

BRAVO SERIES



DESEVILLE:

VISION

L. ANN MARIE



BADASSES

BSC BOOK 22

Luke Rayne: Vision

FBI/BSC Training Center

BSC West Book 22

By

L. Ann Marie

Continuation from Harky: Elite BSC book 21

Luke Rayne is the Commander of the FBI/Badass Training Center who is just waiting for his ol' lady to show.

When Ember Faye falls into his world, everyone's lives change. Clarity and vision are what she seems to bring with her, along with new challenges, names, ancestors, a voice, dog and we can't forget the cupcakes.

Freaky just got freakier!

BSC SERIES Books. Best read in order.

Master's Rise

Benga's Rise

Ranger's Rise

Jack: Honor

Falcon: Respect

Mag: Loyalty

Allegory

Endue

Conform

Justice: Tenacity

Ford's Rise

Driver: Grit

Christiansen: City Boy

Nova: Cred

Blackhawk: Heat

Cooper: Gunslinger

Teller: Connect

Maverick: Insight

Spano: Foresight

Marks: Enforce

Harky: Elite

Luke Rayne: Vision

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Cast of Characters

Full (printable) character lists are on the **Book Info Page** at <https://lanmarie.com/book-info>

Cort Masters - President of Phoenix Rising (*PR*), President of Phoenix Badass Security Council (BSC West)
Raid - VP of Phoenix Rising
Ranger - SAA of Phoenix Rising
Web - Head IT for BSC West, Phoenix Rising
Banks - Stockbroker, invests for the Phoenix Rising and affiliates (*AR*)
Amos - Accountant, manages money for Phoenix Rising
Falcon Beckett - President of Bravo Rising (*BR*)
Jack Decker - VP of Bravo Rising
Mag Bailey - SAA of Bravo Rising
Justice LaPonte-James-Lightfoot - President of Protector Department of BSC, 2nd to Cort in BSC West (*BR*)
Teller Knight - Training Officer Bravo, VP to Justice, Bravo Protectors
Tats - Protector Lead, New Officer (*BR*) *Alder's Security*
Boulder - Protector Alpha-Bit Security (*BR*)
Trask McCabe - President of Champion Rising (*CR*)
Beacon - SAA of Champion Rising (*CR*)
Jinx Solaita - Pres of Veritable Rising, BSC West (*VR*)
Kyler - Protector VP of Veritable Rising (*VR*)
Jeti Callahan - SAA Veritable Rising (*VR*)
Major Christiansen - MC Colorado former President
Brekan Greywolf - President of MC Badass Colorado
Spook Reno - VP MC Badass Colorado (relocating)
Jordan Driver - President of Alpha Rising (*AR*)
Brinks Solaita - VP of Alpha Rising (*AR*)
Slade Nova - SAA (*AR*)
Kristos Christiansen - President of Honor Rising (*HR*)
Mase Blackhawk - VP of Honor Rising, former Prince (*HR*)
Seth - SAA of Honor Rising, former Prince (*HR*)
Lawson Cooper - President of Elan Rising (*ER*)
Cayden Callahan - VP of Elan Rising (*ER*)
Cecil - SAA of Elan Rising (*ER*)
Maverick - President of Delta Rising (*DR*)
Finn - VP of Delta Rising (*DR*)
Stan - SAA of Delta Rising (*DR*)
Spano - President of Sentinel Rising (*SR*)
Nash Blackhawk - VP of Sentinel Rising (*SR*)
Angel - SAA of Sentinel Rising (*SR*)
Texas, Scott Jonas - President of Rising²
Cliff Marks - VP of Rising², ex FBI
Jase Kalmin - SAA of Rising²
Harky - Elite Head, Officer

FBI/Badass Training Center Cast:

Luke Rayne DeSeville - *Badass Commanding Officer, Justice League crew member, former SEAL*
Hampton Ford - FBI Commander, EROP Commander, former SEAL
Cadieux - Second to Ford at Training Center

Meehan - Ops Control FBI, former Green Beret Commander
Vent - Manager for FBI/Badass Training Center Badass Club bar
Owen - Protector FBI training
Vane - Security Lead for Maiyun's teams
Kelly - Security Lead, second to Vane
Tate - Flight Crew Lead
Lara- Club chick
Kim - Club chick

Prospects:

Animal

Other cast members

Jake and Sam DeSeville - Luke Rayne's mom and Dad
Joshua DeSeville - Luke Rayne's brother
Rayne DeFario - MC Baxter former SEAL (Luke Rayne's namesake)
Ember Faye - Maiyun Whitewater, Navajo, worked for CIA
Mary - PA borrowed from Honor
Cage - Bravo Security Brother
Reggie - physical therapist
Keg - Protector Phoenix Rising
Crow - MC Badass, Native, Mason, deceased
Lang - Prospect on ABSZ

Ol' ladies/Old ladies

Addison Berry - Media Rep for BSC, Spano's ol' lady
Jane Meadows - Austen's mom, Cooper's ol' lady
Stella Jackson - Protector, ol' lady of Jordan and Brinks, former Prince (*AR*)
Hannah McCabe - IT Head, ol' lady to Trask, former Prince, (*CR*)
Alexia - Web's ol' lady, ex-FBI, ABSZ IT Lead, Trainer for BSC West
Seren - Cort's ol' lady, Mom to Caelan, trainer (*PR*)
Freedom - Ranger's ol' lady, Trainer/ Enforcer (*PR*)
Leya - Mag's ol' lady, Chocolatier, Ice cream shop owner (*BR*)
AJ - Jack's ol' lady, Mag's sister, Head of IT for Club (*BR*)
Faith - D'Ability house Director, Beacon's ol' lady, Dreng's mom (*CR*)
Carmen LJJ - Justice's old lady, Cytogenetic tech for Alder
Télia Ford - Ford's wife, the Ford brothers' sister-in-law. Saber sibling
Natalia Kensington - Kristos' ol' lady, Head of Technology (*HR*)
Kateri Todachine - Graphic designer, old lady to Mase Blackhawk (*HR*)
Mikey- Prince Lead Protector, Nova's ol' lady, daughter of Cade (*AR*)
Harper Greywolf - Doctor MC Badass Colorado, Brekan's ol' lady
Chenoa Knight - Teller's old Lady, BR Doctor Loyalty clinic (*BR*)
Ginny (Thunderhawk) Marks - Marks ol' lady, Protector, Hemy's daughter (*R²*)
Piper (Lane) Harky - Harky's ol' lady, Dog Trainer

Kids

Dreng - Doug, adopted son of Beacon, Faith
Stephan - Tide's son
Daniel - Raid and Lorelei's son
Tyson - Mag and Leya's son
Amell & Brynn - Mag and Leya's Alpha-Bit boys
Caelan - Cort and Seren's son
Chenzo - Jack and AJ's son
Cove Blackhawk - Hannah and Trask's son
Beck Qunhôtûq - Hannah and Trask's son
Austen Meadows - Jane's daughter

Twins unnamed for Kristos and Natalia
Boy unnamed for Doc Sawbones
Wimonáya - Justice and Carmen, truth
Mihikiku - Justice and Carmen, strength
Nayawi - Chenoa and Teller, freedom
Tátupiyu - Chenoa and Teller, equal
Ayakuhsak - Kateri and Mase, stars
Bert (Bertie) Callahan-Knight - Phoenix and Billy
Ernie Callahan-Knight - Phoenix and Billy
Wápáyu - Kateri and Mase, wind
Ôkatuq - Kateri and Mase, cloud
Kisuq - Kateri and Mase, sky
~
Michael - Web's twin, brother to Ford and Garren
Garren - Michael and Web's older brother, Hamp Ford's twin
Parker Nova - Nova's brother (*AR*)

Doctors

Alder Ford - President of the Alpha-Bits (*BSC*)
Doc - Doctor (*PR*)
Statler - Doctor (*HR*)
Bean - PA (*AR*)
Bones - Doctor (*BR*)
Cannon - Doctor (*ER*)
Chop - Doctor (*CR*)
Patcher - EMT, PA (*PR*)
Chenoa Knight (Blackwater) - Doctor (*BR*)
Ren - Doctor (*DR*)
Jim - Doctor (*SR*)
Harper Graywolf - Doctor (*MC*)
Sawbones - Doctor (*R²*)

Badass FBI Training Center

Hampton Ford - Commander FBI
Luke Rayne DeSeville - Commander Badass
Tucker Brighton – Badass

From BSC East Clubs

Ben Knight - President of Territories for the Brotherhood of Badass Bikers, (aka MC Badass) Princes of Prophecy and Badass Security Council (aka BSC)
Ricky Callahan - VP of Territories for the BSC, VP of Mass MC Badass and second for Badass Security Council (aka BSC)
Darren LaPonte-James - VP of Princes of Prophecy
Aaron LaPonte-James – President of MC Virginia
Kaleb Baxter – US Senator
Eliza LaPonte-James - Officer, Enforcer, Darren's old lady, Princes of Prophecy
Elizabeth Callahan - MC Mass, Ricky's old lady, Knight's daughter
Jess Knight - Steve Knight's old lady, Ben and Elizabeth's mom
Dakota Lightfoot - Member of Princes of Prophecy, BSC, pilot, Prophet
Jessie LaPonte-James - Member of Princes of Prophecy
Aiyana Baxter - Princes of Prophecy Protector, Doctor, Shaman
Jeremy Blackhawk - MC, Princes of Prophecy and Protectors
Jacob Blackhawk - Princes of Prophecy and Protectors, BSC
Christian Blackhawk - MC, Princes of Prophecy Protector
Brantley Blackhawk - IT Head BSC, Princes of Prophecy
Taylor Blackhawk - Princes of Prophecy
Beth Blackhawk - Taylor's old lady, nurse
Jess Baxter-LaPonte-James-Lightfoot - Old lady to Jessie, Dakota, mom to Justice, Aquyà, Destiny

Sheila Jackson - Enforcer, Princes of Prophecy

Jax Jackson - Princes of Prophecy

The Stooges - Steve Knight, Danny LaPonte, Tiny Callahan, *Pres Ben James (honorary)

BSC Protector Crew from Princes of Prophecy

Justice LaPonte-James-Lightfoot, Teller Knight, Mucimi Blackhawk -Bravo Rising

Luke Rayne DeSeville, Jetti Callahan, Tucker Brighton - BSC Training in Nevada.

Hannah Blackhawk (McCabe) - Champion Rising

Cayden Callahan, Lukas Callahan - Elan Rising.

Mase Blackhawk, Seth Baxter-LaPonte-James - Honor Rising

Stella Jackson-Driver-Solaita, Kyler Moniz, Aylene Knight, Mikey Nova, Axe LaPonte-James - Alpha Rising.

Lisa Baxter-Martel - Phoenix Rising

Chris Blackhawk - VP of MC Badass Colorado

Ari, Adrian - Delta Rising

Nash Blackhawk, JC Blackhawk - Sentinel Rising

BSC East Protectors

Phoenix, Aquyá (FBI), Honor, Destiny, Joshua, Blake, Chance, Putam, Keesog, Riley

Virginia Badass

Andrew, Brandon, Heath, Zel, Tekah, Luna, Zeke, Oliver, Kutomá, Case

MC Mass

Harley, Colt, Mitchy, Indie, Brenna, Blaze, Sandy, Shona, Ally

Alpha-Bits: *(full list on my website Book Info page)*

Officers - Akai, Alta, Amal, Aris, Allen, Aaron, Alder, Asa, Anton, Brody, Brann

FBI/Badass Training Bits

Wavan

Les

Nasr

Ezra

BSC West Clubs

Phoenix Rising and Affiliates:

Cort Masters President of Phoenix Rising, President of Badass Security Council West

Raid Benga VP of Phoenix Rising

Ranger Ross SAA of Phoenix Rising

Web IT Head of BSC West Clubs

Trask McCabe President of Champion Rising

Beacon SAA of Champion Rising

Lawson Cooper President of Elan Rising

Cayden Callahan VP of Elan Rising

Cecil SAA of Elan Rising

Falcon Beckett President of Bravo Rising

Jack Decker VP of Bravo Rising

Mag Bailey SAA of Bravo Rising

Justice LaPonte-James-Lightfoot President of the BSC Protectors with ability - BSC 2nd to Cort

Alder President of Alpha-Bits, BSC 2nd to Cort

Asa, Akai VPs of Alpha-Bits

Amal SAA of Alpha-Bits

Texas President of Rising²

Marks VP of Rising²

Jase SAA of Rising²

Harky President of Elite at Rising²

Spano President of Sentinel Rising

Nash VP of Sentinel Rising

Angel SAA of Sentinel Rising

Kristos Christiansen President of Honor Rising

Mase Blackhawk VP of Honor Rising

Seth Baxter-LaPonte-James SAA of Honor Rising

Jinx Solaita President of Veritable Rising

Kyler Moniz VP of Veritable Rising

Jeti Callahan SAA of Veritable Rising

Aylen Knight President of Zion Rising

Mike Walker VP of Zion Rising

Ajhil Stratton SAA of Zion Rising

MC Badass Colorado and Affiliates

Brekan Graywolf President of MC Badass Colorado

Spook Reno VP of MC Badass Colorado

Pauly SAA of MC Badass Colorado

Jordan Driver President of Alpha Rising
Brinks Solaita VP of Alpha Rising
Nova SAA of Alpha Rising

Maverick President of Delta Rising
Finn VP of Delta Rising
Stan SAA of Delta Rising

FYI

Reminder: Luke Rayne is an ex-SEAL satellite who worked Ops in Mass for VP (Steve Knight) then, Ricky Callahan. He was moved to the Princes of Prophecy for Justice's crew. This was by request from Justice and Teller when they were teens.

Mase and Tucker were added with Luke Rayne so their balance of three was kept. While younger than Mase, he's older than Tucker and all have reader ability.

Luke Rayne has abilities that are not seen or talked about, which is just how he likes it. Ability kids are scrutinized by everyone and Luke Rayne has never felt the need to be the center of anyone's attention.

Luke Rayne's mom, Doc Samantha, dad, Jake and brother, Joshua, have homes on the Baxters' Compound in Mass. Joshua is two years younger and works for Baxter's International (Zack's old job).

Luke Rayne is the Commander for Badass and Hamp Ford the Commander for the FBI at the FBI/Badass Training Center. While older than all but Mase in his crew and an Officer for MC Badass, Luke Rayne regularly spends time with his crew and watches out for all the women Brothers, especially Kateri Blackhawk as he is her shield.

Table of Contents

[Luke Rayne: Vision](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[BSC West Clubs](#)

[FYI](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Author contact links](#)

[Other books by L. Ann Marie](#)

[Reading Order](#)

Prologue

Luke Rayne

Tucker is on a roll so I let him finish while checking the trainee's numbers. "Brother, the knucklehead is a dick. He's asking to transfer to Veritable so he'd have a better chance at Jeti. Jinx will kill him and Kyler will drag him all the way to Cort in a dish. Either way he's a dead man walking. Ricky and Elizabeth are down at the end of next week. Elizabeth will go berserk on the dick and probably pin him to the top of the roof, standing on one foot." He says it like I haven't been listening to his whole rant.

With a quick look up, I see he's done. "He's FBI. No Club is taking him. Cort and Prez need a nod from me before they take anyone from here. I finished the list earlier. Give his name to Lisa to add him to the highlighted on the list and we'll get a call before he gets into Badass for why he's a no from here. His numbers are good enough so he could make it by the readers if they're busy and they will be, Cort's expanding again."

He smiles. "The Brother is crazier than Prez with the *what's next* shit. I gotta tell ya, Brother, I love Cort. He's not all in our shit." He makes it sound like everyone else was.

I shake my head at him. "When were Prez or any of the 'rents all in our shit? If anything, the grands took up that position."

Seeing his eyebrows smooth out, I know he got it. "Yeah, Prez let Justice run the crew his way. Getting it from Cort is different. He trusts Justice without question and didn't see him grow up. They didn't know us at all and had no clue about abilities."

I nod thinking he isn't wrong but he's missing the lessons that Cort never missed. "Trust in your Brothers and Badass was big with Crow. It's hard to see because we never met the Indian-Mason Brother, but from the holograms, we see Reed giving Caelan those same lessons. We got them the same way, my dad and yours never missed the opportunity to drill it in from when we were in diapers, just like Cort's doing. Cort trusted Justice from the minute he met him. Falcon too. Cort showing Badass shouldn't be a surprise for you. It wasn't a surprise for the three, Mase, Hannah or me. Hell, even Axe and Nash." I think of the crew that's growing daily. I know Justice said all Protectors from all Clubs but a shitload are trying to get closer to Justice and Teller. The Brother has all he can handle right now and keep doing his job. Another three will have him running flat out again.

Tucker nods, causing me to whip a pen at his head. "Get the fuck out of my head."

With a laugh he catches the pen easily and turns toward the door. "Someone is close. I didn't pull blocks."

That's got me opening my mind for who is close. "Fuck, dad's here, yours too." I close the new trainee board knowing I'm not finishing before the meet that was supposed to be virtual.

Tucker turns back to me. "He wouldn't..."

The door opens and Prez is the first I see coming in, then Cort, the Director, my dad and Digs. I

stand at attention automatically. "Prez, Cort, Dad, Brother, Director."

Prez smiles. "Relax, Luke Rayne, I was blocking so I could catch you relaxed for once."

My dad goes right around Prez and Cort to hug me. "Thanks, Prez, but women, officers and elders would always get the respect I want to see reciprocated. That's a Badass lesson not military."

My dad steps back hitting my shoulder. "Glad it's one you live by. You look great, Luke Rayne."

"I do live by it and thanks. Are any of you ever going to get old so I can?"

They all laugh. "Never," Digs says, stepping back from Tucker and throws me chin.

I throw it back.

"Ford said you have some men you don't want putting apps in at Badass." Cort isn't into social time today.

"Yeah, Tucker just brought me a definite no. He was sending it to Lisa for the reject list to highlight." I put my arm out indicating the conference table and they sit while I get the files on my desk. I went through them earlier so I know it's in the stack.

"You don't keep it on the computer?" Cort asks.

Tucker pulls his tablet out. "FBI part of training keeps paper. We use the Club apps for our forms. I don't do paper, but Luke Rayne prints the sheets that get filed and never seen."

I smile, sitting. "It's the way they do it, Brother. It takes no time to print and makes someone happy we followed procedure. Ford does the same thing."

Director Saber shakes his head. "I don't want the paper. I'll have Aquyà go over that so you're not wasting paper, ink or time."

Nodding, I pull the file. "Thanks. It's not a problem but it's definitely wasteful. This is our reject file." I slide the file with one sheet in it over. "Tucker, tag the trainee you want highlighted."

His head whips up from his screen. "You had him?"

I nod, distracted because I feel more close. "Justice and Mucimi are here?"

"Justice, Mucimi, Rayne and Dakota. You're all stronger. I was blocking that so you wouldn't be distracted," Prez says, sliding the paper to Tucker.

"Feeling them close isn't a distraction, Prez, but thanks." For me, it's more of a connection than distraction. The surprise and having to hunt for who it is, is a distraction.

When Tucker slides the page down to Prez, who slides it down to the Director, I'm surprised and send a warning to Tucker. *Attention.* I don't want him commenting unless he's asked a question.

"If we aren't taking them, Saber doesn't want them." Cort answers what I'd never ask.

I throw him chin. "The name Tucker added is making a play for Jeti. It was all I could do not to shoot the fuck for what he was thinking."

Cort pulls his phone while leaning closer to the Director to see the name Tucker circled. "You have the rejects from the Training Center?" He pauses, then goes on. "Number twelve is highlighted. Yeah, that's him. Make sure SAA's get the highlighted. Dickass is a threat to Jeti. Add my name on it. Thanks, Brother." He closes his phone and reads when the Director slides the page over.

Prez and my dad hide surprise. "Thoughts of rape would have him dead." My dad tries.

I shake my head. "FBI doesn't kill for thoughts. He's aggressive with those thoughts of Jeti, so I'd have killed him, but I don't get that long-range vision. I did send it to Justice so he could see the trainee on Friday. They're out Saturday."

“*Jesus, Maldito, Cristo.* You do realize I’m sitting here?” Director Saber makes me smile his way seeing the amusement in his mind.

“I didn’t kill him because it’s not in your FBI policy. If I see him at a Club, he’s fair game.”

Director Saber shakes his head but he’s still amused and I see he’s got no problem with it. He knows Badass and isn’t fazed by our killing men for rape, so I wait, wondering why they’re all here.

“Do you have the list for BSC East and West?” Prez asks knowing exactly what I’m thinking.

“Yeah, Tucker, take my class, it’s Officer and they’re testing.”

Tucker is up. “On it, Commander.” *Show them on the boards.* He throws walking out.

Hiding a smile, I throw the board up on the screen. “East and West separated. I sent them about twenty minutes ago. Harky was right with Ken, he’s better than good and requested Rising². He wants a dog in an Ops Club. He’d be a good Lead Protector for any Ops but needs a good Control. He didn’t get managed by anyone but his Lead.”

I highlight Ken on the board. My dad laughs. I shrug. “Elders and Officers know my abilities.”

The Director smiles at me. “I don’t.”

I shrug. “It’s not talked about but I don’t have a problem showing you. You’re an Officer that earned the respect.”

He nods with approval. “I’m honored to be there and feel the same, Luke Rayne. I can tell you, Ford has nothing but respect and good to say about you.”

I’m honored and throw him chin.

Cort leans closer to the Director. “VADM loves him. Ford was off when we came down. Between the dogs and Luke Rayne here, I think he’d have given you whatever the hell you asked for, Brother.”

Prez smiles watching the Director. “He calls everyone Brother. It’s a show of respect.”

Cort looks from Prez to the Director. “You want me to call you Director? You’re young too.” He shakes his head dismissing the idea.

Director Saber smiles. “Saber or Rafael, but Brother has never bothered me. It was VADM that threw me.”

I look down fast. Fuck, he’s a funny Brother.

“Vice Admiral Deputy whatever is too fucking long. The guy is like five-foot tall with a seven-foot name. VADM works and Kaleb said he was cool about it.” Cort doesn’t think much about military titles.

I can’t say he’s wrong so I watch my dad and Digs laugh.

Prez just shrugs. He agrees with Cort but keeps us going. “So I have sixteen from this class?”

“Yeah, Prez. Cort has the majority but they requested certain Clubs. Four changed to Aaron just this morning. Wecks is a draw for two, the others met Kaleb.” The full training class is eighty but this is a military class so procedure for Badass and FBI get into the fifty before they’re sent out. Mostly it’s background on Badass, FBI, matching fit for a Club or Ops unit and retraining to shoot with laser.

He shakes his head. “Fuckin’ Brothers. Aaron has his pick down there.”

“Marks said more in Virginia are going to you and Cort. I think you get nine from that class, Phoenix Rising will get thirteen. He’s running forty in the military class. The majority in Virginia are going FBI.”

The Director looks younger with the smile. “Finally, I’ll get some men to work with. Aquyà has

that list?”

Aquyà shows in the chair on the side of the Director. “I got them all, Boss.” He puts a tablet down with the list from Virginia’s new center showing over it. “We have the eleven you wanted from Quantico set for training with Hemy after a week off. That’s his next class. I marked the men from the Badass reject board.”

The Director nods, scrolling down the list. “Don’t take the rejects. Border patrol will take them. This will help. We need Ops controls but this gets us more to build teams around. The commanders aren’t on this?”

Aquyà hits the tablet and a new page shows. “Three. Badass isn’t taking them. Adroit got two, one of those signed as a trainer.”

Cort leans closer to the board. “You wanted Carillo? His app just went to Harky.”

The Director nods. “I met with him and knew he wasn’t taking it. Basinger was his team Lead. There are only so many places good commanders would go.”

“Fuckin’ CIA isn’t helping you. They just fucked with the brother’s kids.” Prez has me sitting up when Director Saber nods. I want to ask but pull it from the Director. Fuckin’ CIA is into everything, none of it good.

“It was Bono that was Carillo’s Lead. He heard about the kids and told me. Adroit doesn’t need any more Commanders. Half of the Bruces two teams *are* Commanders. The CIA is leaving a bad taste with the elite teams. You’re right, Ben, it’s not easy but Church sends me good men he has no room for. If he’d stop taking the ranked commanders for trainers, it would be easier.” He smiles but it’s a tense smile. The Director isn’t quitting and knows he’s got time and work to get through before his Ops offices are running right.

Aquyà switches his hologram board. “Director, Senator Baxter calling in.” He turns the tablet.

The Director nods for him and Aquyà hits Kaleb on.

“Rafael, glad I caught you before you left. CENTCOM just got cleaned. Senate oversight will hold hearings but the CIA ties are out of CENTCOM. We have a meeting in an hour. The request was for you, Prez, Cort, Ford, DeSeville and whoever Prez feels would be needed. They’re going for more BSC Ops and have questions before making a final decision.”

The Director opens his mouth but doesn’t get anything out before Cort jumps in. “More Badass for what exactly?”

Aquyà turns the tablet.

“Aquyà, get me on a board so I can see who’s in the room.” Kaleb is pissed so I throw him on a board. “Thanks, Luke Rayne. Jake, Digs, can I have the room?”

The dads throw chin and move out fast.

“Paying for more Badass Ops and laying off men at Op centers who are not performing. With the east coast training center up, they’re looking at dropping the wording Saber was trying to get changed. I think quite a few will go along with it because they agreed to pay the contracts for the year.”

I shake my head. The government pays more people not to work. If they aren’t doing the job, they shouldn’t be paid.

Kaleb is a good reader and answers my thoughts. “You’re right, Luke Rayne, but the government isn’t Badass. They’ll pay the year contract so they aren’t sued by over a hundred employees that could go to a jury of Americans who agree they should be paid some crazy damage

amount on top of the contract. Luckily, the contracts are yearly so these men are only getting paid for the time they signed for. Perez has that contract iron clad. Getting the Ops offices up and running with EROP procedures is the objective.”

I throw him chin.

The Director moves us along. “CENTCOM is clear?”

Kaleb smiles like his poster. “It is. The President is not happy CIA has another scandal attached to it. A full investigation showed where orders were disregarded and other shit he put in place was dismantled or something. I was texting the generals while he was ranting.”

Cort laughs and Kaleb shrugs. “Be ready, I need to get with my hologram to check a couple of laws. Aquyà, make sure you open us on a board.” The board goes black.

“Roger, Brother.” Aquyà turns to the Director. “Here or a conference room?”

“Conference, everyone the Senator named and the Princes that showed here watching. After the last CIA leak bullshit, I’m not doing another handful of men meetings with them. They want transparency from me, they need to show what that looks like.” I love the Badass he shows.

“We were lucky, Prez, Church and Bruce were in that one.” Aquyà stands and I feel him looking my way.

I finish texting Ford and stand. “Three doors down. Ford will be there with the crew and Badass that’s here once he finishes giving them assignments. I don’t know about assignments.”

Aquyà doesn’t care, he just vanishes. I roll my eyes, then look around for reaction. Cort has a million questions I’m not touching. The Director wishes Aquyà would walk more so he’s taken seriously and Prez is amused watching me so I shrug.

“He should walk. Being referred to as *the circus act* is going to stick if he doesn’t. They’re FBI, not Badass.”

His smile vanishes. “You see that?”

Fuck. “I do, Prez. I’ll talk to him one-on-one.” Moving to the door is to get Prez off me seeing shit.

“It will but it means it’s left unspoken.” Prez has to see everything.

With a sigh, I throw him chin and get the hell away.

Dad has perfect timing. “I’m down for the week you’re gone so I’m your shadow for a few days. Digs went with Tucker. Where are we going?” Maybe he doesn’t.

“I’m off for a week?”

Cort moves. “You, Tucker, Ford and Cadieux are off when this class leaves, the new trainees won’t be flying so they’re covering classes and the other shit you do.”

I like this. “Thanks. Is the crew off?”

“Justice has three days in Colorado planned. The rest is yours.” Prez has my brain spinning through ideas.

“Can I take it at Honor and Elite?” Harky asked about abilities for a job he has on hold.

Prez throws me chin. “Wherever you want to go. I thought you’d go home.”

I smile without saying I am home. “Mom and dad visit all the time and Joshua is out for a month. I’m not Justice or Teller and would never make a week away.” I open the door to the conference room and wave them in.

He nods. “You would but stay wherever you’re comfortable.” I love Prez and his easy nature.

“You feel stress away from the crew?” Cort and the questions.

Following them in, I’m glad there’s food and drinks on the table. “I do, Boss. My time off is on ABSZ or with my crew at other Clubs. I’m comfortable at Mass, Princes and Virginia but away from everyone for days, with less connection, makes it hard to focus. The crew is good about connecting daily with us here. I’m not Indian so the reservation is good but it’s the physical connection for me, even seeing texts or chats work. The reservation every night is a good way to see everyone but it doesn’t last like with the Indian kids.”

He nods with more questions building in his head but he doesn’t ask. “I didn’t know that, thanks. It’s good that he’s got more to connect with.”

“It is and it isn’t. For the crew, it’s good to have more people spread out, but for Justice and Teller, it means more daily work on those bonds. We’re not all together anymore so we don’t see the rest of the crew daily. I know when Tucker and Jeti need that bond strengthened and help but I’m no help to the others unless I feel something off when I see them. Mase works with Chris, Ginny, Anakin, Mitena, Nash and Kristos regularly, but I don’t pick up on help needed until we’re at the reservation or on ABSZ. By then, Justice, Teller, Mucimi or Hannah have it.” I hope he doesn’t ask all the questions that brought up for him.

He sits beside Prez who has his own questions. “I’ll talk to Justice about lightening Teller’s schedule. They both have full plates but say they don’t need help. I tried to get Teller an assistant but they built a hologram to do the house shit.” He’s got everyone chuckling.

Shit. Explaining isn’t always easy. “The bond can’t be strengthened by an assistant.”

He stops me. “Mase, Hannah and you do it.” He’s quick.

“We all do if we see the need, but it would still need constant maintenance by Justice and Teller. Mucimi has been stepping up and it’s a big help but we just got three more Protectors.”

It clicks in his head. “I see it now. Let me know if you think of a way to get them help.”

“Roger, Boss.”

I sit, then stand at attention when Rayne, Justice, Teller and Mucimi come in with Dakota and Ford. “Brothers.” Moving to touch them all on the shoulder or bumping shoulders, I smile with Cort’s question just as Aquyà shows on the side of us and watches.

“You’re all that close?” Cort asks.

Mucimi answers. “Yeah, Pres Cort. Mase, Luke Rayne and Tucker were our Protectors and he hasn’t seen Dakota in a couple of weeks. Rayne in a couple of months.”

I nod, pulling my seat back out.

“They’re always like that. Justice, Teller or Mucimi show all the time. I don’t get many visitors so they visit me or I snag them for a meal. Meals are big with the Protectors.” Ford waves his arm, “I knew you’d like this.”

Everyone laughs at Mucimi and Teller agreeing with some gusto behind it.

I wait until the ribbing slows. “Thanks, Ford. I didn’t have time to set anything up.” I throw him chin.

He watches me. “This meet?” He knows I read him and loses most words when we’re alone. *For this meet*, would make sense to the non-readers.

“Someone will tell you about time off and our replacements. CENTCOM lost CIA ties and FBI is getting paid to sit home because it’s cheaper than a jury trial.”

His head shakes. “The tour was for time off for me?” He asks Director Saber.

“Yeah.”

I smile when no one explains it to him. “After this class you’re off for a week. No flights going up with new trainees so they have replacements for us. Gary and Tucker too.”

“Sweet, I thought it was for you. Are you flying home?”

“No, I’m in Colorado with the crew then at Clubs.”

“Dude, don’t you want to get away from here, see trees again?”

Justice and Teller laugh. “There are trees at the house in Colorado. He likes it here.”

I throw chin at Justice and nod to Ford. “I do. My brother is out and I just saw my mom. Dad and Rayne are here covering me so I’ll see them for the rest of this week. You want to ride tonight? Teller and Mase showed me a new place. My dad, Rayne and Digs will love it.”

“Yeah. Teller, can you see if a flight is going up when I’m off?”

“I’ll get you on one. Alder and Juan have boxes waiting for a flight. Garren is going to be stoked. He asked when Alex was coming back down.” Teller is a good Brother seeing Ford’s thoughts on the cost of a long flight. I’m glad supplies are going up.

The Commander was a surprise when I met him. His Indian runs deep, he’s laid back like Mase and just as smart. I’m honored to be his Badass partner but I don’t think Prez realizes how deep Badass runs in Ford.

‘He knows and would have chosen Ford but FBI is Saber’s choice. Ford has Ops procedures down and should have been running his own office but hates all the red tape. Prez thought he’d be the best match to you since Brekan was already slated at MC.’

I throw chin to Teller for answering and feel the honor of being chosen for here deep. Justice told me so it isn’t like it’s new but I feel it. I know they can’t stop reading and know he’s feeling honor run through me so I don’t bitch him out for the reading. He laughs in my head, throwing me chin.

“Don’t start the Cheech and Chong shit, Teller. It’s been a refreshing trip so far.” Prez isn’t playing.

Teller smiles and I kick him. “Wouldn’t think of it, Dad.”

Justice looks down at whatever he put on his plate. Since his hair is loose and making a curtain, I don’t see what he’s not eating so he can hide his smile from Prez.

Starting young, Teller and Justice have shared a close connection, were and are impressive with their understanding, leadership and insight, but mostly comic relief for the ‘rents. They never pushed for center stage but always landed there making them a hot topic from Princes to the MC. Tucker and Digs come in so I have more conversations to watch and cut the trip down memory lane short.

“I found a model at a bike fest in Springfield, Luke Rayne. Your dad doesn’t think it’s one you have.” Digs slides an old beat-up looking box my way. “Norton Manx. Do you have that one?”

I take the box, careful not to rip it and see the old, faded picture before I have it opened. “A newer version of this bike but it’s plastic, this is great. Thanks, Digs.”

My dad laughs when I pull the parts out causing me to look his way. “You’re sitting at a table, Son.”

Fuck. I smile at him. “Yeah, thanks, Dad. It’s all metal.” I shrug. He knows me. “I’ll build it later,” I say, putting the parts back in the paper envelope. When the box is covered, I look at Digs. “Thanks, Digs. I have more than half my collection replaced with the older model versions but didn’t think I’d find a Norton. I’m honored, Brother.”

He throws me chin. Prez puts his hand out. "Slide it down. Did you build the Army bike Darren sent?"

I nod. "Ford found an old German military bike for me. I have them on the top shelf of the military collection."

"They're some impressive looking bikes," Tucker throws in.

I nod watching Prez and Cort look at the model. That Norton is going to look good by the Triumph I found in Maine last time I was up for a visit. It's the last one I built. It seems so long ago but it was last month.

"Caelan is into helicopters. Alder brought him an old model he found. The glue is different for metal parts."

I nod for Cort. "The one I use is Cyanoacrylate. It's like super glue for metal. I'll send you the link. The hobby store by you has it. If you're at MC, the hobby store up there has an instant weld glue that's silver. It's the same thing but ten bucks more for the silver color that you shouldn't see if you put it together right."

He smiles. "Send me the link. Caelan is too young to put them together so we don't need silver yet."

I send the link thinking he's just like my dad. My dad started my love of models when I was three. The bikes were my favorite, so as I got older, I started replacing them with the old-time models that used metal. He supervised me building them myself while he built his boats, then I got older and he'd come in from work and spend time hearing of my latest build. He has a collection of ships he built as I built my bikes.

"Caelan's a focused Brother like Luke Rayne was at his age. Start collecting the old-fashioned models now." Prez has some good advice.

I nod. "I've been replacing the plastic models for years and still have at least forty to go."

Cort nods. "I'll get Seren on it. She loves hunting shit down." He slides the box back to me. "I want to see your collection."

"I'll show you before you leave." I know he's going to love it. I have all the bikes he's got in his lobby on one shelf. Lisa got me pictures so I painted the plastic model for Crows bike. I smile. His toys are just bigger.

Prez nods. "They are, Brother. Teller, get a counter on wherever Kaleb's tracking shows."

Aquyà stands clearing plates to the kitchenette area in the hall. "You need Prospects."

"We have kitchen staff and Prospects, Brother. They do the same thing without the floating plates." I smile at his surprise. Everything here is split half Badass and half FBI.

"I didn't know that."

I nod and throw to Teller who is looking for the code. *"I can get the counter clock up. What time?"*

"Five," he says out loud, drawing Prez's eyes. I look at the board and throw the code to the keyboard.

When I'm done, a conference room shows a little faded out with two men yelling at each other. I ignore them and stand to run my model to my office.

"I got it, Brother." Tucker takes it and walks out so I sit just as Mase and Alder come in.

"Ford, do you have men to join the meet?" Prez asks.

"Four should be outside. The Director has Miguel." Ford looks at me.

“On a board or a hologram?” I ask, thinking this is more than I normally show. I’m going to get shit for this, I just know it.

“On the board is fine,” the Director says.

I pull EROP up and match the digital counters. Wheeler calls for Miguel in the Ops room. They don’t know we can see them.

“No type, Commander Luke Rayne. You can have job to meets.” Alder gets everyone laughing. I look at my hands.

Prez places men and Brothers around the room and table. I’m glad Alder is at the end and not mixed in with Brothers where he’ll be missed. “Luke Rayne, make sure the full room is in their camera’s view.”

I close my eyes and look for it. “On both boards, Prez.”

He throws chin and watches the boards brighten when the counters finish. “Brother,” he says throwing chin to Kaleb, completely ignoring the suits.

“Director Saber, Prez, Brothers. There have been changes made to the CENTCOM hierarchy. After investigations confirmed CIA interference with the direct-action groups and the President’s objectives were undermined or disregarded, the President dismissed everyone named in both agency investigations. Replacements from the list of vetted personnel are in place starting tomorrow. I was asked to thank Badass, namely, Dakota, Christian and you, Prez, for helping with that list.”

Prez throws Kaleb chin but doesn’t speak so Kaleb goes on. “We are in need of Badass support for the FBI Ops units until those units are fully manned with competent commanders. Because of the actions of the CIA, military elite numbers are dropping. We find that the retiring military are not willing to jump to another government agency. This leaves the FBI undermanned until they can train personnel to fill Ops units.”

Cort is up. “Ops units running right now are killing the men you *do* have at units staffed by dickass commanders. Badass West understands the need and will have no problem running some of those Ops, but procedures need to be changed. My Ops leads have watched six men die with their hands tied. We had men on the ground and were told to stand down so the incompetent commander could run one Op. He got four men killed in one day while we watched. Brothers dying is not an option when we have the ability and Brothers to carry out the Ops. Saber is one man. We need another number to call, a better procedure, something more than we have when commanders are putting agents in danger. Four men needlessly dying in one day is a hard memory to carry. Badass doesn’t take those well.” Cort sounds fierce and the government men notice.

Kaleb nods. A man stands. “Director Saber is known and trusted to make that call.”

Prez stands stopping the ass from saying more but he takes a minute before he replies. “Are you saying that Commander Ford, Miguel Saber and Commander DeSeville are not trusted to make the call? Badass has been running Ops for you for a year and our Commanders are not trusted? Only one man has the power to answer for close to fifty FBI Ops units?”

The dick sits fumbling for something to say. Another stands and I close my eyes seeing his words before he opens his mouth. “Our forefathers gave the President the power to rule the country. He gave Director Saber the position to run the FBI with limited oversight by us for how that is done, just like the President has congress to oversee his work.” He’s spouting simplified and skewed bullshit.

Kaleb nods to me. Not here, not with us. I stand gladly. “Propaganda in and of itself has no value or place in Badass. What’s passing through your mind means I need to explain to Senators the

reality of what the Founding Fathers wrote?”

Prez nods and waves an arm for me to explain. “The Founding Fathers were against positioning any man to become a king. They had just won a war to get out from under a king so that shouldn’t be a surprise. What they wrote was a balance of three branches of power. The President was *not* to make law, but to carry it out for the people of the US. The legislation was to be written by senators and representatives not the other way around. In this century, we’ve seen that power shift. While the legislative branch last year passed 344 public laws the President ended his term writing 220 executive orders or rules. So, of the 564 laws added, the President wrote 63% of them. The Founding Fathers would and should be rolling in their graves because that sounds an awful lot like the executive branch is gaining the power of a king. I’ll repeat the lines for you to grasp how far from the Founding Fathers words we’ve come, the Legislators make the law, the President carries out the law and the Judicial evaluates it.”

The first jerk yells about country progress.

I shake my head at him. “But it’s okay to let every nut job in the country carry a gun because it was written by the Founding Fathers that you misrepresent regularly? Do we only progress for issues that suit you and your state? That line of no gun control that’s on your mind was for an organized militia. Using *your* simple terms to stay on the topic, while the militia of the FBI is riddled with incompetent leaders and you want to pay Badass to be that militia, don’t you think we deserve the right to help the men and women you swore to protect when we see incompetent Commanders killing them? There are several ex-FBI Ops Commanders in Badass that should be able to make a call when we need it fast. We need that option right upfront so our Brothers doing the jobs aren’t leaving Badass because of *your* governmental red tape with limited oversight. Watching good men die because of incompetence is how we got so many of that elite military force that you need right now. Before you throw more propaganda out, think about what you’re asking of us and what we’re asking for in return.” I raise a hand to the dick that’s ready to yell again.

Kaleb jumps in. “Thank you, Commander DeSeville. I threw the facts you mentioned up on a sideboard right from the government website so they can read it for themselves. I’m impressed you got the percentage right but shouldn’t be, you’re like a walking encyclopedia. Is there anything else Badass or FBI needs from us to increase the time we had agreed on or the procedures?”

Director Saber stands. “The limited oversight you feel is owed to you needs to be scrapped. You’re paying death benefits to more than just the Ops units because of that oversight. The job description handed to me did not have your oversight in it. Drop it or I’m out. You’ll have to put Badass on your budget because the FBI can’t do the job with your restraints.”

I’m fuckin’ shocked, Ford sits up straighter. He didn’t know.

“I stand with my Director on this one. I’m taking calls all day that I can’t answer because you’ve got the Director in meetings all over the country. The men are frustrated with bureaucratic bullshit and it’s getting worse instead of better,” Miguel says and Kaleb flashes a smile then drops it quick.

“Prez, Cort, Justice, Ford or Alder?” Kaleb asks for their thoughts in our heads.

Alder stands. “I am honored to stand with Badass and FBI Director Saber.” He looks at the Director. “I have job to you if government continue kill you Brothers too.”

My jaw clamps tight and head goes down quick. Fuck, it shouldn’t be funny but Aquyà laughs. Luckily, he quits that quick.

“We bill by the job and I don’t have a problem with that but we need a go-to for decisions

when lives are at stake. Luke Rayne is right, Badass doesn't watch good men die well. If *your* only objective is kissing the new king's ass or you're fighting to be that new king, you need support not death from these men and ours." Cort has me watching reactions.

Prez looks at Justice so he stands. "They call my Protectors the Justice League. We're the Brothers with special abilities. I have one that won't do jobs with the FBI because he couldn't get an answer and saw the men Cort spoke of die. Aquyà is my brother so it's not like we don't have a way to call in, but we don't have the people we need to make the call when our FBI Brothers are in front of a gun. Two Protectors with ability and one on IT Ops were on a job in that unit. We didn't have to lose good men but we did." He points to the first dick I spoke to. "We don't differentiate between us and them. We were brought up equal, so *we* lost good men and felt it."

Prez looks at Ford when Justice sits. Ford stands. "Badass happened to be here today to see where the trainees finishing up are going. From here, more are going to Badass East and West than FBI. I know commanders and officers are applying directly to Badass and get trained in procedure from there. Our procedures here are the same. They have complete elite teams from all over the world right here in the US defending people that need it. They're doing the Ops the FBI doesn't have the men to do. Luke Rayne wasn't on my SEAL Team but he was satellite for DEVGRU. We know good men. We need good men to believe in our country enough to sign on to our military and FBI. Director Saber can build teams and be effective, you've seen it when he wasn't the Director with your limited oversight. I was one of the firsts so I know. Give him the room and tools he needs to do that. I offered to help when it's needed so I can take calls for decisions. Miguel, Wheeler from EROP along with Brekan and Marks who are right here at BSC West Clubs, we're all EROP trained and we're all still doing FBI Ops. We have the experienced men and Cort knows every procedure for every branch of the military, he can make the calls and he's in BSC Ops all the time. Do something, because the nothing you're doing isn't working."

Prez nods and turns to Kaleb. "We're asking for more than one man to make a decision on Ops. This is a big country. You trust BSC to run Ops for the FBI. We need you to trust our BSC Presidents overseeing those Ops to make a call that will save lives. If we get a no for the simple consideration of having more than one number to make a decision on lives saved, *while defending the entire country*, BSC will return to contracts with the states that trust us to keep their borders and our communities safe. And I'll remind you, those contracts are with every state."

Kaleb stands. "We'll get back to you by five today."

Prez nods and I flip our camera off. We can see them but they can't see us. Prez nods. "Good job, Brothers. Luke Rayne, I don't know how the fuck you knew the statistics and I'm not asking, but well said, Brother. Thanks for showing, Brothers. We'll wait for what's next but don't need the presence for their decision." He hugs Brothers and bends for Alder as the Brothers and FBI men leave.

"So, Saber, if they don't stop fuckin' around, you need a job. Cort wanted to see the new jets, we can talk on the way." We watch them walk out like all that didn't just happen.

I look at Ford.

His head is shaking. "Jesus, that was crazy. Once you shut the idiot up, they never said a word." Ford's not worried about the decision they're making but surprised the Director would walk if they don't give us a little breathing room.

Miguel signs off. I throw him chin. "That was something. I've got a class. You're still riding tonight?"

“Yeah, I need to get to Ops. I’m on BSC for two with Rayne, Cadieux took two hours for me. I’m glad you squashed the idiots before we had to listen to more and be late for shifts.” He’s through the door.

“I’ll catch you at dinner.” I smile at my dad. “We’ve got training.”

He hugs me. “Good job. Lead the way, Luke Rayne.”

I do with a smile.

Chapter One

Three days

Luke Rayne

“Commanders to Ops.” I stop talking and pull my phone walking toward the door. “Dad, I need you to finish this class for me.”

“Roger, Luke Rayne.” My dad makes me smile.

That lasts until I see why I’m called to Ops. Prez, Cort, Director Saber, Rayne, Ricky and almost all the BSC Officers and Presidents are in the Ops room. No, they’re virtual. I breathe taking the stairs two at a time, catching up to Ford. “BSC meet, I think everyone is on virtual.”

He hits the keypad walking in as he’s pulling out his glasses, then I do. ‘*Some changes to Ops Controls and IT Controls.*’ Justice throws to us.

Ford nods to him, making me smile. “Presidents, Brothers, Director,” I acknowledge.

“What the walking encyclopedia said.” Ford points at me and throws chin, getting smiles back.

Rayne tilts his head, I shrug. Ford is Ford and doesn’t offend me. He’s usually right.

Prez looks around the room at each of us. “BSC is running for almost all the FBI Ops units across the country. The east and southeast has help from Adroit. Hemy made a good point. We have trainees able to handle Ops in Control positions. Put your trainees in place so we’re not taxing the Alpha-Bits, Brothers and Clubs. One or two Officers overseeing Ops rooms will work. If you need help or experienced Controls, let me, Cort or Hemy know and we’ll send help.”

“No two-week change-over?” Alder asks.

Prez looks at the Director. “Apparently, the committee that had limited oversight decided to help and paid, then released the men of my units early.”

“Fuckin’ government. Only time they work fast they make work stress to BSC.” Alder shakes his head.

I agree with him and look at Ford then Cort. “Cort, we’re losing trainees with experience tomorrow. We have twelve Brothers and Trainers with experience that would be considered Officers but it won’t cover our Ops schedule.” The oversight left decisions on procedure to Officers with experience. Which means whoever is on FBI Ops Control. Trainees are not BSC.

He nods. “Your Ops Center time is split. Those Brothers, Jake and Rayne can run with Kristos, Cooper and Marks for the next week. I’m told you’ll be with Harky for one of those Ops.”

My eyes whip to Justice, getting a nod. “Roger, Boss.” I throw asking Justice in his head if we’re still going to Colorado.

‘*Yeah, but we’re on Ops when we get back. You and Ford still have your time off.*’ He throws back.

