

Victor looked around in each direction the intersection went, trying to figure out which one to take, but they all looked the same. Every corridor was identical—not one visual reference point for him to use.

All he'd wanted to do was go down the four decks to the one where the Arena was, but the conduit he'd used had only gone two. He'd taken one of the side conduits until the next ladder, but there hadn't been any cross conduits for far longer than two other decks should have taken, so he'd taken the next side conduits until he'd reached a door. He'd tried to find a terminal to work out where he was, but this deck didn't seem to have any.

He thought he was a couple of decks below the Arena, so he could either try to go up, or keep wandering until he found a terminal and hoped it worked. Those would be linked to the central system, so he thought their function depended on if William could retain control of the bridge or not.

Before he made his decision, voices came from further in the corridor to his right. He stepped against the wall to hide and listened.

"Stop whining," a woman said, meanness in her voice. "I'm not going to have any coward in my unit."

Victor glanced in, in time to see a man wearing an ill-fitting armored vest shoved forward from the next intersection. He had a gun belt, but he didn't reach for it as he turned to face who had pushed him.

A woman, also wearing a vest that hadn't been fitted to her, shook her head as she appeared. Another woman followed behind her, wearing a black armor that fitted her perfectly, gun drawn and pointed at the two of them. They stopped in the intersection and the guard looked around.

Victor pulled his head back.

"Command?" she asked. "Command, this is unit G-12, please come in." She cursed. "Command, I don't know if comms are down, or you bunch of lazy bastards are just sleeping at your post, but here's my report. I did the sweep of the Epsilon section of deck twelve. I'm down to three people. Lost one in the last altercation. Right, I forgot to report that one—not like any of you lazy asses are listening, but this stuff gets recorded, right? I came across a group of the intruders, six of them. We took them down, and I disposed of the bodies. We don't want the civvies to get scared seeing all those bodies, do we?"

Victor glanced again, wondering what intruders she was referring to. Unless the ones who'd stayed on the ship had decided to go walking about, which he couldn't dismiss outright, considering how Anders was. Otherwise, there was no one here.

She was talking in her comm unit, but it was the expression on the other three—he'd missed one in his previous glance—that caught his attention. They were afraid of her, but one of the men also rolled his eyes as she spoke. Was she making all of this up? Then what about the person she lost? She couldn't be making that up, could she? Whoever she thought was listening to her would know how many were in her unit.

Then, she had to have killed them herself.

Victor hid again as the woman turned in his direction. She was one of the residents. He shouldn't be surprised, not after the ones on the bridge, and she did look to have a particularly nasty temper.

"Alright, you three," she said, "we're going this way. We need to make sure this entire deck is clear of intruders."

The steps approached, so he had to figure out how to handle this quickly. He could only think of one way. He took his handgun out, breathed, and stepped around the corner, raising it.

"Victor Barstone, Bramolian Law Enforcement. Lower your weapons."

Only one of the men was reaching for the gun at his belt when he spoke. The other man and the woman didn't have the reflex to protect themselves.

The guard had her gun on him, but didn't fire, so it was a decent start. "Get your

fucking guns out. He's no more Law than I am, look at him."

Victor glanced down at himself. She did have a point. "I was undercover among the mercs who infiltrated this ship." There was no way he could claim to have responded to a distress call.

"And you're wandering the halls alone? I thought Law always traveled with a partner."

"We got split up when the group went in different directions. I lost contact with him, so I'm trying to reach him. Last I knew he was by something called the Arena."

She smirked. "So here is where you came?"

"I got lost," Victor grumbled, letting his full annoyance out. "The layout here is confusing."

The one man who had his gun out had it pointed at the floor. He had a confident grip on it, but his body language spoke of uncertainty. The other two hadn't reached for theirs.

"When you haul criminals," the guard said, indicating around her, "it's a bad idea to give them an easy way to get from point 'A' to point 'B.'" She considered something. "Seeing as we're on the same side, how about telling me where the rest of the mercs are? So we can go deal with them."

The man who hadn't taken out his gun gave another roll of the eyes, and Victor kept himself from smiling. He hadn't needed that to figure out she had no intention of going near actual fighting. Still, he wasn't risking her passing any information along.

"I don't know. We were a few decks above the armory when we encountered resistance. My quarry split, and I had to follow him."

"I thought you were looking for your partner."

Victor cursed himself. How many criminals got caught because they couldn't keep their stories straight? "He found out my partner was Law and was going after him." *And if you believe that, he found himself thinking, I have the deed to the Mobius black hole I can sell you.*

"Sure." Her tone made it clear it had sounded as fake to her as it had to him. "Tell you what. You put the gun down, and we'll guide you to the Arena. The five of us against that one guy should be easy, right? I'll even let you get the killing shot in."

