

MIMIC by C.L. Denault

## FAREWELL

Through a two-inch thick pane of laser-proof glass, I watched a boy with streaked blond hair struggle to breathe. His chest, which had risen and fallen in easy rhythm as he'd slept beside me in the desert scrub, now labored to keep up with his body's attempt to repair itself.

It was agonizing to watch, but I couldn't stop. I'd stood there long enough to recognize a pattern. One slow, painstaking breath, and then several fast puffs. Then slow again, to the point where I wondered if he'd breathed his last, before it started over. His lungs were fighting, just as he'd fought to protect me.

The medics had removed his shirt and body armor to attach the healing kit. Perched on the bedside table, it looked exactly like the white cube Reece was hooked up to a few floors below. There was little to it, just a shiny case with some buttons and lights and the word *Elixir* splashed across the bottom. Multicolored wires coiled out of its open top, and someone had attached them to the boy's chest.

Or what was supposed to be a chest. The sonic grenade had pulverized Aspen's torso. Angry red welts marred his skin, broken by the occasional glint of white bone sticking through. A depression hollowed out the place where his sternum should have been. Even the slender, muscled column of his throat was crushed, and his jaw drooped at an odd angle.

Seeing him in such a battered state ripped me apart. Inside my belly, the beast Reece called my tiger uttered a low, mournful keen, and I blinked back tears. The whole thing was so unfair. I should be the one lying there, mangled and broken with my bones poking through my skin. It was me they'd been after, not Aspen. He'd only tagged along for fun.

Another keen, this time followed by a rumbling growl. Restless, the tiger paced inside, aching for revenge with each padded step. She'd come very close to killing Katja, and her desire to finish someone off was still there, waiting. I wished she could take it out on someone. I wished Lef Mercer would stroll down the hospital corridor right this minute. He'd have about two seconds to gloat before the tiger tore him to pieces.

Then she'd tear his *pieces* to pieces.

The avenging thoughts triggered my skill, sending vibrations across the palm I'd pressed firmly against the cold glass. Inside the Critical Care station, Aspen's medical equipment began to fail. Data flickered, and one of his monitors switched off. I took a deep breath and clamped my palms together to stop the energy flow. As I did, the dainty woman sitting beside Aspen turned her swollen, red-rimmed eyes in my direction.

Our gazes locked through the glass. I could feel her anger, her lack of understanding. Her blame. She hated me for what had happened to her son. But she would have hated me, anyway. The wall between our families was already steep. Throwing Aspen into the middle of a rebel attack had simply given her another brick to slap on top.

"You have to stop touching things, Willow." Rush, no longer confined to his wheelchair, detached the red sweeping device from his belt and ran it over the glazy print I'd left on the glass. "This is the fourth handprint I've swept. My swab"—he wiggled the device in my face—"can only hold so much material."

"I can't help it," I said thickly.

"Try."

I stepped away from the window, but not because of Rush's warning. Aspen's mum had circled the bed and was marching straight for us, her hands balled into fists. She halted at the glass, a delicate-looking woman with pale hair, perfect skin, and contempt written all over her face.

She raised her fist.

“No,” I whispered.

With a withering glare, she rapped her knuckles twice on the glass. The window darkened in seconds, fading both her and Aspen from my sight.

I blinked back more tears. “No, no, no.”

“Don’t even think about it—” Rush made a grab for me, but I avoided his outstretched hands and ran back to the window. I tapped furiously, dotting the glass with damp, overlapping fingerprints until he seized my wrist and spun me to face him.

“There’s nothing you can do,” he said. “Tinting can only be controlled from the inside, and she’ll never allow us in there.”

“But I want to see him.”

“He’ll be fine,” Rush soothed, his Core accent melodic to my village ears. “The medics got to him in time. He just needs to heal.”

“Why is it taking so long?” I buried my restless fingers in the long, fuzzy coils of black hair dangling across his chest. “Reece is practically finished.”

“Core officers have efficient metabolisms. Commander Reece heals much faster than a regular man.” He put his hands over mine to still them. “Seriously, stop touching. You’re leaving traces of yourself everywhere.”