This is because he's got more Protectors. I throw it to Ford and tune back in to the questions.

"Anton has a full team for the week. Maverick has space junk but no launches planned for three weeks and said his space geeks can handle the week." Cort is looking at Alder.

"I schedule four teams virtual to ABSZ Ops. Use where you need." Alder is going to cover IT for BSC West.

Cort throws him chin. "Thanks, Brother. The Protectors cut their time down half a day. We're still going to need the help. Spano and Kristos have IT Controls that can cover one per shift or a team if it can be scheduled. Spano has Flight Crews and an experienced Ops Control. Ranger and Jack have Club or military teams to lend as needed. Beacon has four Security and three Enforcer teams. Jinx and Harky each have two Protector teams that are Ops ready. Get a hold of the Presidents that can help. If you have help, send it to me or Amal. Don't forget we have 20 dogs ready for Ops. I have Flight Crews to cover us. Fill in your schedules now so we can help before anything is missed."

Harky walks closer to me with Zeus. "You're back on Wednesday?"

I nod and bend to scratch Zeus down. "I'll be at your Club after noon on Tuesday."

He nods. "The Op I have needs a magic. Ginny, Mitena and Anakin don't move fast enough."

"Justice said I'm there. I don't know what you need but I'll be there for a couple of days, then I'm at Honor or ABSZ for the rest of my time off. If you need more from me, I'm close."

He looks relieved. "Thanks, Brother. I didn't want to ask Mase. He'd have me paying it back forever and I don't have time to be his partner."

I smile. "No payback. Mase is crazy and his fire scares even me. I don't get how he's not burning everything up."

He throws me chin and moves on. He talks less than I do.

"Luke Rayne, Rayne is a Control?" Cooper asks, getting Kristos walking toward me.

"He is. Brekan and Marks know him. He runs MC Badass Ops with or without ability. He doesn't talk much but what he says is New England speak."

"Flight?" Kristos asks.

"He can man positions or run Control. He's from Baxters." They both relax with that.

"Thanks. Let's get with Marks and schedule for the ability Protector loss," Kristos says walking with Cooper back toward Marks.

The Protectors two and a half days away will be felt. They're all talking in groups. I watch each group and the Presidents.

They're covering for us and a heavier Ops schedule. I'm glad that isn't a schedule I'm making or remaking three times a day for the next four days. My job is fairly simple and in a place where I'm training. Ops shifts for me are four hours three times a week and emergency jobs. Ford has the same schedule but more FBI paperwork than I have. I love Badass for making my job easier and the job is right where I want to be. Getting Brothers ready for Clubs or men up to par for the FBI fills a need I didn't know I had. I ran MC Ops, flew or Lead for MC OPs Teams so it's not like I trained more than the team I was on. Moving here opened me up to the training side of Badass. Seeing the Brother's respond to new ideas and use our lessons hit me hard and deep. I can make a difference here that's on a bigger scale than just my team. It feels good to bring Badass to more. I know some of these men will never belong to a Club but I see them doing more in their communities. Badass knows different and it feels good to give the new Brothers more. It's more than they knew and we give them Mason information before they leave. Badass shines through no matter who or where you are.

Walking through the room I stop at the military collection. I'm always impressed seeing the military bikes. Bikes have been around a hell of a lot longer than I have.

"I forgot to ask what Cort thought of the collection room," Rayne asks, stepping closer.

"He loved it. He'll send Paul down to put glass cases down in the lobby. Crow's bike had him choked up. He didn't expect it."

"He doesn't look it, but he feels deep."

"Yeah. Did you get the schedule set?" He schedules for the MC and BSC so our Center is nothing for him.

"Yeah. Take your time with no worries, Luke Rayne. We'll all still be here when you get back.

"I know it but hate making waves everyone else has to swim through." He's known me my whole life, trained me to make BUDS, then satellite and helped me transition into the Club when I got back home. It took some time but I got to where he said I'd feel like part of the Club again. I think Justice asking for me and Mase helped that. Being needed helped. I couldn't connect to the kids while in the military and felt it more because they were already a part of me. Being truthful, I didn't connect so they weren't part of that killing machine that was expected of me. Black Ops is nowhere close to where I expected my assignments to go. It was a rough road home made easier by the feeling of being needed. I wish I could have talked to Joshua but my little brother didn't need my shit anymore than the kids did. He was so gung-ho to be working for the Baxters and his goal of running a team on Ops. I went to the MC when I got back just so I didn't fuck with his happy. It kept me isolated in those bad memories.

Justice being Justice taught me about the Indians growing the connection to more than my family and Brothers. I wasn't just needed on the crew, I was wanted for my experiences they'd never seen in their world, the lessons they hadn't heard from my dad, Rayne, Zack and Kevin who were my mentors. All of Baxters were, but my dad, Rayne, Zack and Kevin were more, mine. I gave those lessons to the kids who looked up to me when I couldn't see more than a soldier, a killer carrying around battle scars and bad memories. Jumping every night showed me I was more than a soldier. I was an elder to a bunch of kids that knew and saw more than I did.

My respect for Justice and Teller grew quickly, showing me different just means different, in a million ways. They're the Badass we need to bring to more. At times, I couldn't believe the abilities I was seeing coming out of kids ten years or more younger than me. Fuckin' Nash and Mucimi aced the flight simulator before I did. It's been an interesting life. Today that solitary soldier feels eons away. The years I was that soldier fly by in my memories. The concept of time changes as your life is lived.

Good memories of countries lay over the bad so I see the laughing, because Nash and Mucimi disappeared in crowds only to reappear with foreign trinkets and a shit load of questions. They needed what I learned as much as I needed what they learned and we each gave it up freely. It taught me how to reconnect with my brother so our times together were finally real and more meaningful. Justice gave me those lessons from a different perspective than my own. Badass is a good life to live.

A hand on my arm gets me back to the collection room. "I haven't seen that in a while."

I smile at Rayne's concern. "I'm fine. Memories of our Badass life reminds me of how good that life is. Today my focus is distracted. It could be because you're all here or something is coming."

His thoughts match his smile. "That life is real, there are times when I need the reminder, our connections always show me. Push away what you don't need right now. It's probably us and the new coming from FBI Ops." He's so good at that.

"Yeah. I'll push it away. I'm looking forward to Colorado. The crew centers me so everyone together will be good." I shut off the lights walking out.

Everyone is waiting when we get outside. "I love the porticos. Tucker said they're on all the Clubs," Cadieux says as if it's a question.

"Go see the Clubs. I bet you can Club hop to every one of them in a week. Check out the space shit Maverick has, the dogs with Texas and don't miss the Vision with Falcon. The ABSZ is an impressive chopper ride. Once you see Alder's compounds, you'll want to stay, so do the chopper ride first," Ford tells him.

Everything he says is true. I'm always amazed at the Clubs. Aylen's is next to open and I have some time planned there. The first woman President is huge. Cort and Justice want everything done when she gets there. They've cleaned and built up towns, set her compound and businesses up so she's not in battles when she opens. There will be so much Badass around no one with a brain will try anything. It's the threat of the brainless that has everyone focused on that Club's security. With Walker and Ajhil at her back, I know she's going to do a great job, that Club was tailor made for her.

The extra Protectors Jinx and Ginny have must be the ones trained for her Club. There's no way any Club has extra teams with no home. I took Teller's class at Bravo and know all those Brothers are meant for the MC, Honor and Sentinel.

"You're quieter than normal, Luke Rayne." Ford gets me out of my head.

"Something is coming or trying to get through. My focus is off."

My bike swerves as hands hold my coat. "A little warning next time, Brother. Surfing at a hundred is painful before the healing."

"I'll warn you next time. We all feel it. Stay focused on now." Mucimi is gone as quick as he showed.

"Fuckin' Brother is going to kill someone someday. Since he's Mucimi, he'd probably revive them." Ford swerves back to my side. We all laugh but have to give him that one. It would be the day Mucimi'd be given that ability.

I'm not focused enough to take the mountain pass road and know it. "Do you want to eat at the lodge?"

"Yeah, I'm not up for the cliff's edge tonight." Tucker is feeling it too.

"The lodge sounds good," Rayne says with some concern.

I'd say it's the trail road down with a drop of hundreds of feet if you hit the edge, but I see it's the warning from Mucimi that's got him avoiding the trail road. They rode it their first night here so they've seen it. Riding the edge back in the dark needs full focus making the lodge perfect in my book.

Relaxing after a good dinner with Brothers, we sit in the back of the Club, with a beer, watching the sky. The view here of the canyon we use for testing is just as amazing at night as it is in daylight. I smile when Digs says it out loud.

“It is. That’s why I wanted the bar over here,” I tell him.

“The Brothers don’t come out here?” Digs doesn’t separate out FBI.

Ford answers. “Not usually when Luke Rayne is out. They’re afraid of him.” He says it offhandedly and with a smile but it’s true.

Digs is surprised.

I answer before he asks. “They’re not used to readers. I hide all but reading. Tucker isn’t a known reader so they don’t have a problem with him.” I hope that stops his questions.

My dad leans forward. “You’re isolated here?”

Shit. “Not really, Dad. Trainees wouldn’t be comfortable with Officers close so it’s normal for them to shy away. Most are terrified of any Officer. I tell them I’m a reader right up front. It guarantees honesty in my classes.”

He laughs. “I can see that. I remember avoiding Officers now that you say it. Living with Badass for so long fades those memories or I’m just getting old.”

I laugh with the Brothers. “Luke Rayne is told how young he is by everyone. I bet he’d give an organ to make it to older.” Ford smiles at my shaking head.

“I’ll save the organs for someone that needs one. It’s always visitors like the VADM or FBI that are surprised. They don’t know Badass or they wouldn’t be surprised.”

Rayne agrees. “That’s true. I’ve seen the reaction Protectors get. Even the Senators Luke Rayne schooled were pissed. I bet it was because Kaleb was showing them he was right and they were idiots but they were pissed idiots.” Rayne went on a few vacations with our crew as security, he knows more than he says and doesn’t usually mention it. Everyone in Badass knows how young the crew is so the reaction from civilians is pretty normal and ignored by us.

“You’re off tomorrow night, are you going to ABSZ with Ford?” My dad wants to know if he’s scheduling a flight. Nothing comes in or goes out without me or Ford knowing.

“I’m picking up Tucker from Honor and flying to the house in Colorado. I’ll take my chopper.”

He nods, taking the beer I’m holding. I take the water from Rayne without pointing out that all I’ve had is two sips from the bottle. “Is Garren here tomorrow, Ford?”

“He’s in Providence. He flew back with Rafael for something he’s working on with Alex and Jared.” He doesn’t know what Garren was saying but he was excited.

I’m glad Garren is happy here. It’s a bigger world than he’s used to but he loves it. The man is everywhere on the ABSZ but always has updates on D’Ability kids and the crops at the greenhouses. I just realized he did the same in Providence. I hope his project keeps him busy. The kids’ houses are there but he’s not growing trees anymore.

“Did he sell his stores?”

Ford smiles, shaking his head no but his mind says yeah. “Perez did. He’s got a new boatload

of money to invest. I think that's what he was talking about with Alex but he was excited so I didn't get it. Perez said he's got information but he's tough when he's busy so I've got no idea what's going on. I'll see when I get there."

A star shoots across the sky catching everyone's attention. The times we sit with no words are my favorite. Everyone in their heads, thinking about our day, amazed at the beauty of the sky, or just content with life while together to live the moments, bring us all closer. I always feel that closer and think it's because I spent time feeling separate. Christian says without pain we'd feel no joy. It's something his grandmother taught him. He's right and she was a smart woman. I feel the joy.

Chapter Two

Colorado Protector Crew house

Luke Rayne

“What made them buy a house when Prez has the Badass Mason mansion?” Ginny and Mitena are full of questions. It’s not normal for them or at least Ginny. I don’t know Mitena well.

“That place is always busy with more than Princes showing there. We were there for a day and Justice couldn’t settle or maybe the crew couldn’t and he felt it. With Badass International Presidents and Officers adding to the US Brothers, it’s nonstop head chatter in every language and accent. You can’t relax there when you’re a reader.”

We crest the steep path we’re on and stop. “Here, we can relax.” The timing is perfect. My eyes never leave the view of mountains touching the sky. Christian’s words can be changed out for everything. Without the gut-wrenching desolate destruction and devastation I was ordered to cause for others, I’d never appreciate the abundance of beauty I see here.

Mitena laughs. “No chatter works for me. Thanks for showing us, Luke Rayne. I’m sitting right here. We’re not due back until later.”

I sit pulling sandwiches and fruit from my pack. “I’m meeting up with Mase, Chris, Tucker, Anakin and Mucimi for boulder climbing. I grabbed you food. Call to me if you need me.”

I’m up and move fast to catch up to the Brothers that took the rockier path to the west. Mucimi turns fast when I show behind him. “You’re stronger.”

I think about that. “I noticed reading more and faster, but I’ve always been able to move fast.”

He keeps moving forward without looking back. “You’re faster and faint. I know you aren’t blocking.”

“Never from the crew.”

We hike for a good hour before we see our spot. “*Rumor Has It*. We did *Cool World* last time we were up.” Mucimi supplies.

All but Mase sits to eat. I feel Mase and look up. He’s placing pros and setting the static rope for Chris and Anakin as a guide. I like that he’s going to let them climb without being on their asses. They did the last one with constant directions from Nash. I gave them reasoning and definitions while Mase gave them the running orders as they climbed.

Mase appears by me so I hand him a sandwich, he grabs an apple throwing me chin. “Glad you showed. This is their second time.”

I nod watching him. “You didn’t know I was here?”

“Not until I felt you watching me up there.” He points to the rock.

That’s fuckin’ weird. “Mucimi said I’m faint but he turned when I showed on the trail.”

Looking at the sky, he finally nods. “That’s a good word for it, faint. The ancestors are crazy. I woke up one day and had fire. It didn’t feel like a gift to me then. Something is coming, your gifts will make sense when you need it for whatever is coming our way.” He eats like that’s all.

No advice? No clue on what’s coming? No help with whatever they’re seeing in me that I obviously don’t?

Mucimi laughs. “There are no directions, Brother. Adjust, adapt and overcome, you’re military.”

I roll my eyes at him. “That’s Marines. Can Aiyana help?” Some Indian advice would be good. Maybe a clue or name for what’s changing in me would be better. I’m a SEAL, we always look for more information.

“Dakota and Aiyana never saw the fire thing. They didn’t have advice but Dakota helped Mase focus his fire. We can ask if you start burning.” Fuckin’ Mucimi.

Chris, Tucker and Mase laugh. Anakin looks shocked – like I feel. “If I start burning, throw water on me,” I tell Mase.

“I don’t think it’s fire. I had fire in my eyes before I saw it on my hands. I didn’t know until later, but Kateri and Seth knew before I did.”

Well that’s just fuckin’ great. “I hope it’s not fire. Your fire is scary, Brother.”

He nods seriously. Reaching in my pack, I get my climbing shoes and push gifts of fire away. I really hope it’s not fire. I ignore their fire banter while getting the harness on and gearing up. The dynamic rope burning as I’m hanging is pushed away and I climb. Every step, hand hold, or pro I set, is done with thoughts of how fire can kill me. I’m up and sitting with water before I look down, surprised to see Tucker and Mucimi only halfway up. Shit.

‘You want me to guide them up?’ I throw to Mase.

‘I’m not reading you but felt you unsettled. They’ve got it. You okay?’ Shit. Mase is a good reader.

I don’t want to say it, but he’s my Brother. *‘I was picturing how new fire gifts would fuck with every step of the climb. I’m good.’*

I hear him laughing. Fuckin’ Brothers. *‘No disrespect, Brother. You’re right and I’m reminded of burning the pages up, while on the chopper out on Ops, when I didn’t get the fire thing. Climbing could be deadly but I don’t think fire is coming at you.’*

‘Thanks, Mase. I was tempted to jump down instead of rappelling.’ I turn quick when Justice appears on the side of me.

“It’s not fire. You’re getting stronger, your connection deeper. Teller has a clarity to him, like what you feel when Chenoa is close. I feel that now. The crew doesn’t read you well but do feel that connection. I don’t know how, maybe like Prez blocking for us, we feel but have to search. The crew isn’t searching, feeling is enough.”

I nod. “So, the gift is the deeper bond?”

He smiles. “It’s never that simple with the ancestors. This is the beginning.” He vanishes.

“Cryptic Indian lost cute when you were twelve!” I yell to no one because no one is here.

He laughs but I don’t see him.

Mucimi and Tucker make it to the top looking around. “I thought you left with Justice.” Tucker looks over the edge like Justice is down there.

I look once the thought strikes, because he’s Justice and loves jumping cliffs or anything that

spikes his heart rate. He isn't there.

Mucimi laughs. "He's with the new Protectors. You were unsettled."

I nod. "I'm good now."

Mucimi is just gone so I look over the edge. He's just below Chris and Anakin. Mase is setting a pro above them. They're away from the guide Mase set earlier. I sit again.

"You're unsettled?" Tucker asks.

"The fire gift had me at the top quick. I thought I'd suspend down."

He smiles. "Mucimi said it's not fire. Your gifts help you, you're not doing Ops. You run them."

That's true. "Thanks. Justice said clarity is just the beginning. My focus is off. I don't feel that clarity."

"You can suspend down from here, like jumping the cliff? I didn't know you had that freaky in you. I can suspend shit to clean my room."

"We're all getting stronger." I avoid answering him. I've been suspending since I was a kid. Not far and not well at first, but I suspended. Kaleb told me what the kids could do and how they did it. Rayne explained and had me jumping the pit edges for practice.

"I hope I don't get fire either. That needs to go to someone that reads and reacts faster than I do." Tucker reminds me of my distracted focus.

"I agree. Mase has been freaky forever. He's got the experience and was planned as an Enforcer for the tribe."

He looks at me with questions he doesn't ask. I don't answer. I'm not Indian but always felt that side of Mase. He's always lived with one foot in a weird realm like the reservation we jump to. That feels as crazy as it sounds but I do feel it.

Tucker nods. "Justice and Teller too."

I look for how he's reading me and smile at Mucimi climbing over the edge with Mase right behind him. I don't block but Tucker isn't one to read a Brother.

Chris and Anakin make the top all smiles. They made it without anyone telling them what's next. I see Mase never said a word to them. Since I wasn't thinking about anything but fire, I'm glad they didn't need help.

We sit with our waters and I watch them chat while thinking about my life. When everyone stands, I do, shaking off the distraction so I make it down without needing healing.

Mucimi smiles, holding his fist out. I bump it and give Chris and Anakin a refresher in rappelling. It's like four sentences they nod through before they rappel down like pros.

'We need to pull them back to the house.' Mase throws.

Mase takes Tucker, I take Chris and Mucimi takes Anakin. All together is an easy push. Back at the house, we shower and join the crew coming in from everywhere and help with dinner.

Holding Wimonáya while we eat feels good. I like that Carmen and Justice let us all take the babies.

That reminds me, "Teller, what did Prez say about the names?"

Chenoa laughs, handing Tátupiyu to JC, which is unusual, they keep the kids close. "He told them we named them Frank and Bob. I've never seen Ben look so lost. Lily was laughing the whole time Teller was going on with his elaborate story about trail horses they rode on when he was a kid." She's got everyone laughing.

Teller shakes his head. “He was struck dumb and said he was just happy it wasn't Oscar and Big Bird. Jeremy showed an hour later and said Nayawi is well named. I think my father was relieved. I still can't believe Mucimi could block that for the whole hour. I got a smack on the head when Christian told him we were fuckin' with him.”

They laugh at the strangest things. I don't think my dad ever smacked my head. Prez does it all the time, but it's not mean, just like a bonding thing, I guess.

“It is, Brother. He does it to all of us and his inner circle, or mostly my dads. You were older and didn't grow up with him. It's no different than your dad flicking your head when you were younger. Older he doesn't do that. There's a respect he has for you that stopped it.” Justice answers for me.

I get it. Tátupiyu and Nayawi sound a whole lot better than Frank and Bob. Equal and Freedom mean more too. My dad forever ago flies through my head. He dug for that? “I see it but Prez always had that respect for you.” How is it the same?

He smiles. “We're his kids and he shows it different. Your dad uses words now but he's not as laid back with that respect. You were different for them to raise on the Baxter compound. Abilities aren't easy and as a parent, I bet seeing it had them all shocked. Prez knows we wouldn't think anything of it and he had a ton of different abilities to understand. It made the respect for those abilities show different. He was ours as much as our parents were.”

Prez always thanking them and making sure they felt their worth flies through my head. “Yeah. I see it now. My dad looks laid back but always tiptoed around ability talk. Uncle Steve told him to hold it until I was old enough to make a decision.”

He nods. “Prez told him the same thing. He knew you were going into the military and thought it could serve you better unspoken. Some Brothers keep it that way. Others don't care. At Princes, the group was so big, it wasn't a secret that would have stayed a secret for long.”

That's true, the babies floating around guaranteed an openness about abilities. I nod for him and get back to eating.

“It doesn't bother you either way?” Tucker asks. He grew up on the MC Compound.

“Nope. It was always my decision. When I had questions, Prez always answered. When I was at the MC, I got training for what I needed from Ricky and Christian.”

Mase leans forward. “I didn't know that.”

I shrug getting Wimonáya moving so I readjust him against my chest. “Christian told me to block so I blocked. The training was closed.” I spent six years away after that and came back an Officer for the MC. Mase spent more time at Princes and working at other Clubs. Even living there, I worked MC Ops and Mase was everywhere, so was the crew. It was still a good life.

Justice stands. “We're jumping after clean-up. The need to strengthen our ties keeps hitting me. Tonight, we'll stay longer, welcome our new crew members and meet up with the other location members.”

I'm glad Justice is doing this. Distracted focus feels like a warning to me. He looks right at me and nods.



Teller and Chenoa hand everyone their babies. Teller said it was new and they needed to keep them close, now it's old so they're more comfortable sharing. I laughed at him, taking Tátupiyu. They're like three weeks old.

The boy feels like Ayakuhsak when I hold him. Energy connects us. I guess I need it because no one is taking him from me.

Dakota sits beside me smiling. "Perhaps it is because you sat away from the Brothers indicating to them you needed the connection to Tátupiyu."

I smile at him. "That could be it. Is that the energy I feel? With Tátupiyu, Wimonáya and Ayakuhsak I feel it more."

"Their connection to the ancestors is what you feel. They will be bound younger than even their fathers were."

Aiyana appears kneeling by Tátupiyu's head. As soon as she touches him, I feel that energy jump.

"Holy shit, Aiyana. Is that the ancestors running through you?"

Her gentle smile looks perfect on her Indian features with her eyes a molten lava color like heated gold. "It is so always. The ancestors run through you as well, Luke Rayne. Remember these connections always. They will remind you to be fuckin' Badass when you need it." She's gone with a spike in energy and I still feel it through Tátupiyu.

My eyes meet Dakota. "Is there a reason I will need to be reminded to be fuckin' Badass and just how this energy feels?"

His smile hits his eyes and my hand goes up. "Don't even try a riddle. I'm not Indian and need it straight."

The smile dims. "I will find my happiness with a riddle for Keesog. There is reason I am not permitted to speak of. I can tell you to remember your fathers. It is a generic and overused warning. Since I cannot amaze you with my gift of words giving you a riddle, it is the best I have." He disappears and all I can do is laugh. Fuckin' Brothers.

Mucimi and Ayakuhsak sit where Aiyana was. This is like the prophet line or something. "You have a warning for me too?"

Ayakuhsak smiles. "The ancestor likes you. I feel it and they want me to show you." He touches Tátupiyu and that strong flowing energy is back, distracting me from the correction of ancestor.

"I feel it, Ayakuhsak. Those ancestors must be my new best friends. Thanks, Little Brother."

Mucimi puts his hand over Ayakuhsak's and I feel close to electrified with energy from the three of them. Tátupiyu wiggles around. "Is it too much for him?"

Justice takes Tátupiyu and Teller puts his knee against Justice's. I feel energy from where Justice is touching my knee but it's soothing, warm and happy or something.

Mucimi laughs. "Focused."

Thinking about that, I nod. The energy is still there and fast or strong or something, but now I guess it's focused. "I'll go with that," I tell him.

They all laugh, then they're gone. Holy shit, I feel a jolt of energy and lay back thinking this must be what getting hit by lightning feels like.

Opening my eyes, I see Aylene on one side of me and Teller on the other. "What happened?" We're in the Colorado house but fuck if I can remember moving.

"The ancestors blessed you?" Teller asks.

Aylene smiles. "Aiyana said you've been gifted and will feel all soon. I guess they decided on a new way. Poor Justice and Mase weren't told either, shit just shows up for them."

I get it but don't. "They gave me gifts tonight?"

"Is your brain scrambled?"

I nod for her. "Then I'd say yeah, they gave gifts tonight. Maybe that's why shit shows for the others in stages. All at once is too much."

"You've been gifted, it was in stages?" She's like Justice and Teller.

"I'm not as strong as either but I do have most of what they do. My spirit guide doesn't transcend me and I can't transcend time."

I put my hand up. "Suspend faster or higher is all I'm going to understand. I'm not sure I want to appear at Princes when I'm here or push to the UK in two hours."

They laugh at me.

Justice shows with a hand on my arm.

Shit. "You're not adding more are you?"

He smiles. "No, Brother. I can't hand abilities out. I felt you were unsure and figured I better fix it before you're pissed. Prez disintegrated a table and Mase catches fire. Who the fuck knows what's next?"

I look in his eyes. "That's not helping calm me."

"It is but I could have worded it better. My dad and the fuckin' riddles have me searching for words."

"I told you, Brother. Stronger, faster and think clearer or see clearer." Teller looks at Aylene for agreement.

I relax when she nods. "I think he's right, Justice. Energy or connection is important but it's always been important to him. He's stronger when he jumps and has gotten there on his own for years. Now he brings Tucker."

Teller looks surprised. "Jeti moved. I thought Jeti helped."

Aylene shakes her head. "She's a reader with some suspending ability. I've seen her older, it's going to be like Hannah, when she has kids, it will show more."

I wonder if they remember I'm here when they keep talking. It's interesting so I watch but I'm amused when Justice jumps in with a list of abilities for Brothers.

Teller looks over my shoulder but I know he's looking for something. "Shit, do you see Kisuq?"

I look for her but don't see her. "Nope."

They all look at me so I smile. They forgot I was here. "So, I'll be stronger, faster and think or see clearer."

Justice nods. "Yeah, but there's something with the connections to the ancestors that we don't have. How you've always been connected is weird but I've lived in weird my whole life so I know I've got to wait for the reasons to show."

I stand up feeling lightheaded. "I've watched so I get it. I need a drink and some space from the list of freaky you've got going on. Since I didn't see Kisuq, the seeing clearer hasn't shown."

Justice hugs me. "I'll feel if you need me."

I walk into the house thinking he'll show if the connections show me stressed. I'll make sure he isn't feeling that from me. The Brother has his babies now. He doesn't need me taking time from them.

Seth, Chris and Ari are playing a game with Mase and Kateri's kids. I sit in the first chair I see and watch.

Nash shows with a glass of juice and a water bottle. "You look like you could use a drink but that probably isn't Jack or a beer right now."

I smile. "Thanks, Nash. I probably need the sugar and a water chaser. You're getting taller every time I see you."

His smile is huge. "Yeah, I used to whine about getting bigger, now I hope my gear fits every day."

Adrian sits laughing. "You look like your dad but have the build of Mase."

He's right so I nod, then drink the juice right down and send the cup to the sink without thinking about it.

They're both watching me. "What?" I ask because it's getting weird.

"The glass just vanished," Adrian says.

Fuck. "The ancestors blessed me. I guess that's the faster thing."

Nash looks surprised. "That's why you're dazed? How do they bless you? I get shit without being dazed. Do they touch the Brothers now? That's gotta hurt."

Adrian laughs putting his hand up. "Give him a chance to answer the first question, Brother. Dazed means he may need a minute."

Nash turns my way and nods. "Oh, yeah. Is that why you're dazed?"

I smile at him talking slow. "Yeah. On the reservation, I thought I was hit by lightning. I felt lightheaded coming in here and sat in the first chair I saw open."

"How do they bless you?" Again, he's talking slow.

"All the prophet people put hands on me and Aiyana said they blessed me. I fell asleep or something and didn't know they moved me back here. Teller said Dakota's riddle meant stronger, faster and clearer seeing, then something they have to wait for the reasoning on."

Nash nods like he understands that but Adrian's brow draws down. My hand is up before he can ask. "I'm still feeling the energy so I can't answer more than that."

He nods. "I wasn't asking. Abilities aren't talked about outside of training for us."

He came from MC. I nod. "That's how I work too. I'm from the Baxter Compound."

"I knew but didn't think about more than reading for anyone not Indian."

"Zeke, Blaze, Blake, Colt and Harley aren't Indian. Mikey, Ricky, Darren and Uncle Danny aren't either." Nash makes a good point. I'm not so different but I'm different.

"Yeah. I don't know how it all works but it does. I've never needed an explanation."

"Did the juice help?"

"Yeah, thanks, Nash. I'm clearer than I was."

His smile looks young. "Want to play the new bike game? Adrian beat me by seven minutes last week."

I see he means Jordan's bike building game for little kids and smile. "Yeah, I'll play." It's time I can use to regroup with easy in the front of my head for a while.

We play the game three times. Adrian beats us both but only by a little more than two minutes for the last game. The game was meant for kids to build, then ride, learning Badass lessons, but we jump lessons and build as fast as we can then restart for the next game. I should ask Jordan to make a game of just the building of an adult-sized bike, the Brothers would love it.

"Why are you quitting now?" Hannah comes in with one of her boys.

Three sets of twin boys. That just hits me. There's a reason hits me too but I push it away. "We try to beat each other's time for building the bike. I was going to ask Jordan to build a full-sized bike game for the Brothers. Adrian has us beat. We obviously need practice."

She laughs. "I'll ask Stella to adjust it for you. Kateri or Natalia can do it but Stella is faster."

"Thanks, Hannah. I'm going to ask Stella to get it before Adrian. I need the practice." Nash is gone making me laugh.

"I appreciate it. My dad asked after Cove and Beck. He can't believe they're more than a year old."

"He'd get a kick out of them suspending. My house is crazy. I'm glad I live at Champion, making us the craziest."

Trask comes in looking worried while following the floating baby.

I hold my laugh and leave them to it. "Later, McCabes."

Finding a rock out in the side field, I sit and call my dad. He listens with amusement to the ancestors blessing me and with concern about lightheadedness. We talk until he's satisfied I'm fine and I swipe him off watching the sky, knowing he's watching it too. I see Rayne asking him about the blessing and I'm glad when my dad tells him what he knows. Rayne knows about my abilities and is a help when I need him.

Feeling better about my day, I jump, surprised to see a lot of the crew here again. I watch the sky and thank the spirits for what they gave me. I can't say I know more than the glass moving fast but I'm honored and let them know. It's been an interesting day. I bet tomorrow will be too.

Chapter Three

Rising²

Two days

Luke Rayne

Zeus runs to me when I walk through the gate just after lunch. Bending, I rub him down. “Glad to see you too, Zeus. Harky has a job for me. Is he around?”

He chuffs and runs toward the simulator building. I don’t follow when he goes in. When he comes back out, I watch him hit his watch and Harky’s picture shows.

I nod. “I don’t know what dogs he’s got in there, if he’s busy, my neck is on the line.”

He chuffs showing me a picture of puppies. I follow him in seeing the little dogs run the simulator like the big dogs. It’s sad in one way and impressive in other ways. Harky has a different dog guiding the small one that’s running. He doesn’t take his eyes off the two, but I know he knows he’s got company. The three puppies sitting at the half wall watch Zeus. His board tells them I’m a command Ops member in sign language. The distinction is good but it’s a lot for puppies I’d think, but Zeus apparently doesn’t, so I’m good with it.

I met Zeus and Harky a few months before I retired. They were on their third mission and needed intel. I was sent in with Zeus before the team. Between the two of us, we had everything mapped and even the count of guards and prisoners with consistent timing marked. It was years ago but I can still see the faces of those prisoners. I’m glad the Marines got them out. Hearing that Harky and Zeus were at the Training Center surprised me. Being up in Mass then with Prez and Hemy in Virginia, I heard about it from Jeti at the first Monday dinner I was back. My next day off was meeting up with Harky and Zeus with his new leg.

Snapping fingers in my face have me shaking my head.

“You okay, Commander?”

“Luke Rayne, yeah. I’ve been distracted lately. The ancestors gave me more but it hasn’t stopped the trips down memory lane from taking over.”

He watches me for a few seconds. “I don’t understand the magics but maybe it’s something you need.”

That’s a thought. “The first time I met you was playing out. I know something is coming, maybe it has to do with the memory replay.”

He nods. “The others don’t know?”

That’s a whole story now. “They can’t say or don’t know. We were all together and they gave me what they could but it’s not telling me why I keep getting dragged back in time.”

“I don’t know if what I’m going to ask of you is going to help with that.”

The door opens and Zeus comes in. I look for the puppies. “You were zoned out for a couple of minutes. Zeus and Sampson took the pups back. Let’s sit, Luke Rayne, and I’ll tell you about the job.”

I follow him to a picnic table under a kite.

He just starts talking. “Piper and Zeus were left behind on a strike mission. Wecks said it was like Zeus was ground zero. An EMP set off in the middle of the drone strikes caught them both. Zeus lost his leg, Piper part of her foot and hearing. She was taken and ended up being rescued by a Delta team that watched the strike happen. They were on a mission for biochemicals and Piper and Zeus were there for part of that mission. It turns out the meet never happened. Wecks lost his informant. I think it was naval intelligence but I’m not sure. Anyway, Wecks noticed there were more that went missing. All special forces, all run out of JASOC. They brought Piper and Zeus to Germany then back to Lejeune. Wecks got discharged and was lucky to avoid the brig or end up missing. He had questions and no one wanted that public so he walked out alive, but still has those questions.”

I nod seeing Wecks talking to Harky. “His informant?”

“It was a team of two. The partner showed last month at a base in Pakistan. The woman I believe is a reader and she’s trying to make it to Badass but something is stopping her. I’ve been out twice trying to find her, but she’s good at hiding. I need a reader or someone who can talk to her. Someone who is military but Badass would be a help. There aren’t many Brothers here with ability that are Badass and military.” He has a list of the Brothers and most have a line through them.

“You were looking at Taylor Blackhawk?” That surprises me.

He nods. “He’s not a reader but military and Badass. Military know him or of him but Christian didn’t like Taylor for this and threw your name out. He said you have other abilities but didn’t say what. I assumed the fast thing.”

I get it. “Yeah. I don’t advertise but was told I’d be faster.”

His hand goes up. “I’m not repeating anything. I think I need a reader and anything more is a bonus.”

“Why do you think she’s a reader?”

“She lost Zeus. If I were alone, I wouldn’t think anything of it, but we were chasing her and she lost Zeus twice. The second time I tried talking to her or thinking shit but never got anything from her. My head is full of recent Ops, anyone that’s any good at reading is seeing that shit.” I guess he’s right there, but I don’t know.

I see him and Zeus running and nod. “Where is that?” Rock and palm trees mean warm. Maybe desert but palms don’t fit desert.

“Outside of Vegas.” That fits.

“Can I read where you’ve looked?”

“Haven’t you been reading me?”

“No, as you talk, I’m seeing different shit.”

He doesn’t get it and doesn’t think he needs to. “Go ahead or I can send you the sheet. Sohn has been tracking through facial. He’s got some movements logged but she’s good at staying out of view.”

“Send me the link. I’ll get where you’ve been from it.”

“Zeus can go with you. I got the feeling she knew him. I’m not freaky but it’s a feeling I had both times I went.” That strikes me as odd.

I trust Harky’s gut feeling and nod. “Send the link. I’ll go through it and fly out when I’m done.”

A hologram pops up above the table to the side of Harky. I didn't know Zeus followed us out here and smile. "Thanks, Zeus."

Harky waits while I read through the sheet. It's not a lot of information and the woman looks homeless in most shots but dressed well in two others. I memorize the shape of her face and see her covering her hair with a wig and hat. This must be the clearer seeing. "The well-off clothes are the disguise?" I say in disbelief. She slept in an abandoned building with cloth covering all but her hands and face. "She's hiding, hurt and scared. She needs Badass but the Club tried to hire her as a Club chick. She needs to move. Someone's getting closer." Shaking my head, I clear it out. "A Club in Nevada tried to hire her."

He nods. "You were talking out loud."

I look at Zeus. "What does Zeus need?"

"His gear, water, candy for blood and goggles to see tracking and hear you."

I nod. "We can go now. I have my gear on the chopper."

"You're flying?" His mind goes right to the visions.

"Yeah. I can push it away when I'm working, flying or when I need to."

He's surprised. "Does everyone do that?"

I shrug. "I know Justice, Teller and Aylene do. I don't know if everyone has vision or how it works for them. Mucimi can't fly because he sees so much but Dakota can. I grew up on Baxters compound, not with the Prince or MC kids. I had Kaleb." I smile, he's a little nutty in his own right.

He nods. "I don't get the magics but didn't know you were one until Christian said it in my head."

"That's the not advertised." I follow him to the garage office and watch Zeus get geared up.

Goggles, candy, granola bones, bowl and water are in his pockets, so I'm not carrying anything for Zeus. "We'll be there for dinner."

"He has food on his watch. I'd make that take out if you don't want the attention."

I smile. "I planned on using the attention he'd get."

"He'll order himself using the watch."

With a nod we head to the chopper. I gear up and we fly to Vegas. Zeus sits in the copilot seat and seems to like the ride.

We land at the affiliate outside of Vegas and I can see why the woman is afraid of the Brothers. This is not a BSC Club but they welcome us in awe of the chopper.

I throw to the President, '*Keep it safe.*' Answering his question about readers in the BSC and making sure he knows I'll see if someone fucks with the chopper.

"You're BSC from Master's Clubs?" He's afraid of Cort?

"Nomad from Phoenix Rising. I'm the Badass Commander for the FBI/Badass Training Center. I come from the original MC and Princes. The other Commander is FBI from EROP and we're both BSC." Nope, he isn't scared of Cort, just intimidated. The Brother is scared of me but I don't have time to see why. "I need a truck. I'll be a few hours."

He digs in his pocket. "Take mine. I live here."

'*Thanks.*' I throw him chin and open the driver's door on the truck he pointed at. It's fuckin' hot so I start it and walk around to the passenger side. "Give it a minute to let the heat out."

Zeus waits in the shade. I swear it's one minute exactly when he launches in. "One minute it is,

Brother.”

Driving into Vegas isn't as bad as I imagined it would be. Letting my gut dictate direction, I stop just before what looks to be the seedy side of town at a restaurant that has covered seating outside.

“Look good to you, Brother?”

Zeus signs yes with his robotic paw.

“Let's give them a show that spreads around. A reader will see it if we got this right. Ember Faye, this one is for you.”

We go in and right off, are told Zeus isn't allowed. I point to his gear. “He's a service dog, that's retired Marine Raider Lt. Commander. His certification is on the gear. We're eating outside and just wanted you to know we're waiting out there.”

The woman relaxes and is relieved I'm not there causing trouble. My guns make her nervous. Shit, I didn't think about that. She follows us out with a menu and seats us at a table for four. I move the chair out and Zeus sits on it like a person. The high table won't work for him on the floor.

“A bowl, two waters and the combo appetizer that smells so good.” I point to the table two away from us.

I get a smile and nod as she moves by Zeus quickly. I shrug at him. “You are big. I'll get the chair from the smaller table.”

He chuffs and I move. With him at a normal height, he's happy. The server all but laughs putting the plates and bowl down.

“He really does eat at a table, if you tell him the specials, he'll tell you what he wants.”

“What's his name?” She doesn't believe it.

Zeus hits his watch and his name and picture show. The server nods. “All right, Zeus. Tour of Italy is one of today's specials. That's lasagna, chicken parm and fettuccini with broccoli. The other special is T-Bone dinner platter with baked potato, house salad, honey glazed rolls and your choice of soup.”

Zeus types *No* and looks at me. “Steaks, pastas, chicken.”

He hits his board showing chicken with vegetables. The server nods. “We have a smothered chicken with mushrooms and sharp cheddar.” He types *Yes*. “I like your watch. You're pretty smart, Zeus. What vegetable?”

He picks green beans and salad, no bread.

“Dressing?”

Zeus hits, *No*, making me smile.

I help him out. “He likes cottage cheese if you have it.”

“We do. And for you?”

“The Italy special. No bread, salad with Italian.”

She takes the menu and walks away. The two customers out here are smiling while they watch Zeus. I fill his bowl and move it into position adding some appetizers on his plate. It smells good so I add some to my own plate.

I tell him about the woman we're looking to help, noticing he doesn't like fried ravioli. I didn't care for it either. “Do you want more mushrooms?”

He chuffs once so I give him one and cut it up.

More people sit outside pointing and watching Zeus. His chatter will be loud if our Ember Faye reader is close. When our plates come out, I move beside Zeus and cut up his food then place it like the hologram board shows.

The attention he's getting is loud in my head. "You make dinner an experience. Thanks, Zeus."

He chuffs, making the server laugh.

"He's not just smart but orderly." She notices.

I nod. "He was trained with a Raider unit. They never sent dog food so he ate with the men. We set our plates in an order so I guess his trainer did the same for him."

"Your trainer did good, Zeus. Thanks for your service. My brother is a Marine out of Quantico. He's not there much but he calls it home." She talks to Zeus so I stay quiet. Zeus hits his watch thanking her Brother and throws 'Rah' up making me and the table closest to us laugh. He's a funny Brother.

The server is surprised and smiles. "I'll tell him you said so. Eat before your food is cold. I'll check back in a bit."

"Thanks," I tell her but she's already on her way.

"She's only got eyes for your partner there," the older guy at the next table says.

I nod. "He's an impressive Brother."

"He's a Marine but you're not?" His eyes go to my gear.

"I was a SEAL satellite, now the Commander for the Badass part of the FBI/Badass Training Center." The more people talking can only help our Ember Faye see we're not out to hurt her.

The woman pipes up. "We went out to see that. Those planes look like spaceships."

"They do. I'm told regularly the lasers on them remind people of Star Wars."

She doesn't care but the guy thinks they should have stayed. "We didn't see them shooting. The helicopters were shooting when we got there. The plane was after, it didn't stay long and we were on our way to my sister's place in Arizona."

I pull a card out of my leg pocket and write on the back. "If you go by again, show Security my card, it will get you into the lobby of the Center. The holograms there are like watching 3D at Disney."

The man is up and takes my card quick. "Can I bring my buddy? We were pilots in the Air Force."

"You can. That just gets you in the lobby. Don't do anything they'll throw you out for and you're welcome to visit as many times as you want. It's you and a guest of your choice."

He nods with a big smile and hand out. I shake his hand and get back to eating but I'm interrupted twice more. Wanting thoughts of me and Zeus going out, I'm overly nice and answer questions until Zeus finishes his food. Stacking his bowl on his plate gets more comments from our new friends.

"You're quite the celebrity here."

He chuffs.

Our server is back with a smile. She's been moving around the other tables but hasn't stopped here. "Can I interest you in dessert?"

I wait for Zeus to answer with melon but they don't have any. "I'll get you melon when I bring you home. I'm all set, thanks."

She hands me the check and I give her my card, distracted by the feeling someone is close, but it's not my Brothers.

Standing, I throw money for the tip as my eyes whip to the patio entrance. *'Ember Faye, I'm Luke Rayne from the FBI/Badass Training Center. I was sent to bring you to Badass for protection and help.'* I take my card back, never looking at the server.

The seemingly homeless woman freezes as I say the words in my head then she turns fast.

Zeus jumps down and walks right to her. "Zeus won't hurt you," I say out loud.

'You know me?'

I shake my head no. *'Of you. Piper is Harky's ol' lady. He sent me because I'm retired military and a Commander for Badass. Zeus was with Piper for your last mission. You need protection and to speak to Badass?'*

'Piper is Badass? Is she okay?' Her concern shows.

'She is, if we don't start talking out loud, people will wonder why you're staring at me.'

She smiles, taking the worry right off her face. "Luke Rayne. What a surprise."

I nod. "Ember. Zeus remembers you."

She bends and pets his head but doesn't touch his gear. "You got a new leg. I saw you jump on Sgt. Lane. Is she okay?"

Zeus chuffs and hits his watch showing her a picture of Piper, Harky and the dog I saw today with Loki.

I step closer going slow. "He lives with them at the Rising² Club. They train dogs and Harky runs teams of elite for Badass International Ops. Zeus still runs Ops with him or, like today, Zeus runs with a different lead."

She nods. "I came for food." *'Did you know I'd come here?'*

'No, I had a feeling you were close. I hoped the chatter Zeus causes would draw you out. I saw the affiliate Club here and don't blame you for not talking to them. They're not BSC.'

"I'm going to get my food. There's a place I can eat and talk on the way." She goes inside as I'm wondering where on the way is to.

I look at Zeus. *'I'm just glad you're that memorable and got her to come to us.'*

He chuffs, making me smile.

We walk through an old train underpass and Ember takes us up to some fallen trees almost at the tracks. I sit and wait for her to eat trying to piece together how she came to be here from her memory. Zeus is sitting at attention so my eyes are scanning our surroundings as I get her time on a ship but it's not a military ship. She's hungry on the ship, like today.

"How do you shield from me?" She asks a little too casually. She's used to reading people.

"I was taught how to block or shield. I grew up on the Baxter Compound. My dad is head of Security for MC-Baxters. I worked at the MC in Mass when I got out of the military, then moved to Princes in Rhode Island as a member of their Protector Crew. Now everyone calls us the Justice League."

She laughs. "Seriously?" She sees comic books with Justice League on them.

"Freaky is an understatement for the Prince and MC kids. Harky calls us magics."

"He's not wrong. It took me a while to figure out what the hell I was seeing. Some kid disappears and appears." She bags her trash, that holds at least half her meal and looks at Zeus. "I got

intel on Zeus and Sgt. Lane. I never met them. I'm guessing they got intel on me."

Zeus chuffs so I interpret. "That's a yes."

Zeus shows a picture of Wecks and Ember nods. "He was my contact. Zeus and Sgt. Lane were going to find the chemicals with the locations I had. I didn't know a Harky. I worked for MARSOC." She didn't but was told that by a dick that I see handling her roughly.

"He was CENTCOM. They ran different than JASOC and MARSOC."

She nods. "Like the old DEVGRU, they ran for Command on the President's orders?" She knows more than I thought but it isn't clear. She's not military at all.

"Yeah, but CIA infiltrated and started fuckin' with the Ops missions. A few days ago, that got cleaned up. Badass is running for the FBI here and will run CENTCOM Ops overseas. We do missions overseas now, but it's been straight Badass Ops."

"They were in Iraq? I saw Zeus there." She's got visions I see clearly. She's scared and thought if she could get to them, she could get home.

"Yeah, with an Adroit Force team."

"Commander Bruce?" He had nice thoughts about his wife. She hoped to get to him.

I nod. "Yeah, he's married to Lt. Col. Basinger."

She shivers and rubs her arms like she's cold but it's not cold. "How damn weird this is. Everyone knows everyone else?" She's heard names but hasn't met them.

"We have a lot of military and Adroit Force is all military." She was kept from military running CENTCOM?

"Yeah, but it's all the same people I have heard of. I didn't know Wecks until the mission. I think I was sent so they could get rid of me. My dad got a letter that I was dead. Two Marines handed it to him the day I was taken in the market. Listen, Basinger had a brother, he's got kids that someone is stealing before they go to France or something. Basinger is going to get attacked right here at home and there's a plan to hit the White House." The Basinger kids Prez talked about. Fuck.

"Slow down. You can tell me their plans on the way to Badass or better yet, write them. Zeus can get you a sheet to type it all on. I need to know who you need to see and get you there. Cort is the President of BSC West, he'll get you security and keep you safe." The list of warnings I see she has in her head should go to Cort and Prez.

"Cort is the giant with white-headed kids around him?" She's got a picture of Cort, Amal and Alder.

"The Alpha-Bits. They were rescued by one of those little Brothers you saw, Alder, President of the Alpha-Bits and a Justice League team through BSC. They're all older than they look. The CIA was experimenting with some fucked up shit but almost a hundred and fifty Alpha-Bits are in Phoenix Rising Clubs and protected by BSC across the country."

