

Lia was cold. And wet. Her hands and legs, plowing through the thick water, began to go numb. Lia decided that would probably be for the best, since the ache in her body as she was swimming through these tunnels was beginning to feel unbearable.

One turn. After another. After yet another turn. They seemed endless.

Until she saw a light.

The light came from a hole in the tunnel, an exit.

Relief burst through her veins and flooded her with a warmth that returned parts of her bodies back into feeling. She didn't want to get her hopes up too high, for fear of being tricked or something but a little voice in the back of her mind was echoing her instructions back at her.

*You'll find an exit to the tunnel if you keep swimming down this current.*

She found it. She pushed the water all around her, with a force she didn't know still resided in her. She just knew she had to reach them. They had to help.

Once she got close enough, she could see a figure standing, kneeling at the edge of the water.

His silhouette was etched with shadow and blurred by light but Lia could, at the faintest, make out a sword in his hands and glowing eyes. Glowing purple eyes. The color of the sky as the sun hit the ground.

Ki'an.

Those eyes glowed brighter when she recognized them, suggesting to Lia that Ki'an knew it was her.

Between breaths, she saw him disappear.

Then she felt warmth. On her back. Air on her face. The ground hitting her feet as she stumbled.

Her legs were too weak. They gave out. She would have cracked her head open if Kyle hadn't caught her. He pushed her back against his chest as he knelt behind her. She was safe now, she let herself rest. Just for a little bit.

"The note didn't say it was you," Ki'an said.

Lia couldn't tell if Ki'an sounded relieved or stressed. She decided she was too tired to figure it out. He was with her now. She was okay.

She heard clanky footsteps approaching. From the rhythm of the metal tapping the ground, she knew it was Ren. She knelt in front of Lia, a look of concern quickly masked by her stoic warrior's face.

They were going to be okay, Lia realized. Ren was going to save them.

"How many are guarding the hostages?"

Lia slowed her breathing down, let her voice come back to her. "Four. The guard with the golden sheath carries a fuokai and stands furthest from them."

"The other three?"

"Standard weapons."

"How far from here?"

Lia tried to make a quantifiable number but she couldn't think of one.

"The observatory over the aquatic gardens."

"That's farther than predicted," Ki'an said.

Ren nodded. "We won't be able to take the entire force without being spotted. We'll split our forces then. Some will save the hostages. The rest can go take down the castle."

"Where do you want me?" Ki'an asked.

"Get the hostages to safety first and then meet us at the throne room. That's where we'll be taking the battle," Ren replied as she got up from her position next to Lia.

She realized they were going to leave soon. She wanted to go with them. She needed to help.

She couldn't just leave them there.

"Lia, what are you doing?" Ki'an asked incredulously. He sounded upset.

She propped her legs up. Never had they felt so numb and tired before. It took all her concentration just to feel the ground beneath her feet so she could stand.

Right before she was going to fall again, she felt Kyle grab her waist and pull her into his chest.

"You're not going."

"Yes," Lia panted. "I am."

Ren had already walked away. Lia could faintly hear the blurs of her voice droning in and out, probably shouting orders.

"You're too weak," Ki'an replied.

"I can't," Deep breath in. "Stay." Out.

“Lia, you just swam miles through water and you’re exhausted.” Lia knew it was rational and better for her to stay. She could feel it in her body; the exhaustion, the ache as she tried to find energy to keep moving, the feeling of numbness as the cold began to hit her again. And yet, she was still digging through the deepest wells in herself to find the energy to not let go yet. Not let go of Kyle. “I can have a couple guards stay behind and- “

Lia brought her arms around Ki’an’s neck and lifted herself slightly to push herself into him, into an embrace. So close, she could feel the warmth from his body spreading across hers, like a blanket wrapped around her in a winter-frozen bed.

“Ki’an,” she managed to say between catching her tired breaths. She relaxed into his shoulder, talking into him.

“I didn’t know if you were okay. Thank the gods.” She could hear her tears in her voice, tasted her breaths as she felt herself believe he was right here. “Ki’an.”

She felt Kyle’s arms wrap themselves around her. She suddenly didn’t have to worry about keeping herself upright out of fear of collapse, didn’t have to feel the soft pulls of pain as she was trying to stand or sit. Kyle was lifting her up, encasing her in him.

“You have no idea how worried I was about you, Lia. Our reports didn’t specify the casualty count. I couldn’t stop thinking about whether you- “

“Me too.” Lia pulled slightly away from his hold, still close enough to feel his face on hers. Still close enough to make her want to lean in. “You’re okay.”

She brought her hand up to his face, slowly brushing her finger across his cheek. She knew she would have to separate from him, that this perfect bubble they were in together would pop and she would be brought back to the cold reality that she would be without him. But here, now, she could take this with her. Her hand memorizing every smoothness of his face, every freckle she didn’t know he had. Every second she was permitted to stand so close to this unreachable person.

She would have to leave. But for now, she let herself remember what it would feel like to stay.