

Alex's attention was pulled away from the subroutine he was building mentally as his hand moved by themselves, taking the weed, moving the loose soil away until its root and that of the plant were exposed. He scanned the jungle, just outside the light, for an indication of what had caught his attention and, not seeing anything, focused on untangling the roots.

It was impossible to entirely free the plant from the weed. By the time it broke the surface, its roots had already pierced that of the plant and what was left in would grow again. But the more it needed to rebuild, the longer it took for it to have leaves that took in whatever spectrum it did at night and really suck the nutrients out of the plants.

Alex had asked why they didn't just cut the section of the root that was 'infected' but then it was the plan that suffered and since the weed affected all the plants, the harvest would suffer, which meant their food supply would and...

Alex had tuned out the rest. He'd asked, gotten an answer. The why was the purview of those who made those decisions. He was just the one sent to deal with the problem.

He threw the weed in the bucket that collected them, to be burned, and covered the roots, and then sprinkled water. As he moved on to the next one, he scanned the jungle again and cursed being in the light, since it meant he couldn't make out anything.

He forced his fingers to relax around the trowel's pommel. It was just the wildlife. They usually kept away, he'd been told, when one had appeared at the edge of the garden, back when the sun barely set, but occasionally, one grew bold enough to investigate the strange creatures working in the garden.

He looked at the plant before him and buried the mounting anger and how useless any of this was. He couldn't 'lose himself in the task'. He couldn't keep his mind from wandering to other things. He wasn't built for this kind of menial, repetitive work. He was built to be thrown as the enemy, unleashed on them, that it be people of a system.

It was why it hadn't hit him, back when he worked at Luminex, how trapped he was. He had had systems to coerce, enemies to force his will on. It wasn't until Tristan had thrown his life in shambles, until Katherine tortured him in the name of protecting the corporation and finding her husband's murderer, that Alex had woken up to the lie his life had been.

He wasn't an office jockey.

He was a blade to be used on anyone that stood in his way. He'd been dull, but still sharp enough to beat Katherine when she tried to keep him from leaving to hunt Tristan down. He'd sharpened himself enough on the Golly that he was able to do what he had to find the Samalian, then Tristan had honed him to an edge so sharp he could cut the universe of needed.

And now, he was used to remove weeds.

He almost grabbed the root ball and yanked it out, but the sound of wood breaking was loud enough to reach him. Even the others looked up from their work, scanning the darkness, before going back to gentle weeding. Alex searched longer, fighting the instincts telling him to reach for the knife, to go find the enemy and destroy them. Just an animal, he reminded himself.

And as he turned to his task, something glinted in the light and was gone.

Nothing natural glinted in such a way. That had been effect of light on metal. And that breaking? No animal native to the jungle would announce itself in such a way.

He ignored the call as he bolted for where he'd seen it, cursing himself for not listening to his instincts in the first place. Tristan had trained him to act, not to question his decisions.

The motion came before he reached his goal, something, someone too close to the light. Light body armor, clothing—Alex smiled—flesh. He threw himself aside, and the blaster shot missed him. Then he was up, knife in hand and running at the surprised merc.

“Contact!” she yelled, and Alex threw his knife. Her gun batted it aside, but he was right behind it, throwing himself at her. The collision sent them to the ground, and while he elbowed her face, his other hand closed around the pommel of the knife at her belt. She shoved him off and Alex rolled to his feet, raising the bloody polycarbon knife between them.

He grinned at the shock on her face. She shouldn't have dressed for the heat. Her hand came up from her side bloody, and instead of raising her gun, she yelled. “The bodyguard's here!”

Alex was on her, opening her gun arm at the wrist, then her throat. He found the knife at the small of her back, another polycarbon, to someone yelling over the panicking locals. “Don't any of you move!”

Two were coming in his direction, one along the light, the other from deeper in the jungle. Alex ran into the jungle. He could make just as good use of the darkness as they did and, by the sound of it, he had more training in moving in this environment than they did.

“Sara?” someone called by the light. There was cursing. “He cut her throat!”

“He did what?” came from ahead of Alex.