She nods. "They have little cars and bikes moving around green houses and a big building with something moving on it."

"IT, they were brought up on computers working or sold to companies. I feel like we're running out of time. Who do you need to talk to from Badass?" Something is coming. *'Justice, something feels off, time is running out here.'*

'Get out of there. I don't see it but feel it through you. Mase, Nash get to Luke Rayne.'

She finally starts walking. "I need to talk to you. You're Badass and FBI. There's an Indian President that's Badass, military and FBI but I don't know him and he looks scarier than you."

“Where...Brekan?”

“Green Beret? He has two of the little white-headed kids but he isn't blond.”

“Brekan Graywolf. He's Cheyenne and was from EROP, the FBI Ops Unit in Providence.”

“That's the guy. I'll be right back, I just need my bag and set traps all over so wait here.”

I nod looking at the broken-down old garage or barn as she moves a board and squeezes through. I'd never fit so I take the order and stay put. “Zeus, cover the other side.” This feeling isn't letting up.

I check my watch again. Four minutes feels like twenty. A scraping noise has me moving toward the board she went in but it's not moving.

“Ember?”

Zeus barks. “Stealth, stay outside, Disarm, Protect!” I push the board and rip the next down. She's not anywhere I can see. Noise from the side has me outside running. A scream and Zeus barking has that thirty-foot run flat out. Ember's hat is the first thing I see, then her body falls forward and doesn't move.

I hear running but don't see who is making the noise. The grunting at the edge of the building gets my attention away from the smell coming from the corner.

“Once I cuff him, Detain, Zeus.” I move fast so I can see what the fuck happened to Ember Faye.

“He's cuff...Fuckin' hell!” Spinning, I block the second blow from the pipe with my arm and shoot the fuck that rattled my brain before Zeus jumps. “Who are you fucks?”

“Cops.” The dick on the ground tries.

“Cops don't come at anyone with pipes, asshole. He'd have shot me or Zeus first.”

The dick moves to kick at me and Zeus has him by the neck pretty fuckin' quick. “Hold this asshole while I check on Ember.” Dizzy hits when I stand.

The dick stops talking and grunts, but my eyes are on Ember. She hasn't moved and steam is coming off the globs of whatever is on her back. Fuck. The smell is her clothes steaming off her. On my knees, I get the cloth off her, peeling skin with it. “Justice, Mucimi, help!” I don't yell it but it sounds loud in my head.

‘Clean it off. No water, jump to the reservation.’ Justice relieves me answering.

“I can't jump alone, Zeus is holding a dick and I shot another. There are more.”

‘Get out of there. Nash and Mase are on their way. You're hurt?’

“A pipe to the head, I'll be okay.” As I say it, I know that's not right but push it away.

‘Jesus, I need help, Teller. What do we do for the burns and where's the closest hospital?’ Justice sounds stressed.

‘Badass is on the way to pick up the pussies. Ambulance on the way, get them to the road. Mucimi and Aiyana are waiting at the reservation. Nash and Mase are fourteen out.’ Teller is faint but in my head.

Justice appears at my side and tries to cover Ember with a shirt I pulled from the bag she was holding, but I stop his hand. “The burns.”

“She's been stabbed, Brother. We need to move.” He duct tapes the balled up shirt in the center of her back right around her front but I didn't see him lift her, then she's up as he helps me stand.

Wiping my hand down my face, I see blood on her back but it's wavering in and out. I'm being

pulled but hold on here.

“You’re here.” I hold onto Justice trying to think.

“I am, Brother. Badass is here. Let’s get you to the hospital, they need to clean her up. I’ll jump from the hospital.”

“I need to jump with her. They’re pulling me.” My eyes close on Justice and open to Mucimi at the reservation.

“Zeus, if they try to touch him again, bite them.” Cort has me smiling before my eyes are open.

“That’s not one of his lines, Boss. Disarm, Detain, Protect. I sound drunk.”

He smiles. “Glad you’re awake, Brother. They don’t get the jump thing. Alder is checking your girl out. She lost a lot of blood. Justice said you took her with you. I guess he’s there.” He points to the side. Justice is in a chair but not here.

“Yeah. He said to jump and the ancestors were pulling at me. I’m okay but can’t fly today.”

“It’s past midnight.”

“Fuck. Does Harky know? Zeus is guarding Justice now. I need to get melon for him.”

He watches my eyes. “Yeah. He said to keep Zeus with you and the girl. She knows a lot of shit but some already happened.”

“She gets visions but she heard and read shit from people that held her. She was tortured by someone overseas, it was the sandbox but they spoke English.” I look to the side and get dizzy. My head feels huge.

“Here, some water.” Cort hands me an open bottle of water.

“Where’s Ember?”

“Next room. Alder, Nash and Mase are with her. Two stab wounds did something to her back and some chemical they can’t wash with water. Alder took over.”

No water. Justice said that. “My head? It feels huge.”

“Twenty-two stitches. Possible concussion. Justice said you’ll be okay. Everyone is working on your girl.”

“She’s not mine. I came to find her and get her to Badass.”

“Everyone always says she’s not mine and she is. I call it like I see it and you’re up. Don’t be a dickass and take forever.” He always says that to every Brother.

I laugh stopping him from his crazy shit, then I’m groaning. My head is going to explode if I keep that shit up. “Fuckin’ hell. That’s not fun.”

“It didn’t look it. You want something for the pain?” He moves toward the door.

“No. I’ll remember what this feels like and avoid it.” I sit up and move my legs over the side of the bed.

“Falling is something you should avoid too.”

Clamping my jaw tight, I nod, then close my eyes and breathe.

“You’re acclimating to the pain and sitting so when you can, you’ll stand?”

“Yeah. That’s not right now but I’m closer.” I take another drink and turn toward Justice and Zeus. “You need water, Zeus?”

“I filled a bowl for him a few minutes ago. Don’t move until I get back.” Cort walks out.

A minute later Nash walks in. “Glad you’re up, Brother. You were gushing blood in the ambulance.”

“I feel lightheaded. Did they bring juice?”

“You were out, they didn’t bring you anything. I can’t leave with Justice out.” He looks concerned.

“Zeus, find some juice or someone to get juice.”

Nash laughs. “We could just push the button. The staff here are terrified of him. He barked and pushed away a doctor that wouldn’t listen to Alder.”

I smile. “They’ll find me juice quick.”

He smiles. “Yeah. What happened to the woman?”

“She’s a reader with some vision. Harky asked me to find her and get her back to Badass. The Club here is an affiliate that is nowhere close to BSC.”

He nods. “I gave the keys you had on you to the President. He almost pissed himself grabbing them out of the air.”

“They aren’t who stabbed her then hit me. The dick said cop but I think they’re gang or gang playing at MERCs. They were paid to pick her up. I shot the dick that hit me. Dead or alive was what he was thinking but I couldn’t focus.”

Zeus comes in with a bottle of OJ. “Thanks, Brother. You want some or need a candy?”

He signs no and goes back to sit by Justice.

Nash smiles. “Zeus is an amazing dog.”

I nod and drink my juice. “Can you read the shit she told me? It was stuff about Basinger and the White House but it’s far away.”

“No, Luke Rayne. You’re not blocking me? The White House?”

I close my eyes. “A hit to the White House, I think. Kids from Basinger getting snatched from France but it isn’t clear. Zeus would have it on his cam. I hit it on when we landed.”

He types on his phone. “I sent it to IT to watch and log what she said for you.”

“Thanks. Cort or Prez need it to ask her what she meant. I felt like we were running out of time.”

“Not seeing yourself sucks.”

I just nod thinking about that. I’ve never seen me but it hasn’t been so bad. I’d think seeing everything that happens in your life before it happens would be bad. A perpetual uncertainty wouldn’t be an easy way to live.

Zeus barks, drawing my eye to the empty chair. “He’s with the woman,” Nash says but Zeus pushes the door and is gone before he finishes.

“He’ll find him. I need to get him some melon.” I don’t know why that feels important but it does.

He laughs. “How do you feel?”

“Like my head got run over by a truck but I’m not dizzy.” I get my feet on the floor and stand with a hand on the bed. “Not too dizzy.” I correct that.

He smiles. “I’ll keep you standing. Let’s find Zeus. I want to see what’s going on with the woman. Alder was worried about something in her back.”

I move slow but make it out and into the next room. Cort is just inside the door watching Justice moving his hands over Ember’s back with pictures of her guts on a hologram board. The shit he does amazes me but this is freakier than usual for him.

He looks over and smiles. “Freaky is my specialty, Brother.”

“That it is, Justice. Thanks for that.”

He throws chin. “Glad you’re making sense again. Nash, Mucimi is still at the reservation, hold onto Luke Rayne so he can get rid of that headache.”

Nash reaches for me. “Hold on, Nash. I need to sit, I’ll never make it standing.”

He points to the chair in the corner. When I sit, I see Zeus by Justice and smile. He’s still guarding him. “Zeus, downtime.”

He chuffs but doesn’t move. Nash does whatever while Alder is talking to Justice.

“You should have stayed in the bed.” Cort doesn’t look happy with me. He’s still worried I’ll fall.

“It’s the ancestors, they gifted me shit and I was out. I don’t want to chance standing up when they’re doing whatever they do. I was dazed for a couple of hours when I woke up from the last blessing they gave me.”

He smiles. “You don’t get it either?”

“I understand all the words but not the blessing with gifts shit. Aylen said they get abilities in phases or stages gradually. They hit me all at once and no one explained it but a riddle from Dakota that wasn’t told to me. Aiyana wasn’t clear either.”

His head tilts. “You’re not on fire.”

Mase and Nash laugh. I shake my head. “Of which I’m eternally grateful.”

When Cort smiles, sometimes it’s like he’s posing for pictures. Kaleb does the same thing. It’s how I know to be on alert. “Glad you’re smiling. Your girl will need it.”

I don’t shake my head because it makes me dizzy but give him a look. “I met her less than an hour ago. She went to get her bag and four minutes later was running from whatever goop was on her, then fell at the side of the building she went in. When I got to her, Zeus jumped the dick that was chasing her. I cuffed the dick, got hit by the second dick and stood knowing there were at least two more.” Seeing it now, I look at Zeus. “You got hit with the pipe? You didn’t warn me?”

His hologram shows him jump from attention over to the second dick. He didn’t warn me? “Was he a member?”

He chuffs and puts a map up then a Raider’s pic with Major under it. A lineup shows Zeus and Harky on the list. “He was on your team?”

He chuffs but doesn’t look at me. “I think I’d be shocked seeing one of my Brothers come at me. Maybe Nash can get Mucimi to heal you.”

He moves closer and lays at my feet. “He was waiting for Justice. What a smart Brother.” I look at Cort. “So, I have known the woman for like an hour and that was a busy fuckin’ hour.”

He laughs at me while Mase bends in front of me. “How’d you know he was a member?”

“I met Harky a couple months before I retired. He had Zeus and was on their third mission

together. I was pulled to run recon for them to get prisoners out of a camp. Zeus was my partner but it was new, dogs like Zeus were never seen before. I got two days of training in his command lines where I stayed with him and Harky so I knew how to keep him safe. Once the job was done, I never saw him or Harky again. Jetti said they landed at the Center but I was in Virginia with Hemy and Prez setting up the Officer training.”

Cort’s head shakes. “You were SEAL and worked with Marines?”

“I was satellite and worked DEVGRU Black Ops. Our missions were with support from everywhere. I was support for everyone. They had three satellites that worked every-fuckin-where. They fucked it up and moved to CENTCOM but they couldn’t keep it clear either.”

He nods getting it.

“You’re clearer?” Mase asks.

“Yeah. Can’t you see it?”

“No but I’m not feeling you stressed until you said DEVGRU.”

My eyes snap to Justice. *They’ll feel it more than read you*, he said the other day. He looks at me and nods then goes back to Alder saying something I don’t get. “Justice said you’d feel the connection more than read me. We’ve been together forever and it strikes me as wrong but in a way that’s okay.”

He nods again. “I feel you stronger or deeper so he’s right.”

Nash lets my arm go and bends to Zeus. I watch Mase stand at the door and explain what we said to Cort without talking. Weird shit.

Nash smiles up at me. “It is but new always is. Mucimi said Zeus got hit in the side. He’s sore but won’t be when he’s done healing him.”

“Thank him for me and Zeus. Harky is going to be pissed. I need to give him the major and get Zeus his melon.”

Cort looks over. “I sent it to IT. Harky will get more when he gets to work tomorrow. I want these traitorous dickasses rounded up fast.”

I nod not sure what to say. They hurt Ember Faye with some chemical and a knife. “What was the chemical?”

Mase walks my way and bends again. “Muriatic acid, baking soda and a battery were in the knife wound.”

No. “A fuckin’ bomb? Muriatic acid, a blasting cap?”

“Alder said body heat with the acid would have melted the battery casing. It was just wrapped, no metal.”

“He put a bomb in her. Did the casing melt?” I’m so pissed I’m shaking.

Justice’s hand is on me. “Brother, stay with me. I got the battery out before we moved to the ambulance.”

“They put a fuckin’ bomb in her. She was tortured for months. Starved on a ship to get to us and I let her go in alone. She said she had the place trapped. I let her go in alone. Did the one cuffed talk? Forget it. I can get it.” I’m trying to stand but nothing is moving. “Release me, Justice.” I growl.

“You’re not going. You got her to the ancestors. Aiyana, Jeremy and Mucimi helped. You’ve got to get her home and safe. She’s got a target on her a mile wide. She can’t stay here. Alder will do the surgery at the ABSZ. We need you here for that. She needs you here for that.”

“She isn’t going to know I’m gone. I’ll be back before she’s awake.”

“You’re with her. This isn’t a negotiation, Brother. She wakes up before surgery and you have to be there.” He’s never given me an order like that.

My eyes bore into his. “I’ll be back.”

“No, Brother. You’ll find every one of them and kill them before you come in. She doesn’t talk to you before the surgery and lives thinking suicide is her only option. You are not fuckin’ leaving. You’re with me all the way through, Brother.”

“Fuck!” My growl isn’t loud but even I hear the frustration in it. “I let her go alone.”

“They got her outside. They knew it was wired. She thought you were calling from the other side. This is not on you, Brother. You’re here with me all the way through. She needs that. You will need that.”

I’ll need that? What the fuck for? My eyes whip to Mase. She’s mine?

“Yeah, Brother. I feel it too. Whatever you need I’m there.”

“Jesus fuck. How did I miss that?”

Cort’s hand goes up. “It’s about fucking time someone gets it without dragging it out.”

I look back at Mase. “Get to the dick. He’ll have past places, new places, names. Find them. Elite is good at hiding and Harky ran with the best, Zeus knows the members. You need eraser gear and your quickness, there’s no way you’ll make it with just guns.” I think about the bag in my chopper. “You see it?”

“Yeah. I’ll get your gear, I’m glad it’s close. I’ve got this. I’ll take Harky and Zeus.”

I nod then he does. “Get him some melon for the chopper ride.” Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. “Nash, is Zeus better?”

Zeus barks.

“He is. He’s ready,” Justice says and Mase walks out with Zeus. “If I let you go, will you try for the door?”

My nose burns and I look at the bed. “No. You have more important shit to do than dragging my ass back. I’m here. It will kill me, but I’m here until you say she’s clear.”

He nods standing. “Thanks, I feel what you do but I need to help Alder, Brother.”

I lean forward putting my head in my hands. She’s mine, needs surgery and the dick put a fuckin’ bomb in her. *‘Mase, he dies with a bomb in him.’*

‘That was my plan, Brother. I got Zeus his melon.’

I nod to the floor. At least that’s done. I can’t believe I let her go in alone.

“You would have died going in and she went out another exit thinking it was you. Nothing you could control would have made a difference. Zeus was wagging his tail when he saw his old Brother. It was already too late when he jumped. This gets to better but not if you’re blaming yourself.” Justice growls at me.

I sit up. “Got it. Do your thing. I’ll find perspective without stopping you. Thanks, Justice.”

He nods going right back to Alder. I need to stop fuckin’ with his focus. I stand and Nash does. “I’m going in the hall to call Rayne or my dad, whoever picks up.”

He nods. “I’m with you.”

Whatever makes him happy. Rayne answers. “Luke Rayne. You’re healed?”

“Yeah, I guess. You know what happened?”

“Cort called your dad but only said you had stitches and were at the reservation with your

girl.”

“Yeah, that’s about how it played out.” I tell him everything I remember and what Justice said about Zeus not seeing a threat then wait.

“You believe you fucked up?”

I smile. “I thought you’d start with she’s mine. I let her go in alone.”

“You would have died going in.” He doesn’t sugar coat anything.

“Yeah, that’s what Justice said. You think this is what had me so unfocused?”

“I do, Brother. They couldn’t step in because it may have gotten you killed. You know how they work better than I do.” He’s right.

“Giving me a warning would have had me sticking closer. There was no threat I could feel there. Fuck. I would have died, they’d keep me out of it until that threat was gone. Justice knew. He answered and showed right away.”

“Glad you’re alive, Luke Rayne. Your Brothers did a good job keeping you that way.” Fuckin’ Brother.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Your girl, we can be there…”

“No, we’re going back as soon as Alder finishes cleaning the chemical. She’ll get surgery at ABSZ. There’s a target on her and we’re not covered here.”

“Surgery for?”

“Her back. They haven’t said, but Alder thought paralysis. I’m bracing for that one.”

“I’ll send Alder and Stella my file. If he thinks it will work, Stella can make it.”

My throat closes up but I get out, “Thanks.”

“We can be there in an hour, Luke Rayne.”

“No, I need to breathe.”

“All right. Who is with you?”

“Nash, Mase went to get Harky so they can find the rest. I’m staying here in case she wakes up.”

“Following advice is not a strong suit for the Brothers. I’m glad you see further than your anger. We’ll be at the ABSZ when you land.”

I see him nod at my dad. Fuckin’ Brothers. “Thanks, tell my dad I’m okay and thanks for not jumping in.”

He laughs then is gone.

Nash smiles. “Rents are awesome when they’re not acting crazy.”

“Yeah.” Something is pulling my focus. Something is coming.

“You know what Alder thinks.” It’s not a question but is.

I nod. “I’ll deal with it when they see Rayne’s back and make a decision. They’ll need time to figure out what to do without my reactions clouding that.”

“You’re a smart Brother. Losing you was all I saw. Now that’s not a threat, losing her is not an option. We all feel it. She belongs here. Everyone will make sure she stays here.” He saw losing me.

Spinning fast at the footfalls, my gun is out. Nash is beside me pointing two guns. “We got company.”

I slide to the side and throw to Cort as I make it to the open area with curtains sectioning it off.

'Don't leave that door, Nash.' Bending, I see the boots and push.

'Keeping her with us means I'm at the door for as long as she needs me here.' He's such a good Brother.

I pull back then a quick jerk to the side. Laying him down without a sound, I'm moving slow again.

Feeling a second here, I slide around against the wall checking every curtained section. He's closer to the doorway pissing me right the fuck off. He has a knife to finish the job and doesn't like the two men that fucked up, he wants his pay. Taking his knife, I stand behind him and plunge it into his neck. A scream has me pushing fast but I don't let the pressure up. His body stiffens but I know he can't move. Dropping him by the chopper at the affiliate Club, I roll fire through him and move. There's got to be more.

'Luke Rayne?' Nash calls to me.

'Almost back there, one more?'

'A reader, yeah. Pissed she's still alive. They need proof.'

I push faster. A reader. Ember is a reader. There's got to be thousands of readers but I've never come in contact with two civilian readers on the same day.

I see the dick taking confident but slow steps toward Nash. *'Doctor coat. Combat boots. Done.'* I snap his neck while Nash lowers his gun.

"Get them out of here. Cleanup will pick them up," Cort says from the door.

I nod. "I dropped one by the chopper at the affiliate. If Nash takes the other, I can be back in three."

Pablo and a big Protector I've seen but don't know come down the hall. "Go, Security has the hospital. Pablo, don't let anyone past this door." Cort gets me focused.

I take Nash's arm and move.

"Fuck, you're faster than me." He's surprised so it must be faster.

"Pick him up and hold on. This is new for me." I drop the doctor wannabe on his dead buddy.

Nash drops the paralyzed dick on him but he's looking toward the Club. "You need to explain?"

I push, stopping two feet away from the President. He steps back. "Cleanup will pick up the bodies."

He nods and steps back when Nash appears beside me. "I told Cort we'd run cleanup."

"Thanks, Brother. You got your truck back?"

"Yeah. You need it?"

"No, we're faster without it. Thanks for the cleanup. This is all that showed at the hospital. Mase will have more."

My hand hits Nash's shoulder and we're moving. He laughs. "He doesn't ever have that many bodies."

I stop at the emergency double doors and we walk through. Pablo and his partner throw chin. "Who's your partner?" I ask. Names are always good.

"Keg. Commander DeSeville and VP of Sentinel Nash Blackhawk." Pablo points to each of us.

"It's good to see Pablo has a partner, Keg. Glad the freaky doesn't freak you out. Cort doesn't react."

Keg smiles. "Had a reader in my unit. Never saw the other shit but I'm told it's normal here."

“What did your reader look like?”

Keg pulls his phone out and scrolls. A team of army combat in utilities shows and he turns his phone for me leaning closer. “Him, Sgt. Nathan Lynch. We were in Pakistan.”

Nash looks then looks at Keg. “The pussy Luke Rayne was holding when you got here.”

“The doctor? He had black hair. Nathan was light brown.”

Nash pulls his phone and throws a hologram board over it. He closes his eyes and the doctor shows on the board getting bigger as he walks closer to where Nash was standing.

“That’s him but he’s got dark hair, the beard and those scars. Look,” he points out ink on the dick’s neck. “He didn’t have anything but the battalion in ink on his arm.”

I look at Pablo getting a nod. Pulling Nash with me, I thank the new guy and walk in the room.

“Your new guy needs training, Boss.” Nash doesn’t miss much.

“He’s a body and big. He’s with Pablo because he’s not very observant but takes orders and is quick to carry them out. He’s not a Lead but a good Brother to have your back.”

Nash smiles. “Glad you noticed. The reader dressed like a doc was in his unit. Nathan Lynch was his name. I sent it to IT.”

Cort nods. “Good job. That’s four dead and one in holding. Any other readers?”

“I didn’t feel any but the doc wannabe. I do feel that this is just round one. If we’re here for a while, I can get trainees out as Security.” I wish the military didn’t move already. They’d have been better.

“I have the hospital covered. Since Zeus was surprised by a team member, I didn’t want trainees-just-out on Security. Flight Crews are manning outside doors.”

Nash smiles. “Smart move, Boss. Keg knew one too but didn’t know.”

I go to the bed seeing only the back of Ember’s head thinking Keg alone would have ushered his buddy in.

Justice smiles. “Almost done.”

Watching Alder with what looks like a frosting tipped bag made out of foil I have to reach to find what he’s doing. “Suctioning the chemical out.” Fuck, there was that much in her? I don’t need that.

“Yeah, Aiyana got it all in one place but the gel was melting.” Justice helps but doesn’t.

My dizzy is back so I hold the rail.

“Breathe, Brother. You don’t need it.” Nash is right behind me.

Turning, I put a hand on his shoulder letting him know I heard, then move to the chair.

“Jesus, another one disappears even in small areas?” Cort gets my eyes for a second then my head is in my hands and I breathe.

“He’s always suspended but he’s faster now. He doesn’t advertise,” Justice answers.

I hear them but push it away and jump. Ember is here with Aiyana, Jeremy and Mucimi. I sit and breathe. The gel was melting. That’s what I saw burning her clothes. They were packing it in or trying to. I breathe. I’m here, Ember. Whenever you need it, I’m here.

She doesn’t answer.

Chapter Four

ABSZ

Two days

Luke Rayne

Pacing the halls doesn't make this go any faster. It's been an hour. Waiting all day for Alder and Chop to decide what to do took more patience than I would believe I possess. Now today, a six-to-ten-hour surgery I'm only an hour into doesn't bode well for me.

Ember was awake for maybe ten minutes of the last two days that I've spent with the knowledge she's mine. Telling her as she got the news of tissue and bone damage wasn't an option. All she knows is she's paralyzed from the chest down unless what Alder and Chop do works. Stella tried to explain about sensors and robotic vertebrae, but seriously, I'm in no mood to learn about their fuckin' crazy technology. I'm having trouble remembering who is here when I turn corners.

My dad pushes away from the wall as I'm going by again. He doesn't say a word but walks with me. That feels good, but I can't say it so I keep walking.

Four hours

“Luke Rayne.”

I jump back and open my eyes. “Yeah, Dad. Is there news?”

I stand fast slapping a hand on the wall quick. “Eat, you’re still dizzy.”

“Yeah, but I’m not leaving.” If I walk out the door Justice will come find me. He needs to stay and do whatever he does so this works.

“You don’t have to. Rayne got a table set up.”

I nod and breathe for a clearer head then follow him toward the front doors. A table is here and there’s food trays on it.

Trask puts a tray down and pulls the chair. “Hannah made you pot roast.”

I smile. “I love my Brothers. Thank her for me.”

I sit and eat most of the oversized tray she sent. It was a nice thing to do. When I put the top back over the tray, I see the OJ and coffee milk and smile. “Perfect.”

Trask hits my arm. “Nash smuggled in the milk. Drink it before Alder gets wind of coffee milk on the ABSZ.”

I laugh remembering the Bits going crazy after drinking it and Alder banning coffee milk on his whole compound and all Alpha-Bit houses. He even sent a notice to the food service workers that Alpha-Bits are never served coffee milk. ‘*Thanks, Nash.*’

‘I felt it, Brother. I sent six to your room at Phoenix. You got a week to drink them.’

‘Appreciate it.’ Honored plays in my mind and I know he feels it. Love my Brothers.

“Tell us about your girl,” Prez says, surprising me because I thought he was at the Badass mansion.

Since he’s here, I don’t make him wait for that answer. “She was on the mission that Piper and Zeus got hurt. She hadn’t met them yet but was bringing locations for them to find biochemicals. The blasts happened and she was taken then tortured for months. She escaped and was on a ship to California. All I got was she was hungry and scared. Something was wrong with her and moving hurt her. In the states, she made it to Vegas, was getting stronger, eating more but still hungry. She didn’t hurt so much to move from what I saw and felt. The Club tried to hire her as a Club chick and offered her pain relief and she walked trying to figure out how to get closer to Colorado. She saw Cort and Brekan and knew Brekan was military and Badass but said he looked scarier than me so she’d talk to me. The information she had was about Basinger’s kids being taken in France, a hit to the White House and attacks on Basinger-Bruce at Adroit and all around DC. I told her to write it out for me because she had a list of shit in her head but I knew time was running out. She agreed and went into the barn building right after that.”

“Jesus on a stick. Do you know her name?” Jack makes me smile.

“I got it before I got there. Ember Faye. She was not military but said MARSOC. She isn’t a Marine.”

“They ran naval intelligence with JASOC.” Jack knows shit I don’t.

I shake my head. “They’re so fucked up over there. Anyway, I found her, talked for less than an hour and most of that she was eating.”

Jack gives me a look. “You knew her for an hour? How is she yours?”

I shrug. “Justice and the crew knew. They couldn’t warn me because she wired the barn building and Justice said I would have died if I went in.”

“Holy fuck. Now I’m glad they didn’t warn you. I didn’t understand that part.” My dad leans over bumping my shoulder.

“I didn’t understand any of it. I kept thinking I should have gone with her then realized Zeus didn’t warn me. He saw an old team member but didn’t realize the dick was a threat. I keep wondering if there were more he knew. At the hospital was a team member that Keg said was a reader. Then Ember is a reader and has some vision. It’s a lot of coincidences.”

“A pussy was a reader?” Tucker is as surprised as I was.

“Yeah, he was in an army combat unit with Keg from Phoenix but showed wearing a doctor coat to get closer to Ember. He was pissed the others fucked up and wanted something from her as proof for payment.”

Prez is up and pacing. I finish my milk because they know as much as I do about Ember now.

Prez turns. “Go over what you felt and saw from her, Brother.”

I close my eyes and start from the beginning. He makes deep breathing noises but I keep my eyes closed while I see and feel her being tortured.

When I feel her on that ship, he stops me. “I need a minute. Phoenix, I need Brantley and get Dakota here.” He doesn’t stand and seeing his hair almost touch the floor has my body tense. He saw more than I did?

I start from the beginning again and look around noticing more than the pain. No. I try to back up and have to push the chair and back away. Keeping hands off me, leaning into the wall with nowhere to go, I stay in my crouch and breathe through her torture hearing sounds I missed. “Sonofabitch! Americans.”

“Stop! Brother, listen to me.” Prez pulls me up. “You don’t go there. You give it to me and walk away.”

“They’re fuckin’ *Americans*, Prez. I can put it on a board. They tortured her.” I breathe and throw what they did.

His hand grabs me by the back of my neck and he pulls me away fast. We’re outside before he starts talking but I’m calmer and breathing steady because his hands on my neck send that energy like Justice when he calms us.

“Relax, Luke Rayne. Walk away from it, Brother. Nothing she went through will do anything more than haunt you. You don’t need it. You can’t change it and you weren’t told for a reason. Mase has no idea what Kateri lived through. He doesn’t need it.”

Mase would light the fuckin’ west up if he knew what she went through. I had Teller and Mucimi calming me when I read it.

My body and mind are already planning for the multiple murders. I don’t need Ember’s nightmare in my head. I get it and nod. “I give it to you and you can take it away. That’s what you did for Mase, right?”

“You won’t keep details, Brother. Live it once and we’ll take the details.”

Yeah. Once, I can do this once and give them what they need. Yeah. I breathe and nod. “Okay. Is Mase or Teller close?”

He doesn’t understand. “Both.”

“Someone needs to hold me here. I already want to find them.” My body is shaking with the

need to bolt and find them right the fuck now.

He sees it. "Mase, I need help." He turns back to me. "We go in a room, just you, me, Dakota, Brantley and Mase. Do you want someone else there?"

"My dad. Don't bring Rayne in, he'll go off."

He nods. "That's one I knew. Jake will keep it together. He did it for your mom."

Mase appears and walks back in with us. "You okay, Luke Rayne?"

"Not even a little but you know that."

He nods. "You're vibrating. When I'm on fire, I close my eyes and breathe from the ancestors' air."

I stop and try it. Picturing the reservation, my favorite rock and the nighttime sky, I feel their energy fill me with every breath. It's calming. Opening my eyes, I see everyone watching. I shrug. "It works."

My dad smiles. "Fuckin' kids."

Now they all smile. It's good for a minute but dad notices me shaking and Mase takes my wrist.

Prez notices and starts issuing orders rapid fire. "Dakota, get with Chenoa and Hannah. We'll jump as soon as he's done. The cloak is all the details. Phoenix, have Keesog ready. Dakota, I may need you to help hold him here until we jump."

"I will be with you, my wise Leader. Hannah and Chenoa will help when needed."

I want to roll my eyes at the *wise Leader* but he's Dakota and knows more than me. Not that I don't think Prez is a wise Leader, but the way Dakota says it like a title is old. Mase rolls his eyes looking right at me. Maybe I'm overthinking it. He laughs.

"It's still better than POT." Prez pulls me into the first empty room in the hall. "Phoenix, get Brantley up on a board in here."

"Roger, Dad." Phoenix types on a keyboard like Alder and has Brantley on the wall. "If I see more of what Luke Rayne has, I'll help him, Dad." I can't believe he's saying it to Prez.

Prez nods. "Thanks for saying so. Ask Jack to come in."

Phoenix shakes his head. "Beacon, Falcon, Cort. There's no way Jack is going to stop him. He'd help."

Prez nods. "One of them and someone to hold Jake."

"Cloud is here."

Prez nods. I'm tired of the setup, my body is ready to spring here, I need this done. Christian, Cort and Pablo come in just as I take a step. Cort points at my dad and Pablo moves toward him.

Christian looks amused. "I am, Luke Rayne. They could have just asked me."

I nod figuring he's right. "We're set. Mase, don't let him go, he's faster than all of us." Christian has us all looking at him. He shrugs and rolls his hand to hurry us along. "He's trying to hold himself here and losing that battle. You may want to get started before he's just gone."

Cort stands by me and takes my arm. I'm watching Prez and feel the steel. It's like a fuckin' second and I'm cuffed to him. "What the fuck?"

"If you drag me anywhere, I'm shooting you." His eyes are scary sharp.

Holy shit. I nod seeing he means it.

Prez throws me chin. "You can start, Brother."

Closing my eyes, I start from the beginning. I'm bent in half and register Prez talking but I'm

stuck in this nightmare that just keeps going. I feel Ember's pain, despair, her hunger and stand. "Food. It's right there! She needs food!" It's on the floor just out of her reach. The water is so close. I try for it but feel the chain stopping me.

They don't move to help. I reach and get slammed back. "The food!"

"Move past it. Go past. She's here, she has food." Christian touches me and I'm running. The sandbox. A soldier. I can't. I'm touched again and see but don't hear the words. I move through the nightmare looking at everything and everyone but don't hear it. I feel pain, tired, hungry and scared but don't get it. The lists get longer, the darkness doesn't quit. Badass. Military. They can help. My Brothers but I don't know them. They have to help. "Fuck! The bombs! Tell Kaleb! Aaron! Let me go! That was the fuckin' Senator! He's going to..."

"Jump!" Prez has me jumping.

I'm weighed down but feel the calm. They're my Brothers. They do help. "The senator. Tell Kaleb about the General. He's going to kill the President. They're using Russia and the ayatollah."

"We got it, just relax, Brother." Cort sounds far away. I relax. He can help.

"Stop them, Cort." I'm pulled back and feel a blast of energy run through me.

"It has not happened. Badass will help. You will help, Luke Rayne. That cannot happen if you do not calm."

"Tell Kaleb or the President, Vice Admiral. You see it?" Someone besides me needs to see this.

"Relax. Hear my words, Luke Rayne. You help with calm and insight, clarity and foresight. The events have not happened, will not happen if you use the gifts as they are meant to be used."

I snap to attention. I know that tone so well. "Roger, Vice Admiral."

Energy slams me.

Opening my eyes, I'm disoriented then hit with visions. "Fuck." I hold my hand over my eyes like that will help. "Shit."

"What do you need, Brother?" Cort asks.

"A minute. Visions but they aren't mine."

"Get someone that understands in here." Cort sounds pissed.

I move my hand and look at him. "Why the fuck am I on the table and why are you pissed?"

He smiles. "I thought you were still stuck in whatever the hell possessed you. Who is Vice Admiral?"

"My down-time Officer. We specialized in other areas. He was my Officer. How do you know him?" I sit and spin with my wrist still cuffed to him. "Think we can take these off?"

Cort's watching the door but not answering.

"Is Alder finished? Why am I in here cuffed to you?"

“Give me a minute, Luke Rayne.”

I nod but watch the door as Christian comes in.

“He has questions. Can I take the cuff off?” Cort asks before I can.

Christian watches me and I feel him in my brain.

“Why am I cuffed? That’s not in there or I wouldn’t have to ask.”

Christian smiles. “He’s clear, you can take it off, Cort. You’re cuffed so you don’t vanish on us.

No one would catch you, it was a smart move on Cort’s part, but we didn’t know you’d be able to carry him without feeling it while moving that fast. Next is Ember. She’s lived through some shit but you don’t need details. Like Mase and Harky, move her forward, the details will have you holding her in a place she needs to move out of.”

I nod and see a ship.

“Don’t go back. The cloak will hold the details so you aren’t reliving them. She stowed away and made it to California. Move on.”

That’s something I remember. “I get it. I can’t help her if I’m stuck in the details.”

He nods. “Yeah, keep away from what’s not clear. When you feel that hazy layer, move away from it. It’s not just you it hurts. You’re meant to help Badass save lives and won’t do it while spinning your wheels in details.”

“Got it. I’m meant to help with calm and insight, clarity and foresight.”

They both stare at me in a weird way. “What?”

“Where did you get those words?” Christian’s voice sounds off.

“Cort asked me about the Vice Admiral. He was my Officer for specialization training on my downtime. I guess he feels close. Why is he important to you?” I look at Cort and see the words. “*Hear my words, Luke Rayne. You help with calm and insight, clarity and foresight. The events have not happened, will not happen if you use the gifts as they are meant to be used.*’ Shit, he always said, ‘*Hear my words, Luke Rayne*’. It was his way of getting my attention. When did you hear that?”

“Ten-fifteen minutes ago. Aiyana said them but it was a weird voice. Everyone was shocked then you fell asleep. You rogered a Vice Admiral.” Cort has my skin crawling.

Aiyana said it? It was the...oh fuck. “He died and he’s an ancestor?”

“It sounds right to me but I don’t know much about ancestors.” Cort looks at Christian.

“Brother, you’re right. He’s an ancestor and talked through Aiyana. Those words he passed down are true. Your life has purpose. You’re the most level-headed Brother on the Justice League, you need to be that Brother with more insight and clarity.”

I nod. “I will, Christian. Does someone see something different from me?”

“No, Brother, but you fell into Ember’s memories and felt what she felt. It isn’t normal to see from you. Keep her going forward or you lose her, then yourself.”

I smile at him. “You know I just met her and don’t really know her.”

“I know if you lose her, we lose you and the lives you were meant to save.”

I take in a breath. “The lists?”

He nods. “Not just civilians.”

Fuck. Kaleb, Tyson, Aaron and southern Brothers.

His hand goes up. “Stop. It isn’t now and you don’t need the details right here or right now.”

Alder will be finished soon. You need your focus clear for what's next."

I nod pushing away the vision. "I'm here."

He smiles which is rare to see so often. "You are, Brother. Let's go out there so they'll stop planning for you to be shadowed by Uncle Danny."

I laugh walking out behind him then remember Cort. "Thanks for whatever part you held in there. I'm glad you didn't shoot me."

He smiles. "You owe me a freaky ride next time I have to be there fast. Mase bitches the whole way."

I put my fist out and he bumps it. "Anything, always, Boss."

My dad hugs me. "You're okay?" He steps back holding my arms.

"Yeah. I don't know what happened but I'm not replaying and I can't hear it or I'll fuck up what's meant to happen."

He nods pulling me into him again. "It's not repeated. You don't need it to take care of your girl."

I smile at the, *your girl*. "That's what everyone keeps saying."

Prez hugs me then Rayne does. "Since I don't get what you all did and Christian is blocking for you, this is weird. Has there been any news from Alder and Chop?"

"You're reading more if you know Christian is shielding. Teller said all the sensors are placed and responding. It's taking longer because the metal has to bolt two ribs, not just the one they knew for sure."

I put my hand up. "I think that's something else I don't need details for. Thanks, Phoenix."

Cort laughs. "Get a drink, Brother. It's going to be a while longer."

I get a drink and see the gouges around my wrist. "Shit."

Mase nods. "You were fighting to get out. Cort held you when we couldn't. It took me, Dakota and Cort to keep you here. Christian was jumping back and forth to the reservation to help Prez not disintegrate the building. The ancestors or Aiyana held you at the reservation. There was nothing left in me by then. You pulled us all there."

"Shit. I pulled you all?"

"Yeah. Christian was shocked and that's not easy to do. He's seen more shit but was shocked you got us all there." Mase's head is shocked that I shocked Christian.

I guess I am too. I drink another OJ and turn hearing clicks on the tile floor. "Zeus. Glad to see you, Brother. Where's Harky?"

He hits his watch with his nose and shows me down-time and Harky, then train.

"Thanks for coming, Brother. He didn't let you come alone. Who is your handler?"

His board shows Sohn. A Brother I've seen comes up behind Zeus. "I'm MB, Commander DeSeville. I accompanied Sohn to the IT building with Zeus. He outranks me so he's Lead on the team. I'm at the Phoenix Club for a while but thought I'd make sure you're up for another Brother lining the walls."

I smile. He's a good Brother. "I am. Thanks for checking. Zeus is never a problem. Was Sohn checking on their team member?"

Phoenix steps over. "He is. There was a reader Zeus had too but I didn't understand the link to you and Zeus. Akai said he has it."

“You met one from Harky's team?” MB asks.

I nod seeing he has no idea. “Zeus had some information Harky should have gotten.” *‘Mase, does Harky have the one from his team hitting Zeus then me?’*

“We got back late. IT was supposed to get that to him, right?” Mase reminds me.

“Nash sent it. It’s a blur so I don’t want to dig for it in case it’s under their cloak.”

MB looks from me to Mase. “Harky went to the K9 Compound to make his training classes. I told him I’d fly over with Zeus and Sohn. I can call him. This sounds important. Sohn went into a room Zeus isn’t keyed for so he showed me you. One of the Bits found you here on tracking.”

I see it now. When I turn to ask, Mase is gone.

‘Getting to Harky to tell him about the pussies.’

“Thanks, Mase. He’s getting to Harky now.” I feel like an idiot but MB isn’t beating Mase even by phone.

He nods. “I’ll be outside.”

“Wait. Did he eat? Harky got back late.”

Zeus’s board pops on with food then he lists what he wants.

“I got it. I can order from Phoenix.” MB types the order out and walks away.

Cort laughs but when I turn back, I see the doors open and move down the hall. Alder and Chop take off their masks.

I look at Chop. “Can you bend so you can fill in where Alder doesn’t?”

He looks surprised so I explain. “He calls you for the hard shit. If you’re here it’s because he needs what you have. I need to understand and he misses words that are new to him. If you’re down here, it’s easier to get all that I’d miss. I don’t speak doctor at all and don’t have time to dig when he’s talking.”

He smiles bending with me. “Whatever you need.”

“You say how I feel to Doc Chop. He know words you understand.” His hands move fast around his head. “Too fast I say what I know. You don’t see in mind you no understand.”

I nod but he’s just starting. “Bone tissue damage, disintegrate?” He looks at Chop getting a nod. “We make steel vertebrae to rib. No. Doc Chop?”

Chop pulls his phone. “The hologram would show it. The two steel vertebrae at the bottom have full steel ribs where the damaged bone was. The picture will show better than I can explain.” A graph shows with shiny steel in place of bone. Alder points at the parts Chop means. “Six metal vertebrae are replacing the damaged bone. Her spinal cord is intact but had some damage. Whatever the healers did has the sensors responding to the nerves and muscles above and below that section. I can say right away, she’ll feel everything.”

Alder stops him. “No paralysis. She feel, no ability to move today. Shell, she start move arm, no shoulder.”

Chop nods. “Yeah. Without muscle and ligaments holding the steel in place, she can’t move right away. We knew that going in, so Stella is making a shell-like brace so she can move chest high and above. That movement is just that. She can’t strain or stress the muscles and ligaments she *does* have or she will cause the sensors to move and lose the feeling she would have had.”

I say his words over trying to get it. Alder touches my arm. “Any lift, pull, push she have paralysis chest down. This new, new mean we no have experience, test, data. Any move fast, hard, strain, we no guarantee she feel. We no solution to correct.”

I nod. "Thanks. We'll make sure she gets that there's no other miracle cure for the next time she's paralyzed."

He nods. "Now sensor say she feel. Sensor need time to...heal to inside muscle?" He looks at Chop getting a nod.

"The sensors need the tissue to heal around them. Any movement of the sensors throws that nerve response off. Like the robotics, if you don't have the band on in the right position, the robotic doesn't respond right."

"Got it. How long does that take?"

"Healers say one-two week. Freaky show to me sensor heal in place, I give wheelchair, new shell more movement. Two-month muscle, ligament grow to new vertebrae, I give exoskeleton. Exoskeleton build more muscle, ligament, maybe I make braces. We see what next, *if* it happen. New mean guess timetable. Boss Rayne timetable I use but different part, sensor is add not to Boss Rayne. Robotic vertebrae not to Boss Rayne. Boss Ember maybe soon, maybe later. I give best guess to me, Doc Chop."

I look at Chop. "The shell and exoskeleton so soon?"

He shrugs. "I don't build them but have seen the progress. Alder is right, this is new. There's no one else that has this technology and we don't have a plan B. I want to keep her in the shell longer and skeleton for a good six months but I watched Andrew walk from the bed and sit in a wheelchair to leave after a week. The healers can speed up that heal time and Alder understands it *and* the technology better than I do. If he's saying it, I agree with it."

I nod. "Thanks, Chop, LP. I'll make sure she hears both sides so she understands the new life you're working so hard to give her. Your timeline is scary, but I know the healers too. Is there anything else I need?"

Alder nods to Chop. "She's here for as long as it takes to get her into the wheelchair. Stella is working on a cable system to lift her from bed to the chair and into the bathroom. She can't hold her weight until she's in the skeleton. She needs a nurse at all times because she can't hold her weight and physical therapy will be built into her days. That shell she wears does not come off unless Alder or I take it off. If I'm taking it off, it's with Alder and someone freaky right there. Her job right now is learning to move, then walk again."

I breathe deep, feeling like she'd understand. "Got it. I'll get it across to her."

I wait and Alder takes a breath. "Old injury need heal time. Broken bone, burn to stomach, neck, underweight, we treat here, at you house. She heal better to good food, vitamin same to Alpha-Bits, free women."

I nod. "We'll get her fed right and follow what you give me. The chemical?"

"Chop clean more she open to see. Bone remove two rib play it safe. No damage to rib here to here." He points on the hologram to the upper ribs and vertebrae. "Knife, chemicals damage one side bad, other okay. Pin hold to vertebrae."

"If I need more, tell me. I don't get all this but will help get what you want to happen done. Do I need to find a nurse?"

Alder looks at Cort.

"Mary agreed. She'll be here tonight then at the Training Center. Get what you need to her then the Doc over there." Cort has it worked out.

I throw him chin.

Alder nods once. "Thanks, Pres Cort. Healers in to Boss Ember. Pres Justice say she to reservation. Faster heal there."

I nod and stand.

Chop does too. "We need to eat. She'll be out for a while. When she wakes up, we need to move her into the mobile frame."

"What can I do for you?" I feel the need to do something. They've been working all day.

He smiles. "Relax, you look exhausted. I'll call you in to help with the frame but that's after I eat."

I step back so they can move. Cort hits my shoulder. "She's going to walk again, Brother, and that isn't in a year."

I smile. "Yeah, thanks for your part in this." I point at his wrist. "And that."

He throws me chin. "I need to see my wife and son for a while. Call if you need me."

I throw him chin. Every Brother here hugs me. I see Zeus's food come in and MB set up his plate and bowl. Mase is back, slamming into me and lifts me right up. "It went well."

"Put me down, you crazy fucker."

He laughs putting me down. "I'm happy for you both. She's got a robotic back. That's a new one. Jinx's eyes have been bumped down by newer freakier shit. Don't ever say cyborg near her."

I laugh with the Brothers. My dad hugs me and keeps his hand on my shoulder. That feels good.

Rayne is shaking his head. "My back doesn't even get a mention with the new you all see daily."

Prez holds his hand up. "Rayne, the first will never be forgotten and Alder had never heard of steel vertebrae. If it weren't for you sending him your file, he wouldn't have figured out a way to get Ember walking again."

A cheer goes up and Rayne throws chin.

"Now, we have a threat file longer than my arm. If we want to keep Ember here, we need to clear the threats that hit every fuckin' where. IT, find a place and way to help. Controls, we have FBI and Club Ops running with two jobs already waiting for a slot on the schedule. If you're not needed here, Ops needs you."

Brothers hit my back leaving with thoughts to Ember. They don't know her any more than I do.

"Luke Rayne, I can stay if you need me." Rayne should know better but I throw him chin.

"I'm fine and need to stay. Go help where you can. Know I'm honored you showed and helped when I needed it." I hug him and get chin before he walks out.

MB is watching. "I told Cort I'd stay with Zeus. He's concerned with readers and a threat to him."

I nod. "Thanks for this. I didn't think Harky knew if Zeus was here without a partner." I bend to Zeus. "The threat is to you now that you've been seen with Ember. When Security moves to high, you need a partner off the compound."

He raises his paw and hits his board on. I wait, then smile when he finds the procedure.

"That's right, you need a Protector with you. MB can be your partner off the compound. You should be safe here, but with a threat, we don't assume you're safe anywhere."

He shows me *affirmative*. "Are you waiting to see Ember?"

He shows me procedure on Ops threats zooming in on *alert team*.

