

Anders had actually blown up the armory. Will couldn't believe it. He'd seen Viv plant the explosives, but even then he hadn't realized what Anders had planned. He'd already worked out that holding the armory wouldn't be enough, not for Anders. He'd thought he was going to hold it for ransom to the captain. Probably for them to kill Alex for him.

But to destroy it? Anders loved anything he could use to kill and hurt others, and that room had been filled with those.

Taking over the ship came as less of a surprise and more of an explanation. Anders had said something to Captain Meron to let him come, and the most likely thing was that if he didn't allow it, if he didn't let Anders get his own ship, he'd try to take the Golly.

More of the crew would have sided with the captain than Anders, but it would have been a hard fight, and afterward, the captain could never be certain where the survivors' loyalties lay. So he'd let Anders go. Maybe he'd told Alex, and that was why no one had died on first meeting, but why act like he hadn't known?

Will was giving himself a headache worse than when he had to line up the words for multiple phrases and he was too late to try to figure things out. Now he had to come up with a way of letting Alex know. He had no idea how Anders planned on taking over a prison ship, even with all the extra weapons, but if he did, he'd make sure Alex died.

He exited the conduits and pulled the rifle off his back, aiming down the corridor as Victor and Lolie exited, too. No guards here at the moment, but by the sound of footsteps, they were on their way.

The numbers around the locks fell into place as Will glanced along the corridor. For it to happen that quickly meant the security was low. How could a prison ship have such lax security? There hadn't been any bulkheads to block off the corridors in case of a prisoner escape.

The next intersection had six guards, and Viv went down. He dragged her against the wall, then fired, and she cursed as she worked on her leg.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Fucking shot hit a weak point in the armor," she replied.

"You need help?" the Lawman asked and fired. He might not want to be here, but Will admired his willingness to deal with the surrounding mess rather than try to cause a new one.

"Plugged the hole," Viv hissed. "I can live with a limp until Doc looks at it." She took Victor's hand when he offered it and pulled herself up.

"Not smart," Will commented.

"Did you bring a portable mender when I wasn't looking?" Viv replied. "And you know how much Doc loves making us suffer of our stupidity. Stop worrying about me."

The Lawman shook his head in annoyance, but Will just stared at her. Didn't she realize they weren't going back to the Golly? He couldn't see Anders giving anyone on his crew the option of going back. Hadn't Anders told her his plan? Or did he not trust her? Will had expected the entire crew to know what Anders's plan was, but now? He followed her as she got back in the fray.

The ease with which they took down the guards reminded Will more of comedy vids, where everyone was incompetent, than any job they'd pulled. It was only—he did a quick count—ten of them against guards on a prison ship. They should all be dead by now. It was like, well those vids, where the cooks were handed guns and were expected to defend the palace. It never ended well for the cooks.

But this wasn't a vid, so there had to be a reason. Was this to lull them into a sense of false security? He snorted, which drew the Lawman's attention. Anders had so much confidence, none had to be added.

But the idea of Anders in charge of this ship, of all those guards. Worse yet, those criminals, because when Anders had suggested to Alex letting them loose, he hadn't been kidding. Anders would do it, expecting to be rewarded.

Even if only a handful of them agreed to work for him, it would not go well for

anyone. Anders would be impossible to deal with, which meant Will couldn't stay here, no matter how things went down. The question was, would he be able to sneak away without Anders stopping him? He could open doors, but not force them to stay closed. If Anders had control of the ship, Will wouldn't be able to hide. And if he got his hands on Aliana...

Will hadn't humiliated Anders as much as the man imagined Alex had, but he hadn't forgotten the times Will had kicked him in the balls. Anders had deserved it each time, but that wouldn't mean anything.

He realized he'd made his decision. The moment this looked bad, he was bolting. Be it Anders taking over, or about to get everyone killed.

Will got his breath knocked out of him when the Lawman shoved him against the wall, hard. He fired ahead and glanced at Will.

"Sorry, you okay?"

Will nodded, berating himself for not paying attention to what was going on. Later would come quickly enough.

"You need to talk about it, I'm here."

Will glared at the man. Had he just... The expression was concern. Right, the Lawman wasn't used to him.

"Thanks." Will motioned forward. He was getting Tim's datapad the instant things were quiet and copying the map.

He shouldered his rifle and joined in the firefight.

Each subsequent fight lasted longer, but they only got minor injuries from them. It was like the more people they put to block their way, the less training they had.

The Lawman crouched by one of the dead guards as the others continued. Will was about to urge him on, but this wasn't grief. The Lawman pulled off a helmet, looked inside, set it down. He undid the vest. Opened it, patted it.

"Vic?"

"It's Victor," he replied, looking at the man's hands before cutting the cloth off his arms.

"Victor?" Will raised his rifle and scanned around them. It was only the two of them.

"This guy's a civilian."

"Enemy."

"That's not what I mean. The helmet doesn't have the harness to make it fit to his head. The vest is missing the armor's plates. This guy was given inferior armor. Defective stuff, I think."

"Gun?"

Victor picked it up, looking it over. Took the pack out, put it back in. "Looks fine, but I don't know enough about how they work. I can barely maintain my service weapon—could barely maintain it." He looked the dead man over. "Will, do you know what 'ridge cattle' are?"

Will shook his head.

"Back home, on Bramolian Six. There are regions where the fog gets so dense you can't see anything. They're also places where you have ridges thousands of feet deep. Back centuries ago, before satellites were everywhere, farmers in that area would raise cattle exclusively to cross those regions. You bought a hundred or so of them and kept them ahead of you, and listened to the scream of death as they fell over the side."

"Meaning?"

"We kept the term, even though the cattle's not needed anymore. We apply it to any group of people sent to their death for a meaningless reason. This guy? Those with him, and before? They were ridge cattle."

Will shook his head.

"I'm telling you, they—"

“Why?” He tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Right, few words. I don’t know why. Maybe they’re out of guards? Which makes no sense, on a ship this size. Even with the prisoners in cryo, they should have a lot of them in case of an escape. We haven’t gone through enough of them. Maybe they’re off the ship? Never mind,” he replied to Will raised eyebrow. “There’s an inconsistency in the number of crew and the number of ships off the Sayatoga that’s been bugging me.”

The next group of guards were killed easily, as was the one after that. Will tried to pay attention at how well, or not, they were armored, and he noticed the lack of any protection on some of them. Anders wouldn’t care, nor would the others, and if he was being honest, if Victor hadn’t pointed it out, he wouldn’t either, but they were more ridge cattle.

The group after that caught them by surprise, taking Lolie down before anyone could react. They were lying on the floor, mostly hidden in the intersection. Will opened a few doors for them to take cover in, and got into one himself, trying to find a target.

“I’m going to guess we’re getting close to the bridge,” Victor whispered.

Will glanced at him.

“When you’re short on qualified personnel, you keep them close to strategic points, and you try to whittle away at the opponent with whatever else you have.”

“Ridge cattle,” Will said.

“Yep. From this point forward, they’re going to make us work for it.”