



Killer Moonshine (Gray Wolf Security #18)

Author: *Mary Kennedy*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Losing a member of the family is never easy. When this loss hits so close to home, the men and women of Gray Wolf decide to take it head on and find the persons responsible. Except nothing makes sense at all. The animals are behaving strangely, the genius kids are acting odd, and everyone seems to act as if something big is going to happen.

For Trak, it become personal when he saves the life of a young woman who brings back memories he didnt need or want. As with everything at Belle Fleur, there is magic in the air and this times, its genuine magic. Things are about to change for the entire team.

****Be sure to check out the series Strange Gifts if you havent already read it. It will all make sense.**

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“I think your questions are irrelevant, Madam Chairwoman,” said the man. He was older, handsome in a short, stout sort of way, and wearing a custom designer suit, obviously made to hide his expanding mid-section. Not exactly the person they thought would be an advocate for moonshine becoming legal in Louisiana.

“Mr. Hugo,” she started.

“You can just call me Cassius,” he smiled with a sly grin.

“We keep things formal here, Mr. Hugo.” He leaned to his partner at the table, whispering something into his ear.

“I’ll bet she’s informal in the bedroom,” he smiled.

“Mr. Hugo, this committee is not satisfied with the information provided regarding the safety of your product. Customers we know to have had a drink of your moonshine, or someones, have been getting sick. We know that there are no guarantees of safety, and that’s just not good enough. We have a lot of questions.”

“Very well, ask your questions,” he smiled. “We have nothing not hide.”

“Is it true that moonshine is a high-proof, unaged spirit?”

“Yes, that’s true. It’s usually made from corn, sugar, and water, but many of the big distillers are now trying all sorts of beautiful combinations. You can add things like blueberries or blackberries, even certain plants and herbs. It’s truly an all-purpose spirit.”

“I’m sure it is,” she said with a frown. “And this all began because of high taxes on alcohol in the Depression, correct?”

“Yes and no,” he said, nodding. “It actually originated in England and was just a term used to describe liquor smuggled during the nighttime.”

“And this combination of ingredients, it’s cooked on an open fire?”

“I think you’re simplifying things. This is a complex process that requires skill and gentle hands. The mash is fermented to produce alcohol, which is then distilled to separate the alcohol from the mash solids. Unlike whiskey, which is typically aged in barrels, moonshine is bottled and consumed immediately after distillation, giving it a strong, raw taste, something a man, or woman, can really sink their teeth into. There’s no waiting for an aging process. It’s why people like it so much.”

“I’m sure they do, Mr. Hugo, but isn’t it often seventy-five percent alcohol by volume, sometimes higher?”

“Yes, that’s true.” He nodded at her, pursing his lips. He didn’t want to go down this road because they would lose any ground that they’d found.

“Mr. Hugo, that would kill the average person,” she said, staring at him.

“Most people don’t understand that they have to be grown-ups to drink moonshine,” he smirked.

“Mr. Hugo! It would be greatly appreciated if you would behave as an intelligent adult in this matter. It is nothing to make light of when people have died from drinking this concoction.”

“Ma’am, I don’t mean to make light of anything. But this isn’t something that’s just

going to go away because you don't want to give it your approval. Moonshine has been around for more than two hundred years, run by men in race cars they designed themselves, which many of us know led to the NASCAR that we know today.

"I think you underestimate the value that something like this could bring to our economy. It's not just about drinking moonshine. Moonshine was used for sanitation and in mountain medicines before modern alternatives were available. Many of those alternatives have proven quite useful in the medical world.

"Did you know that moonshine accounts for approximately one-third of the consumption of alcohol in the world?"

She frowned at him, leaning to her aide to check those facts. The aide quickly showed her something in the massive file and then on the tablet.

"And what is the process to get to this medical miracle?" she scoffed. He only smiled at her, nodding.

"The process is called fractional crystallization. The ethanol may be concentrated in fermented beverages by means of freezing. For example, the name applejack derives from the traditional method of producing the drink, jacking, the process of freezing fermented cider and then removing the ice, increasing the alcohol content. Starting with the fermented juice, with an alcohol content of less than ten percent, the concentrated result can contain twenty-five to forty percent alcohol by volume."

"And these stills where moonshine is made, how are you going to ensure the public that they are sanitary, safe, and producing drinkable products that won't poison them or kill them?"

"Everything is done by heating the product. That alone allows it to burn off any possible bacteria."

“And are you an expert in bacteria and how to kill bacteria-borne diseases? Can you guarantee that no bacteria will appear?” He frowned at the woman, angry by her questions. “Breweries use heat as well, Mr. Hugo, but I’ve never known anyone to die from bacteria or other issues while drinking a beer.”

“Not today,” he smiled. “Decades ago, yes.”

“Again, you are making light of this situation. We’re not talking about what happened decades ago or even a year ago. We’re talking about what’s happening right now, right here today! Many of these distilleries are operating illegally in the woods, Mr. Hugo! This is not something I find amusing in the least.”

“Listen, poorly produced moonshine can be contaminated, mainly from materials used in the construction of the still . Stills employing automotive radiators as condensers are particularly dangerous; in some cases, glycol produced from antifreeze can be a problem. But we don’t see those issues as much any longer.”

“As much?” she scoffed. “But you’re still seeing them.” He said nothing, just staring at the woman, realizing he wasn’t going to get his ‘yes’ today.

Another member of the panel began to read from a medical report.

“Contaminated moonshine can occur if proper materials and techniques are not used. The prolonged consumption of impure moonshine may cause renal disease , primarily from increased lead content. Radiators can contain lead and can result in blindness or lead poisoning. This may also cause saturnine gout, which damages the kidneys and joints. The use of cheap methanol can create serious health risks for drinkers.”

“Fascinating,” he frowned. “Madam Chairwoman, we have been at this all day, and I’m getting a bit hungry. Do you suppose we could break for dinner?”

“We’ll break for longer than that,” she said. “We cannot give an approval for a license to legalize moonshine in this state. Currently, there are only a handful of states that allow moonshine to be legally produced. Louisiana will not be one of them.”

“Although I respect your decision, it’s a foolish one,” he said, standing. “Whether you like it or not, moonshine is currently being created all over this state, and it will become legal soon enough due to high demand.” She stood from the dais, leaning toward the audience.

“And we will close down every single one of them and arrest the people responsible.”

Hugo placed his aviator sunglasses atop his nose, tilting his head toward the sun with a big smile. She didn’t rattle him at all, and he wanted the world to see that.

“What do you want to do, Mr. Hugo?” asked the man standing with him outside the government building.

“I want that bitch dead, but that’s too obvious. If anything happens to her, I’ll be the first person they come to and ask about it.”

“We can tell the boys to start making more stills,” said one of the men.

“No, that’s not it either. I think we need to do this the wrong way,” he said, taking a big puff of the cigar as he lit it.

“The wrong way, sir?”

“Yep. She wants the world to believe that stills are unsafe, contaminated, dirty. Well, we’re going to show what happens when they’re not regulated. We’ll show what happens if you don’t regulate them and allow them to be produced without proper

equipment.”

“But, sir. We might kill dozens of people doing that,” said the man.

“That’s the point. People who rely on moonshine to make their living will be up in arms saying bad practices are hurting their business, and they want the industry regulated. If arresting the moonshiners isn’t working, she’ll be forced to do things differently. And we’re going to force her to do that.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Hey, don’t look now,” smirked Saint, “but I believe that’s Stephanie dancing with one of the Comeaux brothers.” Brax jerked his head toward the dance floor, frowning at the entire scene.

“Jesus, was she born with no common sense!” he growled. “Those guys are animals.”

“Yeah, well, it looks like Marilisa is dancing with one as well. I always hated those guys. Besides, they’re too old for them.”

“They’re the same age as we are,” mumbled Brax. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned, a pretty brunette smiling at him.

“Hi, Brax, wanna dance, baby?” she asked.

“Not now, Leanne.”

“Why not? You’re lookin’ miserable. A nice dance on the floor could make you real happy.”

“I said not now,” he growled.

She scoffed in his direction and walked away, sitting at a table with four other women. When the music was done, Marilisa and Stephanie sat with a few others from Belle Fleur. Although it didn’t make them happy, Saint and Brax were at least relieved that they weren’t there alone.

“I’m ready to leave,” said Saint.

“Yeah, me too.” As they wound their way through the throngs of people, the manager came running toward them.

“I’m glad I caught you,” he said. “I need your help. Someone is real sick inside, vomiting blood!”

“How much have they had to drink, Robey?” asked Saint, following him inside. Brax turned to the team at the table and waved them over.

“That’s just it. The bartender said he asked for water, then a ginger ale. Said his stomach was botherin’ him. I ain’t never seen him drink more than a few beers.”

When they got to the man, he was on all fours, howling in pain as he vomited up blood and water.

“Call 911, Robey. He needs outta here fast,” said Saint. “Hey, mister. I’m gonna try to help you. Can you tell me what’s hurting?”

“M-my stomach, my whole body,” he said, coughing and shaking.

“He’s yellow,” said Marilisa quietly to Saint. He looked up at her and nodded.

“He is. Are you on any medications for iron deficiency, jaundice, anything like that?” he asked the man.

“I’m not on nothin’,” he said. “I don’t take drugs. I drink a bit now and then, but not to excess.”

Brax, Saint, and the others tried to make him comfortable until the ambulance arrived. The problem was that getting to The Well from the roads was rough but taking him through the bayous would take too long.

As they loaded him onto the ambulance, the EMT looked at Saint and shook his head.

“This is the third one this week. Something weird is going on. Their livers are destroyed, stomach lining is completely gone. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Let us know if you hear anything,” said Saint. As the ambulance left, the bar began closing down, and Saint and Brax realized that the others had left with Stephanie and Marilisa.

“I think we need to tell the leadership team about this,” said Brax. Saint was off in space, thinking about letting Marilisa go. “Saint?”

“Yeah. Yeah. The leadership team. Let’s go.”

“Okay, we’re slammed at the bike shop right now. There’s a huge show coming up in a few months, and the guys need to focus on the bikes. Let’s make sure we cover for them where we can. We’ve also heard some whisperings of a group of bikers that want our bikes exclusively. Problem is, we’re not sure we want their business,” said Ghost.

“Lovely,” frowned Miller. “Let us know how we can help with that when the time comes.”

“You know we will,” nodded Ghost.

“We’ve got some security details working with Pork, Kegger, and Vince. Eight new security systems were installed in the last five weeks, which is keeping everyone busy,” said Nine. “But we’ve got something else we think we need to take on.”

“This sounds like something we won’t want to take on,” said Wilson.

“Hear me out first. There have been about a dozen cases of people coming into the emergency room with bleeding from the rectum, vomiting blood, iron deficiencies, all sorts of things. One of those has died, and his spouse asked us for help.”

“I thought we weren’t going to take these kind of cases, murders, that sort of thing,” said Angel, staring at the other seniors.

“We thought so, too,” said Nine. “But this one is personal. Most of you know Maggie, who works at the General Store. She and her husband are good people and have worked for us for years now. Maggie is always there when we need her, and Duckie does odd jobs around the store and our other businesses. They’re both in their seventies, or they were.”

“What do you mean?” asked Miller. “I saw them a few days ago.”

“Maggie said Duckie started to feel sick two days ago. She said he’d had a few drinks the night before, but nothing excessive. He woke up in the middle of the night with excruciating abdominal pain. She wanted to bring him to the clinic here, but he refused.”

“Why?” asked Wilson. “I’ve known Duckie for years. I would have handled him.”

“He didn’t want us to know he’d been drinking,” said Nine. “And we’re pretty damn sure he was drinking something he shouldn’t have been.”

“Why do you think that?” asked Rafe.

“He died from a formaldehyde overdose that started as methanol,” said Nine, staring at the room of men.

“Shit. He drank from a still,” said Baptiste.

“Yep. And we already know it was an illegal one because there are no legal stills in the state of Louisiana. We’re doing this for Maggie,” said Gaspar. “Everyone cool with that?” The entire room echoed the response at the same time with the same sentiment.

“Cool.”

“Hey, can we come in?” asked Brax. They waved Brax and Saint into the room, and the two men stood at the front of the conference room.

“What can we do for you two, other than give love advice,” smirked Gaspar.

“Now is not the time,” frowned Saint. “I don’t know if you heard from anyone else, but a few of us were at The Well last night, and a customer started vomiting blood. He was jaundiced, or at least yellow to me. He was having horrible abdominal pains and was bleeding from his rectum as well.”

“We asked the EMT to let us know the outcome, and he called a while ago to say the guy died,” said Brax.

“Let me guess, formaldehyde poisoning,” said Miller.

“How did you know that?” frowned Brax.

“Lucky guess. That’s two,” he said, looking at the others. “Two that we know of.”

“Two?” frowned Saint.

“Duckie died from the same thing,” said Ghost.

“Damn,” muttered Saint. “The EMT said there had been several brought in the last

few weeks. Are you guys gonna take this on?"

"Definitely. For Duckie."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Maggie, we know this must be a terrible time for you,” said Ian, “but we have some questions we’d like to ask you.”

They’d had Duckie’s funeral only two days before, and she’d been so distraught that they could barely keep her upright. They noticed that most of the people in attendance were from Belle Fleur, which seemed strange considering how long Duckie and Maggie had lived in the area.

“Not sure what to say,” she sniffed, wiping her eyes. Claudette, Marie, Mama Irene, and Ruby were seated next to her. They’d made coffee, tea, and some sandwiches that were all on a pretty little tray on the coffee table.

“How much did Duckie normally drink?” asked Ghost.

“Maybe one at night after dinner,” she shrugged. “On the weekends, if we weren’t working, he might have two or three, but no more. He was always very careful about it because of us losin’ our Meg to a drunk driver.”

“That’s right,” nodded Ian with a frown. “I forgot about that, Maggie. I’m sorry. When did he start having pains?”

“About a week ago, but he refused to go to the clinic. He kept sayin’ it would go away, and he didn’t want the boys to know that he’d been drinkin’ moonshine.”

“Why was he drinking moonshine?” frowned Ghost. “We sell beer, wine, liquor, and other things at the store. It couldn’t have been money.”

“It wasn’t,” she said. “He had an old friend from school that was makin’ it in his backyard. Wanted Duckie to be his taste tester.” She sniffed again, dabbing her eyes and shaking her head.

“What was this friend’s name?” asked Ghost.

“John Brown,” said Maggie, shaking her head. “I’d never met him, but that was his name. There must be a thousand John Browns in the area. I tried to call but just got tired of leaving messages.”

“We can probably narrow it down by his age and the high school they went to,” smiled Ian. “He must not have been a very good friend if you’d never met him.”

“Duckie didn’t want me to meet him. He said John had fallen on hard times and wasn’t the same any longer. I don’t know what that means, but it might help you.”

“Did he ever say where he lived? Where he picked up the moonshine?” asked Ghost.

“Never. He would simply come home at night and have a bottle of that stuff in the trunk. Smelled awful,” she said with a sour face.

“Do you have any left?” asked Ian.

“I do, but I can’t let you drink it. I won’t,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re a good man, and your wife needs you.”

“I appreciate that, Maggie,” smiled Ian, “but I don’t want to drink it. We want to test it to see if we can tell where it came from, what types of chemicals were put in it, where the water was from, anything that might help us to find this man.”

She nodded and stood to walk back toward the back entry of the house. She’d placed

the jug of liquor on the back porch and left it there, unsure of what to do with it. She returned with it, handing it to Ghost. He uncorked the bottle, sniffing what was inside, and began coughing, choking from the smell.

“We’re going to need that open for a little while,” he said. “Just that smell might kill someone.” Maggie shook her head, looking around the room.

“What do I do now? Duckie and I didn’t have any children other than Meg, and she’s been gone thirty years. I’ve got this little house, and it’s paid for, the job at the store, which I’m grateful for. But what do I do without him? We’ve been together almost fifty years now.”

“I don’t know,” said Irene. “I know it will be difficult for you, but we’re here to help if you need it. You could come stay in one of our cottages.”

“No. No, I need to be in my bed here. I need to feel him,” she said, sucking in an emotional breath, “I need to feel him when I wake up, in the air. I need to smell him in the room.”

Every person there nodded, swallowing an emotional reaction to her statement, knowing they would feel the same.

“Whatever you want to do, Maggie, we’re going to help you do it,” said Ian. “If you want to stay here for a while and think about it, then that’s what you’ll do. If you want to move somewhere else, maybe Arizona or Florida, we’ll get you into a retirement community. You could learn to play golf or tennis.”

“Maybe,” she said, nodding at him. “I’ve lived here my whole life. Living somewhere else seems unnatural. I’d be alone without Duckie for the first time in decades. We did everything together. It’s why we loved working at the store. We could go in together, or if I was working and he was off, he’d drive me into the store,

he'd go do his errands or fix up what needed fixing and come back and get me."

"He was a good man," said Ruby. She nodded, smiling up at the woman.

"What will I do without him?" she whispered.

She began to sob and fell into Ruby's bosom as the older woman just held her there, rocking back and forth. At some point, she fell asleep, and Ruby nodded at Ghost to take her to the bedroom, where they lay her on the bed. Back in the living room, they sat quietly, staring at all the photos of the two of them together.

"I'll stay here for a while, Mama," said Marie. "I don't want her to wake up alone."

"Thank you, child," she smiled. "We'll make some meals for her so she don't have to worry about cookin'. I think it's disgraceful her own neighbors haven't done that for her."

"Times are different now, Mama," said Claudette. "Most of her neighbors are young people who probably have never even been to a funeral before. They don't know what's appropriate and what's not. We'll manage things for Maggie."

Ian eyed the small rolltop desk in the corner and then looked back at Irene.

"If you're wantin' my permission," she said, "you got it. I'll tell her I told you it was okay. We've got to find this man John Brown."

Ian and Ghost looked at the endless amounts of receipts and papers. Apparently, Duckie and Maggie never threw out anything. They had tax receipts from thirty years ago, neatly filed, in paper format, with all the other items they were too afraid to toss.

Placing everything back into the correct folders, they filed things as they were and

secured the top of the desk.

“Anything?” asked Claudette.

“Nothing. Just tax receipts, gas receipts, check stubs,” said Ian, shaking his head. “I’d forgotten that Duckie liked a paper check. Everyone else is direct deposit, but he didn’t trust the bank to give him his money.”

“He was definitely old school,” nodded Ghost. He looked around the room and then walked into the kitchen, Ian behind him.

“What are y’all looking for?” asked Irene.

“That,” said Ian, pointing to the wall. “They didn’t like cell phones. They had one that we gave them but only used it if absolutely necessary. They have a wall phone and an answering machine. He looked at the machine, the red light blinking at them. Pushing the button there were several messages of condolence from regulars at the store. Then, there were four messages in a row that interested them most.

Duckie, it’s me, John B. How’d you like it?

Duckie, don’t tell nobody where you got that. I ken get in trouble.

Duckie, you mad at me? Wasn’t it good?

I guess you’re mad ‘bout somethin’. I’ll come see you next week.

“We need to be here when that man arrives to speak to Duckie,” said Ian. “Get someone over here to watch the house and make sure Maggie is alright.”

“On it.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Hey, Robey, what’s up, brother?” asked Gaspar, shaking the hand of the owner of The Well. Roughly half their age, he was closer to the age of their own sons with children of his own. When they’d frequented The Well, it was owned by his uncle. He’d inherited it from his uncle, who inherited it from the original owner, his grandfather.

“Gaspar,” he said, waving with a smile. He said Gaspar as if it were two words, Gas Spar! It always made him smile. “Mr. Nine! How you doin’?”

“We’re hanging in there, Robey. We wanted to ask you about the incident the other night with the man who got sick and later died,” said Gaspar. “A few of our boys were here and told us about what happened.”

“Yeah, man, that’s not good for business,” said the younger man, shaking his head. “He was a regular, and like I told your boys, he never drank more than a few beers. Didn’t touch the hard stuff. I hadn’t seen him in a while until that night.”

“We’re positive he died from ingestion of illegal moonshine,” said Nine. “You’re not selling that here, are you?”

“Hell no,” he said, scoffing at the thought of it. “I know what that shit’ll do to ya. That’s how this place got its start. Great-great grandpa had a still in the bayou because of prohibition. He would mix it up and bring it here to this old fishin’ cabin and serve it up to the boys for a few cents a drink.

“He was makin’ money hand over fist, selling that sewer water. That shit’s nasty,” he said, shaking his head. “Pretty soon, though, he had enough money to fix this old

place up. He put the deck on the bottom first, then built a new one up top, then another floor, and, well, this is what you see now. Three floors of food, drink, dancin', and all the fun you can handle in the bayou. All because of moonshine. So, I don't serve it, but I respect what it's given me."

"Anybody try to get you to carry it here?" asked Gaspar.

"Naw, brother. No one stupid enough to put it in a legal bar. People would know. Besides, I get sheriff's deputies out here all the time havin' lunch. Hell, I got four boys from Wildlife and Fisheries eatin' lunch now. I'm too connected to law enforcement, and they know it."

"Do you have any thoughts about where we should look?" asked Nine.

"I do," he nodded. "It would be remote places like this in the bayou. Smaller, family places that only locals would go. There's lots of them places in the bayou. Small little shacks that only hold ten or twenty folks."

"I remember a few of those places," nodded Gaspar.

"I think the places you remember are long gone," smirked Robey, "but you get the idea. If you haven't been watchin' the news, I'd say you should talk to that lady who's been stoppin' moonshine from becomin' legal."

"What woman?" frowned Gaspar.

"She works for that tobacco and firearms department."

"ATF?"

"That's it. Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Her name is, damn, what's her name," he

said, holding up a finger. He disappeared behind the bar, pulling out a newspaper and flipping the pages. “That’s her. Estella Beauchamp. She’s the head of the department up there in Baton Rouge at the capital. Real firecracker.”

“That’s helpful, Robey. Thank you,” said Nine.

“Hey, Robey, just for shits and giggles, what are your thoughts on this stuff? Should it be legal?” asked Gaspar.

“Man, I don’t know. After seein’ that boy the other night die right here, I say no. Before that, I watched a few videos about it, just curious. Some of the legal stills in places where moonshine is legal are putting out good products. It’s only legal in Alaska, Arizona, Missouri, and Massachusetts.”

“Massachusetts? That seems out of place,” frowned Nine.

“I guess it’s the whole Boston Tea Party, free will, and that shit,” smirked Robey. He heard chairs moving around in the other room and looked back at the two men. “Listen, I gotta get ready for a big retirement party we’re catering here tonight. Let me know if I can help in any way.”

“Just let us know if anyone shows up pushing that shit again,” said Gaspar. He smiled, waving at him as he moved to help the others with set-up.

“I think we need to send a few boys to Baton Rouge,” said Nine. Gaspar nodded. “They should be easy to talk to, calm, and not screw anything up with the ATF.”

“Right,” nodded Gaspar. “Miller and Trak.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

The drive from New Orleans to Baton Rouge was only about an hour, but since Belle Fleur was another thirty minutes south of New Orleans, it took a bit longer. Miller and Trak loved working together because they had a similar style. They didn't need to talk excessively, they didn't put up with bullshit, and they were better with actions than words.

Following required protocol, they'd made an appointment with Ms. Beauchamp, hoping to get in, get out, and be home by dinner.

"Fucking traffic," growled Miller.

