

The barricade ended up looking more like the shield wall they'd had to deal with, the only large piece being the captain's desk they took from the office. Everything else was paneling taken from the consoles and walls, and a few chairs to help keep them standing. Victor still wasn't sure about them stopping anything, even after Timothy shot it a few times at low power as a test.

"They're taking position," Murray said. He was at a console at one end of the bridge.

Victor crouched behind a panel and tried to make himself small enough it hid all of him, but the best he managed still had the top of his head poking over it. No one had found a way of stacking them and keeping them—

Anders pulled him back hard, sending him on his ass. "I don't need some weakling Lawman deciding the people attacking me need protecting. Make yourself actually useful and help Murray take control of the ship. I want it vented."

"I'm not venting the ship; Alex and Tristan are going to need air to breathe."

Anders rolled his eyes. "See? Weak. Then just vent this corridor so these guards are dealt with."

"Have you looked at them? They aren't guards, they're civilians that have been forced in dead people's armor. It's the three behind them you need to deal with. Kill them and the rest is going to stop."

"And now you want to protect the enemy. This is why you're not fighting." Anders pointed to Murray. "Go help him." He turned. "Alright, people. Lolie, you have the lock code?"

She nodded, and Victor looked the bridge crew over to make sure none of them had been hurt while he was building the barricade.

"You're by the lock. When I tell you, open it, give it a five count, and close it. During that time, everyone else shoots at anyone on the other side. I don't care if it turns out it's your mother, if it's on that side, I want it dead." He took position behind the desk, which had the long side up, so unlike everyone else, he had no problem being fully hidden. "Now!"

The door opened and Victor ran out of the field of fire, glaring at Anders's back. Wanting to protect people didn't make him weak, it just meant he wasn't a cold-blooded killer. He felt sick as he watched the people surprised by the opening door be shot, and the ones behind them try to get away, only to be shoved forward. When the door closed, one had an arm in the way, and it got shot off.

He thought about shooting Anders in the back. He was the one getting these people to murder civilians in cold blood. He snorted at his stupidity; no one was forcing anyone here. They were all killers. Even William wasn't showing any remorse at killing people who had been forced into this position.

He so hadn't signed up for this. A rescue was what he'd agreed to be part of, not piracy. He'd readied himself to do a lot of things that were contrary to who he was, so he could show Tristan he wasn't just some Law-enforcer, that he could be as bad as needed, as bad as Alex.

He'd even killed civilians, when they were shooting at him, and didn't feel too bad about it, but this was just a massacre, and Anders's people were enjoying this too much. What he wanted to do was get out of here and go find Alex. Hopefully he'd rescued Tristan already and they were back on the ship, waiting for him to return.

He stepped next to Murray as the door opened again, and more civilians were murdered. The man was angrily tapping commands.

"What's wrong?" Victor asked just as an "access restricted" message came up.

"The whole fucking system's locked." He pointed his gun at the bridge crew. "Which one of you idiots did this?"

The woman who'd stood up to protect the others stood in the line of fire again. "No one. It's an automated response when there's a break-out. It's to keep prisoners from taking over the ship."

“Well come here and unlock it. Unless you missed it, you’re on this side. I get the feeling that if they get in, they aren’t going to be peculiar about who they shoot.”

“I can’t. Only the captain can order an unlock.”

Murray pointed at Anders as the door opened again. “Your captain is busy right now, trying to keep you alive. I’m acting for him, and I’m ordering you to unlock it.”

The woman didn’t move. “That isn’t what I mean. He’s the only one the ship will recognize to give that order.”

“You’re lying,” Murray snarled, and Victor prepared himself to keep the man from shooting her. “If that was true, you wouldn’t have been able to give Anders control of the hangar.”

“That’s a different part of the system, one the idiot who used to be captain didn’t think was important enough to lock, and now he’s dead because of it.”

The door closed again. Victor didn’t want to know how many civilians died this time.

Murray was standing in front of her, gun in her face. “Enough of this bullshit. One of you did this, and you’re going to fix it, or I’m going to blow your head off.”

Victor pushed the gun up. “Don’t do that.”

“Stay out of this, Lawman. You’re not part of this.”

“I’m still here. So maybe you can listen to reason? Killing her isn’t going to get anyone to help you.”

“She’s lying to me.”

