

Numbers floated around the lock. Will didn't look at them; trying to force them into place would only jumble them more. He ran a finger over the pad. Since the numbers were there, he knew that was enough, but the glove was why they were taking their time. If he could actually touch the keys, feel them, the numbers would fall in place that much faster.

"I guess this time I'll win," a voice said over the comm in his suit. Asyr, back in the ship, trying to unlock the airlock from within the computer system.

As if her words had been a challenge, the numbers dropped away, leaving seven floating about the keypad. He entered them, and the light turned green.

"Oh come on, are you kidding me?"

The door slid open, and he motioned for the others to enter.

"I have one of the most powerful computers helping me. How is it you got the combination faster than I could? This is so unfair."

He smiled, but didn't bother answering. This was their usual friendly competition anytime Will needed to get a lock to open—could Asyr coerce it open before he did. The only time she had a chance of winning was if he had to take the casing off. The time it took to remove it gave her an edge, and wires and chips weren't as loud as keys.

He entered and held onto the door. "Hidden?"

"Yes," Asyr replied. "Me and Golly have their sensors in our thrall, and we threw this airlock out of the loop. No one will notice it cycling."

He closed the door and a yellow light flashed. As air filled it, a low tone became audible, turning into a ding as the yellow light became a solid green. Will got out of the suit, and the other five with him did the same.

"Finally," Perry said, and he threw it down. "I hate those things. Why couldn't this have been a heavily armed ship so I could have stayed on the bridge?"

"Maybe because the captain didn't want to hear you whining?" Anna replied. "So he saddled us with you?"

Jennifer opened a case and handed a gun to the man. "There. Not as big as the ones you handle from the bridge, but it isn't like anyone here cares about you having to overcompensate."

"You would, if you were willing to come to my cabin."

"You make that offer again," Asyr said, "and I'm getting Golly to suffocate you overnight."

Jennifer handed Will and Aliana their weapons. He clipped it to his belt and then helped Aliana with hers. She had wonderfully large hands, but they made handling smaller items, like the gun, more difficult. When he was done, he looked up into her vibrant gray eyes. He pulled her down and still had to go on tiptoe to give her a quick kiss. She blushed and put a fist to her heart, then her forehead. "Heart and soul", her people's version of, "I love you".

"Please get a room you two," Perry complained. "Why is it no one kisses me like that?"

"Because you keep going after taken girls," Aliana said in her deep alto.

"We're good to go," Jennifer said as she closed the case.

Will nodded. "Guards?"

"All in the hold, mixing it up with the rest of the crew."

"Perry, Jen, front. Anna, Pat, rear. No dead. Orders."

"It'll be fine, Hun," Aliana said, and her voice melted his heart. "We're not like Anders's death squad. We follow the captain's orders."

She didn't like Anders, hadn't cared for him from the moment she'd joined the crew, and had stopped him from trying to pound Will over yet another perceived slight. The man was getting more impossible to deal with every day.

Will followed Perry as he guided them through the halls in silence. They only had to neutralize three of the crew, all of whom should have been in their quarters, as

instructed by the ship when the attack began. The unconscious and secured bodies were put in the closest maintenance cubicle.

Perry tapped a door. "This one."

"Lucky you," Asyr said in his ear. "I can't race you."

Will nodded. It was why he'd been sent in instead of another group; this lock was fully disconnected from the ship. He crouched before it and ran his fingers over the keypad. It was new, he could tell that by the way there was no discoloration anywhere on it. It also carried the smell of extruded polymer.

The numbers floated around it, like they did around every lock he'd ever seen.

He didn't question how he did what he did. For as long as he remembered, numbers had floated around locks. Doc had her theories; she'd taken scans of his head, of his hands, even one of him naked, because she thought his clothing got in the way of the results. That had been before Aliana.

Her scans didn't show anything, so she decided it was a subconscious thing. He could see discoloration on the keys where the oils remained. Feel the indentation of multiple key presses.

