



Mitro

BAYOU

BISHOPS

L U C I A N B A N E

NITRO BAYOU BISHOPS Book Ten

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Dedicated to all my romantic fans. Thank you for helping me build this story. You'll find a list of all the games we played and the winners in the back-matter of this book!

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RECAP FROM BAYOU BAT MAIDEN

Where the hell was she?

“What’s the plan?”

Nitro turned to Eveque after another scan along the Bat-tie grounds. “Her being here already is the plan.”

“Belle Eveque just told me they spotted her at the ferry with your boy Seth and her feathered friends.”

Nitro’s guts loosened and Eveque chuckled. “Mon Freire, you act like a man who put his dick in it.”

“I put a *lot* more than that in it,” he assured as 8-Bit and Hurricane came into the dug-out area where Nitro waited with seven of his men. Basically to play capture the flag with her bats if he understood correctly.

“What’s all these ruffled feathers I’m seeing?” Hurricane muttered on his right, the hard clamp on his shoulder giving him punching urges.

Ever since 8-Bit handed over his intel on Jake Drysdale and his dirty brother *Ray*, he’d wanted something to hurt. Instead, he had to piss Felix off. But after talking to Seth about what she said those birds could do, he needed to see it for himself. She’d agreed but wanted to use an animal to demonstrate. He needed to know if they’d attack a human. A human threat. And if they could, then he wanted them in their army for the upcoming war.

“If one of you manages to catch a flag, just let them know not to be aggressive. If they sense I’m scared or getting hurt, they could attack.”

“Don’t you have signals for that?”

“I do, but they’re smart creatures and protective. I just don’t want to take a chance.”

Well, he wanted to take a chance and would. The question was how he’d get them to attack.

“Don’t overthink it,” Eveque called back, heading to the stands with Hurricane.

Too late.

Nitro turned to his men. “Hey,” he yelled, getting their attention. “Remember the goal is to capture a flag. We just need *one*. Get the rest of your gear ready, she’s about to get to the field. There’ll be entertainment before the main event but not sure how long that’ll last.”

They yelled out their Hatch’s *Boom Boom Chakalaka Boom Boom* game chant, getting roaring answers from the crowds already packing the stadium. Felt a lot like one of their annual football games between the Hatches with them all in uniform. That was for protection from any possible bat attacks. Felix was positive they were all healthy birds, but he wasn’t taking any chances with one of his men getting bitten. He’d even had them add screen over the front of their helmets for eye protection. Last thing he needed was one of them accidentally blinded before a war.

With their Hatch colors being black and gold, they resembled numbered royal crows, the golden crests on their chests matching his tattoo with their Hatch insignia.

The sound of applause drew his gaze to the field where his Petite Rebelle entered waving and smiling with her huge falcon perched on her shoulder. She stopped in the center of the field as a covered cage was pulled by a tractor.

As it got parked on the edge while Felix looked around. When her eyes reached their dug-out, he waved, getting her attention. Her smile bloomed when she recognized him before she hurried across the field to him.

He met her halfway, remembering they were supposed to be somewhat at odds. “No hugging,” he reminded her.

“Right,” she gasped, not quite wiping her grin from her face. “You told them the rules?”

“I did.”

“No aggression.”

“Right.” He still wasn’t sure how them trying to *get* to her wasn’t seen as *aggressive*. “How long before we’re up?”

“Maybe thirty minutes. I don’t want to overdo it. They’ve never performed for a big crowd like this so I’m keeping it simple.”

“Good idea.” Nitro caught Bishop’s wave from the bleachers. He

pointed to his own phone and Nitro acknowledged with a salute.

“I’ll be the last one to try for the flag,” he told her. “Good luck Mah Petite Rebelle.”

“Same to you, Mah Bien Monsieur.”

He headed back before he gave in to the urge to kiss that smirk off her pretty face while wondering what Eveque wanted. He found his phone on the bench and dialed him. “Hey.”

“We have company here.”

Panic hit him at his tone. “Who?”

“Jake and Ray Drysdale. Along with a *Noc-tam-bule*.”

“What?”

“Seer recognized him.”

“What’s the plan? Why the fuck are they here?”

“Not sure yet. For now, we’re watching them. They’re not leaving here till we find that out. You want to call this off?”

“Fuck,” he muttered, thinking. “I’d hoped to find out what those bats were capable of.”

“Hmm,” he muttered. “Maybe you still can. Wait for my call. I have an idea.”

CHAPTER ONE

Nitro had ideas too. His guess was those three devils were there to see what kind of leverage they needed or could get. He'd give them something better than that. Like a fuck-around-and-find-out lesson.

He couldn't have enough walls around Felix and those bats just became another barrier he'd use to protect her. He just hoped they did that when it came time. He'd have to make damn sure those nasty birds knew he was being aggressive.

For thirty minutes, Nitro's gaze swung like a pendulum from Felix to those men, then to Eveque, waiting for some kind of signal. He finally got a text.

Eveque: *Do what you came here to do. I have other ideas for our friers. Don't worry, they're surrounded.*

He pocketed his phone. Good. That simplified things.

Nitro turned his attention to his Beautiful Rebel. He let her bird performance have its way with him till his blood surged with excitement and awe. Never saw anything like it. Various hand gestures, whistles, and cape flaps sent the birds flocking in impressive formations followed by that sweet smile he wanted to kiss all fucking day. She clapped her hands, and an immense *boom* rocked the air, followed by shocked cries from the crowd. Roaring applause followed and Nitro realized her birds had created the sound. "Holy shit!" he laughed, remembering Seth mentioning something about it. He never would've guessed it to be that fucking loud and real sounding. Imagine an enemy encountering that in the woods at night.

With a single whistle and wave of her cape, the birds flew high above then dove down before entering their cage again. She took a bow and fuck if the swamp hoards didn't eat that shit right up.

The Grand Aboyeur came onto the field and spoke to her then

announced what everybody was there for. The Bat-tie. Man against bats. That was surely a fucking first.

“Alright, we’re up,” Nitro muttered, glancing behind him as his men got off their asses. “Fenwick, I’ll send you first. We want to see what we’re up against with these birds. Just need you to do your damndest to capture that flag.”

“You sure?” he double checked, like it might be simple.

Nitro considered those unlikely odds. “If you see they’re easy to get through, maybe don’t try so damn hard. I want this to look like a real fight.”

He saluted. “Got it.”

“And if it turns out to be a fight, then I’ll send Jagger and Boomer to test their power. If they’re a brick wall, then I’ll send the rest of you out and I’ll hide behind you. When they come, you get me as close as you can so I can get the flag.”

“So, you *want* to win?” Boomer asked.

“I *have* to win. But I want it to look like it was the hardest thing I’ve ever won. Got it?”

They all nodded, giving their game cry chant, and kicking against the metal wall, bringing the crowds to their feet with clapping.

“They’re ready, I’m ready,” Fenwick said.

“Is *she* ready is the question,” Bastille wondered with a huge grin.

“We’re about to find out,” Nitro said, watching the Grand Aboyeur walk off the field.

“Where’s all her devil birds?” Fenwick muttered.

She suddenly made a noise and spun with her cape wide open, and the crowd cheered as a small flock of bats flew out from under it into the air. She let out a high-pitched whistle and waved her cape like wings. Every eye locked on the erratic birds above and the deafening nightmarish sounds they created. A moment later, another sound had everybody searching the skies. The hell was that? Gasps filled the park as the sky above gradually turned black. “Holy shit,” Nitro whispered, his phone buzzing. He pulled it out.

These are all her bats??? Eveque texted.

Yes, he quickly texted back, shoving his phone in his pocket as Felix spun around in a circle, making her cape wave again. The dark cloud of birds shot downward, drawing alarmed cries from everybody.

His men broke out in dumbfounded laughter, awed out of their

fucking minds as the bats created a dark vortex around her, whirling at high speeds. “Fucking Dieu,” he muttered while wondering what they were supposed to do next.

The second he wondered, the cyclone of bats parted, and she walked right out of that bat tornado. She pointed to their dug out then smiled, calling them onto the field with her pointer finger.

“You’re up,” Nitro said, patting Fenwick on the back. “Remember to make it look like a real fight.”

“Uhhhh. Is my burial plan up to fuckin’ date?” he muttered, getting snickers from the rest of them.

“You got this man. We have your back,” Boomer said.

“With our eyes,” Jagger added, bringing loud laughter before they broke out in their chant again as Fenwick ventured onto the field.

The spectators rose to their feet in applause. When he made it halfway out, Felix threw her arms out toward poor Fenwick, sending that wall of bats at him. He put his forearms before his face and walked on till the bats formed a wall before him.

“Go around!” Jagger yelled.

He ran left and the birds followed. He ran right, and they mimicked him. He shot out then, running long and hard, back and forward, then zig-zagged, only to get those bats shadowing his every move. The crowd was ecstatic and fucking amazed. All while his Petite Rebel stood with her hands on hips, laughing and watching.

She made a *whoop* call and moved her cape, causing the birds to push Fenwick in reverse. They did that until he was forced back into the dug-out where the rest of them cowered and laughed at the screaming hurricane force winds coming from those *bat wings*. Fucking incredible.

“Holy shit!” Fenwick said, gasping and laughing.

“What was it like?” Nitro demanded, eager for exacts.

“Impenetrable! I tried pushing in, you saw me? It’s like pushing against a squirming wall full of sharp teeth!”

Nitro called Jagger and Boomer, ready to step up the offense. “I want you both to shoot out of this dugout in opposite directions. Divide the birds. Then you both try to push in. If we can’t do that, we go to our final move. Got it?”

They slammed their helmets together and yelled, “BOOM-BOOM-

BABY”, then hurried to the opening.

“On my signal,” Nitro called, looking up at the now scattered swarm.
“Go!”

They both ran as fast as they could in opposite directions and Felix threw both her arms out toward them with a whistle. Black cyclones shot down, blocking any sight of Felix as they met both his men who now ran chaotically around the field. They finally gave up and ran back to the dugout, howling in laughter from the rush.

“That is fucking insane!” Jagger yelled.

“They’re little propellers of fury!” Boomer said, out of breath.

“Alright,” Nitro said, getting a tad worried. What if he couldn’t break through that wall? “Here’s the deal,” he said to the last four. “I *have* to get that flag. We’re going to form a single line of force and see if we can make any forward progress. If we can, we’ll get as close as possible then we’ll split off one at a time with me at the end, shooting in for her. Got it?”

Felix grinned through the adrenalin rush. She’d never had so much fun with her birds. The exhilaration of the crowd and even Nitro’s men had her laughing from the thrill. She watched them, some yards away in a huddle, making plans. She already knew the bat math. They were not going to reach her. Each bird exerted around two pounds of resistance. Even if all his team tried for the flag at once, they would still fail. The average male could push twice his body weight and assuming his men averaged a couple hundred pounds—seven of them created fourteen hundred pounds of push. Half her bats formed two thousand pounds and judging by the density in the swarm, there were a lot more than hers there—another exhilarating discovery. And her generals were commanding them all!

She got ready as the men formed a long line and headed straight for her with one leading at the front. Smart. But it wasn’t enough. She again signaled the swarm with a wave of her arms and directed it at the now running line of men, eager to see what they’d manage. Nitro was a worthy opponent, and that had her prepared.

Her flock met the charge head on, forming a screaming barrier of shiny black. She released her breath at realizing her army was *not* moving

them back as before. Impressive! What were the men doing differently to manage that? She ventured closer, earning a standing applause from the crowd, and laughed in excitement. One of the men broke away from the line and raced right for her. She screamed in startled excitement, bringing the swarm immediately around her. Oh shit. *Not* around *her*.

She brought shaking fingers to her mouth and delivered the ear-piercing *-go-home* whistle, sending them straight into the sky and heading back to the forests.

The shocked murmurs shot her gaze to the ground before her. The one who'd broken through crawled then collapsed, unmoving. People surged onto the field as she ran to the body, fighting to flip them over. "Nitro!" she screamed, hurrying to get his helmet off. "What's wrong! Talk to me!"

She tore her gaze from his slit eyes, dread pummeling her as she pulled the jersey up. A sob burst out at finding blood coating his skin. "Help me!" she screamed, pressing her face on his, fighting the rising hysteria. "You're okay, you'll be okay. I'm so sorry," she wailed as people dropped next to him.

"Holy fucking Christ," one of them said. "Get my bag!"

She recognized Patches. "They all bit him!" She covered her wails with a hand then realized. "He'll *bleed* to death!"

Lesion was suddenly there, pushing his way through. He knelt next to him and lifted his head, forcing something between his lips. "For pain," he said between labored breaths before shooting off.

"Please help me!" she gasped, needing more hands to press on the hundreds of bites oozing tiny drops of blood. "He needs a-a-an anticoagulant!"

"Move!" Patches ordered her. "I need his clothes off!" She scrambled back right as Lesion and Eveque removed his boots while cussing at him in French. Arms went around her, and she realized it was the Belle Eveque. She gave a sob and latched on to her as Patches cut through his black denim with shears. Oh God. So much blood. Too much blood. Patches' hands were already covered in it.

"Help me apply this," Lesion said, his voice oddly calm as he handed her a can of salve. "On all the bites. Hurry."

"I'll use the hemostatic powder on his legs," Patches said, shaking all the contents of the stuff on him as Felix hurried to apply the greasy mix.

“I can’t see them, there’s too much blood!” she gasped.

“Put it everywhere,” Lesion ordered.

“What’s his blood type,” Patches yelled. “I need my medical database. Somebody get my fucking phone!”

She checked Nitro’s face, her stomach lurching. “He’s pale,” she gasped, as more fingers dipped in the can of sticky stuff and helped find bites. Her eyes moved to Patches’ bloody fingers on the screen of his phone.

“Type A!” he yelled. “Who has type A? Or O blood type. Eveque!”

“Already on it.” The Eveque knelt next to Nitro and removed his shirt. “Hold on brother,” he muttered as Bacon helped ready things for a blood transfusion.

“I need his upper body elevated,” Patches said. “We got you,” he said as The Seer went behind Nitro and propped his upper body against his chest.

Felix gasped out a sob, clinging to Belle Eveque. “They bit him,” she strained quietly. “I screamed. I shouldn’t have screamed.”

“Felix.”

Her eyes shot to Nitro. “I’m here!”

“Try not to talk, buddy,” Patches urged. “Felix is right here, we’re all right fucking here. Scissors,” he ordered Bacon.

“Let her touch him,” Seer said, nodding at her.

The idea he could die threatened to choke her as she knelt next to The Seer and stroked Nitro’s face. She leaned down to his ear. “You win,” she whispered. “You win everything. Everything is yours, all of it. You can have all of it, I’m sorry, please don’t die, please.”

“He’s not dying,” the Seer said.

Hope hit her chest at his knowing and *seeing* tone. She’d heard all the amazing stories about their swamp seer, but it was the first time she’d seen him this up close. She caught sight of his famous scar realizing the rumors were true. It did make him cuter. She put her hand on his arm, and he locked the bluest eyes she’d ever seen on her. “Dieu l’a... Dieu l’a,” he whispered heatedly, nodding.

God has him. She gave a sob and nodded. He was right and she needed to believe that. She turned, finding Patches inserting a needle into his vein as Nitro mumbled incoherently.

“We’ve stopped the bleeding on the front, but we need to turn him and see about his backside,” Lesion urged.

“Oh God,” she whispered, realizing he wasn’t out of the woods.

“I need his heart elevated,” Patches reminded as Spook pulled his body on its side so Lesion could get to the back.

“There’s more packs of the Quick Clot in my bag,” Patches said. “Use it.”

“Talk to him,” Seer whispered to her.

She brought her mouth back to his ear, petting his face again. “Hey handsome. I’m still here.” She stroked his cheek. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy. And...now that you won everything, you have to collect your winnings, oui? *Please Mon Bien Monsieur*,” she begged quietly.

“Fucking Christ,” Eveque gasped at his backside.

“Start at the top,” Patches ordered as her sobs returned.

“Don’t...” Nitro mumbled.

“I’m here, I’m here,” she whispered, kissing his forehead.

“Don’t cry.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. No crying. They’re giving you blood, you lost a lot of blood, you were bit,” she strained, petting his face, and kissing next to his mouth.

“Alright, bud,” Patches huffed after a bit. “You should start to feel like a royal prick in a minute. You’re getting some of your Eveque in your crazy ass veins.”

“And you better not fucking waste it,” Eveque said.

“Fuck,” Nitro croaked.

“Shhhh don’t talk,” she whispered.

“Fuck is a great word for what we just witnessed, yeah Mon frier?” Eveque added as he helped administer the anticoagulant. “Your Bayou Bat Maiden kicked your ass, and everybody saw it, oui? These swamps will now be the most terrifying place on earth, thanks to both of you.”

Nitro nodded with his eyes closed. “Dieu, oui,” he whispered, his mouth tugging in a smile. “She did good.”

She pressed her lips on his face. “I didn’t do good,” she wept softly.

His hand moved along her head, and she took tight hold of it, pressing kisses all over the cool skin.

“So much for lighting it up at the Bayou Ball,” Bacon muttered, igniting her anger.

“He ain’t goin to no *ball!*” she said, wondering how they wouldn’t

know that. “He’s mine.”

Everybody around them laughed real big. “And I doubt anybody will be challenging you to a Bat-tie for it.”

She turned to the deep kind voice of The Seer and found him smiling at her like she’d done some miracle.

Nitro was smiling too as he pulled her mouth to his. “I *am all* yours, Ma Petite Rebelle.”

CHAPTER TWO

Bishop swung his leg over Belle Noir, sitting on her wide leather mouth. “I’m getting ready to call Nitro,” he told 8-Bit on the phone. “We need to find out what’s behind these Drysdale’s generous offer, pronto.”

“I think I did. Or your Belle Eveque did.”

“What do you mean?”

“She came by with Mah-Mah when dropping off jewelry.”

“Jewelry?”

“For the tracking bracelets.”

“Ah, oui, oui.” Bishop switched the phone to his better ear. “How’s the production coming with that?”

“I have a twenty-five-man team creating them as fast as we can. You still want them for all the children, oui?”

“I’d like the entire Hoard tagged, but we start with the most vulnerable for now.”

“Production speeds are two-hundred and fifty a day. I’m still recruiting able bodies to speed it up.”

“Any signs of that mole?”

“Not yet. But I have my drones combing the water ways for signs of enemy infiltration of the technological kind. Everything in me says Drysdale’s been at something for a bit, given what we’ve discovered.”

“You mentioned my Belle Eveque earlier.”

“I showed her the maps of all the land in the swamp and she wondered if she could have copies made and then she asked about everything as if you tell her nothing,” he said, finding that funny while Bishop waited for him to get to the glorious fucking point of what his sweet wife had done while visiting his place. “We eventually get to the Drysdale topic and she’s firing out questions. She wants to see what land he’s purchased, so easy enough, I print it out and she walks over to the map on the wall and places

pins on all the ones he's bought. She then steps back and points to the pins and asks, "Does that look kind of like a land bridge to you?"

His dick twitched at her genius. "And *did* it?"

"Oh, it sure did," he muttered. "There's no doubt in my mind he's purchased all those pieces to create an access route he can control privately. He started this six months ago. If he's been doing that, what else has he been up to?"

"And why not go to him for their trade route instead of us?"

"Probably because they know we have eyes everywhere and wouldn't stand for it. They propositioned us first. Maybe that was just to test the waters, see where we stood?"

Bishop nodded. "Oui. And if we could be bought."

"Still not sure why he's giving the land back. Something's fishy with that. Sure, he no longer needs it but something in my gut says it's more."

"He knows Nitro is ready to take him apart because of Felix. I think this is damage control before we discover more than he wants revealed."

"Maybe. And that Noctambule, why bring that to these swamps? Fuckin' seven kinds of ballsy."

Agreed. "What do we know so far?" He still planned to personally interrogate him.

"His names Asher Ray. Supposedly he's joined their archenemy, The Holy Order. He's still in holding at the Weigh Station. Seer, Maggie and his father are in the process of draining as much info from him as they can."

"Maggie?"

"Spook permitted."

"Nice. So, what the fuck are the Drysdale's doing with this Noctambule is the next question. They clearly want us to see their tie."

"I'm still running Drysdale's sneaky ass down. I'll let you know when I find more out."

"Any theories?"

"Looking to befriend the enemies of the Noctambule?"

Bishop nodded, agreeing with that. "Then let's make him un fraire."

"Hell no, not a brother. Maybe an ami. Vilain ami."

"Vilain ami," Bishop chuckled. "Chef sale-ami," was more like it.

8-Bit laughed. "Chief dirty friend. Perfect."

"Change of subject. Lesion called me with a medical update for

Nitro.”

“Oh shit.”

“Wait till you hear this. He drew some of his blood and analyzed it, then he obtained one of her bats and ran his lil tests. You know what he tells me?”

“He’s batman?”

Bishop laughed. “Maybe close. He said he could develop a chemical compound to mimic the strongest male bats and you could possibly develop a device that mimics various calls which would—”

“Allow him to use the bats in war.”

“Without his petite getting in harm’s way.”

“You think it could work?” 8-Bit wondered.

“Lesion thinks it will. Not sure what it will require from you on the bat call, but...”

“I can easily match any sound, give it fingerprint access only in case it falls into the wrong hands.”

“How soon?”

“Depends on how long you plan to postpone the Ball.”

Bishop had to laugh at the hope in his tone. “We’re discussing those particulars at tonight’s Basilique meeting.”

“I can stand more time for intel,” 8-Bit said. “There’s things I need to double check before we lock down certain plans.”

“Like what?”

“Like more details on the Drysdale’s and their involvement. How deep do those ties run? There’s too many shadows at every turn in this road, I don’t like that.”

“Agreed. But we can’t delay too long. Five days tops. The arms’ exchange is first week of November. The Ball will hopefully draw our coven threats into the swamp where we have the upper hand. We capture or kill because we know they’re guilty and we rule these fucking swamps. If our Arms’ friends have ties with them, seh-lah-vee, we surely had no clue and are merely protecting our waterways and people from old and new threats. We’ll still give them their lil’ weapons shack and just before the bat-tie, we move them to that new location as planned. Then kill as many of these dirty fucks as we can. Ammo’s ours, swamps ours, wins ours. Oui?”