"Mmm," nodded Trak.

"Never used to be this bad."

"Katrina," said Trak flatly. Miller nodded.

It was true. Since Katrina, the population of Baton Rouge had doubled, industry was booming, and it was the new hot spot to live. Thriving nightlife, restaurants, and hotels dotted the entire landscape.

Having the state capitol and two major universities in the city, LSU and Southern, also made it more popular. They loved visiting, but neither wanted to live there.

Parking their car was another pain in the ass. Although there was designated parking for the capital building, as well as street metered parking, it was like finding a golden ticket. Finally giving up, they parked five blocks away and walked the distance.

Entering the massive thirty-four-floor building, they signed into the visitors' desk, showing the security officer their IDs.

"Fourteenth floor," he said, nodding toward the elevators.

They stood in front of the elevator bank, waiting for one to open, and smiled at the holes in the marble walls. Almost a hundred years ago, Huey P. Long, a Senator for Louisiana, was shot and killed in this very lobby. The bullets had been entombed in the marble. Once dug out, the decision was made that they would leave the holes as a historic reminder of what happened.

As the elevator doors opened, five men got off with a woman and walked quickly across the lobby. Trak and Miller stepped on and hit the fourteenth-floor button. When they exited, they found themselves on an entire floor dedicated to the ATF.

"Can I help you?" asked a young woman at a reception desk.

"We have an appointment with Ms. Beauchamp," said Miller.

"Oh, you're her nine o'clock," she said sadly. "I'm sorry, she had to run out for an emergency, but she said she'd be back here by one and could see you then if you could come back."

"Damn," muttered Miller, looking at Trak. He shrugged his shoulders.

"We're here. Might as well."

"Alright," said Miller. "We'll be back at one. Thanks."

Taking the elevator back down, they walked back to their car and sat there a moment before looking at one another.

“Well, we’re here. Let’s go see some things,” said Miller.

Driving along the river, they parked near the LSU campus, walking the beautiful walkways and streets lined with Magnolia and Live Oak trees. There were dozens of coffee shops and restaurants, plus an entire massive enclosure holding a live tiger, Mike, the LSU mascot.

“Don’t tell Mama about this,” frowned Miller. “She’d be pissed and coming up here to get him.” Trak smirked.

“He looks happy and well cared for,” said Trak. “I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” said Miller. He saw a few guys walking toward them from the football stadium and stopped them. “Excuse me, we’re looking for a good place to eat. Anything nearby that you would recommend?”

“It’s not close but a few miles away. Mexican and Cajun fusion. Best shit ever. Sir,” smiled the young man.

“Sounds perfect to me.”

After following the directions given by the young man, they found themselves inside a beautiful, stylish restaurant that smelled like heaven. Mestizo’s was exactly what the kid had described. Mexican food with a Cajun twist.

Crawfish tamales, shrimp and crab queso, crawfish enchiladas, and so much more. They each ordered appetizers, then two entrees, and actually had room for dessert. If they hadn’t been working, they would have indulged in one of the many varieties of margaritas.

“Did you gentlemen enjoy your meal?” asked a man standing beside the table.

“Brother, it was delicious,” said Miller. “I thought my Mama knew every way to cook seafood, but you’ve given me ideas to take home to her.”

“That’s a great compliment, thank you. I’m Jim. I own this place,” he said, shaking their hand.

“Jim. I’m Miller, this is Trak.”

“Well, I hope you’ll come back for dinner when you can enjoy a cocktail. Best margaritas in town, if I say so myself,” he grinned.

“We live in New Orleans but hope we can get back home tonight. Waiting on a meeting at the state capitol with the head of the ATF,” said Miller. Jim’s eyebrows raised, and he nodded.

“I might be able to help y’all,” he grinned. “I have a private room in the back, and it just so happens Ms. Beauchamp and her staff are meeting there now. Something big happened this morning, and they’ve been closed up since. Let me see if she’ll see you now.”

“Brother, that would be amazing,” said Miller. They followed him toward the backroom, where Jim knocked and entered.

“Excuse me, Estella. I have two men who had lunch here who I think you were supposed to meet with this morning. They just happened to be here, so I thought you could kill two birds and not have to rush back to the office.”

“Jim, you always bring me a miracle when I need one,” smiled Estella. “Send them in.” She watched as the two massive men walked into the room. She knew they were with Gray Wolf, and she knew a bit about their history.

“Gentlemen, please have a seat. Jim said you’ve already eaten. Do you need anything?”

“No offense, ma’am, but if I eat one more thing, Trak will have to roll me home to New Orleans,” he smirked. The room laughed, and Miller noticed it was the woman that had gotten off the elevator at the capitol and five men with badges on their jackets.

“We’ll try not to take up a bunch of your time, but we think that we can help you on something,” said Trak.

“Color me intrigued,” she said, sitting back.

“There have been at least two deaths that we’re aware of due to illegal moonshine in our area,” said Miller. Now, she was paying attention. She leaned forward, staring at the two men.

“Go on.”

“One of those men was a dear friend and worked for our family. We want to find the men responsible for this, and we understand that you’re trying to stop this as well.”

“I am,” she ground out. “Cassius Hugo has been a thorn in my side for months now trying to convince officials that legal stills would help the Louisiana economy. Hell, we’re already ranked nineteenth in the nation for alcohol consumption, and that’s a title I do not want.”

“Who is Cassius Hugo?” asked Trak.

“He’s a snake,” said one of the men sitting with her. “He’s been trying to convince men that making moonshine will make them rich. He gives them equipment, rusted,

poorly working equipment and a basic recipe and sends them to town. Of course, we can't prove it's him doing it. If we could, he'd be arrested. I don't know what he has on these people, but they won't say a word about him."

"Why here? Why now?" asked Miller.

"I wish I knew. We've heard him several times at our hearings and have voted it down each time, but like a bad penny, he keeps coming back. You said there were two dead that you knew of, but we know of at least twenty who have died. He keeps saying if we would legalize it, he and his company could provide quality materials to build the stills, thereby avoiding the deaths."

"We want to find this man and stop him," said Trak.

"No offense, you both look more than qualified," said one of the men, "but you're just two men. He's got dozens of men working for him."

"We are more than two hundred men," said Miller. "We run a security agency, and so do our sons."

"You're those guys," smirked a man. "Shit. You're the Gray Wolf, and I'm guessing your sons are Voodoo Guardians."

Trak and Miller said nothing, just staring at the man. He shook his head, almost bowing in admiration.

"I'll have my team share all the information we have," said Estella. "I'm not too proud to admit that we need help stopping this maniac. If you can help us, all the better."

"Can't thank you enough for seeing us," said Miller, standing to leave. Jim walked

back in with two large bags of food.

“Take this to your Mama,” he smiled. “I’d love to talk recipes with her.”

“Brother, be careful what you wish for.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Is he gonna make it?” asked Irene, standing over her granddaughter’s shoulder.

“Grandma, he’s a thirty-year-old alligator. He’s already beat the odds. But yes, he’s going to make it. He just got nicked by a boat motor somewhere. You’ll be alright, won’t you, sweet boy,” said Lucy, stroking Alvin’s head.

“I’ll never get used to my wife treating an alligator like it’s a chihuahua,” frowned Sniff.

“First of all, he’d be closer to a mastiff or Doberman, not a chihuahua,” grimaced Lucy. “And second, he’s so well-mannered, I’d trust him anywhere. Now, help me lift him down. He can go back to the bayou. He’s okay now.”

Sniff lifted the big gator and gently set him on the floor, watching as he walked out of the clinic as if he owned it. Three of the dogs were seated in the waiting area and just watched him move. Sniff could have sworn they nodded at him, but he wasn’t sure that was possible. Was it?

“How are my other babies doin’?” asked Irene.

“Surprisingly well,” said Lucy. “Claire has been handling the tigers and lions. She says they’re sweet as lambs and just happy to have a safe home. The others are all well-adjusted, although the flamingos and peacocks seem to constantly be vying for

attention.”

“Well, your grandpa is expanding the island for them all. Poor dears need more room to roam, and you never know what might be coming.”

“Grandma, you promised Dad that you wouldn’t bring anymore here unless you spoke to him. We already have the equivalent of a small safari park. I know you’re fine with rehabilitating them and sending them home, but we can’t keep doing this,” said Lucy, staring at her grandmother.

“I’m aware of our limits,” said Irene. “But I won’t leave a poor animal out there hurtin’ or needin’ a home. It ain’t right.”

“I agree, Grandma, really, I do. I just think we should be careful about what we bring here. Too many animals could start to draw unwanted attention, and that could shine a light on all of us.”

Irene started to argue with Lucy but knew she was right. She had to be careful about shining a light on her boys. She’d never forgive herself if they were put in harm’s way because of her passion for animals.

“I hear you, child,” she nodded, kissing her cheek. “Now, how are my new pups doing?”

“Why don’t you come and see?” smirked Sniff. He held out his arm for Irene, and they walked toward the massive open-air kennel that held their dogs.

The dogs at Belle Fleur were treated better than many humans. They had heated and air-conditioned enclosures. They were fed the best animal food every day. They were given love and attention by more people than they’d ever seen in their lives. And they were all trained for either protection, security, bombs, drugs, cadavers, or as service

dogs.

“Oh goodness. Those don’t look like the sweet hairballs that were left at our gate,” she frowned.

“That’s because they’re not,” he laughed. “We’ve identified them as half-Newfoundland and half-Neapolitan Mastiff. Lucy thinks they’ll grow to be between one hundred and fifty and two hundred pounds, judging by the size of their paws. They’ll be great protectors for the kids here on the property.”

“Have you named them?” she asked with anticipation.

“That always gets left to you,” smiled Sniff, kissing her cheek.

“You’re a good boy. Alright, let’s see here,” she smiled, kneeling in front of the massive pups. “Three boys and one girl. Redwood, Everest, and Tank. And this sweet girl, she’ll be called Beulah.”

“Beulah!” laughed Sniff. “Irene, that’s terrible!”

“Nonsense. I had a Great-aunt Beulah. Lovely woman, although a bit on the hefty side. She was the most nurturing, caring person I knew.”

“Alright,” he chuckled. “Redwood, Everest, Tank, and lord help us, Beulah.”

The damn dogs’ ears actually perked up, staring right at him. Their tongues came out, their tails wagging, and they stormed his legs, knocking him to the ground.

“See, they like the names,” she laughed. Sniff looked up and saw a dark face staring down at him.

“Oh, hey, Trak.”

“Where is Alvin?” he asked.

“He’s fine. Lucy put a few stitches in him, and he’s good as new. Went back to the bayou for a swim.”

“Thank you, Lucy. I was very worried about him.” He started to walk away and then looked back at them, Sniff still lying on the ground with puppies crawling all over him. “Get off the ground. You’re scaring the other animals.”

Sniff could only shake his head at the whole event. If it weren’t for Mama Irene and her penchant for saving every animal on the planet, he might actually be able to enjoy some alone time with his wife. As it were, he was lucky to get feeding time with her at the animal sanctuary. But the truth was, they both loved it.

“Mama?” called Miller. “We had lunch at a pretty interesting restaurant today. The owner sent some food for you and a few recipes.”

“Wasn’t that nice!” she said, smiling at him. “What kind of food?”

“Mexican and Cajun mix,” he grinned. Irene’s eyes grew large, and she smiled.

“I love it!”

“He put his phone number in there if you want to call him. Real nice man. Jim was his name.”

“Thank you, son,” she said, kissing his cheek. Sniff was still lying on the ground with the puppies crawling all over him. Miller looked down at him, shaking his head at the entire scene.

“What are you doing? Get off the ground. The puppies are getting dirty.”

Sniff could only laugh as he got off the ground, brushing the dirt from his trousers.

“It’s alright, baby. The puppies love all your attention.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Is he gonna make it?” asked Irene, standing over her granddaughter’s shoulder.

“Grandma, he’s a thirty-year-old alligator. He’s already beat the odds. But yes, he’s going to make it. He just got nicked by a boat motor somewhere. You’ll be alright, won’t you, sweet boy,” said Lucy, stroking Alvin’s head.

“I’ll never get used to my wife treating an alligator like it’s a chihuahua,” frowned Sniff.

“First of all, he’d be closer to a mastiff or Doberman, not a chihuahua,” grimaced Lucy. “And second, he’s so well-mannered, I’d trust him anywhere. Now, help me lift him down. He can go back to the bayou. He’s okay now.”

Sniff lifted the big gator and gently set him on the floor, watching as he walked out of the clinic as if he owned it. Three of the dogs were seated in the waiting area and just watched him move. Sniff could have sworn they nodded at him, but he wasn’t sure that was possible. Was it?

“How are my other babies doin’?” asked Irene.

“Surprisingly well,” said Lucy. “Claire has been handling the tigers and lions. She says they’re sweet as lambs and just happy to have a safe home. The others are all well-adjusted, although the flamingos and peacocks seem to constantly be vying for attention.”

“Well, your grandpa is expanding the island for them all. Poor dears need more room to roam, and you never know what might be coming.”

“Grandma, you promised Dad that you wouldn’t bring anymore here unless you spoke to him. We already have the equivalent of a small safari park. I know you’re fine with rehabilitating them and sending them home, but we can’t keep doing this,” said Lucy, staring at her grandmother.

“I’m aware of our limits,” said Irene. “But I won’t leave a poor animal out there hurtin’ or needin’ a home. It ain’t right.”

“I agree, Grandma, really, I do. I just think we should be careful about what we bring here. Too many animals could start to draw unwanted attention, and that could shine a light on all of us.”

Irene started to argue with Lucy but knew she was right. She had to be careful about shining a light on her boys. She’d never forgive herself if they were put in harm’s way because of her passion for animals.

“I hear you, child,” she nodded, kissing her cheek. “Now, how are my new pups doing?”

“Why don’t you come and see?” smirked Sniff. He held out his arm for Irene, and they walked toward the massive open-air kennel that held their dogs.

The dogs at Belle Fleur were treated better than many humans. They had heated and air-conditioned enclosures. They were fed the best animal food every day. They were given love and attention by more people than they’d ever seen in their lives. And they were all trained for either protection, security, bombs, drugs, cadavers, or as service dogs.

“Oh goodness. Those don’t look like the sweet hairballs that were left at our gate,” she frowned.

“That’s because they’re not,” he laughed. “We’ve identified them as half-Newfoundland and half-Neapolitan Mastiff. Lucy thinks they’ll grow to be between one hundred and fifty and two hundred pounds, judging by the size of their paws. They’ll be great protectors for the kids here on the property.”

“Have you named them?” she asked with anticipation.

“That always gets left to you,” smiled Sniff, kissing her cheek.

“You’re a good boy. Alright, let’s see here,” she smiled, kneeling in front of the massive pups. “Three boys and one girl. Redwood, Everest, and Tank. And this sweet girl, she’ll be called Beulah.”

“Beulah!” laughed Sniff. “Irene, that’s terrible!”

“Nonsense. I had a Great-aunt Beulah. Lovely woman, although a bit on the hefty side. She was the most nurturing, caring person I knew.”

“Alright,” he chuckled. “Redwood, Everest, Tank, and lord help us, Beulah.”

The damn dogs’ ears actually perked up, staring right at him. Their tongues came out, their tails wagging, and they stormed his legs, knocking him to the ground.

“See, they like the names,” she laughed. Sniff looked up and saw a dark face staring down at him.

“Oh, hey, Trak.”

“Where is Alvin?” he asked.

“He’s fine. Lucy put a few stitches in him, and he’s good as new. Went back to the

bayou for a swim.”

“Thank you, Lucy. I was very worried about him.” He started to walk away and then looked back at them, Sniff still lying on the ground with puppies crawling all over him. “Get off the ground. You’re scaring the other animals.”

Sniff could only shake his head at the whole event. If it weren’t for Mama Irene and her penchant for saving every animal on the planet, he might actually be able to enjoy some alone time with his wife. As it were, he was lucky to get feeding time with her at the animal sanctuary. But the truth was, they both loved it.

“Mama?” called Miller. “We had lunch at a pretty interesting restaurant today. The owner sent some food for you and a few recipes.”

“Wasn’t that nice!” she said, smiling at him. “What kind of food?”

“Mexican and Cajun mix,” he grinned. Irene’s eyes grew large, and she smiled.

“I love it!”

“He put his phone number in there if you want to call him. Real nice man. Jim was his name.”

“Thank you, son,” she said, kissing his cheek. Sniff was still lying on the ground with the puppies crawling all over him. Miller looked down at him, shaking his head at the entire scene.

“What are you doing? Get off the ground. The puppies are getting dirty.”

Sniff could only laugh as he got off the ground, brushing the dirt from his trousers.

“It’s alright’, baby. The puppies love all your attention.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“How is she?” asked Gaspar when his sisters walked into the office. Marie and Claudette both looked exhausted but shrugged their shoulders.

“The same, Gaspar. She’s in pain and missing Duckie. She doesn’t want to leave the house. Angel and Max are there now, hoping that his friend John Brown shows up.”

“Y’all look exhausted,” said Gaspar, hugging his sisters, kissing their foreheads.

“Watching her crumble every time she sees something that reminds her of him is heartbreaking,” said Claudette. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost Jake suddenly or Marie were to lose Dex. It just doesn’t seem fair, Gaspar.”

“I know,” he nodded. “Go get some rest. We’ll make sure there are people there for her.” The women nodded at him, leaving the offices. Nine stared at Gaspar and shook his head.

“This one is close, Gaspar. It’s hitting everyone differently. Duckie wasn’t part of our team, per se, but he was part of our greater family. I can’t fathom why he’d do something so stupid.”

“I’m guessing his friend convinced him that it was good, and they could make money. I mean, think about it. He knew Duckie was working at the General Store. If he could convince him that it could sell, they’d make money. He didn’t know that he’d have to go through us. I doubt Duckie told him who we really are. He wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s true,” nodded Nine. “I think we need to find those more remote bars in the

bayou that Robey told us about. I know the kinds of places he's talking about. We need to be careful about who we send in there. Those boys from the bayou can be dangerous and don't like outsiders much. Which does make me question how this man is getting the stills put in."

"I would imagine it's the promise of money," said Gaspar. "Most of these men and women haven't ever had more than a mediocre paycheck. Enough to pay their rent, utilities, that sort of thing. If he was promising something more, they might have jumped at it."

"I guess we dive in and see what we can see," said Nine.

"Not me. People know my family and know me, my face. You too, Nine. They've seen us around and would recognize us. We need to send someone not related to me or you. Trak is a good one because he's dark enough to look Creole or Cajun. We might also think about sending Bull and Otto."

"Those work," nodded Nine. They sent the three men text messages and asked them to meet in the office building. They walked in, looking as if they knew what was going to be asked of them.

"You guys good with this?" asked Nine.

"If it's going to the bayou bars to see if we can find out anything, I'm in," said Bull.

"Don't drink any of that shit they give you, Bull. I know you're smarter than that, but that stuff will kill you," said Gaspar.

"I know, man. Don't worry about me. We'll stay together, visit one or two tonight, and do the same in a few more nights. We don't want them to think we're scoping the place."

“Just be careful. This guy is desperate, and we need to watch for him. Hopefully, the boys will find this Brown guy soon, and we can get more information.”

“We found him,” said Code, walking into the room with a sheet of paper in his hand. “This is his address. Police and coroner are there now.”

“He’s dead?” frowned Nine.

“Afraid so. Next door neighbor heard his dogs barking and knew something was wrong. They said he loved those dogs more than he loved his truck. When the police got there, they could see him lying face down on the floor in the kitchen. Estimates are that he’s been dead for at least three days.”

“Looks like this will be you and me,” said Gaspar. “You boys be careful and keep comms on. We can be in the bayou in no time.”

“Not to worry,” smirked Bull. “Alvin’s accompanying the boat.”

“Gaspar, Nine, what y’all doin’ here?” asked the deputy.

“Trying to find information on him if we can,” said Nine. “How’d he die?”

“Looks like he shot himself. Left a note that he was responsible for the death of his friend, some guy named Duckie.”

“Damn,” muttered Gaspar. “We wanted to speak to him about that. We think he was operating an illegal still and gave some of the liquor to Duckie, which is what killed him.”

“Well, the boys found some empty bottles that had a pretty powerful smell. They were looking for a still in the woods back there but didn’t find one. They did find a

flattened space that looked like maybe it did have a still there at one time.”

“Can we take a look?” asked Gaspar.

“When have you ever asked me for permission?” laughed the deputy.

“Turning over a new leaf, Charlie.” They laughed as they walked toward the woods and followed the worn path to the flat patch that he spoke of. There were two stacks of wood, several empty bottles, and some random pieces of copper tubing lying around.

“Well, it definitely looks like he was making moonshine,” frowned Nine. “But why get rid of the majority of the evidence and then kill yourself?”

“Good question,” said Gaspar. “And where did he put it? He didn’t have a garage or shed.”

“I’m thinking someone else came and took the evidence,” said Nine. “And if that’s true, I’m going to bet that he didn’t shoot himself at all.”

“He didn’t,” said the coroner, walking toward the men. “Charlie said you were back here. The angle of the bullet is all wrong to be self-inflicted. Plus, John was left-handed. The shooter was right-handed. Also, he’s been dead between forty-eight and seventy-two hours. The dogs were fed this morning. There’s still food in their bowls, and there’s fresh piles on the floor.

“Now, unless John came back from the dead, fed his dogs, let them shit on the floor, and then went dead again, someone killed that man, came back and took the still and felt bad for the dogs, so they fed them.” Gaspar stared at Nine, then back at the coroner.

“So, we’ve got an animal-loving killer with a conscience. Great.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“What kind of fresh hell is this?” mumbled Bull.

Trak looked at him, then at Otto. The shack was sitting on several barrels used as floatation pontoons. The wood looked rotten and cracked, and as the big men stepped onto the covered porch, they worried it would split beneath their weight.

The entire structure was nothing more than an open-air deck floating in a swamp. There were no walls, just a bar if you could call it that. There were a few make-shift tables and chairs pieced together from old wooden pallets and metal and a railing to hopefully keep anyone from falling off and drowning.

Two men and a woman were sitting on old milk crates at a wobbly wooden table. The man behind the bar looked to be close to eighty. He wasn't shy about showing that he had a shotgun behind him, lying out in the open and ready on the counter.

“Help you, boys? And just so you know I don't take no plastic. You pay cash or move along to somewhere else,” he said.

“Just lookin' for somethin' to drink, and don't worry, we have cash,” said Otto in his best good old boy accent.

“Well, I got whiskey, beer, or somethin' stronger if you want it.”

“Beer for me,” said Bull.

“Same,” said Otto. The old man looked at Trak, and he shook his head.

“He ain’t drinkin’?” he asked.

“He’s not much of a drinker. We’re just makin’ our way back through the bayou after a disastrous day of catching fucking nothing. We were fishin’ out in St. Mark’s bayou. Thought we’d come in before the rain hits.”

“That’s smart,” nodded the old man. “Could be a bad one tonight. Weather is always somethin’ fierce in the spring and early summer.”

“Hey, you said you have something stronger than whiskey,” said Bull. “What’s stronger than whiskey?”

“Good homemade shine,” he smiled with jagged teeth. Bull stared at the old man, realizing that he was jaundiced, probably from his own still. His teeth were rotting out of his head, and his skin was showing signs of his kidneys failing.

“You make your own?” grinned Bull.