“No, she isn’t,” Victor stated, earning himself a surprised look from both of them. “Think about it. You saw how that alien ran. You know how aliens are. You think he’d trust a human with his safety?”

“They’re all humans.”

“Exactly. Any one of them could have wanted him dead for taking over a position he clearly wasn’t qualified for. He probably did it himself, or got one of the residents to do it and then threw them right back in a tube.”

“I’m thinking you’re just too scared to do what needs to be done,” Murray said. The door opened again.

“You mean cutting down scared civilians like Anders is doing? That’s not fear, that’s common fucking decency. I was trained to take down the people manipulating the civilians, not to just shoot everyone down and laugh the entire time. I had to learn to tell who was a criminal and who wasn’t. I had to learn to tell who was lying and who wasn’t. I’m telling you, she isn’t. She can’t give you access to what you want. And if she can’t, I doubt anyone else here can.”

He kept his eyes on Murray, forcing the man to look at him, and hoped the woman would wipe the surprised expression off her face. She wouldn’t be surprised he supported the statement if she’d been telling the truth.

Murray looked at Anders as the door closed. Okay, this wasn’t someone used to making his own decision. Maybe he could use that, and what he knew of Anders, to keep this from turning into another bloodbath.

“Murray, what’s Anders going to do if you kill any of them and they can’t give you access? I get the sense Anders doesn’t deal well with disappointment. You have to know something about systems, if he sent you to deal with this. I know a little about security locks. Maybe we can figure it out ourselves. Maybe Will can help too.”

“His thing only works with doors.”

“How is that even possible? It’s all programs and wires.”

“I don’t know, okay? It’s in his head. I just know it only works with doors.”

“Alright, so it’s just the two of us. Let’s see what we can do.”

“Fine, but if we can’t get in, I get to kill someone.”

Murray headed to the console he’d been working on. The woman no longer had a surprised expression on her face. Now she looked at Victor suspiciously.

He thought about trying to explain he wasn't really with these people, that he should have been with Alex, rescuing Tristan. But even if they'd had the privacy for that kind of conversation, he still remembered the criminal who'd carefully explained how they'd just gotten mixed up with the wrong people by accident, and they were just trying to survive until they could get out.

His explanation would sound just as fake as theirs had.

And she should be happy he'd ended up here, among them, he realized. Because he was certain not one person here would have risen to her defense. They'd have let Murray kill her, and then probably everyone else until someone told him what he wanted.

He was justifying; he knew it. He was trying to make the stuff he'd had to do mean something. The civilians he'd killed wouldn't weigh as much if it had been for more than self-defense, if it had been so he could save the bridge crew. Wasn't that how it started? How Law officers became corrupt? Justifying a bad thing with a good reason?

He wasn't corrupt, he told himself as he rejoined Murray. Of course he wasn't, that voice in his head agreed with him. To be corrupt, you'd have to still be a Lawman. Alex had told him, hadn't he? That he'd have to give up what he was if he wanted a chance at reclaiming Tristan. He hadn't believed him. Now here he was, helping the takeover of a ship.

How different was Tristan from these people, really?

With a snarl that earned him a look from Murray, he shoved that thought out of his mind. He had something to do right now. He could deal with the moral quandary he was in when this was all over.

He looked at what Murray was doing, hardly understanding even that. He'd exaggerated what he knew. He'd gotten basic security protocol training at the academy, but that had been close to sixty years ago, and even if he'd remembered all of it, it wouldn't help here. He'd barely managed to break the basic encryption on his house vault when he'd forgotten the access.

Murray started with navigation. "I'm a pilot, so if I can get that, I can take us off this course and hide us until we fix everything else."

"What can I start on that'll help?"

"External sensors. I'd like to make sure I won't fly this thing into any floating rock."

Victor pulled up the sensors on the screen and received a "restricted access" message. On the screen next to it, he tried internal sensors, with the same results. Cameras worked, but without the sensors, he had no idea where to look to find Alex.

He looked over his shoulder and back at the screen. They were rebuilding the barricade, and Victor didn't want to see what it looked like on the other side of the door.

"Are you a coercionist?" Murray asked as Victor aimlessly looked through the code. He was just trying to look busy so he could claim to be helping.

Victor looked at the man and glanced at his screen, which had a series of "restricted access" messages. It occurred to him Murray might know even less about coding than he did.

