it was Mio's hands running through them. But that never happened.

"Did you.. Love her?" "I did. I really did." Jaz gripped the grass, trying to ground herself.

Then, she started talking. Talking, as if she were face to face with Mio.

"You kissed me once," Jaz chuckled. "You made it a joke. Said it was 'performance art', in front of our classmates. Then, you laughed and walked off, as if something hadn't just cracked wide open at the spot."

Owen tried to talk to Jaz, but Lily stopped him. Jaz's eyes shut, tears finally running down.

*"I didn't sleep that night, I just kept thinking about it. **Replaying it.** Trying and trying to convince myself that it didn't mean anything, because it was so much easier than saying 'oh, yeah! I'm hopelessly in love with my best friend who doesn't want me the way I do.' "*

A breath. Not quite a sigh.

*"**I think you knew.**" Jaz grabbed something out of her pocket. A missing poster. "Mio Jane Atwater: MISSING. If found alive or dead, contact the Police Department."*

The wind tugged gently at her jacket, and she imagined - just for a second - it was someone tapping her on the shoulder. But when she looked back, nothing was there. Just the rustling weeds.

She stood slowly, going to the part of the mural where Mio's figure was outlined. Ironically, the most faded out part.

"She made me feel like I was too much," *her voice low and steady.*
"But I think what scared me was that I was never going to be enough for her."

Lily frowned. "Jaz——"

"SHUT UP, LILY, JUST SHUT UP! Let me- let me say it. Please." *She dragged in a breath as if it were a hundred pounds.* "She made me better- without even trying. I started to think before I spoke. I started staying still longer. Not because she asked me to. Because I wanted to be the person she could've loved back."

Her voice cracked on the word love, but she didn't stop.

"I kept thinking I had time. Time to say it. Time to make her see that I wasn't just noise. That I could be steady. That I could be *hers*."

She finally looked up, eyes shining and sharp like glass.

"Then, she went missing. Is she dead? Alive? Did she leave me? Just because I was loud? Noise? I wasn't good enough? I would go and walk for miles and miles, just to hold her and tell her that I changed. Maybe she left because of me. It's my fault."

The words dropping like stones in a pond. No drama. No soft lead-up. Just the brutal fact that Mio was gone.

Owen's jaw clenched. Lily looked down.

Jaz's voice turned into something more.. Hollow.

“One second, she was here. Next, a call. A car. Some asshole on their phone. And just like that... there was no time.” *She wiped her face roughly, as if angry that she still had tears left.*

“She never got to hear it. I never told her. And the worst part?” *Her voice broke, like something twisting its way out of her vocal cords. “I don’t think she wanted me to. I think she knew. And she didn’t say anything because she didn’t want to break me more than I already was.”*

Silence.

Her hand went to the other part of the mural, where Mio had sprayed her outline with red, telling her to close her eyes like it was a game.

“You told me to slow down,” *her breath shaky.* “You told me to be better. And I tried, I swear to God, I tried.”

The breeze moved through again.

“And now I’m better, Mio. I’m quiet. I think before I speak. I stand still. Just like you wanted.

A bitter smile flashed across her face.

“But you’re not here to see it.”

She turned, walking past Owen and Lily, not looking back. Her voice floated behind her, barely there:

“I finally became the version that you could’ve loved.

And it only cost me ***you.***”

Hahahahasgdjbfghvdjdghv so funny so funny yeah im such a fucking comedian thank you tahnknyou