Removing my hands, Rush swept the opaque glass and then his fuzzy locks before refastening the swab to his belt. I opened my mouth to ask if he’d locate someone who would talk to me, but his finger went to his earpiece.

“Copy that. On our way.” He gestured toward the elevator at the end of the hallway, where Duncan stood guard. “It’s time to return to the Roanoke Center.”

“No.” Sniffling, I crossed my arms over my chest and planted my feet. “Not until I get some answers.”

“Morry wants you back at the Center, where you’ll be safe. And if you want answers, you should ask her. She has Level Five medical clearance.”

I choked back a mouthful of sarcasm. Morry? The woman I’d just threatened to expose to the press? She was the last person I’d ask for anything. “I’m not leaving, Rush.”

“Please don’t be like this. I’m under orders.” Reaching into the pouch at his belt, he pulled out a slim, silver bar with rounded ends.

My eyes widened. “Just what do you think you’re going to do with that?”

“Sedate you, if necessary.”

Deep inside, the tiger growled. Sedation? After blackmailing Morry to keep Reece from being dismissed, I could guess who’d given Rush *that* authorization. Apparently, she wasn’t going to play nice.

Neither was I. Before Rush could make a move, I curled my fingers around the injector sticking out of his fist. The material responded instantly to my touch, melting into silver goo that oozed from both our hands and began dripping onto the floor.

“Willow, what are you—” He backed up, shaking his hand by instinct and muttering a curse when drops sprayed everywhere. “Great. More bloody DNA. Are you *trying* to make things easy for Mercer?”

“No,” I snapped.

“Then let me get you out of here. The Chesapeake attack is all over the news. This hospital will soon be crawling with rebel spies looking for you, if it isn’t already.” Kneeling, he took out his swab and ran it over the tiled flooring. “By the gods, you’re difficult.”

An angry flush warmed my cheeks. I didn’t mean to be difficult, but how else was I to stand my ground? Aspen had almost died because of me, and I needed to be sure he would pull through. More than that, I wanted to see him in person and say the things I might not get a chance

to tell him when he woke up. After all the trouble I'd caused today, the House of Tiernam would be well within their rights to keep us apart.

Rush finished with the mess on the floor and started on the wall. "We're running out of time. If I don't escort you downstairs in the next ten minutes, I could lose my position. You want to see me dismissed?"

My defiance wavered. "Of course not. I'd just like a minute with Aspen's whitecoat before we leave."

"Whitecoat?" Frowning, he swept a couple of silver drops clinging to the glass. "That's a village term. Here, they're called doctors. And I don't understand why you won't simply ask your mum."

"Morry's not an option right now," I evaded. "Why can't I see this . . . doctor person?"

"Well, for starters, you look more like a patient than a visitor." His brown eyes raked over my torn clothing and matted hair. "You'd probably find yourself thrown into a healing station."

"I'm fine," I lied, ignoring my body's secret aches and stings. "I just have a couple of questions."

"Doctors don't hang around waiting for people to ask questions. They have work to do, and Aspen's not the only patient in critical condition." Taking my hand, he ran the swab over my gooey palm. "Look, if you won't ask Morry, then find someone with clearance high enough to access patient medical records."

"Och!" I blew out a sharp breath. "Who else has clearance like that?"

"Commanding officers do." As he swept the last silver drop from my hand, the elevator doors whooshed open, emptying a cluster of figures into the hallway. Rush glanced over his shoulder and groaned. "Speak of the devil."

The devil? Or an angel? I hadn't known Reece long enough to figure out which was the better fit. But that didn't stop my pulse from racing as he headed in our direction, flanked by his deadly quartet of golden-eyed

Ritters. His enormous frame filled the narrow passage, making him seem larger than life.

Rush turned as they approached. “Sir, I swear we were just getting ready to leave.”

“Were you?” Arching his brows, Reece took in my folded arms and rigid posture. “Now, why am I having trouble believing that?”