Pat had asked about the order of the numbers. How could he know that, if that was all there was to it? That stumped Doc, so she'd done more scans.

"Will?" Pat asked softly.

"Working," he replied.

At least she wasn't like Anders, whose tone would say he had to go faster. Then Anders would ask again, as if Will could just tell the numbers to fall into place. No, she was simply reminding him they were working, because she knew him well enough to know he could get lost in the numbers.

Locks were beautiful. Not Aliana beautiful, but beautiful in that they always made sense. Even if the numbers didn't want to cooperate, like these, even if he couldn't tell what the order was, he could feel it.

He took his tools and removed the cover. Doc went even more nuts when he did this. Turning the cover so he no longer saw the keypad didn't make the numbers go away. They floated among the wires, stuck to the chips and circuit. They told him what needed to go where.

He felt along a wire until he reached the end, cut it, followed a number as it slipped under a circuit, unscrewed it, and connected the wire where the number rested. Other numbers stuck to other wires, or chips. He rearranged them, he removed a chip, turned it, and put it back.

When he looked, all the numbers were in place.

He closed the cover, and the numbers stayed inside. He tapped the lock open, and the door slid.

"Doc should have come," Anna said, awe in her voice.

"Gray-green crates," Aliana said, and she motioned everyone inside. "Name on them is Carbotena."

"How many?" Anna asked.

"All of them," she replied. "Captain didn't give a number." She smiled at Will. "You think Anders is going to try to take the credit for this too?"

Will shrugged. He didn't care who got the credit, just that the job was properly done. But Aliana, she did care when someone tried to take credit for something they hadn't done. Still, playing decoy wasn't something Anders cared for.

"Got four crates," Anna said.

"Three here," Perry added when he came back. "This could be a problem."

"Five back here," Patricia said. "Definitely a problem. How are we supposed to bring them back?"

Each crate was two-feet on each side. The content wasn't fragile, according to what the

captain had told them. Whoever had to hold three would be in trouble.

Aliana searched through the shelves. "Any of you worked a mine?"

"Is that like the floor-cleaners your boyfriend is in love with?" Perry replied. "Ow!" He looked at Pat, rubbing his shoulder.

"No bad-mouthing the group's leader, and the guy who managed to convince the captain to keep the ship clean."

"Crimson," Will corrected. He'd been the cause.

"Okay, but you kept it going even after he was promoted."

Aliana returned with ropes. "Well, back where I grew up, they don't use machines to mine for coralize; it has to be done by hand." She crouched by a cube and tied the ropes around it, forming a harness. "You end up with those crystal a little smaller than these. Problem is, they're fragile. You drop one and it shatters. The bosses get pissed if that happens. If you even want to know what pain is like, go under a whip that's been coated in shards. You learn ropes and knots real quick." She had three cubes secured together, then put that on Anna's back, tying the rope over her shoulders and chest.

Perry saddled up to Will. "Does she?" He motioned to what Aliana was doing. "You know, does she do that to you?"

"If you want," Aliana said, as she started working on another set. "I can show you what I do, when we're back on the ship."

"Sure," Perry replied eagerly.

"Don't be an idiot," Jen said. "She's going to get you naked, tie you up, and leave you somewhere public."

Perry thought about it. "Would it be somewhere women could admire me?"

"Enough," Will said. "Help." He motioned to the other crate, and he joined Aliana.

In no time, four of them had three crates secured to their back, leaving Jen and Will without any.

Will shook his head and motioned for Aliana's burden. "Me."

She smiled and took the gun out of her holster, putting it in his hands. "You get to be my hero and make sure I make it back to the ship alive." She leaned in and kissed him.

"I'm just the sidekick, aren't I?" Jen commented.

"I'll kiss you if you want," Perry replied.

"Do so," Asyr said on comm, "and die."

Will looked at Aliana, placed a fist to his heart, then forehead, and turned to the door. "Go."