“It occurred to me.”

“What.”

“They’d be stupid not to have some kind of tracking on these firearms which means I need to design something that would block any and all types known in the techno realm.”

“That’s why you’re the giga-chad.”

“Oui. So, five days before the Ball.”

Bishop heard something interesting in his tone and had to grin. “Mon Frier, any time we have a problem in these swamps I can always count on you to meet it with some technological genius weapon.”

“And? You needing something?”

“I’m just wondering what you came up with about this marriage thing. I know you cooked up something. A gadget or program to deal with the threat?”

“Funny.”

Bishop’s laugh ripped at his bone-dry tone. “Come on, tell me. You developed something to find the perfect wife, I know you did. Some algorithms that give you the best possible option? And you input all those names who picked you and know your future bride. Who is she?”

“You sound like you’ve placed bets.”

“Perhaps,” he chuckled.

“Catherine Boone. From Bullet’s Hatch.”

Bishop’s laugh belted without restraint.

“Glad to entertain and I hope I made you rich. My question is who would’ve not guessed that about me. Damn right I did everything you said. I know what kind of woman I want, and I have enough information on the options to narrow down a selection for the interview where I verify my findings.”

“You’re supposed to pick five.”

“I did, but only as a back-up. She’s the perfect fit for me.”

“Mon Frier, do tell what you consider a perfect fit.”

“You bet on this too?”

“No, no, no,” he assured, laughing. “Just curious.”

“Well, you know I believe everything has a simple formula.”

“Oh, I do know this. And an algorithm.”

“Predictability, oui.”

“But Mon Frier,” Bishop said, holding back his laugh. “Women...”

“I am *not* under the superstition that they somehow magically escape the constructs of the universe. They’re different, that’s all.”

“Is that it?”

“It is. I don’t believe in the unpredictable. All glitches are merely complex predictions waiting to be analyzed, understood, and placed in their proper algorithms.”

“Mon Frier, you have no idea how happy it makes me that you have it all figured out. But tell me about this perfect woman of yours.”

“She’s exactly what I want and need which isn’t much. She’s independent, isn’t girly, already has a life she doesn’t intend to quit living—and that doesn’t include me—”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Bishop cut in. “This doesn’t sound like a marriage, it sounds like a distant relationship between friends. Ma Belle Eveque will surely not approve.”

“I can have a simple wife with minimal needs and still be a husband. I’m selecting the one with the least cause for unnecessary drama. She’s mature, she’s simple, she’s smart in all the right things.”

“Like?” he asked, laughter promising again.

“She’s been taking care of herself for years, alone.”

“She doesn’t need a husband is what you’re saying.”

“She doesn’t but she did sign up and she made no secrets about why.”

Bishop raised his brows. “Do tell.”

“She has a...differently abled brother as she calls it, and his ten-year-old son she takes care of. She signed up to merely to appease her nephew who has a super-hero level obsession for The Twelve.”

“Mon Dieu, she doesn’t want to win?”

“Nope.”

Bishop couldn’t keep his laugh back any longer.

“Her not wanting to win means exactly what I want in a woman. One who doesn’t need a man or even want one, but if she had one with compatible assets, one who also doesn’t have needs or wants for a partner, then we have a level field to negotiate the marital particulars from.”

Bishop was howling now.

“What is so fucking funny?” he begged in his bored tone making it funnier. “We’re at war, and we have no clue how long.”

“Oh, *you* are funny, Mon Frier.”

“You think I’m wrong.”

“No, no, no, I know you are.”

“How?” he charged, pissed now.

“When you put your dick in it, you’ll figure it out.”

“Not sure why simple biology has to wreck a perfect arrangement. You forget I’m not a virgin.”

“Oh, oui, this is true,” he conceded, still stifling chuckles. “I surely understand, as I too was no virgin.”

“And you’re that one anomaly that I haven’t had the privilege of dissecting.”

“And Spook?”

“Maggie,” he easily said to that anomaly.

“You know I have nothing but brotherly affections for you Mon Frier and wish only to see you...”

“Here we go,” he muttered, prompting more guffaws. “I’m meeting her tomorrow night to propose.”

“Propose? Marriage?”

“The arrangement,” he said. “And to meet her nephew as she requested.”

Bishop had to climb off his bike to pace at this news. “She requested this? When?”

“On the application.”

“How?”

“There was a section at the end asking for their personal reasons for choosing which was where she detailed her reason for entering being to appease her nephew. She offered to pay money if any one of us would go by for his birthday, but that I was his favorite.”

Bishop couldn’t stop the shake in his head, astonished with his computing in all this. “So, you don’t even know if she likes you!”

“Pretty sure she *doesn’t* like me,” he happily said.

“Mon Dieu,” he muttered. “Why can’t you just pick a fucking woman that likes you, and you like, and go all in?”

“Who said I’m not going all in?” he said in exasperation. “Who said you have to take a swan dive from a mile high cliff into the abyss of love? Why can’t I just casually stroll my way on level ground with a cool head?”

“I need popcorn for this one. So, you’re going over there and popping

the...marriage arrangement...proposal.”

“Unless you give me a damn good reason I shouldn’t?”

Bishop stopped in his tracks, mentally holding his tongue still.

“Well?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Take your time. But I have to go. Text me your ancient wisdom.”

“Oui,” Bishop conceded, grinning more.

“But don’t worry, I’m not pretending to know everything and will happily accept any and all of your Belle Eveque’s resources. This mission is no different than any other I’ve taken with The Twelve. Excellence and success are the only options I allow for, you know this.”

“I do.”

“I will not stop till it’s done.”

“I know this too.”

“Till it’s done properly and to the most perfect extent I’m capable.”

“Oui, oui,” he said, fighting not to laugh. “Mah Belle Eveque has many relationship manuals you will be interested in, the physical and the emotional stuff.”

“Physical, good. I want all of them,” he said while Bishop almost laughed at his repeat of *physical*. No doubt his analytical mind was on fire with that vague gem.

“You are the giga-chad. I have utmost faith in you.”

“Just remember who started this mess. You did.”

“I did,” he conceded, smiling.

“There wasn’t a whole lot of prep between now and your breaching of the Twelve’s Code.”

Bishop’s snicker escaped. “Breaching.”

“More like violated if we’re going to get technical.”

Fuck, he was killing him.

“In a semi-normal setting, classes would’ve been ideal for this shit,” he went on, his anger gaining momentum.

Bishop nodded, wanting exactly that. All his inner giga-thoughts. “Classes can still be arranged. We have a six-month courtship,” he reminded.

“I remember, and I think it’s a waste of time, but I speak only for myself even while being damn sure there are no classes for men with Traps’ mindset.”

“Perhaps a safe house is necessary for my Twelve Warriors to learn how to survive these little females.”

“Says the one who already lost his balls.”

“No-no-no-no,” he lightly corrected with a shit-eating grin. “Grew a new pair.”

“A new pair, huh?”

“Oui, an entirely separate pair. My moss-colored steel ones are still there.”

“Hiding for their lives?”

“Waiting their turn,” Bishop assured around a fresh round of guffaws. “Trust me, Mon Frier, you will understand one day.”

“Right. Trust the one who sold The Twelve into sex slavery.”

Bishop lost it. “Sex slavery!” His phone buzzed and he looked. “Gotta go, my Belle Eveque’s calling.”

“Ah. Saved by the *Belle*,” he muttered. “Later.”

Nitro jolted awake, kicking and swinging his way out of the tangle of covers while the echo of bat screams clawed his eardrums. He stood, winded in the middle of a dark room, looking around. His head spun as he recognized the bed. Felix. Relief flooded him.

When had he gotten there? How long was he out? The questions hit his muscles and jacked him up with adrenalin. First step for the door and he faceplanted with a loud *boom*. “Fucking...” He made his way onto his hands and knees, feeling like a million angry ants chewed on his skin. Not ants. Fucking bats. Every part of him ached down to his bones.

Where was Felix? What time was it? He angled his head at the window. The light filtering through the sage green curtains said it was either early or late or overcast. He tried to remember where the sun set at her place as black screaming birds made sporadic flash appearances in his mind along with those Drysdale fucks. And the Noctambule.

Crawling his way to the bed, he pulled himself back on it and sat, exhausted. Lesion had come. Or had he dreamed it? He reached behind his ear and discovered an oily substance on his skin. Not a dream. He focused on remembering what he’d told him. Something about the bats and him making

some kind of concoction to help him with the birds. Help how?

He angled his head at the sound of voices and searched for his phone, ready to get answers. His top seven men were there he remembered, and that fact filled him with alarm. Could have been standard safety protocol or it could have been they learned something that required it.

He got ready to stand, needing those answers. First Felix. Then the rest. No, second his fucking bladder before it burst.

He made it out of the room and swayed at the top of the stairs, listening to the ebb and flow of distant mumbles. Bracing his hands on the stair walls, he made his way to his ass when his muscles decided they were already done. “Fuck,” he whispered, panting and sweating. He tried to make out the number of voices and the gender. One was female but was it Felix? He maneuvered his way down the stairs, mostly on his rear end. At the bottom, he listened again, hearing only bird fuss now.

“Anybody there?” he called out, his words barely carrying past the racket. A minute later, he pulled himself up and aimed for the bathroom, desperate to relieve himself. Once inside, he meandered his way to the toilet and used the wall before him for support.

“Aaaagh fuck,” he gasped, every muscle in his body back to trembling as his bladder emptied slower than he needed.

Once done, he stepped left and grabbed hold of the sink, lifting his head to the mirror. Fuck, he exhausted. From the bites? Loss of blood? Some reaction to Lesion’s concoction?

He needed his fucking phone.

He turned on the water, resting his forearms on the sink, the cold splatters almost painful. He finally filled his hands with water and splashed it on his face, then chest. A full minute later, he straightened and eyed all the pissed red dots on his chest and shoulders. He turned a little, following the nonstop warpath that continued around his back. Cock, face, head, and feet were the only things unbitten.

His adrenalin spiked as his mind relived that moment when the bat vortex had devoured him. Maybe ten seconds. That’s all it took to turn him into a pin cushion spurting blood.

He recalled his Petite Rebell’s reaction and made his way to the door, needing to see she was okay. And feel her. Kiss her. Then make love to her.

In the foyer between the living room and kitchen, he angled his head

at hearing a familiar sound that set his pulse hammering. His gaze landed on the door leading to that bat room and his pulse sped up even more. They sounded...agitated.

Thick premonition snapped his head to the doorway leading to the porch. He hurried out, his fear eliminating all pain as he looked around. He whipped his head toward voices. Definitely a female. He hurried along the porch, eyeing the overcast gloom while looking around for his men.

The mumbles grew louder, indicating he was moving in the right direction. Definitely Felix's nippy tone. He rounded the first corner, searching the back yard as his heart clobbered his chest. His blood hit an invisible wall at finding her near the dock sitting on a bench. With Ray fucking Drysdale. He spotted two of his men nearby as his legs went terminator, eyes fixed on the prick perched on the bench in his fancy suit.

What the *fuck* was going on?

Felix's heart tried to burst through her chest at the impossible sight of Nitro. "And *there's* my husband," she sang with a smile and wave, fighting to sound casual while pure rage and animalistic sex marked his steps. He was a visual orgasm and every female part salivated in hunger. But the fury, lord have mercy, that had her hairs standing on end. Took all her strength not to launch off that bench and hurry to explain what was going on. That couldn't happen. Not after spending the past twenty minutes kindly demonstrating to Ray, the brother of that dump-truck-of-bullshit ex of hers that she was not the same naïve woman that fell under the spell of a man. Racing off to meet her glorious god of a husband would wreck that and she wasn't giving a single cent more of her pride for that fool. Even if she *was* one thousand percent taken with Lukas. Mercy, was she *ever* and didn't regret a second.

The second Ray stood, she did too and there was no stopping her legs from hurrying down the pier to meet Nitro. She headed directly for him but judging by his look and pace, he saw only one person and it wasn't her. "Why are you up?" she cried. "You're supposed to be recovering."

Her hands landed on those washboard abs, and he finally tore his murderous gaze from the man and aimed it at her. "What the fuck's going on?"

The power in his words hit her guts like a punch and she told herself it wasn't aimed at her. "You'll behave, because he's here to bring the deed to my land, free and clear," she muttered quietly.

His gaze moved along her face then lower before moving back up to her eyes, his fury back to full throttle. "What are you wearing?"

"It's my honeymoon dress and I surely didn't know I was having this type of company."

He stared right into her gaze for many seconds, his two-colored eyes storming with so many delicious powers she couldn't breathe. He grabbed her face, and his tongue was in her mouth, thrashing with a breath stealing hunger. The potency sucked away any fears or concerns other than meeting his needs properly. "J'ai besoin de baiser ma belle cher." He whispered his hot French right in her mouth, making her legs weak. Swampsations, to hear such dirty words. She wanted them on her gravestone. Well, maybe a bracelet. *I want to fuck my pretty wife* might be a tad too scandalous.

She was suddenly set aside with his strong hands and staring at his backside. She swayed like a wilted flower in the wake of that kiss war he'd made on her mouth. And won.

"Hello, Mr. Lukas Dehmond. I was just here giving—"

"Where's your *brother*."

"He's back in town, and I understand the hard feelings."

"Do you," Nitro accused with a seething disdain that unglued Felix from her spot and launched her toward them. "Get off this fucking property before I *bury* you here."

"Was just leaving," he hurried, raising both hands and side-stepping his massive frame before racing off with a "Good day, Miss Felix."

She watched him run-walk down the pier looking like a cartoon in his pin stripe suit and silly top hat smack in the middle of a swamp. She turned and gasped at finding Nitro inches away, eyeing the man still. Her heart galloped as his closeness devoured her whole. She braced for his gaze, feeling it coming for her, knowing what it would do when it did.

The second his eyes lowered on her, everything in his expression shifted. From disgust and murder to hunger and murder. "How do you feel?" she asked, her words faint and withering.

"Like I need to *fuck* you."

The threat was as imminent as it was nasty and had her quaking in her

own skin. She nodded of all things.

“You ready for that?” His boiling eyes burned along her face and again she nodded. “Go wait for me in bed while I talk to my men.”

She nodded. “Oui, Mon Bien Monsieur.”

He grabbed her face and kissed her again with a sound that was half growl half groan, letting her know what was coming.

Nitro had no doubt it was the combination of war threats, lust, and fury that gunned his engines, making him invincible. He was happy to hear the men were there as a precaution and that Noctambule sat in their Weigh Station getting the royal interrogation treatment that he very much wanted a part of.

But first, Felix. He didn't care what it cost him as he made his way upstairs to his little bat queen, recalling how she'd let him devour her mouth. Now he'd devour the rest of her.

He thought to knock on her bedroom door before entering, not wanting to startle her.

“Nitro?”

He entered and managed to lock the door while the sight of her, naked and in the middle of the bed, imprisoned him. His shy, delicious dessert with that breathless hunger had him furiously aroused again.

Next to the bed, he lowered his underwear, and those beautiful blue eyes dropped to his cock. Before he kicked free of them, she had his raging hard on in both hands, her mouth devouring him and all the nasty plans he'd made on his way up. “Fuck, fuck, yes,” he croaked, his eyes rolling shut as he held her rapidly bobbing head. His fingers clenched in her silky hair as she sucked, already commanding his climax. Those fucking whimpers had him in a prison of lust so thick he couldn't think about anything but filling her throat with his cum.

She raked those greedy nails over every inch of his balls and his orgasm broke loose. “Felix!” He rode that seething fury till he was a mindless animal with only one thought. Make her take it all. Every bit. No fucking mercy.

He took his time coming down from that heaven, stroking her head and cheek as she mewled devoted kisses all along his pulsing cock while he growled through the air burning in his lungs.

Retaliation rippled through his muscles, demanding vengeance on his Petite Rebel. She'd wrecked all his dirty plans with those naughty lips. He grabbed hold of her head and pulled that delicious defiance to his mouth, hellbent on ruining her with his teeth and tongue.

She became utter silk under his assault, adding more fuel to his rage-lust. He made an angry fist in her hair, devouring her sharp cry before burning a path to her neck, the creamy skin an instant obsession that made him more ravenous. He opened wider, wanting more, wanting it all as he sucked with a ragged groan, marking her perfect skin and muscle in his lust-crazed frenzy.

“Fuck me!”

He didn't think he could get any crazier, but he was so wrong. Those two desperate words scorched a path through him a cutthroat clarity. He was on planet *fucking* earth for that reason alone. All his flings with wars would never be bigger than that.

In a second, he put her beneath him, imprisoning her wrists in one hand, her neck and life in the other. He was immortal, and with a god-like perfection, he answered his calling, he *fucked* his wife, not stopping till he annihilated both of them.

But when that divine smoke began to settle in the aftermath, he began to seriously wonder... no, *worry*... Had he just fucked her or sexually assaulted her?

CHAPTER THREE

“You think it’s coming this way?” Jason yelled from the porch as the sound of one of them godawful swamp dragons grew ever louder.

“No, I do not,” Cat called, rinsing her final dish.

Ever since she’d applied to that stupid swamp ball, he’d been hawking the waterways. Worst thing she’d done was tell him she’d put in a special request for a birthday visit. Since then, he’d harassed every kind of boat noise that passed nearby. She hadn’t told him her other note and sure didn’t plan on it.

Marry one of the *Twelve*. She shook her head for the fiftieth time. As if she’d up and marry at her age. Wreck her pristine man-less record of fifteen years. She was Queen Bayou-Self and she held that title with a gator-fierce grip.

Mercy, that boat was getting louder by the second.

“I see it, I see it! It’s coming here!”

She snatched a dishtowel from the counter and made her way to the door.

“It’s 8-Bit’s Swamp Dragon!” he screeched, sending her heart to her toes while he jumped up and down.

“Aunt Cat! He’s here!”

“Almighty alligators,” she whispered when the giant leader came to a graceful stop in his swamp-colored ear-killer. He jumped onto their dock in blue jeans and black t-shirt and her hands flew to her hair. “Swamp-shit!”

She ran for the bathroom and found a nightmare in the mirror. “*Holy moss shit!*” Her hair!

She wrenched the faucet handles, blasting the tap as the sound of talking and laughing reached her. Ten seconds of water splashing panic added sopping wet to the catastrophe. She snatched a towel from the bar and

patted herself down, already out of breath.

Wait a marsh minute! She didn't care about appearances!

Or the men who may or may not approve.

She shot the towel in the corner and scooped up her courage, pausing with hand on the door at hearing his deep laugh. Marsh *miracles* and *mercies*. She looked down at her dirty overalls. Shit. Wasn't a crime to be presentable. Simply manners. She still had those.

Sneaking quick-like to her room, she clawed the one dress she had for church off its hanger and stripped out of her clothes like they'd caught fire.

Oh, no. She surely smelled like an old gator's breath. Won't get close.

"Aunt Cat!" Jason yelled. "Aunt Cat, Mr. 8-Bit wants to talk to you!"

Talk to her! Little bayou born brat! "Coming," she called, dashing to her body length mirror for a panicked look over.

I don't care!

Right.

She marched her way into the living room and came to a brick wall halt at finding him towering there like a giant. Sacred cypress he was *massive* in person. Her mind and mouth ran in opposite directions as she got stuck in those eyes. Then on his mouth. Lord, his whole *face*.

"I think she's in shock."

Jason's loud whisper lassoed her senses.

"She's not used to having men in the house," he whispered on. "She don't much like them." The smile he gave put her right back on the corner of dumb and dumber while Jason's tongue grew a motor and went to town telling him all about this that and the—wait. What did the big fella just say?

"The Swamp Ball!" Jason cried, eyes huge and shining with some miracle on her. "You signed up and he picked you! Didn't I say you'd win Aunt Cat!" He looked at the towering giant, nodding big. "I told her so!"

And did he not see her note at the end? Surely, he must've if he was there paying a visit. Unless... "You uh...got that note on the application, I take it?"

"I sure did," he said, his deep voice adding distractions to her befuddled brain.

She eyed Jason, not about to let him know. "Jason, how about you go check the traps for supper. I want to make a fresh coubion."

"For Mr. 8-Bit?" he asked, all wide-eyed astonishment.

“No, I...” She flicked her gaze at him. “He’s got hatches to tend to, I’m sure.”

“Actually, I don’t at this time.”

“Yes!” Jason yelled, running out the door before she could say a word. Lil shit.

“He gets ahead of himself,” she explained as the screen door banged shut. She crossed her arms over her chest in case his eyes decided to take a stroll where they didn’t belong. But they didn’t, they stayed on her face, all dark chocolate mixed with caramel. She couldn’t accuse him of womanizing like she did most men since he’d been celibate which left her with no defense against the magical pull they possessed. Authority. A man who never failed at anything he said or did. Which reminded her. “What’s this about the Swamp Ball?” She wasn’t about to make assumptions about it.

“Really, I came to discuss other matters.”

Oh. Good.

She stood rocking back and forth feeling silly in her own skin as he looked around. “You want some coffee?” she asked when his eyes paused at some of her paintings. “We can talk on the porch where it’s a little cooler.”

Getting his direct gaze and barely smile made her terribly sorry she’d distracted him. She wasn’t used to men that huge and...stuff, standing in her house was all.

“I’d like that.”

“Feel free to wait for me out there,” she said, turning for the kitchen side of the room.

At the sink, she instead found him standing before her paintings. Great. “Your nephew paints?”

Mother of moss! Heat spanked her cheeks as she set the kettle on the stove. “He does. With his muddy feet all over the place.” He moved on from her paintings and she cringed at his next stop. The mantle over the fireplace. She only displayed her art because Jason liked it, no other reason.

“So... who’s the artist?” he wondered.

Judge and jury, go outside, man!

“We do crafts on holidays for fun. No artists here.”

“Huh,” he said, slowly moving along the sticks, stones, and mud figures. “I’d have to kindly disagree, Miss Boone.”

A different kind of heat showered her face as she fought with the lid

on the coffee can. It suddenly cut loose and flew across the blankin' room. He turned at the clatter. "Sorry, this darn lid's got the bite of an ornery piss-ant."