"I need him alive," Victor said without knowing why, since there was no actual quarry, and he didn't think that would stop her from killing anyone they encountered, mercs or crew members. He glanced at the eye-roller for any indication of what to expect, but other than not taking out his gun—the other woman had finally taken her out—he looked stoic.

"That's too bad. We don't let intruders live here." She smiled. "It sends the wrong message. Now, just put the gun down and this is going to go easier."

Just what kind of criminal was she? Victor wondered. The one on the bridge had seemed decent enough—which meant nothing, he knew—but he didn't have the bloodthirsty look of this one. Had this Justin not cared what kind of criminals he released in here?

He studied the crew members. "I'm not dropping my gun until the four of you put them down. I don't particularly trust someone who forces people without the right training into guard duty."

"Oh, there was no forcing involved," she said, her tone light. "This is a purely voluntary position, isn't that right, folks?"

The other three remained silent, but their expression told him all he needed to know. Maybe she hadn't *physically* forced them to put the vests and guns on, but it hadn't been done of their own free will.

"Well?" she said, "don't everyone speak at once. Tell the nice Lawman how this was all your idea and such."

The other woman nodded, but her eyes said differently.

"It's clear there are trust issues here." What were his options? Take her on to free the three others? He couldn't do that without putting their lives at risk, and the first duty of

a Law officer was always to ensure no civilians came to harm. “So how about we do this? I’m going to back away, take that corridor, and go back to looking for my partner, while you continue with your patrol.”

The man not holding a gun mouthed. “No”.

Regardless of his desire to catch up to Anders before he killed Alex, this was the best way to keep them safe. Once it was all over, he, Miranda, Will, and Aliana could do the rounds and put the residents back in their cells. He had no illusion Alex would even care about how the crew members were being treated.

“Sorry, Lawman, but I’m not letting you roam around the ship. You either come with me, or you stay right here, dead.”

Victor ground his teeth. “Why is it that when any of you says that, you make it sound like an insult? The Law is a respectable profession.”

“Any of us?” she said with a smile. “Don’t you consider us lowly guards as being a form of Law-enforcer?”

Not even if you were an actual guard, Victor almost said. Was it even worth continuing with the pretense he thought she was a guard?

“I’m going to make it easy on you,” she said. “There’s four of us, and one of you. The math says I win, so just do what I tell you and everything will go fine. Once this mess is cleared up, you can explain your situation to the captain.”

“Do you mean that captain who fled the moment the bridge was taken? Or are you referring to someone else?”

She pointed her gun at him. “What are you talking about?”

Victor smiled. “I sort of lied about where I was when I split. We were just done taking over the bridge. But that Samalian ran before anything serious happened.” He stopped himself from mentioning he’d been spaced.

“You’re lying. He looks after us. If it wasn’t for him, I’d still be rotting in one of those tubes.”

“Right, because a captain who uses criminals as guards is really someone you can trust to stick around when things go bad.”

The shot took him center in the chest, and Victor rushed around the corner as he felt the heat spread over the plate. Not for the first time since arriving on this ship, he was happy Miranda had gotten him better armor.

“What are you waiting for?” the woman growled. “Go get him, you good-for-nothing sacks of meat.”

He peered around the corner, and one of the men fired at him. The shot went wide. Victor aimed at the woman, but she ducked behind the other two. He cursed and ducked out of view.

“What is it, Lawman? Afraid of a little bloodshed?”

“Can’t you at least act like the guard you’re pretending to be?” Victor shot back. “You’re the one with the heavy armor, you should be standing in front of them, protecting them.”

“Not part of the job description. Only thing I have to do is keep the civvies from getting uppity. Anyway, if the captain jumped ship, I’m not going to stick around either. Whoever ends up running this place is either going to want me dead or back in a tube.”

Victor ran from one side of the intersection to the other, firing at their feet, hoping to get them to scatter so he could get a clear shot at her, but while the men moved, she kept a grip on the woman.

“If you two don’t go get him dead, I’m going to put holes in your pretty friend here.”

He looked around the corner. The two men were heading his way, warily, glancing over their shoulders at the guard and her prisoner. Both had their guns in-hand. She shooed them forward and Victor backed away.

He could run to the next intersection and take cover there, but all that would

accomplish was to make himself look like he was preparing to fight them. He had no intention of doing that, especially since once they were around this corner, they'd be out of sight from her, so he had a chance to get them to work with him.

He backed up a dozen steps and had his hands raised, gun still in one, by the time one of them peeked around the corner. Victor motioned for him to approach as he took a step back.

The man looked over his shoulders again and stepped forward, gun up and pointed at Victor's chest, but the finger wasn't on the trigger. It was a lower-power weapon, so it probably wouldn't do any good against Victor's armor. The second man stepped around, gun in-hand, but at his side.

"I'm not going to shoot," Victor said, keeping his voice low. He had no idea how well sound traveled here. "Let's just move deeper so she can't hear us." He took another step back, but this time the man didn't, and he stopped the other from following.

