

*I so don't want to be here,* Victor thought as he spun and shot the guard that sprung behind them in the leg. He was supposed to go with Alex, provide support to him and Tristan, not get mixed up with these thugs.

More guards followed the first, and Victor crouched against the wall as Will and Vivianne fired at them, going for kill shots instead of debilitating ones. Victor shot two more, arm and leg, before the attack ended.

He looked at Will, the only one he'd noticed not wearing a gleeful expression as he killed. He should have been more insistent on rejoining Alex. About the only good thing to come out of this was that his hands had stopped shaking. He'd forgotten how different shooting a living person was from shooting a target, no matter how realistic the projection was.

They went up a level. Victor was already lost, so he no longer tried to remember the way back. Hopefully, the terminals would be user-friendly and he could find a map. They had another firefight, but in the front this time. They were down to less than a dozen people now; a lot more had survived than Victor expected.

"We're here!" Anders called.

This corridor was larger, and the door Anders stood before was double the width, so guards could move through it quickly no matter how many there were.

"Short Stuff, you're up. Everyone else, form a perimeter. You know how this goes: for the time being Will's the important one. We can go back to hating his guts once the door is up. For now, your job's to keep him alive."

Victor started following Will, but the tall man Alex had identified as Karl grabbed his arm. "I don't think so. Unless you know how to open a door like Will, you're not getting any protection. You stay right here and earn your cut by killing guards like the rest of us."

"My cut of what?" Victor asked. Was it just an expression among these thugs? The look Karl gave him, which said he shouldn't have said anything, told him that no, it wasn't. They were expecting to get something out of this.

Maybe they didn't know Anders hadn't discussed payment with Alex. Or more likely, Anders had a plan to extort money from Alex. Victor got that extortionist vibe from the man.

He looked over his shoulder at Will looking at the lock, and Anders watching him like he was about to get access to the deepest bank vault. No one else was watching them, so Will should be safe for the moment.

Guards came across the intersection with shields and fired at them.

"Why don't we have those?" a woman asked loudly, echoing Victor's thoughts. He crouched along with the others and tried to make himself smaller as he fired back. The only thing that seemed to save them was how bad of shots the guards were.

"Hurry up," Anders said. He was firing too, his shots going over them and hitting between shields, exposed body parts. Victor was impressed at how good of a shot the man was.

Victor was hit twice, his armor dissipating most of it, but leaving it hot and uncomfortable. "How does anyone stand this?" he grumbled to himself, aiming at the gap between shields.

"It's better than losing an arm," Karl replied. "Although scars are good for the spirit."

"Is that why no one has helmets?" Victor replied. "You can get quite the scar that way."

"Oh, the Lawman has teeth," Vivianne said. She was focusing her shots on one spot on a shield and it was starting to glow.

Victor's gun beeped, and he glanced at it. The indicator was flashing yellow. "Switching pack," he said, dropping it out.

"Am I supposed to care?" Karl said.

"Standard practice with officers." Victor pocketed the pack and grabbed another one. "So those around me can cover the temporary hole in the shooting line."

"I'm not Law," Karl said.

“And if you still are,” Vivianne told Victor, as her target sparked and the man behind it fell, “you’d better start running now, because I’m going to shoot you myself.”

He slapped the new pack in and the light turned solid green. “It’s been made clear that the Law’s done with me, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

Victor glanced over his shoulder. The panel was open and Will working in it. He wanted to ask how much longer this would take, but went back to shooting.

He had to switch packs again, and he was sweating from the heat his armor was generating from all the hits, when Anders yelled, “In, in, in! Murray, Lolie, and whoever the fuck you are have the door.”

The woman grabbed Victor’s arms and pulled him down next to her. “That’s you, Lawman.”

“Everyone else get shopping and make it quick. You want to be out of here before I close the store.”

“Out? I thought we were holding the armory.” He fired at the approaching guards, then looked over his shoulder. Except for the three of them, everyone was grabbing giant-looking guns and rifles, strapping two—and in the case of the bald guy, three of them—on their back. A few put on black body armor, but more seemed happy with what they already had.

Anders tapped Murray on the shoulder before crouching, and the man left to go pick weapons. Anders slid a heavy-looking rifle across the door to Victor.

He looked at it. “What’s that?” He fired at the approaching guards. They were getting bolder, going around the shields to make a run at the door.