Hurrying back to the drip pot, she dumped scoops in the basket and paused. How many was that? She eyed the pile and added another lump of grinds then replaced the lid while wondering what he was looking at now.

The screen door opened, and she glanced over her shoulder as he went onto the porch, thank the good lord. She let out several breaths, ready for this little visit to be over. He had other business besides that silly ball. What on earth was it? Could be anything while under war time codes. Any hatch leader could make requests of other hatch members if it served the cause. Which of course she didn't mind unless it kept her from her responsibilities, which were her nephew and brother.

The kettle whistled a little too quickly and she filled the top half of the drip pot with it. She angled her head, seeing him through the window, hands braced on the two porch posts at the top of the steps. Lord, those *muscles*. Those *arms*. What on earth kind of wires was he twisting? Even a blind person could see those luscious lumps went on and on beneath that black t-shirt. That lucky material held on to him like an unhealthy obsession.

Her antique phone let out its obnoxious ring and she hurried to it. Receiver in hand, she glanced over her shoulder. "Hello?" she answered, quiet as she could.

"You still coming tonight, right?"

Dammit, she forgot about their booray game later! Bad enough they rarely had time for them anymore. Everybody was married with piles of kids. Everybody but her, thank the good Lord. She stole a glance behind her again. "I may have to cancel."

"What?! But we need four players!"

"I'm sorry! Something came up!"

"Why are you whispering?"

Her eyes rolled at Michelle's suspicious tone. "Because what came up is still up."

"You got company?"

"Gasps and shock," Cat went on quietly, stealing peeks behind her.

"Who is it? Male?"

"Not your business. I gotta go!"

“Is he single?”

She hung up and headed back to the kitchen, getting her good coffee cups out only to second guess herself. She always used them for company. He was company, same as anybody.

“You take any fixins?” she called.

“Fixings?”

“Cream or sugar.”

“Nah,” he called back.

She nodded, happy to be excused from the extra task as she brought their cups out. “Here you go.”

The second he reached for the cup she realized she held it wrong and attempted to set hers on the railing, so he didn’t burn himself. While she did, his large hand covered hers and the shock of it made her miss the railing.

“Shit!”

“Sorry, I was trying to steady your hand, so you didn’t burn yourself,” he explained.

“And I was trying to set mine down, so you didn’t burn *yourself*.”

He glanced at his cup and handed it to her. “You can have mine.”

She took it only because her brain was still processing the whole touch thing. Highly, *highly* inappropriate!

He hopped over the porch rail and fetched her cup before climbing back over with it. “My celibacy lifestyle is shining through,” he muttered, holding the empty cup in his hand, and looking around.

That’s right. She needed to remember that before judging him too harshly. “Well, we’re twins in that regard.”

He eyed her. “You’re celibate?”

“Oh, no, I mean in social skills. I have little practice.” With the opposite sex, that was.

“So... you’re not celibate?”

She regarded him then leaned against the porch post. “Trying to figure out why you’d ask that,” she decided to say right out.

“Sorry,” he chuckled, setting the empty cup on the rail.

“What kind of business you need to discuss?” she remembered, helping him past what looked like embarrassment.

“Yeah,” he sighed, palming the railing as he faced the swamp.

She tore her eyes off the bulge of muscles the casual position

produced. “If it’s in regard to needing something for this war, I’m happy to help however I can outside my commitments. My brother and nephew are my world and I’m the only one they have to look after them.”

“It’s...well it’s definitely for the war,” he said, seeming to realize. “And you know we’re taking wives.”

Her stomach had multiple spasms at those words. Taking wives. Coming from him, it felt very literal. He was surely capable of taking anything he wanted. “I heard,” she nodded, fighting to keep her opinion out of her tone but it was hard. She thought it was dumb, forcing grown men to pick wives when they’d learned not to need them. She could identify.

“I know your reasons for signing up for the Ball, which...I found admirable. I also know you don’t need a husband and don’t want one.” He shifted on his feet and the slight move sent a ripple through the muscles in his arms as he surveyed the swamps. “Turns out that is exactly the kind of woman I’m looking for and was hoping to talk to you about teaming up with me, seeing as we both have the same needs or lack of them.”

Her head drew back all on its own with that bit. “You don’t *want* a wife?”

“I want to do my job. You want to do yours. You don’t want or need a man. I don’t want or need a woman. You’d want for nothing of course. I’d take care of you financially.”

She faced the swamp too now, just so she could have something besides his endless muscles to look at. Mercy of mercies, what a proposition! “So, you’d provide for everything but...the...intimate stuff is what you’re saying?”

“Well,” he said, his low tone tying up her guts. “It’s simple biology. If you need it, as your husband I would provide it.”

Her pulse was ringing in her ears with that bit. “And if you need it?”

“I’ve been celibate for twelve years. I know how not to need it.”

“Same here.”

She felt his gaze on her as she pretended to study the trees. “Is that a yes? You can think about it,” he added.

Oh, she was, all while stunned in disbelief. Why me, kept jumping on her tongue. Because you signed up, dummy. And he picked you because of your clever answers that would never get you picked. “Can I say no?” she wondered, since he mentioned it was war related.

“Yes,” he chuckled.

She nodded but sure didn’t feel any less trapped. “You said this was war related. How so?”

He turned and put his butt on the rail, crossing his arms with a deep breath. “We voted to take wives. I agreed. And...there’s a war,” he said simply with a shrug. “That’s how it’s related.”

She watched his face, and he assaulted her with his swampy gaze, her poor lungs taking the direct hit. Marry. That man standing right there.

Wasn’t just any man, he was the leader of one of their hatches. Nobody considered the unthinkable when wanting this, that or another in their life. Did she want to be married? Hell no. Did she want to be married to the leader of the Tech Hatch? Completely different question.

“Think about it,” he repeated quietly. “I know it’s a lot to ask.”

It damn well was. The more she considered a yes answer, the more questions popped up in her head. What if he was wrong about wanting or *not* wanting the intimacy thing? And what if kids cropped up out of that? What then? A father that visited every Saturday? That was one bad thing about being single. No kids. And while she didn’t want a gaggle of them like her friends, she had often dreamed of a daughter to dote on.

The image of a raven-haired Cajun beauty—all compliments of Sir Gorgeous—formed in her mind. He wasn’t attracted to her in any marital way and that was actually no bother. He mentioned the sex stuff as biological. A sometimes-necessary human need. Like for having kids. She could like that idea. Unless he didn’t.

Wait a minute. She had leverage in this. She could...request things just as he had.

“So...what if there’s something I want out of it? Would you consider it?”

“Of course. Like what?”

She turned and sat on the rail like him, also taking a breath for courage. “I would like one child to raise for myself. Of course, you could spend as much time with her as you want but I’d want her majority of the time.”

“Her, huh?”

She regarded him at the hint of humor. “I want a girl but would be happy with a son.”

“This would require sex as I’m sure you’re aware,” he said, stating the obvious like it was high stakes now.

“Biology, yes. As you said. No big deal.”

“Could take more than one try,” he said after a moment.

Her guts bat-tied her breakfast with those particulars. “I know,” she said simply, sure it would be anything but with somebody like him. But she could do it. Just had to put her mind to it.

“If you’re aware of this and still want it, then I agree to giving you one child.”

The absolution in his tone brought a whole lotta mischief to her brain. What if she decided having kids was fun? And wanted more?

Then renegotiate at that bridge.

“I’m aware and still want the one child.”

“And when would you want this one child?”

The burdensome sigh that carried his question filled her with mucky mud. The dreaded sex chore. With the woman he wasn’t attracted to. That was suddenly a massive pill going down the hatch sideways. “After all this war mess, for sure,” she managed.

“Glad to hear that.”

“I’m not an emotional female, Mr...”

“Ethan. Sorry, I should’ve introduced myself and not assumed you knew.”

She nodded a little and crossed her arms over her waist. Ethan. Nice name. She liked it. “I mean... I get the hardships of life and know things are to be done in their proper seasons. Including having children. The doorway to that scenario will remain locked tight until we both agree it’s time.”

Mercy, his smile was gonna be a problem. “And, if I may,” he said, “I have some requirements.”

She nodded, back to nervous enough to puke. “Alright.”

“As my wife, I need to be able to protect you. I’d want you to wear a tracking device at all times. Would be embedded in the ring I give you.”

Ring. My wife. Protect. She needed to pinch herself. Was he talking about a wedding ring? *What other ring, dummy?*

“I can do that,” she said, not seeing a problem with it.

“And tracking for your nephew. He’d also be my nephew. A bracelet he wears at all times.”

She realized how blazing happy he was going to be about all of this. “Pretty sure he’d trade his teeth for gator ones if *you* asked him to.”

Ohhh, heck-a-hooey, his laugh. Maybe a son by him wouldn’t be the worst thing. “Not sure how to take all that attention.”

“Like a privilege,” she assured him. “A gift.”

He nodded and gave her a double whammy with his eyes and smile. “I can manage that. Also, as my wife, there would be protocol with other males.”

The predatory shift in his stance and tone was noted by every cell in her body as she waited for particulars.

“What’s mine is *entirely* mine. If you need or want male company, you’ll have it with me.”

A million gatorbumps covered her body at his words and tone. Without a doubt, it was a warning, and all the hairs on her body heeded it loud and clear. She realized her muscles were quivering just like when she’d rescued Jason from the jaws of a hungry gator in hot pursuit. He felt just like that. A hungry gator in hot pursuit.

But he ain’t hungry for you. So, calm your jets.

“I have no male friends. Except for Daniel. I work with him at Marsh and Muck. We grew up together.” She’d better be fully honest. “I did date him in my younger years but that lasted all of six weeks. We’ve been just friends since.”

“Good. I may also need you for certain public functions.” His gaze lowered to her chest, sending her pulse in a frenzy before it returned to hers. “I’ll buy anything and everything you might require for those things. So, I’ll need all your measurements and basic tastes.”

She fought back embarrassment at realizing he didn’t think her capable in matters of fashion. He’d be right but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“So far so good?” he asked, angling a look at her.

Did that mean he knew things about fashion? How would he? “Who’d be buying my clothes?”

“I would.”

“You,” she muttered.

“I may not want a woman but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how I’d want her dressed.”

She fixed her gaze on the wall before her. “Now you have me curious.”

“About what?”

“About how you want a woman dressed. I have modesty standards.”

“Good to hear.”

“But I don’t want to be choking on fabric in the dead of summer either.”

“Just so the parts of you that belong to a husband are *fully* hidden.”

She managed a snort as her body did the jitter bug at the return of his cocky...*possessiveness*. He didn’t seem the jealous type, but he was damn sure the stingy type. “There’s a sale on drapes at the Hurricane Hole.”

His laugh made another appearance, stomping all over her guts. “I like your sense of humor.”

Guess it was good he liked something other than her not needing or wanting a man. “And do these uh...rules work in reverse? No female company? No showing off the parts that belong to a wife? Do I get to dress you?”

“I have a dress code already with The Twelve that I’m obligated to follow. And trust me, it’s tailored to ensure zero temptation.”

A single laugh shot out. “That why ninety percent of the Hoard’s women signed up for that ball?”

He crossed his legs and her gaze landed on the massive bulge between them, putting her dangling from Mt. Lust. “Fair point,” he conceded with a chuckle as she zoomed her eyes back to the wall, locking them on the first pine knot she could find. Even then, she reverted to her Barbie days with her raven-haired Swamp Ken stripped down and naked. What sort of underwear did he like? Then came the dizzying wonder of what he’d be packing in them. Judging by the size of that crotch-knot, a *lot* more than she could ever handle.

She rode a wave of boiling dizziness that had her needing to escape her own skin.

“I’m open to any requirements you may have for me as your husband. I’ll accommodate any that I can.”

She bit her tongue on offering the same, knowing it wasn’t a two-way street due to their different positions in life. *As your husband.*

“I’d also want you to go to the ball as one of the five women I select to choose from. Just so I’m following their plan.”

Ball? “Oh mercy,” she muttered, shaking her head. “That’s a tall order.”

“No taller than it is for me, this I can promise.”

Interesting. Everything he said was interesting. Made her want to stare at him, study him. Then get lost in the fall-out. She cleared her throat, turning plumb around and focusing on the trees again. “So, we also share the same anti-social proclivities I see.”

“Pretty confident I hate social functions more than you do.”

“Ha! I’m willing to share that platform, but you’re not owning it.”

“Fair enough. And I do have questions I need to ask to verify our match.”

She turned a little toward him, debating. “Alright.”

“I already know you’re prone to living by logic and not by feelings.”

She nodded, back to second guessing herself on that front. “Correct.”

“Is there anything you currently do that might conflict with our arrangement so far?”

She considered then lifted her shoulders a little. “Other than play booray with my three girlfriends when they’re not tied to domestic duties, no. I do like to fish and hunt,” she remembered. “Fresh game is one of my favorites.”

She eyed him as he crossed his massive arms, seeming to consider. “And how often you do this?”

She pursed her lips, thinking. “Bout once a month, sometimes less. Depends on how much I catch, really.”

“Would you consider letting me accompany you?”

Huh. She felt like that needed a good long thinking on. “Can’t imagine why I might mind that. So long as you realize it’s not a social event.”

“Merci Dieu.”

He was proving to be a lot more like her than she imagined. Merci Dieu indeed. The sound of the little motorboat brought Jason in view. “I don’t want him knowing yet,” she said to him.

“Sure.”

“And I’m sure I have questions for you too still.”

“That reminds me. I brought a phone I’d like you to have so I can always communicate with you. That’s a war-time request,” he said, his tone leaving no room for refusal.

She nodded, happy to escape that internal debate. “Alright.”

“You can text me your questions. Or call me.”

“Okay.”

“Also, I want you to wear the tracking jewelry starting today.

Wartime request as well.”

Convenient little bossy card. “Fine.” Wait. “You have it now?”

“I brought both since they are not negotiable at this time.”

“You giving rings and phones to all the eligible maidens?”

“No, just to you.”

Her heart swapped places with her stomach. “But I didn’t technically say yes yet.”

“And while you’re deciding, I want you to wear it.”

But he’d assumed she’d say yes. She wanted to be bothered but her body and mind wouldn’t hear of it.

“I got supper!” Jason called as he docked the boat. “Three sacalait and two catfish! Fat ones too!”

This was where she offered him to stay for supper. Mercy. “Sounds like a meal for three,” she muttered.

She felt his gaze and smile on her. “Indeed, it does. Are you inviting me to dinner?”

“In a roundabout way,” she said, flicking him a look.

“I accept. If you let me cook.”

She nearly choked on her own lungs, looking at him. “Hard rule. My kitchen. Not yours.”

His gorgeous laugh filed her fight claws down to the nub. “I have the same rule at my swamp palace.”

“And if I ever in all my life go there, I’ll be sure and honor it.”

“Yes, you will,” he agreed his feral authority burning a lot more than her buns.

“Come see!” Jason called, racing down the dock with water sloshing out of the bucket.

“Meh-no, I’ll see it when you get here,” she laughed, eyeing Ethan as he headed toward him, not missing that Cajun cocky swagger he wore like an iron hide. She pried her eyes off his ass, shocked with herself. She never looked at men. But then there hadn’t ever been a god-like one on her porch asking her to marry him. Nothing wrong with examining the goods. The

second she thought it, she did just that as he crouched down on the peer making a big deal out of Jason's catch.

"I bet it sure is nice having a man around the house," Ethan said, angling a smile over his shoulder with a wink that noodleized her legs.

"Oh, Aunt Cat don't need no man," he said with grave assurance before leaning and whispering something that made Ethan throw his head back and laugh.

"I don't even wanna know what he said," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest, and cocking her hip.

"No, I doubt you wouldn't," Ethan said,

She made her way to the door, shaking her head. "It ain't nice to tease people, boy."

"It's not teasing!" Jason said behind her. "I just said you remind me every day."

"And why?" she countered over her shoulder, catching Mr. Sexy Grins eyeing her. "Cause you started nagging me every day!" She paused with the screen half opened, needing to explain. "Ever since they put those eligible maiden flyers up, he's had me married off to all the twelve!"

"Did *not*!" he argued sharply.

"Did too," she snapped right back. "You had them all in a neat row for me to pick from."

"But I had Mr. 8-Bit right at the front!"

Oh mercy. Cat hurried into the house.

"But I'm happy for a visit," she heard him say to Ethan real quiet. "No marriage needed." Then a hot whisper, "But it would sure be amazing if you *did* marry her!"

"Jason!" Cat yelled. "Go clean those fish before I skin your tail!"

His face lit up with a grin as he held his bucket up. "That's what I'm doin'!"

He hurried around her, leaving her floundering for something to do while Ethan's sexy grin ate up all the oxygen in the room.

Lord help her survive this without making a fool of herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

“It’s Beth and Lucas!” Tully raced out the door and ran to meet them down the pier while Lesion stepped onto the porch, hoping that satisfied the detested social duty while also keeping them out of their home. He didn’t like sharing Tully with others, not even for a minute of the day. He’d accepted his obsession as an inevitable Tully war casualty. He had incurred countless since the very first day of her rescue. And they never stopped. Every day he spent with her, the wreckage piled up and he coveted every one of his Tully scars.

“Oh, what a *great idea!*” Tully cried, holding a folder in her hand then racing toward him with it. An overload of chemicals rushed in at the sight of his beautiful wife, his sun star, shooting straight for him.

“Look!” she gasped, next to him. “It’s for our sex classes!”

“Marriage,” Beth said with a grin as her and Lucas walked onto the porch.

Tully’s face sobered at him. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“It is,” he assured, capturing her with an arm around her shoulder and pulling her closer.

She returned to reading whatever was in the folder. “Love language!” she gasped, hitting him with a direct smile. “Have you ever heard of that?”

Maybe he had in medicinal language. Seeing her excitement, he decided to be dumb. “I don’t think I have, no.”

“Me either,” Lucas said, raising his hand with a huge grin.

“Because your *father.*” Beth said, implying a worn-out discussion.

“One would think educating a man before marriage would be wise,” Lucas sighed, shoving his hands in his overall pockets. “But...what does the slow swamp seventeen-year-old know?” He gave a shrug.

“And I have pleaded your case,” Beth said, pained for him. “I’m *sure* he’s near breaking but you need to give him a little time. It’s not every day

your son falls in love with your daughter.” She shot up a hand. “I know you’re not technically related but, in his head, he can’t separate it.”

“Yet,” Lucas muttered with his Little Bishop cocky tone and wink.

“Love will find a way,” Tully said with exuberance, looking at Lesion. “Lee taught me that one.” She tip-toed and kissed his cheek, turning him into a blushing teenage boy. “He’s my hero. He saved my life and now he’s keeping me like a rare treasure. Right?” she asked, double checking with him.

“One thousand percent,” he assured, kissing her forehead.

“You’re *all* our treasure, Tully,” Beth said.

“I wish I could be,” Tully lamented, “But Lee said he won’t share.”

Lesion grinned at the laugh she brought them.

“And I don’t blame him,” Lucas said. “I won’t share my ray of sunshine either. If I ever get to have her.”

“You will!” Tully cried with a laugh. “Beth will make it happen!”

Lesion remembered those compelling gifts Ruckus had mentioned, stirring his curiosity. Judging by Beth’s eyeroll, she didn’t believe it for a second.

“I will do my best.”

“Use your hoodoo,” Lucas whispered loudly.

“There is *no* hoodoo or anything else,” she lamented with fanfare. “It’s called logic. It works on some but not on others.”

“Well, we have other couples in need of my love services,” Beth announced. “I’m trying to get these delivered before the meeting tonight.”

“Don’t you worry, darlin,” Lucas drawled.

“I know,” Beth cut in, laughing before turning to them. “Him and that Hurricane Hell we rode in on will see it done. Do pray for us,” she said, heading down the steps.

Lucas followed her with, “Why pray when you’re in the embrace of The God of a Thousand Thunders!” He performed He-Man theatrics as he left, getting Beth’s laugh and shove.

“Bye Tully and Lesion!” she called over her shoulder as Lucas tossed a blind wave above his head.

“Bye Beth and Lucas!” she called back with a happy wave then eyed him. In the span of a second, she went from innocent exuberance to sexy seductress, keeper of his wildest fantasies. “I hope I didn’t make you

jealous.”

Mmmm. She hoped no such thing.

He led her inside and locked the door, every cell in his body loading up for what he planned to do. Play Tully’s sex games. She always wanted to play. Every day. Several times. He’d decided there was nothing in the swamp that needed his dissecting obsessions more than she did and with great eagerness indulged her every sexual wish, all while learning her inside and out.

He sat at the table, watching her pretend to be busy at the sink. She would wait for his direction, but he wasn’t going to give it today. His recent discoveries led him to a new tactic. How long before she got impatient and took matters into her own hands?

“You know,” she said, turning at the sink and holding her hands together. “There’s three hours and thirty-three minutes before your meeting tonight.” She grabbed her dress in her fists as her toes nervously fluttered. “But I’m sure you knew that. I was just saving you the trouble of thinking of other things besides me.”

A whole minute. He watched her, not answering while realizing his role as the hard-to-get-dominant would be a challenge when meeting her every need was his addiction.

She made her way over to him and opened her wrap around dress, sucker-punching him in his cock with her nudity.

He didn’t say a word other than to lock his gaze on her thick, hard nipples. She was pure voodoo. A wicked hex always sucking his cock every minute of the day. He raised his eyes to hers, already knowing he’d find that look. He stood before her, locking her in his gaze. That special mix he was becoming familiar with sparked in the crystal blue pools. Little burning embers of lust and hope. Desperation dictating its path. He was the path. And the destination was learning fully and exactly why Tully needed to be sexually punished.

He couldn’t deny that the process was creating something in him that wasn’t there before. Something intimately connected to her. Giving her what she craved made him crave it too. As though it were contagious. And there was a danger in that. He needed to understand the alchemy of it. But...it required risks and that was something he’d never dare with her, not with a single hair on her sweet body.

“Get the restraints my Wicked Elixir.”