Excuses poured from Rush’s mouth, but Reece held up a hand to silence him. “Wait with Duncan at the elevator.”

“Sir, her DNA—”

“I’ll send you back for a sweep when we join you.”

Rush nodded. “Yes, Commander.”

He started for the elevator, and as the Ritters parted to allow him through, I saw that they were healing. The one whose hand had been lasered off during the attack was already growing a replacement. Its palm had regenerated, along with a thumb and one finger. Another Ritter, its ear previously melted to its head like a lump of candle wax, looked as good as new.

All while Aspen lay damaged in a hospital bed. The injustice of it set the tiger pacing in my belly again, softly keening. I bit my lower lip to still its trembling.

“Willow,” Reece began quietly, “you’re expected to return to the Center.”

“How would you know? Those orders were given to Rush.”

“I’m not deaf.” He tapped his earpiece. “I am, however, curious as to why you came to the Critical Care Unit after I warned you not to.”

Turning away, I went back to the window and stared into its unyielding darkness. “Where I come from, Reece, you visit folks when they’re hurt. You don’t walk away and pretend nothing happened to them.”

He drew up beside me, the lights on his snug military suit reflecting off the glass. When I’d left him an hour ago, he’d been shirtless, smeared

with sweat and dirt. Someone must have retrieved his uniform from the Center, and he'd obviously showered. He smelled clean, and his dark hair tumbled over his shoulders in damp, glossy waves.

Eyes like blue ice met mine in the window. "Did you see him?"

"Aye." I shook my head a little, remembering my speech. "I mean, yes, I saw him. He looks bad, Reece. I didn't expect him to look so bad."

"Which is precisely why I told you to stay away. There's no need for you to upset yourself." His brow furrowed. "Who tinted the glass?"

"Alaina Tiernam." With a sigh, I hugged my chest. "She saw me standing here and blocked my view. I think it's safe to assume she hates me."

"She doesn't hate you. She's under emotional stress, and it's tainting her perspective. You should leave before more of Asp's family arrives. All you're doing is giving them a target."

"I'm already a target." He'd said so at the White Haven lodge, curled up before the fire, feeding me chocolate to earn my trust.

"Then let's get you home." Reece wrapped his fingers, warmer than a man's should be, around my upper arm. His heat seeped through the ripped sleeve and tingled against my skin.

"Wait." I rested my hand against the officer's emblem centered on his chest. "Is there no way I can go in and see him? Not for one wee moment?"

"Technically, it's against hospital regulation. You're not family."

"Please?" I tried stepping closer, but he held me at bay, his gaze traveling over my shoulder and up toward the ceiling. I'd forgotten his warning about the hallway cameras. "I just need to know that he's all right."

His husky, cultured voice fell to just above a whisper. "Is it that important to you, Butterfly?"

I nodded, knowing from experience that when he used my nickname, half the battle was won. To win the other half, I gazed up at

him with the innocent, doe-eyed expression the men in my village had never been able to resist.

He gave me his lopsided smile. “Am I supposed to fall for that?”

Sighing, I dropped the act. “Reece, we have a deal.”

Still smiling, he pressed one finger to his earpiece. “Get me security,” he ordered someone on the other end.

Before I knew it, two hospital guards had escorted a bewildered Alaina from Aspen’s station. The window gradually lightened, its transparency revealing a spectacled man in blue clothing, his hand-held tablet flashing the electronic message that had summoned him. He looked irritated at our presence, but waved us toward the front of the station.

Reece sent the Ritters off with a curt guttural phrase and took my arm. “Come on,” he said, pulling me into a fast walk. “This will only buy us a few minutes.”

We hurried past the untinted glass, turned a corner, and went down another corridor. Reece stopped me when we reached a wide, grey door with a window in its upper half. Beside it, a security console displayed digital text: *CCU – Tiernam, Aspen: Priority Level 5*. He pressed his palm against the ID screen and held it there until the door slid open.

“Commander,” the spectacled man said as we stepped inside, “you’d better have a good reason for interrupting my rounds.” His voice was strained, as if he didn’t want to be there. “And for kicking Mrs. Tiernam out of her son’s room.”