“Sure do. Best stuff in the swamp,” he laughed. “Ask them. They been drinkin’ it for weeks now.”

“He’s right,” laughed one of the men, showing his lack of teeth as well. His fingernails were turning brown, his skin with a sallow, yellow color to it. “Takes away all your aches and pains.”

“Do you have any I could take home with me? I don’t want to drive through the bayou in a storm after drinking that.”

“That’s probably smart,” smirked the old man. “Yeah. I’ll give you some to take home but just bring back my jar. That’s what costs me. Them damn jars cost a fortune, and nobody brings the lids back. I need the whole thing returned to me.”

“Really?” said Otto. “I would have thought all the equipment and material would be what cost you. Didn’t know that jars were expensive.”

“Well, you gotta compete with all the women wantin’ to do their canning of peaches and tomatoes and such. The equipment I got give to me,” he grinned.

“Someone gave you the equipment? That was pretty nice,” said Bull.

“Ain’t nothin’ nice about it. He gives it to me, I make it, and he takes twenty-five percent. It’s a good deal, but I really want it to be just mine. It will be soon enough. If we can get enough folks talkin’ about it and make it legal, then we’ll all have a piece of the pie. If we don’t spread the word and make it legal, I’m out a lot more than this little bar.”

“I thought it was legal,” said Trak with a straight face. The man stared at him, not saying anything for a moment. There was something about him that felt different.

“Nah, it ain’t legal. Hasn’t been in this state ever, I don’t think. Folks are all worried about dirt and rust and that sort of thing. Mostly, the liquor kills all the bad stuff,” he said nonchalantly.

“Well, being out here doesn’t make you easy to find,” said Otto. “How well can you do when there’s no advertising, no signs, and sure as hell not a lot of people.”

The old man stared at him with a frown on his face, then looked at the three seated at the table.

“You know, I ain’t never thought of that before. Can’t advertise ‘cause it ain’t legal. This used to be just the bottom of a party barge for me and my friends to fish off of. Don’t suppose I ever thought about tellin’ others.” He looked at the three people listening to the conversation. “You ever think about it?”

“Why would we? We get to sit here in the quiet and not be annoyed by stupid people,” said one of the men.

“You’re costin’ me money!” said the old man.

“You said you got the equipment from someone,” said Bull. “Did a salesman come all the way out here? I’m just curious. I don’t live near you but might want to do something like this myself.”

“Naw, he ain’t come out here. Friend of mine, John Brown, he knew someone. Hooked me up real good.” Bull just stared at him, nodding his head. “Don’t ask me how to reach him. He died. Not sure how but heard from some folks that he was dead. Make sure you read all the fine print, though. If you don’t make this fella money, he starts takin’ more and more. I’m about to lose my house and maybe this land too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Bull.

“Yeah. Me too,” he said sadly. “Let me get you a jar of the shine, and you can take it home with you. Let me know what you think of it but just remember to bring back the jar.”

“I promise,” nodded Otto.

They sat quietly sipping their beer as Trak watched the surrounding swamp area. There was a small, planked walkway that led to a rickety dock. The old man walked back into the brush, and they could hear the sounds of fire and steam. When he returned, he set the jar in front of them and then walked back across the planks again.

Otto opened the jar and thought his eyebrows would be singed off. He smelled the contents and handed it to Bull and Trak, who both shook their heads. Using their ASL, they signed to one another.

“No fucking thank you. I’d like to keep my organs ,” said Bull.

“Even Alvin can smell that from beneath the boards. He said it would destroy the entire bayou if it caught fire .”

“ Your gator knows about explosives now?” frowned Otto.

“Of course. We speak of many things.”

Otto rolled his eyes as the man returned. They paid him for the beers and the moonshine, waving as they took off slowly out of the bayou. Otto stared at the glass canning jar and shook his head.

“I think we do one more and get this shit home before it explodes in the boat.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

The second location proved to be a tremendous improvement from the first. It was still a dump. But nevertheless, it was an improvement. There were walls, a porch, windows, and even ceiling fans. No air conditioning, but you couldn't be too picky when you were drinking illegal liquor. There were two generators providing power to the small structure sitting on a mound of dirt.

There were two long docks with eight small boats tied off. Most were tiny bateaus. Some had small outboard motors perfect for fishing through the bayous. There was soft music playing, but no one was dancing. In fact, they weren't sure that anyone was even alive inside.

When they opened the door, several had their heads down on their tables or the bar, others looked glassy-eyed, and still others appeared to be completely zoned out.

"I take it back. This is a fresh new hell."

"Yeah, but it's a fresh hell we need to be welcomed into," said Bull.

They walked toward the bar as everyone turned and stared at the strangers. When they reached the bar, they weren't sure that anyone was actually working, then noticed a very short, very, very young woman staring up at them. She had a long dark braid hanging over her shoulder and dark eyes that looked like she meant business.

"What'll it be?" she asked. Trak frowned at her.

"Are you old enough to drink?"

“Who are you? My father?” she frowned. “Never mind. I know you’re not my father.”

“Don’t you know your father?” asked Trak. She opened her mouth, then glared at him.

“No, asshole. I don’t know my father. And no, I’m not old enough to drink, but I can serve it. I need this job. So, do you want something or not?”

“My friend didn’t mean anything by his comment,” said Otto. “You’re just awfully young and pretty.”

“Well, thank you. I’m eighteen. I can serve. Out here anyway. I need the work, and it’s decent money. What do you want?” she asked.

“I’ll have a whiskey,” said Bull. He’d sip the shit out of it, but he wouldn’t drink it all.

“Beer for me,” said Otto.

“And you?” she asked, looking up at Trak.

“Bottled water.”

“Bottled water? Mister, do I look like I have bottled water? I got soda, beer, whiskey, and moonshine. Take your pick.”

“Soda. Diet if you have it.”

“Diet,” she nodded. “Right. The big man with six-pack abs wants a diet soda so he can watch his figure.”

“How would you know if I have a six-pack?” he frowned.

“Dude, I can see the ripples through your t-shirt. Unless you’re wearing padding, you’ve got six-pack abs. Not that I’m complaining, it’s attractive. I mean, for someone who looks old enough to be my grandfather.”

She brought out their drinks as they felt the eyes of everyone in the bar on them. Otto turned, raising his glass and smiling at the people. They all said hello, raising their glasses as well, but stared at Trak.

“Maybe I should wait outside,” said Trak.

“No,” said Bull, shaking his head. “You’re good here. Besides, she keeps running into the brush like the other guy. That still is sitting right out there.”

They watched as she ran back to the bar, grabbing a giant wrench.

“Problem?” asked Otto.

“Yeah, there’s an asshole in charge of something that he knows nothing about, and I’ve got to fix it, or I won’t have enough moonshine to sell tonight.”

She took off, and Bull looked at Otto, stepping toward the back of the bar where she’d exited. A few seconds later, a flash of light and fire hit the sky, and they all ducked. All except Trak, who ran toward the explosion.

Lying twenty feet from the now mangled metal was the young girl. Shards of metal lacerated her skin, pointing out as the fire burned parts of her face and hair, clothing stuck to her body.

“Shit,” muttered Bull. “We need to get her to the clinic.”

Trak lifted the young woman, gently carrying her through the bar.

“Hey! Where you takin’ her?” asked a man. Trak said nothing, continuing to walk. Otto followed, and Bull turned to them.

“We’re getting her to a hospital. She’s burned badly and hurt.”

“She ain’t got no insurance. You’re gonna have to take her to charity,” said a woman.

“Does she have family you can call?”

“Not that I know of,” said the woman. “Her name’s Lydia.”

“Thank you,” said Bull, running after his friends.

Trak was already wrapping her in a blanket from the medical kit, the special material ensuring it wouldn’t stick to her burned flesh. He lay her on the floor of the boat. Beneath the bench, he pulled out the rest of the first-aid kit and tapped comms.

“Female, eighteen years of age, multiple lacerations with metal shards in her flesh, burns from the moonshine still.”

“Trak, this is Riley. Don’t pull anything out. Something could have hit an artery, and as long as it’s in, she’ll be okay. Is she conscious?”

“For now. Sort of. She’s in shock,” he said, looking down at her once pretty face.

Bull took the boat through the bayou as quickly as he could without jostling the poor girl. Trak kept speaking to her, telling her about his own two daughters and his wife. He even apologized for appearing too gruff. She had tears in her eyes, and it was cutting him like a knife.

When they landed the boat, Doc, Kennedy, Kelsey, and Cruz were waiting with a stretcher on the back of the ATV.

“Jesus. Set her down, Trak,” said Doc. He didn’t move, staring at the girl. “Trak, brother, I need you to put her down. We need to get her to trauma.”

Trak just stared at the girl, then up at Doc. Cruz touched his arm, reaching for the girl.

“Let me have her, brother. We’ve got her.” He reluctantly released her into Cruz’s arms, watching as they strapped her to the stretcher.

“Her name is Lydia,” said Trak. “Lydia. She’s eighteen. She’s just eighteen.”

“We got it, Trak,” said Doc. As they disappeared down the long tree-lined path, Trak just stood there. Nine, Ian, Ghost, and Gaspar came running toward them.

“We heard on comms. What the fuck happened? Are you guys okay?”

“We’re not sure what happened,” said Bull. “We’re all good, but the little girl running the bar is burned and cut up bad. She’s a mess, brother.”

“She’s eighteen. Her name is Lydia,” said Trak robotically.

“Brother, we got her. We’ll get her fixed up,” said Ian.

“She’s just a damn kid,” said Otto. “A kid was running that bar because she needed the fucking money. She said somebody hadn’t done their job, and she grabbed a wrench and went out to where the still was located. Next thing we knew, it was up in flames.”

“Was there anyone else there?” asked Nine.

“Not that we saw, but someone could have left through the back trails or around the other parts of the bayou,” said Bull. Trak turned to stare at Nine.

“She’s only eighteen.” Nine frowned as Wilson started toward them.

“Trak, we’re going to help her,” said Wilson.

“She’s only eighteen.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

It was the following morning before they knew anything at all about Lydia's condition. The burns to her face and side of her head had left her with no hair, no skin, and in so much pain she could barely communicate.

The comms team took fingerprints and photos for facial recognition but so far had come up with nothing. The little bar in the bayou was owned by Bertie McClellan, a woman in her nineties that couldn't even walk. She claimed that she'd given Lydia the rights to the bar because the land didn't belong to her. Apparently, it belonged to someone Lydia knew.

With more than two dozen people in the waiting area, hoping to get word on the girl they didn't even know, Riley wasn't surprised to see them when she walked out.

"How is she?" asked Trak, standing quickly and walking toward her.

"Honey, you need sleep."

"How is she?" he asked again.

"She's in a lot of pain, Trak. I won't lie to you. We can't get her to the pond just yet. We need to get some things stabilized before we do that. If the pond doesn't work, she's going to have a very, very long recovery. The burns were from the explosion of the still and the chemicals, but the worst of it was from the moonshine itself that was obviously highly flammable."

"Will her hair grow back? She had pretty hair," he said quietly. Riley turned to Bree, who took a step forward.

“Trak, come with me,” she said gently. He shook his head.

“Go with her,” said Nine. “That’s an order.”

“I’m not in the military any longer. I don’t have to take orders, and I won’t on this. Will her hair grow back?”

“No,” said Riley. “The pond may help with that, but it won’t grow back if we can’t get her to the point of taking her to the pond. She’ll need skin grafts, surgeries, it will be a horrible, painful few years.”

“She’s eighteen,” he repeated.

Lauren clasped his hand, his sons Nathan and Joseph behind him, each with a hand on his shoulder. His daughters looked at him, giving a nod. He stared back at them and blinked twice, following Bree.

“I’ve never seen him like that,” said Ian. “I’m absolutely terrified right now for Lydia, for him, and for myself.”

“We should all be terrified. He’s going to go on a killing spree if we can’t control him. Bull? What about the girl triggered this?” asked Nine.

“She looked like his sister,” he said quietly. “She had beautiful, long dark hair in a braid. She’s a tiny little thing, but she didn’t take any shit from him at all.”

They all chuckled softly, nodding at that.

“Something was wrong with that still,” said Otto. “She was pissed because someone didn’t do something they were supposed to do. She picked up a huge fucking wrench, walked into the woods, and then the explosion happened. Shit was flying everywhere,

everything on fire as Bull and I ducked for cover. Trak had already taken off toward the fire.”

“Of course he did,” frowned Nine. “This is going to be personal for him now. He’s going to use that damn alligator to find this man.”

“I’m not opposed to that,” said Gaspar.

“I’m not either, but we need to get to this man and figure out what the hell he’s trying to do. Why is legalizing moonshine so damn important to him? He could be making money off all sorts of shit that’s safer than moonshine.”

“That’s a good question,” said Ghost. “Why now? Why this?”

“Code? Do we have a background on Hugo?”

“I’ve been working on it. Hugo is an alias. That name doesn’t exist anywhere except to a seventy-eight-year-old man who died in 1956. It’s obviously not him. I’ve been trying to get a look at the hearing tapes from the ATF where he was present, but they have them locked up. They’re old school.”

“Let me call Beauchamp,” said Miller. “I’m gonna bet she’ll let us have them.”

“Do it,” said Gaspar. “If that girl dies, I’m going to hang him for murder. If she doesn’t die, I’m going to kill him anyway.”

“You’ll have to beat Trak to him. You know he’s going to hunt him down, right?” said Ghost, looking at Gaspar, Ian, and Nine.

“Maybe we let him,” said Nine. “I know of no one more equipped, better at what they do than Trak. Even at his age, he’s still the best.”

“But is that wise?” asked Code. They all turned to stare at him. “Trak can be, uh, intense once he’s focused on something. He might not know when to stop.”

“Fair point,” nodded Nine. “Let’s see what Bree says after her session with him. I’m sure it hit him like a ton of bricks seeing that girl. He hasn’t mentioned his sister since he found out about him and Erin being related, and that’s been more than forty years.”

Lauren and the kids walked out, whispering to one another. They waved at their mother, leaving her to look at her husband’s best friends.

“Is he okay?” asked Nine.

“He will be,” she nodded. “He told Bree she looked just like his sister. Everything about that girl triggered a memory for him. It’s eating at him that she’s so young.”

“Nine! Nine!” called Riley from the hallway. “She’s alert and wants to talk.”

“Hi, Lydia,” smiled Nine. “My name is Nine, and these are my friends, Ian, Gaspar, and Ghost.”

“D-do you know the angry man?” she whispered through pain.

“Yeah,” he smirked. “His name is Trak. He’s not angry, honey. He’s just intense, and he doesn’t like it when pretty young girls are hurt for no good reason. He’s very protective, sometimes too much.”

“Are you going to be angry with me?”

“Honey, no one is angry,” said Ghost. “Do you want us to get Trak?”

“I’m here,” said the deep voice from behind them. They all jumped out of their skin. All of them except the young girl. “Hello, yázhí.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Little one,” said the men in chorus, smiling at her.

“It’s Navajo,” said Nine. “Trak is from the Navajo, or Diné nation.”

“Oh.”

“Are you in pain?” asked Ian. She looked at him as if he were asking the stupidest question on earth. “Sorry.”

“They’re giving me a lot of drugs. Is the still ruined?” she asked.

“Yes,” ground out Trak.

“I know you don’t get it, but it was my only way out of there. I was living with an abusive stepfather and needed to get out. Mr. Hugo was paying me enough that I could live on my own in a shitty little apartment. At least I could feed myself.”

“Where is your stepfather?” asked Ghost.

“I won’t go back with him,” she said, almost leaping off the bed.

“Lie still. You won’t have to go back to him ever. Where is he? What’s his name?” he asked.

“Grover. Grover Briggs. He lives near Carencro up near Lafayette. I saw an advertisement in the paper for a bar manager and thought I’d lie about my age. When

I showed up, Hugo looked at me and said you're not old enough to drink. As long you don't drink, I'll let you serve. I'd never taken a drink in my life. One of the many lessons my stepfather taught me."

"He's a drinker?" asked Ghost, opening and closing his fists.

"Among other things," she said, hissing in pain between her teeth.

"I know you're hurting," said Gaspar, "but we need to stop these stills. You almost died, and lots of other people have. Why is he doing this?"

"Money, I guess," she said, looking at them. "I don't really know. He paid for me to set up the still out there, takes seventy percent of the profit, and sends someone out once a week to do maintenance. Except the guy never showed this week. That's why I – why I hit it with the wrench. It usually works."

"It didn't work," said Trak, looking at her.

"You're mad at me."

"No, little one. I'm mad at me." She stared at him with confusion and then at the other men, who looked angry as well.

"He's gonna be pissed, and he's going to make me pay back everything, and then he's going to steal my land. It's my land."

"What do you mean?" asked Ghost. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she mumbled something, then she was asleep.

"Let her rest," said Trak. "I'll stay with her until you find out more."

“And then?” asked Nine.

“And then, I hunt.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“The still in Bayou George blew up,” said his bodyguard, waiting for the man to scream at him. “I went out there to collect the rent, and it was gone, all of it. The place was unlocked, and no one was there.”

“Where is the fucking girl?” he growled.

“Probably dead. There was blood everywhere and heavy tracks toward the water. I’m guessing she was dragged away by a gator.”

“You’d better be right. If she’s alive, she’ll talk. I want my money back. Find out if she put it in a bank or sent it to someone.” The man nodded, leaving the room.

Hugo stared at the sheets in front of him. He hated finance, and he hated balancing books more than anything. He didn’t worry about taxes. At least, not yet. Once the businesses were off the ground, he’d play along with them being legitimate and pay his taxes like a good man.

“Boss? Mr. Sumrall is here.”

“Good. Send him in.”

Hugo stood, straightening his jacket and stiffening his back. He liked to pretend he was taller than he actually was. The expertly cut suits and lifts in his shoes helped, but he wanted people to feel inferior to him. He’d mastered the techniques for fooling people into believing that he was something he was not.

You could call it lying or smoke and mirrors. He didn’t care. He was adept at making

others believe that he was capable of anything.

“Afternoon, Mr. Hugo,” said the man, running his fingers over the bill of his hat in his hand.

“Have a seat, Yaz,” said Hugo.

“Mr. Hugo, I’ll get you the money. It’s just been real slow,” he said, shaking his head. Hugo held up his hand, visually telling the man to stop.

“Yaz, you and I both know that’s a lie. You’ve been packed out there every night this week. You even brought in those girls to mud wrestle. Smart idea. That brought in all the oil workers to watch and wager. You could pay me from that money,” he said calmly.

“I-I didn’t bring them in. They sorta just came out and said they wanted a place to do it. The girls earn the money. Not me.”

“You get a cut, Yaz. I know you do. You owe me for the still. I want my money, or I take the still, take the bar, take your house, and let’s not forget, I get your daughter.”

“She’s just twelve,” he said, shaking.

“She’s twelve now,” smirked Hugo, “but she’ll be a teenager soon enough. She likes to dance. I’ve seen her on camera dancing and swaying. Looks a lot like her mama did.”

“Don’t. Don’t talk about her mama. I let you take her from me, but you’re not takin’ my girl from me.”

“You let me? Not letting me? Oh, Yaz, you really don’t get this, do you? I do

whatever the fuck I want, to who I want, when I want. You don't let me do anything. Your whore of a wife was more than happy to warm my bed for a little extra money and moonshine. She sure got hooked on that shit fast. I wonder if your little girl likes the taste?" he laughed.

Yaz stood, sweeping his arm across the desk, everything flying across the room. The bodyguard behind him gripped his shoulders, shoving him into the chair.

"Stay away from my little girl," said Yaz. "I'll put up with whatever you dish out, but you will not touch my child."

"Give me my money," Hugo smiled.

"You know I don't have that kind of money. It's going to take longer for me to get that kind of money."

"You should have thought of that before going into business with me," he smiled. "You owe for the still, the components, the ingredients used to make the moonshine, transportation costs, and, of course, the room and board for your lovely wife when she left you to live with me."

"She's dead," ground out Yaz. "It's not my problem she came to live with you."

"You should have kept her happier, Yaz. Good looking woman like that needs special attention, special things a man can give her."

Yaz wanted to leap across the desk and pummel the other man, but he knew the bodyguard was watching his every move. What he needed to do was get his daughter away from him and everything he touched. If he could find a safe place for her, maybe everything would be alright.

He slid the envelope across the table and swallowed as Hugo opened it, counting the money.

“You’re short a thousand dollars,” he said, looking angry. “Next month, you owe me the regular amount plus two thousand.”

“I can’t pay that. I don’t have enough business.”

“Start using those mud wrestlers for other things,” he grinned. “Or, put that little girl to work. I know a few men who would enjoy watching her dance.”

Yaz stood, still gripping his hat in order to not reach across the desk and strangle the man.

“Yaz? Next month. If I don’t have it, I will take the girl.” Yaz stared at him and then turned, walking away.

“Over my dead body.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

The medical team made the decision to put Lydia in a drug-induced coma. The pain from her wounds was so severe and so extensive she couldn't function without the drugs at this point.

"We need to take her to the pond," said Trak, staring at the young girl.

"Honey, I'm not sure the pond can help with all of this," said Gabi. Riley nodded, agreeing with her.

"We can't be sure, Trak, and I don't want to give her hope if there is none."

"She's not awake. She won't even know where we're taking her. Can't we at least try?" he asked, looking up at the two women, tears in his eyes. It absolutely gutted them both. This was not a man who shed tears for anyone.

"Alright," nodded Riley. "But we leave the bandages on for now. It should heal the sutured wounds, but the burns, the burns I'm not sure of, Trak. They're not superficial. They're deep, down into the dermis of the skin. That's a lot to ask the pond to repair."

"I can lift her to someone, but I don't want her to wake next to a naked man in the water," he said calmly.

"I can handle her," said Gabi. "I'll get in, and you and Doc hand her to me. I'll take it from there."

He nodded, leaving the room to get Doc. When they returned, Lydia was moved to a

gurney, then to an awaiting stretcher on the back of the ATV. She didn't even move. Not so much as a moan was heard by any of them.

Turning their backs, Doc and Trak waited until Gabi was in the water. Riley tapped them on the shoulders, and they turned to see the silver-haired demon doctor smiling at them. They both shook their heads and gently lifted Lydia.

"She shouldn't feel a thing," said Riley. "Just be careful."

The two men knelt at the same time, then leaned forward over the pond, using their superior core strength to hold themselves up and not tip in with her. Then, they gently lay Lydia into the water and Gabi's awaiting arms.

"She looks so small right now," said Gabi, brushing back the hair on the good side of her face. "I just hope this works."

She held the young woman around the middle and swam backwards, allowing the waters to flow over her. When she had done that a few times, she dared to take her beneath the water. One dunk, two dunks, finally a third dunk, and she swam to the dock.

"I think that's enough. Let's get her out, and we'll check her wounds," said Gabi.

Doc and Trak lifted the young girl, wrapping her in towels before laying her on the gurney. When Gabi was out, she stood by the gurney and looked up at Riley.

"Her face looks healed," said Riley. "Look. It's clean, pink, fresh skin. The hair is there as well. It's short like it's growing out or something, but it's there."

"Look at her neck and arms," said Trak, unwinding the dressings. "It's all gone. The burns are gone."

“It worked,” grinned Gabi. “I can’t believe it worked. Let’s get her back to the hospital and start bringing her out of this. We’re going to have some serious explaining to do, but we’ll manage that.” Riley gripped her arm, staring at Doc and Trak.