I nod. "He wasn't a threat to you because you knew him, you worked with him. What happened isn't on you, Zeus. Brothers aren't a threat until they show you they are. What he did was break that bond, your trust, you couldn't have known. I wouldn't have known. The last time you saw him, he was a Brother. He changed and became a threat without warning. That wasn't anything you were told or knew. You trust in your Brothers. It's the lesson I learned. I trust in my Brothers until they show me I shouldn't. That's not every Brother but it has happened. I didn't change them. They did. You trust in your Brothers until you shouldn't."

He chuffs looking at his board. The *alert team* is still up. I swipe through it. "Badass means we move forward remembering the lessons. Move forward, Brother."

He takes a few seconds then shows me the hold sign and woman. "I'm honored you stayed, Brother."

He goes back to eating so I stand. MB looks concerned.

'*Let Harky know when Zeus isn't close.*' I throw to him.

He nods so I go back to pacing the halls with my dad.

"Your mom is coming down. She got two weeks off."

Great. "Thanks. They'll have a PA with Ember full time."

"I told her. Sam I am isn't taking no today. I think it's more a '*your girl*' thing than a *patient* thing."

"I can see that. Ember will need clothes and girl shit. Mom will hate it, but it can be her thing."

He laughs. "She hates shopping but loves talking to the old ladies so it will get done."

Shit. "Ember doesn't know she's mine. She was awake for like ten minutes. I couldn't explain anything with her drugged up and getting the '*you're paralyzed unless we try some crazy technology*' talk."

"Fuck. I'll let her know. You better tell her before someone scares the shit out of her."

My feet stop. "When should I do that? She's not even awake and everyone knows. She's a reader so it won't take long before she picks it up."

Mucimi scares the shit out of me. "I'll help."

"Don't do that. You're going to get shot again." I put my gun back in the holster and look at him. "How are you going to help?"

He shakes his head. "You're faster. I can block it or show her." He's good at helping with shit like this.

"Whichever you think will help. Thanks, Brother."

He walks with us and I feel energy. "Are you sending me more?"

He smiles at me. "Just healing your wrist. Prez called for me to heal Cort so I figured yours was just as bad."

I thought Cort's was worse, it was bleeding.

He touches my shoulder. "Justice threw to you at the reservation."

I blink and he's gone.

"That kid is crazy."

I smile at my dad showing him my red but not cut wrist. "Nah, he's fast and gets called or sees shit and goes to help. His mind runs fast so he keeps it busy when he's not working on crazy technology."

He nods. "I'm getting old. I see him pop in and out never knowing why."

I start walking again. "We don't always know what he's doing but we know Mucimi. He can change his focus but needs to keep busy so he isn't getting into trouble. He hasn't had any problems in over a year. No, when Uncle Steve was sent to cover Teller, he followed Knight but we found out later he was ordered to. I don't see that as wrong. If he didn't follow orders, it would be a problem. Uncle Steve isn't anyone you ignore orders from."

"You're right." He agrees.

Chapter Five

ABSZ

Two days

Luke Rayne

I open my eyes to a pair of big blue-gray eyes watching me. “I’m glad you’re awake.”

“Are you sleeping in my bed?” She asks with nervousness rolling off her.

I smile. “Not technically. You’re in the mobile frame until you get the shell on, or it may be after the shell, but you don’t need a bed in the frame. You can adjust it to any position. I know it’s comfortable because I tried it out after we got it built.” Feeling suspended was really comfortable.

She moves her fingers on the buttons and is straight up and down. “I found the control. Sometimes it moves by itself.”

“Chop said that’s to keep weight off muscles for too long and it keeps your blood flowing.”

Rolling to sit at the edge of the bed, I text for breakfast.

“It’s futuristic as hell but I’ve read about burn victims in similar contraptions.” The cautious way she talks bothers me.

I smile at the futuristic hoping to put her at ease. “That one was originally built for a Brother with legs that are paralyzed. He wore an exoskeleton that walked for him as a kid. Because of a chopper accident and damage to his original chip, he had a new chip installed in his back and is walking with a shield of sorts. It’s similar to the exoskeleton because of the robotic components but it’s got a Badass look.”

Her smile is sad and eyes take on a haunted faraway look. “I have nothing. No money to pay, no name, no family. They wiped me.” I see a man saying it to another.

“We’ll do our best to resurrect you. If not, you can work and stay within Badass. We’ll get you good paper and you will be Ember Faye again.”

Tears pool in her eyes and I see a picture of a short, compact older woman with a more vibrant red to her hair, the same large blue-gray eyes that have the feel of intelligence to the look she’s giving a younger, taller Ember. They’re looking at each other with the same ordinary facial features but the eyes and hair draw my eyes to them in a way that forces me to disengage in order to see the covered porch of shiplap boards around them. They’re striking in a way that I feel but can’t pinpoint anything in the ordinary features that would cause the feeling. The large eyes and red hair don’t seem to fit with the features but fit perfectly.

I shake my head dissolving the picture. My mind being drawn and held by thoughts and the feel of a picture is new and fuckin’ concerning. What the fuck is that? “Do you need to call your family?”

“They’re dead. My dad first, then mom, her sister and son. I felt my mom and saw my dad. My cousin was a pilot. His planes are gone, the hangar renamed and house has a new family living in it. They were all wiped. There are no mentions of them, no pictures, no graves, I watched them die and cleaners wipe them away as if they were Molly Maids on a job in suburban America. They had music playing and talked about a game they were going to after work. It was just another job.”

I see it and wince. The fuckin’ dicks make plans for dinner while dumping pictures and trinkets from shelves into trash bags. “I’m sorry. That will never be enough for what you’ve lost. I can’t change it but can tell you we’ll do our best to make them pay for everything they stole from you.”

Those pretty, big eyes can’t hold the tears any longer, I follow the trail down her cheek before I realize I’m staring at her tears, fascinated by them moving along the ordinary features, feeling like her family’s lives are being rung from her through those amazing blue-gray eyes. Again, I shake my head clearing the weird thoughts and move to get a tissue. Walking to her slowly, so she sees my intent, I wipe her eyes following the trail her tears made.

“This won’t be easy. You’ve made it this far. We’re working to get you through this and guarantee you make it around what you’ve lost to a life that’s yours. Piece all the good you can together, remember your lost family in a way that makes the memories of them happy. We’re here and determined to get you there. I don’t mean just me, Badass from everywhere were here and waiting for word on how your surgery went. I was hugged and hit so much, I was sore by the time they left.” I picture them all leaving thoughts for her and send it seeing the sad smile.

“Why?” What plays in her mind is. *‘Why bother, I’m dead soon anyway.’*

My jaw clamps tight and I need a few seconds to get control of the *kill the fucks that did this to her* emotion before I can answer. “You’re saving lives with the information you have. Badass has a vision we follow. It was handed down by a President for the original MC Badass Club. He was Mohegan and had some ability besides reading.”

She nods and I’m relieved to see the movement. “I read it on the website. Not the ability but about Wall Thunderhawk.”

That will make this easier. “Yes. I come from that Club.”

“With your feet firmly planted in mysticism, those beliefs being handed down are law.”

My head rears back at the comment I’m not sure is a dig or a statement of belief. “Your definition of mysticism?”

“The attainment of insight in hidden truths that are supported by practices and experiences. I was raised by a reader with vision. My feet are in the same field. I see distrust and feel your uncertainty but I’m not reading you.”

Thank fuck for that. “I’m not blocking you. I was gifted ability by the ancestors and it seems very few can read me now. Justice said they’ll feel the connection and it’s enough.”

Those haunted eyes shine but no tears fall. “I’m Navajo so I understand the importance of feeling that connection. It’s the reason I wanted to see the President in Colorado. The connection felt strong but he’s a scary looking Indian. You’re like the la vida loco guy. Maybe not like him but you feel safe, calm and more connected.” Her face and those big eyes scrunch up looking cute. “No, not the guy but you look like him. Forget it. Tell me why I can’t move but I feel and feel no pain.”

Maiyun

This is unbelievable. For me to even think anything in my life is unbelievable is unbelievable. I've been an outcast since I can remember. Stephen King's *Carrie* had nothing on me and my family.

Mary, the PA that knows more about me than I do, explains her role in my new life. The schedule alone feels unattainable. Steel in my back, robotic vertebrae and me walking ever again is more futuristic than the contraption I'm in or the story of a paralyzed man wearing shields to walk because of a chip in his back.

Yet, this woman believes I will move along the schedule she was given by the white-haired kid that I vaguely remember talking to me in a weird staccato. He not only designed my new metal back but did the surgery with a tattooed doctor named Chop.

My life has never been easy or what anyone would consider normal, but this just takes the cake. To top it all off, the Ricky Martin look-alike is a better reader than I am and there's more in him. He's not Indian but I feel the spirits around him. How and when the hell does that happen?

Luke Rayne gets called away and Mary feeds me while answering my questions. As I'm being fed like a baby and getting answers, the disappearing kid I saw shows and hooks something up by my hand. Mary tells me Mucimi's getting me hooked to a computer so I won't go out of my mind being bored to death. This kid is connected to the spirits too.

The only thing keeping me from wanting to end all this is her belief that I'm worth this effort. That feeling has been gone for so long, it takes me time to grasp what it is that I'm actually feeling here. These people have taken unimaginable steps to make sure I'm safe and protected because I gave them information about people they know. I've been so far removed from human decency, it just now registers how that decency being shown to me can impact my life. They aren't asking me for anything but they're repaying me for putting my life on the line to save the lives of their friends, their people. I can't stop them and tears fall again.

"What is it, Ember?" Mary asks gently.

Shaking my head, I don't even know how to explain that what her mind called *payback* is such a huge relief. That's on top of staccato white-haired doctor, the Ricky Martin look-alike, Luke Rayne, robotic metal back, a doctor called Chop, disappearing kid hooking me to a computer I can control with one hand, people happy that surgery went well and her, the woman who will keep me on a path to healing more than my body. It's all too overwhelming.

Disappearing kid holds my hand, lulling me into a tearful slumber with an energy that I barely reach *flowing* to describe. *Overwhelming* is just the tip of the iceberg with these people passes through my mind before it shuts everything down.

Luke Rayne

The three hours felt longer, I think, as I walk in and throw Mucimi chin. “Is she okay?” He’s holding her hand for a reason. Anyone else, I’d probably shoot them. “Fuck. That came out of nowhere.” I try to explain.

He nods, watching me with tears in his eyes. “She’s yours but needed to calm down. She’s feeling a value the men took away from her. She came close to losing hope then saw a way out but was hurt, weak and so hungry she didn’t know if she’d make it. She just expected to die every day. It’s good that she made it through, but sad.” He looks down and I feel his sadness for her.

I feel him ready to break and swallow hard. “Go, the ancestors will take what they can. I’ll stay with her, Mucimi.”

He’s just gone, telling me he needs the relief he can only get from the ancestors. This is bad if Mucimi is breaking down. I saw the *why bother* thought she had but didn’t realize how deep it ran. Justice said if I stayed, she’d see something to change that. I know the shit she went through so seeing me isn’t a miracle fix. I need to work on that change for her.

“Don’t go there. Knowing what you do is enough. Teller asked me to check on her. Mucimi is off?” Aylene moves into the room and takes Ember’s hand.

I nod. “He said she’s feeling a value the men took from her. I got she was overwhelmed from him.”

“Sadly, it’s a normal part of healing for too many women. You’ve seen it and know. Empowering her with a way to protect herself isn’t happening while she can’t move. Get her helping with what she can do. She’s a smart woman. Similar to Natalia but she has vision and is a good reader. She’s Indian so you can take her to the reservation and she’d be comforted there.” She’s a President meant for her Club.

A thought hits so I ask, “Her helping is to connect her to us and her protection?” With her nod I go on. “Doing an Op with the glasses here will validate her worth and the power she has to keep herself safe, even as she can’t physically move.”

Aylene is happy with that. “Yes. That’s a perfect way to show her. With Kateri, the physical movements were enough. The end result is the same. Show her any way you can. You understand better than most, give that to her. She’s smart so you don’t need to convince her, showing is enough. Did my dad get everything he needs to plan Ops?”

“Yeah. I just got back from the first. I’m on the next just after dinner. I’ll do that from here.”

She smiles, reminding me of a younger Prez with his hair colored Lily’s blond and a girl of course, but the facial features and demeanor is Prez all the way. I shake my head. “What?”

“You’re not the only one that thinks I look like my dad, but the smile was because he’s showing you by putting you on Control for the Ops. It gives you the connection to the solution to keep Ember safe. My dad taught me as much as mom did but his lessons were showing, mom was the talker.”

I have to smile at that too. “They were meant for each other. You kids were destined to be who you are by those lessons. I appreciate the lessons you all share.”

Her smile gets playful. “Even Phoenix?”

Shaking my head is with a smile. “Even Phoenix. He’s come a long way in a short time now that he sees Badass.” Brothers bashing different didn’t happen while Officers were at the Club, it

doesn't mean it didn't happen, it means they don't know how often it did happen.

Getting serious fast she nods. "Yeah. I shouldn't joke about it. A lesson I'll remember. Thanks. She's sleeping. Stay close, she needs to feel the connection you carry with you. If you have time, jump with her."

Nodding, I step closer to Ember and undo the strap around her head. Putting her head on my shoulder, I jump. If it helps, I can give her that now. I could use some ancestral air.

"Luke Rayne."

Opening my eyes, I can't move away before strapping Ember's head back to the frame, so I don't. "Yeah, Rayne. I jumped with her," I tell him without moving.

"Do you need help with the strap?"

Seeing what he means, I raise it off the floor and slide it through the little brackets. "No."

He laughs while I get her back to good and step back. "Aylen said she'd need the jump today. While she's sleeping will help that connection."

He looks concerned. "Did they give her something?"

I have to look for what he means. "No, Mucimi felt her overwhelmed and put her to sleep so he could calm her. Aylen showed when he left but I jumped so I don't know how long she'll be out."

"Did you ever notice how much women go through before they break? She was taken, tortured and had to escape as a stowaway on a ship."

I read about Carolina when I was a kid. He knows the shit women deal with.

"Yeah. She needed to be calmed because she was feeling a value the men took from her. I can empathize with the feelings she has but can't say I ever experienced it. No one ever stole me from me." It's such an odd way of putting it but it's basically what they did to her. She believed she didn't exist then that she'd only exist for a short time.

"Compassion and empathy is all she'll need. It will fuel your need to correct the wrongs done to her in a way that she feels." His words remind me of Aylen.

"I get it. Aylen said to show her. She's smart enough that she doesn't need a map."

He smiles. "We're going to see every reason she's yours play out. You don't need details either."

I suck in a breath. *'She doesn't know she's mine. Mucimi is covering that for everyone until I get a chance to tell her or he does.'*

He acknowledges what I threw to him with a nod. "You have an Op after dinner. Do you want me to stay while you're out? I've got good Luke Rayne stories."

I shake my head with a smile. "Save them. I'm doing it from here so she can see it." I see it click in his head.

"Smart move. I can't stay now. I'm bringing some Alpha-Bits to the Training Center to help

with IT for Ops.” He throws me with that.

“Alpha-Bits? They need a Brother to watch over them and rooms that fit them. Does Cort know?” Cort isn’t letting unprotected Alpha-Bits fly.

“Alder set it up. It’s a circuit crew just doing ABSZ and the Training Center.”

“Okay. Who is the Brother watching out for them?” Being the Badass part of the base, I need ironclad plans and rules going with the Bits.

“Ari is there for a week with them. Alder has Maverick’s Bits on Ops for FBI. They love it and have been working virtual from the compound. Maverick set a pod up for them to work out of.”

Okay. I got this. “Ari is good with them. Okay. They need the Brothers watching out for them. We don’t have Alpha-Bits so they don’t know what to expect.”

He nods so I stop. “Asa is with them for a few days and already did a training class with the officers. He flew in yesterday for it.”

I smile. We don’t really have Officers besides Tucker but I don’t correct him. I had trouble understanding the collaboration with the FBI. “Okay. Let me know if I need to be back there or you need help.”

He smiles hitting my shoulder. “Relax, Brother. Cort is making sure we’re covered so you aren’t pulled from here. Alder and Asa know their Brothers and have the Alpha-Bits covered. Prez is sending a Protector to cover the Bits when Ari goes back to Delta. Hemy has a Protector from his class he’ll send for permanent but you have a two-week wait. Baxters is pulling Joshua back to cover your dad and I’ll go home as scheduled. Call your dad for more but I need to go.”

Jesus, they’re covering me from all over the country. “Love the Brotherhood. Thanks, Rayne.”

He goes with a laugh.

“I do too. Rayne is your namesake?”

Turning back is with a smile because she has one on. “Yeah, he saved my mom before I was born. That’s not accurate, the day I was born early is accurate. Mitch Baxter made the first steel vertebrae. Rayne’s back is how Alder came up with the robotic vertebrae you have. Rayne sent the files to Alder before you were out of the hospital.”

“Aren’t I in the hospital?”

“The day we met, you were attacked.” Her confusion is cute and warranted.

“I remember the two men and Zeus barking. I knew I wasn’t walking again but don’t know how.”

I don’t feel her stressed by that or the black I felt before, but I need to reinforce that she’ll have a new life of walking she needs to get to. “You will walk again and I told you what happened but not the before. That day we both went to the hospital in Arizona. The hospital wasn’t safe and they tried again for you, so they flew us out that night. You’re at the medic center on the ABSZ. This is Alder’s Club grounds. It’s covered in a force field, has Marines, Navy and Badass guarding you and is surrounded by a wall that has sensors that shoot out at any threat. We’re in the center of Clubs that surround Phoenix in a hundred-mile radius. Because Cort is crazy, Phoenix is the biggest Club and has the equivalent of an Army and Air Force base right here.” As I say the words, I throw her pictures, the map and the aerial section of the ABSZ.”

“This is where the little cars and bikes are? The white-headed boys?”

“Yes. The ABSZ. All BSC Clubs have some Alpha-Bits and they all have houses here or in Phoenix but they move around on the circuit or stay at a Club they like.”

She tries to nod. "Can you loosen the band on my head?"

"Yeah. I took it off earlier and must have closed it too tight."

"Why did you take it off?"

"To bring you to the reservation. Aylen came and said you'd get comfort from it. She's the new President for the Zion Club."

She's surprised. "A woman President?"

"It's an Advocacy Club. Aylen was brought up at Princes, her mom came up with the vet and homeless housing centers, PTSD Program for Vets, elderly interaction with college kids and a million other programs she started from the Women's Center in Rhode Island that she runs."

"I've seen the PTSD and Homeless shelters. My aunt helped build one in California."

I smile. "You come from a line of Badass women. Prez will get a kick out of that. He's back at the mansion for FBI Ops so I'm sure he'll stop in at some point." At her look of confusion, I explain. "Ben Knight is the President of Territories for Badass and President of Princes of Prophecy. Lily is his wife and Aylen his daughter. We all call him Prez because he was our President while we were based out of his Club. Everyone else calls him Prez because he's earned it."

She nods looking away then back to me. "He's related to Wall Thunderhawk?"

I correct that. "Axe, Wall's VP. Prez's dad was VP for MC Badass. He's here quite a bit. He was sent to the military by Wall and Axe. Jess Knight was Axe's daughter. Her Brother is a high Officer at MC Badass with the President of that Club who was sent to college by Wall."

She nods and it looks like the strap isn't too tight. "The one that implemented the changes in Badass. I read it when I was looking for the Bruce guy and Zeus. Zeus was named on the news for rescuing kids from a school. That's how I knew about the Club in Colorado. I saw people and the dogs, then the President of a different Club, the Indian with the white-haired babies." She gives a little cough.

"Brekan. Do you want a drink?"

"I can get it." Her hand moves and a hologram pops up making me smile. Technology popping up is fairly normal, what is funny is how fuckin' fast they do this shit. A robot rolls in with water and holds the cup up to her mouth. What a good way to let her do what she can without human eyes watching her every blink.

"They are a little crazy with technology but it's amazing what they think up. I come from Baxters Compound so technology isn't new to me, but the Bits take it to the next level." Mitch would love living close to the Alpha-Bits but she'd probably short circuit with all the shit so many of them come up with.

"New generations always do. I like the robot. Being able to do anything alone is a relief. A kid came in and showed me how to use the controller. This is the first time I did. The disappearing kid came after and was hooking a computer up. I don't know how that works. Did you see him? Did he tell you how it works?"

"No, but we can figure it out. Put up your hologram and look for a computer or icon that means computer." I watch as she does. I see it on the left but wait for her to find it.

"What's this one?"

I smile. "Food. Zeus has that on his watch. He uses a series of signs and pictures. You can order if you're hungry."

"E-mail has a red dot on it."

“The Brothers wishing you well and asking if you need anything. They’ll ask if you want food, drinks you love, a dog...say no to a dog until we get to the Training Center. Basically, they’ll drive you crazy. You can answer or ignore them.”

She gives me a look. “People I don’t know are offering me well wishes and to bring me food I might like and you think I’d ignore them? I want to meet every one of them. People aren’t like that anymore.”

I smile at her obvious anger at me. “They’re like that here and I’ll remind you of wanting to meet them when you beg me to stop them from showing so you can get a minute to breathe alone. I’ll wait until my mom leaves before I do that. She’s a doctor and staying for two weeks. So, you have two weeks before I’ll listen to the first of any begging from you.”

Her anger turns to a smile then a laugh. “I like that. I wouldn’t listen to anyone whining for something so inconsequential. Entitlement, sloth and avarice are three things that annoy me. Human decency is a lesson I learned young. It’s not a life I’ve lived much, outside of my sheltered upbringing.” Those big eyes shining at me have me stunned, then she’s shared so much about her beliefs hits me and I step back before I bend and kiss her. It’s not like she’d have a choice and I can’t touch her until she knows she’s mine. Shit. I take another step back and pull the chair over.

“We grew up with lessons of all being equal so I get it but we didn’t use your words. Asshole, lazy and greed were taught to us young.”

She smiles. “The reservation is an actual reservation?”

“Yes, it’s really the Mohegan reservation in Rhode Island but where we go is more of a realm in time of that place. Our connections with the Mohegan tribe is in Connecticut. The realm thing is weird but I’m not Indian.” I’m thinking she’s going to scoff at the Dr. Who shit.

“We had a circle. Navajo, Cheyenne and Naskapi merged so many times I’m not sure anyone knows who they come from. My mom never cared. Treating everyone with decency is what she raised me on.”

“Do you know Chenoa Blackwater?”

That surprise is a yes. “How do *you* know her?”

“Teller Knight married her last year. She lives right here on the ABSZ. She’s a doctor for Indians in the Bravo towns and the Alpha-Bits. She was a...”

“Marine. My mom was shunned for pushing to get her trained as a Shaman. The chief told my dad if he couldn’t control mom to take her away. I was eight. Mom moved to Nevada with her sister. My dad believed in the old ways and refused to live with us. I grew up before my mom told me he was in with a bad group of Indians. Brewster Jennings company hired a few of us from the reservations and used us overseas to collect information by reading. I knew right away it wasn’t a real company when we landed. The pay was good and we made a difference helping people for a good three years, then it started going bad. We were held under lock and key until it was time to work. I was asked to read the others to see if they were traitors and thought it’s why we were locked up until I couldn’t read them anymore. I couldn’t feel them either. Indians connect so either they were dead or far away. The last job, I was going to ask for help. Sgt. Lane was a woman. I was going to ask her but she got blown up.”

Wiping her tears, I whisper, “Shhh. You can help us find them. I have an Op later for the rest of the men that were hunting you. I thought they were gang wannabe MERCs but they were actually sloppy MERCs that think like gang members. We got names from the dick that I didn’t kill. Some were in Pakistan, some Kuwait. We’ll find them.” Watching her face scrunching up, I stop.

“My nose.”

I hold tissues to her nose and clean it when she's done blowing it. “Thanks. I can't wait to blow my own nose. You're already looking for them?”

“Prez got the list from your head or me from what I read. You've got to have more than I saw so you can help us track them down. We'll plan Ops and get rid of them but it may bring us the information on where the other readers are. Do you know Nathan Lynch?” Keg's Army buddy might be a link we can look into.

“He was a guard at first. He's a reader but not Indian. I haven't seen him in a couple of years.”

“Your guards were Army?”

Her brows draw down looking cute. “No, just security that stayed back while we worked.”

He was a good reader that knew how to block. “I killed him at the hospital. He was trying for a piece of you as proof for payment.”

Her pale face turns paler. “You killed him?”

“I did. I was a SEAL Satellite. He wasn't getting anywhere close to you. There were a total of four I killed that night. One was a member of Zeus and Harky's team from Raiders.”

“Spirit in the sky. That's scary and thank you. It's a weird feeling to have.”

I feel it from her and think it's encouraging that she's thanking me for saving her. She sees her value. “So you'll help us?” I ask hoping she's not out of fight.

“Definitely. Is that when you got the scar? I don't remember seeing it before.” She's looking at my head.

My hand reaches up. “It is. The member from Raiders hit Zeus then me with a pipe. Zeus saw him as a member, not a threat and didn't warn me. When I turned, he tried again and I shot him. Zeus will come visit you again. He's been here every day with a Protector for an hour or so. He'll be glad to see you awake.”

Her sad smile hits her eyes as just sad. “Sorry you got hurt because of me. I heard a noise and knew I had to get away but ran right to them.” Her head barely shakes. “I met Zeus with you. His trainer must be amazing.”

“Harky came up in a Club. Badass is his life, since Zeus learned from him, it's Zeus's life too. Justice showed and helped us both to the ambulance. We made it and we're here. Badass has a saying, *never alone*. My Brothers will do whatever it takes to help whoever needs it. That's all I was doing for you. Harky said you needed help. I went to help.” I shrug, getting a smile.

We talk about anything that doesn't make her cry. It's a good talk where she asks about me, matching my questions to her. Mary comes in with dinner and tells Ember about the ol' lady book. I groan, making Ember smile. The shine to her eyes has me shaking my head as she says she's determined to read it now.

I get my Ops glasses on while she plays with Natalia's MC romance book and call for check-in. I notice Ember watching me and turn so she can see my boards clearly. Her breath catching as Mase kills a dick and it has me wondering if this is right. Her smile when I close Ops down stops my wondering.

“Thank you. They have two breathers means alive to question?”

“Yes. We're not the military or CIA. Badass lives by our own set of rules. Men who hurt women, kids or our Brothers die and not one of us feels a bit of remorse about it.”

She's quiet for a minute or so. “I can't say I would either. We were trained to fight but not with

guns. I think it was just in case we were caught alone or without our security. I've never killed anyone." She looks away fast.

I shake my head at her. "You killed the men who tortured you. That building exploded with four in it."

Her eyes snap to mine. "I set the bomb off but didn't know they died. I hoped they did. So I've killed four men. I stole the money they had in a box too." There's that nervousness again. She had a couple of hundred in her bag so it couldn't have been anything close to what they owed her.

I shrug. "They had it coming and it's four less that Badass has to find." That seems to relieve her.

Mucimi shows up to help her with her hologram board but she's got it. He's got her asleep again when he tells me she knows she's mine. He sends me pictures and I stop him.

"I don't need it. Does she think she read it?"

He shrugs. "Ask when she wakes up. She's settled." He's gone and I want to call him back but drop it.

Explaining when she's got pictures shouldn't be hard. Teller and Chenoa come in. "Teller said she remembers me." Chenoa doesn't even say hi.

I kiss her cheek. "She does. She said her mom was shunned for standing up for you."

"Moopy told me of a reader but I don't remember her. Poppy kept me away from the traditional tribesmen. I didn't really know the Chief until I was older. They had to weigh in on me going to the military. Since they didn't have the money to train me, I went." She's another that's lived through tradition dictating her prison. She walked without the banishment shit Aiyana went through.

"I'm glad you did. Ember may have just heard of you. Her father was part of that traditional."

Teller nods. "He was. She didn't see him after they moved. She's settled but lost her family too. She may know some from the Bravo tribe."

Chenoa is all for it. "I can take her or get pictures here for her. Maybe she'd know some of the freed women."

Teller nods with a smile. "She may. Her name isn't Ember Faye."

Chenoa sees the name. "Ember Faye, spark spirit, spark creator, being, Maiyun. She's Maiyun Whitewater? She's what, three, four years younger than me? Holy cow. I bet Little Bear would know. I must have played with her when we were small." She's out in the hall without an answer from us.

I smile at Teller. "She's got it right."

"Yeah. I'm taking her hand so this works faster." He makes sure I'm okay with it before he does.

I nod knowing he's healing while he's here but touching her is better. They all do it. Chenoa comes back to take a picture of Ember then walks out talking excitedly to Little Bear.

Zeus, Harky and Mase come in causing Ember to stir then open her eyes. Zeus chuffs sitting up, then hits his watch. *Team member* then *sorry* show.

Ember smiles. "Luke Rayne told me. There's nothing to be sorry for. Thank you for what you did today and the day I was hurt. I bet if you weren't there, I'd be hurt worse."

Zeus sits with a chuff and hits an emoji with a cast on his arm that says *better*.

I laugh with Mase while Harky shakes his head. "I'm glad you're getting better too. Mase said you'll be walking soon."

Ember nods. "I saw pictures of me walking. I can't wait to get there but I'm not nervous that I

will get there now.”

“Don’t rush it or you won’t get there. Alder is good about seeing what could happen. Follow what he says,” Teller warns.

Ember’s eyes move to the side. “Who is that?”

Teller steps over so she can see him. “Sorry. I’m Teller Knight. Chenoa was just in here. She says your name is Maiyun Whitewater.”

Ember is surprised. “Yes. We don’t use those names off the reservation. I was called Ember Faye but it means Maiyun, not literally and I’m Navajo.”

Teller smiles. “No, Chenoa went through a bunch of words to get to it. If that’s what you prefer, that’s what we’ll use. If you like Ember, we’ll use that.”

“Either is fine. They wiped me but they can’t take my name. My mom gave it to me. Maiyun Whitewater is my full name. Ember Faye is like Luke Rayne’s two names I guess, it’s what Anglos used in school.”

“Like my name?” I ask not getting it.

“Light giving is Luke and Rayne is who you were named after, your protector, your mentor. I’d think Luke would represent the good in Badass and Rayne the protector in you.”

“Holy fuck she’s another one.” Harky has me smiling.

“She is. We’ll keep her.”

Zeus barks, making Ember laugh. “Thanks, Zeus. I don’t have anywhere else to go and I’ve seen me walking right here or of places I’ve seen of the Badass Clubs. You have a place with a lot of UFO planes?”

“The Training Center. That’s where you’re headed once we get you into the wheelchair,” Teller says and I feel relief from Ember.

“Whitewater is a name we know. A Kateri tie?” Mase asks.

Ember is surprised again. “Kateri Todachine?”

“You know Kateri?” Chenoa comes in surprising her more.

“I think we played together but then we went to Nevada.” Ember’s eyes are taking Chenoa in.

Chenoa nods. “Kateri doesn’t remember before she was taken. She can’t be reminded of that tie. We all played together, you were younger than me but I remembered your name. Little Bear wants to talk with you. I can call him the next time I’m here and it’s not so busy.”

Ember nods. “I thought the stories of the Todachine’s were just to keep me close to home. The two were really taken?”

“It’s a long story but yes, they both ended up slaves. Kateri has her sister’s boy and is married to Mase.” Chenoa points at Mase.

“None of this is spoken of in front of Kateri.” Mase makes sure she understands.

Ember nods looking guarded. “I’d never hurt the Todachine’s or anyone else. We’re raised to uphold human decency and extend that to those we meet.”

Mase throws her chin as Chenoa smiles.

“Whitewater?” I ask before they forget that question. It feels important.

Teller laughs. “It is. Because Crow Whitewater would be Maiyun Whitewater’s family.”

“Holy fuck. Someone better tell Cort before he thinks we’re hiding it.”

Mucimi shows grabbing Mase’s arm. “Wait. Her father was helping traffickers. Ayakuhsak was

there!”

Mase slows him down with an arm that’s on fire.

“He’s on fire!” Ember moves her frame so she’s leaning back. “Move me. There are wheels.”

“He can put himself out. He’s not a danger to you,” Harky says, moving Zeus back. Maybe Mase is a danger to Zeus’s fur.

Mase’s fire goes out looking at Ember. “Ancestors are crazy with gifts. I don’t burn anyone unless they deserve it. Your dad helped traffickers?”

“Will you burn me if he did?” Ember looks terrified.

Mase smiles. “You didn’t, so, no.”

Ember has relief rolling off her. “I don’t know. I know he was in with bad Indians but he wouldn’t live with the tribe in Nevada because they weren’t so strict and didn’t follow the old ways or something. I was like eight. I know when he died. I saw it. He got a letter the day I was taken and they killed him.”

“Good enough.” Mase is happy with the result.

“So, a Whitewater was into human trafficking?” I ask, trying to keep them moving towards a tell Cort decision.

“Yeah,” Mucimi says. Okay. I wait for more. “He wasn’t Whitewater. They took him in. He moved south keeping their name.”

Ember nods. “My mom was Whitewater. Her uncle took my dad in and gave him the Whitewater name. I never met my uncle, he was killed by an Anglo in the city. He did some work for the tribe to the city’s north. I’ve never been there but it’s one of the stories told by the Nevada tribe. A great insightful enforcer lived in that tribe and we heard the stories over and over.”

“Crow?”

Ember nods. “Gáagii the enforcer. Ben T was my uncle. He’s not Navajo, he’s Cheyenne. There’s a Shaman that we heard stories about but I don’t know him. He was someone related to the Todachine’s.”

I look at Mase. “Brekan’s grandfather.” Throwing the picture, he nods. “And grandmother.”

“You know more than we got. The tribal connections here aren’t well written or known by the southern tribe. Can you write what you know for me? I’ll get it to Co so it stays with the tribes. Right now, they have women who can’t find their families. They were the slaves we rescued.” Mase is going to give her another reason and connection.

“I’d love to. My mom was a stickler for that history and our line. I wish I had her books. She had the southern tribe in it. I’m pretty good at recall to build it for you. Kateri is mixed up in there. I don’t think you want her seeing the ties. She’s related to the south, north of the city and the Cheyenne.”

Mase nods. “I planned on giving it to Co, he’s over in Delta with the displaced Navajo and Cheyenne. He’s tied to the Lakota, Cree, Arapaho and Cheyenne.”

Ember’s eyes look away. “Jericho Clearwater, Naskapi is in there. The Prophet from away.”

I smile. “That’s Co, he was a Shaman for the Rhode Island tribe. The reservation I took you to is there. Do you know Bruce Patton? He was also known as Hatchet.”

She nods watching Mase. “He’s not from here. The reader wife was brought here by a shaman woman everyone traveled to meet. Hatchet worked with my uncle for the great enforcer to the north. I don’t know what happened to them once my uncle died.”

“We definitely need you writing the ties. Christian is related to Hatchet and Josephine from

Delta, she's their daughter."

"There's a boy and younger girl."

I smile. Christian is going to love Ember. Teller smiles. *'He's coming. He read it.'*

Harky moves closer. "I hate to break this up, but I need to get back. I have a team going out tomorrow."

Mase leans closer. "I'm going to kiss your cheek. You're going to make all the Blackhawks happy."

Ember smiles and turns her head a little.

When Mase moves, I lean to her ear. "Blackhawks are the most gifted Mohegans. The ancestors went nuts with that poor family."

She smiles. "The stories were written long before we were born. Blackhawks have a long story with gifted Shaman that change the Indian's perspective like your Badass President. It will happen and that's getting closer."

Chenoa laughs. "It's already happening. Aiyana is bridging the tribal lines and the ancestors from all tribes are banding together as they want us to. The ancestors went a little crazy merging all tribes in a firework show at my wedding."

Ember's big blue-gray eyes get huge. "It's happening? My ancestors are with yours and the Algonquian tribes?"

"All tribes. Moopy and Poppy are with the Blackhawks grandmother, the Shaman that brought Naskapi to the ancestors of the Mohegan. The wish is that we are all one tribe as Moopy used to tell me stories about."

Ember nods slowly. "I've heard them. This is new. I've only been gone for four years."

"Last year it happened, since then, Cherokee joined the Mohegan and accept all tribes."

Ember is amazed and I feel it, glad she's got this. "This is history, the prophecies we heard from the ancestors and Prophets."

Chenoa laughs at Ember's excitement. "Your family will be reunited with mine and all tribes. I feel Moopy, Poppy and Kateri Blackhawk in my circle regularly. Cort felt Crow there."

"The enforcer related to Todachine's."

Chenoa leans closer to Ember. "He was your uncle's father, your grandfather."

Ember cries. I hand Chenoa tissues and walk out to call Cort.

Chapter Six

ABSZ

Luke Rayne

Opening my eyes to the boots I hear has me jumping up quick. “Prez, Cort.”

Prez shakes his head. “Relax, Luke Rayne. This is why I’m always blocking.”

I shrug. “It’s ingrained.”

“If you didn’t block, he’d know you’re here and would be relaxed when you see him.” Cort is right but I’m not saying that to Prez.

Prez smiles. “I’ll stop with the shields.”

I throw him chin. “I need coffee. It was a late night.”

“Is your girl okay?” Cort asks as I put the pod in for the pot.

“Yeah, she was excited to help chart ties and maybe find the readers the CIA took from the reservations. She hasn’t felt them so she thinks they were moved far away or they’re dead. With her help, we may be able to at least find her answers.”

“How many?” Cort’s more than pissed tone has me turning.

“Three others. She was in a group of four. They locked them down the year before last. They were let out for jobs.”

“The same men that took and tortured her?” The growl is loud, making me wince. Ember won’t be sleeping for long.

I nod but Ember answers. “Yes. You’re bigger in real life. I see why I thought the white-haired boys were so young.” Make that, she’s already awake.

Cort throws her chin but his eyes are still sharp making him look intent and intimidating. “Some are, others are older. Alder is twenty-five now that they’ve had a birthday for the As again.”

Ember doesn’t understand.

“The CIA grew them. They celebrate a letter at a time since they don’t really understand birthdays and don’t have a date. There are a few alphabets, so it makes sense to them to do a letter at a time, rather than the first date on the lab result sheets for each Little Brother.” I explain and her eyes shine with tears.

“Did Akai get your computer set up?” Cort changes the subject.

Ember’s weak smile answers him but he lets her say it and throws chin for the thanks. “You know Kateri and Crow. Did you know Reed or Rex?” I feel Cort’s anxiousness. His dad did things he didn’t know anything about and it unnerves him.

Ember takes a minute to answer. “Reed Law? Part of the great enforcer’s warriors in the tribe north of the city?”

Cort watches her closely. “Reed Masters.”

“Law was given to the enforcers. My uncle was Ben T Law. He was Whitewater but the name Law was part of the war party that worked for the Gábii from the city to the north, according to the stories handed down. It means he was an enforcer for Gábii the great enforcer from the north. I’ve never heard of a war but Indian is translative. They could have done a certain job for Gábii. They did stuff like that taking land back or moving Anglos away from reservation water so we could use it.”

Cort nods. “My father worked with Crow for a job with other Indians?”

Ember's eyes bounce to me then back to Cort. She's nervous. “The stories we were told mean that, yes. I didn't know Gábii the great enforcer was actually Crow Whitewater and he was my family, but it would be in the books my mom had. She had a thing with the history and lines. Indians moved because of weather, lost water and fires. Merging tribes meant people lost their ties within ten to twenty years. My mom would hound the elders and write it all down. I always thought *the great enforcer, the crow*, was a big guy that was trained, intelligent and cunning.”

Cort nods and seems to relax.

Prez watches Cort relax and waits to see if he has more questions. When Cort nods to him, Prez gives a warning. “You know quite a bit of our history. Kateri has cloaked memories that stop her from the details of her past. It's not spoken of. The Pattons were moved here separately but found each other and married. That shouldn't be spoken of with Josephine and Jacky.”

Ember has a sad smile on. “I'd never hurt anyone, especially a survivor of so much pain. You should know the Shaman that leads all to one people knows all. She cannot be blinded by good or bad intentions. In order to see all, she must feel all. It was written of long ago. I know my great aunt healed and felt so much because of that ability. In order to use it, she had to feel the potential impact of her decisions. All vision works the same way.” She read about Aiyana from one of us. It makes me wonder if she can dig for memories.

I look at Prez. “Like the kids, Aiyana knows, has known all this time.”

Prez closes his eyes and I feel that pain stab at him. “Fuckin' women are unbelievably strong and smarter than me. Phoenix was telling me that and I was annoyed he'd say it. The knowledge is to remind us of our part in the world we are shaping. Aiyana, Christian, Dakota, Mucimi and Justice need us to realize our decisions and plans have a cost to them personally. It's a lesson I'll add to the beginning of my book.”

“This is why Justice and Teller can't be cloaked?” Cort asks.

I nod. “Yeah. Most of us know about Justice but Teller isn't spoken about. He gets comforted different by the ancestors. He just says they make it easier for him than Justice but Justice told me and Mase that Teller has a connection to clarity that gives him better understanding. He told us if Teller ever needs us, we go, no questions. We'd go anyway, but it's how I knew he feels it the same. The slave-baby proved it. Teller couldn't let it go until Chenoa came into his life. Now she makes him more. I bet the feeling is dulled by him seeing it better.”

Cort nods. “Like you.”

What? I'm about to say no but Prez and Ember answer. “Yeah.”

Prez smiles. “Just like that. Mase is the enforcer so Luke Rayne is the planner, to us, Ops Lead. Teller and Justice can do everything but Lead is their destiny. Justice being heard and Teller amplifying him. You need to remember the lesson, they feel it all in order to reach more.”

Ember surprises me. “That’s a good way to put it. Mase asked me to write the ties. I will but you could probably make it easier for everyone to understand. The tribes now are dysfunctional and kids don’t get the traditions or wording. It’s all I ever knew until we were hired by Brewster Jennings.”

Now Prez is surprised. “You lived in the old tradition?” His head is saying no.

“Not at all. My mom was a rebel. That doesn’t mean I didn’t learn it. She was big on history but the tribe in Nevada believed in the ancestors and their power. We heard the stories, the legends and ancestor prophecies. The Shaman bringing all tribes to one is just one of them but there are legends and stories of the future that haven’t happened yet. Chenoa said the ancestors are already merging. It’s a story I grew up hearing. The Shaman women of Blackhawk is a prophecy I will get to see and experience. There are so many more, but I don’t get all the words, like I didn’t know about Crow Whitewater and Blackhawk is a name not a symbol.”

Cort and Prez nod. I explain. “There are a lot of things she doesn’t understand in real time or life. She was sheltered in Nevada, probably to keep her safe. The only time she saw different was with the CIA taking them off the reservations. Her school with Anglos was when she was with Chenoa’s tribe. In Nevada she was homeschooled with a group of smart women that knew about the trafficking, she has no clue about the trafficking but her mom did. For the CIA, she had a bank account but went to the bank once, her pay was deposited, then wiped. At first, she shopped but didn’t have much to buy. Life tasks are not a strong suit. I was going to ask Aylen to help her learn about life outside of the reservation.”

Prez nods but it’s Cort that answers. “Aylen has classes set up in virtual. Ember will have the time and will get most of it before she moves to the Training Center.”

Ember seems surprised. “How do you know I’ll understand?”

“You’re a reader with vision. You may not know why some things are, but you will when it’s explained. Like with Crow, you just don’t have the experience or words. You’ll understand a lot more looking back at the things you’ve seen and didn’t understand.”

I smile. “You’re smart, Ember.” Turning to my Brothers, I explain, “Aylen said she’s like Natalia with reading and vision. She doesn’t need a map.”

Cort nods. “Got that. The books from your mom. Where are they?”

“Buried. They put everything in trash bags. I don’t know where they are but planes were close. Not the big planes like I went on to Kuwait. It’s little planes like my cousin had but not in California.” She looks at me. “How do I make you see my pictures? Like when you show me the Clubs and maps.”

I smile. “I sent them to Prez. He can put it on a board or I will.”

“Really? Show me.” Her hand moves and her hologram board is up.

“New document with the little flame on it. They’re spreadsheets we can send links for others to see and add to.” I wait for her to get it and pull up a blank sheet. “The first line, first box.” I throw the first picture she had up.

Prez steps closer. “Ember, think of that airport and look closer at the planes. If we get a number, IT can trace it to the airport. All we’ll need is a direction from there and we’ll know where they buried them.”

I throw two planes close up and zoom on the numbers. Ember laughs. “This is amazing. How do I put the pictures up? I can show you the men.”

“Send that link to IT. They’ll get location from the fence lines.” Cort is typing on his phone.

Mucimi appears by Prez. "I'll go. It's Paiute Meadows Ranch."

"You need Protectors and a team to dig. It's buried." Cort isn't letting him go alone.

Mucimi nods. "Whatever you want, Boss."

Mucimi's seriousness has Cort on alert. Prez notices. "Will you need that team?"

Mucimi nods. Fuck.

Pulling Protectors now could hurt. "Can this wait to be put on the schedule?"

Mucimi has tears in his eyes. *'Her mother is buried with everything in her house. There are books Maiyun hasn't seen.'*

Prez looks at me for input.

"I hate to say it, but there's so much going on in Ops, scheduling it will keep the team safe. Piecing a team puts them all in danger and Mucimi can stop most, but Ops isn't his job." I throw out instead of fuck no. Putting Mucimi in danger will always be a fuck no from me.

"Please wait. Schedule it for everyone to be safe. I wouldn't go if I knew there was a chance I wouldn't come back. Enough people have been lost. We have to give everyone a chance to live like we do. Ordering them to maybe hurt or death isn't how I'd live. It's time and I've got all the time in the world or at least two weeks before I get to sit in a chair for a couple of months." Ember has tears ready to fall again but it makes me proud. She's like all new ol' ladies.

I look at Prez and Cort. Cort shakes his head. "We'll schedule it. We run Ops regularly, Ember. There's always a chance that we'd lose a Brother. That's never good or planned. Our teams are highly trained and fierce. We don't lose Brothers well and thank fuck it isn't often. I don't know what Mucimi sees, but he relaxed when Luke Rayne said we should schedule it. Mucimi would give his life for his Brothers but a day or two means we don't need him to. He grows on you." Cort throws his politician smile on.

We all smile. Mucimi throws a blast of energy before he vanishes.

"Thank you, Cort. I've lost enough people from my life. Mucimi is growing on me too." My girl is sweet. "Can someone show me how to put the pictures up? I have more that will help when they go."

Prez looks at Cort. "If you two can get the classes from Aylen and Op scheduled, I'll show her." *'FBI lost another. Not BSC. Saber is going to ask for the south Washington state office to switch to BSC.'*

I nod and follow Cort out.

I'm surprised he stops just outside the doors. "Get with Aylen to send the virtual classes and get this up on the schedule before the schedule is filled. I'll take Saber's call."

"Roger, Boss." Walking to the radiology hut, I know it will be quiet and get the classes set. Aylen sounds happy to help. Raid gets me on the schedule as Ember Ops in four days. I don't correct him or add anything. Cort can tell him.

Since Cort is on the phone, I order brunch for four and wait for Alder to get off his bike.

"Hey, LP. I'm surprised you're back."

"Boss Chenoa, I have physical today. You have x-ray? Machine not on today." He points to the hut looking concerned. They get a warning if the machines are used.

"No, Brother. It's quiet for phone calls."

He looks relieved. "Yeah. Boss Ember sleep, eat full meal?"

"She slept some but hasn't eaten. I just ordered food. Prez and Cort came in first thing."

“Food important. She need to heal.” He’s a good doctor.

“She’s spent almost a year underfed. She’s getting used to eating more. The vitamins will help and she likes everything so your granola bar is a hit.”

“Good. Boss Stella have shell done. It here, I call Doc Chop help get on Boss Ember.”

Ember is going to love this. She’ll be able to move her arms a little more, at least from her elbows down. “Thanks, Alder.”

He goes to Allen behind the desk while I keep walking. Prez is talking so I wait on the side of the door where I’m not seen or distracting them.

Alder waves a hand. “Boss Luke Rayne, chopper here thirty-minute. I get physical check back.”

“Thanks, LP.”

He runs throwing orders. “Get food.”

I smile watching him go. I hope he’s okay.

Maiyun

I push the tray table back. “There’s no more fitting in me.”