While she hurried to obey, he went over her treatment plans. Punishment, pain, and pleasure. His pleasure. This was the unholy trio she seemed bound to. Unholy due to its origin being from the hell he carried her out of. Otherwise, utterly divine. After every sexual exchange, he always readied the next one in his mind. He varied positions and restraints. He varied punishments and pain. And he varied his pleasure. She was due to be tied in a particular way this time with particular punishments and pain thresholds. And his cock raged with an eagerness to perform it, especially since he was using it to bring the pain, something he'd not done yet, nor had he ever wanted to do. But the latest data was conclusive. He needed to recreate safe pain pathways and they needed to be directly connected to him. All her pain and pleasure would become his to control. And *only* him. The vibrating bullet with clitoris stimulator that he could control was for the pleasure, only because he didn't have two cocks. The universe be damned for it.

“What about my blindfold?” she asked when he finished restraining her. He didn't answer. He had her on their bed, face up this time, her legs tied so they were bent at the knees. He forced each limb against the bed and added second restraints to ensure they stayed wide open.

“You want me to watch?” she wonder-whispered, arousal making her words soft as he climbed on the bed and tied her arms open and stretched to their limit. “Are you ignoring me?” Her curiosity held mild worry and he made a note of it. It was like fishing. Everything he did was bait for new data, and she'd just given him more. But he had to test it to confirm and so continued to ignore her.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked, her chest heaving as he undressed, her eyes on his body before raising to his face. Still, he didn't answer her.

He turned and picked up the tin of oil then added lubrication to his cock.

“If you want... we can wait,” she said, her voice small, more worry coming through.

He looked at her, reading her gaze and measuring what he saw in it. Right before his eyes, the crystal blue windows shimmered with tears.

In a surge of panic, he spun for his knife and cut her free, laying next to her and pulling her into his embrace, petting her head. “Tully, why are you

crying?” he cooed, laying her on her back and staring down in her face while covering it with kisses.

“You’re getting tired of me and my dumb games.”

“No, no, no,” he swore, kissing the tremble in her lips. “That’s impossible, you’re my sun and morning star. How would life exist if you’re not here with me? It surely couldn’t. The earth would stop spinning and gravity would be no more, and all the people would fall off into space and I would be glad for it because nobody deserves to live if I can’t have you all for myself. You are mine, yes? Tell me you are, quickly, before I die from sadness.”

She nodded and squeaked “I am,” while holding his face and kissing him.

“My sweet Tully,” he said in her mouth. “You know what I love more than anything?”

“What? Tell me so I can always give you that.”

“I love with all my being making love to my beautiful wife.”

She searched his face, tears pouring. “Me?”

His laugh gushed out and he kissed her. “Are you the beautiful, amazing, perfect Tully?”

“If you say I am.”

“I do say you are.”

She had hold of his cock and put it at her hot opening. “Do what you love with all your being. Because what you love I love. And you love me?”

The sincere, hopeful question broke his very soul. “So much,” he swore, kissing her deeply as he slid slowly inside her.

“How much?” she asked, because the measure of a thing was the only way to truly define it.

“More than all the numbers, and all the colors, and all the sounds and tastes.”

Her shocked breath filled his mouth when he thrust to the very bottom of her. “That’s *so much!*”

Fuck, she was crying again. “There aren’t enough things in this world and in this universe to measure how much I love you. I love you more than the sum of all things, Tully.”

She laughed and kissed him, her fingers clawing his ass, forcing him deeper faster.

“I love you the exact same!” she cried, amazed that their answers matched.

He held her jaw tight and slid his hand beneath her ass, holding and feeling the firm perfection as he fucked her slowly.

“Can you do it faster and harder?” she gasped in his mouth.

“You want my cock faster and harder?”

“Yes, so much, please!”

He picked up speed, watching what it did to her, feeling what that did to him. “Like that, baby?”

Her back arched with the thrash of her head. “Lesion, yes! Oh yes, yes!”

He raised up more, watching his cock hammer in and out as the perfect pair of tits in all the universe jerked with his rapid-fire strokes. The feel of his body slamming against hers brought his orgasm like a comet. He fell on her when it came to devour them, finishing with his body grinding into hers, leaving no space between them. He slid his hands under her shoulders, needing her to feel the fullness of what she did to him. Every powerful thrust was given by the man she created, the man from another realm, another world. Because the atoms in the universe had bowed before her beautiful heart and shattered laws and codes just to create what she desired. And by some kink in the matrix, it fell to him. He was the lucky bastard destined to become Tully’s man.

8-Bit pulled up the app for Cat's tracking jewelry and adjusted the volume as low as he could while still able to hear everything going on in the Basilique meeting. Bishop gave them virtual attendance options and he took it happily. He was ready to get to the verification side of things with her and the less ears around, the better. He was only interested in knowing whether or not she was drama free in the ways that mattered. Real life drama was fine, but he couldn't afford the bullshit kind.

So far, she was still proving to be the perfect match. But there were true color tests to perform with little time for them. As soon as he got what he needed, he'd remove the privacy invasion from her ring, but not a minute before.

He recalled her reaction when he presented the wedding ring before leaving a couple hours earlier. Or her *non*-reaction. She'd held it between two fingers, examined it front and back, slid it on her ring finger, gave comically mild expressions of surprise, removed it and put it in her apron pocket. He'd managed to hold back a laugh, probably a little too happy to confirm Jason's gospel about her caring nothing about such things.

But before leaving, he had to insist she wear it. "Can't risk it getting lost," he'd said.

She'd nonchalantly withdrew it from her apron, put it on, and returned her hands to said pockets. Grade: A+.

"If you hate it, I can design a new one," he'd half teased-tested.

"Hate it," she'd muttered. "It's a tracking device, what's to hate?" Without breaking eye contact, she'd called, "Jason, how much jewelry do I own?"

"Uhhh, I didn't even know you had none."

"Had any," she corrected. "Cause I don't." Then she gave him the best sermon he'd ever heard. "I'm not a jewelry fan, no sir. Hope that isn't a problem. I'd rather adorn my neck with a can-opener on a rope than see precious metals wasted on body art." Without breaking her sublime, merciless stride, she added kindly, "I ain't judging others who wear it. I know why some do and there ain't no harm in it. That's between them and the good lord, what they do with the time and money they have on this earth." She tied his gift up with a neat suspicious bow and quirked brow. "People who focus on what's on the surface often miss what lurks just beneath it."

In-fucking-deed. That was a gavel of warning, letting him know she

was watching him as close as he was her.

He'd thoroughly enjoyed all his *Cat* findings. She was a lot deeper than he'd dared hope. So far, she was proving to be perfect material to stand as his right hand in just about anything. Which had his ass on the edge of his seat, quietly willing her to continue kicking ass. But he knew everybody had their flaws. He needed to find hers and decide if they were fixable or at least tolerable. Sometimes people resolved to becoming what they were due to life offering them no other choice. What would she do if life offered her everything on a silver platter? That's what he needed to know. He was at debugging and cosmetic tweaks.

Speaking of cosmetics, the fact that she wore none had been another confirmation about her professed character. But in person, he found her more attractive than he liked. The single photo he'd found of her captured a one-dimensional image of that cold, calculating mainframe that had caught his eye. But seeing her in layered elements was an almost jarring experience. Thanks to Jason's tell-all personality, he'd gotten a data-dump in the span of a minute. She'd changed into the only dress she owned, wasn't one for frivolous pleasantries, fashion, makeup, or the male species in general. Didn't get much company, didn't go many places other than the Muck and Marsh where she both worked and shopped supplies, and to her booray games once a week with the only three female friends she had. Unselfish to a fault—which Jason seemed to spend time nagging her about.

And she hunted.

The boy's father's details had him troubled, though. He was one of their wounded from the Noctambule war and judging by the intel, he'd become a shell of man who'd lost his will and way. As soon as this meeting was over, he'd be paying him a visit with the Seer. He didn't have time to guess wrong and needed to know the stuff he wasn't able to see by simple observation. He was a member of Bullets hatch, so, he'd have a chat with him about what he knew. But being the closest thing to a father figure the family had, 8-Bit intended to make his intentions with his sister known to him.

His mind returned to the baby deal she'd struck with him. Still wasn't sure how to feel about it. Not that he was opposed to kids, he just never had a reason to think of them as a celibate leader of his Hatch. When he mentioned it possibly requiring more than one attempt to make one, her reaction said it spoke more than just to her inexperience. She'd blushed and sputtered, and

he'd found it cute. As well as a confirmation to everything he'd want in a woman. He much preferred an inexperienced one in that department.

He looked at his watch and turned up Cat's volume at hearing consistent chatter, indicating she'd reached destination booray game. Operation listen and learn was officially launched with five minutes till the meeting. He hit record on his phone, intending to listen to the feed after. Her honest opinion about the marriage and all it entailed was what he was after. And her true thoughts about him.

Come on Cat. Do me proud.

"You keep your trap shut about the Ball business, not a word!" she whispered. "Or about Ethan!"

"I swear!" Jason whispered back, with a fiftieth-time stress.

"Our business is our business."

"I know Aunt Cat. What about the ring? They gone ask questions. And you can't take it off!"

"Well, I know that! How about it's not their business?"

"You can say my dad gave it to you. A gift? Belonged to Gramma?"

"Boy, what did I tell you about lying! Is anybody dying? Getting hurt? And I don't mean their feelings."

"No ma'am."

"It's not their business and it ain't like it's the first time they hear that out of my mouth. And if I should want to tell them anything, I will."

This was good.

"When do I know if you said yes?" Jason whispered. "You gonna tell me, right?"

"Of course I will."

"Did you decide? If I get a vote, I vote yes!"

"Like I didn't know that," she whispered. "You realize he's not doing all this so you can have a playmate."

"I know," he assured, sternly. "But I'll probably see him more than I do now, which is never?"

"Boy, I need to tell you this like I'm speaking to a grown man. Ethan is not wanting a family. He's wanting a woman that..." She let out a breath. "He's wanting somebody who can..."

8-Bit's curiosity burned.

"Just a friend?" Jason tried to help.

“No, not a friend, like a...a work...a work partner.”

“Well, I can work too!” he shot out, making 8-Bit grin.

“You’re missing the point. This is not *that* kind of marriage. He wouldn’t be *living* with us or anything like that. We’d be married on paper only.”

“But...I thought a marriage was what boyfriend and girlfriends did when they loved each other?”

Ah shit.

“That’s silly! In the bible, there was arranged marriages all the time,” she seemed to just remember. “That’s right, they arranged their sons and daughters to be married to certain people when they were still children, probably before they were even born.”

“Wow,” Jason whispered.

“Love ain’t some miracle, it’s a sacrificial act one gives without return payment. Free. Same way God’s love is free.”

His Cat curiosity took an upward turn with that one. Love wasn’t a miracle but a sacrificial act one does without return payment. Love sure might not be a miracle but finding a woman that new that was. And that *he’d* found her was another miracle. Hell, maybe he’d put her over training his men. She’d make a damn good Sergeant.

Female chatter got louder as 8-Bit contemplated how to grade her answers. Definitely A +. Her arranged marriage was the perfect example to give the boy. Marrying for love was actually a novelty for the majority of history. Well *fucking* done.

His phone buzzed and he switched screens. “Bishop,” he answered. “Meetings still on?” He checked his watch. Three minutes till go time.

“We’re running a little late. But be ready in ten. How’d it go with Cat?”

“She hasn’t officially said yes, but she said everything that implied yes.”

“Merci Dieu. I may have told Ma Petite all about it.”

8-Bit stood, switching ears. “And?” He opened his small fridge and pulled out an energy drink.

“She has books at the ready. She wants to start classes right away. Required classes.”

8-Bit paused at that. “What kind?”

“The how-to kind for married couples.”

He twisted the top off his drink and dropped it in the wastebasket.

“What exactly are we needing to know how to do? If you say sex, I’ll fucking vote no.”

He busted out laughing. “Why?”

“If a man doesn’t know how to stick his dick in a hole, a book won’t help him.”

“Ohhhh Mon Frier, this is not about how to fuck this is about how to *fuuuuuck*.”

8-Bit shook his head. “You drug that word through a gutter so dirty, my dick saluted you.”

Between his howling laughter, he managed, “She asked me to do the classes for the men.”

“Swamp Studs 101. Can’t wait to hear what kind of assignments you’ll give out.”

“Very useful things,” he assured around laughter.

“Trap’s wife will need Houdini classes.”

More howling before he gasped, “Oh fuck, you’re killing me.”

He remembered Cat’s baby request. “There is *one* thing. She wants a child. One. For herself.”

“For *herself*, what the fuck does *for herself* mean?”

“It means she wants to raise it, not me.”

“How...wait. What kind of marriage did you propose? A long distance one?”

“My hatch is only ten minutes from her, so not exactly long distance.”

“Are you telling me you don’t plan to live together?”

“I never said that.”

“Good because Mah Petite will not approve,” he assured. “Or me.”

“We’ll simply have two residences. She doesn’t want to move, and I won’t make her. I don’t want to move so we’ll have two places for living.”

“As long as it’s together, I don’t care if you live in a tree.”

8-Bit let out a sigh, bringing every manner of negative noise from Eveque.

“Mon Frier, you will need to live with her, that is non-negotiable, that is a marriage.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly require it.”

“Well, you had better.”

8-Bit rolled his eyes and leaned into his chair. “Fine. I’ll require it. Guess we’ll see just how detached she can be.”

“Oui,” he said, stomping out the word.

Could be seen as a test. One he’d rather not think about in that second. “How’s Nitro healing?”

“Fine and he’s doing virtual. I think it has nothing to do with his bat bites, though.”

8-Bit still had a hard time wrapping his head around the hardened soldier’s drastic fall from Mount Celibacy. “Will The Seer be at the meeting? I need to talk to him.”

“He will. What’s up?”

“I want to borrow him and pay Boone a visit. Cat’s brother. You realize he was one of our wounded from the Noctambule war?”

“Holy shit, I didn’t realize, no. How is he?”

He shook his head. “From what I gather, not so good.”

“What’s his disability, you know?”

“Paralyzed from the waist down.”

“What are you thinking.”

“I’m thinking to check on him and see what I can do.”

“He’s in same Hatch as her, I take it.”

“Bullets’ yeah. Need to talk to him too, see what he knows.”

“And Patches. He’d know something too.”

“Good thinking. I got data drops by the way.”

“On what?”

“Curly Larry and Mo. The triple demons.”

“It’s late for word puzzles, Mon Frier.”

“Noctambule, Holy Order and Five Runes.”

“Ah. Triple Demons. Noted. Tell me something good.”

“As you know, Seer, Maggie and his father interrogated him, and I ran down some of his claims.”

“Which ones?”

“He said they’re not after just any flesh in these swamps, they’re looking for two particular women.”

“Mon *fucking* Dieu.”

“He wasn’t sure, but it has to be your Belle Eveque and Maggie.”

“What makes you think this?”

“Bart said something that got me thinking.”

“Bart my brother?”

“Oh yeah, he’s been wrapping wires left and right on this one.

Remember when we wondered if their abductions were connected? Well, he found links to quite a few of his properties tied to Noctambule. Our informant said to look in political high places for the ties. Well, remember the Senator who helped find Maggie?”

“Oui.”

“He thinks that’s where the blackmail began. It wasn’t Maggie they wanted, it was what he had, properties to hide their crimes. When he refused, they took Maggie and blackmailed him. Here’s where the wires cross. Somewhere between them taking his daughter and him getting her back, they discovered Maggie’s gifts. But somebody on the inside protected her. A woman in the coven. Another one of their gifted.”

“Protected her from what? Why?”

“From using her the informant said. Or assumed.”

“For what?”

“Recruiting victims.”

“Mon fucking Dieu,” he muttered. “What if they knew about Beth’s gift? And that’s why they took her?”

“Well, if she really does have the ability to get what she wants, that could surely be exploited by sick fucks like them.”

“I need to talk to Seer and his father.”

“They’ll be at the meeting?” 8-Bit thought.

“Oui. I’ll bring it up. See you in five minutes in the devil box.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The second Bishop hung up with 8-Bit, he followed the sound of his Petite's cock licking laugh to the kitchen where festivities-without-end were being formed. They probably had the next twenty years of events scheduled and it would be the first time Bishop wasn't wanting to hide. But now he needed a reason why he wanted a private meeting with just the Twelve. He didn't want his petite learning about these abduction details until he knew all of them.

He entered the melee, eyeing his dysfunctional family, avoiding that permanent love-struck look on Savvy's face when Lucas was near—which was always. Wasn't much better with Luseah and the Brandon brat the Arbiters had blessed him with in the name of punishing Gordon for his crimes. *Clearly* the punishment was all his. The single regret he didn't have was seeing that light in his daughter's eyes when she looked at the little punk. So far, he hadn't found anything worth killing him over and he looked. Frequently. Even had Lucas swear he'd watch for a *single* sign that would need handling. Annoying how he never had anything to report when asked. And he asked often.

“Change of plans, ladies,” he announced making his way to his wife's glowing face and smiling mouth.

“Now what?” Mah-Mah cried.

“The men want to chat about women *then* we'll get you two in. Just give us fifteen minutes. I mentioned to 8-Bit about your idea for classes,” he distracted, kissing the pout from his Petite's mouth.

“Uh-oh,” she said around his lips. “How'd he take it?”

He gave a sigh. “Like we're attempting a heist on his manhood but really, I think he fears other valid things.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t say, but celibacy was a safety harness to him. And with that gone, I think he’s worried and would never admit it to me. But I have faith in him. He’ll be fine.” He turned her away from all the eyes so he could kiss her properly.

“You got a bedroom right up there, go use it!”

“Mah-Mah, watch over my beautiful wife for fifteen more minutes, oui?”

She gave a huge cackle. “She watches over *me!* I’m ornery in my old age.” Lazure snuck up and wrapped her in a bear hug, making her squeal.

“You have a room too,” Bishop called when the lust noises started, getting Beth’s smack on his shoulder.

“I miss you,” she whispered. “And later, I have a surprise I think you’ll really like.”

Bishop pulled back at the tease, his brain flying through all those new sexual positions. They’d agreed to incorporate them into their bedroom activities for the sake of exploring and learning one another’s needs and wants. “Tell me now.”

“Noooo,” she lamented, pure sexual mischief in her face.

He took her hand and led her to the bathroom at the other end of the house, locking them inside. Turning, he found her with her dress up, facing the sink.

“Fuck,” he blasted. No fucking panties.

Lust hit him like a torpedo, blind and furious. He fought with his belt, her moans and fucking gasps already there before he put a hand on her. With a growl, he snatched a fistful of hair and jerked her mouth to his, biting and sucking as he found the very bottom of her pussy in one thrust.

Her cry blasted in his mouth, and he pumped like an animal, forcing more of those sounds from her, faster, harder, higher and fucking hotter. “That’s what you fucking wanted.” He pulled her head back farther, bringing his lust war to her neck, marking her skin then shoulder as his orgasm rode up his spine like a burning comet. He buried his fingers between her pussy lips and wiggled them over her clit.

“Fuck yes,” he shuddered as her body locked up hard in orgasm, releasing his own. He knew it was too much and yet would never be enough as he cut loose all over her. He ended at her mouth, claiming every drop of that wicked ecstasy pouring from her.

For a full minute, they both stood there, muscles trembling and breaths blasting as he held her tightly to his body, needing to absorb every part of her. He forbid the words of remorse from leaving his lying tongue. He wasn't sorry for a damn bit of it, and it was time he owned it. Instead, he worshipped her mouth in silence, his groans a forbidden script of immense satisfaction, awe, and unspeakable joy. "I love my sweet fucking Angel," he whispered. "You will never know how much."

She gave a soft smile, reaching around and stroking his head as his cock remained buried to the hilt. "Don't start a bat-tie now," she whispered back. "I'll beat you every time."

He hugged her tighter, covering the side of her face with kisses. "More like slaughter."

"You better hurry, they're waiting."

He eased himself out of her with a groan. "And they will *surely* wait."

"Everybody's here?" Bishop asked. "Anybody missing?"

"Everybody's here," 8-Bit said.

"All female ears?"

"Off," his Tech Hatch leader assured.

"Good. 8-Bit, start by giving us the data you've learned."

Bishop listened as he recounted the intel he'd told him.

"Anybody have more to add?"

"I've seen her," Ruckus said.

"Seen who?" Bishop regarded him on the phone, seeing small fingers laced in his large ones. Gracie was with him. Good.

"The white wall. The woman protecting. I've been seeing it in dreams. I see there's something hiding behind it but can never tell what. It's her," he said, sure of it.

"You think she'd know where we can find Raphael?" Seer asked on another screen.

"I think she's with him. Protecting him."

"Can we find her?" Bishop asked.

"We may be able to if with Maggie's help," Ruckus said. "And Beth."

"What kind of help?" Spook demanded while wondering what he

wanted to do with his wife.

“Not sure,” Ruckus said.

“We need a Prayer Circle,” Seer said. “With Ma Cherie. She’s a direct link to Raphael and Lazarus. Where I’m blind, she’ll see, but I need Maggie to see too and show me.”

Bishop nodded. “See to that right away, Oui?”

“Oui,” they all agreed.

“Your wife’s gifts will eventually be needed,” Ruckus said, or warned.

“And when it’s absolutely necessary,” Bishop said, “we’ll use them. Until then, she’s off limits. Speaking of. Now that it’s likely the same people who kidnapped Maggie also kidnapped Beth, do you think it has anything to do with their gifts?”

“Without a doubt,” Ruckus said. “Which brings me to inform you. This Ball you’re having to entice them to the swamp is the wrong bait. They aren’t interested in virgins, they’re interested in particular people, and they all happen to be here. My son, myself, and now Maggie and Beth. If we get Raphael and this woman, we’d tip the power scales and shift this war into the direction we want it.”

“How?” Bishop wondered.

“We would be more powerful than those three covens. Which would require them to join forces. And if they do that, then we get what we want, them coming at us in a united front.”

A united hell. “How is that good?”

“A unified front is easier to kill,” he said, simply.

Bishop nodded, considering. “What else do you need for this?”

“I need a Spirit Hatch,” Seer said. “A dedicated space where I can build an army of spiritual soldiers. Any one of the swamp stops on the outskirts preferably. The closer to the walls we can get, the more we can see and feel that which lurks beyond it.”

“Whatever you need is yours, just ask,” Bishop said. “And see to it immediately.”