Reece didn’t take offense. “There seems to be a problem with her data work. I’m sure security will sort through it quickly. In the meantime, I’d like a status update on your patient.”

The man, whose digital shoulder-label identified him as Crowley, looked indignant. “Patient data is confidential.”

“I’m aware of that,” Reece said. “Just as you should be aware of my jurisdiction when it comes to matters involving the military.”

Crowley swung his tablet toward Aspen. “But this young man is a civilian.”

“He was also injured in a rebel attack, which is now under investigation by Military Command.” Reece folded his arms across his broad chest. “If you still have doubts about my authority, we can continue this conversation in an interrogation unit.”

Conflicting emotions played across the man’s face as his resolve wavered. It was a familiar sight. Everyone gave in to Reece at one time or another, unless I counted Morry.

“Doctor?” Reece prompted.

Crowley sighed. “Fine. But the girl has to leave.”

“The girl has a name,” I ground out, bristling at being referred to in such an offhand manner. “It’s Willow Kent, from the House of Roanoke. Or don’t you watch the news?”

He blanched. “Morry’s daughter?”

I almost laughed. No one ever called me Fenn’s daughter. “Aye—I mean, yes, under all this dirt and mess, I happen to be Morry’s daughter. And I’d like a moment with Aspen, if you don’t mind.”

Caught between my surly tone and Reece’s intimidating stance, the doctor relented. Tablet in hand, he followed Reece outside the station, leaving me alone with the boy who’d helped keep me alive.

I stood there a moment, adjusting to the room. The window in the hallway had provided some distance, and that was gone now. I heard every beep and click, caught the soft glow from the machines around Aspen’s bed, saw their clear cords swooping toward the floor. Saw the IV line feeding him. There was nothing to buffer me from the full, broken state of his body.

My feet felt like lead. I forced them to move, to take me to the edge of the bed. A painful lump crawled into my throat. I climbed into Alaina’s seat, still warm from her bedside vigil, and swallowed hard.

He looked worse up close. Sweat seeped from every pore, and bits of grass clung to his damp hair. The medics had tried to clean him up, but colliding with the ground had forced debris deep into his wounds. The smell was awful. Everything about this was awful.

“Oh, Asp.” I took his limp hand and pressed it to my cheek. His palm burned hot with the healing fever. “I’m so sorry. I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry.”

He didn’t respond, and I didn’t expect him to. Rush had explained that heavy sedation was necessary for traumatic injuries. Healing kits worked fast, but the pain was excruciating. If Aspen were to wake up, his screams would echo through the entire floor.

“I know you can’t hear me,” I said, my throat aching with unshed tears. “But I need to say this now, because things will be different once you’re healed, and I might not get another chance.”

His palm felt like fire against my cheek, so I pulled it away and linked our fingers together instead. But the gesture reminded me too much of Tem, and my heart couldn’t handle any more regret. I lay Aspen’s hand back on the bed, gently resting mine over it, while his lungs drew in a long, shuddering breath.

“I want you to know,” I began softly, “how grateful I am for what you did today. You didn’t have to come along, and when things got bad, you didn’t have to stay. But you did. You fought for me.” I paused, remembering the eager way he’d drawn his lasers and fired, hitting everything he aimed for, including the car he loved so much.

“You were so brave,” I whispered, stroking his hand. “You’re the bravest person I know, and you deserve better than this. Better than fighting rebels for me.” My voice quivered. “I’m not worth it, Asp, and I never meant for you to get hurt. This is—it’s all my fault.”

The tiger stopped pacing and growled. *Don’t*, she warned, her tail sweeping in low, angry arcs. *Place the blame where it lies.*

She was right, and I took a deep breath, drawing strength from her rage. “But I’ll make it up to you. I’ll do whatever it takes. Cross my heart. And as for Mercer”—I spat his name out like poison—“I swear, he will pay for this. I’ll make sure of it.”