Mary smiles. “Luke Rayne didn’t think you’d eat more than a Bits portion. Alder will be happy you got almost all of the small down. He’s worried about your weight.”

“He shouldn’t be. I’m not moving to exercise at all. I’ll be heavier by tomorrow.” I smile so she knows I’m joking.

She laughs. “You’ve got a point. How does the shell feel?”

“Fine, when I feel it, I move the frame to a new position. There’s nothing to complain about when you’re in this thing. This must be what antigravity feels like.”

“When you’re out of it, I’m going to try it out. We have some virtual classes for you but before I set you up, let’s do some basics. Have you ever ordered food?”

“Kiosks and at market when I was with Brewster Jennings and at restaurants here. I wasn’t always clean so I’d find someone I could read and send my order. Like telling them from far away. We did that with other readers. I learned I can do it with some people, maybe they’re Indian or something.” I don’t really think they’re Indian but not everyone hears me.

She nods like I’m not insane and explains about ordering from the kitchen that serves the medic center, restaurants and ice cream places.

“Just warning you, the little guys love their ice cream and may have one close by but it’s soft serve so it’s going to be melted before you see it. There’s a bakery that has sweets right here on the ABSZ and at Bravo. The free women love to share anything new they learn. I had an éclair last night. They’re really good at baking.” She smiles and I see her eating a big thing with chocolate on it.

“Can I see what the foods are?” I don’t know some words other people use for foods, some foods I’ve never seen or heard of. Hunting for every kind will make this lesson last forever.

“There are pictures. Here, it would be easier to see.” She gets right to it.

Guiding me to the icon for food, I see foods I like, then the menu for meals. She shows what I ate today and I get it. The meal is easier to order. The P icon that’s a broomstick and dustpan sideways to form the letter has a whole world happening behind it. I spend hours looking at stores, food and drinks, then a list of what the Prospects can help with.

“I love prospects. They do everything and have everything.”

Mary shakes her head. “First, the Prospects don’t *have* all this, they go get it and deliver it to you. Second, never say you love Prospects or Brothers.”

“Brothers fuckin’ crazy. Boss Luke Rayne shoot Prospect, Brother, you say you love.” Alder has me looking at the door.

“He will?” He doesn’t seem like a guy that’d shoot people over words.

The little doctor rolls his eyes at me, not looking very professional when he does that. “You feel connect to Boss Luke Rayne?”

“Well yeah, he found me and saved my life.”

The *No* shake looks like he’s disappointed in me. “Connect deep. You feel,” his hands move around his head then in front of his chest, “deep. Boss Luke Rayne more to you than protect.”

I thought so too because of the pictures and seeing me walking, seeing Luke Rayne laughing while flying me in a helicopter. “How do you know that?”

The rolling eyes show me what he thinks of my question but I haven't even figured out what I feel. The man is nice and interesting and doesn't care about my 'Carrie' attributes - well honestly, they all have more than me in those scary attributes.

"You feel. I see. He yours. You his. Indian feel more. Boss Luke Rayne no Indian but he feel same to Indian. See same to Indian. What he know you need lesson. What you know he need lesson. You no see no future to you now. He know you future to him, feel connect you to him. He feel, you feel. Boss Luke Rayne level-head. He no crazy same to Brothers. He wait, give time to you see. You see more...fast you make you happy, Boss Luke Rayne happy. Ol' lady make Brother wait, Brother crazy. Alpha-Bit no hormone, I no get it. I see Brother crazy I know woman close." He waves his hands around his head.

I smile at the smart little man. "You saw all that?"

He shrugs. "You sleep, no see Boss Luke Rayne protect you at hospital, twenty-two stitch to head, blood to gear, a mess. He show concern to you I work to get stable to you move here. He feel connect there. Pres Cort, Pres Justice hold him back to find men try hurt you. Boss Mase give advice Boss Luke Rayne stay to you, Boss Mase find men. Pres Justice show Luke Rayne important you see him you wake. Take no future away you see he connect to you. Pres Justice see future you to Boss Luke Rayne hurt he go find men you no see him to connect. Only crazy I see Boss Luke Rayne is to hospital. He see connect hurt you. He stay."

Whoa. He stayed so he didn't hurt our connection. I wasn't even awake. "We talked for what, like an hour? I had just met him."

Mary snorts. "He's been here for days. Even I see how you two are meant to be. I'm not Indian and have never been connected to anyone. I've seen the same connection with other men here. You should see Natalia and Kristos. They're like you and Luke Rayne, I can feel it when they look at each other."

"Wow. I saw pictures of me where the UFO planes are. We were walking and laughing. He held my hand the whole time. That's real?"

My disappearing buddy, Mucimi, appears. "It's real." He looks at me and I see us eating, then Luke Rayne flying us somewhere with a smile as he looks at me.

"Stop. I think I want to see all your pictures but I don't think it's good to see them all. Living anything is better than watching it. Good or bad, I need to live and learn to live those pictures."

Alder nods once. "Good you know. You go to school? I have ol' lady harem work to me keep ABSZ, IT, Lab going. What you know?"

"Ol' lady harem? What does that mean?"

Mary laughs. "He has Natalia working on virtual, Kateri is a graphic artist and did the pictures for the medical program Alder made, Chenoa is a doctor for him, works in the lab with Carmen and Jane does something at IT with servers. She knows all kinds of languages."

"I don't know any of that other stuff but I speak a lot of languages. Brewster Jennings bought us phone things that taught us any language we want to know. When they locked us in, there wasn't much more to do besides the training crap. It got old but I know languages."

"Pres Justice say language a life force..."

I smile and speak Greek right back to finish it. "To a nation."

He smiles. "You quick. You no learn specialty?"

"I don't know what that means so I guess not."

Alder looks at Mucimi. “Specialty or classes in something you want to do.”

“I type really fast but not on the phone thing. I mean using all my fingers or my mind. I always said my mom went overboard and was nuts with the history but I’m good at finding information for her when she couldn’t get it from the elders or visitors.”

“Genealogy?” Mucimi asks.

I look for that. Genea-logy “The study of lineage. Yes, I guess. Indian isn’t easy to follow, especially in the west here.”

“You saw the definition in a book.” Mucimi is surprised.

Alder shakes his head. “You see photographic?”

“He means photographic memory,” Mary tells me.

I have to read then nod. “I thought it was the visions. I pull up things I’ve seen or books I’ve seen.”

Alder looks up at Mucimi who shakes his head no. “She sees a library and pulled a book down to see photographic memory. I don’t think it’s all the memory. Have you read that book before?”

I look at the book and shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“You pulled it down again. Where are you when you do that?” Mucimi sounds weird, not being his normal matter of fact.

“I’m not sure. I can go places to find things when I need them. Words are the library. When I don’t understand how things work, I can go to a factory or whatever and see it built. I can fix things when I figure out where to get information.”

“How did you learn to transcend?”

“I didn’t know that’s what I was doing. You can see in me.” I think of mom’s fridge. She had the loser guy come two times. He was not nice and tried to get me to go with him for parts. I told mom and went to see how to fix it, then did.

“That man never came back. I could find all kinds of stuff when I needed it. That’s transcending?” The things I’m going to learn from these people are getting me excited. They know more than my mom did.

He nods. “The man is dead. He was with the traffickers. You transcend to find your answers. Alder recalls the book, page and whatever he reads. He recalls everything, what he reads, sees and hears.”

I remember taking a test in school and answering from the math book.

“That’s photographic memory. That’s how you remember the stories told too. Finding places for answers when you’ve never seen it is transcending. Most of the Justice League transcend to the ancestors on the reservation nightly. Some transcend space from point A to B, like me showing up places. Christian and Aiyana can transcend space and time with their minds or in person. Justice can transcend space and time but I don’t think he uses it or maybe he hasn’t needed it. You’re different. I can ask Aiyana or Christian. They’ll both be here.”

“Here, Brother. Prez called me down. I came here before going to Delta.”

This man looks familiar. It can’t be. “You knew Hatchet Law.”

“He was my older brother but I never met him. How do you know that?”

I see the picture of Hatchet with Ben T. “That’s the picture I saw. Ben T Law was my uncle. His name was Hó’nehe Whitewater but everyone called him Ben T. Hatchet was Mohegan. My mom had me add *from away*.”

“He was Mohegan. You have that history. I can get it. Finish Mucimi.” He points to me.

Mucimi shakes his head. “Don’t jump in there yet. She transcends to find answers. I never saw it before.”

“What do you mean? We can transcend.” Christian is confused.

Mucimi looks at me. Alder smiles. “PC mount condenser mic element.”

PC is a computer. Mount, condenser, element it’s parts or a part. I look and see the shop but keep going to manuals. This is a lot of books. Seeing the computer, I type the words in. This PC-mount omnidirectional microphone element has a wide 50-10,000Hz frequency response. Requires 1-10VDC.

That doesn’t tell me what it is. Looking at the labels, I tap product information. “I don’t know what it is but it’s from Radio Shack for \$3.88 and it says omnidirectional microphone element that has a wide 50 to 10,000HZ frequency response. It requires 1 squiggly dash 10VDC. I don’t understand it to know more. I can look for the computer mic and see how it’s used.”

“Holy fuck.”

I look at Christian. “It didn’t have a description.”

Mucimi laughs. “It did. You gave it but don’t understand the words. What factory was that?”

“I don’t know.” I look back in and see Omni. “Omni is on the door.”

Mucimi and Christian are standing still but Christian’s eyes are closed.

Alder shakes his head. “Freaky crazy too. I send work to you; you find me answer?”

He’s offering me a job. This is the best unbelievable yet. “Yeah. I need to live somewhere and eat. I’m a little afraid to go back to the reservation.”

He rolls his eyes at me again. “You stay to Boss Luke Rayne. Work to me. Boss Natalia make you virtual lab to my work, you work to freaky BSC they need you lesson.” He points to Christian.

Mary laughs. Christian smiles at me. “That’s cool as shit. I never tried for information like that. It gets me everywhere.”

I nod. “I don’t know where it is but after the first time, I realized I could find everything if I got a word to help me identify what I’m looking for.”

“Good job. I need you to teach the kids. Showing them from your mind will work.”

“I can do that. Prez showed me how to put pictures on a board. I can’t get the pictures from me but I could take them from him for the board.”

He shakes his head. “That’s different. Aiyana is coming to heal. Mucimi and Justice can help after dinner. I’ll be back when they get here. I want to see how you know my family and what else you know. Did you ever make a room with the Indian books?”

Make a room. That would be better than Ops that people can get hurt. “I think I can. If I use my bedroom and put all the books on shelves, I could pull what I need to write for the Co guy.”

“Co would need it but I meant for the rest of us. If it’s in your mind, I could get to it?”

Carrie has entered the building. “I don’t know.”

He smiles. “What’s *Carrie*?”

“Stephen King wrote a book called *Carrie*. I saw the movie. It’s scary. A guard used to call me *Carrie* and brought a TV in our common room so we could watch it.”

“The fuckin’ prick. You’re nothing like that. We only use our gifts for good. When you misuse them, shit happens making you pay and the ancestors won’t gift the tribe more than reading. We don’t

fuck with the ancestors. I'll be back and can explain what you don't get. Jo works tomorrow so I'll come in the day. Tonight, I want to see who else you know. Aiyana puts everyone to sleep so I'll see you tomorrow, Maiyun." He's gone.

I look at Alder. He shrugs. "That freaky crazy. You build room in head, crazy freaky. I okay vision, ancestor, freaky carry to me fast, reservation is okay – I like lake, feel there."

I laugh. "Freaky is what you call it?"

I get a look. "You not see disappear? No, I have answer. You build room in mind get book like library. I no need answer. You freaky crazy, no see it."

Mary is all but falling out of the chair laughing.

My eyes roll back to Alder. "That's true. You've been to the reservation?"

"Yeah, Pres Justice take me. Bring Alpha-Bits they need heal. Interesting. No explanation okay, I see, feel myself."

I want to go. "Luke Rayne took me but I was sleeping."

"In frame?"

"I don't know. The strap was off my head, he said. I don't think he took me out."

"Alert send to me it open. Boss Luke Rayne freaky. Freaky do more freaky, Brothers watch no say, no question. I not need freaky explanation. I come back, Boss Aiyana here. I open frame once."

I nod understanding freaky a little better and how no one reacts. I'm freaky, not Carrie.

"No, just freaky."

My eyes go to Mucimi.

"Boss Aiyana come what time?" Alder asks him.

There's a pause, then, "Seven, she's taking Maiyun to the reservation. I can get you here."

Alder nods. "Show respect I no shoot you again."

Mucimi nods, looking embarrassed. "Roger, LP."

Alder runs out, making me smile. "He shot you?"

He shrugs. "I picked him up after he warned me to ask first."

"Where did he shoot you?"

"With the laser. It stuns for four minutes."

I laugh and Mucimi disappears. I don't think Mary has stopped laughing. When she gets up and runs out, I laugh more. I know that hunched down *run like hell before I pee my pants* position well.

Luke Rayne

Holding Ember, I jump back with Aiyana, Justice, Alder and Mucimi. Jeremy, Teller and Chenoa aren't here so they must have jumped alone. Christian smiles. "You're stronger and faster than I saw."

Anyone else would ask what the fuck he means but he's Christian and I'm not an idiot. "They hit me all at once. I have noticed I can't read Ember anymore. I feel our connection and know when she's happy but I can't read her words. I can when she sees things."

"Sonofabitch. I still can't read Dean. I feel her extreme emotions but only if I'm getting close. I think the ancestors are fuckin' with me." He's pissed.

Hiding the smile, I nod. "You could be right."

He elbows me. "You smiling would be a dick move."

"That's why I hid it."

Justice laughs. "You saw the incision is healed. She's got the sensors firmly in place."

I put my hand up. "Alder knows?"

Justice nods. "What does all that mean to me and Ember?" I ask Alder.

"I like Maiyun. Not easy, unique, good first impression name."

I roll my eyes at him. "I'll tell her."

He smiles. "Sensor have tissue hold them in place. One day we move to wheelchair. I say one day. Boss Justice say tonight." He shrugs. "I trust I see skin grow sensor in. It new. I not know new tissue hold."

"I'll stay and help reinforce it," Mucimi interrupts him.

Alder looks at him for a minute then back to me. "Wheelchair tomorrow. She move only upper body. No weight, no stress, push, pull." He's putting her in the chair for a day as a precaution.

I nod. "So, she can sleep in the bed tonight?"

"No movement. She need net to bed, same to Boss Andrew," he says it like he's asking.

"Brother, she walks or is paralyzed with everything we do in the next few months. Fuckin' with that outcome is not happening. I want her to walk through the rest of her life. I'll do or not do anything you say to make sure she's walking through the rest of her life."

"You be easy, mean easy to me, Boss Maiyun easy too. She sleep to bed Boss Mucimi reinforce sensor. No move, net to bed. I send bed you sleep close no accident hurt to Boss Maiyun."

He stops so I nod. "This is faster than your timeline."

He points to Aiyana. "Boss Aiyana, ancestors, Pres Justice, Mucimi," he waves his hand, "all freaky heal mean faster. Timeline throw out. We see next, I see progress muscle, ligament grow."

With some reservations about how fast this is moving, I agree. "Okay. I'll make sure she gets all that. Thank you again for doing this, Aiyana, Justice, Alder and Mucimi."

Aiyana bows her head quick. "It is the ancestors' intent to heal Maiyun. Your appreciation was given and acknowledged. I will be close and continue to heal what I can. Maiyun has the blessings of the ancestors."

"Oh shit. Did she get more ability?" She doesn't need that on top of her...back, not walking yet. Whatever.

I focus on Aiyana. She's got that barely smile on. "Your gifts will serve you well. Practice focusing faster. Maiyun was blessed by the ancestors, not gifted more, yet."

I relax, noting the *yet*. "Thanks. It took me hours to recover from that one."

She throws me chin and is gone. Justice laughs. "Always thank Aiyana first, Brother, she'll make you pay if you don't."

"I remember you saying it, but I would anyway. She's a woman and should be named first."

He nods. "I didn't get that woman thing. Everything is equal in my head. Carmen and my boys are first but she's my ol' lady and we got that one. I'll make sure the Protectors get that."

Alder waves his hands. "You lesson important to you. I go to Lab. I have result waiting."

"Fuck, I knew but didn't think about making you wait." Justice looks stricken.

"You stop talk, bring me to Lab, I no wait longer." Alder is a funny Brother.

Justice throws chin and is gone with Alder. I laugh with Mucimi. "Can you help me get her on the bed, then tell Justice we need to know how to move her."

"Suspend her. That's what Andrew did. He was suspended to the chair, bathroom and bed before Alder said he could walk."

"Thanks. I can do that. Stay with me so I don't fuck it up."

"Think of a board and move her as if she's on it. For the bathroom, as if she's in a chair."

Okay. I picture a board and slide it under her.

"Stop. Don't slide. It's there."

Okay. I close my eyes and see the board under her. I adjust her legs and raise her to get my arm out. The shell doesn't allow her to bend where I'd hurt her. Knowing that makes this easier. When she's over the bed I lower it and close my eyes seeing the board disappear. Opening them, I smile. "That was cool."

He nods. "Next time just see the board, then don't see the board." He snaps and a board is there, when he snaps again it's gone.

"Will do. The chair works the same?"

"Yeah, and you don't have to be in there. Your mind will be, but you see nothing but her where she needs to be and her moving when she's done."

"I got it. Are you close?" I'd feel better if he's going to be close enough for questions.

He nods. "Aiyana is sleeping here when she's back. If you move Maiyun, she'll know and help if she's needed. If you're unsure, call to me and I'll help you."

"Thanks, Mucimi." I pull him closer and kiss his head. I've done it for so long he's going to be white haired and I'll be kissing his head.

He smiles. "I won't care and will kiss your head too. She needs the net and you need to look in the mirror."

I nod and he's gone. Christian laughs reminding me he's here.

"Is Alder okay?" Since he's here, I can ask.

"Aiyana says he's perfect but looking for any little thing out of place. She just told him the ancestors blessed him with a long story and he relaxed. She says he thought something was wrong because he slept for four hours two nights in a row." He delivers that with a big smile.

'*Sorry, he looked exhausted,*' Mucimi throws and I can hear his embarrassment. We laugh.

"I need to get the net on her." I turn for the door.

“Done, Brother. Stand against the wall.” Christian is awesome with those abilities.

A bed appears on the other side of Ember’s. “Thanks.”

He stands and stretches then sits back down.

“You’re staying?”

He nods. “She’s got a lot of the ties I never got. I need to jump with Jacky and Jo but I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here.” Throwing my bag on the bed, I put my hands down to push it, then think better of that. I can push it closer when I’m ready to sleep. Looking around, I see the chair, tray table, a waiting room chair and a small table.

Moving the waiting room chair out, I think of my desk chair from my rooms and it’s here. I smile thinking that was easy. Since that worked, I think of the little couch Jetti had in her rooms. I like the leather look in here and picture the old table I have that looks like an old-fashioned flat wheelbarrow. It looks good with the lighter leather too. I love the metal wheel and handles.

The other side needs a chair. Jetti won’t care. I take the matching recliner and think that will be perfect. Moving the beds around, I like this way. I have just enough room to squeeze by to get into bed and there’s enough room for a chair, or Mary to move along the side of Ember’s bed.

If she’s in the wheelchair tomorrow, she needs clothes. ‘*Mase.*’

‘*Yeah, Brother.*’

‘*Is Kateri busy? Aiyana healed Ember and she needs clothes. I got no clue and Ember is a little taller and thinner than Kateri but I think she’d fit in Kateri’s breeches if she has a spare pair.*’ If not, Jetti is about her size.

‘*Hold on, they sent a couple of pairs that are too long. Jetti didn’t want them.*’

I wait then decide to get some work done. When I sit, Mase walks through the door. “This looks better. All rooms should be furnished.”

I laugh taking the bag he holds out. “She sent some shirts, socks and panties with tags. The tags are a big deal so say it. I didn’t ask why, Brother. Just say it. I’m happy for you, Luke Rayne, she’s already out of the frame. It’s good to see her in a bed. I bet she’ll be happy with the chair when they get her up. She’s got the shell on?”

“Yeah. Stella is coming tomorrow to see if she can figure something out that’s not so long or something. I saw the shell but don’t get it.” I never get much of what Stella says when she goes off with technology and programming shit. I grew up at Baxters so it’s not like technology is new but sometimes Stella talks in programming or code I’ve never heard of.

“If it’s possible, she’ll figure it out. Don’t let Ember move too fast. Justice was worried about the sensors or something.”

I nod. “Moving. Alder mentioned it. They got the tissue healed around the sensors but Alder was worried the tissue wasn’t strong enough to hold if she moves. Mucimi and Aiyana are close tonight so they’ll help get it done.”

“They’re unbelievable. Andrew was in a chair in a week. Alder said without the healers it would have been a month to six weeks.” Mase shakes his head.

“They are amazing. I’m so glad we were born us. Ember got more on the lines today. She can transcend to a library she put all the books she read in. Christian will be back to read from it or something.” I smile at the surprise on his face.

“Fuckin’ freaky.”

I nod. "Watch," I say and pull a floor lamp in, then put it by the recliner and turn it on."

He laughs. "I should have just told you to come get the bag. Did you leave for it?"

"No, Mucimi told me how to move Ember. I used a board I imagined, then saw her without it and it was gone. He snapped for it and it appeared by him. Their freaky is freakier."

He smiles pointing at the light then waving his arm back. "You think you're not?"

I give him that. "Yeah. I don't know what else I was gifted. I need to thank them for this new one."

"Yeah, I'll see you there." He vanishes.

'Wait, can I take Ember?'

'You better, Brother. They healed her today.' Mase is right.

'Thanks, tell Kateri I appreciate it.'

He makes me smile. *'Tell her tomorrow, Natalia and Kateri are there with the kids for lunch. Ayakuhsak said Aiyana would be there.'*

That kid is too much. He sees more than I did at ten and he's only four.

Sitting, I get my glasses on and get some work done. My dad is doing a good job but he doesn't know this paperwork. MC doesn't do FBI anything unless they're BSC for the FBI and dad isn't a reader. Clearing email is next. Dad sends one at the end of every day that I always save for last. He asks about Ember and I smile letting him know all she did today and the healers that were here. He's going to call me tomorrow when he reads it. Clicking off my last form, I hear little squeaks and look up.

Mary is at the door with a smile. "I squeak when I stop short. I like the new decor and Ember is in a bed."

I nod. "Aiyana took her to the reservation to heal her."

She shakes her head. "I tell everyone I understand heal because I see it." She points to my head. "I don't really understand it and don't need more than the heal word."

Getting it completely, I nod again. "She's healed enough for the bed. Aiyana and Mucimi will be here or close tonight, so they'll heal more. She won't be awake until tomorrow."

"I need her vitals for the night."

I nod and she moves to the bed. It's almost time to jump so I get my bag zipped up and move to the side of the bed. "Do you know what jump to the reservation means?"

"No."

I nod. "We'll look like we're sleeping but we won't be here. I need the door locked so we aren't touched."

She nods. "I'll sit outside of it and explain, but your Justice League shows inside rooms."

"They'll be at the reservation or healing Ember. Her Indian name is Maiyun. If you see them, they'll call her that."

She doesn't want to know. "I'm not asking. I'll wait outside the door. You can lock it from inside." She puts her stethoscope in her ears showing me she seriously does not want to know.

Sliding my boots off, I go for Ember's clothes and move them to the little cabinet. Mary leaves so I lock the door, lay down on my bed, hold Ember's hand and jump. She's in my arms when I open my eyes. My first thought is I'm so glad she's here with me and thank the ancestors for giving me that and healing her today. The energy feels like a low thrum just under my skin. It's different but nice. I

feel closer to her hoping she feels it with me.

“She does, Brother. You’re a healer?” Christian asks me.

“I am? Who can we ask?”

He laughs. “Aiyana, Luke Rayne is a healer?”

“Not as you know healers. Luke Rayne can harness the ancestors for his Maiyun. Maiyun has been blessed as he has. The ancestors will share all they are to help keep the vision alive,” she says it, then is gone.

I look at Christian. “What does that mean in English?”

He smiles. “Teller, can you explain so Luke Rayne understands?”

Teller and Chenoa sit by us and I feel that thrumming change from just under my skin to a deeper vibration all through my insides. Holy fuck.

“You can probably heal if you call on the ancestors to help in emergencies. Saving what’s meant to be is a definite yes. I don’t know about the rest of the time. Think about the vision and what the ancestors mean to us. They’ll always show to preserve it. If it doesn’t happen, you aren’t meant to heal the person.”

I smile at Christian. “That’s a definite maybe?”

They all laugh. “Yeah, but I think it means don’t try for Chenoa’s assistant. If you’re meant to help someone, you’ll feel it. They’re getting stronger. We all feel it. The vision is the focus for them. Maiyun is another bridge they’ll use because she’s here and yours.”

“I got most of that. She would probably understand better and can explain it to me. Thanks.”

He’s just gone. Kateri sits with Ayakuhsak. “Ayakuhsak wanted to see Maiyun before we leave. My grandmother is close tonight. Am I a relation to Maiyun?”

“Thanks for sending the clothes. They look good on her. I don’t know about relation. She told Prez she was brought up with decency as a life lesson so if she is, she may not tell me.” Ember would shield that so Kateri isn’t hurt.

“Thank you for that. Aiyana said I should have no fear of Maiyun. She is from Nevada.”

I am not correcting that. “Yes, her mom and aunt raised her in that tribe. Her aunt moved to California with her cousin. They all died. She’s happy seeing us all connected and excited when she’s talked to Brothers, giving her a way to be connected to us.”

I feel her pain of isolation and want to take it away but don’t know how. “We’ll see her tomorrow. I’d be honored to offer her a connection to us.”

“Thank you. She’s going to need it when her focus isn’t on walking again. Monday nights will be an important connection for her. We can become her family.”

She smiles. “You’re good at that. I’m learning, so this will be a good lesson that I will have a lifetime to practice.”

She’s such a good woman. I look for Mase and see him holding Kisuq as he turns my way. I smile and he throws chin. “I’m so glad you found Mase and the kids. We need you. It’s a lesson I’m proud to share with Maiyun.”

“We will help,” Ayakuhsak says, leaning to hold Ember’s hand.

“I’m honored, Ayakuhsak. I feel your energy with the ancestors’.”

He smiles looking cute as hell. “I’m helping them. They like you. Your head is all better.”

Leaning over, I kiss his head. “Thank you, Little Brother. I forgot to look in the mirror. The

ancestors and healers amaze me. I'm honored and appreciate it."

Jeti, Aylen and Ginny sit. "Brothers."

Mase comes for Kateri and Ayakuhsak while Kyler, Nash and Ari sit.

Jeti asks. "How is she doing?"

I smile down at my girl in her breeches and a top I must have put in the cabinet but didn't see. "Better, Aiyana and a crew healed her here today. She'll go in a chair tomorrow."

"That's good. She's Indian with that red hair?" Ari asks.

Justice sits. "A sign of ancestral gifts, shaman or leader. Any off color from the tribe was a sign. She's got vision, reading and transcending different than us, but you'll learn it. Her mom was Crow's granddaughter, uncle one of Crow's sons. Her dad was raised by the uncle and took his name. Her mom was shunned by the tribe when she fought to get Chenoa trained as a shaman. She went to her sister at the Nevada reservation. Her dad helped traffickers but never lived with them when mom got booted out. She doesn't understand traffickers. She doesn't understand much of the outside world but finds information to help her. She'll need our help and we need her. She has information tying us all together. Ben T Law was her uncle. She never met Crow or doesn't remember him. Hatchet Law worked with Ben T."

"Wait. Ben T that took care of Kateri?" Nash asks.

"One and the same. She has his Indian name, Hó'nhe Whitewater. Hatchet Law was Bruce Patton."

"Holy shit. Josephine's father."

Justice nods for Nash. "Josephine's father. She knows they're from away and Prez said she's got ancestral lessons, prophecies and stories that were handed down. She's got a photographic memory and a way to find information by transcending to places she thinks of."

"Holy shit." Nash has us all smiling.

I look at my amazing girl with the too big blue-gray eyes and mop of fiery red hair. "She wants to help. She learns fast and Aylen said she's like Natalia but with the vision and shit. If you can help, I'd appreciate it. If you have questions, she loves helping so ask her. There isn't anyone left in her family. The CIA wiped every one of them. She was supposed to help Piper with locations for biochemicals and was taken and tortured. She was going to ask Piper for help because she is a woman but saw her get blown up. She was considered Marine Intelligence but was never a Marine. CIA brought them there from the reservations and used their reader ability. They are trying to kill her. She has no name; they cleared her bank account and the Alpha-Bits can't find any trace of her." I look from my girl around the circle that got bigger. "I'm not Indian and don't understand more than I do about Indian connections. She needs to be here. Aiyana said the ancestors blessed her and other shit I don't get. Losing who she is means she needs help. I have no idea what she needs but I know it's more than me guessing."

"I'm in, Brother." Nash is always in.

Everyone else says they're in and I breathe deep. Ancestral air with my Brothers right here pledging that help is what she needs. I throw chin because I can't say it.

"We feel it, Brother." Justice stays with me while everyone touches Ember or me and mills around bouncing from group to group.

I smile seeing Aiyana show and hug Mucimi, Hannah, then Teller and Chenoa. I feel her blast of energy then it's gone and so is she.

Justice laughs. "I love the Brotherhood and my Brothers. Mucimi and Aiyana will heal more tonight. I need to catch Stella while she's in her Lab. I'll stop in tomorrow, Brother."

"Thanks, Justice." I jump us back.

Chapter Seven

Two days

FBI/Badass Training Center

Luke Rayne

Coming out of sleep, I take a deep breath knowing I'm home. I love my bed. Opening my eyes confirms I'm in my room. It feels good to be home.

Reality crashes in and I know I need to catch up with Lara and Kim sometime today. It's not that I owe them an explanation but Lara is sending texts. Mornings are when I'd alternately show in their Clubs and blow off steam. The cut in their pay deserves an answer from me. I could just answer the text but *'you can fill my time slot,'* lacks sensitivity. Showing up and saying I've found my ol' lady with the explanation of her injuries distracting me from calling would be more dignified. While they're whores, they're still women that deserve that respect.

With it settled, I roll out of bed realizing as I do that Ember is right here. Suspending up and into the bathroom, I shower and pull clothes to me then shave. My hair is wet so I see the edge of the scar but it's completely healed. They're amazing.

I wonder if harnessing the ancestors to heal will come from me, like the healers do, when a Brother or person that is important to the vision needs it. While holding Ember, even here at home, I feel the thrum just under my skin, the same way it felt at the reservation.

Smiling, I think of last night. Flying us back and having a full day of Brothers in and out was exhausting. Sitting in the oversized rocker on the deck was a perfect way to unwind and let the day go. Ember was happy to see a new view that reminded her of the reservation, minus what she calls the UFO planes and choppers coming and going. Officers are on the backside of the Training Center but we still see our fair share. I'm glad Prez and Cort had the airfield and hangars set away from us. They matched the ABSZ plan and it works for me.

Washing my face, I blow most of the water out of my hair and smile. I have to practice that. Mase said he's got it now. I'll ask how he does it.

It's time to get my girl up and into her skeleton. Seeing the tray in the dining hall kitchen, I picture it on the wheelbarrow table of the sitting area and walk out. It's here.

"Did you do that?"

Turning, I smile. A mop of red bedhead is sexy as hell. "I did. I've been practicing and it's coming easier."

"Well, thank you. I missed coffee every morning and it didn't take me long to fall back into the habit. Should I call for Mary?"

“No, you showered last night before the reservation. Do you want the other breeches?”

“Yeah, and a short-sleeved shirt?” She pictures the green dyed one, panties and green socks so I turn and get her clothes on her.

She giggles but I don't turn. When all that's left are socks, I turn and pull the moccasins to the bed. Even if it's her feet, I like putting my hands on her.

“I can't put the skeleton on like that. Maybe I could, but I'm afraid of missing something and fuckin' it up.” I give her honestly.

Relief washes through her. “I'm glad you think like that. Chop said they don't have a plan B. I need to do this right and only have one chance.”

Nodding, I gently pull her to sitting. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I mean as in fine, not any little thing is a little thing not worth mentioning fine.” She's cute.

“Thanks for differentiating.” Getting the skeleton on her upper body, I have to go under the shirt. “The shell covers you. I'm going to take your shirt off so I get the band in place and clipped to the shoulder. I didn't think of it before I put it on you.”

She nods so I do. Stella made the shorter shell so the band goes against her skin. She's in the shield-like skeleton, not the one that has everything showing in front and back like Andrew and Jinx first wore. This is lighter, gives her more mobility and doesn't have pistons and wires that get caught on shit, according to Stella. I think it looks badass but didn't say. She was already annoyed with me for calling it a skeleton and pointing out it's under clothes so exo doesn't fit. Ember thought we were funny but Stella was pissed and thinking of names to call me that she didn't say out loud.

Getting the upper body portion on her, I get her shirt but she stops me. “I need to put the bands on my legs. Since I can only bend so far before they're on, I won't be able to see the dots.”

I nod, she wants to do it herself and I'm not going to stop her. Reaching for the bands and laying them out so the clips are to the side, I turn away but stay sitting on the bed close to where she's at. “Let me know when you're done.”

“My aunt married a control freak. He died when I was fourteen. All I can remember was how relieved she was. My cousin too.” Her hand on my shoulder sends a jolt through me but I don't move. I do help her up to stand. “We went to his life celebration and I don't remember anyone that was sad. I thought it was sad no one felt it. I'm glad you're not a control freak. I'm done but need the breeches buttoned. I'm afraid of twisting too far.”

I turn and smile up at her reaching for the button to the side of her waist. “Good job. Test it walking for coffee. I'll shield you so you can move without worry.”

“Does that mean hold me up?” She moves slow making sure each foot raises. I see the picture of her feet moving in her head and smile. She's got it.

“Yeah. Shield you from falling.”

“It feels the same as yesterday. I'm going to sit, then stand, so I'll feel if it's wrong.” She does, then sits with a big smile. “I got it on the first try. Stella will be proud.” Those big eyes are excited.

“She will. It won't be long before you're getting in and out of it alone. Debra is making you some covers for the foam guard, she said Jinx loves them.”

She smiles. “She talked to me on the chat. I told her anything but she wanted colors. I'm getting blue. It's who I am.”

“Mohegan are navy and aqua. You're like an electric blue.”

“You know Navajo colors?”

Shit, I wanted to explain about claiming her not the tribes. “Kateri is Navajo, Chenoa’s Cheyenne. I’ve seen both in regalia and the color they gravitate toward. I’ll get a ring with the colors for your tribe when it’s time.” I smile because it’s a start.

She blushes looking innocent and beautiful. “When it’s time, I don’t need a ring. We have a ceremony.” She sees a picture of the clock.

We’ve talked about her being mine and her feeling the same connection. She’s easy with the claiming but we haven’t talked about the details of when she’s claimed or the Badass traditions mixed with Indian.

“I have to check on the Alpha-Bits, have an errand to run, then I need to see how everything is running. The ol’ ladies can explain about claiming and the ceremony. It’s different for each ol’ lady because they’re from different tribes. You decide what you want and it’s incorporated into our Badass tradition. I’m not Indian and the ring would be a tradition for me. Because of your heritage, the stone, metal and look will match what you know. The ring is all I need, what kind doesn’t matter to me as long as the wedded symbol is the purpose.”

She smiles with those big blue-gray eyes, losing that haunted look completely. “I can wear a ring. Thank you. I’ll ask Kateri later. I have breakfast and therapy first. You’re having lunch with me?” She sees the clock again.

“In the dining hall or some of the men call it the Mess. You’ll have Security with you. Mary was an Enforcer. She knows security and how to protect you. After lunch, you have time to breathe without a constant nanny. Make the most of it because my mom is due in this afternoon.” I love the smile that’s still in those eyes.

“I can’t wait. I need to brush my teeth and wash my face and I can do that myself today.” She spent yesterday meeting Brothers and learning how to move the skeleton. Today is going to be big for my girl.

“You didn’t have makeup to put away. If you need it, use the app or wait for my mom. She’ll be ordering you clothes and whatever you need.” The smile I love falls.

“I don’t wear makeup. At home I didn’t wear more than breeches and T’s. Brewster dressed us for jobs.” She sees military uniforms, jeans, dresses and skirts.

Fuck. “Whatever you’re comfortable in and whatever makes you happy. You saw Kateri and Chenoa. They wear Indian made clothes and look comfortable. You wear what makes you comfortable.”

She nods looking around. I’m not getting pictures. I wish I could read her. “I’ll do that. I need to get washed.”

Standing, I lift her with me. “Your day of firsts with your skeleton. Have fun but don’t overdo it. I’ll see you for lunch or if you need me before that. Don’t forget, the button on your skeleton is for Security. The built-in watch is where you call Mary from, or your phone.”

She smiles. “Watch like Zeus’s, phone, tablet, laptop. I don’t need it all with the watch but thank you, I remember.” Excess amuses my girl.

Kissing her lips, then head, I smile. “You do. I bet you’ll use it all. Later, sweet Em.”

I move hearing her laugh and throw to Mary that she’s alone and washing right now.

Wavan, Les, Nasr and Ezra are on this week's circuit schedule. I've met them all and they know Ford because he lives part-time on Web's compound. Most of their questions are about Garren and Michael. I have to tell them to call Garren when they're done with work today in order to move on to what they need for rooms. I shouldn't have bothered because Asa has it done. They changed out the toilet and cabinets and built six bunks on the wall like the Colorado cave-house. It sounds like they're happy with everything so I leave them with a thanks and get to Delta, then Arizona.

While Kim is happy for me and wishes Ember well, getting to and saying the same words to Lara has her pissed. I don't get the pissed and look for why. She's fuckin' crazy to think I'd take her as an ol' lady. Explaining a second time, I'm more to the point and turn to leave.

"Wait, that's it? She's hurt and you skate on through?" Her anger spikes.

Clamping my jaw tight, I turn, taking in a deep breath. When I let it out, I nod. "Yeah, she's my ol' lady and won't be disrespected by me, ever. Showing that from the beginning is important. It could take her a year to walk and it's a year I'll show her that respect. I live on a base of men and will give her no reason to wonder if one of them would treat her better."

"But you can walk from me not worried about disrespect?" Sarcasm isn't going to help her.

"Do you get paid for every visit I make?"

She doesn't answer so I do. "You do. This is and always has been a service. Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to. Coming here was to tell you in person that you can fill my time slot. Since I thought it was worth an explanation after a year, I showed up to give it. Don't text me, Lara. I no longer need that service." I always walk in and out of places, but today, I push and disappear hearing her surprised scream.

Getting back to the Training Center takes no time. I'm considerably faster, that's a plus in my book.

Ops is busy, meaning too busy for me to distract the Brothers asking questions right now so I go to my office. Paper is strewn across my desk in no semblance of order. Dad is obviously not working out of here. I could talk to him but he's in a class right now, so I tackle the mess on my desk, glad my alarm will pull me away soon. I'm looking forward to hearing how Ember's day of firsts has been.

Maiyun

Therapy is fun but hard. I'm breathing heavy just mimicking the therapist's movements. I have to stay in the strap thing that holds me up if I fall but it's saved me twice already.

"The sideways crossover steps are just not happening today. We'll work on it tomorrow. You have the movements down and show no unusual heating under the shell. Let's call it a day and pick it up tomorrow." My therapist, Reggie, has me smiling.

I'm so happy I want to jump. I don't, of course, strap or not, I'd probably fall. "Thanks. Moving is tiring. No unusual heat means I didn't screw anything up?"

He smiles. "The shell was tested yesterday but I was watching the graph today just in case. This was more than you've done for every movement and the sidestep was added. We'll keep at it until normal movements aren't tiring you out. When that happens, we start an exercise program. Can you lift your arms without feeling it under the exoskeleton?"

I smile at him. "Since the skeleton isn't out in the open it's just a skeleton. I do feel it but it's in my upper arms and legs. A tired kind of feeling." I wait for him to get the strap off me.

He nods. "I'm not changing Stella's name. That woman has a short fuse. Keep moving your arms today but it's just movement, no lifting, pushing or pulling."

"Will do, Reggie. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You will, darlin'. I'm here every day but Sunday at the same time for as long as you need me. Alder has me working at a rehab center for the rest of my day. The little guy even has a condo for me in the Honor town. I'm so glad I took the job." He's an excited guy, that's for sure.

"I am too, Reggie. Were you hired just for me?" That feels good but a little excessive.

He clicks away on his keyboard and the graph of me goes away. "No, they're expanding the rehab center. A woman named Solei hired me right away but the expansion hasn't even started. Alder was there and gave me the job with the house if I'd fly to jobs when I'm needed. Gotta tell ya, girl, being needed and the technology they have is all I needed to say yes. The flying is another bonus to me."

"I'm glad you're here and showed up when you did."

"Oh snap. I need to go, toodles. Hey, Mary, bye, Mary. The helicopter is here in like three minutes." He runs pulling his little rolling bag with him.

I smile at Mary. "Where does the chopper pick him up?"

"There's a pad on the other side of the building and a bunch at the airfield. I think the airfield is for work planes and choppers. I was dropped off right here but it's a long walk to the other side of the building." I see all the choppers and planes in her mind.

"I'm all sweaty and feel gross. Luke Rayne's mom is coming today and I don't want to be a smelly mess meeting her. Can you help me change before lunch?"

Her smile must be perpetual. "I can. It's a hike to the dining room so we need to be quick. How was therapy?"

"A hike like we go outside to get there?"

"It's an expression meaning a long walk." She never makes me feel stupid, she just teaches me, I really like that.

I answer her questions about what I did in therapy, then give details as she helps me get in the

contraption that takes me from the toilet to the tub. The shower thing you hold washes me good enough with the shell on. Mary lets me wash most of me with the curtain closed, then she does under my arms and my feet. I'm dried and dressed in the contraption and we get the skeleton back on. She lets me do the leg bands alone too.

As we're walking, she points out offices and the gym. She's telling me about all that's here but I realize she was asking questions while I showered so I wasn't embarrassed. That was nice.

"I need to sit for a minute." My body being tired isn't all that new to me but this is a different kind of tired. I've been eating well but almost a year with very little movement is not making the get up and go very easy.

With a nod, we sit on a bench against the wall. I see people walking up ahead but they never come down this way. "What's down there?"

"The lobby. The entrance into the building is over there. The VIP choppers set down a little further down."

It's been nagging me so I ask. "Luke Rayne's mom is coming and will order clothes. I always wore breeches or what Brewster dressed me in. Luke Rayne said to order and wear what I'm comfortable in. What do women going out wear? Is it like on TV? But on TV they dress up and have makeup."

"When you dressed up, what was comfortable to you?"

I think about that. I didn't just wear breeches but I wore them most days. "I had slip dresses and my mom always wore those or pants and shirts that were light and airy but not breeches."

She nods. "Kateri wears clothes like that. The breeches she wears are like yours, I see them on her when she takes the kids hiking or out to play on their bikes. Chenoa is always in pants or skirts when I see her. The pants aren't like breeches but definitely look Indian inspired."

That's what I saw when she was here. So, I need clothes for everyday, then all the things Luke Rayne says we'll do. I ask just to be sure. "So, they wear clothes like that all the time and breeches for hiking and playing?"

She nods. "From what I've seen. You should call Kateri and ask. She's always willing to help everyone but I think she was alone a lot so she's quiet. You know how you ask what words mean?"

"Yeah, it's quicker than looking for it and I don't always get it right."

She nods. "I think Kateri watches because she's trying to learn and doesn't ask. I don't think she has a place to go to get answers so she's quiet."

Someone said she was a slave. "Slave means owned maids and cooks or field hands?" I read early American history about slaves. Not that Indians didn't have them but I never read about us, they're stories passed down.

Her sadness hits me. "The free-women and kids were slaves and learned that kind of thing, but sex was their purpose. Some women were chained to walls. I heard Ayakuhsak say he lived in a house with no chains to Kristos's new boys."

Spirit in the sky. I saw that kind of slave but Lidia said it was porn and just actors. Porn is sex movies not real life. "They were beat?"

She nods and I cry. Kateri is more of a survivor than I knew. The freed women they talk about lived through that? Oh no. "The Alpha-Bits?" I ask, wiping my face.

"Dear Lord, no, Ember. They were sold for work, they ran computers, I've never heard about them being hurt sexually."

I breathe bending lower with my hands on my thighs. Seeing boots in front of me, I look up, then I'm lifted and sitting in Luke Rayne's lap.

"Shhh, Em." He holds my head to his chest and asks. "What happened, Mary?"

"She asked what a slave was. You said to be honest. She put it together with Kateri. It would be better if you just read it."

He kisses my head then answers her. "She needs you to be honest. Thank you for that. We'll meet you in the dining hall."

It takes me a couple of minutes of slow breathing to calm before I look up. "Thank you. You don't hide things from me but I don't always understand or I understand wrong. What I saw wasn't porn was it?" I show him the pictures.

He winces. "No. Women bleeding and screaming like that isn't acting."

I hoped he'd say it was. Poor Kateri and the other women and those poor kids. "I'm so glad BSC rescued them. Is that how Kateri was rescued?"

He nods but doesn't say anything. I see his throat moving and know it hurts him too. It makes me feel normal when he hurts for the same reasons.

"Kateri hurts you. I don't need you to say more. I'm just glad they're here and protected."

He clears his throat and says, "I'm a shield for Kateri. She lived through shit she'll never remember and I wish I never saw. Every ol' lady has a shield. I'm one for Kateri. I used to train with her to protect herself. Now she trains with the women Brothers on Tuesday mornings and with virtual. She only needed to know what the moves were for. A shield is a Brother that will protect you when you need it. He's close to you but he's just a guardian of sorts."

"Like my cousin when we were young. He taught me how to defend myself and always watched out for me like that."

"Like your cousin. There will be Brothers that will explain security or safety to you. You'll feel close to them, trust them and don't know why, that's your shield."

"I understand. You don't shoot shields, do you?"

He laughs. "Never, sweet Em. I'll bring you to the bathroom before we go into lunch. I messed up your hair."

As if I care. "Thank you. Did Mary call you?" I'm whizzed to a door so fast I'm a little dizzy when he puts me down.

"No. I felt your heart breaking." He holds the door to the bathroom open and leans down to kiss my cheek.

Spirit in the sky. I felt like my heart was breaking for Kateri, the boys and women I haven't met. Washing my face, I think it's hard to keep something that big from messing with the compassionate Ricky Martin look-alike's time.

Walking out, I take the hand he extends for me. "Did I make you leave a class?"

He smiles down and I remember the picture of him walking with me and holding my hand just like this. "No, I was sitting at my desk trying to clear the mountain of paper a week away left me." He was busy working.

"I hope you don't have to leave work again for my over-the-top emotions. I didn't understand the slave word."

He nods. "It wasn't over the top and what they went through deserves the emotion. It means you'll show kindness to more knowing you never know what they've lived through."

“Like the vision and healing. Thank you. They deserve everything. I’ll remember because it’s part of the lesson’s mom taught me.” Feeling her close, I love that he reminds me she’s always with me through those lessons.

“They do deserve everything and I’m glad you learned it. Your mom was a good teacher. This is the dining hall. You’re never here alone, Mary and your Security are always in here with you, Security will stay by the door and wall closer to you, Mary is at your side.”

I see the Security guy I forgot was following us move to the wall. Oh great, he saw all that messy crap. He nods to me and I smile. He doesn’t care how immature I act. His mind says he’s glad Luke Rayne calmed me so fast. It’s nice that the men here think nice about him.

“Thank you, Mary. Sorry I freaked out. Is that the right way to use freak?”

She smiles waiting for me to sit. “It is. Freaky, as with abilities, is more slang than the real definition. Maybe freak as in *I freak out* is too, but it’s used right.”

Luke Rayne kisses the side of my head. “You should check out the slang dictionary. I don’t understand more than half of it.”

That doesn’t sound like a good idea. I already have to ask about words. I look at Mary. “I’ll just ask. That’s not a good book for me to read. Is Jake in one of Natalia’s books?”

Luke Rayne groans.

Mary smiles. “He is but don’t read it when they’re close. It was emotional for me to read.”