“Have any of you ever seen healing like this with the pond? I mean, we’ve healed a lot of wounds, breaks, that sort of thing, but nothing like this.”

“I’m not going to question it,” said Trak. “The great spirits obviously thought she was worth saving. I will not question that or argue with it.”

“Same, brother.” Doc nodded as he drove toward the hospital. Behind them, standing in the shrubs, were Irene, Ruby, Matthew, and Gabe.

“How did you do it, Pops?” asked Gabe. “That was a lot to heal, and it was definitely more than we’d ever done before.”

“I’m not exactly sure,” he said with a smile. “I just knew that child deserved another chance. Sometimes, you pray for certain things, and you don’t get exactly what you want. Sometimes, you pray for things and get what you need, but not what you wanted.

“Either way, that girl got what she needed, and so did Trak. Now she’ll be able to tell the boys what she knows, and her future will help thousands of people. I had to try.”

“You’re a powerful man, Matthew. I’m glad you’re being used for good,” said Ruby.

“Same to you, Ruby,” he chuckled. “Same to you.”

It took a full forty-eight hours for Lydia to come awake completely, and when she did, she screamed. Loud.

“What’s wrong? Are you in pain?” asked Cruz, running into the room.

“No! No, I am not, and the question is why. How? I mean – look at me. How???” she asked again.

“Honey, I need you to calm down,” he said as he began to take her vitals. Lydia nodded, but they could tell she wasn’t exactly calming down. She was staring at the places where her wounds were once so horrific, touching her face and hair. “We’ll explain everything to you in a minute.”

After checking to be sure she was fine from a medical point of view, Cruz sent messages to the doctors, Trak, and the senior team to come to the hospital. When they walked in, they all smiled.

“I remember you,” she said, pointing to Trak. “You were an ass to me.”

“That’s me.”

“He also saved you,” said Riley. “He carried you away from the still and brought you here. Do you remember anything about that?”

“Pain. I was in horrible pain,” she whispered, looking down at her body. “The burns. Where are the burns? And-and my hair. It’s shorter than the other side, but it’s there.” She touched her scalp and then looked at everyone in the room.

“We have exceptional doctors here,” said Trak. “I’m glad you’re well, little one.”

“Th-thank you,” she said, staring at everyone. “He took it, didn’t he?”

“Took what?” asked Ghost. “He took what?”

“Hugo. He took the land since I wasn’t working the still, didn’t he?”

“The land is yours?” asked Gaspar.

“It was,” she said, exhaling. “I mean, it belonged to my mother, and when she died, my stepfather took it. He let an old woman build a bar out there, but she couldn’t take care of it any longer and just left it. It didn’t belong to him. It belonged to me. Legally, it was mine on paper, but he made a deal with Hugo to use part of the land for the still, and my only way of getting it back was to make enough to remove the still from the land.”

“The still is gone,” said Bull.

“I know. I don’t care about that. What I care about is that if the still isn’t running and I don’t make money to give to Hugo, I lose the land, and it’s valuable.”

“Honey, that land was nothing but swamp and trees. I’m not sure it was valuable,” said Bull.

“I had a land study done. It’s rich in natural gas, but I couldn’t afford to hire someone to drill and figure that out for me and to tell me just how much was actually there. So, I agreed to run the still because I was at least making some money. No one is going to hire an eighteen-year-old girl with no college degree.”

“What was your stepfather getting out of this?” frowned Trak.

“Me out of the house, number one,” she scoffed. “I had a tiny little efficiency not far outside the bayou. It was horrible, but it was what I could afford. He got a thousand dollars a month from Hugo.”

“How much were you paid?” asked Nine.

“The same. A thousand a month. It paid my rent, utilities, and the rest went in the bank. If I couldn’t catch my food, I didn’t eat.”

“That ends now,” said Trak.

“See, you’re still damn bossy. Why? I didn’t do anything to you. Why don’t you like me? Why are you bossy?” she said, staring at him. He grinned and nodded.

“I am bossy. Just ask my wife and children. And I do like you, and I’m going to keep you alive for many reasons, but one is that we want Hugo,” said Trak.

“Well, good luck with that. He’s hard to find unless he wants you for something. I don’t even know if he lives in the area or not.”

“What’s his ultimate goal?” asked Ian. “I mean, why push the stills?”

“Truthfully?” she asked. The men all nodded. “I don’t think it’s about the stills at all, although he does talk about mass producing moonshine. Every person who owns a bar for him or a still for him, he has something of theirs. Something he can hold over their heads.”

“Like?” asked Nine.

“Like me.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

The men stared at the little girl who was eating as if her life depended on it. Lydia felt well enough to get out of bed, get dressed, and take a seat at the big conference table. She was enjoying some food as well.

“Mama, who is this child?” asked Gaspar, staring at Irene.

“I can talk,” said the pre-teen. Gaspar raised an eyebrow at her, and she looked down, blushing. “Sorry. I can speak, sir.”

“Okay. Who are you?”

“My name is Yarrow Sumrall.”

“Sumrall?” frowned Antoine. “You related to Yaz?”

“He’s my daddy,” she said, nodding.

“Why are you here, Yarrow?”

“My daddy dropped me off with the church ladies and told them to find Miss Irene and give me to her for safekeeping.” The men all frowned, staring at the girl, then at Irene.

“Why would he do that, honey? What do you need safekeeping from?” asked Ghost.

“That man she was talking about,” she said, pointing to Lydia. “Mr. Hugo. Daddy told me that he was saying real dirty things about me. Daddy has been trying to make

a go of that little bar for a few years now. Ever since Mama left us and went to live with Mr. Hugo. She got used to the moonshine and died from it, I think.

“Sometimes, I clean the tables and stay with him ‘cause I don’t like staying at home alone. The bar wasn’t doing so good, and then Mr. Hugo came in.

“A while back, we got cameras at the bar, and I love to dance to the music. I guess, I guess he saw me and thought I was trying to do something else. Something grown-up. I didn’t mean to dance that way. I was just having fun.”

“Where is your daddy now?” asked Antoine.

“I-I’m not sure. He said that he needed me to be safe. If he couldn’t come up with more money for Mr. Hugo, Mr. Hugo said he was going to take me as payment. I ain’t got no money.” Irene smiled.

“You don’t have any money, child.”

“That’s what I said.” She took another bite, and Lydia smirked at the little girl. “Daddy said Mr. Hugo told him if he didn’t have all the money for the still, he was gonna take the bar, our house, and me.”

“I see,” nodded Ghost. He knelt beside the young girl. “Listen to me, Yarrow.”

“You can just call me Yar,” she smiled.

“Okay, Yar. Listen to me. That man isn’t going to touch you, but we need to know where your father went so we can help him.”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s the truth. He said he was gonna try to get the money for Mr. Hugo but wasn’t sure he could. I don’t have a phone, but

he said he'd call Miss Irene when he was able. I-I'm real worried about him. Mama left a few years ago, and it's just been me and Daddy. We were doin' okay, then Mr. Hugo told him he could make a lot more money if he had the still. It was a lie. We're still barely makin' enough to keep the bar open, and lots of people get sick by the stuff."

"Lydia? I need for you and Yar to stay here on the property for a few days until we get this settled," said Gaspar.

"Can you at least say please?" she smirked.

"I'm not in the habit of it, but for you, yes. Please. Stay on the property." She shrugged, laughing.

"I can see where he gets it," she said, pointing to Trak. "I'll stay, but I want my land. I'll do whatever you ask if you can help me with that."

"I've got a solution to that," said Katrina, walking into the room. "My name is Katrina Redhawk, and I'm one of the attorneys here on the property."

"Why do you need attorneys on your property?" she asked. "You know what? Never mind."

"Good thinking," smirked Katrina. "This document will actually sign over your land to Robicheaux Oil and Gas."

"Wait!"

"Hold on. Let me finish. Mr. Matthew owns Robicheaux Oil and Gas. He's willing to drill for the natural gas, then connect it to his pipeline, taking only five percent of your haul. You will run all decisions on the line, if..."

“If. There’s always an if,” she said sadly.

“If you go to college and get your degree, which Mr. Matthew will pay for.” Katrina smiled at the young woman as she stared at the room of people.

“Wh-why? Why would he do this? I’m no one.”

“You’re someone very special,” said Matthew, walking into the already overcrowded room. “I’d like you to get that degree in engineering, if possible, and then come to work for me. If you don’t want an engineering degree, do what you want, but I could use a young woman with your spunk. I don’t have nearly enough of those around here.” The room chuckled, and she stared at them.

“How many do you have?”

“Oh, two or three hundred. But I could use a few hundred more,” he smiled. “What do you say, Lydia?”

“What about my stepfather and the document that Hugo had drawn up?”

“You let me take care of that. We’re going to make sure that everything is legal. I found the original documents filed with the parish stating that the land belonged to you and was leased for use as a bar to the elderly woman you spoke of. There was never any exchange of land to your stepfather, and he has acted on your behalf without legal counsel or consent from you. That won’t bode well for him,” smiled Katrina.

“Sign this, and we’ll file it with the state then I’m going to send some friends out to your land to wait on Mr. Hugo.” Lydia smirked at the older woman, nodding.

“Will you take pictures?”

“Definitely.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

The new still was up and running, and they'd found someone to operate the bar until they could find Lydia. The someone, or someones, were the bodyguards that had nothing else to do. Hugo was obsessed with many things, money being number one, fame being number two. But right up there with those two things was always having protection around him.

Hugo was pissed beyond belief that she was missing, but at least they were out of the office and enjoying the warm weather. Of course, there were also bugs, snakes, gators, and the small group of people who didn't appear to have a full head of teeth between them.

"Did they find her stepfather?" asked Johnny.

"Yep. Dead. He was drinking three jars of this shit a day," said Manuel, pushing the moonshine jar toward the man at the end of the bar. "We need to find the damn girl, though. She's the one that has to sign everything over so he can have the land, and if he doesn't get that land, he's going to be impossible."

"Y'all lookin' for Lydia?" asked the man at the table. His ball cap was pulled low over his eyes, and he was slumped in the makeshift chair.

"Yeah. You know where she is? Bitch hasn't been working lately, and the boss is upset," said Johnny.

"That still blew and hurt her real bad. Some boys carried her outta here to a doctor," said the man.

“Is that right? What boys? What doctor? She wasn’t supposed to go anywhere without our knowing about it. So, what doctor did she go see?”

“None of your fucking business,” said the man, standing from his seat.

He pushed off the ball cap, and the two men stared at him. Easily six-feet-four, maybe taller, with sprinklings of white hair mixed with dark. They weren’t sure why, but they had a feeling this man wasn’t helpless at all.

“What did you say, old man?” asked Manuel. “Do you have any fucking idea who we are? Who Mr. Hugo is?”

“Yes,” growled the voice behind them. “Dead men.”

Manuel and Johnny turned, staring at a dark face, the hissing at their feet forcing them not to move. The alligator looked hungry and angry. Not a good combination.

“You don’t seem to have much to say,” said Antoine, staring at the two men.

“You’ve fucked with the wrong people, mister. That girl owes Mr. Hugo money, and this property will belong to him,” said Manuel, trying to appear strong and unfazed, but the truth was he was pissing his pants.

“I don’t think so,” smirked Antoine. He slapped an envelope against the man’s chest, waiting for him to grab it. “You take that to Mr. Hugo and let him know that Lydia no longer owns this property. It is now the property of Robicheaux Oil and Gas and will be worked by said company. If he sets one foot out here, we will sue and have him arrested for trespassing.”

“That’s if Alvin doesn’t eat him first,” said Trak.

“Oooooee,” said one of the men at the table, laughing. “You done messed with the wrong folks.”

“What does he mean by that?” asked Johnny.

“I mean, ‘dem Robicheaux boys don’t take no shit. Matt-chew, he owns ‘bout half the state now, I ‘spect. If he owns ‘dis land, you outta luck, city boy.” The old man chuckled, standing from the table. The others followed.

“I guess we be lookin’ for another bar, right, Shorty,” laughed another man.

“I ‘spect we will.”

“Wait! Don’t leave,” said Johnny. He started to move, but Alvin gave a very definitive growl and hiss, letting him know that he wasn’t going to move. “What the hell is this? Is that gator gonna eat one of us?”

“He is hungry,” said Trak. “But we need one of you alive to let Hugo know he won’t win this fight.”

“Mister, I’m happy to deliver whatever message you want, but just know that Mr. Hugo wins every fight he’s ever been in. He’s a highly decorated former Marine.” Trak and Antoine both raised their eyebrows.

“Is that so? I find that hard to believe when there is no one by the name of Cassius Hugo in any database. If he were a decorated Marine, that would have shown up. So, whatever your boss has told you is a lie. Or. Or, that’s not his real name.”

The two men stared at one another, doubt filling their features, still afraid to move because of Alvin. Just when they thought they might catch a break, an explosion rocked the swamp, flames licking the sky just as rain began to come down. Miller

appeared inside the tiny bar, smiling.

“Nicely done,” said Trak.

“Timed perfectly with the rain. The still is destroyed. So are the ingredients. Now it’s time for you boys to leave.”

“Who the fuck are you guys?” Miller looked at his brother, then at Trak, and finally down at the salivating Alvin.

“We’re justice.”

“We’re justice?” smirked Antoine.

“It sounded good at the time. Alvin must have been very hungry. I was hoping to pin the deed notice and our little love letter to that guy’s sleeve. I had to use his chest.

“He seems to be more aggressive when he knows that men have done bad deeds. He’s much like a good K-9 who can smell evil.” Trak scratched the top of Alvin’s head and then watched as the gator pushed himself out of the boat and into the swamp, swimming alongside them.

“How is Lydia?” asked Antoine.

“She is confused, but she is well.”

“And the stepfather? Did you have anything to do with that?” asked Miller.

“He was a bad man undeserving of life or a daughter. Sometimes, we must take these things into our own hands. I’m older now and have less patience.”

“Less?” scoffed Antoine. “Brother, I’ve known you for fifty years. You’ve never had patience.”

“You’d be surprised at how much patience I actually have,” he said quietly. “She is acclimating to her new surroundings and helping Yarrow as well.”

“Pops said she accepted his offer and will be enrolling in college for the summer semester. I’m thrilled for her. He said there’s enough natural gas on that land to keep her going for a lifetime.”

“That is the hope. Has anyone found Yaz Sumrall?” asked Trak.

“Not yet,” said Miller. “We’re still looking. I knew his father, Yuma. Something about using a ‘Y’ for the first name. I mean, shit, pick an easier letter. His dad was a good man. Worked for the parish in the parks department for years. I just knew Yaz as a kid.”

“Mama said Yarrow showed up at the church scared to death when her father dropped her off. The church ladies knew what to do, though.”

“They always do,” said Trak. “We need to find these other stills. So far, this man has held the land and a child over their heads. He’s using intimidation, bribery, and scare tactics to take the land and force them to run the stills.”

“And we still don’t really know why,” said Antoine. “Ella and Jean ran the numbers. He’s not going to get rich selling moonshine. So what is he doing?”

“Hastening his death.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“I still don’t understand any of this,” said Lydia. “I don’t understand how my burns and wounds were healed. I don’t understand why Mr. Matthew would pay for my college education. And I don’t understand why he would go into business with an eighteen-year-old kid who knows absolutely nothing about oil and gas.”

“Sometimes we don’t have to understand things like that,” said Katrina. “Sometimes we just need to be grateful for what we’ve been given.”

“My stepfather will try to take the land from me,” she frowned, pushing the food around the plate with her fork.

“Lydia, when I was a girl, my father wasn’t a very good man. I mean, he was always a good father. But his occupation was in the realm of organized crime and drugs. That all changed when these men entered his life. Someone kidnapped me, my uncle, and they saved me. It made my father realize that he had to change his ways.

“Now, these men could have killed my father for all he’d done. They could have easily ignored his pleas to save me or saved me and then taken me from my father. But they didn’t because they have an uncanny ability to see the good in people and to do good for them.” Lydia nodded at the woman, smiling at her.

“And my stepfather? What about him?” she asked.

“We wanted to tell you,” said Erin, looking at her. “Your stepfather is dead. The boys found him, and it appeared he’d died from an overdose of the moonshine.” Erin hoped her lie was working. She knew that someone probably poured those damn moonshine jars down his throat.

“Don’t hate me, but I’m glad,” she said. “It’s an absolute relief.”

“Lydia, did he touch you, honey?” asked Riley. She blushed, looking at her food.

“He tried. When my mother ran off, I guess he thought I’d be a suitable replacement for her. He’d been tolerable up until then. When I threatened to tell the police, that’s when he got mean, beating me for any little infraction.”

“We’re sorry, honey,” said Bree. “We can talk about it at your appointment this afternoon.”

“I think I might need to,” she nodded.

“Is my dad coming back?” asked Yarrow. “He’s not mean. He’s a good man.”

“We’re looking for your father,” said Faith. “He’s probably hiding to stay away from Hugo and his men. But our men are better. They’ll find him and keep him safe.”

“Promise?” asked the little girl.

“We promise, honey.”

“I’m done with my lunch. May I go play?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” smiled Grace. They watched as she ran toward the other children in the grove, happy to be outside in the sunshine.

“She’s struggling with blaming herself for everything,” said Bree. “She honestly believes that her dancing is what caused all these issues. I’m trying to get her to understand that this had nothing to do with dancing and everything to do with Hugo trying to control her father.”

“That’s terrible,” said Lauren. “She’s so young. I’m sure she’s finding it hard to understand the mind of an adult male with nothing but horrible intentions.”

“Who has horrible intentions?” The women all jumped, and Lydia just giggled. He stared at her, the slightest curve of his lip telling her she was safe.

“You know, you portray this big, intense, mean guy, but you’re actually really sweet. What’s the deal? Why were you such an ass to me at the bar?” she asked. The women all looked at Trak and smiled.

“You reminded me of someone I knew once. Someone I lost.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s alright, little one. She was my little sister, and I had vowed to protect her and could not. I was too late. You look like her.”

“That makes sense,” she nodded. “My mother was a quarter Chippewa.”

“Then that does make sense,” said Trak with a slight grin.

“Hey, what’s the deal with all the animals around here? I mean, I’m an animal lover, but I’ve seen some strange ones. Peacocks, flamingos, and I’m pretty sure I saw a gorilla.”

“Mr. Matthew’s wife, Irene, loves animals and hates to see them hurt in any way. If she finds animals that are in need, she brings them home. We’ve got an entire island dedicated to the animals so that they can roam free and feel safe,” smiled Grace.

“Seriously!”

“Seriously,” laughed Erin. “Would you like to go and see them?”

“Really?” she asked excitedly.

“Really,” said the women in chorus.

“Yes! I always wanted a dog when I was little, but my stepfather wouldn’t allow me to have one.”

“Well, prepare yourself,” laughed Lauren, “you’re about to meet an entire zoo.”

Lauren kissed her husband as they made their way toward the docks with Lydia. He watched the women leave, then looked at Antoine and Miller walking toward him with trays of food.

“We thought you’d be hungry,” smirked Antoine, setting the tray down. Trak nodded his thanks as the other senior members came toward them.

“We were listening on comms and watched the video. Obviously, we double-checked Hugo in the veteran files. It’s definitely an alias. The tech boys are still trying to pull a good image from the capital cameras. It seems Hugo likes wearing hats to cover his features.”

“It’s not like them to take so long,” said Miller.

“That’s why we’re giving them a wide berth. Either this guy is squeaky clean prior to all of this, or he’s had facial reconstruction, and we may never know who he really is.”

“Yes, we will,” said Pigsty, walking toward them.

“What do you mean?” asked Gaspar.

“I mean, although his facial features have been difficult to nail down, we had some other indicators as to his identity.” He laid out several photos on the table and started at the left. “This was one of the first visits to the capitol. He was asked to remove his jacket to go through security. You can see that at first he doesn’t want to, then finally gives in and lays it in the bin.”

“Okay, what does that mean?” asked Nine.

“His arms are bared, which shows us several very interesting tattoos.”

“Hey, that’s a Corps tattoo,” said Ghost.

“No, it’s not,” said Rory, standing at the end of the table with Piper. “Look at the detail. The eagle’s wings aren’t spread. They’re close to the body.”

“Damn. You’re right,” frowned Nine. “He’s trying to make others believe he’s a Marine. But why?”

“Maybe he thinks it will get people to follow him. What else is there, Pigsty?” asked Ian.

“Several tattoos that are seriously random. Birds, a dog, but then this one. It’s very faint and very hard to make out.”

“I can’t see what it is,” said Ghost. “It’s just a blur.”

“We ran it through the system that Ivy uses when she’s trying to bring clarity to old photos. When we did, this is what we got,” he said, tossing another photo down.

“Is that...”

“Yep. Merchant Marine. I’m guessing he just decided he would change which marine he actually is. The tattoo is old and faded, so I’m going to guess he got it when he first joined. I don’t see any others, so he may have left after just one tour.”

“So, he would have served five years and then maybe left. We can find records through the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. We just need a date range,” said Ghost.

“We don’t need one. This shows his year of graduation,” said Pigsty, pointing to the photo. “We’re pulling the records and photos for those that enrolled during that year. We’ll let you know when we find something.”

“Nice work,” said Gaspar. “I’ll come check on you guys in a little while to see if we’ve found anything else.” Nine frowned at the others, shaking his head.

“So, he was a merchant marine faking that he was in the USMC. We’ve seen applicants who fake claims of their heroics in the military or as first responders. Why? The merchant marines are a tough bunch of bastards. They have to guard ships of commerce all over the world and are generally trained and armed. Even in history they’ve fought with the Navy. Why downplay that? And especially, why downplay it if it has nothing to do with selling moonshine on the black market.”

“I’m not sure,” said Ian, “but we’ll definitely figure it out. Or I should say the geeks will figure it out. We’ll do our best to not interfere.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Hugo stared at the folders and files in front of him, frowning. He needed these stills to bring in more money and more people if he had any hope of keeping his investors happy. He'd made a lot of promises, and these weren't men who would be forgiving if he didn't fulfill those promises.

If he could get everyone's attention, this would take off for him, and he'd be wealthy. Hopefully, beyond wealthy. He wanted everyone to remember his name and to know that he was a successful businessman. More importantly, he would serve justice that had been eating at him for decades.

There was a loud sound of a door slamming outside his office, and he shook his head, then heard people running and shouting.

"What in the hell?" he muttered, standing and moving to the door. He opened it, prepared to unleash on the noisemakers, and then saw Johnny lying on the floor covered in blood. At first, he thought he'd simply been shot, but when he saw that his arms were missing, he nearly vomited.

"What happened? Where's Manuel?" he asked, staring down at his face.

"D-dead," he stuttered.

"Who did this to you? What happened?" His eyes went to the envelope pinned to his chest, and Hugo yanked it free, trying not to touch the fresh blood. "Get him out of here."

"Sir, he needs an ambulance," said one of the bodyguards.

“Then take him to one, but get him off my floor!”

Storming back into his office, he slammed the door and then pressed his fist against his abdomen, hoping to squelch the urge to vomit. What or who could have done that?

Taking his seat, he opened the envelope and then tossed the bloody covering into the trash. From his desk, he grabbed two wipes and swiped the blood from his hands. Throwing that away, he looked at the document and frowned.

