

"Mister Williams." The voice came from the comm system. "Please come to my office immediately."

Will smiled at the woman who had been beating him repeatedly. "Got go."

She pulled him up from the floor and kissed him passionately. "Now you can go. I'll be in our room, and don't think this training session is done. I've added the time to tomorrow's."

"Kill me," Will said as he put his shirt back on.

"I'm doing this because I don't want to lose you."

"Still hurts."

"My intentions are good!" she called as he left the gym, grinning. He did hurt, but a lot less people pushed him around since she'd taken over his combat training.

He headed directly to the bridge. The captain rarely put "immediately" in his summons, but when he did, he meant it. Perry noticed him and indicated the other door. Will nodded and went to it. It opened as he stood before, allowing him into the spacious room.

"Mister Williams," the captain said from behind his desk, not giving him time to admire the view outside the large windows in the wall. "I believe you remember Mister Crimson."

Will grinned at the back of the projection in the center of the office. How could he ever forget his roommate? He even wore the same gray and crimson pants and jacket he'd grown fond of during his stay.

"Hey, Will," Crimson said, but didn't move. "How's it been?"

"Good." He walked around, standing next to the desk.

The projection didn't turn to follow him or glance in his direction. The hologram wasn't live, it was an image the captain had put there to have someone to look at. It explained why he looked like he had the last time Will had seen him.

"Mister Crimson has a proposition for you. He's already explained it to me, and I have agreed to it, so the decision is entirely yours." The captain stood. "I will let you discuss this alone." He headed for the door. "Ship?"

"Yes, Captain?" the deep voice answered.

"Nothing is to be recorded in this room while Mister Williams is in it."

"I understand."

The captain exited, and Will waited for Crimson to speak. It took longer than he expected.

"How long has it been?" The hologram didn't move, not even to sync the lips. Will shuddered.

"Years." He looked up. "Golly?"

"Yes, William?"

"Turn off."

The hologram vanished.

"Turn what off?" Crimson's now incorporeal voice asked.

"Hologram."

"What— Never mind." He sounded hurried. "I'm mounting a rescue mission. I could use your help."

"Who?"

"His name is Tristan."

He frowned. He knew that name from somewhere, but he didn't recall Crimson being the one to mention him. "Not your man?"

There was a sigh. "He is. It's complicated. He's being held on a high-security ship, and I could use your talent with locks."

"Who else?"

"I have two muscle lined up, a pilot, and a medic. I want to keep the crew on the

smaller side. This is an extraction. The plan is to get in and out as quickly and quietly as possible.”

“My crew?”

“Who’s in it?”

“Perry, Asyr, Pat, Anna, Jen, Aliana.”

“Yes, that’s fine with me. I’m surprised they’re all still around.”

“Good people.”

“I know. Think Meron will let Asyr off the ship?”

“Find out.”

“Okay. We’re meeting on Mobius. I’ll be there in five months, objective.”

Will went to the terminal on the wall; he wasn’t touching the captain’s desk. Before he reached it, distances were already listed—to their destination, to Mobius from there, depending on which route he picked.

“Thank you,” he whispered, then raised his voice. “Need more. Need ship. Dock first. Take time.”

Crimson was silent, and Will hoped he wouldn’t ask him to say it clearer. After the training, he wasn’t in a state to line up words.

“How much time do you need?”

“Dunno.” Numbers appeared on the terminal. To the distances, time estimates were added, as well as engine models. “Year, most.”

Another pause. “That’s not ideal, but I can adjust and wait for you to get there.”

“Why me?” He reached for the terminal, but it turned off by itself. He liked this new Golly. The way Golly spoke like a person had taken some getting used to, but how it could anticipate what he wanted was really useful. Anders seemed to be the only one on the ship who couldn’t get a handle on it.

“I told you. Because of your skills with locks.”

“No.” He turned and leaned against the wall. “You can. Others can.” Sure, Will could open most locks faster than Asyr, so probably faster than Crimson, but the difference was only in seconds.