"Not really." He tried to make himself sound nonchalant. "Nothing like Alex, anyway."

"Who?"

Victor studied the man's face. Did he seriously not know who—

Realization lit Murray's face. "Oh, you mean Crimson." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "I don't think anyone other than Asyr's as good as he is. So how do you do this, if you don't have an earpiece?"

"Don't you know how to code?"

Murray shook his head.

"Then why did Anders send you here? I thought he wanted us to void the corridor."

"He told me to get the ship moving. He's going to be pissed if we can't get that to happen by the time they're done dealing with that."

Victor bristled at how casually Murray referred to the deaths happening on the other side of the closed door. But he focused on what was important: keeping Murray from realizing the truth.

“I had training, as part of joining the Law, and I picked up a few things here and there over the years. As for the earpiece, it’s only needed for serious coercion. I’ve never done that. I just know code.”

Murray nodded like he’d received wise advice. “How is it coming with the sensors?”

“Slow.” Victor indicated the screen. “Security’s tighter than I expected.”

“They don’t want us to know reinforcements are coming.”

“We have months before that can happen.” At least that was true. “If I haven’t gotten through it, Alex—Crimson is going to, once he’s done rescuing Tristan. It’ll only take him a few seconds.”

He went back to looking at the code, and Murray sat back at his console. Victor entered commands, tried to get the code to do something, anything, without success, and he hoped Murray was typical of Anders’s people, because if anyone here could tell he knew next to nothing, Anders was going to kill him.

A cheer went up, and he turned to look. Murray did the same, wiping all the “restricted access” messages in the process. The door was open and bodies littered what Victor could see of the corridor.

“Viv, go make sure they’re all dead,” Anders ordered. “We don’t need any more people in here.”

Victor turned to the screen. He didn’t want to see that.

“So, how is it coming?” Anders asked, standing behind Murray. “Have we made it to a safe zone yet?”

“I have us moving,” Murray replied confidently, “but until the Lawman gives me sensors, I don’t know how safe we are.”

Victor fought not to roll his eyes. This was the kind of leader Anders was? His people preferred lying to him rather than admitting they hadn’t been able to do what he ordered?

“Well?” Anders asked Victor.

He shrugged. “It’s tougher than I expected.”

Anders looked at the screen. “Doesn’t look that tough to me,” he said derisively.

Did he know code? Victor couldn’t believe that, but... “If you want to take my place, feel free.”

“It’s okay, I trust you to get it done. After all, I’m pretty sure you know what I’ll do if you don’t.”

*What you’ll do regardless of anything I do*, Victor thought, but that confirmed Anders knew nothing of coding.

“Anders, you’re going to want to see this,” Barbara said. She was at a screen. Victor joined her and Anders. She was looking at a vid of a fight in a canyon, a lot of people.

“What’s that?” Anders asked, sounding annoyed.

There was something odd about the two-dozen people fighting, Victor decided.

“I decided to look through the cameras, see what else we’d have to deal with to maintain control of the ship, and I came across this.”

Except for two of them, everyone else looked the same.

“Really? One of those cameras is set to show vids?” Anders asked.

They all looked like Alex.

“No, the camera is in that room.” She indicated a large room on the map another screen was showing. “There are dozens of cameras all showing this.”

The others were Tristan and the guy with the mohawk, Victor didn’t remember his name.

“Are you telling me there’s a room in this ship that’s actually groundside?” Anders

asked, in awe.

“It’s a hologram,” Victor said, watching Tristan rip one of the Alexs into two and breaking it into shards of light. “It’s some sort of entertainment setup, I’m guessing.” He looked up, saw the map with points indicating the cameras. “A big one.”

Anders leaned in. “So Crimson decided to just play while I did all the work?”

“They look pretty hurt,” Tim said, “if it’s just a game.”

“It isn’t a game, sir,” the guard said. “It’s the Arena. We all went through it. The old captain forced us to fight in it, sometimes in pairs or larger groups. Some of us got out and were offered employment, the others were sent back into cryo.”

“But it’s holograms, it’s just light,” Anders said.

“Not this one. Those can hurt you. They can kill you too. I watched one of the women I was fighting with get stabbed through the heart by some nightmare creature. The rest of us barely managed to reach the end alive.”

“So Crimson could die in there?”

“Yes, sir.”

Anders smiled and focused on the screen. “Okay, so which one is the real Crimson? And what’s that other thing fighting next to Zeph?”