I sat numbly, putting off my goodbye, until a sharp rap on the door made me jump. Reece was beckoning me through the glass, mouthing *time to go*, and I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay until every last inch of Aspen’s flesh had knitted itself together. Until he opened his blue eyes and sat up with a wink and a grin, ready for his next adventure.

Reece rapped again, this time with an urgency I couldn’t ignore. I climbed reluctantly to my feet and went to the head of the bed, threading my legs through the swooping cords so I could bend over and whisper into Aspen’s ear.

“I have to go, Asp. Whatever happens, I’ll be thinking about you.” I brushed my fingers lightly through his hair as the door swished open behind me. Someone entered, and I assumed it was Reece.

So I thought nothing of dropping a soft and lingering farewell kiss on Aspen’s hot, sweat-dampened cheek.

## COUNTERMOVE

“*What* do you think you’re doing?”

The accusation was loud, angry, and distinctly feminine. Startled, I jerked away from Aspen and backed into one of his machines. The cords tangled about my legs, and I made a desperate grab for the nearest monitor to steady myself. It didn’t work. I went down, monitor and all, like a sauced Fair Maiden miner.

“How dare you come in here,” Alaina spat as I rose onto my elbows. She stood near the entrance, shaking her tiny fist at me while three Tiernam security guards fell into place behind her. “You have *no right* to touch my son.”

Too shocked to reply, I waited for Reece to storm in and counter with his usual arrogance. Then I caught movement outside the door’s window—a lot of movement, including his fist smashing into someone’s face.

“Guards,” Alaina screeched. “I want that girl bound at once!”

Her men started in my direction. Their expressions were fierce, and one held a pair of rings in his palm. They glowed blue as he snapped them together.

Restraints. My pulse quickened.

There was nowhere to run when he flicked them. The rings flew at my wrists, and I instinctively curled into a ball. They struck my body instead, glancing off my ribs, landing somewhere in the room. Footsteps slapped against the tile. Just as I lifted my head, strong hands closed around my ankles.

I kicked them off with a shriek and wriggled backward, dragging cords and medical equipment across the floor. The man made another grab for my feet. I kicked again, connected with his arm, heard him curse. He grabbed hold of the cords and yanked hard. My body slid forward, and the other men closed in.

“Reece!” I glimpsed him through the window, shrugging off a guard, reaching for the console. Two more guards tackled him, throwing him face-first into the door. Metal groaned and glass shattered, raining down on Alaina’s men as they seized my arms. They were trying to lift me off the floor. I bucked wildly and somehow managed to wrench free.

*Skill*, the tiger hissed in my ear.

Heart pounding, I buried my hands in the cords and focused. They warmed, melding to my palms.

“Somebody bind her,” Alaina ordered.

The cords became part of me. Surrendered to my desperate thoughts.

“Do I have to do it myself?” she snorted. “She’s just a *girl*.”

One of the guards knelt beside me and seized my shoulders. I didn’t fight back, just glared at him while my palms vibrated and my imagination went to work.

“Time to give up.” His fingers dug into my skin.

I pictured the cords as whips.

He smirked. “Little girl.”

And brought them to life.

He didn’t know what hit him. His cheek ripped open in two places before he fell back, clutching his face. The other guards retreated quickly, staring in disbelief at the cords whipping viciously through the air. Alaina lapsed into shocked silence.

“Come on, then,” I said, my voice low.

The guards glanced nervously at Alaina, then at each other. One signaled, and they began to circle me in opposite directions. A smart move, separating themselves. But they couldn’t both escape. I lashed out at the nearest one, wrapping the cords around his chest. He grunted.

*That one had the restraints*, the tiger whispered, laughing maliciously when I tightened the cords. The man gasped and sank to his knees. Holding him there, I swung my head around to find the last guard.

He found me instead. I saw his shadow too late and tried to roll away, but he planted his boot in my chest and shoved. The tiger shrieked in outrage when the back of my head smacked the floor. Vibrations thrummed across my palms. She was ready to send him flying.