“That,” Anders said, bringing his own rifle to his shoulder, “is real firepower.” He aimed, fired, and a man’s torso exploded. Anders smiled. “No wonder they tried to keep these babies out of our hands.”

Victor stared at the man. He’d just blown up a living person and looked like it was his birthday.

“Well?” Anders motioned to the rifle on the ground. “Pick it up.” He fired twice and Victor didn’t look, but by the bliss on Anders’s face, someone had died again. “What are you waiting for? For one of them to have a holo over their head saying ‘I’m next’? Or is it a Law thing that you should die instead of those trying to kill you? I can arrange that, if you prefer.”

Victor picked up the rifle and could feel the power in it just by the size and weight. It was already on, but he took the time to find the power setting and brought it down as low as it went.

This was a bad idea. He breathed in and out. He brought it to his shoulder and fired at a shield. A hole appeared in it, and the guard on the other side staggered back. There weren’t enough of them left to close the line and someone next to him fired into it, and body parts vaporized.

The bald man was next to him, and Lolie was putting on a gun belt.

“Eyes forward,” the man said. Tim was his name.

Victor shot another incoming guard in the leg. Just how stupid was whoever was giving the orders?

“Shopping’s done,” Murray said. “Viv’s putting on the finishing touch so we can close up shop.”

“Alright everyone,” Anders said. “Get ready to move.”

“Move where?” Victor looked out, there were still a lot of guards out there.

“Anywhere but here,” Anders said.

“I thought the job was holding—”

“The job’s whatever I decide it is.” Anders motioned for them to leave, and people ran out carrying even nastier-looking guns than what Victor held.

“Alex said—”

“Alex isn’t here. I give the orders. You want to take his, go back to him.”

“Trust me, I would if I knew where he was.”

“Then you’re going to want to run, because I’m about to close this store down.” Anders threw him out of the armory and Victor crouched to avoid getting shot, only to notice there was no one shooting at them. All the guards were dead.

Anders smirked and ran by him. “Keep up, Lawman.”

Victor ran after him. “You’re abandoning Alex? You promised him a distraction. I thought this was it. You said you’d keep the guards from arming themselves.” A guard stepped out of a doorway and Victor shot him in the arm. The hole that appeared there made the man drop the gun and go back inside.

“Who said anyone was getting anything out of there?” Vivianne handed a detonator to Anders.

“You can’t be serious,” Victor said. “Do you have any idea what an explosion is going to do to the power packs stored in there?”

Anders grinned. “A very big boom.”

“We’re in a ship! There’s vacuum around us!”

Anders rolled his eyes. “We’re center-wise.” He fired over his shoulder and Victor saw a woman drop. She hadn’t been wearing any armor. Another civilian. “This won’t even bow the hull. And this is going to give Crimson that distraction he wants so badly. It should mean people will be too busy to keep us from reaching the bridge.”

“The bridge? Why? This is a rescue mission.”

Anders gave him a look, and Victor understood. That was Alex’s mission. Anders always had his own plan; Alex had implied as much.

They reached a maintenance access and Victor leveled the rifle on Anders chest.

“I can’t let you do that.”

The man looked amused. “Think about this for a minute—well, seconds anyway. What better distraction can I give Crimson than controlling the ship? With that, he can get his man and just leave. You too, since this is clearly not your thing.”

“Leaving the ship for you? No, this is wrong.”

Anders had his rifle above Victor’s shoulder and fired before he could react. He only now noticed that no one had aimed their rifles at him. It wasn’t because they were hoping Anders would die; Karl was the only one looking for that. The others knew he could handle Victor without help, and now Victor knew it too. Will looked worried, but it was for him, not Anders.

“Tell you what.” Anders put the rifle over his shoulder. “You ground folks like voting for things, right? So let’s put this to a vote. Who’s in favor of taking over the ship?”

Anders raised his hand, and everyone followed suit. Even Will had his up, if not as fast. He didn’t look happy, but he shook his head when Victor raised an eyebrow. This wasn’t a fight that could be won. Victor lowered his rifle and sighed, before raising his hand.

Anders grinned. “You know, I can see why you ground folks like this voting thing. I might have to adopt it for my ship.” Anders raised the detonator. “Now, we need to head up, because this deck is going to get crowded with emergency people.” He pressed the button.