“What in the hell is this?”

He scanned the words several times, flipping through the sheets as quickly as possible. Then he went back to the beginning, reading the first few lines once again.

It was very clear that it was a declaration of sale and of ownership of the land he wanted. His land had been sold right out from under his nose.

“No. No, how can this be? No!” he yelled. He stormed from his office, seeing the bodyguards place Johnny onto the gurney. “Wait! Who gave this to you?”

“D-don’t know,” he whispered.

“Who!”

“Sir, he’s in a great deal of pain. He’s losing consciousness,” said the bodyguard.

“You listen to me, all of you. Keep him alive long enough to learn what the fuck happened out there. I need to know who did this and who took that land! Is that clear to everyone?”

“Yes, sir.” The bodyguards stared at him, then wheeled the poor man from the room. It would be unlikely he’d survive, given the loss of blood. He didn’t care. What he cared about was finding out who was screwing with his plans.

His cell phone rang, and he stared at the number, unsure of whether to answer or not. Then he realized it was local, and only those who did business with him knew to call that number.

“Hello?” he said gruffly.

“Having a rough day, Mr. Hugo?”

“Where the hell are you and where is that sweet little daughter of yours?” he asked Yaz. “You were supposed to bring my money to me. Today.”

“Well, I won’t be bringing any money to you, and you won’t be touching my daughter. She’s somewhere safe and sound. Somewhere that you won’t ever be able to get to. As for me. Come and find me if you dare.”

The call went dead, and Hugo screamed, shaking his fist in the air. Spittle was coming out of the sides of his mouth, and he could feel his blood pressure rising. He’d spent the last ten years of his life making connections that could help him. Connections in the alcohol sales industry, shipping, dispensing, and manufacturing on a mass scale. Then, of course, he’d made friends who enjoyed the same tastes as him. Young, firm, sweet women that you could force to comply with your wishes.

Yes, he’d found them, fostered the relationships, and he found ways to help them as well. Of course, he was also very good at convincing people that he was adding value to their lives even when he was not.

Fools. Fools everywhere.

Now, someone was attempting to make him look a fool. He'd suffered with people trying to make him look stupid his entire life. First it was his own parents telling him how disappointing he was, how he'd failed them once again. The last straw was his father telling him he couldn't accomplish anything.

He'd proved him wrong when he accomplished the seemingly impossible. Killing his mother and father without anyone suspecting him at all. It wasn't easy. It took almost an entire year of planning, but he'd done it and then joined the Merchant Marines.

Another horrible mistake. The work was back-breaking, nonstop, and horrible. He'd found a way out of that one as well. In fact, changing names and identities had been the easiest thing ever. Every time he became a new person, he smiled up at his father and whispered, 'I told you so.'

Turning, he looked out the third-floor window at the Gulf beyond.

"No one will ever doubt me again."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

With the tech team trying to find the real Mr. Hugo, teams were sent out to find the other stills in the bayous. It wasn't all that hard. Ask a few church ladies, knock on a few doors, check in with the locals, and even turn over a few rocks with wildlife and fisheries, law enforcement, and local hospitals.

"Gaspar, what's up, brother?" smiled an older man, walking into the office.

"Vishon Moreau. I thought you were dead," smirked Gaspar.

"Brother, there are days that I damn sure feel dead. Which reminds me. Why aren't you dead? I'm eight years younger than you."

"Good livin', Vishon, and Mama's good cookin'," he said with a twang. "What can we do for you?"

"Well, y'all know I'm still workin' with wildlife and fisheries, givin' tickets to boys fishin' in the wrong spots, killin' too many gators out of season, all the usual."

"We sure appreciate what you do, brother."

"I know, and I appreciate what y'all do. Which is why I'm here. Ran across two stills this morning, and my sister said that your mama told the church ladies to call you if they saw anything."

"Where are they?" asked Nine.

"Damn. You're still alive? I'm really feeling like shit now," he smirked. Nine just

laughed. “One of ‘em is at Bayou Saint Francis. It’s way back in them swamps. They can’t be gettin’ more than fifteen or twenty regulars. It would be an easy one to shut down.”

“I’ll send Rafe and Baptiste.”

“They still annoyin’ you?” smirked Vishon.

“You know my brothers too well,” laughed Gaspar. “Where’s the other one?”

“That’s the thing. It’s just a few hundred feet from your property line.”

“What?” he frowned, standing from his chair. Nine looked at the man, Ian and Ghost standing as well.

“Yes, sir. You remember where that old shipwreck was? The one that was half outta the water all these years and finally got destroyed.”

“I know which one you’re speaking of,” nodded Gaspar. In fact, it was the very wreck that led them to Marcel.

“Ain’t but a quarter mile from that. Hidden up in them trees. I wouldn’t have noticed except for seein’ smoke. I thought someone was burning a fire illegally. One of the folks in them nice little houses there said they’d seen lots of boats comin’ and goin’ and thought it might be y’all buildin’ somethin’. I thought I’d stop and say hello and see if you was startin’ fires. It was a fire alright.”

“Did you see anyone?” asked Nine.

“That’s just it. It’s why I didn’t approach them myself. Musta been a dozen men up in there, and they weren’t dressed for fishin’, huntin’, or for drinking moonshine. They

was all in dress pants and them fancy short-sleeved shirts with the horses on the chest.” Gaspar grinned at their old friend, nodding.

“We’ll got take a look, Vishon. If you see any more like these, don’t approach them,” said Gaspar.

“One more thing, Gaspar. Them boys got themselves a big old set-up. Got a track out there.”

“A track? Racing cars?” he asked.

“Nope. They runnin’ dogs, and them dogs don’t look like they volunteered.”

“Dogs?” growled someone. Vishon jumped, shaking his head.

“That damn boy is gonna kill me one day. Tell him to stop scaring folks, Gaspar,” he said, turning to see Trak’s face. He was angry, but he also knew that he wasn’t angry at him. He was angry at the men running dogs.

“They’re running dogs?” asked Trak.

“Yep. Got a long track up into the woods with four lanes. Looks like they poke them dogs to get ‘em to go and have ‘em chasin’ somethin’. From what I could see the dogs don’t get to eat unless they win.”

Trak turned to leave them, and Gaspar called out to him.

“Trak, wait! Shit. We gotta go, Vishon.”

“Yeah, I think you do,” he smirked.

“Trak!” yelled Nine as Ian, Ghost, and Gaspar followed the man out of the building.
“Trak, for fuck’s sake, slow down!”

“Why? Have you not been keeping up with your PT?”

“Trak, don’t make me shoot you. I like your wife too much to do that,” said Nine.
Trak stopped and turned toward the four men.

“Did you not hear the man? They are abusing the dogs.”

“Yes. And we will stop it, but we’re going to stop it in the right way. We know that piece of land better than just about anyone. Let’s get our own dogs, no gators,” said Nine, “just our own dogs, and then we’ll tear that place apart.”

Trak stood still for a moment, staring at the four men he considered his closest friends. Running toward them was Sniff with Goliath and Beast. They turned, staring at the giant animals and then back at Trak.

“You already texted him?” smirked Ghost.

“Of course I did. I’m not stupid.”

“I never said you were stupid,” said Nine with exasperation. “We just didn’t want you running in there with guns blazing. We need to get something out of these men.”

“We’re wasting time,” said Trak, taking the leads for the two dogs. “We’ll meet you on the boat.”

They watched as he jogged toward the docks with the dogs keeping pace with him. Nine just stared at his friend, running as if he were still a twenty-one-year-old Delta operative.

“Maybe we should catch up with him before he takes off without us,” said Ian.

“Yeah,” nodded Nine. “Keep an eye on him. Wherever he is, Alvin is never far behind, and we need to prevent that alligator from eating any more witnesses.”

“You can tell him that,” laughed Ghost. “I damn sure won’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Vishon had been right. The still, bar, and track were almost within sight of their property line. Had it not been for all the trees, you would have easily seen it from the small community they'd built a few years back.

"I'm surprised comms didn't see the smoke coming from back here," said Ian.

"Wind is blowing out to the Gulf, so they wouldn't have caught sight of it," said Gaspar. "They damn sure have a death wish pushing it so close to our property."

Docking the boat at the community docks, they stepped off, waving at a few folks they knew all too well. When they began traipsing through the brush, the dogs became eerily quiet, sniffing the air, then the ground. Trak patted their heads, whispering something in Navajo to them.

"Do the dogs speak Navajo?" asked Ghost. Trak stared at him as if he'd gone mad.

"Dogs don't speak anything," he frowned. "They understand everything."

"Right," nodded Ghost, staring at the others. There were some days they were terribly concerned with Trak's mental health. Other days, he was the most sane of them all.

"Shit," whispered Nine. "There must be fifty people in that bar."

"Which is why you assholes should have waited," said Miller. Nine looked around, seeing the familiar faces on the other side of the clearing. "We figured you could use some help."

Sure enough, Miller, Antoine, Jean, Angel, Rory, Tailor, Alec, Max, Gabe, and Piper were hidden in the trees.

“They brought Piper,” frowned Ian. “Why?”

“Because there are women in that group. Again, if you’d waited, comms would have told you that they deployed a drone, and we saw all of this. Besides, she’s a fucking badass and wanted to come out.”

“Fine. We’ll just – wait, what the fuck is Trak doing?”

Trak was walking casually into the clearing, the two dogs at his side. Men and women turned, staring at him and then down at the behemoths covered in fur.

“You’re abusing the dogs,” he said calmly.

At first, no one said anything, then the group began to laugh. Trak scanned the crowd, his eyes catching with a few locals who knew all too well who he was and who those damn dogs belonged to. They left so fast no one even noticed.

“Friend, you’re in the wrong place. This is invitation-only. Unless. Unless you want to race your dogs against mine.”

Trak smirked at the man, calmly unleashing the two dogs. He gave two clicks of his tongue, and the dogs stormed forward, ramming into the man and pinning him to the ground. Goliath had his teeth wrapped around his throat. Beast was a little further south. As men drew their weapons, Trak released two knives at the bodyguards, killing them instantly.

That’s when the team slowly appeared, their weapons drawn.

“You are so fucking impatient,” growled Nine. Trak shrugged, calling back the dogs for a minute.

“You’re dead!” yelled the man as he got off the ground, gripping his saliva-covered throat. “You have no idea who you’ve fucked with!”

“Cassius Hugo. Blah, blah, blah,” said Ghost. Everyone stared at them, then looked back at the one bodyguard left alive.

“I-I don’t know who they are,” he muttered.

“I’m your neighbor,” said Jean. “All the property that way, and that way, oh, and that way, is mine. Well, mine and my parents and siblings. And friends. It’s ours. Don’t worry about the semantics.”

“This isn’t your property!” yelled the man.

“But it’s within the zone of protection,” said Gaspar.

He watched as Trak walked to the dog kennels, letting each one out and guiding them to the boat. When they were seated with water and food, he commanded Beast and Goliath to watch over them, then returned to the group.

“What the hell is he?” asked a woman.

“I am a man. A man who values animal life more than human life. Unless it’s my family. You are not my family.”

“Nine,” whispered Angel, walking toward them. “You may want to see what they have in that shed.”

“Do I want to see it?” he frowned.

“Nope. But you’ll need to.” Nine began walking toward the shed with Ghost. When two men stepped forward to stop them, Tailor and Alec brought them down so quickly their bones echoed in the quiet of the swamp.

The door to the shed was open, allowing fresh air inside. But when he shone the flashlight, Nine and Ghost both felt their blood boil. Three young girls, barely sixteen or seventeen, stared back at them. They were wearing short denim shorts, tank tops with no undergarments and were dirty and sweaty.

“Are you alright?” asked Ghost, kneeling at the entrance. The girls shook their heads. “Are you hurt?”

“We-we’re hungry,” said one of the girls. “That man said we owed him money, but we didn’t owe him anything. He said our parents bet on the dogs and lost, and we were payment. My mama wouldn’t do that!”

“I know, honey,” said Ghost. “We’re going to get you out of here. You see that pretty lady over there?”

“The tall one with the gun?” asked the girl. Ghost smirked.

“Yeah, that’s her. She’s tough, but she’s really nice. You’re going to go with her, and we’re going to get you cleaned up, some fresh clothes and find your parents.” Ghost stood, holding out a hand, and the first girl stood, taking it. She could barely walk she was so weak, so Antoine and Angel stepped forward, helping the girls to the boat.

“You’re going to be okay now,” said Piper. “Let me get you to safety.”

Ghost turned as soon as the girls were out of sight, marching toward the remaining

bodyguard. He slammed his fist into the man's face, his heavy silver rings causing blood to spurt everywhere.

"Where is fucking Hugo?" he growled.

"I-I don't know! We don't ever get to see him at his office. We have to see him out here," he said. Ghost turned to Tailor.

"Kill him."

"No! Wait! Please, I'll tell you what I know, but I don't know a lot. He keeps us in the dark and doesn't tell us anything."

While the others were being cuffed around trees, Ghost, Gaspar, Ian, and Nine stood over the bodyguard.

"Why is he doing this? He's not making a killing out here on four dogs on a track or on moonshine. Why?"

"He's fucking crazy. That's why!"

"That's not good enough," said Ghost, cracking his knuckles. The man shook his head, holding up both hands in defense.

"It's some sort of vendetta. I don't know anything about it other than he's trying to get two men to come after him."

"Why?" asked Nine.

"Look, I heard him muttering to himself once. He does that a lot. He talks to himself like a lunatic. He said he'd show them he was good enough. Smart enough. He said

no one would ever say he wasn't good enough again."

"Good enough for what?"

"Some fucking security job that he didn't get here." Nine and Gaspar looked at one another then at Ian and Ghost.

"A security job. Why here?"

"All I know is he said that they're based somewhere around here, but he didn't know where. He was literally standing over these huge maps spread out on the hood of a car and saying, 'They're here. I know they're here, and I'll find them.' He was planning to let some guys in the Middle East know when and where he found them."

The echo in the trees said it all.

"Shit."

"Shit."

"Shit."

"Shit."

"Shit."

"Shit."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“That little bit of information helped us a great deal,” said Pigsty. “We went back through applications for the last thirty years, given what we believe Hugo’s age could be. Obviously, we pulled only those that were rejected.”

“And?” growled Gaspar.

“And we found him. Not only was he rejected, he was rejected in the first interview because he lied on his resume. He claimed he was USMC, but we couldn’t find any truth to that. Gideon Samson.”

“Gideon Samson,” repeated Nine with a puzzled look. “I don’t remember that name at all.”

“He never got to you, and he wasn’t using that name. He was using the name Harry Borden. He even said his call name was ‘Killer,’ which seemed a bit over the top,” said Pigsty. “This guy is completely unstrung. Officials believed he may have killed his parents at the age of eighteen but could never prove it. He was always a suspect, never arrested.

“He joined the Merchant Marines under the name Cassius Borden. When I went back into the maritime records, Cassius Borden was deemed lost at sea, having fallen overboard during a storm. His body was never recovered.”

“Jesus, what a fucking shit show,” growled Ian.

“That’s not all.”

“Of course it isn’t,” said Ghost.

“After somehow surviving the alleged lost at sea incident, he appears in Karachi under the name Borden Hugo. There are several incident reports of him being found in locations where terrorists groups frequented, but he was always deemed an innocent businessman who’d lost his way.”

“Are we really that stupid?” asked Ghost.

“Apparently so. Our interview was done with him early on. He was only twenty-two or twenty-three at the time, and we conducted it in downtown New Orleans. It would have been one or two years after his alleged drowning. That was back when we didn’t want anyone on the property until they’d been cleared.”

“Right. We used to use the backroom at Brennans or Court of Two Sisters,” said Gaspar. The others nodded, remembering those days.

“He has had multiple surgeries from what I can tell from passport photos. He’s also been in a lot of countries that should make us very uncomfortable. Not just the Middle East but also Russia, China, Malaysia, and a few other fun hotspots.” Pigsty looked at Gaspar and grinned. “Thanks to your parents and their hospitable ways, and I suspect some magic, the bodyguard said that he’d not only promised these men in the Middle East to find you but also promised a constant flow of women to be trafficked.”

“Where is he?” asked Nine.

“I’m still working on that. The bodyguard was right. He doesn’t have any properties in his name, which means he’s used an alias to rent or buy them, or he’s squatting somewhere. He didn’t think that he was too far away because when they do call him with emergencies, he seems ready to appear within an hour or two.”

“Well, that leaves a pretty wide circle,” said Nine. “That could mean Baton Rouge, Lafayette, any number of places. Hell, if he has access to a private plane or helicopter, he could be in Mississippi or Texas.”

“Did the bodyguard give up the other locations of the stills?” asked Ian.

“He did, and the boys are taking care of those right now. When they’re all destroyed, he’s going to be livid and looking for serious revenge. But he did say that he had plans to mass distribute the moonshine. He’d already looked for a location to legally brew and bottle it and then sell it worldwide if he could. So, that wasn’t just a front.”

“Okay,” nodded Gaspar. “At least we have a few answers. He wants us, and the bastard is going to be sorry when he gets us. This isn’t the first time this has happened, and it won’t be the last time. Any signs of these so-called Middle East friends of his?”

“Nothing that I can find,” said Pigsty. “Hey, I do have a question for y’all. When I was sending up the drones to search the area, I flew over Belle Isle. Why are there thirty new houses out there, and the island expanded? Is someone else coming out there?”

Gaspar shook his head, frowning at Pigsty.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Pigsty turned the screen toward the men, showing them all the new cabins.

“I’ll talk to Pops about it, but I’m sure there’s a reason,” said Gaspar. “As usual, I’m the last to know.”

“What now?” asked Sly and Code, awaiting further instruction for their team.

“Right now, we wait to see what sort of reaction this man gives to all his stills being gone. He’s not just going to sit around. If we can find contact information for him, we can initiate that contact and let him know that he’s no longer in hiding.”

“Yaz. We need to find Yaz,” said Ian. “He can help us.” The others nodded, Gaspar stood to leave the room.

“Then that’s what we’re going to do. Find Yaz.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Yarrow, honey, we need to talk to you,” said Nine.

“Are you going to make me leave?” she asked with a terrified expression.

“No. God, no! Why would you think that?” She shrugged.

“Is something wrong with my daddy?”

“Honey, we’re trying to find him. His cell phone is turned off, so we can’t get a read on where he is right now. Did your daddy have any places where he went to feel safe? Maybe someplace that was real special to the two of you?”

She looked at him, shaking her head, then looked down at the tiny gold Claddagh ring on her hand.

“Wait. The place he and Mama met. He used to say it was the happiest time of his life until I was born. We used to go out there and have a picnic and explore the grounds.”

“What grounds, honey? Where?” asked Ghost.

“Cypress Plantation. It’s that old home about to fall in, out on Highway 61. Daddy always said his great-grandparents lived there once upon a time, but I don’t see how. We don’t have that kind of money. The whole place looks like it’s gonna collapse. But he loved it. He said he and Mama had their first kiss out there.”

“It sounds like a special place, honey. You stay here, and we’re gonna go see if we can find your daddy.”

When the four men ran toward the big black SUV, she turned to Lydia and the other girls and shook her head.

“Aren’t they too old to be running around like that?”

“Yes,” laughed Faith. “But don’t tell them that. Men have fragile egos, honey, and we like to let them think they’re still young.” She shook her head, her expression filled with confusion.

“If you say so. Daddy used to say he didn’t understand women. I don’t think I’ll ever understand men.”

“You know where this place is?” asked Ian.

“Definitely,” smirked Gaspar. “It was far enough away from the city that when we were teens, we would go out there and have bonfires, chase the girls, catch a few, and do things we were too young to do.”

“I see,” nodded Ghost. “Is it really falling apart?”

“It was falling apart fifty years ago. I can’t imagine what it looks like now. It was once one of the grand plantations along the river. I think the owners finally let it go sometime in the 1960s. No one ever bought it, so it’s just crumbled.”

“What about the land? That must be worth a fortune,” said Nine.

“The land was bought by one of the chemical plants, and the house was deemed a historic structure. You couldn’t tear it down, but no one wanted to give them the money to repair it. I can’t believe it’s still standing at all.”

It was a forty-five-minute drive, and they reached the old mansion just as dusk was

falling.

“Well, if this isn’t fifty kinds of hell in a horror movie,” muttered Ian.

“Yeah,” laughed Gaspar. “Seeing it as an adult, it does have that vibe. Which, I imagine, has kept folks away from it. Shit. I’m not sure it’s safe to even step up on the porch.”

“It’s not,” said the voice just inside the shadow of the doorway. “I’ve fallen through twice. Leave before I shoot.”

“Yaz? Yaz, it’s Gaspar Robicheaux. If that’s you, we’re here to help.” They heard the creaking of the boards, and the shadow began to emerge, looking weathered, worn, and beaten. He held a shotgun in his unsteady hands.

“Gaspar?”

“That’s right. Yaz, you look terrible, brother. Put the shotgun down. Yarrow is safe with Mama and the others. She’s awful worried about you.”

The man dropped the shotgun and fell face-first down the steps. Exhausted, hungry, dehydrated, he was done.

“Shit,” muttered Ian, running his way. He knelt beside him and nodded. “He’s alive, but he needs help now.”

“Evie? Autumn? Someone in flight control. I need a pickup now at the old Cypress Plantation off 61. Send someone from medical as well.”

“Roger that,” said Evie.

The men tried to give Yaz water, but he was barely conscious and unable to accept. He kept mumbling his daughter's name in spite of their reassurances that she was alright. Evie arrived with Doc, and they loaded Yaz and took off south.

By the time the seniors got to the clinic, Yaz was showered, lying in bed with an I.V., and his daughter holding his hand.

"How is he?" Gaspar asked Doc.

"He's dehydrated. Needs food, which he'll get once we get more fluids into him. But other than that, he's actually doing alright. He didn't sleep more than an hour or two a night. Poor bastard was worried sick for his daughter."

"Can he speak to us?" Doc nodded, moving out of the way. "Yaz? How are you, brother?"

"Grateful," he said, smiling at him. "Grateful to your mama and all of you that Yar is okay."

"We would have never let harm come to her. Yaz, can you answer some questions for us?" asked Ian. The man nodded as they took seats around the bed.

"Tell us about Hugo."

"It started about five months ago. The bar was really struggling. I was worried about what Yarrow and I would do if we lost it. He came in and said he was planning to be in the area for a while but needed help with something." Yaz shook his head, frowning. "I was stupid. I believed everything that came out of his mouth. He said he was from a major brewer of moonshine, and I'd been selected as a beta test bar. Me. Pfft!"

“It does seem a bit much,” smirked Nine. “I mean, we all love your little place, Yaz, but it’s not exactly beta test material.”

“I know, I know. I agreed. I agreed and signed those damn papers without having a lawyer look at them. I just couldn’t afford one. And before you tell me how stupid I was and I could have come to y’all, I know that now. And to top it off, he was the man that my wife ran to and fooled around with. He killed her with that shit. Yarrow doesn’t know. Again, don’t tell me how stupid I was for trusting him.”

“Well, I don’t like to repeat myself,” laughed Gaspar.

“Yeah, you do,” grinned the man. “Anyway, Yarrow, she loves to dance, and we have music playing all the time. Sometimes live, sometimes a DJ, or just piped in music. I put cameras in the bar because I thought Hugo’s men were stealing from me. I had no idea what he was going to do.”