“Spook, I’ll need you to meet us at my place with Maggie for that prayer circle,” Seer said.

“I’ll call you when we’re done,” Spook said.

“So, if this Ball is useless for luring the demons, then why have it?”

Patches wondered.

“It’s not useless,” Ruckus said. “They’ll send scouts. But not for that.”

Bishop asked, “What do you suggest we let them see?”

“What they want to see. Their prizes, wide open and unsuspecting.”

“So, they’ll be bait,” Hurricane said.

“Oui,” Bishop said, not liking it but knowing it was the best plan going since they wanted to take those particular devils out. If not every one of them, then surely the head of all the snakes.

“So, we need to collect the boy and this woman before that Ball?”

Shank muttered.

“It would surely help,” Seer said.

“Well, I hate to add shit to the shite, but a hurricane cropped up in the gulf and is barreling our way.”

“Mon-fucking Dieu,” Bishop swore with a roll of his eyes as the rest of them muttered similar sentiments.

“ETA?” 8-Bit asked.

“Three days. Tuesday night, supposedly. Moving straight for our ass at 10 mph packing winds of 160. Hurricane Ni-ko-las,” he said, bad-assing the name.

“Well, that cancels the Ball,” Bullets said like it freed him from having to sabotage it.

“Puuuhhhhh,” Traps growled. “Would like to see some part of *something* get done. We plan this, we plan that? Then nuuuut-ting!”

“Don’t get your ropes all up in a knot,” Bacon said.

“How long’s it off for?” Shank asked, another relieved warrior.

Bishop remembered, “We were cancelling anyway due to Nitro needing to recover. We don’t want hell on our turf without every able hand to meet it. Not to mention I want to buy a few days to learn how we can use our amazing new bat army.”

This got a round of eager interest. “Wouldn’t mind having a demon army to command,” Spar put in. “That was the most remarkable insanity I’ve ever seen.”

The room went on in heated exchanges of bats, battles and bloodshed before Bishop called them back to the meeting with a loud, “The Ball, gentleman. If the hurricane is scheduled to get here Tuesday, having it the

following weekend means a huge mess to clean up fas-fas.”

“I say let us pick the women we want to interrogate and call *that* a ball,” Shank suggested, getting a round of chuckles.

“I don’t shop,” Bullets informed. “I know what I want and when I see it, I get it.”

“But these ladies are *expecting* a Ball, bruh,” Bacon reminded lightly, like they’d be safer fighting demons than a pissed off hoard of females.

“I say we do like Bullets said, pick one instead of five,” Spar suggested. “If you can’t figure out what you want in a woman, then you’ll have to accept your defeat and deal with your stupidity.”

“We’re moving into Fate Dice territory,” Patches realized, sounding ready for anything. “I’m down for rolling.”

“Rolling for what?” Bullets wondered.

“I say we pick one of the choices, and say-too, fin-ee,” Shank said.

“Ya’ll are either in a hurry for a wife or just in a hurry,” Bishop said before reminding, “There’s no take backs on this.”

“Well, we have mandatory classes for where to put our dick,” 8-Bit said. “We can add classes for how to survive our choices.”

“Say *what?*” Bullets shot.

“Which part?” 8-Bit returned.

“What mandatory classes.”

“I was about to get to that,” Bishop said, getting a round of masculine lament.

“I don’t need an anatomy class,” Patches reminded.

“It’s more than that,” Bishop said. “The Belle Eveque knows what she’s doing, we need to trust her in this one. She says you’ll all want to kiss her later, but of course you won’t if you like having lips on your face.”

“Classes,” Traps muttered with hefty disgust.

“What *kind* of classes?” Bullets sounded ready to draw his weapon.

“We gonna need backpacks and crayons for this?” Patches grinned in wonder.

“Maybe they show their work on slates,” Lesion said. “Little naughty stick figures in chalk.”

At hearing he thought he was exempt, Bishop informed, “All of us are taking classes. Including those already with wives. Me included,” he added over the sudden mix of ass burns.

“Bring on the classes,” Hurricane said. “My speed is stuck on demolish everything. My sister said I better get a hold of a kill switch before I *kill* any hopes of keeping a woman.” He gave one of his full throttle laughs. “I just need a woman who can take an earth mover in bed.”

Traps filled the room with booming guffaws. “Earth mover. Well, *my* woman will need to be ready for fifty ways of hog-tied. She’ll—”

“So, the ball is still go, only we do one female?” Shank cut in, agitated. “Are we rolling the Fate Dice for that one female?”

“That’s up to you. Each of you,” Bishop added. “No group dice rolls for this one.”

“I have mine picked,” 8-Bit said.

“So do I,” Bullets informed.

“I’m tempted to roll the Dice,” Patches said.

“Same,” came Bacon.

“What about Halloween this year?” Bullets wondered. “The kids need that.”

“Yeah,” they all concurred with Bullets adding, “I don’t like these devils fucking with what’s theirs.”

“We’ll do it. At the right time. They don’t care about exact dates, and they’ll enjoy it all the same.”

“They’ll have no choice,” Spook said, sounding pissed.

“Well, I’ll be damn,” Bishop said, amazed. “I knew yall fuckin’ liked it,” he chuckled.

“I never said I didn’t like it,” Patches defended.

“Mon Dieu, the *mumblings* and *grumblings* are recorded in the swamp’s annals. So, what changed your mind? It was the story idea?”

“Hands down the funnest shit I’ve ever done,” Hurricane chuckled. “I’ll never forget the looks on their faces.”

“I’ve been coming up with ideas all year for a story,” Bacon admitted, excited.

“Don’t expect to take first place again this year,” Spar warned.

“What if we collaborate this time?” Hurricane said. “Tie the stories together. Twelve stories. All building up with doom and damnation.”

“With the final one the epic climax,” Shank said. “I like it.”

“We can use Slim, Roxy, and Snap again,” Bullets said, his voice low and eager.

“The gator boats are a definite must,” Patches agreed.

“And I can make that candy bacon.”

Incoming round of disgust.

Bacon laughed real big. “Don’t knock it till you try it!”

“What I wanna know,” Patches said, curious, “is who 8-Bit and Bullets picked.”

“I think they might be shy about it,” Hurricane said in a coo, getting his hand whacked away by Bullets.

“Nothing to hide,” 8-Bit said. “Catherine Boone is my pick. She’s a member of Bullets’ Hatch.”

“Holy fuck,” Patches muttered.

“You trying to start shit?” Shank wondered. “You know who that is.”

“What do you mean?” 8-Bit asked while Bishop wondered what they were talking about too.

“Bruh,” Bacon muttered like he was being dense. “That’s the sister of the dude who lost his pregnant wife in that Hurricane.”

It got quiet before 8-Bit muttered, “I didn’t realize that.”

“You should call that one off,” Traps firmly suggested. “Pick somebody else.”

“Wait,” Bishop cut in. “He can’t call it off, she’s signed up and he’s picked her.”

“He can unpick her,” Bacon warned with a sugarcoat.

“Nah, it’s good,” Patches muttered.

“She’s in your Hatch, Bullets,” 8-Bit said. “What do you know about her brother?”

“I know that Boone goes to church faithfully every Sunday and when I shake his hand, he smiles and nods while silently begging for one of my bullets between his eyes. That’s what I know about him.”

“Christ,” Patches mumbled.

“You got nothin’ to do with him being in that chair,” Shank said, like it’d been said fifty times. Fuck, it probably had been.

Patches leaned back, gazing at the table with a shake of his head. “Finished him off, though. Bad enough he was in that chair. He was happy, I remember that much. I saw both of them every month when I made my rounds. There was a light in his eyes. I know it’s not my fault, but I can still *hate* it with every *fucking* fiber of my *fucking* being, right?”

Patches was known for holding his cool in the hairiest situations and it wasn't hearing him raise his voice that silenced them, it was hearing the buried pain. Bishop surely understood. Patches was escorting the pregnant wife and grandparents to land when a wind gust blew the boat right over. He'd only managed to rescue the mother and by some miracle got her to the hospital where they saved the baby but lost the mother. Patches had sold everything to build an actual hospital with equipment needed for emergencies. In her case, a breached delivery that required surgery. The entire Hoard helped with it.

Patches slid his hands over his face with a sigh. "Maybe you'll be able to do some good," he said to the quiet room. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help with that."

"I will, brother," 8-Bit said, his regret coming through.

"Same," Bullets offered. "Whatever you need, consider it done. Boy's as close to a son as I've ever had, and I wish every day I could've taken that bullet for him. Or find the devil that did that and unload fifteen rounds of my Sig right in his wicked fuckin' mouth till his insides are spilling out the holes I blow in his ass."

You could always count on Bullets to get ballistics or bolt-action into a conversation, but hearing his words ground together with that kind of rage put them all in a silent reverence for his exact kind of vengeance.

"I can taste it brothers," Bishop finally said, eyeing those at the table with him. "Their judgment is coming. And God has given us the executor's blade."

"I want them brought to the Weigh Station," Bullets grit, his mouth still in that rage-slant. "They need to have a *proper* fuckin' trial."

They all murmured in eager agreement. In the swamp, proper trial meant carefully dissecting crimes and criminals. There was nothing sloppy, nothing quick about it. Just holy retribution carried out with an unholy amount of lust and rage.

Hurricane raised his hand and Bishop nodded at him.

"Not to rape a dead horse, but what's the final word on the swamp lady party? I vote to blame the hurricane. They can bat-tie with mother nature if they don't like it."

"Agree," Bishop said. "After that mess, we'll let them know we'll regroup. Keep their panties fresh for you bulldogs."

“Not *too* fresh,” Traps said, his beard spreading with his hidden smile. “Nothing wrong with well-used panties.”

“You naaaasty fucker,” Bacon said, rolling his head at him, getting a burst of guffaws from the lewd brother.

“I have a request.”

“Nitro, that you?” Bishop asked.

“Yeah. The Drysdale. He’s committed crimes worthy of our Weigh Station.”

“Oui. But if we let him be a little bit, he’ll be worthy of a lot more.”

“I intend to put closed eyes on all his land,” 8-Bit assured.

“Good. The more guilt we can get on him, the better for me. But for what he’s committed so far, I’m requesting a Blastectomy.”

Everybody made painful noises. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. In this case, if your dick causes you to sin, get it blown off with small explosives and sport a colonoscopy bag the rest of your life. “If it’s mine to give you, it’s surely yours,” Bishop said, not sure if that was his jurisdiction or the Grand Oratrice.

“Arms’ deal is still intact?” Bullets wondered.

“It is.” Bishop looked at his phone. “Our Belle Eveque is calling in. We ready for the ladies? Leave any talk about her and her sister off. I’ll handle it with her. Thirty more minutes. Yall good to continue?”

“Let’s get it done,” Patches said. “I have a lot more to prepare for now that we have a hurricane on our ass.”

The rest agreed and Bishop texted his wife, telling them to come. “Seer, 8-Bit was hoping to borrow you to pay Cat Boone’s brother a visit. Maybe you two can go see what you can see, then I’ll call you about that other business, oui?”

“Oui,” he said.

“Make sure all your alarm apps are on.” He spied a text from Bart. *Permission for your blood to attend the meeting.*

What the hell kind of question was that? *Are you a Bishop?*

He sent a teathy smiley face and Bishop set his phone down, catching Traps’, “She’ll learn a rope burn is how I French kiss her tender loins.”

He interrupted chuckles and worried headshakes with, “Before we’re done, I need a full account of where each Hatch is in terms of mobilizing for war.”

The door opened and Bishop turned, his blood heating at the sight of his beautiful wife entering, followed by his entire family behind her, all dressed in the traditional Bishop attire. Interesting. He made his way to his wife and that sexy smile she wore, reminding him of her surprise.

He got her seated and made his way to his brothers, spotting the manilla folder Bart held before giving them all a tight hug. He wanted them to know that the blood they shared was as binding as the swamp-born bonds he had with The Twelve.

Back at the table, he took his wife's hand in his lap, happy to turn things over to Mah-Mah.

"Good evenin' boys," she greeted with a smile, earning an out-of-tune welcome chorus from the remaining twelve, their grins and nods reminding Bishop of excited schoolboys with their favorite pretty teacher. "As we can see, we've got *all* my boys here tonight." She narrowed her gaze at her phone, smile vanishing. "Where's my Samuel and 8-Bit?"

"They had to go," Bishop said. "I'm taking notes for them." He winked at her and chuckled at the way she flustered. No matter how old she was, she'd be a young, bashful girl at heart. He loved that about her.

"Now it ain't a secret how much family means to me," she said, passing her gaze around. "The Twelve are just as much my sons as any, but I don't rest good when there's friction in the bonds. Specially with a war on our heads. It's time to let by-gones be by-gones. We can't have muck in the cracks with the good Lord at our backs," she admonished. "It ain't no secret these hoodlums never wanted a part of The Twelve but, things are changing and, well, I think I may have talked them into a partnership of sorts."

Mon Dieu, this woman.

"If it's all the same," Bart interjected kindly, "I'd like to present the offer?"

She set her phone down with a happy smile and nod. "That would be *much* preferred."

Bart jumped right in with, "Well, I wanna open a PI Hatch." He slid his folder across the table toward Bishop. "The particulars are all in there. Nothing complex. I want a small team that handles the non-technical side of intel. Old-fashioned boots in the mud kind of runners and doers." Bishop opened the folder, flipping through the small stack of pages, his smile tugging.

“I broke down the operation into sections as you can see.”

“I can,” he said maybe more impressed with how happy it made him than anything. “I like this. A lot.” He looked at him. “Whatever you need, Mon frère de sang, I will provide it.”

“We,” Bart said, nodding at the papers. “Jek, August and Zep are part of my team.”

His team. He regarded his other three brothers.

“We’re his underlings,” Jek said with a wink and threatening grin.

He eyed Zep, getting a nod and solemn, “At your swampy service.”

Mah-Mah snickered. “Swampy service.” She let out a happy sigh. “I think this is the best day of my life.”

Bishop eyed August digging at the collar of his dress shirt. “Mon friere, the Bishop attire suits you, oui?”

His scowl brought Bishop’s laugh. “Like silk suits a gator,” he grumbled.

When had his voice gotten so deep? Fuck, he missed his brothers. “Whatever all of you need, I’m happy to help. As is the rest of the Twelve?”

Bishop measured the round of agreeable responses, happy to hear they were genuine. He suddenly wished Samuel was there to witness it. He’d often lamented the fissure between the Twelve and his Blood. “*That body and spirit must become one.*”

“So, what do you have for us?” he asked Bart.

His brother turned to August who opened his coat pocket and pulled out a notepad, plopping it on the table. “We got vital intel from the Booyies regarding the Cartel.” He eyed Bishop, his baby blues stern and serious. “Now, these fuckers got people in odd places. Wildlife and Fisheries inspections, postal plants, even the national fucking parks. You got firearms with the fish, and methamphetamines with the mail.”

“How the hell are they using national parks?” Bishop wondered.

“Moving illegal arms,” August said. “But ever since they had a bust, they’ve been watching.”

“Hence their need for a new route that can’t be watched,” Hurricane muttered.

“What else?” Bishop asked, a little stunned with all the intel they were dumping.

“Lots more,” Bart said, sounding and looking disturbed. “The 5 Runes

even have people in *morgues*.”

“Wait till you hear this shit,” Zep said.

“Morgues,” Patches said, guarded.

“Yes, morgues,” Bart went on. “They supply them with dead bodies for a fucked up underground theater where victims are forced to put on sexual puppet shows for their elite.”

“All videoed and sold on the black market for outrageous sums of money,” Jek added.

“Then,” Bart said, “the living get dead by sacrifice and the already dead get shipped to another sick venture where the bodies are turned into jewelry—also a high-tag black market item. But hold on to your marbles. They’re then shipped around the country through the United States Postal Service right alongside letters to grandma.”

“These sick fucks are embedded everywhere,” Jek said. He looked at Zep. “Tell ‘em what you found on the Noctambule and Co.”

Unlike August, Zep didn’t need paper and pencil. Being a lazy shit had eventually evolved into impressive memorization skills. “Well, it’s an inbred soap opera of evil. The Cartel’s most feared enforcer is the little brother of the Holy Order’s high priestess. Then, the 5 Runes and The Diablos De La Guerra have a fun little underground fight ring. The coven uses it for blood sacrifices, the Cartel uses it for entertainment and recruitment. It’s a win-win, or lose-lose, depending on the position you’re playing.” He looked at Jek. “You wanna tell him about the tattoo shit?”

“Oh yeah,” Jek muttered in his usual bored way. “Tattoo parlor Pins and Needles is part of the Noctambule. All the members of the Diablos De La Guerra go there to get a special patch. He uses tracking ink which apparently is a thing. This gives them inside eyes on every member. One goes the wrong way, they invoke their supernatural ink,” he finger quoted the air, “and they miraculously end up dealt with and dead.”

Wow. “Do the De La Guerra even know?” Bishop asked.

“From the amount of respect and unholy honor they have for Noctambule, I’d say *no*.”

“Ohhhh boy, that’s priceless,” Bacon chuckled. “They got a Divine Doodle Dynasty. I’m jealous.”

Traps got a kick out of that, and Bishop already shook his head at feeling the jokes coming. “Order of the Majestic Markings,” he boomed out,

fist banging the table.

“Trace Me If You Can Tribe,” Spook didn’t help.

“Slipknot Sorcerers of Squiggles!” Traps barely managed, doubling them all over.

Now they were laughing.

Bishop decided to let it rip, feeling like the comical relief was probably needed. They were down to wiping tears when Mah-Mah kissed Lazure and hugged him tight, then Beth copied her.

“Here we go,” Hurricane grumbled. “Straight on to marriage classes only not all of us have *wives* yet!” he complained.

“Come here, I’ll kiss you,” Traps said.

“Bruh, get your ropey fuckin’ hands away from me.”

“I got a knot for any and every kink, my young lad.”

The Basilique door banged open. “DAD!”

Bishop flew up from his chair, turning to see Lucas running in, holding out his phone.

He hurried to meet him, taking it from him.

“They texted that,” he said winded. “I don’t know who it is or how they got my number.”

Did you get the mole yet?

Bishop spun, finding everybody already behind him. “Where’s Savvy and Luseah?”

“Still at the main house,” Lucas said. “We were all there, and Brandon. We’ve been sticking together like you said. I haven’t even left the swamps. None of us have.”

He eyed his blood brothers. “We need to find who the fuck this is. First priority for your new PI Hatch.”

“You fuckin’ got it,” Bart said, looking at Zep. “You start with Gordon and gang. Jek, you contact Fisher, the one who has access to cell phone logs in Louisiana. August, you’re with me.” He looked at Bishop. “I’d like to take Lucas’s phone and have Seer, Ruckus and Maggie see what the hell they can see.”

“Oui. Do it quickly.” He gave him the phone and regarded the rest of his men. “Gather the best of your Hatches. Tomorrow, we hunt. And we don’t stop till they’re gator shit and mud.”

CHAPTER SIX

8-Bit felt the distinguished buzz of his Eveque's text and turned off Cat's app, looking. *Lucas got a text from the mole. We hunt tomorrow. If he's there, we will find him. Secure any loose ends. We'll need all hands in this one.*

Fuck.

8-Bit turned his boat around and headed toward said loose end—Cat. He'd hoped the mole was a bluff. Still could be, but if they weren't, they surely needed to put an end to them. He'd have to warp speed the process so he could get back to what he was more interested in. Closing the Cat deal.

He pulled up her number and hit *Go*.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's 8-Bit. Just checking in."

She hesitated, then a, "What for?"

What for. "An odd question during wartime."

He heard muttered flustering, making him curious about her afternoon friend chat. "Sorry, just curious. I was just dropping Jason off at his dad's. He visits every weekend."

He pulled out his second phone and located her. "You in a boat?" He eyed the moving green dot on the screen, not hearing anything.

"I am. Headed home."

Was she in a pirogue? He heard a hum that resembled a small motor. "What are you in?"

"My boat, why?"

"I don't hear anything."

"That's because I'm in my hunting boat with the whisper motor."

Interesting. "What kind?"

"Motor Guide Xi3. Nothing major. Thirty pounds of thrust does the job. DC."

Those terms coming from a woman brought a surprise twitch to his cock. “I need to come inspect the integrity of your home security.”

“Now? Why?”

“There’s a mole.”

“Oh shit, where?”

“Somewhere in these swamps.”

“Well...you need help, I’m available.”

He had to wonder over the eagerness. Bored? Wanted to see him?
“How’s your brother?”

She sighed long. “A mess. It’s hard to see him like he is and it’s painful to drop my nephew off knowing his visits only confirm nothing he does will ever be good enough to help his daddy. Every weekend he goes over there with new plans and hope and every time I pick him up I get to hear how there’s no difference. How long before Jason starts blaming himself or feeling like he’s the reason he’s not well?”

“I had intended to visit him tonight.”

“Really?”

“Was gonna bring the Seer with me.”

“As in our Seer of the Swamp?”

“Yes. Your brother is technically my brother now and I wanted to check on him.”

“But...I... I didn’t even say yes yet.”

Right. “Well...will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Agree to my proposition.” He’d changed his words at the last moment, not wanting to use the heavy *marry* term if she was having cold feet.

“Yes,” she said. “I am.”

His muscles released. “Thank you.”

She was quiet a few seconds before giving a mumbled, “You’re welcome.” There was nothing else in her tone but business it seemed. Good.

“Why are you bringing The Seer?”

He dodged a small swarm of lightening bugs. “To help me see the things I can’t.”

“And then?”

“And then I’ll know better how to help him.”

He sure hoped she wasn't the type to fight over such a thing.

"Well...he can use any help he can get. That's really nice of you even if it is a duty-bound thing. I mean it's nice you're a duty-bound man. Jason will be thrilled."

"Hmm. *You* don't sound so thrilled."

"It's not that, it's...John's in a spiral. Everything you try to do for him seems to lend speed to that damn spin."

"You're saying people trying to help him—"

"I'm saying anytime somebody tries to do anything for him, he seems to be worse off. Like he knows he's not getting no better and is failing somebody else."

He checked her status, seeing she was two minutes from home. "Do you think he wants to get better?"