He stopped. Amateurs. He felt at his feet for something heavy, a fist size stone, and threw it to his right. His target lit himself up, firing at the sound it made hitting a trunk. By the time he realized his mistake, Alex had a knife in his chest, yanking to the side hard enough ribs broke as it exited. He clipped the new knife to his belt and made his way toward the light. The thirty or so locals who had been working in the garden were clustered together, instead of running for the sanctuary.

Just his luck that today not one of them had been a retired merc. He could do with backup.

“Stop whimpering. We're not here for you.” The man was on the slim side, but the muscles on his exposed arms were hard. “You hear that Bodyguard? It's not them we're interested in. Step in the light, unarmed, and we can move on to what we're here for.”

Three by the locals, fully in the light, but too far. He could get them throwing the knives he had, but there was no way to be sure the throws would be fatal. That left three at

the edge of the jungle, two looking into it, guns raised, and one idiot with his back to it, covering the locals.

Alex moved to him, wondering how long it would take for any of the mercs inside to realize there was a problem, and did he really want backup? Did he want someone taking away any of his fun?

He grabbed the back of the merc's harness and pulled him into the darkness, letting him get out a yell of surprise before slicing his throat open.

"He's over there!"

This time, they came in the jungle shining lights ahead of them. Sweeping left and right, as well as, in one case, up.

Alex threw the knife in the smart one's chest and as the two with him turned to watch their associate fall, he ran at them. He planted a knife in the side of one's neck, sending blood in the others face as he forced the knife out through the trachea. The merc screamed as he backpedaled, then turned to run away. Alex followed, waiting until he was at the light before throwing the knife. It hit in the middle of his back and he fell, his legs no longer working, which only made the screaming more desperate.

Alex dropped as they fired blindly into the jungle and made his way to his previous kill. By the time they stopped, he had two new knives, one of which he used to end the one his throw hadn't killed. Hadn't hit anything vital but the look of her struggling to her feet. The knife through the neck ensured she was dead.

She had three knives, which he added to his belt, then made his way back toward the garden.

"I swear," the leader yelled, "that if you don't get out of there right now, I'm going to kill one of th—" he staggered from the knife in his shoulder, then tripped in the loose soil.

"Get inside!" Alex yelled at the locals as he ran for the still standing merc. One was missing. That was never good.

The merc fired, but his hand shook so hard they all missed. By the time he realized what a mistake letting panic set in was, Alex was on him, knife in his stomach, and buzzing as he pulled it up. He turned to face the downed leader, but blaster fire made him jump aside.

Only he wasn't the target. The missing merc was at the treeline firing into the locals. Alex ran at her, yelling to get her attention, but she ignored him. She kept on firing.

Alex collided with her. Then he had a knife in her shoulder, one in the other, before she could raise it to defend herself. He had another up, ready to bring down through her skull, but the terror in her eyes registered.

She didn't deserve this.

He leaned forward. "I wish I had the time to make you suffer the way you really deserve." He nicked her carotid artery and grabbed her gun as he stood.

He ignored her pleas to him, heading back into the light.

The leader grabbed a communicator. "Failed! The mission failed. The threat level is higher than—" his head exploding kept him from saying more.

The locals were seeing to the injured, and at least one dead, as Alex reached the dead leader. He took the comm unit and sighed as he heard the network through it. This wasn't a standard model. He hadn't contacted his ship. This could contact someone anywhere in the

universe.

He considered telling the person on the other end what had happened. Giving him a detailed description of how he'd killed the merc he'd sent, so he'd know not to do it again.

"I should have killed you before you got back on your ship," he said instead. "Every instinct told me letting you go would only cause trouble, but I'm here to be a better person, so I ignored them." He planted the knife through it before he could say the rest.

Before he could demand why only eight barely trained mercs? The kills had been too easy. They hadn't pushed him at all. Didn't he get what Alex needed? Didn't he get he couldn't lose himself in any tasks but one?

The one task he was here to make sure he would never lose himself into.

It was too bad he hadn't shot the merc sooner; he told himself. Now, there was no way to know what the retaliation would be.

He really should have killed him sooner, he told himself again, and did his best not to think about the excitement building inside him.