

Because I can't

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"Why? Why do you keep doing this? This is the fourth rejection! Why won't you just forget him and move on?"

Slowly, a beautiful smile spreads across her lips. It is gentle, full of love and so very sad. A tear trickles down her cheek.

"Because I can't."

Silence.

The young man standing across from her stares as more silent tears make their way down to her chin. She is still smiling and for a brief moment, he wonders how anyone could willingly do this to her-

"I just can't. I know I should, but... I can't."

His gaze settles onto her eyes, normally grey with just a hint of green, and she looks back with irises painted in the colours of a forest that bursts with life. A colour caused by soundless tears.

"Why can't you?"

"Because I love him too much."

For a while, they just stand there, staring at each other. He feels so sorry for her, he wants to help her, but *he can't*, because he's not the one doing this to her.

"You're destroying yourself."

Slowly, she shakes her head, just once. She's still smiling and it tears at his heart.

"No. It's okay the way it is. I'm content being his friend."

He hates himself for believing this, for *believing her*, but he's seen enough of her to know she's saying the truth. He can't help but point one thing out, though.

"But you're not happy."

"I'm not unhappy, either."

"Are you sure?"

Silence engulfs them once more and her smile shakes just the tiniest bit. But it's enough to let him know that he's right. She hangs her head for a split second before looking up again. Her eyes are filled with warmth, caring, love. Bitterness. Resignation. All because of one person.

"You're right, I would be happier if he recuperated my feelings. But he doesn't. That's what I have to accept. I still want to be a part of his life in whatever way he lets me, and if it's as a friend, that's what I'll take. I'm fine with being content, that's still more than what many other people get."

He watches her and for the briefest moment, he asks himself whether he's the only one she's trying to convince. He fears the answer is *Yes*.

"I still don't understand why you have to do this to yourself. I get that you want to be his friend, but... doesn't it hurt? Why won't you distance yourself from him, at least for a while?"

She shakes her head once more. No more tears are spilling from her moss coloured eyes, and he feels another stab in his chest because normally he'd be looking into grey and he hates himself for thinking *Her eyes are beautiful like this*.

"Don't you see... In order to get rid of my feelings for him, I'd have to distance myself for weeks, probably *months* and that would hurt far more than anything else he does or could do. There's also the risk of him forgetting me and leaving me behind, and... I don't want that. I don't even want to think about it."

He sees and hears the horror at this particular thought creeping into her features and he understands. It pains him, but he does.

"But... why him?"

He expects new tears to spill from her eyes, but there are none. She just smiles at him and he can almost feel the love radiating from her when she talks about *him*.

"I don't know. He just... I wasn't lying before, when I said I'm happy being single and don't plan on changing that. Then we talked and he just... blasted through all my walls and I couldn't do anything but watch helplessly. No one's ever managed to do that. People usually only get past my walls when I let them. I've tried to rebuild them, but every time he smiles at me or we talk and laugh, everything crumbled again. I actually lost control over myself for a while, I've got it back, though. So now, my walls are standing once more, but he's still in there and I don't know how I could let him out without destroying everything again. And that..." Her voice hitches for the briefest of moments and he's astounded at the amount of pain he can see in her features just

from the pictures in her head. "That would hurt way more than anything else. Letting him go, letting him out, that... The risk of us becoming strangers is one I'm not willing to take."

The amount of determination in her voice, her face, her *oh so green* eyes is almost overwhelming. He realises it doesn't matter what he says. She's made her mind up. With a sigh, he admits defeat.

"I... can't say I understand or approve. I still think you're destroying yourself. But if that's what you want to do..."

She smiles again, and this time it's directed at him. There's a hint of a different kind of love, and gratefulness.

"It is. Don't worry about me. If there's one person who could deal with this kind of thing, it's me."

He feels a wave of self-loathing washing over him when he finds himself agreeing with her.

"I'll keep going this path. I'll keep being his friend, because when we're together, I'm happy. Even if we're just talking and laughing."

He wants to believe her. He does. Because he knows it's true. Then, one thought pops into his head and before he can stop himself, it spills from his mouth.

"What if he finds someone else?"

Another silence settles around them, but this time he can feel the tension. It makes his skin crawl. He sees her clenching her fist for two, three seconds, and then she loosens it again, takes a deep breath and smiles at him with an unreadable expression.

"That's a bridge I will cross when I've reached it."

He hates himself because all he can do is nod. The tension in the air slowly dissipates as they're looking at each other. He still wants to help her, but he doesn't know how and he doesn't know if he even *could*. It really sounds as though the best way to go would be letting her do it the way she wants. He hasn't known her for long, but he's already realised that she's been broken far more times than he can imagine. He also knows she's too stubborn to let that happen again. She once jokingly said she's indestructible. He's inclined to believe her, even if he worries. But he also feels as though lecturing her would only make it more difficult. So he doesn't.

At that moment, *he* comes around the corner. When she sees him, her eyes light up, the green is still there but it is slowly fading and making space for the grey he's so used to. He watches as a genuine, small smile spreads across her lips and her gaze flickers over to him once more. He nods and waves goodbye. She winks at him and turns to go to *him*. *He* grins when he sees her and they hug. She opens her mouth to say something, and even if he can't hear what she says, he can hear *him* laughing at it

and replying. All three of them know she's in love with *him*. All three of them know *he's* not.

He's not sure whether he should be mad at *him* or thankful. *He's* not avoiding her, hasn't even after the first time she admitted she likes *him*, months back. If anything, to him it feels like that was the starting point for their friendship. *He* slowly became less guarded around her, and today, if you wanted to know something about one of them, chances were high the other would have the answer.

Part of him wants to walk over and hit *him* over the head for being stupid. How can *he* reject her like that (*"All I feel is friendship", he replies after she asked once more whether she stands a chance and shrugs his shoulders. He doesn't look happy.*) when she clearly loves *him* so much? But he knows it would be futile. You can't force yourself to love someone.

So instead, he simply watches as they make their way to the door to leave. *He's* talking about something and she's listening with a smile on her face. She laughs. He can see her eyes glowing (*the green is almost gone and he loathes the pang of regret that shoots through him*). He waves them goodbye as they pass him, she waves back and *he* nods. *He* holds the door open for her, she steps through and does the same for *him*. *He* grins and they make their way outside.

He doesn't know what will happen. He hopes she's right, that she'll be able to deal with her feelings for *him* the way she intends to. He hopes *he* doesn't mess up and leaves her a wreck. Deep inside, he hopes the very thing she doesn't dare hoping, the very thing she has long since accepted as an impossible outcome-

That one day, maybe, *he'll* feel the same.