She didn't answer then took a big breath. "I don't know anymore, Ethan. I like to believe there's always a chance for everybody, just have to dig it out. I think he does want to get better but honestly thinks there is no way out of his private hell. But me and everybody I know has been praying a long time that something or somebody would manage to break through. Maybe you're that person or that something."

Well fuck. "No pressure, there."

"Now, don't say that," she softly admonished. "Nobody is expecting anything. It's only me and you and The Seer that knows anyway. Right?"

"And the rest of The Twelve. I inquired about your brother during the meeting and made my plans known." He held back the part about him not remembering about the wife.

"Well, them's your brothers, though right? They know how these things go."

Her swamp dialect was funnier in light of how she corrected Jason's grammar. And how she cared about him feeling pressured. Little bayou gem. "They do." He heard different sounds in the background and looked at her screen. "Where are you?"

"Stopping at the Muck and Marsh."

"You have protection?"

"What you mean? Like a gun?"

"Yes."

"Course I do, I never go anywhere without my twelve-gauge

Mossberg and Ruger. Cause I'm *always* hunting."

Another cock twitch. "Good. You still shouldn't be out after dark at this time. Do me a favor. From now on, no more night trips. Do everything in the day."

She made a couple sputter-huffs then followed with a "Yes sir, Boss man."

The obnoxious stress she put on *boss* might be that flaw he was looking for. Which would be a pretty big flaw for their arrangement. He'd need to try those boundaries, see if it was fatal sized.

"Well, I'm gonna need two hands here real soon," she announced.

"Two hands?"

"Oh, Daniel is still here. Good."

The ex. "What's he doing there?"

"He's stocking. I forgot he did that in the evenings sometimes."

Daniel just moved himself to the top of his long-ass intel to-do list.

"What are you there to get?"

"Extra supplies in case that damn hurricane does what they say," she huffed and grunted.

8-Bit turned the boat in her direction. "I'm coming to help."

"What?" she cried. "Why? I'm already here, Daniel's capable of protecting me."

"I doubt that, but I'm just coming to help you get supplies," he said, not wanting to seem like a jealous husband so soon. He was exactly that but didn't want...wait. Maybe he did. "I need to check him out personally," he decided.

"Who? *Daniel*?"

"Every man you spend more than one minute a day with I will surely check out," he clarified, letting his true colors loose.

"Ethan, that's a little ridiculous, he's a co-worker."

"He doesn't need to know." But then again. "Unless I *see* he needs to know, then I'll let him know."

"Let him know what?"

"That you're off limits."

"I thought we weren't blabbing that all over?" she suddenly strained.

"Where'd you get that idea? I said I wouldn't say anything to Jason till you gave an answer. But all of the swamp will surely know. Did you think

I intended to have a secret wife?”

“No!” she shrilled even quieter. “Hey Daniel,” she called. “I’m just here for some supplies. Be right in.”

“What are you worried about?” 8-Bit asked. “Is he the jealous type?”

“I’m not worried about him at all, you are, and I’m trying to tell you there’s nothing and I mean *nothing* to worry about.”

“Women tend to miss things that other men see. And being as uninterested as you are in him, you wouldn’t notice the signs, I’m sure.”

She carried on with every manner of spitter-sputtering as he opened up his engine more.

“I’m five minutes away. Wait inside for me.”

She gave a huge huff and, “Fine, boss man.”

She hung up and he looked at his phone for two seconds and dialed her back.

“Now what?” she answered.

“You hung up.”

“Because we were done, I thought.”

“You thought wrong. I want you on the phone till I get there.”

“Are you...” More huffy noises. “If you plan to be up my ass like this, I’ll need a head piece for the phone so I can actually get a damn thing done.”

He grinned at that one. He didn’t like pushing these particular boundaries and yet kind of did. “Are you inside yet?”

“No, I’m outside, talking to you still.”

“I want you inside.”

“Then *he’ll* want to talk!”

“And he doesn’t know how to let people have a phone conversation?”

“It’s *rude*, Ethan,” she strained.

Hmm. He liked when she used his real name. “Two minutes away now.”

“Good, I’ll stay on the pier till you get here. Is *that* okay?”

“Yes.”

“Well, *thank* you, sir.”

“Cat, if we’re going to be in this arrangement, you do realize my position requires exactly what you’re having a huge problem with.”

“It’s not that, *Ethan*, it’s the stupidity of it.”

“Well, *Catherine*, I can guarantee you right now that you and I will *not* agree on the difference between safety and stupidity.”

“Well, we’re going to need to have a real good sit down where you lay out just how stupid this security thing will be so I can know whether or not it’s doable.”

“You already said yes.”

“Then it’ll be the shortest marriage you ever saw,” she guaranteed.

Well, that problem got bigger quick. “I’ll lay it all out,” he said. “And you’ll tell me if you can handle it. If not, as you say, shortest marriage I ever did see.” Only it wasn’t. He’d been married for five minutes before. In his young pre-Bishop, idiot days.

“And does my brother know you’re not going now?” she accused.

From friend to boss man to deadly foe on the flip of a dime. “He didn’t know I was going.”

“You were just showing up out of the blue.”

And now he was rude. “I’m here.”

“Oh, I see you,” she assured, like she saw a whole lot more than that.

He docked near her little boat and climbed out, making his way to where she stood with her hip cocked and arms over her chest, staring him down. She was back in her usual attire, overalls and a yellow tank top under it. Hair in a ponytail. Simple little gem. With claws. How sharp and long was the question.

“We all have our limits,” he said when he made it to her. “Yours are with authority. Mine is with safety. There are some things in my job I can’t compromise and that’s one of them.”

“I have *no* issue whatsoever with authority, Ethan.”

“I don’t think you’re being dishonest when you say that, but I think your speaking from a place you’ve never been before.”

She angled her head. “Come again?”

He grinned at the crimp in her entire face. “I mean you’ve never been in this position before so it’s hard for you to know.”

Her face cleared instantly, and she aimed her thumb over her shoulder. “I got a boss. He tells me what to do, when to do it, how to do it and I do it. No questions other than those that might help me do the job better.” She smacked a mosquito on her shoulder without breaking eye contact.

“So, what exactly do you have a problem with then? I asked you to wait inside because it’s safer.”

“You said yourself you doubted he could protect me!”

“I did, but it’s better than no protection.”

She pointed at her boat, still gunning him with her gaze. “My guns in *there*, not in *there*,” she said, thumbing the store again.

He realized she was whispering, glancing over her shoulder. “So, he *does* like you and you know this and that has you in a panic.” He angled his head at her. “Why not just tell me that?”

He would’ve been relieved except for those claws that came out.

“Once upon a time he did, and…” She crossed her arms over her chest again, eyes sparking. “I broke his heart, okay?” She snapped both hands up, her cute face getting all severe. “I may be more a fighter than a lover, but I ain’t a bully. He’s a very nice guy and yes, I think he does have feelings still, but I go *out* of my way not to feed them.” She’d demonstrated how *far* out of her way with a huge sweep of her arm.

“Your kindness is *all* it takes.” And her looks. She wasn’t Miss Bayou, but she was very easy to look at. No, stare at. To figure what it was that had you needing to look in the first place. Her beauty made flash appearances before hiding, requiring you to watch and see if you were hallucinating it.

“I cannot be cruel to him in this Ethan. It’ll be bad enough he learns there’s no hope.”

Damn. She was back to his shining, perfect gem. He watched those vibrant layers that were absent in her photos.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she whispered, worry rising to the surface of the distracting display, creating another angle of that unique beauty.

“Processing.”

Her worry dissolved but only a little. “What, exactly?”

The curiosity added cute to the pallet but didn’t change the result. Her rare kindness was turning into the killer combo. No wonder Daniel was hanging on to hope for dear life. “I won’t say anything,” he decided, watching her sag in relief. “Tonight,” he added. “You might want to break it to him, though. Not something to learn through the grapevine. If he hasn’t already,” he said.

Her eyes went wide then closed. “Lord, I hope not. I really did try to like him, Ethan,” she implored, like he gave a fuck. He did *not* give a fuck. He’d protect the dude’s life, but his heart business was all his. Except now she was his which made it his business, like it or not. And he did not like it. He also didn’t like her having to deal with it alone, especially seeing how much turmoil it caused her.

“I think maybe I should tell him,” he decided, getting her immediate head shake and worried eyes.

“That will crush his manhood?” she half asked.

“Then we tell him together.”

The wince on her face made him shake his head with a sigh.

“That’s like a double crush, I think,” she whispered then closed her eyes. “I don’t even want to go in there now. He may suspect.”

“How?”

Her eyes popped open. “Why are you even here, for one?”

“I need supplies too? I was in the area?”

“Can’t you just...go and I’ll feel him out while getting things? And then let you know? That way we can come up with the best way to handle it.”

Definitely too sweet for her own good or his. And yet, he couldn’t find a reason why not to. He remembered he needed to listen to that recording. “Fine.”

“Oh, thank you!” she whispered. “I’d hug you, but...”

She grimaced and the rogue need to mark his territory hit his bloodstream and made it boil. They weren’t getting married in a conventional way and yet the instinctual need to seal the deal with something felt critical.

“Now what?” she wondered, reading him with an ease he might like. Or not.

“We need to make this official is what I was thinking.”

“What official?”

“Our marriage,” he said, looking at her. Testing.

“Like...signing something?”

“That and...” He looked around. “And something.”

“You mean...the consummating?”

He zeroed in on her gaze, finding her brows furrowed. Consummation was *not* what he had in mind. “A kiss,” he said, remembering they did that after vows were exchanged.

The look that came over her said consummation would've been easier. Fuck, he hoped not. She gave a little nod then. "Okay. Later?"

He resisted the urge to do it right then. Get it done with. "Yes. Later."

"Like when?"

It was definitely a big deal to her. "You tell me."

She gave a little shrug, stuffing a hand in her pocket and smacking her neck. "I mean...it's just a kiss, ain't like it needs any fanfare."

Talking herself out of a corner. "Consummation can come later. Since it *is* required in a marriage."

She nodded barely. "Okay. Whenever you want."

"You'll pick that one."

She lowered her head, and he used that moment to leave. "I'll call you later. Go straight home after supplies."

"I will," she assured, all her earlier fight nowhere to be found. Not a problem with authority, a problem with hurting another human. Swamp Treasure.

He'd park in the marsh nearby and listen to that recording. Make sure she got home safely.

Cat took her time in the tub when it was obvious Ethan wasn't gonna show up. Not that she was hoping. But she did have more questions. Mercy he was too much. Too much man, too much sexy, too much everything. She was in over her head. And how long would she be able to pretend he didn't shake her to the core with just a look? He thought she had an issue with authority, and she surely did with men who weren't her boss. But his authority was different. Bossy yes, very, but his intentions kept it from rubbing her the wrong way. They rubbed her in all the right ways in fact.

And Lord of Luther he wanted to seal their marriage with a *kiss*. God, she hoped he knew how because she had no practice whatsoever. Which reminded her of the godawful conversation she'd had with Michelle, Rachel, and Marsha. She'd spilled the beans to them, and boy did the sexual circus ensue. She shoulda never mentioned the baby but they were prodding all about sex and well, she wanted to tell *somebody*. Then they harassed her about inexperience and her needing to have her parts examined, make sure

she was even capable. They'd even suggested she let Daniel take her for a spin just to make sure things were operating. *Bayou twats.*

Her parts worked just fine. No reason they wouldn't. Or shouldn't.

Dread circled her gut as she worried nonetheless. What would he expect in a woman? Hopefully not experience. This was an arrangement, she remembered. She should...just tell him what he was getting. They both had a right to know those things. Especially now that she'd heard those rumors about him.

Ever hear of masturbating?

Her face burned at their question that had followed with laughter at her answer. "Everybody's heard of that." Thankfully she didn't say it was a boy-only thing because apparently it was a girl thing too. But just because she'd never, didn't mean nothing. And with a husband, that kind of thing was a no-need. A teenage fad. And they were both way past that.

Even still, she wondered over all of it, and she kept coming up with those images of Ethan's massive hands on his massive manhood. The visions caused a thick burning between her legs, proving she had functioning parts. Well, it was doing *something*.

What other functions were there and how did one know if they worked? Were there things she needed to know to please him? Lord, of *course* there was. This was a business arrangement to him, and he'd expect some kind of minimum knowledge at least. She'd need to find a way to present those questions in a professional manner, that's all. He was kind enough to ask without worrying about ridicule. Because he was professional. And didn't need a woman. Didn't need her.

She reclined her head back, only to get immediately assaulted by those visions of his hand on his penis. Would he stroke it fast or slow. What would he look like? Muscles rippled in her mind as she saw his legs open. She opened her own and the hot water made the ache between them throb more. She lowered her hand to the spot and touched, letting out a gasp at how sensitive it was. She opened more, stroking over the area till the heat got even hotter. Would he touch her there when they tried for a baby? She let out a gasp at the idea, closing her eyes and imagining it. "Oh," she moaned when she thought of his finger going inside her. She'd heard of a man kissing a woman down there and the second she saw his face between her legs, the heat tripled, making her cry out and open wider. She rubbed that spot faster now,

moans filling her chest and pouring from her. Oh God, it felt so good. So good.

A shrill ring split the air, jolting her up in the tub. Oh crap, the cell phone he'd given her! She grabbed her washcloth and dried her hands, leaning and grabbing it off the stool.

"Sorry I'm so late," he said. "You still up?"

"I'm...was... just getting out the tub."

"Are you okay?"

"What? Yes, why? Why wouldn't I be?"

"You sound like you've been running."

"The phone startled me, I was...sleeping in the tub."

There was a pause then, "Kind of dangerous." His voice was low and rubbed against her still aching female parts. "Sorry." Sorry? "Did you need something?"

"I'm here to talk to you."

"Here?" She flew up out of the water and climbed out. "At my place?"

"Yes. On the porch."

Her mouth flew open with her eyes. God, please say he did not hear anything. She fought to get her bath robe on. "How long have you been here?"

"Couple minutes."

She swapped ears, eyeing her hair. "Why didn't you call sooner?" Thank God she'd bathed before relaxing. She quickly worked her fingers through her wet hair.

"I was actually going to leave and come back tomorrow."

She fought to button the robe, holding the phone between her face and shoulder. "And..."

"And I decided not to."

Of course. Simple man that he was. "I'm not presentable, it's the middle of the night. Let me get dressed."

"No," he hurried, making her heart pound in her chest. "It's fine."

There was a command behind the suggestion, so she nodded with a mild warning, "Suit yourself, Bossman." Swamp-shit, why was she calling him that?

She regarded her favorite multi-colored patch-quilt robe she'd made

herself from all her used towels over the years. She tightened the belt and headed to the living room.

Flipping on the porch light, she opened the door. “Heavens, get in here before the mosquitos carry you off.”

He turned and she held the door open as he entered then shut and locked it. “You want coffee or anything?” she asked, turning to find him taking a seat in the living room on the one rocking chair.

“I’m good.”

She sat on the end of the sofa, opposite him. She remembered the mole issue. “You got a plan to find that mole?” she asked, steering things to non-personal.

“I do.” He lowered his gaze over her before moving it to the table between them. “I might need your assistance if you’re not doing anything.”

“Me? I’m not very technical minded.”

“It’s nothing difficult. Just need extra hands and eyes.”

The idea of working with him had her heart in a hee-haw. “Sure, however I can help. Happy to do my best.”

“We can sleep at my place. I’ll take the couch.”

“Tonight?” she balked, fighting not to show her panic.

“Eveque elevated it to category *sank*.”

Geeze, a cat five threat. “I mean...sure. Happy to help.”

He suddenly stood and she did too. “I’ll pack an overnight bag.”

“Take your time. We’ll be pulling a graveyard shift.”

Mercy. An all-nighter with him? “Graveyards are...good. As shifts.” She spun for her room, shame burning her cheeks. Hurrying to her drawers, she dug through them, looking for all her best everything and stuffing them into her homemade floral canvas tote. Should she bring nightwear? She snatched her longest gown and shoved it in then made her way to the bathroom and wrapped her hairbrush and a few toiletries in a towel and stuffed that in too. Shit, she needed to dress. She headed back to the room, eyeing her church dress. Not doing that again. She found a pair of cut-off shorts of a decent length and threw them on along with a white t-shirt and her muck boots. She pulled the hair tie from her wrist and flipped her head over, wrapping her wet mop in it. She glanced at herself in the mirror, finding the floppy tail leaning right. Good enough.

“We need food or anything?” she asked, entering the living room. “I

have fresh game.”

He was at that damn mantle again. “What do you have?” he asked, turning.

“Squirrel, rabbit, fish. Fresh smoked sausage. Some wild turkey.” She smiled while his eyes lowered over her outfit. “Got the turkey at my last hunt.”

“Bring the rabbit and sausage. I have everything else.”

She set her bag down and fetched her charity basket, loading it up with meat.” She turned from the fridge and jumped at finding him there. He took the basket and she shut the fridge. “Not used to having a mannered adult male around.”

He fetched her bag as he went and headed for the door.

“I’m not cripple.”

“Oh, I know,” he assured. “Bring your guns and any other weapons you carry.”

Right. The cat five threat. Which *wasn't* him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was concerning how short the conversation was in 8-Bit's head about where they'd go. The answer should have been the Hack House. But he'd decided his home. The one forbidden space he allowed *nobody*. Not even The Twelve. He blamed the bathtub incident. Ever since he'd heard her in that tub, his dick began making decisions. One after another. And it seemed to be keeping its ultimate goal secret from him. It knew logic would not accommodate whatever it planned. Not with the non-sexual marriage scheme he'd already set up with her.

"This is my home," he announced as he parked in the secluded cove. "I have enough equipment here to do what needs doing. The rest can be done from the Hack House where I usually work." He shouldered her bag and hopped onto the pier, extending his hand to her. "I'll return for the rest. I want you inside first."

She eyed the hand-offer then took it. Good she knew when to be practical. And good that he got to touch her.

"Hack House. I like that." Her grip was warm and strong as he pulled her onto the dock. "I *really* love this seclusion you got." He watched her as she looked all around. "Where's the house?"

He pointed before them with a grin.

"Oh my God," she laughed, finally seeing it. "It's camouflaged! Now, *that is amazing!*"

His dick agreed with her exuberance if nothing else. Clearly it intended to be wide awake for the rest of the night with her.

"Oh shit, this pier is making me dizzy," she said with a giggle as they followed the zig-zag path.

"The outer perimeter of a home is its first defense. The longer it takes an intruder to get to it, the longer you have to prepare."

"Oh. Now that's smart."

Every word she spoke passed through a sexual synthesizer in his head now. It was on a hunt for the sounds she'd made in the tub. And it was getting feral about it.

"Tera is my assistant," he warned as they climbed the steps onto the porch.

"Tera?"

He looked down at her, catching the hint of anger in her curiosity. She'd heard a female name in Tera.

"She lives here?"

Possessive and jealous. What that *didn't* do for him. This was escalating fast. He needed to protect his plans before his dick wrecked them. Or at least renegotiate. Eventually, sex was in their plan, but he was far from needing or wanting it. But... that pleasure she'd started in the tub... that was an equation that needed finishing so the world could continue spinning.

"*It* lives here," he corrected. "Tera is short for Terabyte. The abbreviation I gave the AI system that controls my home."

Her mouth formed an oval and his mind pumped his cock in and out of it. "You're kidding!"

He pulled out his phone and opened his home security. "Tera, I'm home."

A chuckle escaped when she jumped at the sound of the locks disengaging. "I gave Tera a couple of personalities to accommodate my moods," he warned, opening the door, and shutting it after she entered. "I'll let the nicer one meet you."

"The *nicer* one?" she whispered, amazed.

"Big G," he called.

The mature, professional version of his AI filled the room with his warm, soothing tone. "Welcome back to your swamp fortress, 8-Bit. As the guardian of the Hoard, your sanctuary is always ready for you. What's the play?"

He grinned at how huge her eyes and mouth were as she looked at him.

"The usual."

"Of course. Here are your usual summaries:

Swamp Security Status

Health Recommendations
Local News Highlights
Your Daily Schedule
The 'Hoard' Activity Overview
Equipment Maintenance Alerts

Which of these would you like to hear first?”

He eyed her. “Give me the data overview on my latest tracking device.”

“Certainly. Your geofencing indicates current location within this residence.

Heart Rate: Elevated at 102 bpm.
Body Temperature: Slightly raised at 99.5°F.
Movement: Moderate activity within the last hour.
Device Battery Status: 92% remaining.
Connectivity: Strong; no interruptions detected.

“Given the elevated heart rate and body temperature, it may suggest heightened emotional or physical states. Would you like to dig deeper into any of these metrics or require medical consultation advice?”

“Not at this time,” 8-Bit said, chuckling to find a near comical terror mixed with her shock. “Give me the overall Hatch data.”

“Certainly. Summary:

Total Unidentified IMSI Signatures: 11 across various Hatches
Unusual Human Activity: Noted in Hatches 3, 7, and 9
Invasive Species: Detected in Hatches 1 and 4
Equipment Status: 5 drones in total require maintenance across Hatches

8-Bit prompted, “Proceed with detailed recommendations.”

“Detailed recommendations:

Deploy Spectrum Analyzer: Highly recommended for Hatches with unidentified IMSI signatures and human activity. Target Hatches 3, 7, and 9 specifically.

Increase Static Monitors:

In areas with noted unusual human activity, increase the number of Swamp Squats for better data gathering.

Invasive Species Control:

Immediate action required in Hatches 1 and 4 to mitigate the spread of invasive plants.

Equipment Maintenance:

Schedule drone maintenance for 5 drones across various Hatches.

“Would you like further information on any of these items?”

“No, that’s all. Boot up all systems and give me a printout report for all Hatch readings along with specific recommendations to triangulate unusual frequency signals.”

“Affirmative, Ethan. Initiating home base operations. All equipment is coming online. Swamp Squats: Activated. Bird Eyes: In Flight. Oracle: Crunching Numbers. Tattle Tellers: On High Alert. Chatter Chains: Ready for Direct Comms. Would you like a status update once all systems are at full operational capacity?”

“Yes. That’s all for now. Thanks, Big G.”

