

Val faints into Katie's arms, forcing her back until her back's against the wall.

Based on the thudding of the footsteps, Elliot's goons are one floor above them. But they don't have much time. Katie drags Val by one arm, acutely aware of how badly she's panting. "C'mon, Val! Hurry!"

Behind her, she hears a door open—likely the emergency door—and more footsteps.

Then, a booming sound resounds, and in front of her, a small part of the wall bursts.

She slams her body into Val's, sending them sprawling into the floor of another hallway, out of harm's way.

That was a *gunshot*.

Katie is being *shot at*.

Val's groan pulls her back to reality. Katie grabs Val's shoulders, only for Val to hiss and one of Katie's hands to come back sticky and red. Katie pulls Val up on her good hand, saying, "C'mon, Val. You have to get us out of here."

"Can't," Val mutters, head hanging low as Katie hefts her, slinging Val's good arm around her shoulder, snaking her own arm against Val's. "Need... focus..."

Gritting her teeth, Katie heads for the elevator, thankful that the door's open already. When she gets them both in, pressing the close button, she hears a yell from far behind her, then—

Bang, bang, bang!

—they're shooting at her, and she's shutting her eyes, but—

Bang, bang, bang!

—she's not in pain, because something's blocking the bullets from hitting her, something sturdy but warm and leaning into her—

One last bang, then a voice shouting "they're heading for the basement!" and the elevator door closes.

That's when Katie realises what's blocking her from the bullets. Or rather, who.

"Val!" Katie turns, grabbing both of Val's shoulders to keep her from falling down, uttering teary apologies when she accidentally touches Val's bad shoulder. Miraculously, she's breathing, and half conscious. "Val, Val, Val." Katie guides them both into a sitting position, Val's head dropping into Katie's chest. Katie lets her.

“Val,” she says, because what else is there to say?

Val shifts.

“... coming... us...”

“What was that?” Katie asks. Groaning, Val tries to push herself away, only to cry in pain and slump back into Katie. “Don’t move, Val,” she says. “You’re—” She tries to swallow away the heaviness in her throat, but it doesn’t work. “Stay with me, Val.”

Val doesn’t answer.

“Val, please!”

A meek cough. “Leave,” Val says. “So they....” A shuddering breath. “Teleport...”

That’s when Katie realises the elevator is going down. Cursing, she gets up to her feet despite the pain and hits all of the buttons in the elevator to buy time. She considers hitting the emergency button, but decides against it. Doing that will mean they have to wait for someone to come after them. That means game over.

*C’m on, c’m on, c’m on, stay awake!* At this point, Katie doesn’t know whether she thinks it or shouts it at the top of her lungs.

The elevator door opens, and Katie stills, expecting Elliot’s goons to be waiting for them. But no one’s waiting for them outside. Which means Elliot’s goons are waiting for them in the basement. Guns drawn. Hungry for children to shoot. To kill.

“Please, Val.” She knows she says it this time, not quite a whisper but gentle all the same. “I just got you back. I can’t lose you again.” It hasn’t even been a week since they reunited, and yet it’s like no time has passed. Still, though. She wants to spend more time with Val. To share more stories. To laugh at more jokes. There are so many things they can still do. Things they should do. “I never even got to tell you...”

Tell her what, exactly? How Val makes her all the things she wants to be? How she’s always wanted her, even before she understands what it means?

The elevator door opens again, and, unlike before, there are several people. They’re not goons, though. They’re bystanders. Innocent people. Upon seeing them, they gasp and cower and run away from them. Can’t they see that she and Val need help? Or do they know, and are too afraid to give them what they need?

She should give up, shouldn’t she? It’s obvious Val won’t wake up. They’re dead already. Choking back a sob, Katie’s back hits the metal wall.

Val twitches in her arms, and lets out the faintest “Katie” that’s ever been uttered.

Katie stares at her.

Val's bleeding, oh so much. That's not the only pain she's experiencing. She looks so tired, so faint, so small.

The word angry is too simple to describe her state. She is fireworks, she is a lion's roar, she is a vase thrown into the floor, she is the strum of a distorted guitar. She wants to tear this elevator down, tear this hospital down, tear this world down. Tear Elliot down. Tear herself down.

And she wants to do it for Val.