This was the best he was getting. "Look, you guys don't have to do this. I can tell you don't want to be here. Just leave." He indicated behind him. "Just run, I'm not even going to ask for your guns. Go find a safe place and wait for this to be over."

The man with the gun at his side started stepping around the other's arm.

"You do it, Harland, and I'm shooting you myself. She has my sister, so we're not going anywhere." The man gripped his gun with both hands. "Are you really Law?"

Victor hesitated.

The man's face fell. "Fuck. You're just another one of those mercs." He moved his finger on the trigger. "He's going to shoot us the moment we have our back to him. These things aren't going to offer us any protection against that gun of his."

The other man raised his gun, still looking indecisive.

"Don't do this." Victor kept his hands up. "I don't want to shoot either of you."

"I'm not hearing any screaming!" the woman yelled. She sounded a lot closer.

Her voice cemented the resolve of the experienced shooter. With a curse, Victor lowered his arm and shot him in the leg. The other man fired over and over, all his shots going wide as Victor ducked out of the way. He fired a few times in his direction, but with not having time to aim, and having to avoid getting shot himself, his shots didn't land.

It did allow him to move closer to the downed man before he could grab the gun again, so he kicked it away. Motion out the corner of his eye showed him he'd put himself between two shooters. He threw himself down, landed badly, and felt pain go up his other arm. He rolled and fired as he stood, trying to not get shot.

More motion, yelling, and he fired again. He'd always hated those free-for-all scenarios during training.

The guard was coming at him, gun up, but trying to aim. He didn't bother aiming; he shot at her until she dropped. He went to a knee and looked around.

The guard was down, dead, considering one of his shots had hit her in the neck. The man was alive, crawling toward the other woman, on the floor, unmoving. She had a hole in her chest; her armor hadn't even absorbed any of his shots.

He recalled the motion of someone rounding the corner, the reflexive shot. He sat down. He'd shot a civilian.

A part of him tried to say he hadn't had a choice, but he watched the man pull her to him, cradle her against him, crying, and he knew he'd had plenty of choices.

He could have assessed the situation better, have realized that when the men mentioned the sister, his best option was to surrender to them, then take the guard by surprise. He could have been more careful about studying the map on the bridge before running after Anders. He could have rejoined Alex when he'd gotten into the wrong group.

The man held the sister Victor had killed as he watched.

He could have told Alex no, he thought as he rested his head in his hands—should

have told him no. He had no business in this situation; he was Law, not some mercenary.

All he'd wanted to do was rescue someone.

He looked at the man and the dead sister.

This wasn't what he'd wanted.

* * * * *

He was most certainly lost, he admitted to himself when he finally saw a terminal. He'd sat with the two of them for too long, and then he'd wandered aimlessly as he tried to get his brain to engage. He was lucky the ship was down to so few personnel; anyone could have jumped him.

Now he was determined to get to the Arena.

He tapped the screen to bring it to life and menus came up, nothing for a map on the first one so he started looking through them. He was through the fifth menu tree when he found the search function and entered "Arena".

The screen turned blank.

"Oh come on!" He tapped it a few times. "Can't you just give me a break?"

Hello, Victor. The words appeared on the screen and he took a step back. He looked around, which was stupid. He wouldn't be able to see the cameras. *Yes, I can see you.*

"Alex?" It couldn't be him, could it?

No, I am not Alex.

"Who are you?" Nothing appeared, and after a minute Victor asked, "Do you work for Alex?" It was the only thing that made sense. How else would this coercionist know who he was? Alex had made plans he hadn't told anyone. This could be one of them. Enough time passed without a response that Victor opened his mouth.

I do not work for Alex.

Then who was this? Why was he talking to him?

"Are you working against Alex?"

I am not working against Alex.

"Okay, then why are you even talking to me?"

I am... There was a pause before the next word. *Curious. I hoped there would be more time, so I could ask you about why you reacted the way you did, but it took too long for you to find this terminal. I may contact you later.*

"Ask me about what? Why isn't there more time?"

The words vanished, and a map appeared, with a route marked on it, from where he was to the Arena. He took out his datapad and transferred it, then ran to the conduit access marked on it.

He didn't know who that had been or what they'd been hoping to find out, but they seemed to think time was short, and he believed them. He went up a level, exited there, ran through the corridors, passing a pair of people who screamed in terror on seeing him. Crew members who'd decided to brave the halls?

All he cared about was they didn't shoot or chase him.

He entered the conduit, crawled to the ladder, went up two more decks. He got out of them and ran down the corridor, and nearly ran into someone as he turned a corner.

With a curse, he tried to pull out his gun while keeping his balance, only to find himself grabbed by the shoulder.

"Victor?" He looked at the woman who'd spoken.