“Why threaten you with her? What did he really want?” asked Gaspar.

“He wanted me to tell him about y’all,” said Yaz. “I didn’t figure that out until later. I’m not sure why. Maybe because it all seemed so out of context. He asked if I knew any good security agencies, and I said no. I mean, y’all have said you don’t want advertising.”

“We don’t. You did the right thing.”

“Then he started telling me about an interview he had at a restaurant in the Quarter a long time ago. He asked if I knew what companies did that. Again, I said no.”

“Didn’t he remember the name of our company?” asked Ghost.

“Well, that’s just it. He said he was looking for a group called REAPER. I didn’t

know that y'all went by that name."

"We don't," said Nine. "Not any longer."

"I think he thought I was lying, and that's when he threatened me with Yarrow's life. I couldn't let her be harmed. I didn't care about me. But I couldn't let anyone hurt her."

"Daddy, I care about you," sniffed the girl as she walked into the room. "We're a team."

"Yes, we are," he said, kissing his daughter's hand. "We'll be a team for a long time to come now."

"Yaz? Any idea where this man is located?" asked Ghost.

"None. But I do remember the phone number that he programmed into my phone. I destroyed my phone, but I called him right before I did that." Gaspar laughed, shaking his head at the man.

"You couldn't have led with that?"

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“They’re all gone. All of them. Every still has been burned to the ground, every piece of property you were going to lay claim to was purchased by someone else, and all the bodyguards are dead. All except me.”

“What good are you to me?” he sneered.

“Right now, I’m all you’ve got,” said the man. “I’m it, and no one in this fucking God-forsaken place will go up against the men you want. No one.”

“How do you know who we want?” he asked, staring at the man.

“Because I’m not as stupid as you believe. I listen. I hear things. I know things. You have the audacity to fuck with the Robicheaux family and the legacy men of REAPER? I gotta say, Mr. Hugo, that’s some big balls you got there.”

“They’re just men,” he said between clenched teeth.

“Just men? No, they’re superhuman. Do you know how many men have tried to kill them? How many countries? How many agencies? These aren’t just men, and you’re a damn fool if you think they are.”

“Do you know where they are?” he asked.

“Hell no, and I don’t want to know. Like I said, you’re a fool for going after them.”

“I have very powerful clients who want them,” he said, leaning back in his chair. The man laughed, shaking his head.

“No, you have very powerful enemies who are willing to pretend to be friends with you because they would rather see you die trying than to lose one of their own. They know that these men are like ghosts. They come and go in the night like the wind. You won’t get to them.”

“So, you won’t help me?” he asked.

“Five million. Upfront.”

“You’re crazy!” he shouted.

“Yep. But not as crazy as you are for thinking you can do this. You think we’re all stupid, don’t you? You weren’t USMC. That tattoo is wrong, and it’s disgraceful that you put it there.” Hugo covered his arm, pulling the sleeve down. He knew the tattoo was wrong, but it hurt to get it, and he didn’t want to sit through another session to fix it.

“You were a Merchant Marine, but you disappeared. AWOL. I don’t abide by those rules. I might be totally fucked up and a disgrace to my country, but I never went AWOL.”

“Four million.”

“Five.”

“Get out. I don’t need you.”

“Fine,” nodded the man. “I’ll send flowers to your funeral.” He turned, leaving the office. Just as Hugo was about to call for him to return, his cell phone rang. It was an unknown number, but it intrigued him. Only a few people knew this number.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Cassius. Or should I say Gideon?” Hugo froze, immediately his body began to shake in fear and nervousness.

“Wh-who is this?”

“Oh, I think you know. Who is paying you, Gideon?” asked Nine.

“No one. No one is paying me. Not yet. When I turn you over to them, I’ll be a wealthy man.”

“You’ll be a dead man,” said Nine. “You’ll never come near us.”

“I’m capable! I would have made an excellent operative, and you didn’t give me a chance to prove it.”

“Because you lied from the start. We don’t tolerate liars. You lied about the stills. Ms. Beauchamp was happy to hear that, by the way. She won’t be giving you any more hearings with the ATF. Your dreams of ruling the world of spirits are done.”

“You asshole! I could make that work. I could make millions.”

“It isn’t legal, Gideon. It never would be legal. You’d lose any money you have. You won’t steal anyone’s property, you won’t touch anyone’s daughter, and you won’t be doing business any time soon.”

“You won’t ruin this for me again! I’m capable! I can do anything!”

“Turn yourself in Gideon. Turn yourself in before your business partners come hunting for you. I would suspect that they’re going to want their money back. You

foolishly took their money in advance, didn't you?"

Gideon was breathing so heavily they honestly thought he might be on a treadmill. They could hear him moving things around, stomping his feet, and pacing in whatever room he was in.

"Hey, Gideon?" called Nine. "How's the view of the Gulf from Pass Christian this fine evening?"

Now, there was silence. Nothing except silence, and they wondered if he had passed out. Nine gave a thumbs up to the comms team.

"We'll see you soon, Gideon. See you soon."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Hey, Riley. Can you come look at something for me?” asked Suzette.

“Sure. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think anything is wrong, necessarily. I just found something strange. I’ve been combing through all the data on Stephanie, Marilisa, Victoria, all of our resident geniuses. There’s something really weird in their blood work, and in the tissue biopsies we did of their brains.”

“What do you mean weird?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, I know it’s not normal, but I can’t figure out what it really is. If you look at the tissue samples beneath the microscope, they have a pink, fluorescent look to them. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Riley looked at the slides, then at the sheets of blood work results, and back at the slides. She magnified it, looked at it through multiple microscopes and then backed up from it.

“Did you show Gabi?”

“She did,” said Gabi, standing in the doorway. “What the hell is that, Riley?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know, but it’s identical in every single one of them.”

“Don’t say anything to them,” said Gabi. “I don’t want any of them feeling more different than they already are. It could explain their advanced intelligence and

abilities to hear and see things we can't. It's like superpower juice or something."

"I doubt that will make them feel better," said Suzette.

"No. I'm fairly certain it won't. It is odd, though, considering they weren't all always together. There is a significant age gap between them all, and we believe there are more out there. What does this stuff do to them?"

"I'm almost afraid to find out," said Suzette. "They've all been adjusting so well. I don't want to disturb that, but I also want them to understand any health risks they could have."

"Let's keep looking into this," said Riley. "If we can find something to sink our teeth into, it might help us to find the source. If not, maybe we just let this go. I mean, maybe it's not something we're supposed to know."

"Maybe," frowned Suzette. "It all just seems like something we need to know."

Pass Christian, Mississippi, sat neatly between Gulfport and Bay St. Louis. It was a sleepy, quiet little town most of the time. In the summer, it brought in beachgoers from north Mississippi and Louisiana.

As the men pulled within a block of the location where Gideon's signal had pinged, they stopped to watch for a while.

"We all used to come up here and make a day of it," said Gaspar. "We'd bring all the kids up here, swim in the warm waters of the Gulf, grill on the beach, eat ice cream, and then drive back. The little ones would be sound asleep in the back by the time we got home."

"Sounds wonderful," smirked Nine.

“It was. It was damn sure a simpler time, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe. Or maybe we just make everything more complicated. Maybe if we put away all the devices, all the phones and computers, all the distractions, it would be simpler again,” said Ian.

“Let me remind you all that we are what we are because of those damn technology devices. We couldn’t function without them,” said Ghost.

“That’s true,” said Gaspar. There was a tap on their window, and a man motioned for them to roll their window down. “Can I help you?”

“No. But I think I can help you,” said the man. “You’re waiting for Mr. Hugo if I had to guess. He’s gone. I used to work for him and found out that he was after all of you. I’m guessing it was you that killed all the other bodyguards, so, out of courtesy, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t kill me.”

“Where is he?” asked Nine as they stepped out of the vehicle. The man stared at them, shaking his head.

“You’re all supposed to be senior citizens, easy to take down. Apparently, he was a fool about that as well. To answer your question, or not answer it, I don’t know. I told him I would only help him if he gave me five million. Obviously, I knew he wouldn’t do that, so I left. I was so glad to be out of there I forgot my own things. So, I went back and got my bag, but he was already gone. Everything is out of that little house.”

“Does he have money? Has he really taken money from men in the Middle East to get to us?” asked Gaspar.

“I don’t know if he has money or not, but all he’s talked about is getting to you guys and proving that he’s capable of being what you are. He didn’t think I would notice

that his tattoos were fucked up. I think that really pissed him off.”

“Where would he go?” asked Ian.

“I don’t know. That’s the truth. There wasn’t anything left in the house. Not that there was ever much in there to begin with. He kept everything in small storage boxes, I guess to move quickly if he needed to. If it’s true that you destroyed all the stills, he has no money coming in that I’m aware.”

“What about his connections for girls, or any of it?” asked Ian.

“As far as I know, he doesn’t have any. He met with a man three weeks ago. Francis D’Agostino. Some big deal on the East Coast.”

“We know him,” nodded Ghost.

“Well, he was pissed when he left. Told Hugo not to waste his time again, or he’d cut his balls off with a dull knife. He tried to laugh it off like they were friends joking with one another, but I don’t think they were.”

“D’Agostino has no sense of humor, so he wasn’t joking,” said Nine. “Did you get your things out of there?”

“I did. Sir.” Nine tilted his head, looking at the younger man. “I’m ashamed that I went to work for him. I take some solace in that all I did was guard the house and him, but it doesn’t change the fact that I feel like I betrayed my country. I’d just like to ask that you let me live so I can make up for it in some small way.”

“You’ll live,” said Ghost. “You’ve given good information that will help us. If you know where Hugo went, that would be even better.”

“I know he drove south, so I have to guess it would be New Orleans. But that’s all I know.” Gaspar nodded at the man.

“That’s good enough.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Waking in the campground in southern Arkansas, the rag-tag group of people were in surprisingly good spirits considering what they'd been through in the last few months. Several people were moving around, preparing meals, others were shaking out the sleeping bags.

Leaving their homes was the hardest thing they'd ever had to do. They'd been settled, each with their own home, and living a life away from prying eyes and onlookers. When they saw the groups of people moving through the valley toward them, they knew they had to run. There was no time to take anything personal or to pack cars or vans with items.

Thank goodness they were always prepared. Tents, sleeping bags, utility bins filled with supplies and food, it was all ready. As they escaped on the route that had been planned for years, they took one last look back at the only place that had ever been home for them. And watched it burn.

"Good morning," said their leader. "Everyone okay?"

"All good," nodded several of them. "Any word?"

"No. A few strange vibes, but nothing concrete that we can use. I think we need to try and find my old friends."

"They're not going to want to take all of us in," said the other man.

"I don't think you understand. It's kind of what they do. If we're in trouble, they'll help us. We probably should have gone to them in the first place. We can't keep

running from campground to campground. Sooner or later, someone is going to find us, and we're going to be out of luck.

"We've got people that will need medications, we've got pregnant women, we can't keep running. Besides, that's no way for the kids to live. They deserve to be able to play outside when they want to without fear."

"I know," nodded his friend. "I'm just terrified for all of us. We've known that there were more like us somewhere out there but to believe that we could find them was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Plus, who's going to believe us?"

"These people will. I promise you. They will."

They spent the morning discussing their options and talking about the possibility of heading back to their homes. Except it was no longer an option. They'd lost a few during the exit and skirmish. Had it not been for the quick thinking of their team, they would have lost more.

The problem was he wasn't really sure how to get in touch with his old friend. Hell, he wasn't even really a friend. Just someone who'd saved his ass once. But he knew of what he was doing and what he was accomplishing. It was something they all wanted to be a part of.

For three days and three nights, they camped out in Arkansas. The weather was sunny, cool, and blissfully perfect. But when one of the team suspected their stalkers were coming their way again, they knew they had to move on.

"This needs to be a decision for everyone," he said. "Do we stay and fight? Do we move somewhere new? Or do we try and find my friend in Louisiana?"

"Louisiana," said the crowd.

“We’ve always trusted you,” said a woman. “You’ve never steered us wrong, and if you think this person can help us, then I believe you. I don’t think we have a choice at this point. Someone desperately wants us and whatever we have.”

He knew that hiking through the woods and making their way on foot was going to be a long process, but it was better than being tracked in vehicles, and it would require at least a dozen vehicles for all of them. They didn’t have a choice. They’d left everything behind.

“Then, Louisiana it is. We leave at dawn.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

With the comms team searching security cameras, street cameras, and door cameras for Hugo or whatever his name was this week, the seniors were trying to remember the initial interview with him and if anything was said or done that could give them a hint of where he was hiding.

“Hey,” said Code, stepping into the conference room. “You’ve got a video call from Ms. Beauchamp. She said it’s important.”

“Send it through,” nodded Gaspar. A few seconds later, the woman’s face appeared, and she nodded at the men. “Ms. Beauchamp, what can we do for you?”

“I think it’s me that can do something for you. Consider it payment for the information on Hugo or whatever the hell his name is.”

“No payment needed, but we welcome any helpful information,” smiled Ian.

“As you know, at the ATF, we’re primarily focused on illegal use of alcohol, the sale of tobacco, and, of course, firearms.” The men nodded, believing she was telling them the obvious. “Unlike a lot of agencies, I prefer playing nice with the rest of the alphabet soup both locally and federally. This morning, I got a report from my friends at Homeland and the FBI that four known terrorists made their way into my fair state.”

“Shit,” muttered Ghost. “Any names?”

“Just remember you asked. Does the Samaan family ring a bell to you?”

The four men let out slow whistles, leaning back in their chairs. The Samaans had been a part of attempts to kill each of them, as well as their sons. They'd believed they were all dead, but apparently not.

"The name definitely rings bells. Big, huge, brass bells," frowned Nine. "These have to be the grandsons or nephews."

"I would imagine so. Homeland said they're twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-one, and thirty-three. The four men came in together, claiming that they were attending a course at LSU, except LSU has no record of that. When they finally got around to trying to find them, of course, they were nowhere to be found."

"Shit. That's all we need right now. If Hugo has crawled into bed with these guys, he's in deep shit if he can't produce us. They prefer to cut off body parts than talk reasonably with anyone."

"Well, I can tell you that he hasn't bothered to call up here today, but yesterday, he called to say that everything you had uncovered was fabricated and you had a vendetta against him. Apparently, the story he's telling is that he was going to start a security agency, and you were afraid of the competition and set out to destroy him.

"Now, I'm not stupid, and I know the truth of that, but it doesn't mean he won't try to tell that story to someone who will listen. It looks like the Samaan family has chosen to listen to his delusions. My staff is sending you the most up-to-date photos we have on the Samaan family. If you need my help, I'll be glad to chip in where I can."

"We appreciate the heads up and the information," said Ghost. "We know that Hugo is in the area and still looking for us."

"Well, it might be dangerous, but at some point, maybe you let him find you. I know what kind of army you have there. Four Middle Eastern men and a crazy lunatic are

no match,” she grinned.

“Yes, ma’am. Let’s hope you’re right about that.” As the call ended, Ian looked down at the small folder from Hugo’s interview. His application was there, along with a resume and a fabricated DD214. That’s what ended the process for him. His lies about being in the USMC.

“Hey, look at this,” said Ian. “It’s a note from Adele.”

“Candidate possesses delusional thoughts of grandeur and possible hero worship for himself. Takes credit for events that historically could not have happened in his time in the service. Disconnected from reality and quite possibly psychopathic, narcissistic, and bipolar tendencies. Should not continue with the interview process.”

“Damn. I remember reading that,” said Gaspar. “It’s what made us dig deep into his USMC claims. He kept saying he was capable or good enough. I wonder if that’s what prompted him to kill his parents. Maybe they said he wasn’t good enough.”

“That’s possible,” nodded Ian. “Doesn’t make it right, but it’s possible.”

“I’m hungry,” said Nine.

“Same,” said the others.

They closed up the files and locked the door, heading toward the main cafeteria. As with every evening, they could see others coming out of their homes, walking toward the scents of tonight’s delicacies. As they walked the tree-lined walkway, they spotted Victoria, Marilisa, Stephanie, Wyatt, and Monroe. They were standing still, staring up at the sky.

Ghost looked up and didn’t see anything, then looked around them, still not seeing

anything unusual. As they approached, Ian touched Wyatt's shoulder, and the boy jumped.

"Whoa," he said, raising his hand. "It's alright. It's just me. Are you guys okay?"

"We're not sure," whispered Victoria. "We all felt the same thing. It was like something pulling us. It feels like someone is in trouble, but we can't tell who it is."

"One of our people?" asked Nine.

"No," said Stephanie. "That's just it. It doesn't feel like someone we know. Yet, it feels familiar."

"Honey, that doesn't make sense," said Gaspar.

"I know," she said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," said Ghost. "Don't ever be sorry for speaking the truth. If y'all are feeling something peculiar, something strange, then we believe you. We just need to figure out what it is. Are you hearing something? Seeing something?"

"Yes and no. We all feel this weird sensation, like a vibration inside of us. It's like, it's like a hum that's trying to tell us something," she said, shaking her head. "I can't explain it any differently." Katelyn was walking toward them with a strange expression, and they all turned to stare at her.

"You feel it too," said Victoria.

"I do. What is it?"

"I don't know," said Nine, "but we're definitely going to figure it out."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Where are they?” asked the man.

“Here,” said Hugo. “They’re close. I just don’t have their exact location yet.”

“You said you had them. You told us that you knew their location and had them ready for us to dispose of. All of them.”

“I’m working on it. You need to be patient.”

“We have been patient for decades. Our grandfathers were patient. Our fathers were patient. These are old men. Men that should be dead, and yet you cannot find a group of old men. We want them in our possession by tomorrow, or you will be the replacement.”

“I’m doing what I can,” said Hugo, slamming his hand against the table. The eyes of those around them at the outdoor dining space turned, staring at the disruption. He cleared his throat, shaking his head. “I’m doing what I can. They’re obviously not as old and decrepit as you believe. They were able to kill all of my men. All!”

“Perhaps this was a mistake,” said one of the men. “Perhaps our fathers were right, and we should let this go.”

“No! No, we had a deal. I will get them for you, and you will give me what I want.”

“Do not yell at us,” said one of the men quietly. “If you raise your voice again, we will leave you in the hands of these men.”

“I will get them to you,” he said confidently. “I just need more time.”

“Tomorrow. Have them within our reach by tomorrow.”

The four men rose and left the small outdoor café. Hugo stared at their retreating backs, secretly despising the men and who they were. But he needed them. He needed their money, he needed their contacts, he needed them to introduce him to the right people and elevate his name.

But getting the men of REAPER, or Gray Wolf, or whatever they called themselves now, to show up and show their faces was harder than expected. What he had going for him was that they wanted him. Yes, he’d have to put his neck out there to draw them in. Yes, he’d have to risk his own life in the hope that his Middle Eastern friends would kill them before they kill him.

For him, it was a risk worth taking.

He took the narrow side streets back to the small boutique hotel where he was staying. At more than three hundred dollars a night, he expected top-notch service, and he was getting it. He left orders for fresh coffee every morning, two eggs over easy, bacon, and a toasted everything bagel. At night, he wanted a steak, medium-rare, baked potato with everything on the side, and a salad, along with a great bottle of red wine.

Every morning and every night, it came to his room like clockwork.

“Good evening, Mr. Hugo,” said the desk clerk.

“Good evening,” he said with an aristocratic air.

“Shall I have them begin to prepare your evening meal, sir?”

“Please. And tonight, have them send up dessert as well. I’d like pecan pie with vanilla ice cream and the double-chocolate cake.”

“Oh, you’ll love that,” smiled the young man. “They’re the best.”

“Good. Good,” he smiled.

In his room, he quickly showered and pulled on lounge pants with a t-shirt, checking his e-mail. He needed to find a way to draw out the men to a remote location, giving the Samaan family a chance at their revenge.

The Quarter was too public. Too many people, too much traffic, too many cameras. Just too much. Shopping malls were out with all the cameras and people.

“There has to be something,” he whispered to himself.

When a knock on the door came, he stood, welcoming his evening meal. He looked at the young girl, thinking he might need a distraction tonight, but then noticed she had an engagement ring, immediately changing his mind. He didn’t need that kind of trouble right now.

“Thank you, Jeannie,” he said, signing the bill. “I appreciate the quick service every night.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hugo, for the great tip. My fiancé and I are attending university, and it definitely helps.”

“What are you studying?” he asked without really showing any interest.

“Exotic animals. I get to do work at the New Orleans Zoo and this really cool island in the bayou that rescues animals and brings them back to good health or helps

elderly animals die with dignity. It's so cool!"

He stared at her, nodding.

"In the bayou, you say?"

"Yes, sir. It's got a short little bridge to it, but you have to be invited, and then they'll let you on the island."

"So, I can't just go out there?"

"No, sir. You have to be invited by the zoo or the university or the owners, and I don't know who they are."

"You know, I have a fascination for preserving wildlife. Do you think you could get me an invite to the island? I'd like to make a sizeable donation but don't want them to know that just yet."

"Oh, wow! I could see. Can you give me a few hours to check?"

"Of course," he smiled. "Take all the time you need."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“What’s going on with them, Gabi?” asked Nine, staring at the young people all lined up in the room.

“I’m not sure. They’re not delusional. Their heart rates are elevated, their senses seem to be on high alert, something is definitely putting them all on edge, but none of them can pinpoint what it is.”

“These kids have never been dramatic about anything. Not even when they had a right to be dramatic. I don’t think this has anything to do with Hugo, I mean, how could it? But something has affected them.”

“I’m going to keep asking questions, and we’ll draw some more labs,” said Gabi. “Listen, Nine, we’re not sure what was done to them in their special schools or what was given to them. Those poor kids could have been kept unconscious for long periods of time, experiments done on them, and we may never know. I don’t want them to feel like lab rats, but I’m also worried that this might get worse and drive them to something strange.”

“You don’t think...” asked Gaspar, tapering off.

“No. No, no. I don’t think any of them are even contemplating something like that, but it doesn’t mean I’m not thinking about the potential.”

“Hey! We’ve got Hugo on the line,” said Code. Nine nodded at him as Gabi rose to leave the room. She closed the door, allowing Nine, Gaspar, Ian, and Ghost to handle the call.

“Hugo! My man, long time no hear,” smirked Ghost.

“Fuck you. You want me. Well, you can find me in two days’ time.”

“Two days? Wow, I can already feel the anticipation,” smirked Gaspar. “And pray tell, where should we meet you?”

“It’s an animal rescue center,” he said calmly. The men all stilled, staring at one another. “Hello? Are you there?”

“We’re here. Why an animal rescue center? You into hurting animals now, Hugo?” asked Gaspar carefully.

“You guys are such assholes. If you could contemplate how much I despise you, you would be shocked.”

“Probably not, but please enlighten us,” said Ian.

“Contrary to what you believe, I don’t want to harm innocent humans.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe that,” said Nine. “But you’re willing to harm innocent animals?”

“They’re fucking animals. Old. Buying time until they die. I don’t give a shit. If you want to meet me, you can find me at the Last Chance Animal Sanctuary.” Gaspar looked at the men and frowned.

“We know that place, but you usually have to have a personal invite.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Well, I promised a sizeable donation to a college kid working out there, and she got the university to give me an invite.”

There was a light tap on the windows, and Gaspar jumped, staring at the image of his mother and father with a big smile on their faces. His father gave a thumbs up, and Gaspar held in the laughter.

