

Alex had expected that as the full dark stretched to the point where the sun was only out for a few hours out of the day, work in the garden would come to a stop. His father's orchards didn't stop, but they were in a zone where the weather was amicable to growing all year long. And even then, they would go dormant for a few months after a harvest.

Here, lights were setup to illuminate the garden, and taking care of the plants, with leaves now so dark they could be black, continued. Pruning, and weeding, tilling and picking ripe fruits. He'd asked how the plant could survive with so little light, and one of the other merc at the sanctuary had lent him viewers set to see into the ultraviolet section of the spectrum, and the nearly black leaves had come alive with colors.

Alex was certain the scientist had talked about it while he 'fixed' their computer, but he'd barely been aware of their presence, soaking in as much of the sounds of the network since he wouldn't hear it once they left until they came back, but the mercenary told him the plants had a way to shift from photosynthesis to the equivalent using ultraviolet light.

He'd found the idea a distraction for a few minutes, then had good back to attempting to lose himself in the work. That still escaped him, but he'd made the experience more bearable by running code in his head. The once improvement was that with full dark, the rain had lessened. Unfortunately, the heat hadn't dropped much, nor had the humidity.

The chime sounded and Alex stood, rubbing the soil out of his hands before stretching. Another day of tasks done. Another wasted day, he tried not to think. All this was doing nothing to curb his desire to kill. The frustration alone made him want to lash out at something, which was why he did his best to avoid anyone who had been vocal about how they didn't think he or Tristan should be allowed in the sanctuary.

All of them were mercenaries, but not as many as Alex had expected cared about their presence once Maraco made sure they all knew who Tristan was. And even Maraco had been subdued about it after being gone for most of a day.

Alex didn't ask Tristan about it when his Samalian next visited, but he suspected where the man had gone to, and why he'd survived the trip was only Tristan's concern, not Alex's.

The sound made Alex look up as he headed for the sanctuary's entrance. Lights were approaching from above. If it had been raining, he wouldn't have heard or seen them until they were nearly on top of them. Now he made out the ship's shape even before enough of the garden's lights reflected on the underside.

"I wasn't expecting them to be back," Alex's companion said, also looking up. "They never showed an interest in the winter stage of the garden," she said.

Except this wasn't the scientists. They traveled by hover. This was a ship; he could now make out the shape of the engines. He hurried inside, then toward the landing zone.

This could be trouble.

The sanctuary wasn't hidden, but it also wasn't easy to find. Which meant anyone unscrupulous would think they were hiding something. And if someone worked at hiding something, someone else believed they could make money from whatever that was.

He tried not to notice his eagerness at the possibility of a fight. Told himself it wasn't that. He was readying himself to defend the people here. He should get extra knives, but that would delay him and he needed to be there to welcome the potential problem. Cut it down before they caused harm.

He wasn't the first, and slowed on making out Teklile's silhouette in the outside lights. The man turned and smiled at him.

"Trouble?" Alex asked, trying not to sound eager.

"Hardly," the man replied with a chuckle. "Most likely someone like you, looking to us to help them cope with the universe."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then it might be someone here to study one of the books, or bring us something to add to our collection."

"Just how valuable are all those books?"

"Value changes with who you ask."

"Which means someone might want something you have."

The ship maneuvered, then descended close enough to the entrance the turbulence sent damp grass and earth in their direction.

"Our doors are open to any who want to look at what we have."

"And if they want to take it?"

"You have to stop looking at the universe in such a negative way, Alex. There are more out there than those who hired you to steal and kill for them. There are good people, driven simply by curiosity and a desire to improve themselves."

Alex nodded. And how often were those on the receiving end of a mercenary team hired by one of those people who wanted what they had? If Teklile was going to be the optimist, Alex would be the pragmatist, ready to act and keep the other safe.

That was his role as a defender, wasn't it? If Hea'Las insisted he had one of those Samalian aspects too, he might as well use it to justify what was about to happen.

The ship was in good shape, but had seen use, and a couple of rough entries. Or maybe those were burn marks from a Law ship firing on them. He couldn't tell how recent they were. Whatever else, the owner took care of it, but preferred that their ship work over looking good.

A lot of merc had that mindset.