A slew of voices filled the station. The man with his foot on my chest did go flying, but not because of the tiger. I heard Reece's growl of rage and the heavy thump of the man's body slamming into a wall. Heard Alaina calling for arrests. More voices, more scuffling—Rush and Duncan had joined the fray—and my view became one of legs and boots and the occasional security guard landing on his back.

"Enough!" Reece's voice boomed above the chaos. His defensive shield cut through the station with a crackling hiss, separating Roanoke from Tiernam with one flick of his wrist. Alaina and her guards stood, trapped, on the other side.

"Commander," she said sharply, "lower that shield."

Reece ignored her. "Rush, do a sweep. Duncan, get Willow untangled and on her feet. Quickly, please."

Alaina headed straight for Reece. She stopped at the barrier, glaring at all six-and-a-half feet of him. "Did you hear me? I ordered you to lower your shield."

"I would," he said coldly, "if I answered to you. Which I do *not*."

A muscle in her cheek twitched. "The Council will hear about this."

His only answer was to extend his palm, pushing the barrier forward until she had no choice but to retreat several steps. Defeated, she turned her glare on me, and I looked away. I was done with her. If she wanted a battle of wills, she'd have to find it somewhere else.

"For crying out loud." Duncan, kneeling beside me, worked at the snarl of cords without success. "What did you do? It will take a miracle to get you out of this."

“I’m sorry. Here.” I focused my thoughts and made the cords loosen for him. As he bent forward to pull them off, I saw red marks on his face. There was a spot near his temple where the skin had split open.

“You’re hurt.”

He shrugged. “Might have taken a punch or two.”

Guilt gnawed at my conscience. “Because of me.”

“Not now.” He jerked the cords down.

“Duncan—”

“Apologize later. You’ve been through enough for one day.” He threw me a sharp look. “We all have.”

His remark drove the guilt home. “But I needed—and Aspen was—I only wanted to—” I broke off, burying my face in my hands. Anguish won out, and the station walls shivered with each sob that erupted from my throat.

“Willow,” Duncan said, working faster, “please don’t cry. Come on, now, I’m almost done.” He freed my legs, hauled me to my feet, and wrenched my hands from my face. “Let me see your eyes.”

“What?” I blinked, sending hot tears down my cheeks as he held my wrists and stared into my eyes, like he was looking for something. He let go abruptly when Rush approached with his swab.

“Could we put a damper on all the touching? This is getting ridiculous.” Rush ran the swab over Duncan’s hands and turned to Reece. “When you’re ready, I’ll sweep the room.”

Reece tipped his head toward the entrance. “I want Willow out of here first. Duncan, escort her to the elevator. Keep her *calm*. Rush and I will join you shortly.”

“You got it, boss.” Duncan led me out of the station, around the corner, and down the main corridor, where the Ritters were waiting by the elevator. Reece must have deliberately kept them from joining the fight. Good thing, or Aspen’s station would now be littered with torn limbs and severed heads.

The largest Ritter came toward me, the top of his head barely reaching my shoulder. He hissed when he saw my tears. Turning his cat-eyes on Duncan, he uttered something in his native language.

"I'm okay, Leitwolf," I put in quickly. The last thing I needed was for Reece to come back and find Duncan in pieces. "Just a bit of crying, that's all."

"Allow me." Duncan gently lifted my chin and wiped my tears away with his fingertips. "Better?"

I nodded.

"Are you sure?" He leaned closer, peering into my eyes.

Confused, I pulled away. "I'm sure."

He kept his distance, but continued giving me furtive glances as we waited. I didn't like his uneasy expression. It was the same one he'd worn after snapping me out of my murderous rage in the stable yard, when the tiger had taken over. I shivered at the memory. She'd been so horribly eager to kill. If Duncan hadn't intervened—

The elevator chimed behind us, and I whirled.

"Get back." Duncan whipped out his laser and aimed it at the doors. When they parted, a tall man with dark, streaked hair and green eyes held up his hands.

"Easy, Duncan," Fenn said. "It's just me."

Duncan holstered his weapon. "I'm sorry, sir. We've had a bit of a . . . situation here."