Emotional will have Luke Rayne with me constantly. While I like him around, I don’t need a man that’s my everything. I have people to support me for all kinds of stuff. I need a partner and man that’s a respected best friend. Knowing you can count on your man is important, you don’t need to control every aspect of his life, at least I don’t want to. “I’m not reading it while they’re here. Maybe never.”

She laughs at me. “You will, but you’ll wait.”

Luke Rayne groans again.

Luke Rayne

I feel her but let mom do her surprise thing. She leans from behind me and kisses my cheek. “You have a new scar but look healthy.” Her voice has me looking up. Her eyes are on Ember’s big smile.

“I am both, Mom, this is Ember or Maiyun Whitewater. Sweet Em, this is my mom, Samantha DeSeville. Everyone calls her Doc Sam or Sam. My dad calls her Sam I am like the Dr. Seuss book.”

Those big happy eyes shift to mine. “Should I read that book?”

Everyone smiles while I explain Dr. Seuss. My girl doesn’t care and stands slowly with my hand to hug my mom. I kiss mom’s cheek and help Em back to her chair. Mary moves so mom can sit by Ember. It’s a good move because they start chatting and forget I’m here.

The men from Ops come in and eat whatever is up telling me Ops is busy. Ford and Cadieux are due back today and it looks like we need them. “Do you need help in Ops?” I ask Meehan.

“No, Commander. Marks said to hurry lunch because it looks like we’ll be busy for the afternoon. Your dad is on next but isn’t here so I told the men to be ready in case he’s held up.”

I nod, then lean over the table. “Mom, where’s dad?”

“A woman stopped him for a job in the Club. He said she’s not allowed here and took her to the Club. She had a card but he didn’t look happy.” Her voice is off again.

Why would a Club chick come into the Training Center? She’d be told to go directly to the Club, well here, it’s like a bar with a few rooms upstairs for visiting Brothers.

“I’ll go see what that’s about. Why is your voice off?” I surprise her with the question. She’s never been completely clear but it sounds like the arms on her glasses aren’t working right.

“I didn’t know I wasn’t clear. I have an earache but have been on the plane and chopper. We went to the ABSZ so Telia could get Alejandro home and Garren wanted to show Michael his house is still there.” They’re cute.

I nod looking at Em’s empty plate. “You ate it all. Good job. You want to walk it off? I need to go to the Club and see why a Club chick is showing in the Center.” No whore should ever be in this building.

Her smile is enough of an answer. “I’ve never been to a club so yes.”

I take her hand, throwing chin to the table. “I’ll check in Ops on my way back, Meehan.”

“Roger, Commander.”

“I’m going to our room. I could use something for this earache.” My mom doesn’t let shit like this bother her.

“You know where the medic room is if you need it and you know my rooms.”

She pulls my shirt and kisses my cheek. “I’ll find Ember. She needs clothes and I have Nancy on speed dial.”

I touch her ear and feel the thrum run through me.

“Are you healing?” Ember asks from my side.

I hope so. “I don’t know, I think maybe I am, I only ever feel it when I hold you.”

My mom’s eyes brighten. “That’s definitely different and I feel it.”

I kiss her cheek. “I can meet you in your room if you want. I need to get dad to lunch, he’s on

afternoon Ops.”

“I’m going to change. I’ll be in your rooms with Ember. Move your hand before I fall asleep.”

Fuck. I move my hand and she laughs. “Feels better.”

I love mom. Kissing her cheek, I tell her.

“So you healed your mom. That’s gotta feel good.” Sweet Em shows that sweet as we’re walking the hall toward the Club.

“It did. Teller said the ancestors would heal those important to the vision in emergencies. It’s odd to me but it felt good to take away her pain. She does so much for everyone else to live pain free.”

“I bet. I’m not surprised she’s an amazing woman. Your compassion and drive have to come from somewhere. I don’t think she’ll mind my questions.” She looks up for an answer.

“Never. She was sheltered as a kid so she gets it. This Club chick isn’t sitting right with me. Today, my errand was telling a Club chick that I found my ol’ lady and wouldn’t be back. The reason I even went was it’s been a year of standing appointments and I never texted for what I missed while we were at the ABSZ. She got angry because she expected to be that ol’ lady.”

She covers her mouth fast but I smile down at her trying to hold her laugh. “Sorry, but she’s a Club chick and got angry.” She’s right and I shrug.

I explained the Club chicks and how we were taught to use them. She didn’t think much of me for that but it’s a job women take and men use.

“I guess she saw that different. Someone showing here strikes me as off and possibly intentional. I’m telling you so you can wait outside or come in and not be surprised.” I’d rather she be with me. I’m not hiding shit from her and won’t let anyone hurt her.

“I did say I haven’t been to a club. I want to see it. If she’s there, I’ll get to live another new first; with your looks, it’s gotta be a first. Since I can read most people, I’ll know what’s coming.” She’s got Mary hiding what’s got to be laughing noise.

I smile at the easy nature. “You shouldn’t get shit from anyone because I knew I was going to find an ol’ lady. Let’s go see what’s up.” I open the door and walk us in slowly so she can take it all in. Cort and Prez made sure it was Badass and we got a mix of pictures from Brothers to the other Clubs.

Sweet Em points. “I saw that on the website!” Her excitement has her brain moving faster than her feet to get closer. I catch her before the fall and steady her in front of the picture. “That’s you and Mase with Prez and who are they?”

“Jessie and Cloud, Justice and Mase’s dad.” My dad comes closer. “Dad, show Ember the Club while I deal with the Club chick.” My eyes scan and stop on Lara. Vent is following her slow walk. I hope it’s to the door but see she’s still pissed.

He nods. “I was calling Security to get her out,” his head says to keep her contained.

I throw him chin. “Dad can tell you about the Clubs, sweet Em. I’ll be right back.”

“Sweet Em, aww, that is so cute. Since you have a Club of Brothers, you won’t mind me *servicing* them now would you, *Commander* DeSeville? Looks like your new toy needs some training so you’ll be busy.” Lara throws a southern twang on her words pissing me off more than the words themselves. Malice is not winning her anything.

My girl turns with a smile. “Does *need training* mean I’m not experienced?”

I look down so I don’t laugh.

“Pure as the driven snow.” The attitude dripping off Lara has me wanting to roll pain through her.

Ember squeezes my hand so my eyes focus on her. She’s not stressed. “Explain that later.” She smiles.

I nod with a smile. She’s going to fuck with Lara. “I will, sweet Em.”

She nods with those big blue-gray eyes shining, then turns that smile on Lara. “I am inexperienced but I’m told it’s a very good thing. When Luke Rayne told me about you, he explained service. I worked for the CIA in the Middle East and saw places that were like that. Those women were nice and always had a smile with their wave when I’d walk by. I thought it was different from what I know but it was a job they liked. I hope you find a job you like no matter what it is but my mom always said you get what you give. I don’t mind being called Sweet Em. It tells me I’m giving what I want back. I hope you get that too someday. I’m sorry that isn’t going to be today.”

My dad laughs. “I don’t know how you have honey dripping off your words but you are sweet, Ember.” He kisses her cheek getting a huff out of Lara.

“Bet that bitch ha...”

I’m in front of her with my hand over her mouth, not quite as gentle as she’s used to from me. “My dad is right and you’re way over the line showing here, Lara. I am Commander DeSeville as in *The Commander* for Badass on this base. This Club is part of that Badass. The FBI that makes up the other half here won’t take a liking to a whore throwing shit at me or mine. They tend to like me here. In case you haven’t clued in, it’s *that* FBI and they’d just as soon arrest you than hear your voice.”

Vent is watching with his arms crossed over his chest. “Vent, get her blacklisted from Badass and out of here. If she opens her mouth again, duct tape around her head to shut it.”

“Oooh, I don’t know all those words she’s thinking but they’re vile. Mary, can you show me around and explain those words while they deal with the mean girl?” She’s excited about swears. The woman is so fuckin’ cute.

Mary takes Ember away, making me smile. I love my girl. Looking back at Lara who is glaring at me, I smile bigger. “She’s a reader, like me.” Catching up to my girl, I let Vent handle it.

“I need lunch then to get to Ops. Check on your mom. Something had her off when she got here.” My dad is right with me.

“She said an earache but I healed her. She’ll be with Ember in our rooms.”

His feet stop before we get to Ember talking to the Prospect. “You healed her?”

I shrug smiling at my girl who is excited about getting a drink at the bar now.

My dad touches my arm. “Thanks for healing her and don’t fuck it up. Your girl didn’t give you shit for the whore and smiled in her face.”

I laugh. “I’m not fuckin’ it up and she’s so fuckin’ sweet, I bet she really hopes Lara finds a job she likes.”

Hitting my back, he laughs walking away.

Maiyun

My face must show how completely shaken I am when we say goodbye to Nancy because Sam hugs me. “You look a little shell shocked.”

“Shocked is in there so I guess shell shocked means the same. I am that. She’s sending everything. She’s not Indian and showed all those clothes that are Indian made and styles I’d like, but I don’t need that much. I wear breeches most of the time. I did say I don’t need that much.” I have no money for all that stuff.

She smiles and hugs me again. “You said it a few times. If you don’t want them, you can send them to the women on the ABSZ but you’ll probably wear them more than you think. If you’re working for Alder, you’ll have to meet up there at some point. You go to the Protector compound every Monday. Luke Rayne is going to take you to the Club here and they have parties all the time at every Club down here. You’re not wearing breeches to a party.”

“Spirit in the sky, I never left the reservation that much. This is going to be different but different so far has been fun. It’s way better than hiding.” I don’t mention the cost. She doesn’t seem worried about it.

“Anything is way better than hiding. So what drink did you get at the Club?” She doesn’t want me to think about hiding or why I was hiding. I really like Sam.

“A virgin daiquiri. It was so sweet I couldn’t finish it. Mary said to try new drinks when I go, so I’ll do that.”

“I’m seven and seven, Kahlua or White Russian. I’ll get the supplies and we can test them out each night I’m here.”

It’s a thing just for us and hits me right in the heart. “Thanks. I’d like that and won’t be gagging in the bar.” I smile so she knows I’m kidding. “I have more questions.”

“Are they questions you can ask while walking?” The doctor in her is going to keep me exercising.

I move to push off the arm of the couch but she stops me. “Take both my hands and I’ll pull you up. One-sided pushing like that could hurt you.”

“Damn, I’m glad you said it. I’ll remember now. The skeleton works but my body gets tired of moving with it. I need more practice in it. Doing stupid things I’ve been warned about, will give me tons of practice time, but I don’t want it.”

She laughs pulling me up and we walk. “So, what are your questions?”

“What does pure as driven snow mean? I’ve seen snow that’s been driven on and it’s dirty.”

She smiles. “It’s supposed to mean someone who is a virgin. You make a good point and driven-on snow is dirty but driven snow means snow that falls hard and fast. That snow is usually packed tight and pure white when the sun hits it. At least in Mass that’s how it looks. Almost like it’s glowing. For someone to say that to you, I’d think they see that glow you have. Your excitement has your face and beautiful eyes all but glowing. When you’re happy, your smile lights up. There’s a feeling of importance about you. Maybe a little spiritual but you have a simplicity and thirst for knowledge that makes your intelligence shine. I guess whoever said it feels that glow shining around all you are, Ember. I have a question. Ember or Maiyun?” She just gave me all those things mom always said but never all at once. I love Sam not saying a word about virgin. It’s an unclear memory

that I am not pushing to see. Aylene warned me about memories like that.

“Thank you. My mom said your words but never all together. My name was Maiyun on the reservation and Ember Faye off of it or to Anglos. I’m off the reservation but feel it inside more than I ever did before. I said it didn’t matter but I feel Maiyun more than Ember. Ember is what the men who took me used.”

She stops in the middle of the hall and hugs me. “Maiyun is what I’ll use. I think it fits your happy insightful disposition better.”

“Thank you. I like Luke Rayne calling me Sweet Em. It’s a name just for me.”

She laughs. “I bet it’s the letter M for Maiyun and not shortened Ember. We’re not Indian but I think my boy is.” She laughs but may be right. He feels Indian to me but so does Alder a little.

“I feel that in him. I did when we met. He looks like Ricky Martin from a gigantic picture I saw of him on a road. He made a song I loved about living a crazy life. My friend played it for me so I’d know who he was and I fell in love right then and there. Mine was the definition of a crazy life and it felt like he knew just how I felt. People didn’t shun us but they were nervous around us. A few times I got to go places with the older tribe kids but they barely looked at me. I knew why but you never hurt people because you can. They didn’t get all the lessons I did. My mom should have been a teacher. They heard of the ancestor’s gifts but didn’t see them there much. Everyone moved around and I guess the readers didn’t like it there.”

“He does look like a young Ricky Martin. I never noticed before. Now he’s yours.” She smiles and I know I am, because he is mine and shows me whenever he’s close. “What did your mom do?”

“She read for people. We could help other families because she was good at it. People always gave her more if she gave them a warning. She had better vision than me. I always thought I’d be doing readings but she wouldn’t let me. That’s why I worked for Brewster Jennings. I wanted a house of my own right next to my mom’s. Mom said I had time before I’d mix with Anglos so I worked for Brewster hoping it was time when I got home. I had enough for a house even if I still had to wait to mix with Anglos.” I smile.

“That’s impressive.”

“Not really. They paid outrageous amounts. The houses on the reservation are pretty cheap. How come the people in the Middle East aren’t Anglos? Aren’t Anglos anyone not Indian?”

“People are funny with labels. Most people would be offended with the Indian label. At least the ones who don’t live on the reservation where I come from are. I’ve met the Connecticut tribe and they don’t care if you call them Indian, they call themselves Indian. I think if you use any label as a racial slur, it should be offensive, but my son is more Indian than Anglo and I don’t mind you or anyone saying it. I also think your mom might have been keeping you safe for whatever she saw as your future. There’s no way she saw you hurt in that future. The love and sadness in your eyes when you talk about her tells me you were close. There is a loving respect you have for her that’s immeasurable and lasting. That is why you feel like Maiyun here. Your mom is close and always will be.”

I have to stop and sit on the bench. We watch the sky with choppers and birds flying. “I do feel that I’m closer to her. For some reason, when Luke Rayne is near, I feel it more. Yesterday I thought it was an acceptance of him by her that made me feel it. The reservation made me think I was right. She’s there and I felt her happiness. It was so good to know she’s happy and will watch over me.”

She holds my hand but keeps looking at the sky. “I know how you feel. My mom was a reader and died too young. When I met Tess from the MC, who is a reader and has vision, she told me my

mom was happy I had Jake. I cried like a baby just knowing she was there and watching over me. It wasn't until a year had passed and Luke Rayne was born that I realized she had always been there. I just didn't know how to feel her." She hopes I don't ask her questions.

I hold her hand tighter. "Thank you for saying it. The year I've had was not in a place where I could see that. She had to be there because I couldn't make it alone. I feel it now and see that better. It makes the past not look so scary. Mom had to be the one telling me to take another step. No matter how tired I was, my head said to keep moving forward one step at a time. That had to be mom."

She nods with a smile. "I bet it was. I can't say I know how, but I know my mom is close and always has been. Badass is forward. It's a trait we share with your mom. That must be why you're comfortable with us." She stands and puts her other hand out to pull me up. "What other questions do you have?"

I smile walking beside her. "I have questions for everything but you're a doctor so I put aside those for you. The stab wound was packed with chemicals and a battery was put inside the stab wound. I was running when I got away but one caught me with the knife again and I fell knowing I wasn't walking again. What they did was make a bomb in me. Is that why I have metal replacing bones and ribs?"

"The chemical was mixed to make a paste. The paste alone is erosive." She stops but I nod having read it. "The battery was in a casing that was meant to melt with moisture and heat. If Justice hadn't found it and got it out, you all could have died. Aiyana said his fingers were damaged but Mucimi had her at the reservation to heal the skin. There was enough with what was packed in you to blow you, Luke Rayne and Justice up. Mitch said an eight-to-ten-foot radius. So, to answer your question, the metal is because the chemical eroded bone and tissue. They removed the tissue and replaced the bone. That bone eroding is probably why you fell and felt paralyzed."

"Spirit in the sky, that's more than I asked and scary to know, but I'm glad I know it. Will that chemical be a problem for me in other ways?" She knows way more than what I was told or saw, so I ask everything I saved up for her.

"Alder sent vitamins because he's worried about your weight and health. Underfed for a prolonged time period means your bones, muscles and body in general are deficient. His graph shows it. Pregnancy needs to be discussed with you, but with the deficiencies you are already fighting, trying to supply a baby is a major concern for you and that baby. The chemical was, I have to say here I'm a doctor and healing fascinates me but I don't understand the how, so that being said, the chemical was contained in one area by Aiyana while Alder and Chop cleaned it out of you. If Luke Rayne hadn't been hurt and Justice wasn't under a threat, he would have had time to get more out before the majority of damage was done. Aiyana said he feels it. I think she means he feels guilt for it. He jumped to the reservation with you once you were in the ambulance, but he thinks it wasn't enough."

I cry. He worked so hard to get me walking again and feels guilty. *'Justice, please hear this. Thank you for all you've done. A few minutes wouldn't have changed anything. I knew I wasn't walking again when I fell. I think you need to know that.'* "I told him I knew right away," I tell her.

We sit in chairs at the end of the building and she smiles but it's sad. "He'll see it when he's ready, like us seeing our moms. Sometimes you need to get through crazy shit to see the good that held you up. Men take longer."

As I wipe my eyes, I'm lifted but Luke Rayne isn't here. Justice appears and hugs me. "Thank you."

Sam laughs when he's just gone and I'm sitting in the chair again. I smile and think of my next questions making sure to get the baby talk in there.

* * *

Luke Rayne

Justice shows on the side of me in the middle of Ops. Turning, I hug him. “You okay?” I ask but can feel he’s not.

“Ember told me she knew she wasn’t walking again when she fell.”

I nod. “She told me on the ABSZ.”

He watches my dad on with FBI in Idaho. “I thought I fucked up. I knew and held back the call for Mase and Nash. I didn’t see the other threats, Brother.”

I nod, keeping my eyes off him. “The gifts you have are literally unbelievable to most of the world. I guess some would see it as God-like. Probably most of the world would.” I give him and smile watching Meehan’s board. “The thing is, when you’re so used to having those gifts, you tend to think you can do everything with a thought. I changed the medic room that way, then was kicking myself because Ember still needed the net and couldn’t move. I couldn’t do a fuckin’ thing about it no matter what gifts I was gifted. You don’t see everything for a reason. Maybe it’s a lesson to take what you do have and celebrate the gift.” Turning, I put a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe it was because I needed time to figure out what the hell they gifted me. Maybe it was Mase, Nash or Teller that needed to see that you may be seen as God-like but you are not God.”

His eyes are on mine but his mind is racing. He turns and hugs me. “You’re right. Maybe I needed to see your connection and how strong it is when I’m the one in need.” He smiles. “Brother, I’ve never seen me as God-like and don’t have much of a reference on God. We’re brought up with ancestors. Thanks, Luke-Rayne. Maiyun is more comfortable than Ember for her. The men who took her called her Ember.”

I nod. “I’ll remember.”

“Love ya, Brother.” He leaves me smiling.

No matter what is happening, he takes responsibility for it himself. I get it and see, as President, it’s his burden, I just don’t think of everything as a burden. Without him showing and making the calls to Mase, Nash and Teller – Maiyun, Zeus and I would have died. The Brother is anything but a burden in my book.

He was right about my sweet Em seeing me when she woke up too. The shit he sees and does saves more than anyone will ever see. My girl is happy to live her life with connections to her past, her now and her future. Without him seeing shit, she’d still be thinking she’s not worth it. I owe him more than I’ll ever be able to show but he’s my President and doesn’t need adoration from me. He needs what I can add to him, the ancestors and the vision. Because he takes responsibility for everything, I’ll work to make sure he gets that from me.

My girl’s words come back to me and I’m glad she got the same lessons we did. She’d understand this; He deserves everything and every Protector that knows his heart is willing to give that to him because that’s what we get from him.

Thinking about that, I send it to Justice, then to Cort, changing the Protector to Brother. He deserves it too.



A good-dinner with my mom, Chris, Nash, Kyler, Jeti and Tucker went to long-dinner when my dad came in late from Ops and had us laughing with the crazy shit people do.

My sweet Em doesn't ask anything because Kyler is giving her explanations. Her big eyes, bigger in her surprise, have me watching her more than talking. Since I don't talk much normally, I don't mind seeing the new hit her giving me new expressions to memorize.

Nash shows with Zeus, MB, Ari and the Bits. I watch Maiyun take them all in. Zeus sits at the corner of the table between me and Maiyun. I lean over to scratch him down. "Thanks for showing. She's in the skeleton now and can walk."

He hits his watch to his nose, then hits a pic of his robotic. While he's looking at Maiyun, I smile as she lifts her sleeve and shows him her skeleton.

Mucimi shows at the other end of the table but everyone is focused on Zeus and Maiyun.

Seeing it isn't enough for Zeus, she shows him the skeleton on her leg and explains. "It's like your robotic because it is robotic but it does more because my body can't. I'm not missing an arm or leg but the ability to move the arms and legs I do have by myself, so the robotic does it for me."

Zeus looks at me. "He doesn't understand. Harky told him she was paralyzed." Mucimi has everyone's head whipping toward him or jumping and I laugh.

"The surgery was to replace bones in her back so she can use the skeleton to walk and move like everyone else." Mucimi tells Zeus.

He hits his board and has everyone snickering when he chats to Piper: no paralyze, new, skeleton. Command Ops, a picture of me then, girl, walk, eat.

When he's done, his board disappears and he chuffs before he touches Maiyun's skeleton on her arm. He chuffs again and she laughs. "Thanks, I love it like you love your leg."

"Do you want a dog? Before you answer, Tyson wears a skeleton to help him move around but his body gets tired regularly. His dog fetches and helps him shower every day. Without the skeleton, he can't stand or move normally for very long. Andrew is the same but his skeleton is only for his legs. Jinx has one side that has a skeleton so an arm and leg. Without the skeleton, he's too weak to stand or hold things for very long too. The dog would be trained for what you need. Like their dogs are trained for what they need. Zeus is asking now so Piper can find the right dog. You'll need to let her know what your needs are. I don't see you showering with a dog like Tyson and Andrew, but you'd need a dog big enough to hold your weight to get the skeleton on." Mucimi is good about giving the example of needs but not detailing what I know he sees.

My girl looks at me. "A dog sounds like a good idea but I'm not sure what I will need because I'm not healed enough to know what I will be able to do without the skeleton." She may have more upper body strength while not in the skeleton so I see her reasoning.

"You make a good point. I'd say a dog that will be able to hold your weight and is service oriented but also protection when you're not in need of that service."

Those big, beautiful eyes get huge. "Like Zeus is trained?"

Mucimi helps me out. "Maybe not at Zeus's level. You can meet Tyson and his dog. I think that

type of protection is more of what you need. I see you able to move normally in the skeleton. It's more important to get a dog for when you're out of it."

She nods looking down and I feel sadness from her. "We'll be right back." I throw out lifting her up.

In the room, I don't let go and sit on the couch. "What's wrong, sweet Em?"

"Do you shorten Ember or call me the letter M?" She asks softly without looking at me.

"The letter. I like both names but your Indian shows Maiyun more than Ember. I like the Indian." I smile when she looks up. "What's wrong?"

"Without the skeleton I'm not going to be able to move."

I nod. "Not much. From your chest up will but the rest needs the skeleton to move."

"You're going to have to take care of me forever. Are you hiding that?"

Hiding it? "I won't hide anything from you. What do you mean hiding it?"

Her anger shows in her eyes, surprising me. "You say the rest needs the skeleton to move like it's just a thing."

I wait but she doesn't explain. "It is just a thing. You think Andrew, Jinx or any of the people that got skeletons think it's more than a thing? They can move after not being able to. It's a tool for them to live normal lives. Hell, Jinx is the President of a new Club. He probably kisses his skeleton daily."

She can't hold that anger and smiles. "I'll get to walk every day and have no reason to throw a tantrum because I've got the tool that gives me that ability. I'm sorry. I'm trying to be everything right for you. It's stupid because I thought I don't need you to be everything for me. I need you to be you with the job and your friends, Indian beliefs, my best friend and man I love."

My hands move fast holding her face so I can kiss that mouth that loves me and all my crazy Badass-Indian-FBI life, even though I'm not Indian or FBI.

Her hands pull my head closer and I'm lost. Knocking has me growling. "We'll be out when we're out."

"Just saying bye, Brother. Your mom and dad will see you tomorrow. We'll see you at the reservation." Jetti's little giggles have me smiling down at my girl.

"Bye."

When they're gone, I breathe her in. "I will be everything to you and you will be everything to me. Badass is crazy and you'll need your own work and friends but we tend to find ways to help with that too. The women roll their eyes but they smile about it. I'm going to drive you crazy and you're already driving me crazy. It's a match made by the ancestors knowing we'll be who we're meant to be together. You know my mom is deaf and needs glasses to read like Stella. Marty and Diego have voice chips that talk for them. Jinx is married and hasn't had a problem with his skeleton. We live this life together and if it's yours, it's mine. If it's mine it's yours. Your skeleton is a gift to me just like you are."

Her calm and thoughtful look is another I've come to love. I wait for her to respond.

"You're who my mom saw?"

That's not what I expected. "I don't know what your mom saw."

She nods. "Mucimi says you are."

"Mucimi needs to stop watching us." The fuckin' Brother sees everything.

"I asked him. It's hard to see who we will be but I feel it, I feel this, whatever connects us is

strong. Do you feel that?"

"I do. I felt it at the hospital the first night. Justice said you needed me there and I wanted to find the group so bad I was shaking. Mase went and all I could do was wait, the whole time thinking I'd let you go in alone. The connection was already there, I didn't see it and didn't protect you. The wait killed me but my focus changed in a split second. Seeing your eyes open was all that mattered from then on. There were no fireworks or aha moments. One minute I wanted the group dead, the next your eyes to open so I could tell you about the surgery they'd do to get you walking." I smile at her. "Life changing moments should come with some sign that your life is about to change, shouldn't it?"

Her eyebrows go up. "I went to get dinner and woke up in a contraption that only let me move my hands. I had a metal back and new people in my head and all around me. I'm not gonna lie. My life has never been normal but you people take unbelievable to new heights." Her seriousness has me laughing and hugging her tighter.

When I calm, I'm glad to see she's smiling too. "You've got a point there. Just so you know, we don't know what normal is, Prez reminds us of that all the time. You'll fit right in."

"I'm glad because you're all growing on me. Except maybe Nancy, she's way over the top."

I laugh and spend the night talking about the crazy men and women of Badass. My sweet Em tells me of her mom, great aunt, aunt and cousin. It's happy memories she shares and laughs about. I'm glad she feels that. Tomorrow we have Ops for her that will need her to remember the happy and funny she shared with the family she loves.

Chapter Eight

Two days

FBI/Badass Training Center

Maiyun

Walking to the room the Alpha-Bits set up for me, I think about all the people that showed up last night. Everyone was surprised that I was quiet but okay. I already knew my family died. I saw my mom and dad die. Crying for mom lasted for what felt like months. It couldn't have been but it felt like it. My aunt and cousin were always lumped in there but she was my mom. It was horrible to lose them all, but they're with the ancestors.

The first time at the reservation I felt my mom more than I do here. It was so comforting I was looking for a way to live there. Mama would say to live my life and celebrate all who made me. In other words, don't live in the past. I think going to the reservation is a way to celebrate our past and those who touched our lives daily. It feels good to remember but I need to live this new life with my new connections while celebrating daily how I got here. It's easier said than done but I've got those ancestors watching over me and ready to help me when I fall. I'm sad they're there, but glad I still have them.

"Maiyun?" Sam says softly.

Shaking my head, I give a small nod. Daydreaming at the window is not getting the books on the shelf that was built special for them. I use my hand to get the door open and freeze with one foot in. The right side is set up as an office, kind of, with my mom's book shelves right there against the wall.

I'm stunned and just start talking. "These people are so unbelievable it's starting to feel like another world. The Middle East was like that when we got there. I saw TVs but didn't have one, so for me, it was a world I never knew existed. Reading about countries and knowing where they are does not prepare you for them in your reality. Here, walking into a room with mom's dulled wooden blue bookshelves with the drawer on the left and cabinet door on the right, her remembrances, *in the right place*, feels like my new reality is based between the past and present."

Sam's hand rubbing down my back keeps me right here. Jumping to tell mom all about this can wait, I smile shaking my head, she's here, she knows. "All that's left is putting her books up but I have to touch."

The soft laugh has me moving. "I'd have run." Sam knows. The last two days have shown me I'm not the only one that's gone through this. Sam feels like a guide that was sent to me and helps keep it all in perspective. She's happy and excitable at times but reminds me that my bouncing feelings and emotions are okay. Running isn't an option after therapy but I make it to the shelves and touch every treasure telling her about it.

When the door opens, I'm surprised to see we've been here for almost an hour. I'm happy to be right here but the memories will still be here and I'll see and feel them whenever I want. The boxes of books need to be put up, the lunch just brought in needs to be eaten.

"Thanks, Mary. I didn't think about lunch but I don't want to leave."

She smiles. "I'm glad Sam sent me to get it. I didn't think about you seeing this for the first time in years." She's not saying after losing my mom and I'm glad she doesn't. It's a happy and sad moment that I think I just need to get through.

"I appreciate it. Let's eat." Now I'm excited to get to the books.

"You have some help in the dining room, they were giving you time." Her smile says she isn't telling me but I see it.

"I'll be happy to have it. There are books that go behind the door that I've never seen. I don't know what was brought but there's a safe room that I've never seen either. I hope that's here."

Sam takes the cover off my food. "There's a storage container at the hangar that has pictures and other household items Mucimi pulled out. The guys were redecorating your house with some of it while we were in here."

The smile feels foreign on my face telling me it's time to move forward. One step at a time. "That's why it always feels unbelievable. I get through one moment just to step into the next. They're very compassionate and considerate men, aren't they?"

"They don't think so but they are. It's why we love them. Don't call them sweet. The biker shows growling and I kid you not, they have to prove they're not sweet but it's always in a way that's ruggedly sweet. They're funny men, a breed of their own but funny men."

"I have to try that one but I'll wait until I can handle ruggedly sweet first."

They laugh at me, making me smile. I've always been the girl throwing in comments that cause a laugh. It feels good to laugh again.

Luke Rayne

Closing down the FBI Ops unit, I go to Wavan and ask him to pull up Maiyun's lab. She's at the table eating with a smile on.

He zooms in on her face and smiles up at me but I see it, those haunted eyes have happy in them again. "Boss Maiyun Badass, Commander."

Bending down I smile seeing he means she's moving forward. "That she is, Brother. Moving forward is Badass. Her mom taught her without our lessons but she learned like we did."

"I not surprise. Indian freaky pass lesson same but different. Like Boss Garren." They are so smart I shouldn't be surprised with them.

"You're right. I have a class to get to."

He shakes his head. "Boss Jake take class you help Boss Maiyun." My little Brother knows more than me.

I love my dad but kiss Wavan's head getting a little giggle. "Thanks, Wavan. I'll eat and go help."

I've felt Christian and Mucimi all morning so seeing them in the dining room isn't a shock. "Brothers, my dad took my class so I'm free for a couple of hours."

Christian nods. "I was just thinking this is going to take forever. I feel a pull to the books and haven't seen them."

A pull? "There's something you need in them?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. It could be curiosity. Today isn't the day but I'm drawn here for a reason."

I nod and order a sandwich so I can get to the lab.

"She's happy." Mucimi doesn't add anything to that.

"Happy is good." What the fuck can I say?

Christian laughs. "She's moving forward. She's something to the tribesmen here but I don't think it's yet. Her connection feels like Chenoa, but she's more. Maybe like Aiyana when she was young. You knew she was more but it wasn't her time."

I move for my plate and throw chin. "I feel it and have time."

"She's growing into her purpose. Not Aiyana but a voice for her people to hear. Co was Aiyana's teacher, but he's Maiyun's guide." Mucimi's voice has me frozen. His mind is not here with us.

Christian hits my arm. "Mucimi has grown into his purpose."

Holy fuck. "I guess he has."

Feeling Justice and Teller, I look around, when I turn back, they're behind Mucimi with their hands on his shoulder. Freaky needs to slow down so I can follow.

They both smile at me. I eat while I can, watching them and Mucimi. I don't even blink when Aiyana shows behind them all – but she isn't here.

I've got a few bites left when Christian stands. Everyone behind Mucimi vanishes and Mucimi smiles. I guess we're done.

Standing like that all didn't just happen, Mucimi smiles at me. "Keep Christian from reading. He can read when you take Maiyun to Delta."

“So, I’m going to Delta?” A quiet dinner at home was my plan.

Christian laughs. Mucimi doesn’t answer. I follow them out because it’s fairly normal not to get answers from them. I’ve learned those answers aren’t always good but sometimes it’s a life changing moment you’d never get back if you were told beforehand.

Flying us to Delta, my girl is excited that Maverick has a special satellite going up. Josephine invited her to come watch it after their ol’ lady meeting. Since ol’ lady meetings will make my life easy, my girl happy and sex interesting forever, I’m flying us to Delta. Mucimi could have just told me.

Setting down, I point out Zeus waiting for us. My sweet Em laughs. “He’s like my best friend.”

“It’s weird but he’s a good friend to have.” I unbuckle her from the seat and help her stand.

“My legs are wobbly again.”

Keeping her hand, I guide her out and suspend us down. “It’s new. You’ll get used to it.”

Zeus barks, getting our attention. “Hi, Zeus. I’m glad you’re here. Where’s... Hi, Harky.” Em holds my hand tighter.

Harky in serious mode is intimidating. “Brother, you need Security with you. Adrian said you were on the Ops boards.”

Zeus jabs his watch with his nose. *Flight* and Maiyun’s picture show and he jabs again, then moves to Maiyun.

I laugh watching Harky’s face. “She said they’re best friends,” I offer.

“Here is getting crazier. I never saw us getting to here.”

I smile and point to my girl. “Me either, but I love here,” I tell him, bending to scratch down Zeus. “Thanks for showing. She has an ol’ lady meeting to get to.”

His board comes on and we see the chat from Piper telling him to show Maiyun where the ol’ ladies are.

I look up at Harky. “He was following orders.”

He shakes his head following Zeus and Maiyun who is talking to him about the books like he’s a person. It is a little crazy here. “He outranks everyone and ignores their orders. Piper has him wrapped around her finger, but I can’t complain, I’m right there with him.”

“I hear ya, Brother. I’m there too. Where’s the meeting?” We’re headed to the side of the Club but it’s the office side.

“Maverick’s meeting room. Prince and MC ol’ ladies are joining them on a board.”

At the stairs I move right behind my girl. “Tell me when you’re ready for the freaky ride.”

Those big eyes looking at me over her shoulder have me holding in a groan. Jesus. “If there’s more stairs I may need it, but I think I got this if you put your arms out.”

I bend my elbows so my arms are at her side and she pushes up for each step easily. “Good job.

There is an elevator.”

Zeus chuffs getting her attention. “Can you show me? Freaky rides make me dizzy.”

With a look from Zeus, I’m forgotten and she starts talking about the wood in the hallway, then pictures on the walls. I shake my head.

Harky thinks she’s just like Piper. He’s only her American dream on her terms. Whatever that means.

I follow and listen to the meeting room.

Piper sees Harky and her eyes light up. Turning, I note he saw it and thinks of her American dream again.

I don’t ask but bend to my girl. “Have fun, sweet Em. I’ll be in the Club.”

Aylen pulls her away as soon as her lips are off mine. “I’ll get her to you, Brother.”

Fuckin’ women.

All the Officers are sitting in the back. “Where’s Zeus?” Mag asks Harky while Jinx and Mase are talking about riding next week. Brinks calls in if it’s a morning ride. I watch Harky.

“Outside the meeting room with Remo, Michaels, Morse from Elan, Clay and Boulder.”

Falcon sits beside me. “Good job with the Wisconsin Op. I wanted them to shoot the fuck.”

“I did too but Washington would have had a field day with us shooting to kill. I’ve never run Ginny on FBI but she was right to use the laser. Their lives weren’t in danger when they went in.” I see he doesn’t care.

“The kids?”

“The parents met them at the hospital. One is staying overnight, the other two were released.”

“I still wish Harky and Zeus were there. If Harky didn’t kill him, Zeus would have.”

“That may be but it still would have been wrong by FBI procedure. Those are not Badass’ call to make. That dick will get his. Following the procedure needs to be seen. What happens after, when he’s locked up, no one has that shit under a microscope.” I smile knowing it will be done. I’ve seen a few we’ve handed off go missing or found dead. It’s always while they’re waiting in jails.

His eyes snap to mine. “Badass?”

I shrug. “I never asked. My IT follows the names,” I shrug again, “we’re half FBI. I get weekly reports and noticed.”

“God-damn-motherfuckin-monkey-pissers. I’m getting that link.” He makes me smile with his shortened version of that line.

I shake my head. “If *you* do, then all Clubs will, FBI under a microscope means so are the Clubs. One mention to the wrong people means oversight is back in place and those dicks handed off may walk from court. Leave it knowing the handoff isn’t the end of the Ops for someone.”

He watches the sky shaking his head. “I’m glad you’re on the Ops. I’ll keep it. Does Cort

know?”

I wondered that myself and looked. “He gets the same reports I do.”

He doesn’t ask any more about Ops. “How’s your girl?”

My smile is full out. “Walking, excited about her new job and happy for her new connections.”

“That’s good, Brother. Solei said the therapist is amazed she’s walking already.”

“Yeah, he’s got her moving faster in two days. She climbed the stairs here using my arms but kept walking to the elevator. I expected her to stop for a minute.”

“The shit they do is mind boggling. Did Stella get the waterproof skeleton done?” They all follow my girl’s progress. Badass never being alone is shown in all parts of my life, but Brothers showing me, makes me proud and honored to be Badass born and raised.

“She hasn’t said. I know Justice was working in her lab with her. We’ll find out soon.”

He nods. “Juan was waiting to build it yesterday. The Bits think not swimming is a punishment,” Falcon says thinking they aren’t wrong. I love the Brother.

I laugh, noticing Mag and Harky chuckling over that.

“She’d need the skeleton in the water. For me the pool is therapy, like Tyson. For her, she can’t use it for therapy until she has the waterproof skeleton.” Jinx makes a good point.

I nod but hadn’t really thought about her using it for therapy.

He’s not done. “I meant to ask, do the sensors control the skeleton?”

“No, they bring feeling to her body below her chest. A small part of her spinal cord was damaged. The sensors work for that bringing feeling back to what was paralyzed. The skeleton works like yours with bands. The hope is that muscle and ligaments will grow around the metal and perform like normal vertebrae but the damage to bone was more than they expected and the cord, while encased in metal with sensors attached, doesn’t control movement, just feeling.”

Jinx looks away so I do. He clears his throat after a minute. “I’m glad they could do that for her. I’d be lost without the skeleton.” He feels for my girl.

“She wanted to meet you, Brother. Zeus is pushing a dog but she doesn’t know what she’d need it for once she heals enough to get the skeleton on herself.”

He nods. “I’d be honored to help her any way I can. Even with the skeleton, Champ helps me with balance all day long.”

“I’ve seen it. She has a track on the ceiling to move without the skeleton to the chair, bathroom and tub. Imagining what you need when you haven’t used the tools isn’t easy for her. Some advice from experience would help.”

He nods. “I’ll find her tonight. Tyson’s dog helps in the shower. He may have some tips for her too.”

“She wants to meet him too. Andrew talked to her but he doesn’t have a dog. His legs are paralyzed and the chip works his skeleton. I know it’s apples and oranges but Andrew has always worked to take care of himself. When his dog died, he wouldn’t even look at getting a new one and he was only 17 then. He built braces working off the chip for the water and bed so he’s covered no matter what he’s doing.” Looking from the sky to my Brothers, I see everyone is paying attention to me. I didn’t realize they stopped talking with each other.

“He builds his own robotics. Someone else said that before. You kids, or now men, learned everything.” Cooper says.

“I was Baxter but we all did. I had Mitch, Jess, Kaleb and Jared in the engineering labs. They

were like the Bits but I was never drawn to work robotics or virtual. I loved learning it and had a blast building shit, but I've always been drawn to the military and Ops," I tell them smiling. It was fun but not my calling.

"You had the three Baxter men to learn from. They were all military," Brinks says.

Pride creeps through me. "They were and were mentors. Kevin and Rayne worked with me for martial arts and stealth. They're some scary fuckin' Brothers when they're in stealth. My dad, Zack and Jamie taught me the office. I had to start at the bottom and work every position until one would sign off. Control for flight was Ben. It's funny that the one thing every one of them pushed was listening to people, focusing on their voice. You can learn a lot of shit from the inflection of someone's voice and they all made a point of teaching it."

Falcon turns toward me. "They were training you for the military?"

"As soon as I cleared pop ups. I was eleven or twelve. Rayne was my range trainer, from there, I went to training for half my day and school part time. I wasn't in the labs so much unless it was for school. Rayne and my dad pushed procedure so I could move to the next position. Once I got it, procedure was how I lived. It got me new responsibilities, but to a kid, that came with more fun shit to do and explore." I smile, making them laugh.

"Sounds like a good upbringing." Brinks is smiling but I know how hard his life was.

"It was and I know how lucky I had it. Mitch, Lori, Zack, Ben, Carolina and a bunch of people on the compound barely made it there. I read all of them from young and to this day, carry their stories to remind me why we're Badass, why I'm Badass."

Jinx throws me chin. "It's a good way to keep perspective. That perspective is how you're always so calm on Ops."

I don't know but throw him chin.

Maiyun

We find the men in the back of the Club. It was a long walk and everyone sits on their husband's lap so I sit on Luke Rayne needing the rest. Josephine sits in the only open seat across from us. "I don't know about you but I need the seat." She closes her crutch up as she says it. I love her gadgets and style.

"It was a long walk down here. Zeus let me lean on him coming down the steps or I would have waited for a freaky ride." I point behind us at the deck steps going up to the Club."

"You should have told me." Aylene hits Josephine's leg and sits at the end of the lounge chair while her aunt points her gun at Stella and Brinks making me laugh. Stella sits at the bottom of the chair with Elizabeth so I don't get why they're laughing still.

"Or me." Luke Rayne has me turning toward him. Thinking back, he means telling him I was tired? He was talking to Falcon and Solei.

"It's five steps. I made it and didn't need help."

Debra smiles. "Let her live and ask for what she needs. She's not shy and needs to learn her limits. It's how she'll know how far to push."

She's so quiet but really smart. I nod, looking at Jinx's smile. "Experience, I bet. I wanted to talk to you about your dog."

He lifts Debra like she weighs nothing and turns them on the seat so he's facing me. "Ask me anything." His eye swirling in light blue distracts me for a second.

While everyone talks Jinx gives me real life advice and tips. Champ is with him all the time for balance. My questions are not for balance but he's just as smart as Debra and explains crap I never thought about as if paralysis were part of his life. I get it and ask him more, he's obviously been there.

When I don't have more questions and thank him, Josephine stands extending her crutch. "The launch is in five, according to Anton. I hope he means minutes."

We laugh as men stand. Luke Rayne doesn't set me down. "We're walking to the side. We'll be able to see and feel the launch from here." He's good about letting me know what's happening.

"Thanks, I've never seen a space launch."

Josephine and Aylene laugh. "I have a good video for you before this one goes up. Put her down, Luke Rayne." Josephine fiddles with her phone.

He does but holds me from behind. The video starts and I'm excited. "I know that song."

She nods. Maybe everyone does. Watching the video, I'm shocked. "Maverick sings this song?"

"He mimicked it. I'll explain later."

I nod, watching, but he's singing the song. I don't know what the army has to do with it, but I like the song so I push it away and watch Maverick and his Air Force men on the video. At the end, a rocket launches and I'm riveted. "I'm going to see that!"

They all laugh but the ground is vibrating. Luke Rayne's arms tighten around me. "Right now, sweet Em."

Josephine points to where it looks like something exploded, then we see the rocket burst up into the air as if trying to escape the fire. "Oh, my spirits. That's beautiful."

The fire changes to just under the rocket. Josephine's security guy talks about how fast it's

going and what happens next. I'm glad he's here.

The ground isn't vibrating like it was but the air still is. I can feel power all around me. "Do you feel that? A power all around us?" I ask softly, looking up at Luke Rayne. The man is gorgeous all the time, but that brown with sandy highlighted hair looks lighter, his full lips are serious but look luscious and those eyes.

He turns me bending closer. His eyes are piercing in a way I haven't seen before. Soulful, peering, love? Pulling him closer by the shirt brings his lips to mine. I want to feel that look and I do.

"Keep your eyes closed." His growl makes me want to smile but I do as I'm told. It's seconds before his lips are back on mine. I don't need to see him. I feel everything I saw in his eyes.

Needing air, I pull away. "Air," I say, getting pulled to his chest. We're sitting? I lay my head down while he holds my head right against his beating heart.

"You're gonna fuckin' kill me, sweet Em. I felt the power all around us. What was in your eyes?" He's asking about my eyes?

"Listing how handsome you are?"

"No. The power in your eyes, was that excitement over the launch?" His hand running from the back of my head down my back makes thinking through the past minutes a little tough.

I want to go forward. "I was excited but your eyes looked soulful or something. My head listed words and stopped on love. It surprised me. I wanted to feel it and kissed you."

"That's what I felt. Your eyes show love. It's a love I wanted to feel. I'm glad we're alike there. Take what you want when you want it, because I'm going to, sweet Em. Close your eyes."

I do, thinking he's going to kiss me again, but I'm standing and open my eyes to his. "I love your excitement, sweet Em, but feel that love in everything." He kisses my lips quick and turns me so my back is against him. Aylen's aunt nods to me so I smile, I hope. I met her before but everyone was at Aylen's new Club so our chat was only for minutes.

My spirits! Tears make seeing the blip of light in the sky hard. He loves me and feels it in everything. Take what I want, he said.

'You're a lucky girl, Maiyun. Live every minute of that love. Luke Rayne is a catch and a half.'

Turning my head, I see Aylen watching me with a smile. *'Happy you found each other.'* She tacks on.

I smile at her. *'Me too.'*

She turns back to the sky so I do, blinking to see the little light blip.

Luke Rayne

I watch her sleep going back over my time with her today. She's moving her arms more without the skeleton and pulled her shirt off as soon as I sat her up. The movement had me focusing on shit things that happen to good people so I wasn't thinking of her ripping her shirt off.

The look over her shoulder jumps and I think that's a position I'm going to love. Pushing it away, I get back to our time together. The tears as she read a letter, from her dad, that was stuck in a book gutted me. He was a dead-beat-dad-douche. Her mom wanted a car to take Maiyun to the other reservations and he disowned her. She was nine years old and he disowned his girl. She said her mom started reading for Anglos then. Christian told her that her mom learned of trafficking because the elder she went to - told her Maiyun's dad was working with them. I was pissed but she just nodded.

"I was safer and better off nowhere close to him." The haunted look in her eyes held the pain she had to be feeling and kills me, but her words had my mom agreeing.

Christian threw for us to put personal shit in a box for her to read alone and we all did. Maiyun didn't notice or didn't care. She kept putting the books up. Some she'd show Christian, some she'd smile opening.

The stories passed down that she told me are in a few books marked ancestor. She showed me one and I read the entire story. She didn't miss anything and told me almost verbatim. She's an amazing woman.

I smile. She's *my* amazing woman. Rolling onto my back and suspending her closer to me, I will the lights off and close my eyes, finding her hand. "My sweet Em."

Chapter Nine

Two days

Bravo Rising

Maiyun

Mag sets down and the man that helped me on, bends down in front of me. “Do you need help with the belt or standing?” He’s worried my legs will be shaky.

“I’m right here, GI Joe.” Reggie takes offense.

“I got the belt but need help standing. Reggie will be all over me if I try pushing with one hand on the arms of the seat.”

Reggie chatters on about healing right under the shell. I ignore him and use the arms the man holds out for me. “Thanks. My legs are okay. I’ve been on choppers a couple times a day for a few days now.”

He nods, handing Reggie my bag. “Do you take this?”

Reggie’s hand goes on his waist and I wince. “Is that you showing your homopho...”