"Mary?" He looked at the woman steadying him. "Aliana? What are you doing here?"

"Us?" Mary asked. "I should be asking you that."

"No, I mean weren't you with Alex, outside the Arena?" He remembered assuring Will that Aliana had made it out, remembered seeing them on the screen.

“Neither of us knows anything about locks,” Aliana began, “so we decided to head back to the ship. I’m just happy we haven’t run into any guards.”

“Wait, so we just ran into each other by accident?” Victor looked from one to the other.

“I guess,” Mary replied. “We only just got a terminal to give us a route to get there. The previous ones only showed where it was, and we had to work it out on our own, which only got us more lost.”

“Show me the map,” Victor asked. It was nearly impossible for two random people to accidentally walk by each other on a ship this size.

She took her datapad out and he placed his next to hers. The route on this deck matched exactly. His guide had arranged this. “The terminal that gave you this map, did it talk?”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind. You don’t want to go to the hangar; Anders spaced it. The ship’s outside right now.”

Aliana glowered.

Mary gasped. “What about Jacoby? Is he okay?”

Victor realized that, among everything else, he’d forgotten about the pilot. “Alex had him seal the ship, right? So he should be fine. Maybe Will has gotten in contact with him since I left the bridge.”

“Will’s okay?” Aliana asked earnestly.

“Yeah. A few scratches, but nothing more. Anders had us take the bridge, and that’s where I left him while trying to follow Anders. He’s heading to the Arena to kill Alex.”

Aliana cursed.

“I don’t even know where we are in relation to the Arena,” Mary said. She looked at the other woman. “You go to the bridge. I’m sure Will’s worried about you.”

She shook her head. “If Anders is down here, I’m staying with you. That man is dangerous.” She took out her gun.

“I can handle him,” Victor said, “if Alex and Tristan haven’t already. You should both head to the bridge.”

“You don’t know him like I do. He’s a conniving bastard, and he’s going to be with others. You’re going to need me.”

“If there’s going to be a fight, you’re going to need me to patch everyone up,” Mary said.

“It’s only him; Will made sure of that.” He looked at his map. “Alright, then the access we want is further down. We’re below the Arena deck.”

* * * * *

“That’s not the door we were at,” Mary said.

The door was larger than those they’d walked by on the way here. It gave Victor a sense it was armored. The word “Arena” was stenciled over it. “There’s bound to be more than one access to a room that size.” The lock next to the door showed the red light anyone who wanted to get in somewhere hated. He tapped it, just in case, and a panel next to it slid open instead of the door.

The space inside it was shaped like a headband, but what it had contained was missing. One of those things that only went around three-quarters of the way instead of the full thing, so they were easier to make fit. On one side, lights flashed in varying colors that told Victor nothing.

“Does that mean anything to you?” he asked Mary. “Most of the headbands I’m familiar with are used by doctors.”

She shook her head. "If it's medical, those aren't about any of the few readout methods I'm familiar with." She tapped the screen above the holder. Did it a second time, and it came on.

Local controller status: active

Pairing: complete

Mesh: 98.2%

Settings: full control override, authorized voice only

Status: system off

Reset? yes / no

Victor sighed. "It's a local controller for the room." The two women looked at him. "The Arena is a fully interactive holographic system. The captain used it to tests the prisoners before deciding if he was going to offer them a job or not. I shut it down from the bridge, but I'm going to guess Anders took it."

"If he came this way."

"Something tells me that this is exactly how he got in."

"Someone else could have taken the controller and not put it back."

Victor nodded, but it wasn't why he was confident this was where Anders had come.

He looked at the "yes/no" option on the screen. It was off, which meant that Anders either hadn't been able to use it, or Alex had shut it down. Either way, Anders had been without it for a while, which meant he'd been dealt with.

"Do you think they're okay in there?" Mary asked.

Victor smiled. "Alex is a coercionist. Tristan is a killer."

"He's in a pretty bad shape," Aliana said.

"The two of them can still handle someone like Anders. I'm starting to think Anders showing up "unexpectedly" was even part of Alex's plan. I can't see how we would have pulled it off without some major distraction like what Anders offered."

"If that controls the room, do you think it also controls the door?"

"I doubt it, but there's one way to know for sure." He tapped "yes".

The red light remained on.

"Maybe it has to be worn to unlock the door," Aliana suggested.

"That isn't helping us get in thought," Mary replied.

Victor nodded. Getting to this point didn't help anyone if they were locked out of the room. He checked the map. This was where the route led.

He looked at the lock, then the screen.

"What?" Mary asked, watching him.

"I'm just thinking that considering how urgently I tried to get here, it's really annoying there's a locked door in my way." He watched the red light.

"Yeah, maybe we need to go around the room? One of the other doors could have the headband needed to open it."

The light turned green.

Mary stared at it.

Aliana looked at Victor. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't," he answered.