Fenn stepped into the hallway. "What kind of situation?"

Reece rounded the corner with Rush beside him. They blocked our view, but there was no mistaking Alaina's agitated voice following them.

Duncan grimaced. "That kind."

"Brilliant." Fenn sighed and started down the hall. He spoke briefly with Reece, shook his head, and went to face Alaina. Their conversation—heated on her side, calm on his—was difficult to make out, but I could tell he was doing his best to pacify her.

“Why is he being so nice?” I hissed as Reece drew near. “She was about to have me arrested.”

“Politics,” Reece said. “This is the Core, Willow. Not every problem here is resolved with a brawl.”

Rush scowled at his scraped knuckles. “She certainly gave it a good try.”

“It was foolish of her.” Reece glanced over his shoulder at Alaina. “She knows better than to throw a few security guards at me.”

“Then why did she do it?” I huffed.

“Why do the Tiernams do anything?” he responded. “Power, intimidation, pride. They’ve been making a fuss ever since the switch was discovered. Playing the victim is typical for Alaina. But don’t worry.” He smiled. “Fenn can handle her.”

I looked past him and saw Fenn escorting Alaina toward Aspen’s station, his hand on her shoulder and a sympathetic expression on his face. He must have used his intuition skill to talk her down, because she no longer seemed angry. Crowley met them in the hallway and held out his tablet. Fenn pressed his palm against its surface for a moment, then shook the doctor’s hand.

As he turned and walked briskly toward us, Fenn’s face conveyed a combination of relief and disappointment. My own intuition reached out to read him. I didn’t like what it told me. The burden of worry and doubt he carried was heavy.

He came straight to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “Are you all right, sweetheart?”

Nodding, I leaned against him, though I didn’t deserve his comfort. This was the second time he’d had to publicly smooth things over for me. I really needed to stop giving him reasons to salvage my reputation.

“Is Alaina pressing charges?” Reece asked.

“No.” Fenn raked his fingers through his hair, sending the sable-streaked locks every which way. “Neither is the hospital, since I agreed to pay for the damages.”

Inwardly, I cringed. “You mean, the equipment I broke?”

“The equipment, the smashed window, the mangled door. A man’s face was split open—he’ll need treatment. There’s also a security-guard-shaped dent in one of the station walls.” He sighed heavily. “I take it that’s your work, Reece?”

The commander shrugged. “The man’s life was forfeit the second he touched Willow.”

“He still has his life,” Fenn said. “Barely. I’ll be paying his hospital bills as well.”

“That’s madness,” Rush spewed. “*She* started it. We were just defending Willow—”

“Who wasn’t on Aspen’s list of approved visitors,” Fenn cut in. “I didn’t have much of a legal leg to stand on, gentlemen. Financial compensation was the only way out.”

Tears stung again. All I’d wanted was a few moments with the boy who’d almost died for me. Such a simple request. How could it have gotten so complicated?

Fenn, sensing my pain, tightened his hold on me. “We should get you home, darling. You look like you could collapse any second.”

Even as the words left his mouth, dizziness made my head swim. I hadn’t eaten in hours, my emotions were running high, and my body ached in places I’d never dreamed could feel pain. The tiger chuffed her agreement. We needed food and rest. Peace and quiet, too, instead of listening to Rush bicker with Duncan over my DNA.

“Touching again, were you?” Rush aimed the swab at him.

Scowling, Duncan held out his fingers. They were pink and smooth and not one bit charred from the ropy flames he’d unleashed during the rebel attack. “I was helping.”

“You mean, touching.”

“Helping.”

“Touching.” Rush did a quick sweep. “Hands to yourself, Smoky.”

“Oh, *that’s* original,” Duncan retorted. “Think of it all by yourself?”

Reece cut them off with a wave of his hand and touched his earpiece. He spoke briefly, and I could tell by his tone that he wasn’t pleased. The Ritters clustered around him, blinking their golden eyes and waiting for orders as he ended the call.