“Get over yourself. My brother is gay and I love his husband like a second brother. The commander told me what to watch out for and carrying her bag on her back is one of those things. I’m not following her around and don’t know who takes the bag. Her woman isn’t here with her.” GI Joe isn’t taking crap from Reggie.

“Oh, sorry. I’ll take it. She’s got Security but you are all in the same uniform.” Reggie makes me laugh.

The man smiles at me shaking his head. “Who is your lead?”

“Owen.” I point him out and Owen takes my bag with a smile.

“Thanks, Brother. Reggie’s usually cool.”

The flight guy nods. “He’ll get it. I haven’t met whoever fucked with him but he’s usually calm on flights.”

I see he’s remembering his brother and look away from all that. Owen lifts me down to a smiling little guy. “Boss Maiyun. I Alta Ford. Maddox, Juan build you skeleton to swim. I stay to you to meet Tyson, Maddox, Juan, Boss Alexia.”

I nod at the little guy. “Thanks, Alta. I’m going to the Protector compound when we’re done. Carmen will be home by then.”

He nods, taking my bag from Owen. Once he’s got it on his back, he takes my hand and starts walking. I love the little guys. “You’re one of the older Alpha-Bits, right?”

He smiles like the question makes him happy. “Akai older than me.”

I nod. "Akai, Alta, Amal, Aris, Allen, Aaron, Alder, Asa, Anton. I was told you're the busiest Alpha-Bits here. It's an honor to have you with me today. They could have sent anyone."

He smiles up at me but has tears in his eyes. "I honor to meet you. All As have BSC Club job, ABSZ job. Alpha-Bits have help with Brothers and other Bits. Today, I get perk. Show ABSZ to you, have lunch to Boss Alexia, you. See my Brother Tyson. Give skeleton, maybe you swim. All perk to me, hard work not hard today. Fun."

I laugh. "Glad you get those perks, Alta. It makes life happy."

"Happy!" A security guy says with Alta.

"That's cute. The Bits at the Training Center say it like that too."

"It's big for the little Brothers. Don't say the other word." Owen takes my bag from Alta so we can get on a golf cart. "I can carry her bag, Alta. It's weighing you down." He's a nice guy. I wish I could hold it on my back but I'm not cleared for that yet.

Reggie waves from a little car. "Have fun, Maiyun. If the skeleton works, we'll be in the pool tomorrow."

"Thanks, Reggie."

Security follows us around in a truck and I wonder if they just want to speed by. I think I would but I like the golf cart. Alta tells me about the Club, pointing out sections for different groups. The Justice League lived here but moved to ABSZ when the Alpha-Bits did.

Luke Rayne told me about the rescues and had me in tears. I don't cry today. I'm glad he tells me crap or, without it, it would have had me asking hurtful questions. The little guys have been through too much already.

Tyson meets us at the door with his dog. "Welcome to the land of Tyson. It's quiet now so we can talk. The little shitsilis will be home in a couple of hours and they will lure you into their tiny world to play, so come on in while you can still think." He sounds like a game show host making me laugh.

"Thanks for seeing me, Tyson. Shitsilis is brother in Navajo and reminds me of how much I wanted to use it but I never had a little brother. I like it and your skeleton colors."

He waves for me to sit on the couch. "Mood of the day colors. I feel optimistic and grateful."

Alta sits beside me handing me my bag. "He always have blue, red."

Tyson sits with a smile. "Two weeks ago, I wore yellow and everyone asked what was wrong. It's a conversation starter. Why don't you have colors showing?"

"I wear blue too but I don't put it on very often. I could match my clothes, I guess. Drawing attention to myself on a base of predominantly men doesn't seem like a good idea."

He nods seriously. "You make a good point. Just about everyone there are trainees. Keeping you safe is different than me. I'll remember this." Luke Rayne is right, he's a smart kid.

"It's the reason I wanted to talk to you. Zeus chats to me every day about a dog but I don't know what my needs will be. I'm still in the shell until everything is healed right. Can you tell me what your dog does for you?" He nods, looking thoughtful.

"My mom said you're paralyzed from the chest down without the skeleton. It's different than me but I can see that some parts aren't really. My body gets tired even with the skeleton. Not as much as before, but I still end up in my chair a couple of times a day. Before I'm there, I use Nótaxe to keep me standing until I get to the chair. He runs for anything I need in the house but won't leave me at school. He's security for me besides being a service dog."

I smile. "You use Indian words a lot?"

"We had to ask a little sister. She knows all kinds of languages. Just so you're not surprised, Maiyun means wolf in Cheyenne and Dreng named his dog wolf."

I smile. "I lived on a mixed reservation. The kids were always calling me wolf girl. I'm Navajo so it means spirit or spark. Our words don't translate well to English but it's the easiest to remember."

He watches me before he talks. "Spark feels right. You've already started a spark and I get the feeling you're not finished setting that spark."

I pull blocks but can't read anything he may have meant by that. "I hope it's a good spark."

He makes me a little nervous until he smiles. "I wouldn't have said it if it weren't."

"Are you a reader?" I ask.

"More of a seer like Alder."

We get into a whole discussion about reader and vision abilities until he freaks me right out. His great grandmother is in one of my grandmother's books. Without saying a word about it, I change the subject because that family was led into tragedy. A seer's vision says a crow with broken wings is touched by the ancestors and rises up. I can't help but wonder if Tyson is a crow with broken wings. Talking about what I might need from a dog is safer.

Tyson comes with us to the lab but the printer isn't finished. With his strangely grown-up way of talking, he tells me he'll see me later and I'll get to meet his little shitsilis. The seer in him has to be more than how Alder said he sees.

Alta takes me to what he calls the smart car hub and we ride in one of the tiny cars. I laugh through the beginning until we're speeding down a road with little cars and bikes being ridden on the side by obvious Alpha-Bits. Cort was right, some of them are very small.

The big IT building with moving binary numbers is another wonder in my new world. The smaller building to the side of it is 'BSC Ops' but doesn't get more of an intro than that. I get a tour of the big building, which is impressive and has a lot of Alpha-Bits working in it and drones flying around it, then I'm brought to Alexia's floor.

Alta tells me she was FBI before she saved some Alpha-Bits and got fired. She moved and her dad lives on the ABSZ at Web's compound. He was the FBI director. I don't ask a single question because unlike Tyson, Alta thinks of more than he says and I see it easily. I still find it unbelievable and I'm not sure I understand it right so no questions pass my lips.

He knocks and walks into the office where a smiling woman that looks close to my age is behind a big desk. "Hi, Alta. Is this Maiyun?" She stops with her eyes scanning my whole face. "Ember Faye. I helped find you on face recognition in Nevada." She's surprised I'm the same person she watched on videos.

I nod. "Maiyun is the name I was given. My mother found English words to describe Maiyun that I use off the reservation with Anglos. Ember Faye are those words."

Her head tilts. "What's Anglos?"

I smile. "People who don't live on reservations." At least according to Sam but it feels right.

She doesn't get it but doesn't ask. She's like me not understanding everything. She'll wait and see if it gets explained. "You're Indian but don't really exist. Web brought me your papers this morning so we can do that then have lunch. I'm excited you're here today. Garren and Michael changed our lunch date until tomorrow."

I nod but don't understand. "Aren't you married to Web?"

Alta hands me my bag as I sit. This may take a while.

"I am and we have five babies. I didn't have them, they're like adopted." She stops talking and pulls open an envelope.

"I find that on the ABSZ I don't understand more than I do."

Her eyes whip to mine. "Are you autistic too?" That's the intelligence and simplicity I see. I should have known.

"No, but I was raised on the reservation and homeschooled. I don't understand things when words I'm not familiar with are used or words I know don't make sense where they're used."

"Like slang?" She knows.

"Yep. Or situations and people I don't know. Meeting so many new people has my head spinning."

She nods fast. "I'm like that. Head spinning are words I wouldn't have understood, but when I went to Quantico, I learned all kinds of words like that. These are the papers, your social security card, a driver's license and birth certificate. Web said Carmen will have your immunization records but you won't have any out of the country shots. Ford said you weren't immunized coming back to the US. This doesn't match." She pulls everything right back to read them again.

I shake my head. "We got shots leaving but it was four years ago." Or almost.

She looks confused and replays what we just said. "Alder had Carmen run your blood and Chenoa built you, or something, on a program Kateri helped with that's important to them. You didn't have anything that's bad so that's good." She smiles, making me smile.

I like Alexia. "I didn't have a driver's license so I won't drive but it's good for identification."

"You never had a driver's license?" She looks at her computer saying my name in English over and over in her head.

"No. It would say Maiyun Whitewater if I did."

She starts typing. "These are wrong. Web will have to make them right but I can look for your history with the right name. This has Maiyun Ember Faye and I was looking for Ember Faye."

I nod but don't understand.

Alta stands. "I take Boss Maiyun to lunch greenhouse town."

Alexia nods without looking up. She's going to hunt for me right now. I smile at Alta and realize I need to stand. He runs to the door for Owen.

"Boss need help."

Owen comes in without registering to Alexia and helps me up. I say bye, smiling when she doesn't answer. She's like a boy on the reservation. He'd take everything apart and rebuild it, never seeing anything around him but his parts.

I close the door walking out. "She's safer with it closed."

Alta points to the ceiling. "Camera, drones everywhere close to Boss Alexia. Web crazy to her security."

"He should be and she needs it."

He nods. "Everyone love Boss Alexia. She good IT, SWAT level to FBI, but in head – new Alpha-Bit to understand people, work stuck to her head she no see to anything."

"I knew a boy like that. He's super smart with machines but not so much with people. He was

always nice to me and my mom loved him. Well, she loved him when he wasn't taking apart the lawnmower and weed-wacker. We had one little patch of grass under the trees she planted so it's not like they got used much and he always had them back together pretty quick if she got on him about it. I found it funny because he's who cut the little patch of grass she loved so much."

He laughs as we get back in the car with no driver and tells it where we're going.

FBI/Badass Training Center

Luke Rayne

Ford comes in my office and drops in a chair. I look over and smile. “Problems?”

“Web just called. You didn’t send him Maiyun’s name. He’s flipping the fuck out because she’s Crow’s. Crow is who brought him and the As to Badass. He was the President...”

I put my hand up. “I know who Crow is, was and his relations to the tribes, Alpha-Bits, Web, Masons and Badass.”

“Apparently you didn’t share that with Web. FYI, he has to remake her papers because he had the wrong name on it.”

I smile again. “Who exactly will she show them to?”

He’s surprised. “I don’t know.” He smiles and I laugh. “Let’s get lunch.” He stands so we’re done. “You have a class and I’m heading into Ops.”

“My class is virtual today. I love the Alpha-Bits being right here. I’ll walk with you.”

“Garren and Michael have a surprise for you. They won’t tell me so it’s not spoiled. I’m supposed to tell you they’ll see you at the Protector compound.”

A surprise for me? “Okay. I’m headed there at five. Are they having dinner with us?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Tell them they’re invited and I’ll pick up some extra dessert for them.”

He hits my back before turning toward Ops. “Will do. Later, Brother.”

I smile heading to the dining room. He calls me Brother more than my name. I’ve noticed it’s happening with other FBI men in Ops. Badass is seeping in.

I sit and order from the Prospect that’s waiting like I’m in a hurry. “Relax, Prospect. I’m in my office after this.”

“Roger, Commander.”

“He’s with me after lunch. I’ll have the same and it’s not a rush, thanks, Animal.” Christian sits across from me.

“You’re not usually one popping up.”

“No, I walk in most places. No one was looking this way. Maiyun has stories and words from the ancestors that tell of my grandmother, Prez, Aiyana, Hemy, Crow, me and Maiyun. It’s fuckin’ crazy the way I can follow. Maiyun is heard here, or with the tribes here. She’s Navajo, Naskapi and Cheyenne. Her mom was held up in the Navajo tribe but only by the elders. The tribe didn’t pay her much attention unless they needed shit from her. She knew and still helped them out. Women are crazy.”

I smile for that but point him back to my girl. “She’s heard here?”

He nods. “The Bits are back in her lab setting her up for virtual. I talked to Co and he agrees, virtual may be how she’s seen and heard by the split tribes here. The old dicks that refuse to believe in banding together and moving forward with the times, aren’t listening to her and there are enough young that have grown up in that fucked-up belief that she’d get shit from them.”

My head is already shaking.

His hand goes up stopping me. "I know. It doesn't work for Co or me either. Virtual will get her in where she can share the stories and words passed down to her and her mother. It works, Brother, and she can do it from here. Bravo is open and accepting, Co is with the tribes at Delta, they're open. The tribe she came from will be open once they see what she has to offer and how their lives change because of the ancestors. This is going to work, Luke Rayne." His smile tells me he's seen it.

"Okay, I'm with you. How do I help?"

"I need to talk to Aiyana. The book that's about Maiyun shouldn't be shared with Maiyun. I'm not sure it should be separated from her and her mom's books. There's something stopping me from taking it back to Aiyana."

"I can put a safe in and keep it right in her lab," I try.

He nods without the excitement in his eyes. "You with no one that can read you might work. I don't think you should read the book. This is a future you have to live." He doesn't have to convince me.

"I got it. It's not a future I want to see first. She's mine. I feel it in my soul, Brother. I don't need the preview. Imagining our life is way better than the pressure to reach something we don't understand, or at least I don't understand."

He's back to smiling. "You're right. Not seeing me in visions has always kept me working."

Our food comes out so we eat. Maiyun is going to be happy she has more work to do. More connections are always good.

"There's no longer concerns of suicide."

I shake my head at him. "Don't do that. I keep working to make sure there aren't. I need to reach the end myself."

He looks thoughtful, then smiles. "You're right. I'll hold that shit in."

I laugh and finish eating. Before he hijacks me, I need to call my sweet Em.

He opens his mouth and I shake my head. "I'm not the Brother that needs a map."

"I was going to say I'm not hijacking you. Aiyana thinks the safe is a good idea. Get that done for me and you're in the next class on time."

"I can do that." I'm up and out before he's done so I can call my girl.

She answers laughing. "Sweet Em, I'm glad you're having fun."

"We're eating in a diner at the greenhouse town. Some of Alta's little brothers showed up to eat with us. I just learned why a certain word isn't said."

I laugh. "Cool is not cool. Is Alexia with you?"

"No, she got stuck on my name and is looking for me in her computer world. Owen and his guys are taking turns eating. He said they can't all sit even on the ABSZ." She's asking?

"He's right, beautiful. Security is everywhere on the Club grounds but they're focused on Alpha-Bits. They don't protect adults. Alexia has her own Security. Are you staying on the ABSZ?" If she's off it, I need to call Falcon.

"Is the Indian compound here? I don't always get what Alta says. There's a gate we go in, but nowhere I've been has a gate but Bravo." She got some of it.

"I'm glad you asked. The compound is in between Bravo and ABSZ but protected by Bravo. You can pass through but Chenoa is considered an elder in the tribe. You may want to wait until she can bring you."

"Oh, I'm glad I asked you. Owen may not know of Chenoa. He's still at the door. I can go back

to Bravo and if the skeleton is done, I'm swimming with Alta and Tyson."

I smile at the free spirit she's showing. "I can pick you up at Bravo when I get in. I need to get dessert for dinner."

"No, I'll get it, there's a bakery here and I want to see it."

"Okay. You can get dessert for dinner. Count on twenty-five and something to add for breakfast tomorrow."

"Like muffins and breads?"

"Muffins and danish maybe. Danish are the round things with fruit and cheese Ford had this morning." Fuck. I want to see her reaction to the bakery.

"I'll get some of those and I know Chenoa likes auclairs." She's got me covering my mouth quick.

When I can, I tell her, "E-clairs. The kids like cupcakes and adults eat everything from brownies to cookies. Pick what looks good and everyone will be happy. You can send it to the Protector compound. They'll know what to do."

"How do I pay for it?" She knows Aiyana is crazy excited and sent money to her account for all the ties sweet Em brought to the Mohegan's.

"Use your Badass card or print my name and put Justice League by it."

"I will. Thanks, Luke Rayne. I need to eat. Owen just came in and the Fords are almost done."

"Go, sweet Em. Have fun."

"I am but I wish you were here."

"Me too, beautiful. Swimming and the bakery sound like good times I'm gonna miss. Christian is here. Gotta go." I turn toward him noticing he's *walking* out the door.

"Bye." She hangs up, making me smile.

I send her an emoji holding a heart.

"Whipped."

I smile, putting my phone away and walk with him. "I am."

He laughs. "I said the same thing to Aaron years ago. He said I was a lucky bastard, since I agreed, I drove away from him. He's come a long way from wishing."

"So have I. How are they doing?"

"Aaron is still trying to keep up with Kaleb. Kaleb thinks it's funny but doesn't see he's the reason. Anibet is happy and thinks they're both funny. The kids are the kids."

"Kids being kids could mean Justice crew kids or..."

"They're getting it and working more effectively, but some are still trying to prove themselves. Since they're all working together, I don't get proving themselves. Dakota says it's normal." He turns into Maiyun's lab.

"I didn't go through it so I don't feel what they do. I know they don't have the ability and confidence the Justice League does. The thing with ability is, if you give more, you get more. It wasn't anything we shot for. It just happened."

He nods watching the Bits cleaning up. "I was like that but wanted to be in a place I was needed. I didn't know where or what I'd be doing. My ability grew when Prez put me at Protector Lead. I'll talk to the three and help them along."

"Sounds right. Where do you want the safe?"

He points. "Behind that picture?"

"Got it."

I push to the building they make parts in and look around for the shit I'll need. Pulling a big enough sheet of steel, I picture a box, then the door. I need a catch release so I add it in and laugh. Shit flies all around my box making me smile. When I'm done, I move the paint cans, extra steel and hinges back where they belong and take my box with me. It's heavier than I expected. The Alpha-Bits are still here when I hit the keypad.

"Nasr, I need a keypad..."

"I got it, Brother. It has Aiyana and Tyson's print on it already." Mucimi hands me the keypad.

I don't ask why Tyson is on it or how he made it so fast. "Thanks anyway, Nasr." I wait for the Alpha-Bits to leave and think about the keypad on the box and the catch release popping open.

Mucimi laughs, getting my eyes to open. "It worked. The ancestors have some crazy ability." The trash bucket moves and all the bits and pieces of steel fly into it.

"Thanks, Mucimi."

He points to the wall. "I want to try."

I nod. "It's heavy so it needs extra wood to hold it up."

"Uncle Steve showed me how to make braces to hold weight in the garage."

I wave at the wall. "Go for it." I swear he's got it in before I said *it*. The kid can do everything. I kiss his head. "I'm glad you're you, Brother. We need it open to put the book in."

Christian smiles. "It's in. Don't kiss my head."

I laugh at him. "I'd say never but it may be a lie so not today, Brother. That's impressive."

He nods, then is gone. When I turn, Mucimi is gone. Looking around, it's clean and empty. I push to my desk. I've got ten minutes so I find my girl and pull feeds. She's laughing with Wolfgang and I think that's Oman. Alta has a smile on watching them. I was hoping to catch her at the bakery.

Shutting it down, I think of more places we can go that will get my girl smiling and excited. She loved the fish place Stella and Mikey raved about. The food was good too. The mansion was good but I carried her through most of it. She said Phoenix was too big to see more than the Club so we went to the lobby, then Club.

Cort was on me to claim her. He didn't like me claiming her at my Club before my mom and dad leave. Sweet Em is happy to do anything new and loved seeing Crow in the lobby. I know Cort has a meeting then dinner at Champion tomorrow, so maybe I can take her to the other Clubs to see the lobbies. She loves the virtual people.

Turning down the corridor to the classrooms, I see what has to be a fight with the growing crowd. Fuckin' Brothers fight over the dumbest shit. As I'm seen, men move aside.

"Stand down!" I order as Security comes running from the other side of the corridor.

Seeing the gun, I shield and pull it away but it's a second too late. "Stand down!"

Everyone is looking at my chest for the blood that should be oozing from the bullet hole I don't have. "Relax, I threw a shield. Security, get the two out of here." Bending, I pick up the bullet.

Security pulls the shooter and looks at me. Taking a breath in, I grab, then push the second idiot at them.

"Holding. They're FBI, Ford needs what happened. He'll question them. Mark that they're both a no from me and the fuck that shot at me may not make it off the grounds. The fight is who ranks higher in Hogan's Alley."

The men back up, surprised I know.

Looking around, I smile. They've never seen ability and are showing some fear. Shit, now I need to explain in a way that shows the ability as good. "Did you think reader was just a lie we tell trainees?" Pushing, I'm in the classroom and wait for the rest of the class to come in. I make that wait, leaning against the desk and smile at the surprise I see coming in the door.

When they're seated, I start. "I am a reader and top of the leaderboard. In Badass, my words would never be challenged or doubted." Putting my hand out, I show the leaderboard floating above it. "Being Badass means no one would go back and verify what I say, because being Badass, I compete with no one but me. You see one name at the top. That doesn't show you everyone that helped get me there. My dad, Rayne, the Baxters, Prez, Justice LJJ, Steve Knight, Christian Blackhawk, Ricky Callahan, every member of the Justice League. I could go on for days. Everyone that played a part in my life and training are seen when I look at my name. I'm honored to be there. I'm honored to share that spot with them for the work they put in getting me there. *You're never alone* is the first thing I taught you. I'm not either. My Brothers are right there with me. Seeing that isn't easy for some. It's how we know who is Badass and who isn't. It's also how you get a spot at a Club in Badass. If anyone doesn't believe me," I wave at the door and it opens, "leave now."

No one moves. I look at the guy in the third row who isn't making Badass. "Your question so everyone hears it."

"I'm going to the FBI." He thinks my shit doesn't pertain to him.

"That isn't your question but I'll address it. You may or may not make it to the FBI. Director Saber is using Badass to weed out potential FBI agents that will not perform as his original Ops units did. From EROPs original lineup we have Commander Ford, Graywolf, Mingo, Petit, Attiquin, Marks, Marino, Schneider, Reno, Nunez, County, Hale, the Carlson twins and two flight crews right here at the closest BSC Clubs. That doesn't count the FBI that is in the east and south Clubs. Some of those are working with Hemy Thunderhawk as trainers for new FBI candidates. I'm a reader so I know why everyone moved to Badass. Not the answer they'd give you or the Director, but the real reason. Men coming into the unit forgot what brotherhood means. Men coming in the unit didn't bond with or respect the bond that their teams had. I could go on but those two reasons should be enough for you to see the need for the Director's new orders. It should be enough for you to adjust your way of thinking so you get on one of those FBI Ops unit teams. We're all in this together and we need each other to fulfill the objective whatever team you're on is given. I was a satellite for Black Ops under SEAL for DEVGRU, then CENTCOM. I know what running alone means and thank fuck I grew up Badass because I know what the bond with my Brothers means. Never alone is where your head needs to be in order to make it." I watch seeing my question guy not agree. The majority have understanding and positive thoughts on making it through with the information I gave.

Pulling my tablet, I mark him on facial putting an X over his face and move on.

Maiyun

The lab is more like a little factory but they call it the lab. I don't ask why but they call everything a lab. Alder runs in making me smile at the run and quick stop. Alpha-Bits running is a trend everywhere but I'm surprised to see him. "Hi, Alder," I say as Tyson says, "LP in the house!"

Alder nods at me then smiles at Tyson. "You surprise I show after you call?"

Smiling, I watch them banter, Alder did that with Stella at the medic room. He's a funny little guy when he's not in doctor mode.

He turns to me. "You no need...chatter to friend, you need test to skeleton. Chatter is bond to Brother while I wait to Doc Bones." He points at the door.

"You fill your time wisely. I like to see you banter back and forth. It makes you more human to the rest of us."

He smiles. "You concern of cyborg name?"

I look to find cyborg and smile. That's cool but I'm not saying that. "I'd be excited over cyborg. How many women can say they're a cyborg?"

The Doctor laughs walking in. "She's got a point, Brother."

Alder acts like he's thinking about it. "I will work to fix cyborg population. Today I start to you. Juan, Maddox finish waterproof skeleton. Doc Bones brother to Doc Chop here to help test. I need to check skeleton, maybe help to hold you it no work."

I laugh and nod to Doc Bones. "Tell me your mom didn't name you Bones and Chop?"

He smiles looking much friendlier. "Dad did. We grew up in the Club. They're road names."

I understand that. "Nice to meet you and they must be proud." Two doctors are impressive.

"They are. So, you have clothes for the pool. Where is your PA?"

"On a chopper with another doctor today." Damn.

"I have Boss Carmen help to Boss Maiyun change at pool."

Bones nods and we all walk across the road and lawn to a walkway that leads to a pool. And what a pool it is. The view here is amazing.

I'm reminded of when I was young. "I lived here when I was young. Or out there." I point, letting them know the view is why I'm slower than I should be.

"Doc Chenoa love view to remember life before her family die, fire, plateau break apart." Alder reminds me Chenoa lives here or close and sees it all the time. She must tell him stories of those precious memories.

"I think anytime you see the past in your now, it's a reminder to remember how you made it and a push to make it farther. The views here will be with me forever but it reminds me of the people and lessons passed down from my greats and dad to me." Tyson definitely has that Indian in him deep.

"Is your spirit guide the crow?"

He smiles at me. "No one has ever said. I'd be honored if it were. Chenoa is the white dove. What's your animal?"

"White wolf. My mother said the white wolf has a long life, is a teacher of sorts, it means loyalty, strength, freedom and kindness to all. It beats the fables of long ago as the lone wolf. I like sharing stories and hearing new. People need courage and hope, not isolation and ignorance."

Alder and Tyson stop and look at me. "That spark has a long way to go, Maiyun. Courage and hope, determination and resilience, instinct and freedom are just a few of what you've already shown. I can't wait to see what else you're going to teach us." Tyson turns and starts walking the path.

I look at Alder. "He didn't grow up with the tribe?"

He smiles. "Boss Luke Rayne have no Indian."

I roll my eyes and start walking. "I think that's wrong. His mom's mother had vision. He just doesn't know about the Indian in him. It doesn't mean it's not there."

"I will test." He holds the gate open then runs to Carmen.

She bends for him but is watching me with a smile. With a nod for Alder, she stands to kind of hug me. "You're walking better and I saw you like two days ago. You just can't beat that with a stick. You ready for the water?"

Beat it with a stick? I nod and look at Alder. He shrugs. "Curtain to you privacy. Doc Bones close to help you need it." He points to a circle of curtain around a shower head.

That's nice of them to give me some privacy. "Thanks."

Carmen closes the curtain and points for me to sit in a plastic wheelchair then takes my shirt off. "Doc Bones, I need the how up to where she can help me."

The doctor comes in and explains taking the skeleton off from the bottom first, then shows her how to put the water skeleton on me by laying it out on a big towel. When Carmen repeats it all back to him, he nods. Before leaving he bends. "Don't get up from the chair with the new skeleton. I'll get you up and make sure it's working before you take a step."

I'm relieved and nod. "I'll wait for you. Thanks for doing this."

He nods with a smile and closes the curtain back up when he leaves. Carmen gets my clothes changed and new skeleton on without any help from me. I hear all about the twins while she works; making it feel better than she's dressing me because I can't.

When she stands, I take her hand. "Thank you."

Her smile is sweet. "Believe it or not, I was excited to be called, no one ever needs my help, mostly because I'm married to Justice. The damn guy does everything."

I smile. "I bet, everyone is always talking about him doing everything. I'm glad I needed help today and it was you that was available."

She bends to kiss my cheek. "Me too. Don't get up in case the bands aren't right. Doc Bones will mark the band so you know where to attach them for next time."

I agree because I heard the doctor tell her those same words minutes ago and the curtain is opened. Doc Bones and Alder are waiting.

I'm lifted but know something isn't working right away. "They're loose. Don't let me go." I wince at the panic I hear in there.

"I've got you. Alder?"

I feel his little hands on my legs. "Bands tight, Doc Bones."

Doc Bones bends to see my eyes. "One step at a time until you say you have it. I'm putting my hands on your waist and will walk with you. Yeah?" He's a nice guy.

"Yeah. Thanks."

His hands move so I take that first step, then the next. "It's holding me up."

He nods. "Let Alder mark them so you know for next time, then I'll move behind you and walk

you to the pool.”

I stop until he's behind me and Alder gives me that one nod. “This feels bulky and hits harder than the other skeleton.”

Alder moves in front of me. “Heavy skeleton. Wires covered. Metal heavier, no damage to water. Skeleton no heavy *in* water. Pool therapy important. Build muscle you move normal out of water.”

“This will be good for me. Reggie said if it works, I'm in the pool tomorrow.”

Alder nods. “Walk, learn sidestep, back, dance to water help to teach natural movement out of water.”

“Thank your brothers for me. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get there.”

Doc Bones makes a chuckle noise behind me. “Then it will happen. One step at a time. The water is going to throw your balance off.” He moves fast and is in front of me before I take the first step down.

Three steps in, I get what he means by off balance but I hold his arms and make it in without falling sideways. The water is chest high on me so standing isn't a problem. I bend my knees one at a time and march in place. “It's a hell of a lot lighter now.”

Tyson laughs moving closer. “I can teach you the first things your therapist is going to have you do tomorrow.” This kid is too cute.

“I need it so he isn't kicking my butt tomorrow.”

Alta laughs from the edge of the pool. “Alder watch. No butt kicking. I get suit.” He runs, making me laugh.

Tyson laughs, then shows me the moves to stretch and walk forward, back, sideways and crossing one leg over the other. Doc Bones and Alder stay close but don't say a word even when I trip and have to right myself. I love these people.

ABSZ

Luke Rayne

Setting down at the Prince pads I think about them being Prince pads. At Princes, we had crew pads, at the Training Center I set down on the first pad. On ABSZ, all Prince choppers are in the first row. Right behind our line are stealth choppers. I take my spot beside where Mase sets down and send everything to Ranger, or more accurately, a Phoenix engineer, then sign off. It feels good to be here.

Finding Maiyun on tracking, I push to the bakery only to make it as they're walking out. Her foot catches and I'm there.

"Are you okay, sweet Em?"

She yelps before smiling at me. "My legs are tired. We just finished but Carmen had to get the babies and she's getting a wheelchair to the compound. Alder said to use it when I need it."

His name is enough for me to relax. "It's electric?" She holds onto me, so I lift her up.

"Damn, I didn't ask."

"Electric," Alta says at the same time.

"The pool did you in?"

She smiles laying her head on my chest, I guess so I don't see it. "It was Tyson. I didn't feel it until I got out and he laughed at me. He said to watch Reggie when we start therapy on my arms. It takes a couple of weeks before my legs won't feel like stumps I'm trying to drag around."

I laugh, getting a caustic look from Alta. "Boss Maiyun work hard."

I nod for the little Brother. "Dragging stumps around isn't funny but sounds funny. She probably should have gotten the chair before she left Bravo."

Maiyun shakes her head against my chest as Alta nods. I see a picture of Owen lifting her into the SUV and get it.

"I'll be in the pool with Reggie and Mary tomorrow. There's a lift and the thing I can use to move me." She wants to do it herself.

I kiss her head because I'm not talking about it here. "Whatever you want, sweet Em."

"You missed the pool and bakery. I got to taste this tiny cupcake. They're really good bakers. We got the little ones for the kids."

"Their parents will love you for that." The adults love the mini cupcakes as much as the kids do.

"Boss Maiyun, I see you later. I ride to dinner Web's compound today."

Maiyun puts her hand out to Alta. "Thanks for everything, Alta. I hope you enjoyed your perks today."

Alta looks at her with his face lit up. "Today best perks."

"Later, Alta. Thanks for keeping her safe today."

The little Badass throws me chin.

Suspending us into the SUV, it's minutes to the compound and I suspend us out. "I'm glad you had a good day. Garren and Michael may be here for dinner. They're going to love you."

Owen follows us into the kitchen. “Here’s her bag, Commander. Our chopper is on the way. Ranger said to leave the SUV for you and he’ll have it picked up tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Owen. Anything I need before you go?” He looks at Maiyun before turning back to me.

“I wasn’t sure about her walking into the bakery. Alder and Bones both told me about her in the wheelchair when she’s tired. I’m not a doctor and she said she’d be fine.”

I see he was worried because she wasn’t fine and had to sit in the bakery. “Mary had to be on a chopper with Doc from Phoenix today. Maiyun won’t be off the base without her or me again until she’s moving better. I didn’t think about her being tired. Call me if you have questions.”

He nods relieved that he didn’t have to say words that would piss off Maiyun. “I will. She’ll tell you about the pool but the two docs let her walk out with the team and Alta.” He thinks she should have waited for the chair.

I nod. “They know more than me but may not have realized she’d have stops along the way.”

We hear the chopper and he nods. “That’s my ride. I’ll call next time. My only concern was the walk after swimming.”

I nod. “You can make the call for a chair if you think it may be needed.”

He smiles. “Thanks, Commander. Tyson had one after swimming. It wouldn’t be a bad idea as a just in case.”

Maiyun turns smiling. “I’d have climbed in it.”

Owen laughs walking out with a wave.

“He’s a nice guy, but I’m not sure I want to be manhandled by Security to get me in the truck.” She had Security that kept them prisoners when she was overseas, so I can see that.

“We’ll figure it out. Sit, sweet Em, and tell me about your day.”

We turn when Carmen comes in with babies in both arms. I take one and the bag weighing her down. “Chenoa has the wheelchair and some veggies. The Prospects just pulled up.”

I smile, kissing Mihikiku before I put him in the little play corral. He yells as Carmen hands me Wimonáya who is answering the twin call. Twins are weird with the call. I stand straight and turn, seeing Chenoa with the babies in pouches on her as she pushes the chair piled with net bags of vegetables.

“I got the vegetables. Do you need help with Nayawi?” I ask because he’s on her back.

“I’ll put Tátupiyu down and can get him thanks, Luke Rayne. The Prospects have the rest of the food.”

I nod as I’m dropping the vegetables on the back counter. Carmen is nowhere in sight. Turning, I see Maiyun smiling at me. “Close your eyes, sweet Em.” As soon as she does, I move her to the chair.

She smiles at me. “Thanks. I can help from here.” She moves the hand control and rolls away.

Chenoa laughs, drawing my eyes to her. She’s watching me so I shrug. “Her legs are tired from the pool today. The water skeleton works.”

She nods. “Carmen said that on the phone. I wanted to ask her about it. Alder has her built in the program and I saw what they did. I’m impressed with the way they came up with the sensors’ placements.” She walks by me to talk to my girl.

Kyler, Chris, Nash and Anakin walk in. “Did you get dessert?” Nash asks putting a pan down on the island.

“Maiyun did. Prospects should have it here or it will be here soon.”

“There are six of them out there. The bakery boxes are on a cart.” Chris has the biggest smile on.

“Fuck. I’ll send some to Champion or Elan.” Cayden and Lukas laugh walking in. “No fuckin’ way. Send it to Trask.” Cayden has me smiling.

“He’ll be here so he can’t refuse it.” I walk out to stop all the sweets from coming into the kitchen. Carmen will not be happy with a week of leftover sweets. She’s worse than Justice with wasted food.

The Prospects have two rolling carts by the trucks but they’re not all from the bakery. “This isn’t all for tonight, is it?”

They stand straight and turn fast. “No, Boss. The food order had to wait for the fish. The supply plane got unloaded late.”

Thank Christ. “The bakery order?”

A tall, lanky kid steps forward. “I had to separate the Indian boxes from this one. Yours is on the cart. The Bit kid said they were marked but it wasn’t packed in the truck as two orders.”

“Is it a normal order for here?”

“Two boxes more than you usually get.” Two isn’t bad.

“Thanks, Prospects. I can take one cart in and get it put away before the rest of the crew gets here.”

They smile. The lanky kid speaks up. “Pres Justice or Mucimi will get it put up. They fly everything where it’s supposed to go.”

I smile at their excitement over floating food. “They’re not here yet. Let’s do this so it’s not on their list of shit to do before they can eat.”

Three Prospects move to the back of the second truck quickly while my lanky friend pushes the first cart toward the door. They really like seeing floating food. I shake my head and follow the food.

Kyler, Tucker and Nash help me get everything put away. Apparently, Mucimi, Teller or Justice do this regularly and the Prospects watch while straightening up the kitchen and pantry. My lanky friend sets the bakery goods on platters but keeps his eyes on what’s happening. I like the way he doesn’t miss a thing while setting the platters up so everything looks nice and isn’t crowded. He’s done in minutes and I move the platters to the end of the side counter.

“What’s your name, Prospect?”

“Lang, Boss.”

“Where are you headed when you’re patched in?”

He looks uncomfortable. I see he’s gay and worried. “Here, Bravo or Phoenix, sir. Cade said I’d be fine at both Clubs.”

“What job are you looking at?”

He’s a nervous wreck. Jesus, it’s just a question. “IT. Web has me in Ops IT on my last rotation.”

I nod wanting to calm him. “I like that you see everything while paying attention to the details on the platters. If you change your mind about Clubs, the Training Center is always in need. We have trainees but they don’t do Ops IT until their last month. You’d have no problems on the base and flights back to Phoenix are at least twice a day.”

His eyes close for a second. A determined look is in his eyes when he opens them.

“I’m gay, Sir. I don’t think a base is a safe place for me.”

Before he can say more, I’m shaking my head. “You know Reggie, the new therapist?”

He looks hopeful. “Yeah, Boss. I helped him move into his condo.”

“He works on the base with my girl. Not that you need my sexual preference but there it is. We don’t give a shit who is in your bed. The reason I bring Reggie up is I was told someone is fucking with him. A Flight Crew lead let me know so while I’m here I can stop that. You have any idea who that might be?”

I see a Prospect, two nomads in Bravo’s Club and a dick at the gas station closest to Bravo in his head and turn fast seeing the Prospect dick on the other side of the kitchen.

‘Tucker, Prospect with arms crossed against the back door is who is giving shit to Reggie and this Prospect.’ I throw the pictures and Nash is right in front of the dick, then they’re both gone.

I shake my head. “There’s one less Reggie needs to worry about. Nash will get the others to Falcon and Mag. Badass means you’re not alone. The only way we can have your back is if we know where the problems are. Yeah?”

Relief and honor floods through him. “Yeah, Boss. Thank you for fixing that. Not everyone would. I worked IT as a contractor on a military base in France. I wouldn’t mind the Badass Training Center base.” Shit, he was terminated when his command found out he’s gay. People are fuckin’ stupid.

“You let Mag know where you want to end up and he’ll make it happen. I’d be honored to have an experienced tech in Ops. If you have anyone in your class that’s got experience, let them know the base is in need.” With more FBI Ops, we need the help.

Honor flows through him again and his forehead relaxes so the wrinkles are just gone. “I will, Commander. There are a few Prospects that are staying at Phoenix or Bravo for safety but the ABSZ doesn’t need techs.”

Phoenix, Billy and the kids come in behind Garren and Michael.

“Commander Luke Rayne!” Garren yells when he sees me.

“Garren, Michael!” I yell back at them, making the new crew laugh. “Let me finish here, Brothers.” I bend and hug the kids, then man hug Billy and Phoenix.

“Daddies, can we get a cupcake?” Ernie asks.

I shrug at Phoenix and Billy.

“Absolutely, as soon as you finish your dinner. There are some grapes and melon on the sideboard table,” Billy says, holding his hand over Phoenix’s mouth.

The kids go for fruit on the way to the back door and Billy throws me chin as he pulls Phoenix out. When the door closes, we all laugh.

I explain to Lang, “Phoenix feels bad, the kids are adopted from here and he wants to give them the world. Billy grew up in care and knows a good life that he helped build. He wants the kids to learn that through moderation and a healthy work ethic. They’re Knight and Callahan so we know the kids will get that. They are funny, though.”

His face lights up. “They are, Sir. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

That stops me from watching Garren talk to my girl. My eyes snap back to Lang.

His hands go right up. “My partner is gone. I need to get back to the bakery. The other Prospects took the Indian compound delivery.” His partner is the dick and he’s happy he’s gone.

I nod. “Go, Lang. Call Cage for a partner.”

He nods but I see he isn't going to. "I'm off in an hour and help with the robots for dishes, cleaning and restocking. Two Prospects are allowed in the building and Dewey is off today." His head shows the other Prospect is in a wheelchair.

"Go so the women aren't worried. Thanks for getting Maiyun's desserts out."

He throws me chin. I pull what I can from him until he's out the door. I need to talk to Falcon about IT Ops techs at the next BSC meet. Lang is going to be a loyal Brother because he's honored to be treated kindly. What a sad world we live in. It's good for me because we're doing more Ops and need more techs but it's a fuck of a way to live for Brothers who are different.

"Welcome to my world." Phoenix hits my shoulder walking by.

I smile and go see what Garren is talking to my sweet Em about.

"Commander Luke Rayne, we made a new company. Alex put it on a computer and Michael made bike avatars for all the ones Rayne said you were missing. Now they're not missing. Rayne and Alex bought some and said they're perfect. Look!" Garren takes a box Michael hands him from his backpack.

It's an old-fashioned looking box with a 1950 Indian Chief picture on the top. The box is too heavy to be plastic. AGM in between wings has me smiling. "You made a company that manufactures metal models?"

Michael smiles big while his head bobs. Garren gives me a look. "That's what I said."

"I'm going to hug you," I tell him before I do. I bump Michael's shoulder. "Thank you, Brothers. I'll call Alex and Rayne tonight. This is perfect. I'm honored you'd do this for me."

"We can't eat here but we wanted to show you. Hamp will bring the rest home tomorrow. It's a lot of boxes. We only brought two models. Now your Maiyun is better, Hamp said it's a good time for a surprise 'cause you're not worried."

I smile at Michael's bobbing head agreeing with Garren. "He's right, Brothers. I'm honored you showed today."

"We brought the steampunk stuff to Josephine yesterday. Jackie likes all the gears and boring stuff. Josephine is putting the shelves in her office and pictures in the shop!" Garren is excited tonight.

"What else are you making, Brother?"

"Here." Michael shows me his phone. There's a website for AGM showing. Wooden shelves with pipe fittings as braces, gear clocks, mirrors extending from a wall that are cool as shit in the steampunk look, have me looking at these two incredible men. "This is awesome, Brothers. I bet Josephine and Jackie are honored too."

Michael puts his phone away nodding like crazy. Maiyun takes my hand laughing. "Awesome and unbelievable are prerequisites here aren't they?"

Garren nods. "Everyone, everyone here is awesome. The mean people get kicked out, kicked out."

Michael holds a serious look with his nodding.

I have to laugh. "They do, Brothers. Thanks for building the models. Did you send a bill in the box?"

"Rayne, your dad and the Princes paid us for them. We only keep enough to pay the workers and get supplies. The profit goes to the people Mitch helps. A boy is having sensors like your Maiyun. Alex said that's what good Brothers do. The D'Ability houses have money so we're helping D'Ability kids."

Oh my fuckin' God, they're good Brothers.

"Spirits in the sky. That's a beautiful thing to do, Garren, Michael. I'd like to help."

Garren shakes his head no. "We have to raise, raise money like the houses."

I look for what he means. "Mitch said it's better to get everyone involved in raising that money. Ricky has Diego making a presentation and they'll get donations. Garren, Michael and Alex will keep thinking of new stuff."

Michael nods. Garren smiles. "You read our brain good!"

"I do, Brothers. This is a great way to raise money for the people that need it. I'm proud of you all."

Garren surprises me with a hug. Michael pulls him away. "Dinner with Hamp and Web." The Brother doesn't talk much but he gets his point across.

"We have to go to our brothers' dinner." Garren waves letting Michael pull him away.

I shake my head watching them walk out the door.

"Unbelievable." My Maiyun gets a kiss from me in agreement. They're amazing men.

Maiyun

More unbelievable happens here than anywhere else I've been yet. Shaking my head, I think about that. A rocket launch, meeting my grandfather as a virtual man in Phoenix, walking when I'm paralyzed, the little guys and their crazy factories or labs, disappearing and appearing people, my best friend - who is a dog - sending me chat messages, now people jumping off cliffs. I went for the first jump, so I'm not saying it's bad, but it fits the unbelievable.

"How are your legs feeling?" Chenoa asks, sitting by me.

"Not as sore as they were. Thanks. That lotion helped." She's a great Shaman and I'm glad my mom fought for her. Luke Rayne putting lotion on my legs was a little over the top, but Chenoa didn't take offense to him showing up and ordering her to give him the tin of lotion.

"Good. I have something I want to show you." She stands and puts her hands under my arms to help lift me up. "You're going to love this. Mucimi built it for me with some help from the ancestors."

"Now I want to see whatever this is."

She laughs. "Before I opened my mouth, you didn't want to see it?" She's funny.

"I was wondering if I need the chair. Now I'm empowered by curiosity of what the ancestors helped Mucimi with."

She laughs taking my hand.

"Our all-seeing ancestors are great motivators." Aiyana scares the crap out of me appearing out of nowhere.

My foot catches, then I'm floating just above the ground as we follow her into the darkness. They're unbelievable.

I see an iron gate that looks familiar but I know it's not. As we pass through, the rocks light up. "The circle. I haven't been here in years but this is the circle."

Chenoa smiles letting my hand go. "It is. Every time I walk through the gate, it lights up. Aiyana asked me to show you where you can find peace, love and strength for your new beginning. You are welcome here anytime."

Peace, love, new beginning. "White dove. That's you. New beginning, peace and love. Someone said that but it wasn't my mom."

"My grandmother, Moopy."

I laugh remembering the words and the older woman. "She loved you so much."

She puts her hand out and I see the arrowhead catch the light flashing green.

"Tragedy to the family. The broken winged crow. You're related to Tyson? Is Tyson the broken winged crow?" I look at Aiyana for that answer.

"He is but Chenoa has no knowledge of her mother's ties. She left the tribe when Chenoa was young."

She left the tribe? Pages flip in my mind, stopping on Cheyenne-Naskapi. "Blackwater. In the new beginning, Blackwater runs into the meadows creating tragedy. Tradition and legends tell us of paths best taken so it is written as so. Tragedy turns to celebration when the broken winged crow rises and soars above with a wisdom shaped by many great spirits, leaders and enforcers of all tribes. The new beginning is formed with the Shaman destined for great power and enlightenment."

"I will ask that you stop there, Maiyun. There are many words spoken by prophets that should

be heard, regrettably, the next in your book should not.” Aiyana gets my attention and I push the book away.

“I don’t understand all of them. Before I do the virtual job Christian talked about, I’ll need help so I know I won’t hurt anyone.” Spirit in the sky! Aiyana is destined for great power and enlightenment. The all-seeing Shaman, Blackhawk and the waters. That’s all the waters, Whitewater, Blackwater, Stillwater...

Aiyana laughs so my eyes snap to hers. “You are correct. Perhaps now is not the time to work out all of those words. I have marked the books and words you should pass on.” She leans closer. “Those in your mind would be enlightening to many and I have marked what is meant to be spoken.” Her eyes flash like gold and I see blue paint on her face, then it’s gone.

I take a deep breath and hold Chenoa’s hand tighter. Unbelievable can be scary sometimes. “Hey, I’m a Water destined to be right here. That means Crow and Reed, spirit in the sky! Hawk, Thunderhawk, Blackhawk!” Indian and Badass have been together a long time.

Chenoa laughs while Aiyana shakes her head with a little smile on her face. “My sister was a Waters renamed. She married a Blackhawk that was renamed. The ties you speak of were predicted many years ago but have passed in our time. As the bridging of tribes is happening now, you are a help to that bridging, Maiyun, aptly named for you are the light that will shine in dark hearts.”

I’m stunned and can’t think of words that express the way that feels to me. The ancestors need me to do the virtual thing. Me, the *Carrie* nightmare people were afraid of. This tops that unbelievable cake. I blow out a breath trying to put it together in my head. “With help from that Shaman destined for greatness, our new beginning, the Justice League enforcers, plus all the Anglos and Alpha-Bits. I’ll be the voice we need to make the ancestors happy. They see more than I ever will.”

Chenoa laughs loud. Aiyana smiles with her eyes and traditional paint showing. “So it shall be. Sit, jump to the ancestors. They will bless you with healing for your legs and the strength to be fuckin’ Badass, so dealing with the men does not wear you down,” she says all this with a straight face.

I laugh and almost fall sitting. She floats me down gently and sits with us.

Unbelievable does get funny.