“Crimson’s man,” Will said. He was standing next to Victor, who wasn’t focused on the screen anymore. What had that Samalian said? He had family matters to deal with.

“But—right,” Anders said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Crimson likes them with fur.”

“Crimson’s man,” Will repeated.

“Didn’t you know Tristan was Samalian?” Victor asked. “Wasn’t Alex with you for a while?” So Justin was indeed related to Tristan, Mary had been right. He’d kidnapped his brother, and now he was putting him through whatever that was. Justin didn’t like his brother.

“A year,” Will said.

“Subjective,” Anders added, making it sound like it had felt so much longer. “And what do I care who fucks him? I just forgot this was his perversion in the middle of all this. Didn’t we drop Crimson off on a planet that sounded like that name?”

“Samalia,” Will said.

“Right.” Anders shuddered with exaggerated disgust. “I’d prefer killing myself than letting something like that touch me.”

“His life,” Will replied.

“It’s still sick. Barb, can you get me a closer view? I can’t tell which Alex is the real one.” He smiled. “I want to see him get the crap beaten out of him.”

Victor went back to the console he’d been using. He needed to figure out something.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Anders asked.

“You still want sensors?”

“Of course.”

“I can’t work on that while watching Alex get killed.”

Anders shrugged and went back to gleefully watching the screen.

Will was next to Victor as he brought up the Arena’s cameras and rewind until the room was dark. He brought it to the door opening and a light appearing around it. Alex, Tristan, and Zeph entered, the door closed behind them. Alex looked like he screamed something, face pressed to the door. Were Mary and Aliana on the other side? Tristan studied the door.

Victor glanced at Will, who looked worried. “She’s on the other side of the door,” he said with as much confidence as he could muster. Will nodded.

Victor found another angle that let them see the door and rewind it until the door opened, showing Mary and Aliana on the other side, just as the door closed on them. Will let out a sigh of relief.

He returned to the camera showing inside the room, just as a large Samalian head appeared in the air before them. There was a conversation between it and Tristan. He wasn't familiar enough with Samalian body language to tell the tone. The head vanished, and after a few seconds, the canyon appeared.

Victor removed that image and brought up commands for the Arena. Nothing came up, so not controlled by this console. One of the other ones?

Victor looked around the room. That didn't feel right; Justin had been the one in control of the arena. The guard had said he put them through it, and for something as personal as dealing with Tristan, with his brother, would he let someone else control it? If he was anything like Tristan, he'd want to do that personally.

Victor's gaze fell on the captain's chair, the one chair Anders hadn't let anyone pull out. Justin had been sitting in it. Victor could imagine him cherishing it as much as Anders would.

He went to it. The right armrest had a small control screen. It wasn't locked. Either Justin had forgotten to lock it in his rush to escape, or he'd been confident no one would touch it when he wasn't around. He'd sounded arrogant enough for that.

After typing around the interface, the Arena controls came up. Victor didn't bother looking for specific controls. He did a full shutdown.

"Hey!" Anders yelled. "What happened to my show?" the screen was dark. The camera should still be working, but with the Arena dark, it couldn't see anything. Anders looked around and he saw Victor. "What did you do?"

"I shut it down."

"Well, turn it back on."

"No. Considering how long it's been running, they're in bad enough shape."

"I decide when Crimson's done suffering."

"I'm not here to watch him suffer; this is a rescue. Maybe you need to remember that."

Anders strode toward him, and Victor stepped away in reflex, before catching himself and stopping. He wasn't going to be cowed by this pirate.

Anders stopped a few paces away. "Listen to me, Lawman, I'm the captain of this ship. Everyone on it does what I tell them if they want to live. Got that? Now turn it back on."

"No."

"Didn't you hear what I said? If you want to—"

"I heard you. You don't scare me. I'm not like them." Victor motioned to Anders's men, including Will in the gesture. "You're not going to push me around." He noticed Will's hurt expression.

"Oh, you think that because you're Law you're better than I am?" Anders said with derision.

"No." Victor pulled out his gun and Anders jumped to the side. "I'm better than you because I don't go around slaughtering people." He didn't aim at Anders, who landed and rolled to a crouch. He shot the captain's chair. Possibly there were other controls for the Arena, but while those were found, Alex and Tristan would have time to escape it.