“Okay. We’ll meet you there. Then what? Are we supposed to believe you’ll come with us peacefully, Hugo?”

“I’m willing to talk,” he said with confidence. “Meet me at the giraffe enclosure at 0800 in two days’ time.”

“0800. That’s eight a.m. for you civilians, right?” grinned Ghost.

“You have no idea how much I hate you guys.” He ended the call, and Ghost raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, I think we know exactly how much he hates us. I wonder how he’s going to get the Samaan family on the island?”

“I’ll guess that they’ll either swim or think they can just walk through,” said Nine. “We need to have someone on our team at the gate. Maybe Teddy. They would never expect an old man to be with us.”

“We are old men,” grinned Ghost.

“Fine. Older man.” Nine stared at Ian, who looked like he was a million miles away. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. This shit happening with the kids. Something feels off, but not wrong if that makes sense.”

“I know what you’re saying,” said Gaspar. “They don’t seem to feel any danger, but

they're definitely feeling something. Those kids have amazing instincts, and we're only now getting to know their true genius. If they say something is wrong, I have to believe that."

"The question is, what is wrong? And is it a danger to all of us?" asked Nine.

"I guess we're going to find out."

"Where are we?" asked his wife.

"I'm not positive, but I think we're in north Louisiana. I think we're okay to rest for the night, maybe even a day or two. There's no one around, and we haven't seen or heard anything following us for nearly a week now."

She nodded, leaning against him. They were all exhausted. When they knew where they were going, the exact location, they would be able to send a few people ahead to ask for permission to meet with the men of REAPER or whatever they were calling themselves now.

All he could do was pray that they would remember him. Or at least respect who he was. Without their help, their band of misfits would all die.

"Can we start a fire?" asked one of the men.

"I think we're safe to do that."

"Great. We caught about a dozen fish, and they're big. We should be able to give some to everyone. We also found some wild blueberries and other things we can eat. It will be our first good meal in a while."

"Perfect. I think we're going to need the energy."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Nine walked toward the table where their geniuses were sitting quietly eating. Normally, they would be running around, sitting with others, enjoying the company of unique tables. The last few days, they were huddled together, seemingly stuck like glue.

“How are y’all feeling?” he asked.

“Honestly? We’re not sure,” said Stephanie. “We were just saying there’s this really weird feeling that we all have. It’s like a vibration or something.”

“A vibration?” he frowned.

“Yeah. Like someone is calling you, but your phone is on silent. I’m constantly reaching to see if it’s my phone, and it never is. It’s just a low, buzzing vibration, and it’s making us all a bit crazy.”

“I’m so sorry, you guys. We’ll figure this out,” he said, hugging each one of them. He immediately walked toward the table where Riley, Gabi, Suzette, and the other members of the medical team were huddled together.

“How are they?” asked Suzette.

“Confused. I am too. What the fuck is happening to them?” asked Nine.

“We’re trying to figure it out, Nine. Their brain tissue showed this strange residual of pink, fluorescent specks, like dust or something. I think it contributes to their intelligence and special skills, but I think it also makes them identify in one another

what they share.”

“Wait a minute. What special skills?” asked Ghost.

“They’re all highly intelligent,” said Suzette. “IQs are well above genius levels. But when the younger boys first got here, they’d never been exposed to anything outside the classroom, and yet they knew everything about the subject of their interests. Like marine life. That doesn’t happen from books or documentaries. Even with Stephanie and Katelyn, they were connected and knew that they were different, that they shared something beyond intelligence.”

“They just described this feeling of a strange vibration,” said Nine. The medical team all nodded in agreement. “What is that?”

“Well,” sighed Riley, rubbing her temples, “we honestly believe that it’s some sort of ‘call’ or ‘messaging’ to one another.”

“But they’re all right here,” frowned Ghost. Riley stared at him, tilting her head sideways. “Fuck. Are you telling me that maybe they’re communicating with others like them and don’t know it?”

“Stranger things have happened. I mean, not to other people, but to us for sure,” smirked Riley. “We think it’s possible that this is some sort of calling to others like them. We know there were other students out there, we just don’t have any idea of who they were, how old they are, nothing.”

“Alright. Well, keep a close eye on them. I want to be sure those kids are okay, and I don’t want them feeling any pressure about things around them.”

“Nine. They’re geniuses. They feel the pressure to be smarter than everyone else around here. They feel the pressure to come up with new ideas, new innovations, new

security tools. You, we, all of us, saved them and have given them safety and homes. They worry that they might have to leave.”

“No,” said Ghost, turning to look at the table. “We would never do that. They’re our family.”

“They’re geniuses, Ghost. But they’re all still kids.”

Ghost walked over to their table again and sat down, taking the hands of the two kids on either side of him.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Ghost?” asked Monroe.

“Monroe, all of you, listen to me,” he said softly. Ghost was the toughest, meanest bastard in the bunch when he needed to be. But he was also sweet, kind, and tender with the kids, always worried about their feelings. “You all are family. There is nothing that will change that. Nothing! You are our children, our grandchildren. Whatever is going on with all of you right now, we’ll figure this out. We’ll make sure that nothing happens to any of you.”

“You won’t make us leave?” asked Victoria.

“Honey, what on earth would make you believe that?” asked Ghost. “We love you. You’re ours. Our family. Family doesn’t ask family to leave. You all belong right here, and this is where you’ll stay unless you want to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave,” smiled Victoria. “You know that. This is where I feel safest. I don’t feel judged or critiqued.”

“Same,” said Stephanie. “I never thought I’d feel safe with anyone. I feel so safe being here with all of you. I don’t want to leave.”

“Then don’t,” said Ghost. “You stay right here and let the medical team help to figure out what’s going on.”

“I don’t think it’s something bad,” said Katelyn. “It doesn’t feel like something that’s hurting us. It’s like – like a call. Someone is trying to call us, and we don’t know how to answer.”

“Let’s start there,” smiled Ghost. “If you start to feel out of sorts or out of place again, I want you to come to one of us. Because you’re not going anywhere. Deal?”

“Deal,” they said in unison, smiling at the older man. They watched as he walked away and then looked at one another.

“I feel better,” said Monroe. “But I do feel like someone is trying to reach us.” Victoria nodded, looking at the others.

“Me too, Monroe. Me too.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“We’re moving most of the animals off the island,” said Sniff, standing with Lucy in the conference room. “We’re going to leave Alvin, Semu, the lions and tigers, a few of the bison. If we take too many off, it will look odd.”

“So help me, if they shoot those animals, I’m going to rip their throats out,” said Miller.

“I need everyone to be in stealth cover throughout the island. Comms added some cameras to ensure that we have views of every possible angle for the island. We’ve even added cameras on the road to the bridge and in the parking lot. However, he thinks he’s going to get the Samaan family on that island. We’re going to see it.”

Sly walked into the auditorium, staring at the faces of the entire team. The seniors had asked for the VG crew to sit in so they would know what was happening on the property and be prepared to help if needed.

“Nine? We might have an issue.”

“Shit, what now?”

“I’ve been keeping tabs on weapon sales, anything that could be used as a bomb or incendiary device, that sort of thing. Three rocket launchers were purchased yesterday via a black-market dealer. The purchase was made just outside of Houston, which is a little too close if you ask me.”

“Fuck,” muttered Gaspar. “If they have a rocket launcher, they could get close enough to do some serious damage to the main property.”

“Another thing. Francis D’Agostino is on the line for you.”

The men all stared at one another, wondering what the mafia boss would want with them. Since Ghost was the most familiar with him, he took the call.

“Francis, long time no see,” smirked Ghost, staring at the screen. The background was blacked out, not showing the others in the room.

“I’d like to keep it that way, you big ugly asshole,” said the man.

“Now, that’s not nice. I left you alone,” said Ghost.

“Yes. You did indeed, and you kept your word. For that, I owe you, and this is my payment. I understand you’re hunting down Cassius Hugo.”

“That’s not his real name, but yes, we are.”

“That figures,” frowned the old man. “He accepted more than six million dollars from me as an investor in his new distillery, which I now understand was an illegal group of stills that you have destroyed.”

“I did have some help,” smirked Ghost.

“Still a smart ass. Anyway, I want my six million back, so if you could figure out where my money is before you kill him, I’d appreciate it.”

“You’re assuming we’ll find him and kill him,” said Ghost. D’Agostino laughed so hard they thought he might have a heart attack.

“We both know that you’ll find the piece of shit. I have to say, this one is a bit personal for me. I’m usually good at reading people, and I never let a man fool me.

He was fucking good at that. Always would show up with, uh, shall we say, free entertainment for us at our meetings. Brought his new liquor with him, and the boys enjoyed it.”

“None of them got sick?” asked Ghost.

“I didn’t say that. I had two boys that had to take off an entire week, but they’re better now.”

“You’re lucky,” said Ghost. “We’ve had people dying from it. But back to why you called, if we can get your money for you, we will, but it’s doubtful he has any left.”

“I sort of figured there was nothing left,” said the older man. “Here’s where I pay you back that favor. The Samaan family is in country looking for a few of you boys. Now, normally, I wouldn’t give two shits about four or five men coming after you and your team. You’d figure that out. But rumor has it that they’ve got a dozen men on the ground who will be helping them. That changes the odds significantly.”

“It does,” frowned Ghost, nodding at the others in the room. “But it’s nothing we can’t manage. I do appreciate the heads up, D’Agostino. Consider your debt paid.” Sly handed a note to Ghost, who started to chuckle.

“Everything okay?” asked the other man.

“Well, you can thank my tech nerds later, but we just deposited your six million into your accounts.”

“Y-you what? How the fuck do you know what accounts are mine? Where did you get that damn money?” he asked.

“I don’t think you want to know how we know which accounts are yours, and it

doesn't matter where we found the money, but it came from Hugo's accounts. It was under another alias sitting offshore. You've been paid."

"This is why I leave you the fuck alone," he smiled. "You know, one day, I'd love to just sit down with a glass of wine and talk to all of you. No guns, no fights, nothing illegal. Just talk."

"You know what, Francis? Maybe we'll do just that. I think the world needs a bit more of that right now." The line went dead, and Ghost looked at the room, eyebrows raised in humor.

"Are the accounts drained?" asked Nine, looking at Sly and Code.

"We left a little. Thirteen cents," smirked Code. Nine smiled, nodding.

"Good. That problem is solved. Roughly sixteen or so men, with at least a few grenade launchers, and they're coming for all of us. Time to get prepared. Move all the kids out to the Sugar Lodge. Everyone on high alert. Close the café, salon, all of the businesses at the front of the property."

"Done," nodded Luke. "we'll take care of all that. You guys take care of the Samaans. If you need us, we'll be on comms, listening."

"Then let's do this."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Is everyone alright?” he asked their doctor.

“So far, everyone is doing surprisingly well. How much farther do you think we have to go? Is there no way to get vehicles?”

“I think walking is still the best. If we stay off the main roads, no rentals, no identifications, we’re going to be better off.”

“Did you find him yet? Any contact at all?” he asked.

“I’m still working on that. We sent a few of the boys ahead to scout for potential areas. He’d be at least in his seventies now, maybe older. I’m not sure. I never asked the man his age. Hell, I’m sixty.”

“We’re all old,” smiled his friend. “But we’ve done alright, don’t you think? We’ve helped others like us.”

They watched as their technology and communications specialist walked toward them, rubbing his temples.

“Are you alright?”

“I think we’re getting close to someone like us,” he said. “I can’t pinpoint it exactly, but I’m getting feedback from the search signal. It feels strong.”

“Then we’re headed in the right direction. This will hopefully be the last time any of us ever has to move.”

“You’re putting a lot of faith into this man,” said his friend. He nodded, looking at them all.

“I have to. I don’t have another choice.”

Nine sat on the bench near the fountains, watching Victoria and Monroe whispering to one another. He was scratching his head, and Victoria nodded, doing the same.

“Something wrong?” asked Ian, coming up behind him.

“I’m not sure it’s wrong, but someone or something is absolutely trying to connect to those kids. Did we check them for tracking devices, anything that might have been implanted?” he said, frowning.

“We did,” said Cruz and Wilson, walking up to join them. “It was one of the first things we did when they got here. We couldn’t find anything. It wasn’t until this week that we noticed the strange specimens from their brain biopsies.”

“Have we ever seen anything like this?” asked Nine.

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Wilson.

“I don’t want those kids going mad, thinking they’re hearing things when I know damn good and well they’re not. I believe them. I believe every word they say.”

“I spoke to Hawk. He said the other night, he heard Wyatt talking to someone in his bedroom. It was late, maybe midnight. Wyatt’s cell phone was connected to the cradle in the kitchen charging,” said Cruz. “Hawk stood at the door a few minutes, then pushed it open and didn’t see anyone with him. When he asked who he was talking to, he said Monroe.”

“Monroe? He’s a good five hundred yards away in another cottage. Did they have walkies?” asked Nine.

“No,” said Cruz quietly. “Wyatt said that he can hear Monroe. In his head.”

“Fucking hell,” muttered Nine. Victoria started to walk toward them, and they all stilled, smiling at her.

“You don’t have to pretend,” she said. “I heard everything you were talking about. It’s not just Monroe and Wyatt. I can speak that way with Stephanie but not with Katelyn. I can’t do it with Hayes, but Hayes can do it with Marilisa.”

“You didn’t tell us any of this,” frowned Nine.

“What would you have thought? Honestly? I mean, we start hearing one another, speaking to one another after finally all being together, and you’re going to think we’ve all lost our minds.”

“Honey, I promise if anyone is losing their mind, it’s me. Something is happening to all of you, and I’m pissed at myself for not being able to figure it all out.”

Victoria took the seat beside him, staring at the men seated on the edge of the fountain.

“Listen to me. This isn’t your responsibility to ‘figure out.’ We’re all doing exceptionally well because of the life you’ve given us here. We’re happy, well-fed, educated, and becoming more educated by the day. We have friends. We have family. We have everything we’ve ever wanted.

“Riley and Gabi said that we’re not sick. No one is dying. No one has anything that will hurt them. Whatever this is inside of us, we’ll figure it out, and we’ll all be okay.

Here. Right here. We're not going anywhere."

Nine smiled at the young girl, hugging her tightly and kissing her forehead.

"Thank you for saying that. I'll also have to remember to watch what I say from now on. If you can hear from anywhere, I might get into trouble."

"No more so than with the ghosts," she smirked. "You forget that they hear and see all."

"Shit, she's right," laughed Wilson.

"Promise me that if you start feeling sick or feel that something is wrong, you'll tell us," said Nine.

"I promise. The only thing we're all feeling right now is that it feels as though someone is trying to reach out to us. To speak with us. I think it might be kids just like us."

"If it is, they'll be welcome here," he said. She smiled, waving as she walked back toward the cafeteria.

"What do we do now?" asked Cruz.

"Fuck if I know. Prepare for whatever bullshit Hugo is bringing to the party. If we see them, kill them. I don't want anyone getting hurt because we want answers. I don't give a fuck about the answers any longer. Kill Hugo, and if you see them, kill the Samaans."

"Well, that's going to make the boys happy," smirked Wilson. "Tailor and Alec are on the island setting up camp to watch for them tonight. They're acting like it's a

field trip.”

“That’s because, to them, it is.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Hugo was so cocky; he honestly believed that he could get on the island without any issues whatsoever. The Samaans and their so-called trained assassins were meeting him out there. He'd promised a clear shot at as many of the men who were there.

"Where the fuck is this place?" he mumbled to himself. He spotted a small general store and pulled in to ask for directions. There were only two cars in the parking lot, but it actually looked like a decent stop.

Inside, there were wonderful smells of fresh pies, barbecue sandwiches, and paint. He stared at the things in the store and realized it was some sort of consortium, allowing artists to put their work in one place.

"Help you, mister?" asked the man behind the counter. He was an older black man, but he definitely looked sturdy.

"Not sure. I'm looking for an animal sanctuary on an island. I was given permission to go out and see what they're doing. If it's good work, I plan to make a sizeable donation."

"Ain't that nice of you," smirked Jake. Hugo nodded with a sly grin. Yes, sir, he could fool anyone into believing that he was a good man.

"It is nice of me, isn't it?" he grinned. "What is all this?"

"Well, now, we got lots of good artists in this area. They make their goods and bring them here, and we sell them or ship them around the world. Got world-famous pralines, fudge, crawfish pies, just about anything you might want. Have yourself a

look.”

“I’ll do that,” said Hugo, walking around the place.

He picked up several items, looking at them, then saw an interesting painting of a woman standing on a long pier with an alligator by her side. He shook his head in disbelief and then walked back to the counter. Grabbing two pieces of fudge and two pralines, he set his card down on the counter.

“How far to the animal sanctuary?” he asked.

“You ain’t far,” smiled Jake. The credit card machine beeped, and he frowned. “Sorry, mister. Your card is declined.”

“What? No. Try it again,” he said. Jake did it again, and the same thing happened, the beeping over and over again.

“Sorry. Ain’t no good,” smirked Jake.

“This is ridiculous! What kind of shithole are you running?”

“Now, that ain’t nice at all,” said Jake, pulling a baseball bat from beneath the counter.

Hugo stared at the old man and pulled his jacket back, showing his own handgun. When someone cleared their throat behind him, Hugo turned to see an attractive older woman with a shotgun.

“You shoot my husband, I’m going to have to shoot you,” she smiled. “That is after he beats you to death with that bat.”

“What a fucking joke! Keep your damn food,” he scowled.

He walked out of the store, shaking his head, mumbling as he slammed his car door. Opening up the app for his bank on his phone, he typed in the password and waited for the balance to appear.

\$0.13

“No. No, this isn’t possible. It’s not possible,” he whispered, slamming his hand against the steering wheel. “They’re going to kill me. They’re going to kill me.”

For a few moments, he thought about turning around and heading back to the city, but since this road was the only way in, he’d no doubt pass the Samaan family and their gangsters.

“No. No, I won’t turn around,” he said to himself. “I’ll let them kill all of them, and then I’ll kill the Samaans.”

He was proud of himself for thinking of the answer to his problem. He could do this. He would let them do the bulk of the work, and then he would kill the rest.

“That’s what I’ll do,” he said, smiling to himself as he pulled away.

Jake and Claudette stood at the window watching, ensuring that their bodycams caught everything.

“That was pretty hot,” smirked Jake. “I think I might like you with a shotgun in your hands.”

“Eww. Dude, we’re all on comms. That’s my sister. Just remember, it might be hot, but she’s a damn good shot. So be sure she’s not pointing it at you.”

Jake laughed, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry, little brother,” smiled Claudette. “Just know that if I need to shoot something, I damn sure can.”

“He’s on his way,” said Nine to the others. He turned to scan the island, seeing what others could not. The new safety, day, and night vision glasses were designed to show where the men were located, even while in stealth suiting.

He glanced up at the massive crow’s nest in the middle of the elephant sanctuary and spotted Bull and Vince with their sniper rifles. In one of the old treehouses that was perched inside the big cat exhibit, Tailor and Alec had made a comfortable nest for themselves.

Trak looked up, hearing the red hawk make its shrill sound. Flying beside it was another hawk that he’d never seen before. Both seemed to be trying to tell him something.

“What’s wrong?” asked Nine.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “We need to be extra careful here.”

“We always are, brother.”

“Nine? I think we need to take care of Hugo first. If he arrives before the others, let’s just get rid of him and be done with it. Leave his car in the parking area, and that will force the Samaans to search for him and us,” said Ghost.

“I can agree with that,” said Nine. “Gaspar? Are you good with that? I don’t think we need to waste our time on this asshole. Let’s just be done with him.”

“He’s mine,” said Trak.

“Trak,” started Gaspar.

“For what he did to Lydia, he is mine.” Nine and Gaspar nodded at him, watching as he walked off, Alvin by his side.

“Jake? Any sign of the others yet?” asked Gaspar.

“ Nothing yet, but we’re watching. You’ll know when we know. ”

“Then let’s get ready to welcome our Middle Eastern friends.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Hugo parked his vehicle and walked toward the small ticket booth. Inside was an elderly man who appeared to be Noah himself.

“Can I help you?” said Teddy.

“I’m Cassius Hugo. I believe you’re expecting me,” he said with an aristocratic tone. He looked around, not seeing anyone else. “Aren’t there other visitors today?”

“Oh, yeah, there will be lots of visitors today,” smiled Teddy. “It’s early yet. For now, you’ve got the park pretty much to yourself.”

“Good. That’s good,” he smiled.

“I need your hand.”

“My hand. Why?” frowned Hugo.

“We stamp everyone’s hand so they can go in and out, and we know that they’re supposed to be here. No stamp, no entrance,” said Teddy.

Hugo frowned at the old man and then stuck his hand through the small window. Teddy pressed the stamp against the back of his hand, probably harder than he needed to, but it was giving him great satisfaction.

“Did you need to press into my flesh?” frowned Hugo.

“Just doin’ my job, mister. Go on in and enjoy. It’ll be the time of your life.”

“I doubt that,” mumbled Hugo as he walked through the gates. He was immediately met by a group of flamingos who promptly shit at his feet. Cursing, he pushed them aside and then noticed several species of monkeys walking around.

“Do they not have fucking cages?” he growled.

“Oh, we have cages. But they’re for humans,” said the deep voice.

Hugo swung around, staring at a face that he recognized immediately. He shouldn’t be able to recognize that face. It wasn’t possible. He looked the same as he did decades ago during his interview.

“You! How? How is it possible you look like that? You’re the asshole that interviewed me and refused to move me forward. You and the crazy ass Indian!”

“That would be me,” said Trak.

Hugo whipped around, staring at the man. He shook his head, unsure of what he was seeing. Quickly, he gripped his weapon at his waist. Trak was faster, holding the man’s wrist and slicing his knife across the back of his fingers. Screaming, he dropped his weapon, staring at them.

“This isn’t possible! You two should not be alive.”

“Neither should you,” said Miller. “Don’t worry, Hugo. We’ll let the Samaan family know that you couldn’t make it.”

Hugo shook his head. He couldn’t believe it. How could they know about them? How was it possible that they knew about the Samaan family?

“Don’t look so shocked, Hugo. It is what we do, after all. Before we take you for a

walk, I do want to know why you were pushing that fucking piss water of yours. Moonshine? I mean, you could have bought a vineyard or built a brewery.”

“It wasn’t piss water. It was a lucrative business idea, and if it had been legal, I could have sold it for millions!” He was holding his bleeding hand against his abdomen, the blood dripping around his feet.

“Millions? You’ve lost your mind. Moonshine is only appealing to a small group of people,” said Miller. “You would have lost millions.”

“You’re a fool,” said Hugo. “Don’t you get it? I manufacture two types of moonshine. One for the public and another for my colleagues. A special brew that has additional ingredients to make people do as you say.” He gave an evil grin to Miller, and Trak stared at him for a moment, then slammed his fist into the side of his head. Hugo fell to the ground, cursing as he tried to get up.

“You don’t have the guts to kill me,” smirked Hugo, his ear now bleeding along with his hands.

“You seriously underestimate me and my friend,” said Miller. “I’m old now, Hugo. I don’t give a shit about fighting a man hand-to-hand unless he’s an honorable man. And you are not an honorable man. You don’t deserve to fight for your right to live. You deserve to die. Slowly, if possible, but it really doesn’t matter.”