All for her.

(Koi no yokan.)

*No.*

The thought comes to her suddenly, but strongly. Just a word, but one powerful enough for her to say it aloud: "No."

"Wh—" Another cough. "What?"

"No," Katie says, firmer. "You are going to let me handle everything." Through lidded eyes, Val stares at her, uncomprehending. Katie smiles despite how blurry her vision is. Her hand moves on its own accord, caressing Val's cheek and rubbing circular patterns on it with its thumb. "It's okay, Val. Go to sleep."

"... have to..."

"No," Katie says, willing her voice not to waver. "You don't have to do anything anymore. It's my turn to protect you. You'll be okay."

"... promise?"

The urge to tear everything apart comes back. Val sounds so small, so scared. Katie widens her smile.

"Yeah. Promise." It's true. Katie won't let anything happen to Val. She herself, on the other hand...

"You'll be okay," she repeats.

Then, the elevator lurches to a stop, and the screen shows that they're a floor above the basement. A floor above where they're supposed to be. The doors slide open.

Katie doesn't think; she moves.

The whiteness of it adds to her hysteria. She's beginning to understand Val's aversion to it. There are people, people everywhere, sliding to the sides and making room for her to drag Val forward, but where? Oh, where to go? Elliot's goons must be onto her. Any second, they'd show up and take Val away *unless she does something!*

Gasping, Katie teteers, then forces herself to get inside one of the hospital rooms on her right. Tripping on air, she protects Val from hitting a gurney, but not herself. The side of her forehead has its own heartbeat.

Katie looks up. There's a nurse there. An old nurse. Her brown hair is streaked with grey. She reminds Katie of her mom, and her shoulders sag. "Help," she croaks, "please."

But the nurse won't help them. No one will help them. Katie has to take action herself. And so she does. No regrets. Not even an emotion. Just a dullness that's expected out of a doctor. Or a scientist. Like the ones who experimented on Val.

She has to do it, though. There's no choice.

She has to protect Val.

And so she does. She does whatever it takes. Whatever it takes. And soon, she's out of the hospital, dressed up as a nurse, pushing a body-bagged Val through the mess of people and shouting. Then she's pulling a semi-conscious Val out of the bag, and pushing her into the car, shaking and crying and pleading for Val not to die, please, *no, don't die, no, no, not after everything, Val, please, don't you dare—*

Inserting the car key. Twisting it. White-knuckling the steering wheel as the engine roars to life. Stomping on the gas pedal. Too fast. Not fast enough. Not knowing where to go. Struggling with the GPS on her phone as she drives away, away, as far away as possible, away from him, away from everything.

Not knowing if she'll make it.

Making it.

Not knowing if this is the right thing to do.

Whispering to Val that she'll be back. Stumbling out of the door. Into the building. Up the stairs. Into a familiar hallway. Banging her fists against a familiar door. Yelling. Weeping.

The door opening. Aisha's surprised face melting into something professional, something almost blank.

A beat of silence.

A voice in her head, telling her this is a mistake, a stupid mistake, there's no way she'll—

"Where is she?"

Her mouth opening, closing. Her mind blanking. “In—in the car. On the road. Outside. She’s hurt. She’s hurt real bad. Aisha—”

Aisha not wasting a second, running. Katie, following after a (too long) beat. Grabbing Val’s arm, hefting it across her shoulder. Aisha doing the same with the other arm. Maneuvering her into the apartment. Laying her down on Aisha’s bed. Uncomprehending as Aisha tells her to grab the medical kit. Jolting when Aisha snaps her fingers in front of her face.

“Katherine, *nak*, I need you to focus. *Valentina* needs you to focus.”

Right. Val. Do it for Val.

Giving Aisha what she needs. Standing by as she works on Val—healing her, fixing her, making sure she won’t bleed to death. Nodding as Aisha instructs her to pick up Yusuf and Jamal from kindergarten. Halting when Aisha calls out her name.

“Your clothes,” she says.

Katie looks down, throat drying at the splatter of red. “Can I—” Katie tries to meet Aisha’s eyes, but fails. “Can I borrow your clothes?”

“Katherine... what happened?”

And so Katie tells her what she’s been telling herself, hoping that this time, she can believe her words: “I did what had to be done.”