The ramp on the side lowered and once the man stepped on it, Alex knew he wasn't a merc. He was dressed casually and moved with ease. He smiled and waves at them as he walked down the ramp. Alex was surprised no bodyguards followed. He resisted the temptation to listen to the ship's system. He couldn't afford the distraction.

"Hey there." He looked young, fifty, no more than sixty. But walked with an easy confidence that made Alex triple the age. He chuckled. "You sure don't make this place easy to find."

"Welcome to Solitude," Teklile greeted the man. "Will you come inside? Rain is still

possible at this time of the year.”

“Certainly.” The man studied Alex, then focussed on Teklile again. “After all, it wouldn’t do to conduct business outside.”

“You should ready yourself to be disappointed then,” Teklile said, motioning for the man to step inside. “We are not a place of business, but of rest and learning.”

“Of course.”

Alex followed a few steps behind, earning himself a glance over the shoulder from their new arrival and a nod of approval.

“I’m going to make this simple,” the man said. “I’m Carter Hart, of the Galactic Hart. You’ve heard of us, right?”

The name was familiar to Alex, but Teklile shook his head. Some business family like his father’s. Not corporate, but wealthy.

“That’s not important, anyway. What is important is that I am a love of the arts, more importantly, of the art of Morllove Arthonom. Him, I am certain you have heard of. Famous maybe a thousand years ago, all the best art houses have had one of his painting at one time or another since.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t.”

Alex hadn’t either, but other than the art of coercing and fighting, none of them interested him.

“That’s strange. I have it on good authority you have one of his piece. A painting? Moon set on Shoroun?”

Teklile shook his head. “But I can’t say I’m familiar with all the pieces we hold.”

“Then how about we go look? I’m willing to pay you well for it.”

“I will happily help you look for it, but I’m afraid that it isn’t for sale.”

Carter grabbed Teklile’s arm and came to a stop, forcing the man to face him.

“Look.”

Alex readied himself. There were no obvious weapons, but he lived with someone who took them apart for as a way to keeping occupied. He’d seen the sort of weapons that could be easily hidden and still cause destruction.

“If you’re worried that what you’d ask for is going to be more than I can pay, don’t be. I’m sure you’ve heard this often and have disappointed them, but money is no problem for me. I’m sure that there’s plenty of things you need to buy for a place like this, so once we locate it, figure out how much you want and I’ll transfer it on the spot.”

“Mister Hart. All we need is already here. My statement about not selling it isn’t because I don’t think you can afford it, but because the man who founded Solitude wanted what he had gathered to be protected and maintained. We are a repository of old and important works. All are welcome to come and study them, but here they remain. I am certain that your intent for that painting is good. That you hold this artist’s work in the highest esteem. But to sell you a piece means that I will not be able to tell the next person looking to buy one no. And I can’t know what their intentions will be.”

Carter searched Teklile’s face. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked, sounding disappointed.

“Extremely. All of us here take our role as caretaker of Solitude seriously. I wish I had a better answer for you.”

Carter's smile faltered. "I wish you had one too."

"I'll still be happy to help you locate it. I'm sure that seeing it will be enough to make this journey worthwhile."

Carter shook his head and sighed. "I'd rather not..." He straightened. "I think it would be too painful to look at it and not be able to bring it home where it belongs."

"I'm sorry this journey couldn't have a more pleasant conclusion."

"Yes." Carter's expression became distant, then he focussed on Teklile. "Yes, I'm sorry too." He offered his hand. "Thank you for your time." Teklile turned to the entrance, but Carter stopped him. "Please, don't trouble yourself on my account. My ship is only outside the door."

Alex could end this now. One slice and the man would be incapable of bringing down what he'd threatened. He might have to add a stab, if he had skin armor, but if the man glanced at him, evaluated him as a threat, he'd act.

The man walk by without looking, and Alex questioned what he'd heard. There had been a threat in the tone, hadn't it? It wasn't his desire for a fight that had put it there.

Not a fight. To kill. To feel his knife sink into flesh. To cut it. To look into the eyes of the man as his life spill out.

"You see Alex," Teklile said as the man stepped outside in the starting rain. "Not everyone needs to take what they want. Some understand that protecting history will be more important than their desires."

Alex nodded and reminded himself this was why he was here. Because killing wasn't only easy, but something he craved. Something in might be inventing reasons to indulge in.