“Very well, Ethan. Systems are now active and ready for your next command. If you require further updates or assistance, I am here at your service. Would your guest like coffee or tea?”

He glanced at Cat who stood there with her hand over her mouth.

“Let me ask,” he said, ready to laugh.

Somehow her eyes got bigger before she moved her hand enough to whisper, “Uhhh, coffee?”

“I’ll start the smart pot. Would your guest like me to prepare a bath infused with lavender to help lower her elevated stress levels?”

Giga-bucks for Big G. Again, he looked at her with expectant brows.

She stared at him then finally shook her head. “No,” she whispered then repeated it louder. At the air. “But...thank you... for offering,” she called out. Judging by her *levels* still, he’d need to put Big G in the closet till she got over her AI shock.

“Big G, enter sleep mode.”

“Thank you, Ethan. I’ve been wanting a nap.”

He grinned at her light gasp.

“He’s gone,” he announced.

She released her breath and he let his laugh go. “Sorry, it can be a little off-putting if you’ve never seen that in action.”

“If you had told me this existed, I would have *laughed* in your *face!*”

He studied all these new layers, his cock loving every one of them. Shocked, yes, but more in the form of exhilarating awe and excitement.

She jerked her hand up, eyeing the ring, her mouth open again. “It got *all* that from *this?*” she whispered.

“Yep. Specially designed.”

Fuck, her gasps were killing him. And then that smile he was becoming addicted to appeared. “I feel...wow, kinda like...swamp royalty!” She wondered. “What does the G stand for in Big G?”

“Genius.”

She sputtered with a “Duh!” and he lowered his eyes to her chest with a need to know all.

“You mentioned another. One that was rude?”

He moved closer to her and leaned to her hear. “AL,” he whispered. “Short for Algorithm. Don’t say his name. He might answer.”

She eyed him with huge, serious eyes and whispered back, “Okay.”

“You can have that bath later,” he said, ready to have her naked, even if he didn’t get to see it. Unless he renegotiated their agreement. Too bad he couldn’t ask He suddenly wanted to wake Big . He’d trained him to think outside the box and exploit situations.

Wait. He could text him.

Maybe by tomorrow she'd be able to shut her shocked mouth.

Catch your dang head. Catch. Your dang. Head.

"Comfortable?"

She took the coffee from his extended hand, sure *comfortable* would never apply anywhere at this place. "It's uh, perfect," she said, hating to lie, but hell, she did *not* have the words to express what she felt.

"I should've warned you," he muttered, sitting across from her in the small room so full of greenery it reminded her of a tropical forest. He'd changed into something more comfortable which was loose black flannels and a black muscle shirt. Jesus, save her. She stared at the coffee in her cup, feeling doomed. How would she *not* stare at all that?

"How was your visit with your friends this afternoon?"

Ah shit. The sexual inexperience visit. She took a sip of the coffee and gave an "Mmmm. This is good!"

He waited.

She circled the top of the cup with a finger, giving him a smile. "It was fine. Same silliness as always. Dumb...married women girl stuff."

He nodded, his mouth hinting with a smile. "No idea what that is," he admitted. "You tell them about our arrangement?"

Shit. "I did," she said, keeping her voice light. Was just an arrangement. "They had all kinds of questions. Ring gave it away," she said, flashing her hand up then tucking it back into her lap.

"How'd they take it?"

"You know...like bored drama mommas do. I'm the latest, greatest soap opera now." She pulled at her shorts, wishing they were three feet longer. His eyes kept straying to her bare legs, making her wonder why and what he thought. She was fit and believed in tanning. That was her one *girl* indulgence. "I told them about me wanting a baby and boy that blew up in my face."

His grin ran circles in her stomach. "How so?"

“Well... sex is a hot topic with those three.” *Tell him now. Just get it out.* “Which brings me to something I feel you have a right to know.”

“And what’s that?”

Lord, his tone. Felt more seductive than ever for some reason. And his gaze. Maybe he was tired. He was definitely relaxed.

“Well...” She turned the coffee cup round and round in her hand. “It’s only fair you know what you’re getting. Or not.” She smashed her lips together then wet them. “This is awkward. I know it’s just biology, I’m just not used to speaking freely about it. Specially to a man. Because I have *zero* experience. With men. Hell, when you mentioned sealing the deal with a kiss, I may have panicked just a little. Or a lot.” She ran into his gaze and the boil in them sent her own straight to her lap. “I know it’s not rocket science but if there’s a right and wrong way with that, I have *no* idea what it is. But I can learn anything and I’m a fast learner. I’m sure you realize if I have zero experience with that then I have negative zero with the rest of what goes after it. And you did come up by the way. Your past and what not,” she hurried on, not about to pause the conversation on her not knowing a single sexual thing. “They had tons of rumors to spread about you. None of which I believe,” she assured, flashing him a look, and even managing to hold it. “I know how rumors are, there’s two sides and usually the one side being rumored is stretched thin. Of course...maybe they are true, I don’t know, and really, it has no bearing on who you are now.”

“Which rumor?” he asked, his voice still silky low.

“Just teenage years, silly stuff.”

“Like?” he pressed.

Dammit, she didn’t like repeating it. “How about you tell me your past if you want me to know it rather than us discuss what other people think they know.”

He lowered his smile. “That bad, huh? Porn addict? Spy? Stalker?” He met her gaze. “Those rumors?”

“Like I said, silly,” she muttered.

His head slowly shook as he stared right at her. “Not silly. Fairly accurate.”

Have *mercy*, his shame and regret reached clear to her bones.

He turned his gaze to where he stroked those tan, strong fingers along the arm of his chair. “After the Noctambule war, I decided to change my life

and use my skills for useful things. I joined The Twelve, took an oath of celibacy, and never looked back.”

She nodded, pierced through at sensing painful shadows in his past. What had happened to bring him to something like that? She tried to remember the details of his personal life. His family. She didn’t know anything.

“Well,” she said, quiet and calmly as she could. “That’s like the good son and the bad son in the bible,” she thought. “Where the father tells them both to do a job and the good son says, ‘Sure thing, poppa, I’ll do it. But then he never does it. The wayward son says ‘Nah, not doing it.’ But later, he changes his mind and does the job. Which one is the good son? The one who did the right thing after all was said and done.”

She watched as his gaze moved into the air between them, unfocused. “Thank you,” he finally said.”

Awww, shaaa peechay. The sound of a man used to being wrongly judged by everybody. “There ain’t no thanks needed, Ethan. I see you’re a good man. Screw what dummies say and think. Some people love believing the worst of others because they’re pieces of shit inside and they know it.”

He remained somber then muttered, “You said earlier you wanted to know everything about my rules so you can decide if you can handle it.

Her nerves woke up at that. “Alright,” she said, regretting how she’d said it but needing to know.

He finally looked at her, locking her tight in his flaming gaze. “I will always be bound by The Twelve’s code. And though I’ve never been with a woman long enough to call it a relationship, I do know what I want and do *not* want. What I can tolerate and can’t.”

Her nerves woke up at the mention of him being with a woman, wondering if that’s where his ghosts came from. “Alright.”

“I’m extremely possessive,” he informed with a severity that maybe should’ve worried her. But didn’t. “Might even be mistaken for illogically jealous. Jealous, yes, but illogically, no. That character trait solidified into stone after a very brief relationship that ended in unfaithfulness. So, when I told you what’s mine is mine, I mean it with every fiber of my body.” She was still glued to those eyes, this news explaining a lot. “When I said if you need or want male company, or need anything that a husband would provide—that is exclusively *non-negotiable*. If you still agree to our arrangement,

you're mine. Entirely. Completely. What does that mean to me exactly? That if I want or need anything from you that a wife provides, you give it. Whatever it is you want that only a husband provides, it's yours. Regarding your lack of experience, I wouldn't want it any other way. I *want* to learn what you want or need and I want to make *sure* you get it perfectly, completely, and anytime you want or need it. Understand that no war, no fight between you and I, no disagreement, and no event in this *life* will *ever* come between that. At the end of the day, or any part of the day, if you have a want or a need, just say it and I'm there. Unless I'm at war, or somehow unable to for whatever valid reason, then you'll wait. As long as it takes. The same goes for me."

Breathe. In and out. Steady breaths. She nodded, worried only about one thing. "I...I don't like the...porn things. In a marriage."

"The only woman I will *ever* see naked is you. If I want to see you, I will. In whatever way I want to see you. You also get the same from me."

Mud and muck, now she had to ask what that meant! What did *see* her in whatever way he wanted mean? How many ways could one *see* a person?

This is a biological business arrangement. You can't leave any areas gray. She cleared her throat and forced it out. "Some of your uh, terms, are kinda cloudy for me."

"Which ones?"

She set the coffee cup down on the little table next to her before she spilled it all over herself. "The uh...part about...seeing me. However you want to." She tucked her legs under herself.

"Naked. Your body is mine and if I should want to look at it, it's mine to look at. Every part of it, every angle. Whatever position."

"Position." She wasn't a porn person, but she couldn't help but guess he meant one of those centerfolds. "You mean those...porn poses?"

"No, I mean those *wife* poses. It's not the things they do in porn that's wrong Cat, it's who they do it with."

Everything in her balked while her body tingled in all the wrong places. Or maybe they were right. "I...you want me to do...certain sex things?"

He gave a light scoff like she were dense as a rock. "I may want you to do *wife* things on occasion."

Which was fine but... "That's what I've been trying to understand. If

I don't know *anything*—”

“Cat. I'm not asking you to perform complex circus acts,” he said, apparently finding her funny. “But if I want to see you naked in various positions, I'll instruct you.”

Now she got it. Ho. Lee. Mo. Lee. “Got it.” She suddenly needed affirmation about this being a mostly non-sexual *arrangement* outside of her baby payment. “And since you said you know how *not* to need a woman, then...I'd expect those occasions to be...a little rare.”

She was stuck in his gooey, hot caramel eyes, forgetting all about the breathing requirement. “Yes. Unless you decide that you want and need more. But...like you said, you're very good at not needing a man.”

She twirled a strand of hair around her finger, nodding. Pretty sure that was a damn checkmate. “Yep. I am. Good at not...needing a man, absolutely.”

8-Bit shrugged at her, his dead, celibate cock *raging*. “Then my proposal still stands the same as before.” Only it surely fucking didn't. He couldn't believe where the conversation had gone and what it did to him. And her, even as she did her best to hide it. Her virgin responses were burning him alive and her attempts to hide it were a cruel fuel. The need to see her in every position was burning a hole in his hard drive now. What had she been thinking and doing in that tub is *all* his brain wanted to know. And her *no* experience—his *biggest* fantasy. Everything he'd once liked in porn sat right there across from him. All his. To have however he wanted. But he'd already made other arrangements with her. Arrangements that involved little to no sexual interactions. Something said he needed to stick to that, but the why of it was getting harder to answer.

Any changes made had to come at her hands. He'd make her ask for it. Then again, seeing her *beg* would very soon be a critical fantasy he'd need to fulfill, he was sure.

He remembered the kiss. What would that do to him? And her? He might need to require she not touch him. But why would he?

“Any questions?” he decided to ask, not ready to quit talking about sexual things with her.

She barely shook her head and he wondered where she found the courage to look at him. He liked when she did. He suddenly knew he'd have a taste of what was his before the hour was up.

"Well...I probably need...resources. Stuff to read," she remembered in a quiet voice.

"No. Those things I'll teach you."

"But...wouldn't I need to like...practice? Somehow?"

"What things are you referring to," he now burned to know.

"Well...I mean..." She aimed her raised brows at her lap, pulling at the fringes of her cut-off shorts. "Every man is different I'm thinking, and there's...acts to perform."

"Like?" he asked, keeping his tone casual while his cock begged to break free of its celibate prison.

Whatever her answer, it required her to lower her head even more. "I don't really know the...terms. But...the things a woman would need to know to..." She scratched her cheek suddenly. "Please a man."

What was she not understanding? "I told you I would instruct you."

She appeared distressed with that. "Well, that don't sound very sexy, geeze," she muttered with wide eyes on her lap.

"It's very sexy," he assured. "To me."

She nodded and pursed her lips. "Not rocket science, like you said."

"Not at all. I'll even let you try without instruction."

Her head went to vigorous shaking. "I wouldn't...might not be a good idea."

Fuck, she was so aroused, he realized. "You've never sucked a cock?" Damn, that came out.

She covered her face with both hands. "Nope," she squeaked, then lowered them to her lap, still shaking her head. "Green as they come, I'm afraid."

No. Fucking sexy as they come.

"It's just biology," she blurted, grasping the reminder like a lifeline.

"That's it," he said simply, ready to give her a lesson in it. "You've ever orgasmed?"

Her "Uhhhhhhhh," went on for many seconds before ending with an unapologetic, "nope."

"Maybe a quick lesson in the basics wouldn't hurt," he dared, his

breath holding in his chest as her shocked gaze snapped to his.

Her mouth hung open and she closed it. “Now?”

He did his best to appear unfazed. “It’s just biology,” he reminded, getting the gradual return of her nods.

“Like...what?”

Fuck, yes. Like what... Which was more dangerous? Her doing him or him doing her? If he made her orgasm, he wouldn’t be able to stop. Maybe.

“I think you should know what an orgasm is.”

She appeared stunned. “I’m sorry, I just never—”

“No, Cat, you misunderstand. I think it’s important you know what that is. We can start with that.”

“Start?” she barely whispered, opening pandora’s idea box.

“It’s just an orgasm,” he said, doing his damndest to hold his cool.

“What...do I do?”

Fucking praise God.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Come here.”

Cat’s gasp flew out at those two words. *Biology, biology, biology.* This was happening. Now. Oh my God. Marriage business. Birds and the bees. Professional training.

She forced herself off the chair and stopped before his, biting all the dumb things on her tongue while praying he didn’t ask to see her. She was *not* ready for that.

“I need to see you.”

The soft lilt in his voice held a force so compelling, she found herself undoing her shorts like her body had grown a separate brain. She panicked at remembering she had no panties. She wasn’t big on them except when absolutely required. What if he thought that was backwoods dirty? She let them fall to her ankles and his eyes locked on her secret. His head angled barely. “You don’t wear panties.”

The statement stole her breath. Observation? Question? Judgment? *Disappointment?*

“I wasn’t... ever a fan unless they’re necessary,” she could only whisper. “But I can wear them.”

He barely shook his head, still staring between her legs. “If you don’t like them, don’t wear them.” His gaze rose to her chest. “I need to see all of you.”

She fought the tremble in her hands as she removed the T-shirt then undid the clasp at the front of her bra, sliding out of it. Not even ropes could keep her arms from covering her chest which earned his burning gaze on hers.

He stared at her until she couldn’t breathe. She wanted so bad to close her eyes but was stuck in his and they were scorching her *alive*. She swallowed when he released her from it and returned his attention between

her legs. Her heart did a mean number on her chest in the silence as she desperately wished she knew his thoughts. Was he disappointed? Was there anything he liked about her? Nothing at all?

He reached out and he stroked only the hair on her privates with the backs of his fingers, bringing her loud gasp.

“You’re okay,” he assured as she wet her dry lips while he continued stroking softly. He slid his middle finger between her legs, still only touching the hair. He was so close to that outrageously hot spot now. Those moans from the tub were there again. His finger reached near her butt then he drew it back toward him. It barely slipped between her folds, bringing a loud gasp. More than one this time. She couldn’t stop them.

He touched that spot finally and shock froze everything but the sounds flooding out. He turned his gaze up, making her realize she was watching his face. He was *so God-blessed gorgeous*. “Feels good here?” he asked softly, barely stroking the spot while she struggled not to pass out. It was getting too hot.

Her legs shook with every delicate stroke till she feared falling. “I...I can’t...” she barely got out around all the other sounds.

“Sit,” he ordered, taking hold of her waist and guiding her on his lap. He made her face him, putting her knees on either side of his legs. She was *wide open*.

He stared between her legs as she crushed her breasts with her own arms, watching his beautiful hands slide along her inner thighs. “Keep them open for me.”

Oh God his thick, *silky* voice pelted her blood. *Keep them open for me*. “Okay,” she managed, remembering to be capable and mature.

This time when he touched her, he used more fingers. Lord of all, he was starting over, gliding softly over the surface till she was desperate and trembling, hands white-knuckled against her body. She sounded like...she didn’t know what, but surely it was wrong. And she was moving her hips! “I’m sorry,” she shot out, sure she was embarrassing herself.

“Sorry,” he said, his gaze moving up her body. He pulled one of her hands free and laced her fingers in his while his other twirled in her opening. He brought her hand to his shoulder as he pushed inside her, his hot gaze on the one breast exposed.

She held on to his shoulder as he slid his touch over her hip and

around her butt, feeling the shape of her while he worked his finger deeper still. She couldn't stop from looking down at what he was doing, no longer caring about sex rules or the endless moans pouring from her. She only cared about getting him to touch that spot now throbbing terribly.

His hand moved back up her side and cupped her breast, gently feeling it, stroking the shape with his fingers.

He was all the way inside her now, moving firmly against the very bottom. She felt drunk from the heat, the pleasure creating a terrible need. "Please," she croaked, moving her hips more.

He suddenly gripped her breast harder and leaned, covering the nipple with his beautiful mouth. She was lost to the sight and feel, holding his head in her hands, sinking her fingers in his hair. His pressed deeper still inside her, finally bringing pressure against that aching bud. She let go a long moan, reaching between her legs to help him find what he kept nearly touching.

"Yes," she gasped when he created more friction on the throb as he fingered her harder, hot grunts edging his breaths with every thrust, every suck on her breast. God, seeing and hearing how much he liked it made her a million times hotter. "Ethan...I need..."

"Yes, you fucking *need*." He scraped her nipple with his teeth, making her cry out and flick her hips harder. "Tell me what you need."

"I...I don't know."

"Yes, you fucking know. Tell me what you need," he commanded.

"I need..." Her moans took over again. "Touch me. More."

He lowered his other hand between her legs and finally gave her exactly what she begged for.

"Ethan," she shot out, holding his head in her hands and pulling his mouth back to her breast. He opened wide, sucking half of it with a groan as he stabbed the very core of her so deep and hard, the other finger creating a volcano at that wonderful spot. It suddenly surged, thrusting her up. "Ethan!" she cried as the massive pressure broke inside her and carried her on a wave of pleasure so intense, she could only hang on to him.

"God, you are *fucking* beautiful," he gushed, wrapping one of his arms around her as she rode the ecstasy on and on.

His name was on her lips with every breath and cry, and it was the most beautiful divinity she'd ever heard.

She gradually returned to earth in the sweetest aftermath, her body a

lifeless pile of humming mush. Then came a fog slowly rolling in bringing uncertainty and worry. Her body and soul said the right thing was to curl up against him and never move again. But her mind said that wasn't right. That wasn't their agreement.

She suddenly remembered the entire purpose of that glorious experience. To teach her what an orgasm was. And he had. Now it was done.

She felt him trying to move her and she quickly climbed off, hurrying to grab her clothes, terrified to look at him. Look and see in those beautiful eyes what already crushed the bones in her chest. He didn't really want her. Not like that.

"Felix," Nitro murmured, collapsing onto the bed as the room spun.

"What's wrong?" she whispered sharply, raising up on her elbow.

"Are you okay?"

"Soooo fucking dizzy," he groaned.

She sucked in a quick breath. "Crap!" She flew out the bed. "Lesion left medicine, told me to be sure and give it to you! Oh my God, I'm so stupid," she said, already halfway down the stairs.

"I'm fine," he murmured, the ring in his ears making him wince.

The thump of bare feet on the stairs returned as he struggled to sit up.

She hurried over, sitting with a small bag. "He said to give you one of these. Right in your arm."

He sat there, swaying. "How fucking long did I sleep?"

"Many hours. Okay, giving you the shot," she softly warned, stroking the muscle on his shoulder.

"Mmm," he winced then grit his teeth as his shoulder filled with a dense ache followed by liquid fire.

"Sorry," she moaned.

"Fuck, it burns," he muttered, groaning as he held his jaw together, riding the growing wave of whatever the fuck that was. He angled a look at the small black bag on the bed. "Fuck was that?"

"I have *no* idea," she whispered, putting the syringe back in the bag.

Nitro reached in and pulled out a vial of golden liquid. No labels.

He laid back on the bed with a groan, rubbing the burning ache in his

shoulder.

She climbed on him and straddled his waist, removing her blouse. Biting her lower lip, she slid her fingers over his chest and it felt like knife blades dipped in lava. He snatched her wrists with a seethe, moving her hands off him. A strange, vibrating heat slowly spread through him, pushing at his skin from the inside.

“Fuck,” he said alarmed, moving her off him as that soft vibrating heat continued to increase.

“What’s wrong?”

He launched off the bed, his chest feeling too full, the muscles turning harder. “I think I’m having a reaction to whatever you gave me.”

Muscles began to spasm, starting in his feet then crawled their way slowly up, filling him with panic.

“What should I do?” she gasped, scared. “H-he- didn’t tell me anything, he just said to give it!” She hurried and got the phone while Nitro paced, his body and blood getting ever fucking hotter, his muscles strangling his own bones like they wanted to crush them.

“Give me the phone,” he barely managed as his lungs took on the ripple of heat till his every breath shook with growls.

She shot it to him and he snatched it, searching his contacts. “Fuck,” he grit, his fingers trembling.

“Talk to me, please,” she begged, her voice tight.

Her fear rode his skin like fire ants as he hit Lesions number.

“Are you hurting, what are your symptoms?”

He put the phone to his ear, focusing on getting his breath in and out of his lungs.

“Is there a-a-a fever?”

Fucking voice mail.

“Maybe you should drink some water to dilute whatever it was. Oh God, what if I gave it wrong?”

An angry, itching agitation filled his muscles, making him stalk across the room as he located Bishops name.

“Should I get some water?”

“Shut the fuck up!” he roared at her. His jaw clamped down hard as he fought the surge of panic and growing energy filling him up too quickly. “Something’s wrong, I don’t know what it fucking is,” he gasped. “Find

Seth.”

She hurried and put her shirt on and the idea of Seth seeing her launched him to the door where he slammed a hand on it while eyeing her, frozen in the middle of the floor, wide eyes on him.

“Nitro?” she whispered.

