

The music was too loud. There were too many people talking. Too many colours, too much light. Kiara's breathing was too shallow, too fast. It was all too much. She had to get out of there.

She shoved her way through small groupings of people. She didn't want to start crying. Not here, not with everyone watching. Her hands shook and her head felt like it might explode. There was a weight on her chest, and her head was spinning because of how little oxygen she was getting.

Kiara crashed through the doors of the ballroom, rushing into the cool nighttime air. The garden was quieter, and when the door closed behind her, the noise was muffled further. She knew she could calm herself down out here, it would just take a bit.

Kiara walked over to one of the stone benches, still shaking. She leaned her back against the wall behind her and pulled her feet up onto the bench, hugging her knees. Her breathing was still coming in short, shallow gasps, but at least the air out here wasn't as stiff. Her cheeks felt wet, but she didn't have enough control to wipe them yet.

She closed her eyes, focusing as hard as she could on slowing her breathing.

After a long while, Kiara's breathing had evened out and her shaking stopped, though her throat still burned and her cheeks remained wet. She was still sitting on the bench hugging her knees when a voice startled her.

"Kiara?" Kiara looked up, relieved to see it was Sam.

She smiled weakly and patted the bench beside her. While Sam situated herself, Kiara tucked her face safely against her knees.

Sam sat silently for a moment, her hands gripping the edge of the bench. The quiet between them had never been awkward, something both girls appreciated. Sam often found herself uncomfortable in social situations, preferring to sit in a corner alone, and Kiara got easily overstimulated in loud and bright spaces. They hadn't made a pact or anything out loud, but they would both always keep an eye on the other.

Sam knew Kiara liked some space to calm herself down before talking to anyone. When she saw Kiara run out like she had earlier that night, she always gave her ten or so minutes before finding her. Kiara suddenly felt an intense urge to thank Sam, feeling like she'd not said the words enough.

She pulled her face away from her legs, opening her mouth to say something, but no words came. She huffed in frustration, annoyed that this happened so often. And not only when the panic attacks came. Sometimes she'd be completely unable to speak for hours at a time, and she didn't know why, or how to stop it.

"It's alright, you don't need to say anything," Sam reassured her.

Kiara reached out to hold Sam's hand, suddenly getting an idea. She pulled her hand away, wiping her cheeks, and stood up. Sam looked at her curiously, somewhat surprised at the sudden energy burst. Kiara spun around twice, stopping to reach a hand out to Sam.

*Dance with me*, she mouthed. Sam accepted her hand, laughing quietly when Kiara pulled her from the bench with unexpected strength.

"You want to dance now, do you?" Sam said with a smile. "I have to warn you, I'm a terrible dancer, but I can try."

Kiara smiled broadly and tugged Sam to the small plaza in the centre of the garden. The music was faint through the closed doors, but it was enough. Kiara took the lead, letting Sam follow her steps and spinning her gracefully several times.

After dancing together for a long while, Sam pulled Kiara close, resting her head on Kiara's shoulder. They swayed gently, Kiara nestling her face into Sam's hair. The sounds of

the party inside were faint, and the night air was still. They said nothing, but they didn't have to.

"Thank you," Kiara mumbled into Sam's soft black hair, finally getting her voice back.

"Anytime," Sam replied, smiling against Kiara's shoulder.