“Hospital security is on full alert,” he told us. “They’re double-checking IDs and have multiple teams at every entrance.” He punched a code into the console beside the elevator doors, and they slid apart with a rapid swish. “This will take you directly to the roof, where our helicopter is waiting.”

Rush frowned. “You think she’s ready for that?”

Reece put his hand on one of the doors to keep them open. “We don’t have much choice. Her presence here, along with Aspen’s, is attracting far too much attention. Mercer’s forces are limited to the ground, and that makes the sky our safest option.” He gestured to the empty car. “In you go.”

Fenn ushered me inside. Rush and Duncan followed, but I turned to find Reece still in the hallway, on the verge of pulling his hand away from the door.

“Wait!” I pushed my way to the front of the car, my pulse spiking. “You’re not coming with us?”

“I’m needed at Military Command.” He sounded slightly impatient. “I have a report to file and prisoners to interrogate.”

A knot of dread formed in my stomach. “Prisoners?”

“It’s protocol, Willow.”

I moved closer to him. “When will you be back?”

“In the morning.”

“The *morning*? But I want you with me—”

Fenn cleared his throat.

With a deep breath, I started over. “I mean, I don’t feel safe without you at the Center. What if Mercer attacks again?”

“I’m tripling the security detail on your apartment,” he said evenly. “Same with the rooftop patrols. You’ll be safe until I return.” He kept his expression neutral, and it felt like miles between us instead of inches.

Troubled, I looked into his eyes. “Reece?”

“I have to go, Willow. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Stepping back, he took his hand off the door.

The reflective panels whooshed together, blowing back my hair as they shut out his image. I stared at the cold metal and tried to find comfort in the fact that he couldn’t lie. His genetic enhancement made it impossible. If he said he’d see me tomorrow, he meant it.

But that didn’t stop my brain from conjuring up images of Katja—in all her conniving, scantily dressed glory. He was going to spend the night interrogating his former *mistress*? How did that work, exactly?

The tiger squirmed, hissing, and I covered my belly with hands that trembled from exhaustion. My undernourished state was getting to me. Reece had good reason not to show me affection in public, and he’d asked me to trust him. Likely I was just being paranoid.

Still, an annoying lump swelled in my throat as the elevator rose swiftly up Callayo Medical Center’s primary tower without stopping. The fast climb was nauseating. I swayed a little and felt Fenn’s arms come around me, drawing me close to his chest. He was only trying to help, but all I could think of were the ways I’d let him down today—risking my safety, alienating my future husband, causing problems with Alaina.

And those were only the ways he knew about. What would he say if he found out about my deal with Morry? He’d cautioned me to make my moves carefully, as if I were playing a game of chess. But I hadn’t been careful. I’d rushed headlong into an agreement that would seal the fate of an innocent man and protect another I barely knew.

Fenn murmured reassuring words in my ear. He spoke calmly, smoothing my hair the way Mum always had. It wasn't the same—he didn't smell like ale or bread, or speak with the high, lilting brogue that had sung me to sleep on a thousand cold nights. But I let him try, clinging to him until the elevator finally stopped moving.

The panels slid open, and a group of hospital guards allowed us onto the rooftop. It was flat and stark, broken only by colored squares marked with white numbers. The shiny Roanoke helicopter waited for us on the nearest square, its blades producing a whirlwind of air and sound that brought back memories of the Chesapeake battle in sharp, unwanted detail. I took one look at it and froze.

“Darling, it’s just a helicopter,” Fenn said.

I backed up a step.

“There’s no need to be afraid,” he went on. “I’ll be with you the entire flight.”

Rush came up beside me, his fuzzy coils flapping in the wind. “I don’t think it’s the chopper, Fenn.” He turned to me. “Is it, little heiress?”

I didn’t answer. My gaze was fixed on the pilot. His black uniform, complete with an officer’s emblem, hugged his bulky frame. Light brown hair fell over his shoulders and hung down his chest. He stared back at me with cold, calculating eyes. Eyes like blue ice. Intuition kicked in, making my heart pound.

Morry was countering.

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