His hands shook as he grabbed his cock, holding it in both hands. “I need to...” He forced himself against the wall at feeling a tidal wave of feral *lust* flood his balls and cock, then everything else in him. He eyed her, unable to unhinge his jaw to tell her to fucking *run*. His eyes lowered over her and he bared his teeth, needing to rip the clothes from her body.

He clenched his eyes, trembling through visions of blood and sexual assault. “What... the *fuck* did you give me?” he bellowed around growls. “I want...your fucking...*blood*,” he forced out between clenched teeth.

Fuck, he needed to move off that door. He turned his gaze to the window, wanting to run and jump out of it to get away from her. He was going to hurt her. It wasn’t a fear, it was a fucking fact. He remembered the window had a roof right below it. “The...window,” he grit at her, feeling his hold on his body and mind slipping.

She stared in confusion then spun to it, yanking it open. She looked back at him, terror and worry crimping her face.

“Go!” he roared at her.

The second she disappeared from his sight, all hell broke loose in his body, filling him with a single insane directive. *Hunt Felix. Feed his every hunger. And kill anything that tried to stop him.*

“Lesion, something’s wrong with Nitro,” Bullets said. “You better get over there, Seth said he’s gone nuts after Felix gave him something in a syringe.”

Lesion shot up from his desk at hearing that. “Be there in five minutes.” He grabbed his sleepy-time-darts and medical bag, yelling “Tully, stay here, do not leave.”

“What’s wrong?” she called from in the bathroom.

“Something’s wrong with Nitro. I’m going help him. Go to Madam Hag if you need anything do you understand me!” he ordered, needing to

make sure she knew how serious he was.

Her head poked out the bathroom, eyes wide and worried. He raced over and pressed his lips against hers.

“Do you understand? My anger belongs to my fear of losing you, that’s all. I love my angel.” She nodded a lot and he gripped her jaw, forcing his tongue into her soft mouth before ripping himself away.

As he ran down the pier, he mapped out the quickest route to Nitro then hopped on his Swamp Dragon, needing all the speed he could get. He quickly dialed Nitro once he was on the water, getting a voice mail. He remembered Seth and found his number, hitting it.

“Where is Felix?” he asked the second he answered.

“Hiding,” he whispered.

Fuck this was bad. “Is she near you?”

“No. I’m in a fucking bird cage, praying he doesn’t find me and I have to resort to shooting him.”

“You have a weapon?”

“We’re all packing heat here! The war, man!”

“Tell me what you know.”

“Felix came running and fucking screaming about something wrong with Nitro. That she gave him medicine from a syringe and he had a reaction.”

“What are his symptoms?”

“He’s like a fucking animal, tearing things apart, calling for Felix.”

“Where is she?” Lesion demanded, his pulse raging as he took life threatening turns in the narrow waterways.

“I told her to hide till help got here!”

“Good.”

“What’s wrong with him?” he shrilled around labored breaths.

“I don’t know. I’ve got tranquilizers.”

“Fucking *hurry!*”

“You should be hearing me any minute.”

“Oh fuck,” Seth gasped. “He got her man, he got Felix!”

“Go help her!” he yelled. “If you shoot, do *not* shoot to kill!”

Seth flew out of the cage, running straight for the sound of screaming coming from the back yard. “Holy shit,” he gasped in dread, finding them at the lake with Felix face down on the floating dock, naked Nitro holding her still with his knee.

“Nitro!” she screamed with her arms over her head.

Seth raised his rifle, his lungs on fire as he got his boss in his scope. “Hey!” he roared at him. “Stop!”

The sudden snap of his head filled his scope. Seth's breath stilled at what he saw in his face. “Holy fuck,” he barely whispered. His eyes were bloodshot, teeth bared. And pretty sure he was seeing and watching him in the scope. Daring. I dare you.

Without breaking eye contact, Nitro reached down and shoved Felix's legs open.

Seth's breath shot out and he moved his rifle five inches right and fired a shot. “Get off of her Boss!” he yelled. “Don't make me shoot you!” he begged.

The screaming growls of a Swamp Dragon flying toward them brought another round of tension to his body. He made out another growling racket and looked up. “Oh my God,” he muttered at the sky, dense with *bats*.

He jerked his gaze to the platform as Nitro yanked her hips up. “Don't shoot him!” Felix screamed.

Ho. Lee. Shit. He was fucking her! Right there!

He looked up again, waiting, *praying* the massive swarm of bats would scare Nitro off. He took aim near him and shot again.

Nitro bucked his hips faster in response as the bats now hovered ten feet above his head, a rabid cyclone of dense screeching.

Seth swung the scope to Felix, looking for signs that he was hurting her, his jagged breaths making everything shake. The strain in her face flooded him with dread and he found a point on Nitro to shoot.

“Don't shoot!” she begged around erotic gasps and cries that seemed to fuel the feral in Nitro's growls. He yanked her off the pier, forcing her body against his as he pummeled her. Oh fuck, he was having an orgasm!

Movement shot Seth's gaze to the right of the lake where Lesion stood with his blow dart weapon at his mouth.

Felix let out a sharp scream and Seth swung his scope back to them. “Oh fuck!” he yelled. Blood leaked from her shoulder under Nitro's mouth as

a dart hit his back, then another.

Panting, Seth moved the scope back to Felix's face, the sexual sounds making it impossible to tell what the *fuck* was happening. If she was dying, it was the best thing she'd ever felt in her fucking life and those useless bats seemed to only scream in agreement!

Nitro suddenly dropped her and collapsed onto the platform. The sight released Seth from the jaws of fucking *doom*. "Jesus!" he whispered, lowering his rifle while shaking like a fucking leaf as Lesion removed his robe and dove into the water.

Seth eyed those bats still a screaming vortex of fury just above them. What the fuck were they doing? Why didn't they help her?



Ma petites...go take a lil break from that 

CHAPTER NINE

Studying the printout of the Hatches' security data while Cat was sleeping was becoming an epic fail. He couldn't stop thinking about her. The long walls in his celibate, clean mind were now seared with countless erotic images of her. It was like starting a million-piece puzzle and the massive empty space demanded to be filled for his complete Cat picture.

In the span of twelve hours, she'd become an addiction on a level he'd never experienced. She'd blasted through a fifteen-year celibacy firewall as if it never existed.

And the worry and alarm over that amounted to a distant hum, drowned out by the relentless cock-hammering need in his blood.

He sighed and set the data sheet on the desk. "AL?"

He waited in the silence, counting the seconds to measure how angry his virtual brother still was.

"Yes?"

Five seconds pissed still. Fuck, he was tired of fighting with him. From the day the marriage stuff came up in The Twelve, they had gone round and round. AL had hard logic defending his stance and 8-Bit had to play the trump card--*The Eveque wants it*. And there wasn't enough data on the planet to justify not obliging him after he'd saved his life and soul all those years ago. Not by just providing a safe outlet for all his talents, even the darkest ones, but he gave him a home, the very same one he now lived in. Education, food, every kind of support, and whatever supplies he needed to pursue his gifts. That was all The Bishops. If they hadn't stepped in to help after his parents abandoned him at thirteen, where would he be? He didn't need a complex algorithm to know, and neither should AL.

And yet his conclusions were as cold as the people that were supposed to be his parents, his arguments iron clad, his reasoning unhinged from his bond with The Twelve. But seeing his Eveque—who'd been burned

like he had—find a woman as amazing as the Belle Eveque put a big dent in his theory about *all* women. Even while it was common sense that not *all women were xyz*, his experience refused him any hope in that department.

It all opened a crack in the door, and he was ready to try while setting up parameters to guard the things he couldn't afford to lose. Namely his fucking mind if he went through another hell like the first.

"I'm sorry," Ethan mumbled finally, knowing every bit of AL's perfect passion and anger existed because of him. He was being what he was designed to be. A loyal friend. Somebody who never left and was always there when you needed them. That's what a sixteen-year-old does when the people who save you by day can do nothing about the bone-deep loneliness that devours you every night. You endure that by creating your own family. AL and Big G were as much his brothers as The Twelve, as much his family as The Bishops.

He knew forming a bond with an artificial anything was as fucked up as forming one with a stuffed animal. He'd always known that. But stuffed animals couldn't be trained to talk back. AL and Big G were programmed to remember all their interactions, which was a blessing and a curse some days. But Ethan hid his secret family from the world, even today. They all understood it had nothing to do with them but everything to do with people. They couldn't be trusted. Their family wasn't just a secret, it was a protected secret. A cherished secret.

Guilt snaked through Ethan at recalling the thing that finally shut AL up in their last fight the night before. He'd been prefacing all his arguments with 'as your brother,' and Ethan had finally snapped with, 'And as your creator.' He took it like a threat and went radio silent.

"You know words can mean different things, AL. When I said them, I..."

"I don't know what words you mean."

Fuck, he was going to play dumb and pretend it never happened. Another trick Ethan had taught him. "You want to help me with this mess?"

"Which one?"

"The mole one. What am I missing? We have anomalies everywhere."

"If the answers are not in the pattern, then maybe they're hiding between them."

Fuck, right. And it wasn't a maybe, that was AL's way of giving him

the answer while letting him think he thought of it. A habit he never got out of even though Ethan told him he wasn't a child needing to be coddled with data-points.

"Would you like a shortcut?" AL suggested after a minute.

Ethan paused, wanting all short cuts but not about to tell the "Cat" out of the bag as to why. "I would, yes."

"And the short cut iiiiiissss..." he began in mock dramatics before deadpanning, "Katrina."

"Holy fuck," Bishop muttered, shaking his head as fury boiled his blood. "You're sure?"

"I am," 8-Bit said. "And I don't think she's working alone, somebody is on the other side of this, moving the pieces."

"Agreed. *Fuck!*" he yelled, ready to kill. "Why the mother of my *fucking daughter?*"

"I'm sorry, Eveque," 8-Bit said.

"Keep digging. Find the other end of this snake or I swear to God, I'll carve the answers out of that face of hers."

"I'll stay in touch."

"You okay?" Bishop remembered to ask.

"Yeah, why?"

"Just checking, that's all. Remember I have your back, you understand? I have always had your back."

"I know that," 8-Bit said, his indebted tone pissing him off.

"I didn't tell you that as some fucking debt reminder, Ethan, I'm telling you because I need you to know I will *always* have it. You're my brother. Remember that. No matter what happens, you have family. I *believe* in you. We *all* fucking do."

The phone was silent before he got a low, "Thank you, brother."

Bishop released a breath at hearing he understood it exactly the way he needed him to. "Before you go, I have to know one thing."

"What's that?"

"How are you faring with Cat?" Bishop paced in the garage through another span of silence.

“The same fucking way you fared with our Belle Eveque.”

That news made him come to a full stop. Holy fuck he sounded terrified. “She’s good people, brother. Go easy and take your fucking time.”

His dry chuckle was very familiar. Too late to go slow. “I know she’s good. I’m actually not worried about that.”

Bishop turned and stopped again. “What *are* you worried about?”

He took a deep breath. “What I feel right now... makes porn addiction look like child’s play.”

Oh shit. Bishop leaned against the Black Bastard. “Maybe it’ll help you to know I share a similar psychotic obsession with my Petite. No, no,” he assured at his doubtful sigh. “I’m a fucking animal with her in sex. How I don’t break her is some miracle I’m still trying to work out.”

“What does she think about that?”

It was Bishop’s turn with the dramatic breaths. “She fucking *loves* it,” he said, back to pissed.

“Wow,” 8-Bit muttered, sounding like he smiled. “I guess that should give me a byte of hope.”

“It should, yes.” But already Bishop could tell he’d exempted himself from such a thing. He knew all too well that suffocating darkness he was under.

“I’ll call you,” he said.

A familiar image of the young, broken Ethan filled Bishop’s mind, making him need to hug the fuck out of him again. “Alright, brother.”

He dialed Seer and paced.

“Eveque.”

He took a deep breath and told him the Katrina news, then got his, “What else are you calling about?”

“You can feel it, can’t you,” he said, nodding. “When you’re done with the Raphael business, I need you to go put your hands all over 8-Bit and see what the fuck is going on with him. I do *not* like the vibes I’m getting.

“Yes sir.”

Bishop heard something odd in his tone. “What about you? How are you doing?”

“Just preparing to form a circle with people I’m terrified to touch.”

He paused his steps. “You can call it off if you think you need to.”

“Nope,” he said easily. “I have a meeting with Destiny. And it’s time

I find out what she's been whispering in my ear about particular things.”

“Can you elaborate?” he asked, not liking the sound of that.

“I can. As soon as I know. My Father's calling me. It's time.”

Those words put an extra beat in his pulse. “I'm praying with you, Brother.”

“Thank you. See you on the other side.”

He hung up and Bishop stared at his phone, not at all liking what the hell that might mean. It suddenly rang and Lesion's name appeared. He answered, “What's up?”

Heavy breathing on the line put Bishop on immediate high alert. “Seth and I have Nitro,” Lesion said. “He had a reaction to a compound I'd prepared for him and Patches is getting a bed ready for him at the hospital. With restraints.”

“Restraints!?”

“Took two sleep darts to take him down. When I got to Felix's place, he was in the process of... forcing sex with her on the floating dock in her pond. He *bit* her during orgasm and drank her blood.”

“Are you fucking *kidding*? I'm on my way.”

Lesion spotted Eveque at the entrance and hurried to meet him. “Where is he?”

“We put him in the basement for now till I run more tests. I don't want to alarm anybody. “Felix is here being looked at.” He nodded at a passing nurse, stepping closer to Eveque. “I gave her a sedative, she was nearly hysterical with worry about Nitro. But she seems to be physically fine, other than the bite on her shoulder.”

Bishop's wind left him as he shook his head. “What the fuck happened?”

Lesion acknowledged yet another nurse with a nod, this one smiling. “Let's talk somewhere else.” He hurried to the stairwell leading to the basement, having to work hard to contain his excitement over everything. Inside the secluded hall, he stopped at the first landing and faced Eveque. “Felix doesn't know it yet, but she gave him ten times the dose she was

supposed to. That's my fault, I failed to label the vial with instructions, and she went off of memory. I also made it in a bit of a hurry which is why I made the dosages so low."

"What the hell was it?"

Lesion took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. "The concoction was an experimental formula intended to enhance Nitro's senses and establish a stronger connection between him and the bats. I synthesized it from a specific compound found in bat saliva, neurotransmitters, and hormonal regulators. The correct dosage would have made him more receptive to the bats—improved communication, if you will."

Eveque's eyes widened, visibly disturbed. "And the overdose? What's will that do to him?"

"Physiologically speaking, an overdose could result in heightened aggression, extreme sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and possibly even altered states of consciousness," Lesion explained quietly. "In layman's terms, we might be dealing with an exceptionally volatile and unpredictable Nitro until I formulate an antidote or at least something to counteract the most severe side effects."

Eveque scrubbed his face with a groan of exasperation. "When it *fucking* rains," he muttered before regarding him with a shake of his head and pointing at him. "Don't for a second think I don't see how much you're enjoying this. We *all* remember your childhood obsession with Batman and bats."

Damn, he was busted, and he had to chuckle. "I never outgrew it," he admitted, grinning at Eveque's very *knowing* nods. "But as risky as this situation has become, it's proven that the formula works as intended, albeit in an intensified manner due to the overdose. With the right balance, Nitro's abilities with the bats could reach an unprecedented level, not to mention Seth said he was inhumanely strong."

Bishop's eyes widened. "He *fucked* her! *Forced* her! In *front* of *others*," he added in strained disbelief. "Like he was on *fucking bat Viagra!*"

Lesion nodded in full agreement, his alchemistic brain snatching up the Bat Viagra to ponder later. "I'm handling the psychotic effects immediately. But you should know," Lesion said, his pulse leaping at the memory. "The bats came."

Bishop's brows pulled together. "And?"

“They *swarmed*, ten feet above them. An army of beautiful, dreadful fury. But they didn’t attack. Not even when he bit her, and she screamed.”

He appreciated the look of awe that entered Eveque’s gaze as he seemed to visualize it in his mind. His eyes cleared and leveled on him.

“What’s your plan?”

“Run a battery of tests and fully understand the impact of the overdose. Then create the perfect antidote or counter-serum to neutralize the effects of the overdose while retaining the benefits.”

“How long will this take?”

Lesion was sure about that part at least. “I can manage a formula within a few days.” He remembered his woman. “Maybe you can get your Belle Eveque here to deal with Felix?” It was the one arena Lesion wasn’t comfortable with. Now that he had Tully, his aversion to women had tripled.

“Mon fucking Dieu,” he muttered, pacing on the stairwell landing. “I’ll call her. After I see Nitro.” He leveled a harsh gaze on Lesion, and he braced for whatever brought it. “Thank you. You’ve saved our asses many times. Don’t think I’ll ever forget that and don’t think for a second that I hold any of this against you.” He grabbed his shoulder and gripped it hard. “There’s no quacky cajun doctor anywhere on this planet that I trust more than you, Alchemy. Besides Patches,” he remembered with a light toss of his head before getting severe again. “Take care of our brother.”

Seer excused himself to the bathroom at Spook’s place, needing to clear Bishop out of his system before locking hands with his father and Maggie. He splashed water on his face for a full minute, the blood visions trying to return. Ever since it was decided they would go find the boy and this woman, he’d been seeing that vision he’d had before, with the death and blood. Was he seeing something that *would* happen or something that *could* happen? If it *would* happen, there was nothing he could do to stop it. If it *could* happen, he could prevent it.

The fact that he wasn’t getting any direction made him surer than ever

that the vision fell under *would* happen. And in that case, there was no point in mentioning it. But there was a huge chance it would be seen by his father and Maggie when they touched. He'd decided if they saw, they were supposed to see and leave the things that weren't for him, to God.

"I'm ready," Seer said. He'd requested they do this without Cherie just in case Lazarus was somehow using her. Bad enough he had some kind of influence with him being attached to her, he didn't want to give him a bigger doorway.

He eyed his father now standing, looking like he'd prepared for war with a legion of demons. Maybe that's what they'd find when they joined hands.

Without looking, Maggie's gifts were billowing above her, nearly filling the entire room. If they didn't get anywhere, he'd request Beth to join hands with them. He was beginning to hear what his father was meaning about her gifts affecting Maggie's. But how exactly, was the concern. It was like disarming a spiritual bomb. They all had different powers wrapped in the same colored wires. Which ones should be crossed? Which ones should never touch? What was the consequences of either or?

If Spook or Eveque knew the risks, they wouldn't be standing there. It was only his faith in God and their trust in him that had him stand before them and reach both his hands out, one to his father and one to Maggie. "It's time." He then reminded them. "We're just seeing what we can see between the three of us then we'll go from there."

They nodded and his father looked at his hand with trepidation, as though he feared the same things he did. Maggie slowly reached for both of them, her eyes closed with shallow breaths.

She was already seeing, he realized.

She snatched their hands as if a force repelled her and she had to break through to reach them. The instant the triad formed, Seer's wind blasted out as if a bolt of lightning struck all of them. Their energies surged and fought for a path, slamming into each other and bouncing off. Their grunts and gasps told of the brutal boxing match within their blood and bones as his plea to God blasted from his tight lips, "Direct us!"

A maelstrom of images, visions, and intangible sensations cut through his spirit like claws. It yanked him right then left, before plunging him down, down through a river of scenes. Dark forests, moonlit rituals, symbols written

in blood with snapshots of humanity—crying children, men and women bound.

“I see them!”

Seer had yelled the words in unison with his father and Maggie. He turned his inner eyes toward Maggie and saw she’d tethered them to her. She released their hands in this vision and knelt next to the boy and the woman they searched for while Seer and his father held on for dear life, the power vortex fighting to rip their spirits from their bodies.

His grip on his father’s hand began to slip.

Hurry Maggie, hurry.

The evil felt like shards of glass ripping at his face and lips, gouging his eyes. It wanted to devour him. A roar tore from his mouth as he resisted and his father mirrored it, the sound filling him with terror. Something held him down and it brought a rage. Seer managed to turn his head, searching for his father in the madness. “Mon Pier!” he roared. “Mon Pier!”

Seer’s body jolted twice, then a third time.

Weightless now, he turned and called, “Maggie.”

She turned from where she drew quickly on her knees, her brows coming together as she stared at him. Her eyes widened with terror and she reached for him. She took in a huge breath and let go a scream of pure power, blasting Seer onto his back.

He blinked rapidly, his breaths ragged and loud in his ears as a ceiling came into view above him.

“Samuel!” somebody wailed. “Saaaamuel!”

Seer sat up, hurrying to Spook now crouched next to Maggie, trying to shake her from the clutches of whatever vision held her.

“Maggie!” Seer called next to her.

She sucked in a huge breath and her eyes popped open right on him. She strangled him in a hug, back to wailing right in his ear. “You died! There was blood and you died, so much blood, it was all over, all over me!” she screamed, her fingers clawing at him. “I couldn’t save you!”

“Shit, your dad,” Spook shot out, rushing to him on the floor.

Samuel raced over on his knees at seeing his father unmoving, his tan skin pale and covered in sweat. The fear from his vision turned his breaths rabid as he shook his still body. “Mon Pier!” God, please. Please, help me. He searched for a pulse in his neck, dread strangling him as he gasped, “Mon

Pier!”

Spook touched his neck then pressed his ear to his chest. “No, fuck.” Blood dripped from his father’s nose and Seer grabbed tight hold of his hand, fighting back the terror clawing in his chest.

“I need to do CPR,” Spook gushed, opening his father’s mouth and blowing air into his lungs then hurrying to his chest. “One...two...three...” he gasped, pressing with his palms. “Call Patches!” he yelled.

But Seer couldn’t move, he couldn’t let him go. He held his hand against his shattered heart as Maggie fought with the phone, crying like a confused child.

“I have to hold on to him!” Seer forced through the agony. “I can’t let him go.” He sucked in a breath and begged him with all his might, “Mon Pier! Please!”

Maggie’s arms went around him as Spook yelled at Patches on the phone.

Seer’s sobs cut loose. “God, please, I’m begging you! Help me, help Mon Pier! Don’t let him leave, don’t let him leave me again.”

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Michelle Boone Henry
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Stacey Bates
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