“I see,” he said nervously. “So, it will be two against one. That’s very manly of you both.” Trak gave the tiniest evil smirk at the man.

“No. It will be one on one. I will only jump in if Alvin needs me.”

“Your name is Alvin?” he laughed, staring at Miller. Miller chuckled, shaking his head.

“No. My name is Pierre Alfonse Christopher Robicheaux. My friend is Joseph ‘Trak’ Redhawk. I don’t care if you know our real names. You can tell the fucking devil when you meet him.”

“Th-then who is Alvin?”

The hiss and Jurassic-like growl at his feet made him jump, and Alvin jumped at him, gripping one ankle in his mouth. Hugo screamed like a little girl, trying to kick Alvin off of him, only serving to embed his teeth into his leg even more.

“This is Alvin, and he is very hungry. He also has children to feed.” Trak patted the top of Alvin’s leathery head and nodded. “Take him away, Alvin.”

Most people don’t realize that alligators can move very quickly, and their bite force is exceptionally strong. Alvin moved toward the water, dragging Hugo’s body as he screamed. Pulling him into the bayou, Hugo’s head went above the water, then under as Alvin swam deeper and deeper into the swamp.

Miller grinned at Trak who had the slightest of grins on his face.

“That gave me great satisfaction.”

“I’m sure it did,” smirked Miller. “You can tell Lydia she won’t have to worry about him ever again.”

“We can all tell Lydia. Now, we must prepare for the Samaans. I don’t think they will be so easy to overcome.”

“They never are, brother. They never are,” said Miller, slapping his back as he walked toward the giraffes. “Trak? If I haven’t told you lately, I love being your partner, brother.”

Trak stopped and stared at Miller, giving a slight nod. He then gripped his shoulders, pulling him closer. He touched his forehead to Miller's and nodded.

“You are my brother. I'm honored to work with you.” As Trak walked away, Miller chuckled, shaking his head. In his earpiece, he heard the voice of Nine.

“He can speak when he wants to.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Hugo is not answering my calls,” said Ahmed Samaan to his cousins.

“Do not worry about him. Once this is done, we will kill him as well. He serves no purpose for us.”

The four cousins were seated toward the front of the oversized van. The other men they’d brought with them were huddled in the back. For decades, their fathers and grandfathers spoke of the men who had destroyed their plans, killed their people, and took back their hostages. Every grand plan they had was destroyed by a group of men that no one could find and no one could stop.

That would end today. They would destroy these men and bring justice to their families.

“I need to stop and urinate,” said one of the men in the back. Ahmed frowned at them but nodded. Up ahead, he spotted a store. There were not many people around, so it seemed a safe location to stop. As the men got out of the van, they entered the store.

“May we use your bathroom facilities?” asked the young man.

“Of course you can,” smiled Claudette. “It’s right over there.” He nodded at the woman, surprised at her pleasant demeanor.

“I’m hungry,” said one of the men, whispering to another. Claudette smiled, pulling out the platter of pralines she had below the counter.

“Oh, honey, we don’t let anyone go hungry around here. Try this. It’s a sweet, but it’s

delicious. Melt in your mouth,” she smiled.

He looked at one of his leaders, and the man gave a short nod. The men each took a piece of the delicious candy and smiled as they bit into it. It was much sweeter than what they were used to, but it was every bit as good as the woman claimed.

“It’s delicious. Thank you,” he smiled.

As the men left, Jake walked out and grinned at his wife.

“You’re becoming more like your mama every day,” he said, kissing her. “And I love you more for it.”

“Well, by the time they realize I put sleeping drops in them pralines, they’ll be staring at all those men, and animals, on the island. We’ll see how they react to that.”

“Did they all eat a piece?” asked Jake.

“No. Only about half of them, but it’s enough to give the boys a bigger edge than they already have.”

“They’re on their way, and Jake said about half of them took the candy,” said Gaspar. “My sister is a devious woman.”

“Get the animals ready,” said Nine, looking at Gabe. They weren’t sure how it happened or when it happened, but Gabe was almost as good with the animals as Irene was. Gabe looked at the other men and smiled.

“Don’t worry. The animals know what they will need to do.”

“What’s with that?” asked Antoine, pointing up at the strange hawk flying above

them.

“I’m not sure,” said Gabe, frowning at them. “He’s not part of the animal sanctuary, and, in fact, he’s not really indigenous to this area. He’s been flying above us for a while now.”

“Do you think he belongs to the Samaan family? I mean falconry, the use of hawks in hunting is a common practice in other countries,” said Ian.

“I just don’t know. I don’t get any feelings of evil or ill intent. I just don’t know why he’s here in this place now.”

Gaspar stared at his little brother, then looked at Miller, Antoine, and the others.

“Gabe? You get feelings from the animals now?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, Gaspar,” he smiled.

“I’m not worried. I mean, I am, but not about you, just for you.” He smiled at his younger brother and hugged him. “Everything done with Hugo?”

“Yep,” said Miller, Trak echoing the sentiment as he walked forward as well.

“Alvin took care of him. He is no longer an issue. His intentions were to sell some of the moonshine legally if it were legalized. But the rest he was going to sell with additives that would force the drinkers to do what they were told. Sick bastard,” frowned Miller.

“He was that,” said Nine. “Let’s get ready. They’ll be here soon.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

With the van parked, Ahmed tried to rouse all the men but was unsuccessful. It didn't take long for him to realize that those who ate the candy had been drugged. He would be sure to kill the woman before they left the island.

"Perhaps we underestimated them," said his cousin. He stared at him with a frown on his face. "If they knew to drug the candy, they knew we were coming, cousin. I don't think we should do this."

"We will do this! I will have revenge for my father!"

"Our fathers and grandfathers, uncles and cousins are dead," said the other man. "Perhaps revenge isn't what we should seek."

"I will not leave here without killing these men."

"You're not even sure what they look like. You could be killing innocent people," said his other cousin. "We vowed to no longer do that. Our mothers made us promise, and I do not want to shame my mother."

"Yet you are willing to shame your father by letting his death be in vain!" He was angry now, and his anger made them uncomfortable. They'd come a long way to assuage their anger, but along the way, a few of the men had begun to have second thoughts. Perhaps this wasn't the way.

Ahmed grabbed the weapons, slinging a rifle and a rocket launcher over his slight shoulders. The men still awake slowly grabbed their own weapons and followed him toward the small ticket hut.

Prepared to kill the ticket taker, they realized that it was abandoned. No one thought twice about it, passing the small box and entering the gates of the animal sanctuary.

“ Danger is com... Danger is here. Help them... move to...”

“Are you hearing this?” asked Marilisa to the others.

“I am,” said Stephanie, “but I can’t figure out where it’s coming from. We’re not on the same comms line as the men out at the island. What are we hearing?”

“I don’t know, but it’s strong, and I don’t recognize the voice. I think we have to warn them,” she said, whispering to the others.

“Marilisa, we can’t leave the Sugar Lodge,” said Katelyn. “We need to stay here. The men know what they’re doing.”

“No. I’m telling you there is something that they need to be warned about, and all the animals are in danger as well,” she said, pacing the space in front of them.

She looked around the room, seeing Brax, Saint, and the others seated at a table, talking. Saint had been avoiding her for the last few days, and she was pissed about that, but she didn’t care right now. She needed to warn the others on the island.

“Just tell them I went outside for fresh air,” she whispered.

“Marilisa,” hissed Victoria in a whisper. She turned, placing her fingers at her lips. Without a thought, she left the safety of the Sugar Lodge, hopped on an ATV, and headed toward the docks.

“This is going to end badly,” said Victoria, looking at the others.

“I could help her,” said Monroe.

“No! You’re still just a kid,” said Stephanie.

“I’m a genius kid. Someone is sending us a message through some sort of connection or subconscious mind communication. And the message is that they are in danger. Are we supposed to just sit here? They’re not going to believe us if we say it’s in our heads. Even I know that sounds crazy,” said the feisty teenager.

“It’s too dangerous,” said Katelyn. “We need to stay here. If the messages get louder or change, we’ll notify the others.”

Stephanie looked up to see Brax staring at her. It was as if he were hearing their entire conversation the way he stared at her. She couldn’t look away, and there was an overwhelming urge to run to him and tell him what was happening. But she also felt the need to allow Marilisa to help them.

“So, we all agree that we’ll wait a little while and see what Marilisa finds,” said Stephanie.

“Agreed,” they said to one another. Katelyn looked at them, shaking her head with uncertainty.

“We wait.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

As the Samaans entered the animal park, they paid very little attention to their surroundings. They saw the markers guiding them toward the giraffe exhibit where Hugo was supposed to meet them.

“I don’t see him,” said his cousin.

“He’s a coward. I’ll bet he doesn’t show. He wishes for us to do his dirty work and then take the credit and be paid for it. We will kill him when we are done.”

“That will be difficult. He’s already dead,” said the voice coming from the animal enclosure.

The men turned with weapons drawn, staring at a dozen men. Large, older men that looked battle-hardened and solid.

“I will kill you,” said Ahmed.

“I’m sure you think you will, son. But you won’t,” said Ghost.

“I am not your son.”

“No, because if you were, I’d turn you over my knee and beat the shit out of you,” said Gaspar. “Your fathers wouldn’t approve of this behavior. Neither would your grandfathers. They were terrorists, but at least they had the decency to speak with us as men. You squirmed your way onto our property with ill intent.”

“You own the animals? You own a zoo?” he frowned.

“Something like that,” nodded Ian. “You’re not even sure which of us met your fathers and grandfathers. You’re just willing to kill for the sake of hate.”

“You will die.”

“No,” said Nine, shaking his head. “You will.”

Marilisa ran across the land bridge, hoping to find the men and warn them. The warnings of danger were getting louder in her head, and she was feeling panicked as she looked up at the screeching hawk above her head.

She was so focused on the bird that she missed the man leaning against the ticket gate. Before she could evade him, he gripped her arm, pulling her toward his body. The tip of his blade was at her neck.

“Don’t move.”

Marilisa could only nod as the man walked her slowly into the animal sanctuary. She only hoped that one of the men would see her and help to save her life. She should have listened to the others and asked for help.

Who was going to believe them about the voices in their heads?

“I believe you,” said the voice.

Marilisa shook her head, and the voice said something to her that she didn’t understand. She heard the voice again.

“I believe you. Look up.”

She looked up at the hawk and couldn’t fathom that the bird was sending the message

to her. As she was shoved around the corner, the team turned, and all hell broke loose.

“Where is Marilisa?” asked Saint, staring at the others. They squirmed in their seats, looking at one another. “Where is Marilisa?”

“Sh-she kept hearing a voice. All of us are hearing a voice that there is danger near us,” said Monroe.

“Shit. Where did she go?” he asked again.

“She went to the island to warn the others,” said Katelyn. “I’m sorry. We asked her not to go, but she said she had to. The voice is really loud.”

“Fuck!”

As Saint ran out the door, Pax asked the group what happened and what was said. Before they could even finish their explanation, the others were running out of the Sugar Lodge, and Pax was tapping into comms to warn the men on the island.

All they heard was the sound of Code’s voice.

“They have her. Someone has her.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

Seeing Marilisa in the arms of the terrorist made the others flinch just enough that it gave Samaan and his men the opportunity to have their weapons pointed directly at them. But the chaos that ensued wasn't gunfire or rockets.

It wasn't normal.

The rush of wind, dirt, and water swirled around the man with the rocket launcher, lifting his body and tossing it into the swamp. Clearly unable to swim, he sank below the dark waters, lost to all.

Flashes of light caused them all to stare at the men, wondering what the hell was happening. Gaspar turned to Gabe, his brother shrugging his shoulders. When the man tightened his grip on Marilisa and the knife at her neck, he tapped comms.

"Kill that motherfucker!" Before the bullet could be fired, the rush of wind and flash of color flew by them, Marilisa disappearing in a whirl of strange sounds and wind.

"What the hell was that?" asked Ghost.

"I don't know," whispered Nine, staring at the last Samaan cousin standing. The man was in shock, wondering if the men were witches.

"Put your weapon down," said Gaspar.

"N-no. You are evil," he said. He held up the knife in one hand and his handgun in the other.

“I don’t want to shoot you,” said Gaspar.

The man shook his head, raising the weapons higher. Just as Gaspar was about to say something, the metal in the man’s hand began turning red hot. He stared at it a moment, then slowly screamed as the metal melted in his hand, burning his limbs.

With the Samaans all dead, their men dead or knocked out in the van, the Gray Wolf men stared at one another as they slowly walked out of their hiding spots.

“I didn’t get to hurt anyone,” said Tailor with a frown. He turned to see Marilisa being carried by a strange man and smiled. “Boy, you better put that little girl down, or I will hurt you.”

The man smiled, shaking his head.

“A thank you might be nice,” he said, setting the girl on her feet. Tailor frowned at him, then looked at the others.

“Ghost? Master Chief Stanton? Is that you, sir?” said a man, walking toward them. There were more than two dozen people behind him looking tired, dirty, and afraid. Ghost stared at the man.

He was big, easily six-three or -four. His shoulders were wide, and his face showed signs of scars from something. Ghost tilted his head, looking at the man.

“Ghost? Do you know this man?” asked Gaspar.

“I do. I think. I saved you in the sandbox a lifetime ago,” said Ghost. The man smiled, nodding.

“Yes, sir. You did. I’m forever grateful for that. I never got to thank you properly, so

I hope you'll take all of this as my thank you. Our thank you."

"Kane. Kane Jackson," said Ghost.

"Yes, sir. That's it."

"Son, you need to explain this to us," said Nine. "Men flying through the air into the water, metal melting in a man's hands, and what the hell was that man flying in to save Marilisa."

"You're one of us," whispered Marilisa. The group all turned, staring at the girl. "They're like us. Different but like us."

"I think we need to meet about this. With Mama and Pops," said Gaspar. Gabriel walked toward the group and smiled, reaching out to shake their hands.

"They mean no harm, Gaspar. Marilisa is right. They are like our little geniuses only different in some ways. There are a lot of you."

"There are," nodded Kane. "This is my wife Aislinn. That's Flip and his wife, Nat. Dr. Adam Thorn and his wife, Fiona."

"Him," said Marilisa, pointing to a man. The man smiled at her, nodding. "He was the one sending the message. How?"

"Why don't I tell you everything later," said Kane. "I'm just asking for a safe place to lay our heads and maybe some food, Ghost. We've been on the run for a while now, and there are men chasing us. If what the girl says is right, and she's like us, they'll be after her as well."

"Let's go," nodded Ghost. "I'm sure we can round up some food for everyone,

showers, and places to live.” Gaspar looked at Gabe, who was smiling ear to ear.

“The thirty extra cabins on the island. Know anything about that, Gabe?”

“Maybe,” he laughed. “It’s always fun getting the best of you, mon frère.”

“Asshole. Let’s go, people. We need some answers to what we just witnessed. On a property where the unusual happens all the time, you just blew my fucking mind.”

As they walked toward the docks and the boats waiting there, the team from VG was standing on the land bridge. Saint pushed through, glaring at Marilisa.

“Saint, I...”

“Don’t. Fucking stupid, childish move. Stupid!” he said, yelling into her face. Saint never saw it coming. She reared back her hand and slapped him so hard he fell backwards into the arms of Brax.

“One day, you will realize I am neither stupid nor childish, Saint. I only hope I’m still here when you do.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:05 am

“Well, we have the Samaan problem handled. The Hugo problem is gone. Now we have all these people needing shelter, and I have no idea who they are,” said Gaspar to Ian and the others. They were watching them eat as if they hadn’t eaten in days. They were dirty, desperately needing clean clothing and showers.

“I need you to trust me in this, brother. I saved that man, and for good reason. There was something about him I couldn’t put my finger on, but he was never wrong about whether a tango was lying or telling the truth. He knew with just a touch if someone was good or evil.”

“Alright. Let’s see what they have to say.”

Irene, Matthew, and Gabriel stood to the side of the cafeteria, watching the chaotic scene of their medical personnel helping the group of individuals. Riley was speaking with the doctor of the group, Adam, looking utterly confused.

“They should be here,” said Matthew.

“They are here,” said Gabriel. “We got them here.”

“I know, I know,” he nodded. “I just don’t want your brother to act too quickly. These folks are different and might scare others. They’ll also open a web of craziness for our own little geniuses. It could be rough around here for a while.”

“When is it not, Pops?” smirked Gabe.

“I’ll get the children clean clothes,” said Irene. “We’ll take them all to the pond later.

Anything urgent the medical team can take care of.”

“The craziness continues,” smiled Gabe. “I think I’m enjoying this more than I thought.”

“Yes, but that could end tragically,” said Matthew, nodding toward Marilisa, who was speaking to her rescuer. In the corner of the cafeteria, with a definite handprint on his face, Saint frowned at her table, looking as if he were going to set it on fire.

“He’ll learn, or he’ll be miserable,” said Irene. “Either way, we’ll be here for all of them.” Matthew kissed his wife, nodding.

“We always are, my love. We always are.”

EXCERPT from STRANGER GIFTS

Aislinn heard the familiar beeping of the heart monitor attached to her body. Her head was heavy and thick with a drug-induced fog. Her limbs were weak, tingling from the awakening and something inexplicable in the room.

This wasn't her first rodeo. And no doubt, it wouldn't be her last. She tried to remember the events of the past few hours. The coffee. The coffee that had ruined her sweater, a sweater she loved. Then she saw Willy, and he let her through. Then, then it was the elevator. She remembered being at work and setting her things down. Then Mr. Lewis walked up to her cubicle.

Oh God! I cursed him out! I'm going to be unemployed.

"You won't lose your job," said the rich, velvety voice. Aislinn wondered if it was her imagination or real. She tried to open her eyes, but the heaviness prohibited even one eyelash from moving. "Don't even try. The doctor said it would be a while before you could probably open your eyes."

"I- who are you?" she asked in a cracking voice.

"We don't really know each other. Although, I did lie and tell them I was your boyfriend," he said, grinning. He knew it was stupid. She couldn't see his grin, see the face that might make her turn away and scream in horror or laugh.

"Y-you told them. Why?" she asked again, her lashes fluttering with another attempt at opening them.

“They wouldn’t have let me in otherwise.” He said it so matter-of-factly she almost didn’t question him.

“But, I don’t know you,” she said quietly.

“How do you know? You haven’t opened your eyes yet,” he said, smiling down at her.

“I-I know. I know I would recognize your voice.”

He couldn’t argue with that logic. She most likely would have recognized his voice. It was definitely distinguishable from others. The raspy velvet undertones hadn’t always been there. His new voice was courtesy of a Taliban leader.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” he said apologetically. “I’m Kane Jackson. I was passing by your office building when they were taking you out. I’m not sure why I followed, but something told me I should. I promise I’m not a psycho or a stalker.”

“So, you just decided to come along for the ride?” she asked.

“Something like that,” he said quietly.

Aislinn felt the last of the pain slip away and knew it would be okay for her to open her eyes now.

“Is the light out?” she asked.

“Yes, I thought it might be easier for you,” he said quietly. His face was something most women needed to get used to gradually. He stepped back a few steps from the bed and watched as she carefully let her eyes flutter open. He knew that she was trying to focus, trying to see his image.

“Hello,” she said quietly in the sweetest voice he’d ever heard. His breath caught in his chest, and his stomach flipped.

“Hello.”

“Can you step closer for me?” she asked.

He was hesitant, wary, and she wanted to know why. He took a small step forward, and she saw his size more clearly. He was dressed in dark jeans and a sweatshirt. His hair was shoulder-length, rich shades of wavy brown tresses kissing the broad muscles tight beneath the sweatshirt.

“Closer.”

He took another tentative step closer. She looked directly at him, directly into his face, and he held his breath. Waiting with bated breath, he prepared himself for the inevitable gasp.

“Thank you. You said your name is Kane? Do we know one another?” she asked calmly. His eyes went wide with shock. She showed no reaction at all, no signs of disgust or fear.

“Y-yes, my name is Kane. No, we don’t know one another. As I said, I saw you coming out of that building and just felt like maybe you could use someone by your side.”

“I see. And you’re used to rescuing damsels in distress?” she said with a small grin.

“Not hardly.” His lips were tight, and he watched her face. She was joking with him, actually joking with him.

“Well, I do appreciate you being here,” she said, trying to sit up. She pushed the

button on the bed and raised the head, her body now upright and woozy. She waited to gain her equilibrium. “I need to leave now.”

“You can’t leave,” he said calmly.

“Why not?”

“The doctors are doing a bunch of tests on you. They said you would most likely be here at least twenty-four hours, if not more.”

“I don’t need a bunch of tests. I know what it was. It was a headache. A bad one.”

“Lady...”

“Aislinn,” she countered.

“Aislinn, that’s beautiful. Aislinn, I’ve seen my fair share of headaches, had a few of my own,” he said, rubbing the side of his face, “but I’ve never seen a headache that caused so much pain.”

“Mine are, unusual. But I’ve had them since I was a little girl. Believe me. There is nothing that anyone can do for them.”

Aislinn pushed up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The glass partitions that separated her from the other emergency room patients were slightly ajar. She looked out at the nurses’ station. The back of a tall doctor leaned over the desk made her suddenly sit up straight. As he turned, she could see his profile clearly and knew that her vision was real.

“What’s wrong? Are you in pain? Should I call the doctor?” asked Kane.

“I need you to get me out of here. It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Life and-look, Aislinn, I think you need help,” he said, shaking his head.

“No, you look, Kane. I don’t know you, and you don’t know me, but I promise you this is a matter of life and death. I need to get out of here.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, raising his hands in self-defense. “But I need more context.”

“More context? You don’t need more context. You can’t help me. I just need to get out of here. Can you help me do that? Can you help me get home?”

“I can do that, but you need to give me an explanation, and then I can help you,” he said firmly.

Kane recognized fear when he saw it, and something had spooked Aislinn. He wasn’t sure what, but he knew that something put fear in her eyes, and he desperately wanted to be the man to remove it.

Aislinn eyed the tall, dark man. At five-foot-five, she was average. Her curves were athletic and firm but still curves. Some men liked them. Some didn’t. It didn’t matter to her. A relationship would never be in the cards for Aislinn. Her eyes traveled up his body. He was well over six feet, his defined muscles etched beneath the tight-fitting sweatshirt. His brown hair was shaggy and still wet from the rain, touched his shoulders, the green of his eyes stared into her soul.

Aislinn let her eyes follow the scars along his face. Ugly, raised scars that appeared to be burns from his cheekbone to his neckline and below the sweatshirt.

“Tell me something honest and real about yourself. And don’t lie,” she said, “I’ll know.”

“I never lie.” He crossed his arms, flexing purposefully. “I was in the Army for almost twenty years.” He stared at her, his arms folded, waiting for her response. He

watched her eyeing his scars and knew she was curious.

“Thank you for that.” She started to stand and reach for her clothes, but he grabbed the stack of damp garments and held them out of reach.

“Not so fast. Something honest about you.” Aislinn eyed the man again, her rich brown eyes penetrating his own.

“Fine, but remember you asked,” she said, taking a deep breath. She wasn’t sure why she was willing to risk everything to tell this man, but she knew in her heart it was the right thing to do. Her only prayer was that he wouldn’t judge her, or worse, he wouldn’t call for the doctors. “My headaches aren’t just headaches. They’re visions. Visions of murder, and that doctor out there is going to murder someone tonight.”