The silence stretched and Will cursed the words. It had been a long time since they’d conversed; Crimson probably had trouble figuring out what he’d meant. He closed his eyes and began lining up the right words, but Crimson spoke.

“I don’t know that I’ll be in a position to do it. The ship we’re going on is a prison ship. The Sayatoga. I’m our way in, the criminal being handed over, so my earpiece is going to be out of my reach, and there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to get it back. It’s also running dark, so I can’t poke at their system and figure out what kind of security measures they have. Having you there ensures locks are one thing I don’t have to worry about.

Will smiled as he remembered how infuriated with him Crimson had been those times he’d tried to keep Will out of their room. Depression wasn’t good for someone like Crimson, so Will hadn’t let him wallow in it. That lock had been easy; he’d known it a long time.

“Check with Captain. Get crew. Get ship. Meet you.”

Will gave Crimson time to decipher what he’d said, again hoping he wouldn’t have to explain. He knew what he needed to say if an explanation was required, he could even see the words in his mind, but keeping them lined up on the way to his mouth was exhausting.

“That works. Let me know when you expect to be there before going under cryo, and I’ll set things up.” There was a pause. “See you soon, Will.”

“You too, Crimson.”

“The communication had been terminated,” Golly said.

“Thanks.” He opened the door. “Captain?”

It felt odd being the one in the office, asking for his captain to join him, but by the

smile on his face, the captain found the situation amusing. He said a few words to Murray and joined Will.

“What have you decided?” he asked once the door closed.

“Helping.”

The captain nodded. “I expected you would.”

“Need crew?”

The captain paused by his desk. He sat, then shook his head.

“Help Crimson. Crew helps.” He had no doubt they’d want to join.

“No.”

“Captain.”

“No, Mister Williams. I understand they’ll want to help too. I even appreciate they might do so against my orders, but I am telling you, no. I can’t sit at dock until you come back. This ship will continue to work, and that means I need my people. Asyr is vital to every operation I will engage in. Mister Duroy is my best gunner. You know how I operate—everyone has a job to do. Even you. Lending you to Mister Crimson means I’m without my locksmith, and that means I need to change my plans to ensure your particular skills are not required.”

“Why?” If this was such a bother, why agree to it?

“Because I owe Mister Crimson a debt. He didn’t only fix my ship’s computer, he showed me a different way of operating, a more profitable one. And because he did me the courtesy of asking my permission.”

“Job needs crew,” he tried again.

“Mister Crimson is quite capable of building one of his own. He wouldn’t have survived this long otherwise.”

Will nodded, then fixed his gaze on his captain. “My woman?”

He sighed. “Are you certain you want Miss Fleat to be part of this? Mister Crimson gave me the rundown of what will have to be done. Who you’ll be up against.”

“I ask, she comes.” He had no doubt of that. They weren’t just lovers, they were partners. He’d have to explain who Crimson was, but she’d agree to help.

The captain nodded. “I expect you’re right, and that even if I said no, she’d still go. That woman is devoted to you. Treat her with care, Mister Williams.”

“I do.” Will waited a few seconds to see if the captain had anything to add. When he didn’t, Will left.

This time, everyone looked at him. Perry gave him a questioning look and Will shook his head. He’d explain later, he had time. And he needed rest before he could line up all the words that would require. Hopefully they’d argue with the captain, not him.

He headed for his and Aliana’s room, looking forward to a shower and then rest in her strong arms. But his mind was already working the problems, lining things up. Just the two of them meant a smaller ship, but did that mean slower or faster? Asyr might know. Cheaper for sure, if he decided to pay for it. That could be easier.

A hand fell on his shoulder and, by the tight grip, Will knew who it was before he spoke.

“Well, fancy meeting you here, Willy boy. You and I, we need to have a talk.”

Will slumped. Of course Anders would pick when he was tired to do this. What was it going to be this time? He looked up and wished Golly could read his mind and call Aliana for him.