Chapter Ten

One week, one day

FBI/Badass Training Center

Maiyun

As soon as I see them, my eyes tear up because Sam and Jake leave today. The dining room is too full for me to do the crying like a baby thing, so I suck it up and show them my warrior woman, just like mom said is how I should face the world the day I turned eighteen. I guess it was her way of saying act like an adult. Sam is up before we get to the table.

I smile at them both and try for adult. "I'm going to miss seeing you every day. I have enough technology that we can FaceTime from anywhere."

Sam bursts out in tears throwing her arms around me in a hug that Luke Rayne and Jake are trying to get her to loosen. The sound she lets out has me shaking my head while my arms go around her. "Let her be. She's not hurting me, but you may if you keep pulling her," I say softly.

Luke Rayne steps back with his hands up. "Dad, let her go."

I don't see Jake but he must have. Luke Rayne puts his hand on Sam's shoulder and I feel a low energy. He's calming her, the man is so sweet with his mom.

When Sam stops making those heartbreaking noises, I loosen my hold but don't let her go. "Luke Rayne says he calls all the time and sees you regularly."

"He's a kiss ass," Joshua says from behind me, making me brace at the competitive edge in his voice. The younger of the two has some jealousy issues made worse by Luke Rayne always pointing out facts to counter him.

I know it's coming and jump in before they're fighting. "See that, you won't have a chance to miss us." Letting her go, I step back and smile, then stop as Joshua steps too close to Luke Rayne's face.

Luke Rayne shoves him back and I'm shaking my head. "Dad says you call him more than I do and you haven't grown those two inches in years. Whatever your problem is, spit it out, or let it go."

I shake my head again trying to move Sam to a seat but Jake takes over so I turn to the two brothers. "You're not helping like that. Both of you, let it go and sit before I ban you from breakfast so I can eat with your mom and dad without playing referee."

Jake pulls my chair out. "Outside both of you." Uh oh. Dad isn't happy with his boys.

I take a deep breath and sit.

Sam watches them walk out but I keep my eyes on her. "Why is Joshua so mad?"

Spirit in the sky. "You'll have to ask him."

Her eyes focus on me. “You can read him. I’ve never seen him act like this.”

Telling her he’s jealous Luke Rayne claimed me, has more ability, Jake and Rayne talked Joshua out of going in the service and everyone is talking about Luke Rayne being a good Commander, will have to come from him. Two days of Joshua is a lot to take.

I don’t think his problem is all of that but one thing that he isn’t thinking about, so I shrug and turn to the Prospect. “Hi, Animal. I’ll have a poached egg on toast, fruit, juice and coffee.”

He nods typing on his tablet, then looks at Sam. “Ma’am?”

“Just scrambled eggs. Jake made blueberry bread with cream cheese and muffins. Can you bring some out? The boys love them too.”

Animal nods. “I have it ready. Coffee and juice?”

“Yes, thank you.” Sam looks like she’s going to cry again. “I’m going to miss the service here.”

“Then you’ll come visit more.” That puts a smile on her face.

“K. Maybe you’ll need clothes again.”

I shake my head. “You better visit before that. I won’t need clothes for another three years.”

She doesn’t believe that. “You’ll tell me if you need anything at all?”

“Definitely. There aren’t a lot of women here and Mary went back to Honor Rising. I’m glad I have work and training. Between Carmen, Aylene’s classes, the Indian Protectors, Alder and Cort, my days are full.”

“And Reggie.”

I smile at that. He’s not coming today but she’s right. “Who can ever forget Reggie?”

The guys come in as we’re laughing over Reggie phrases that her and Mary had to explain to me.

I smile up at Luke Rayne, getting a kiss as he sits. Animal is back with a platter of bread and muffins.

Luke Rayne orders. “Eggs, bacon, fruit and coffee.”

“Roger, Commander. Boss?” Animal asks Jake. I don’t look at Joshua while he sits stewing over ‘*commander*’ and being asked for his order last.

Eating my egg seems safer so I do that.

“Dad is known for his baking.” Joshua thinks I should eat the stuff Jake made.

Damn. I look across the table at the moody brother. “It’s a deserved reputation. He brought a loaf of the bread and some muffins to our room last night. It was midnight snack. I figured I’d get some real food while I can. I planned on it being mid-day snack too.”

Sam and Jake laugh. Luke Rayne leans over and kisses my head. “I’ve got his recipes.”

“He can bake but doesn’t unless you beg him to.” Sam looks like a proud then pouty mom right now.

Luke Rayne winks at his mom and my brain notes that sexy look because I’m deranged – he winked at his *mom*. “I bake when I’m craving sweets. It’s just not my thing.” He focuses my thoughts back to the table.

Jake starts talking about the motorcycle models so I eat hearing about bikes and the boats Jake builds. Those big Ford brothers are as impressive as the little ones. They have everything on their website, apparently. Rayne ordered Jake military ships that are metal. I guess it’s a big thing. Popping the last grape in my mouth, I look up and see Joshua watching me.

“What?” I ask not really wanting to know but he’s hard to miss when his thoughts are so ugly.

“You’re bored with their models too.”

I try for a sweet smile. “No, I like what I’ve seen and even built one. I needed to eat and was blocking all the voices out of my head while I did.” That shuts him up.

“Too much chatter?” Luke Rayne asks.

Damn. I look for words that aren’t going to piss anyone off. “Sometimes, it’s louder than usual.”

He nods looking at Joshua but doesn’t say anything. I lean forward. “When we go up, I can see your boats. Luke Rayne said you have one that’s four feet tall.”

He replaces the glaring eyes and frown when he turns from Joshua toward me. “I do but it’s just the mast that’s four feet.”

“I don’t know much about boats. You can explain when I’m there to see them.” That gets him smiling. He loves his ships like Luke Rayne loves his miniature bikes.

He nods as Sam laughs. “He can spend hours telling you about the different boats and why they were important at the times they were built.” Hours?

“It will be a good lesson then. I never saw big boats in Nevada. The lakes on the reservation had little boats with oars and motors hung on the back. I made a platform from recycling and would push it with a big stick to get around the lake.” I smile as Luke Rayne laughs.

“You were on a ship for almost a month and didn’t learn anything about it?” The snotty attitude has the DeSevilles’ freeze, then turn toward the moody jerk.

I look up at Luke Rayne. “It’s okay.” I put my hand in his and look at his brother. “I was on a ship to get back to the US. You know why and you know that I was a hurt and starving stowaway. The memories aren’t clear and while they don’t hurt me, you saying it was to hurt me. I am trying to understand where a younger brother only sees accomplishments as negative instead of positive, but you’re making that hard when I become one of the negatives. I’m sorry you don’t see like I do, I can’t change that, only you can. The ancestors only gift a pure heart with the abilities you think you want. I’m telling you so you realize with every gift, you sacrifice. I can’t eat in here when everyone is mad because I hear it all. Blocking only works for so much. Luke Rayne calmed your mom but felt her pain, her sorrow, because healing means you feel and see it all from whoever you touch. Gifts from the ancestors are a blessing when all you see is the gift. To me they’re a blessing and sacrifice. I’ve lived my whole life being treated different because I had abilities people didn’t understand. I cherish every gift I am given as an adult because I can balance out the gift and sacrifice. While eating here today, that sacrifice feels like more than the gift and is stopping me from enjoying my last meal with your mom and dad before they leave. Hurting me, your mom, dad and your brother, who is confused, hurt enough that I feel it from him and angry that you’d do this, I’ve had enough. I’m going to my office where it’s quiet and I feel happiness from my other family members and ancestors. I hope you learn to live seeing the good in our ever-changing reality, because your current path is going to lead you to a life of misery. And, Joshua, that would be an epic fail.” I try to scoot my chair back but Luke Rayne moves it back for me and takes my hands so I can stand.

He’s shaking with anger. “She’s a reader with vision. Fuckin’ with her, even in your mind isn’t missed by any of us.”

I turn away from them to Sam. “I’m sorry, I can’t be in here anymore, but I’ll call you tonight. Have a safe trip. I’ll miss you the whole way home.”

She isn't crying which is good but she's mad. "I'll miss you too and be waiting for your call. I'm..."

I shake my head. "Do not apologize for a grown man. I know you and Jake love your boys but you're not your boys. Thank you for who you are. I love who you are." I smile and get another hug then a Jake hug where he barely touches me thinking he'll hurt me. I do get a kiss on the cheek.

Luke Rayne hugs his parents and walks me to my office that they, of course, call a lab. He doesn't say anything until, "I'm okay, Brother." That has me looking his way.

I smile at Mucimi.

"I came for Maiyun but you're the one who needs calming."

I agree with him. "He does, he's still shaking in anger."

"He...forget it. He's pissed and taking it out on me. Taking it out on you is inexcusable. He's good enough to block me sometimes but he wasn't able to block everything. You did nothing to deserve his anger."

"I'm glad you said inexcusable and not unforgivable. He will make it up to us both and I'll get to know the real Joshua. This version is a jerk."

Mucimi laughs. "Fair and accurate. He will fix it and he'll be happy. That happens soo..."

I lean forward and smile. "Hi, Teller." His hand on Mucimi's mouth is normal. They're both gone when I scan into my office. "I guess he said too much again."

Luke Rayne smiles and shakes his head once. "You're too good to my brother. He's been off since he got here. Thank you for putting up with him. Do you have questions you need answered?" He lifts me up on the table I use for the books.

"No. I could see and read from him. I know he loves you and saw it through him. I have a question about lunch. Mary and your mom are gone." I'm not used to being alone walking around all these men.

He nods. "Hit your watch when you leave here. You have three women for Security, they're just Security and will have male partners. It's enough to cover days and nights for you. Off the compound, you'll have Owen and his team or one of the Justice League. Teller gets your schedule so he'll work it out with Security and send it to me."

That's more than I need to know. Teller is like Justice and is everywhere all the time. "Okay. So, I'm covered and just hit the button on the skeleton?" Last time he said that but he just said watch.

"Yeah." He smiles. "Did I say it wrong?"

"You said watch but I thought the skeleton calls security."

"You're right. Your watch does too. They built the watch into the skeleton but left the security button on it. Hit either and it will call Security. You held my hands to stand. Are you sore?"

"Not at all. I should have used the table but wasn't thinking. It feels like I've been afraid to do too much forever. I won't overdo it but being alone will keep me moving where I can."

He leans in and kisses me like I've never been kissed before. That's mostly because no one has ever kissed me like their life depends on it. The ol' lady meetings are great and Leya told me to just follow Luke Rayne's lead, so I kiss him back like my life depends on it.

He pulls away breathing as heavy as I am. "You're fuckin' killing me. I need to get to Ops."

I smile at that and hold my breath for a second. "If you die it's your own fault."

He turns toward the door. "Love you, Sweet Em, but that's not happening until Alder says so."

I roll my eyes at his back. "Did you ask?" I don't say *the doctor with no hormones* because

that would be more than mean. Alder can't help it if he doesn't know what this feels like and being bitchy about it isn't helping anyone.

"I'll call him today." Growling Badass la vida loco guy is hot.

I laugh when the door closes. I wish I could hear that conversation. My mom was pretty open about sex talks but they take it over the top. Who am I kidding, everything they do is over the top.

Aylen shows up as I push off the table and holds me just high enough that my feet don't touch the floor.

"You people are a little scary. I'm supposed to be moving as normally as possible without heavy lifting. I can hop down."

She lowers me. "Sorry. I didn't get the update."

"There are updates?" Over the top.

She laughs. "No, but I didn't expect to show as you were jumping."

"Hopping off the table."

Her eyes light her whole face up. "Panty scorching activities?"

"Spirit in the sky. Don't read that crap!"

"I didn't but I'm a good guesser. Mucimi said my brother pulled him away. Your first day alone doesn't seem to be bothering you. What's going on?" They're so good at these check-ins.

"Joshua was making life difficult but they'll be leaving soon. Luke Rayne was mad but I think he's over it." I smile. "Boxer scorching activity?" I'm not sure how to say that.

She laughs. "Whatever works. So, he's calm now?"

"He's calling Alder because I'm killing him."

She hugs me laughing. "Later. Call to me if you need me."

"Don't you have a Club to run?" The woman is going to run herself ragged babysitting little issues that aren't really issues here.

She steps back looking into my eyes. "You call if you need me, if I can't get here, I'll send someone."

I don't get to answer before she's gone. I love this family. Thinking about family, I get back to the book I'm copying on a sheet for Christian.

After almost an hour, I stand straight and stretch. The red light flashes on the side of my big wall mounted monitor so I click it on. "Hi, Natalia."

"Stella is on. Switch us to the lab."

I hit the button on the table and the front of the room changes to Stella and Natalia in different labs. "It's hard to believe how cameras completely change my office."

Natalia looks proud, smiling. "It's a little more than cameras but the code is boring."

"Don't tell her that. I need answers." Stella yells at her. I've learned Stella does this a lot but she loves everyone.

"What do you need?"

"The chip Andrew has, moves his exoskeleton by transmitter, like Wi-Fi. Your metal vertebrae are connected to sensors that connect to specific nerves. Can crushed vertebrae be replaced with metal and will those sensors help or can I hook those sensors directly to a chip and bypass the bands on the skeleton?"

I nod repeating her question in my head so I understand what she's asking because she knows

I'm not a doctor. "Let me find what Alder has for his research. I think he'd be the one that has the most answers since he thought it up. Luke Rayne said Andrew was at the medic room on the ABSZ. Did Alder do the chip for Andrew?"

"Kaleb helped me with the chip but Alder had new metal and better connectors for it." Whatever that means.

"I'll look for both and send it over to you. Give me a minute." I open a new doc and close my eyes. Alder has everything on the computer. The A7 program has research so I pull it up and find Andrew, then me. I can't understand more than half the words in here so I copy and paste it to the sheet under our names. The pictures take me a minute to resize but I think I got what she wanted. Crushed vertebrae are different than disintegrated but the sensors were placed for muscle movement in Andrew. What I can read doesn't tell me anything that is helpful in clearing that up.

When I open my eyes, I send the doc to them. "That's both of us. Is it what you're looking for?" Luke Rayne says she makes technology better.

"Hold on." Stella reads the sheet. "Holy fuck, you're good at this shit. I bet I could use the sensors for Josephine. She'd at least feel her leg." How she jumped to that is her making it better for Josephine now. Unbelievable.

I hold my hands up to Natalia. She smiles. "I'm not a doctor either. I don't get it."

Stella looks over at us. "This will work."

I nod. "I'll take your word for it. Do you need Josephine's research?"

"No, I got it. How was your claiming night?"

I roll my eyes. "Still him making sure I feel everything everywhere. That does not include me feeling him. The man has got a will of steel. Did I say that right?"

They laugh nodding so I go on. "He's calling Alder today."

Stella stops laughing. "He's got ability. He can suspend you and you'd never get hurt. He should ask Justice not Alder."

"You can have sex up in the air?"

She nods. "I don't have ability but I know the Brothers with it do. I'm calling Aylen, she'd know. The girl was beet red telling Hannah all the shit Elizabeth told her."

Huh, they talk about everything but Elizabeth is her aunt giving advice on sex with abilities? My aunt never did that. "She was here earlier and didn't say."

Stella turns away from us talking on her phone.

Natalia smiles. "They're not shy when it comes to sex. Kristos would have dropped me if it weren't for them." She's crazy.

"Kristos can't breathe without you. The man is never dropping you." Mary was right. At the claiming party, he felt every time she moved and watched her. Their connection is felt by everyone around them.

Her smile gets huge. "I wouldn't let him. Luke Rayne is like that with you. Did you see Cort and Seren?"

I nod. "Elizabeth and Ricky, Christian and Dean, Prez and Lily. Spirit in the sky, they're all like that. Jinx and Debra are adorable too."

"You saw it so you know they don't do divorce."

I nod. "It was a surprise because I read the stories about some of them. I haven't gotten to the ones here yet. I'm ready to start Nash's parents, Taylor and Beth."

Stella turns back. “Aylen said with ability you’re good to go. He’s got to be gentle and you need the shell on. Should I make one like a corset for bed?” She waves her hand. “I’m making one. Your girls need attention. Have you been wearing the bed skeleton?”

I laugh. “I’ll thank you now for that. Yes, the bed one worked last night but I can’t walk in it.”

Her face turns white. “Fuckin’ hell. Did you fall?”

“No, I realized I can feel my feet but can’t move them. Luke Rayne moved my legs so it worked and he didn’t seem to realize he did it.”

She breathes out a sigh. “You scared the shit out of me. I didn’t do the feet for bed because you’re in bed.”

“It’s perfect, Stella. He got it and I’m not complaining. I thought it was funny but wasn’t going to say it to him. He was busy.”

She smiles, putting her hand up. “I don’t want to know.”

“I don’t want to know details either. I do want to know if you’re happy with how it all works for you?” Natalia asks.

I think about a month ago. “You know, I spent so long thinking I’d never smile again. I think I believed that was all my future held, being here and having so much family and love all around me, I don’t see that as even a possibility anymore. Luke Rayne is more than I ever thought a man could be and I talk about the other couples, but I don’t know how I’d breathe without him.”

Natalia wipes her eyes smiling. “Love and Badass just go together.” She’s right.

“I believe it. The stories prove it.”

She smiles. “I’m writing yours.”

“Damn, I’m not telling you anymore.”

She shrugs. “Mary is home again, she’s seen enough to give me material.”

Spirit in the sky. I shake my head. “I’m getting back to work. Thanks for calling Aylen, Stella.”

Stella waves but is reading from her computer. I watch her wipe under her eyes and smile. Natalia laughs, closing me down. I shut their labs off and my office is my office.

Since I’m alone, I text the good news to Luke Rayne and get back to work.

Luke Rayne

My woman is going to kill me. We're at Rising² for dinner, then calling my parents. By the time we get into bed, she's going to be exhausted. Reggie is on every other day so she won't be sore tonight. Smiling, I think I can work with that.

"You got another one done?" Ford comes from behind me.

"I did. How did you know?"

"You're jogging up the stairs fast."

I laugh. "It's not over a bike model today."

"I'm not asking."

I'm not explaining so it works for me. "This is an FBI call."

He hits the keypad following me in. BSC Presidents are on virtual. "Presidents, Brothers." I say sliding my glasses on.

"Luke Rayne, Ford. Cooper is on for the chemical aspect. Hemy has FBI Ops in Virginia. A bomb threat was called into a Secret Service line. There are events all around DC but no location. Web and Alexia are working on the number that called in. Hemy has dogs out at four events. We're hoping to narrow it down and take events separately so he can move some Leads from Control to on-site. This has a link to the information we got from Maiyun Whitewater. I have Christian and Mucimi looking for anything in that warning that might help."

I nod reading that Ford isn't happy. "FBI doesn't have unit teams close?" He asks.

Prez takes a few seconds before answering. "This was a call to a Secret Service line. I haven't talked to Saber yet but do know that he's in a meeting with top officials. The call came to me directly. I know she saw high officials planning the threat and one helping to stop it. Saber may have understood the warning better than I do since he's from the military."

"Do you have a list of events?" I ask to move us along. We've got Brothers and dogs out there now.

Prez nods and Billy gives us venues and events on a map. Cort watches, then jumps in with a plan for our parts. Prez nods and we're off.

I text Harky. He'll let Piper know we're running late. Ford jogs down the stairs with me. "Good job, Brother."

I shake my head. "We all played our parts, Brother. You found it before it dispersed into the crowds."

"We'd have never got the general and shit he's pissed about. I'm glad you know Kaleb that well. He's different with you than he is with the Director."

I shrug. "He's older than me and taught me a lot. We grew up together. I need to get to Maiyun. Something has her scared." I push getting to her as a Security Brother stops in front of her.

"Vane went to the bathroom. She'll be right out." Kelly lets her know she's okay.

My girl relaxes. "Thanks." She turns back smiling at me. "I was going to ask if our dinner was called off."

I throw chin to the Brother and he steps back. "No, sweet Em. You need your dog. The Brothers on your Security are trusted and handpicked. You can trust them. This is Kelly, he's a team Lead and Vane's second. Vane is the Lead for your teams, you met her yesterday. If you need someone changed, you tell Kelly, Vane or me."

"I should have asked. I was nervous and didn't read him because I was looking for a woman behind him." She's so easy.

I nod. "Your dog is a layer of Security you can trust too." I throw chin to Vane as she jogs our way. "We're headed to Rising². You were scheduled for tonight so you can see the commands and the dog will have two leads to trust for Maiyun's teams."

Vane nods. "Thanks, Commander. Training with the dog was a question I had. We got basic at Bravo."

"Zeus sent his material with procedures but I've been in Ops. I'll send it to you when I stop for more than a minute."

"Roger, Commander." They both say following us to the chopper.

By now the whole fuckin' base knows about my ability so I suspend us into the chopper and check to see that a wheelchair is on board.

"It's strapped up here, Commander." My Flight Lead points to the chair strapped in the front so I'm not making the walk back.

"Thanks, how'd you know I was looking for it?"

"Owen said you sent it twice. It was important."

I smile. "It is. I pulled the flight plan while I was in Ops. Ready for flight."

"Roger, Commander. Ready for flight."

I get to my job and let them do theirs. The flight is short and sweet. I love the weather here. We set down and I send my data to Phoenix.

Maiyun's big blue-gray eyes are shining with excitement. "Zeus said I'm going to love my dog. He trained him for me." She makes me laugh with her continually referring to Zeus as her BFF.

"You know he'll be good. Zeus is a good trainer. Falcon had him at Bravo training classes when I was there helping them out." I took Teller's classes one day while he was flying but she doesn't need it.

Suspending us down, I shake my head. "Zeus is waiting." I point him out.

She moves at a slow jog toward the end of the pad with Vane following close. It's faster than I've seen her move so I turn back. "We may need that chair at the Officers compound."

The Lead smiles watching my girl love on Zeus. "Roger, Commander. I'll have it brought over."

I stop and turn. "We're here until nine. Take the crew for dinner at the Club, Tate."

He salutes me. "Roger, Commander. Can we go to the K-9 compound?"

The Brothers are funny. "Yeah, they have trainers there 24/7. Do whatever makes you happy,

Brother.”

I turn back to my girl and move fast but stop when Zeus lowers and she braces her hands on his back. He chuffs and lifts up. He’s teaching her. Fuckin’ Brothers are smart. Vane smiles my way realizing what just happened.

“Good job, sweet Em, Zeus. That’s how Jinx uses Champ.”

Zeus puts his robotic up and Maiyun bumps it. I shake my head and start walking my girl toward the SUV. “K-9 compound or the house, Zeus?”

He barks once. We get in the SUV and I drive us to the dogs.

“Did you tell Piper we’re running late?” My girl is so excited it’s rolling off her.

“Harky was on Ops with us. He sent her a heads-up.” I park in front of the office and Zeus barks running by the SUV. The Brother is fast.

We follow him in and right to a fenced section Piper is in with Loki and big dogs I’ve never seen.

Zeus barks once and the dogs run, then sit at attention. Maiyun squeezes my hand smiling.

Piper shakes her head at him. “I had them, Zeus.” She turns back to the dogs.

I hold Maiyun back from walking in.

Piper throws, “Members.”

I move Maiyun through the gate. “Never walk in a gate because Zeus does. Bigger dogs are usually trained and need orders. Their training has them going for the throat. Smaller dogs go for your groin.”

“Spirit in the sky. Should we be in here?”

I smile at her. “You think Zeus or Piper would let them hurt you? The member command is so they know you work for Badass and are a team member. They’ll be alert and may detain you, but never hurt you.”

She nods, turning to Piper. “I never had a dog. I’m excited and a little scared.”

Piper laughs and calls for Perses. Whoever named them had a thing with the Gods. A dog almost as big as Zeus gets a push from Loki to move faster. Perses runs forward and I look at Zeus. He’s not worried.

I turn back and wave Vane and Kelly closer. “They aren’t moving. Piper and Zeus will keep you safe. Be close enough to hear what you need.”

They stand behind Maiyun. I step back and send Vane what Zeus sent me. I have his commands down but this is new to them. When I hear ‘kill command’ I look up. Loki has the other dogs on an obstacle course. Zeus and Perses are waiting in front of Piper.

Kelly moves a chair over and Piper shows Maiyun the commands he knows to help her move from lying down, getting up and steadying her like Champ does for Jinx. I’m surprised when Piper pulls a plastic skeleton out and has Perses bring sections to my girl. When they get into the command lines, Piper doesn’t give the kill line and I see Harky will talk to Maiyun over dinner.

An hour of trying out commands and we’re heading for dinner. Maiyun is ready to jump out when I shut the truck off.

“Perses is as fast as Zeus and Loki.” Her hand goes down and Perses steps to her side.

“Harky runs with them I bet. When I ran an Op with Zeus, we did five miles a day.”

Piper laughs. “He still does five miles but doesn’t wear the pack. He says he’s slacking.”

I smile, guiding Maiyun in following Piper. “Vane, Kelly, you’re in here with us. We’ll see how Perses eats and responds to a crowd.”

They roger and follow us in. The kitchen is full and busy. I don’t see Texas but Harky and Marks are at the island with the Bits, Ginny and Attiquin. “Ladies, Brothers.” I acknowledge.

Marks looks up. “Good job today, Brother. That would have been bad.”

I nod. “Kaleb got us the clues to stop it and Ford had the team running perfect.”

He laughs. “Team is built into you, isn’t it?”

“It is, Brother. The information wouldn’t have stopped them. Put what we all did together and it’s no longer a threat plus we cleared another from the warning list.”

“Hooyah!” Harky says, making me smile.

I hit my chest with my closed fist like I always do at Baxters and answer. “Hooah.”

Ginny and Attiquin laugh at us. Harky points. “The chair is on the side.”

I throw him chin and bend for Sohn. “Perses has board to meals. I make two, home, kitchen. Boss Harky say you no have house.”

I nod for the little Brother. “We have rooms on the base. Will we see how he orders today?”

He nods and points. “Training board Perses know. He use Zeus board he close.”

I smile. “Zeus, show Maiyun what Perses knows on the board so she can ask her questions.”

He chuffs and barks once. It’s not as loud as his command bark, I notice. Maiyun, Kelly and Vane follow to the side. I lend a hand to my Brothers.

Harky gets me on biscuits and Piper cuts up fruit. “She’s doing good in the skeleton. I thought she’d be in the chair for a while,” Harky says.

“No. She was only in it for a couple of days. Stella made a better shell for her and the healers had her moving faster than Alder expected.”

Harky nods, then points to the Bisquick. “You want the recipe for the biscuits?”

“I got it.”

“They healed her fast. She’s not in the chair as much now?” Ginny watches the group at the board smiling.

“Not as much. She jogged to Zeus so I had the flight crew drop it here. She’ll sit when she’s tired.”

She nods getting back to her vegetables.

Maiyun

Perses touches my hand then goes to the board. It says John and I nod and watch him open the door to leave. He's smart like Zeus. "Will he get a watch like Zeus and Loki?"

"Perses no Ops," Sohn says.

"I don't know what that means. Maybe I should ask if his board could be put on a tablet since I spend more time in my office or out with Luke Rayne at night than I'm at home."

Sohn raises his shoulders and puts his hands up as he turns toward Harky.

Harky nods. "It's a good point. Perses doesn't need Ops on his boards but he isn't going to be able to carry the board with him. He knows a lot more than meals and needs to communicate with Maiyun."

Sohn nods but looks at Texas. "I ask Maddox, Juan to build watch?"

Texas nods. "You can make it but only for what he needs to talk to Maiyun." He looks at me. "The watches don't go with every dog. They're expensive and use minerals that are being mined for by countries of impoverished people. Alder started buying the old technology recyclables so they'd have those metals or parts they need for batteries and whatever. We're doing our part by not wasting what we do have." They'd make good Indians.

"Thank you. Sohn, can you use my watch for Perses? I have everything on the skeleton."

Sohn smiles. "I take off and reprogram, Boss Maiyun. Perses be happy. I print new band to Perses. No water to watch."

Luke Rayne pats my leg. "Let me pop the watch face off your skeleton and explain it to Perses so he doesn't get it wet." He takes my hand and does whatever in a second.

I shake my head at how easy everything is done.

"Rain okay, no submerge." Little Xavier has me smiling.

I tell Luke Rayne, "you may want to mention that part."

They all laugh. "Boss Maiyun. I send watch tomorrow?"

"Whenever you get it done, Sohn. We'll have the board for now so we're okay."

"I send tomorrow. Perses need."

Harky smiles over at me. "He's got a thing with dog technology."

"Lucky us. Thanks, Sohn." I wink at the little genius.

He juts his chin out like the men do. He's too cute.

We get up to help clean, then head to the back. Perses and Zeus find us by the pool. Zeus gets his leg off and jumps in but Perses doesn't go in so I ask Piper. "Does he swim?"

"He does but not every day like the other dogs. He's from a training base in Brazil. He's been trained like Zeus and trained troops on that base for years. He's a year older than Zeus. He got injections on base or wherever they rescued him from like the others from bases. They had no paperwork. We know he was a Training Commander."

I don't understand. Turning, I see Luke Rayne watching me and ask him. "Did you understand about injections?"

"I'll explain later." He moves closer and bends. "Should he run with a training class?"

Piper smiles. "He'd love it. He helps with the dogs and trainees now."

He nods. "Maiyun has therapy three times a week. We can get him in a class for her therapy time. She'll drop to twice a week but that's in a couple of months and that one is for life."

Piper nods. "It still keeps him working. He runs with Harky and trains with the Bits and Zeus. Loki isn't good training with the Bits but Xavier and Trece said Perses is fun in training."

Awww. That's cute. "He should train with me. It's the days I don't have therapy. I'm still learning."

Luke Rayne nods. We watch him. "It would be good for him to know what you can do and how you'll move. I'll get him in training with the men on therapy days and you can do your time. His board will have a schedule."

He's perfect. "Thank you. We'll do that." I turn and smile at Piper.

She smiles from Luke Rayne to me. "You're good together. Perses is going to love his new home. I think he misses the base."

Luke Rayne stands. "He'll fit right in. Are you ready, sweet Em? We need to show Perses around and get his supplies where he can get them or put them up."

I move my legs over and Perses shows up. "Thanks, buddy, This one is low."

He bends and lifts up when I lean on him. "You're good at that. It's been a long day."

Piper is up when Luke Rayne bends. "You need the chair?"

"I will if I have to walk back to the chopper."

Piper laughs at my smile. I shrug.

We turn and Luke Rayne has the chair in front of him. Perses chuffs. "I'm with you. Disappearing people and objects are a normal part of my life. If people show up, they're members."

He chuffs again.

Piper and Harky laugh, drawing Zeus over in a three-legged run. "Thanks, Zeus. You did a great job. I'll chat with you when you're not busy. Go play with the little guys."

He barks running back to the pool. Piper walks to the igloo with us. "I swear he's human." I can see why she'd think so.

Freak comes to mind. "He's a dog freak. It kind of works here."

They laugh at me until we get to the kitchen. "Loki!" Piper yells as I hit my control to avoid the dogs running through the house.

Perses barks making me jump and I narrowly miss the side table.

"Attention!" Luke Rayne orders. All the dogs sit.

I laugh. That was easy.

"Loki, get them back to the compound before Texas comes in and takes your watch for not being responsible." Piper has me holding my breath so I don't laugh. Not responsible?

Loki puts both paws up and hits his watch, 'Train,' a picture of Perses and a picture of a house shows next.

"You don't get to decide to train because Perses is moving to his new home." Loki swipes an icon and 'GO!' shows.

I turn the chair and move past the dogs. "Attention. Member. Loki get these dogs back to the compound. You're not allowed to take them off the compound, that's an order."

I don't stop to see Loki answer. Perses opens the door and we all follow him out. The dogs show when Luke Rayne is backing up. That's when we all start laughing.

“I bet Perses is glad to be going back to a base. MB said Loki wasn’t happy Perses was training and at the house,” Kelly says, making Vane laugh.

Perses barks once softly. I try to look back but can’t see him. “I’m glad you’re coming home with us. Luke Rayne has you working with trainees when I have therapy. We don’t have any other dogs on the compound but we have Alpha-Bits, they’re our family too.”

He does his soft bark again.

Luke Rayne carries me into the chopper. “Is it weird that Perses eats like Zeus?”

“I’ll explain all that later. It’s a long story.” He doesn’t look like it’s a good story.

“Okay.”

He kisses my lips and sits me upfront with him.

“Ready for flight.”

The head guy repeats it.

Luke Rayne

We walked the base, met Prospects that will help Perses get the shit he needs, saw the gym, dining room and Club. While we walked, I explained the injections so Vane and Kelly got it with my girl. She was upset but didn't ask questions.

We stopped in IT so Perses paw prints get him in rooms and he meets Les and Ezra. Vane and Kelly take off to read his procedures as I get my girl and our new dog home.

Perses paws us in and moves to the side for Maiyun's chair to pass by him. I know right away someone has been here.

"Your room is over here. Harky sent your stuff over today." Maiyun rolls through but stops at the spare room door. "Did you come home today?" She backs up for Perses to walk through.

I see the room and smile. "We may want to check the bathroom." They have a twin bed and gear boxes in here. I open the closet as Maiyun goes into the bathroom. He's got gear and cuts but no plated gear. "You wore uniform gear?" I ask.

He chuffs. I point out his board on the wall and watch as he hits it on and pulls up a map with all the Clubs on it. "This is FBI/Badass Training." I point and he chuffs.

Harky said his trainer was shot by friendly fire and Perses was stolen back from the CIA on BSCs last rescue Op. His mind listed dogs who lost trainers from that Op. The CIA doctors are fuckin' sick. It does explain why there were so many big dogs again.

"Come...come in here." Her laughing means they got the shower in for Perses.

I only heard about it when Alder explained in a BSC meet. Falcon loves the showers.

"It's a dog wash." She hits the paw control and the dryer goes on blowing air down. I hit it off as she tips sideways laughing.

I'm glad she's in the chair. "The toilet is gone." I look around but a paw activated bubbler and the shower are all that's in here.

"Perses, how do you go to the john?" Turning to get that answer, I stop and watch as he runs by us.

He stands and pisses on the pipe in the grass at the side of the shower floor. When he steps out, he hits the paw control on that side and the grass flips around while water oozes down the pipe.

"They're fuckin' crazy but it's a smart crazy."

He chuffs, setting my girl off again.

We check out the new that's been added throughout the house and show Perses where his snacks are in the pantry. He waits and watches until Maiyun tells him it's downtime, then he runs in his room. She laughs checking on him and switching the light to the LED that glows from under his bed and along the open wall leading to the bathroom. The muted feel of the room is comforting. Perses sniffs along the wall and checks under the bed then hops on. I carry my ol' lady out before she moves in with him.

"He likes it, right?"

I know by the troubled look on her face and unsettled eyes this will be a connection to her journey here. Perses was rescued too and she can relate to her new dog in a way I never will.

"Loves it, sweet Em. If he didn't, he'd be prowling to see everything in his new space. He's comfortable and by the looks of him, happy to be here as much as we're happy to have him. I'll check

on him later but I think he's got this." I smile when she relaxes. Nothing on her mind but us is where I want to be.

"Thank you. I was scared waking up with new people all around me. You made it easier."

Finally, I get my girl in our room, alone for the first time today. "Because I loved you before I knew I did. Tonight, I get to show you that in every way."

"Tonight, I get to touch more than from the waist up. Aylen said to call the man things your package." She pulls her shirt off as I lay the bed skeleton out laughing.

I'm glad she's excited about touching more than my head and chest. "Dick works."

Her beautiful, big blue-gray eyes dilate, then scrunch up. Shit, damn and hell are the worst I've heard out of her sweet lips. "Dick it is."

Bending, I kiss those sweet lips. "It's yours tonight and always, beautiful. A new paper wrapped bundle was in the medical cabinet. It says bed on it."

"Spirit in the sky, she's quick. It's a new shell that will show off my girls." She's fuckin' cute getting me hard as a rock in seconds with those innocent-like words coming out of her mouth excitedly. She rips the paper off the shell holding it in front of her. The moan I make has her smile widening. "A corset she said. I want to try it but will need T-shirts on every day if we leave this one on."

"You're fucking killing me with the teasers, sweet Em. Knowing you're braless isn't going to make my days easy."

She's surprised, lowering the shell. "I don't have bras. Alder said nothing can go across my spine but I never wore a bra before. That makes sex better for men?"

Fuck. "That is not helping. Sex is an act, love between us will make the act of sex almost an addiction. All in is a guarantee that you'll keep me and I'll keep you, forever. We don't quit putting the work into us that we deserve. The classes you take, lists I get, it's all to keep us focused on our partner for life. We live, learn and grow together in life and love. As kids, we grew up learning everything and share that with our ol' ladies, so they have the same information. So, while it's not necessarily about sex – the act, I love knowing that you won't have a bra on and I will always have full access to your breasts. I'm not sure I want other men seeing that but knowing all I have to do is lift your shirt to suck a nipple will have it as a thought always on my mind." I smile at her shiver.

"That's pretty blunt and extremely arousing."

I hug her laughing. "Let's get this on you and see what else we can do to arouse you."

"And me you?" That hopeful look is not helping my hard on.

"We've got years to learn, but I wanted your hands on me three days ago when you came in my mouth."

She turns red and smiles up at me. The red on her face and the bold look in those beautiful eyes have me smiling at my brave girl. "Me too."

Jesus. I shake my head and turn her around, sliding my hands up the shell over her chest. "Soon, sweet Em. I need you to lay on your stomach so I can take this shell off. I'll lift you and slide the new one on, then clip it together. Do I need anything besides the shell?" I've never seen her with it off.

"The cotton stuff so I'm not sweating and the shell doesn't hurt me to move."

Going back to the new cabinet, I find six-inch rolls of fluff wound care cotton and bring one back to the bed. "I'll see how you're wrapped now so I can put it on the same way." As I'm talking, I notice how her ass is barely covered by the pretty blue panties.

“No, my girls stay uncovered. I undid the bands on my legs.”

I smile at the determination in her voice. “Not a chance of me missing that, beautiful, or the sexy panties.” My hands slide up her thighs and squeeze her ass, getting a moan.

Standing on the side of the bed, I lift her straight up and remove the skeleton and bands from her. The shell makes me nervous but I keep moving to release the velcro and lift it off her. “The cotton wraps all the way around you so this won’t take long.” Her not feeling anything bothers me so I make quick work of wrapping her.

“It’s too high, my girls are covered.”

“I’ll cut it, Maiyun. I need the back higher and don’t want it all wrinkled under the shell.” Measuring the back piece against the new shell, I lay it on her and raise the front into position. Already I can see her breasts were flattened by the old shell, I bet this feels better for her, even with the cotton covering ‘her girls’. My mind has the bed skeleton pieces moving fast. Before I set her down, I check the bands and sit her on the side of the bed. “Bet that feels better already.”

Her hands slide up the shell testing out the feel of those newly freed girls getting a moan out of me. “I love to see your hands on you.”

Her eyes find mine quick and she smiles. “I didn’t feel like they were all squished but I guess they were.”

Smiling, I don’t care why her hands are on her and wonder if that’s fucked-up but not for long. Seeing scissors in my hand I bend in front of her. “I’m going to cut along the shell. Hold those girls up against you so I don’t miss. This time it’s just for a minute.”

Her hands move to lift her breasts up and away from the scissors while I cut just above the shell going right across. “Elbows up.” I cut the sides and flatten the padding on the little slopes that looks like a shelf for her breasts to sit on. The fucking pictures of naked breasts should concern me.

When I’m done, I lose the scissors and tear my eyes away from her hands to find her eyes. “Done.”

She smiles moving her hands but my eyes stay on hers. “I feel like I got more back. It’s stupid because it didn’t bother me to have them covered but no cover feels like I got something back.”

Leaning in, I kiss her lips. She didn’t feel whole? “I have questions for later but right now it’s killing me. I have to see.”

Her arms go out to the side. “See.”

My mouth waters, getting the first sight of her. Free and magnificent. Feminine with the biggest fuckin’ nipples making them dominant is my second thought. Breasts being dominant has got to be my dick talking because it doesn’t make sense. But he’s right. “Fuck, you’re beautiful, sweet Em.” My brain isn’t holding anything back so I show her how fuckin’ beautiful I find her breasts getting lost in the feel of her globes, her hard nipple in my mouth and the sound she gives me letting me know she likes it as much as I do.

“Luke Rayne!” Pulling away, my eyes whip to hers, but my hand takes the nipple I had and puts pressure where my mouth was. Focusing on her closed eyes I finally get it and go right back. Wet is where I need her and this is the perfect way to get her there. “So fuckin’ beautiful.” Scraping down she comes, making me smile. Freedom looks like it feels good to my girl.

Jumping back, she rolls off me and sits. “Now I get to touch you.”

Since her hands on me has been held back to *after* our first time together - that was interrupted and made phenomenal because the ancestors pulled us there - I’m all for it right now. “Anything you want, sweet Em.”

She pulls the sheet off me. “I want to touch you. Tell me what to do.”

Her curiosity is sexy as fuck with the quick demonstration I give her.

When she reaches for me, the anticipation before her hands touch me has me frozen as every nerve in my brain powers up to electrified, causing my dick to jump and my sweet girl to giggle.

The thought of a lifetime of reactions like that gets pushed away so I can watch my girl learn me.

Lifting her, I take the bed skeleton off and put my head on her hand. She sleeps with that one hand out every night so my head is right there, every night. “Love you, sweet Maiyun.”

She’s dead to the world. I never expected it to be this way but I wouldn’t change one thing about my life right now. With Maiyun, I’m home. How the ancestors know this shit is weird but they do and I spent time showing appreciation because they do. Suspending so my girl is safe and gets to feel everything I do was given to me by them. So much has been given to me by them. Turning my face, I kiss her hand, my new purpose was given to me by them. All these years jumping to the ancestors when I’m not Indian fell into place tonight, I am Indian as much as everyone is, because we all had to come from someplace. Justice and the crew showed me when we were young but tonight, I felt it. My Maiyun felt it.

She needed me and thank fuck, Justice held me close so I was there. Justice must have seen the parallel with my life. I needed them and he held me close then too. It’s funny how life works out. Believing in Badass has given us a good life. Time will only make that better.

Closing my eyes, I breathe in the reservation and thank the crew for showing me.

Chapter Eleven

FBI/Badass Training Center

Luke Rayne

The phone wakes me with a groan. I don't want to answer because I don't need more of my brother's whining but this could be a chance to fix whatever the fuck he's imagining. Rolling away from sweet Em, I walk out to the living room. "Yeah, Joshua."

"Luke, thanks for answering. I've been an asshole and know it. I need to fix this. Can I call Maiyun and apologize?"

My first thought is, '*Not a fuckin' chance.*' "Tell me why you were acting like a dick and what changed."

I hear his breath catch. "Fair enough." More breathing tells me he understands my mistrust here. I'd read him but want to hear his reason for acting so out of character. Mom was right, he's never done that shit before but giving him a pass on the disrespectful behavior toward my Maiyun isn't an option.

"Baxter's want me running International based out-of-country. I want to come home, settle down and live like everyone else. They told me to think about it. Dad thinks this is some kind of honor and isn't hearing my reasons for turning it down. We've never competed with Badass and this feels like a competition. You went to the MC and they handed you the world. Now you've got a girl too. I can't even get a fuckin' job I want. I don't know, Luke. Being there and seeing the life you live had me pissed. Brother, I know how hard you work and what it took for you to get there but none of that registered until Maiyun said I'd be miserable. I'm already miserable. Don't fuck it up with her. She's an amazing woman."

I smile. He's right. "What is it that you want to do?"

He laughs but I feel anger in there. "You're the first one that's asked me that, it's been so long since the three have asked. I want to get into one of the Clubs. Have a normal job where I'm home but can do the parts of the job I like. I owe Baxter's everything but lately I feel trapped here."

"Did you talk to Rayne? He's in MC-Baxters."

"Rayne's yours. I have dad and he isn't hearing me." What the fuck is he talking about?

"We had the same training, Joshua. Rayne is mine?"

"No, not...I never connected to him like you did, I guess. He doesn't talk and shit."

I nod. "Like me. It doesn't mean there's a lack of respect or pride in the job you've been doing, very well, from what he's told me."

"Yeah? He never talks about shit like that."

I roll my eyes watching Perses run to the bedroom. "It's in his voice. Focus on the inflections."

“You and the fuckin’ voice shit. When I’m feeling pressure from my closest Brothers, inflection isn’t on my mind.”

I laugh. “It obviously should be. Talk to him. He’s got a voice that’s heard by dad and the Baxters. I can talk to dad...”

“No, Luke, I fucked it up with you and he’s pissed at me. I need to fix this. I’ll talk to Rayne. You think leaving Baxters is disrespectful?” That’s what’s got him so upset.

“I guess it depends on how you do it. You’ve worked for them since you were a kid so you put the time in. On the other side, if you feel that strongly about keeping that tie tight, what can you do that incorporates what they’re doing and what you want to do?”

“See that’s the thing, as an Officer in Badass, I could train Brothers like we do here. Dakota is doing flight still. I can train in the other areas or even flight now that the Justice League are all there. Baxters have an interest in that training.”

I see the merge getting tighter and nod. “That sounds like a job you’d love that brings Baxters and the MC closer. BSC is gearing up for more. Cort and Prez are still crazy with what’s next so throw in and ask for the job you want.”

“Yeah? You think they’ll give it to me?”

“No, Brother, I think you’ve earned it. You’re going to be twenty-seven and they’re asking you to man an international base. Wanting your Brothers closer isn’t a crime or unusual. Merging with BSC is going to happen, why not with you?”

He takes a few seconds and I see him relax. “You’ve seen it? You get more vision?”

“I do and have, Joshua. Do this for you. If this is what you want, go after it. Talk to Rayne, get it straight in your head and listen to his words. You’ve got the ability to do anything you set your mind to. Do it.”

“You’re right, thanks. I should have told you but dad said you had enough on your plate.”

“Anything, always, Joshua. Dad can be wrong, you know.”

He laughs. “I’m learning. I need to fix this with Maiyun before I talk to Rayne. I was such an asshole to her. Can I call her?”

“Yeah, she’s in therapy today from nine to eleven. They got the water skeleton working for her. She should be in her office after lunch until four or five.”

“They’re incredible with the engineering. I can’t believe she’s paralyzed and walking. Don’t fuck it up.”

As if. “Never, she’s everything.”

“Does she like music?” He’s always had a thing with music. Dad took him to every concert that came to New England.

I never minded hanging with mom. “She doesn’t know much about music. She was held on the reservation, then brought to the Middle East.”

“How’d she get so smart? Held on the reservation doesn’t sound like the worldly view she’s got came from that.” He’s stuck on the held word.

“Aiyana was held and went to Harvard. The Blackhawks started with Nunánuk and Cloud...”

He takes in a breath quick. “I meant no disrespect. She’s smart but I didn’t think about people here. Those reservations don’t look like here.”

“Relax, Joshua. I took no offense. Her mom was a seer. Maiyun is taking classes to learn about life off the reservation so some things we take as common knowledge are lost on her. You may need to

explain what she doesn't get. Do that honestly so she's not blindsided by someone she shouldn't trust."

"Thanks. I'll take care. Mom said Maiyun's like her when she moved to the Baxters."

"Yeah, dad said the same thing. I need to get..." I turn fast and smile. "Hold on, Joshua." Taking the phone from my ear I bend and kiss that happy smile. "Perses got you into the skeleton?"

"He rolled me so I could get the top half on. I washed in the tub and got the rest on myself."

I washed her quick because she was tired but I guess it wasn't enough, "Good job. You too, Perses. Thanks, Brother." He gives a low bark. "I'll get some clothes on and take you to breakfast."

"I'm ordering coffee and debating whether to go to breakfast or cook it for you so I don't have to see clothes hiding that body."

I laugh pulling the phone back to my ear. "Brother, I need to go. Call her later."

He's laughing. "Don't fuck it up!"

I swipe him off and lift her shirt loving Stella for giving me full access.

Maiyun

Perses comes into my office surprising me. “I was just dropping off the book, then I’m going to lunch.”

He chuffs and stands by me when I bend to put the book back on the shelf. “It didn’t have what I was looking for. I should wait and just input them.”

His body stiffens after his front paws move a step out. I get it and use him to stand. “Thanks, Perses. I’m a little sore from the pool.”

He swipes at my wrist.

“What?”

He does it again so I hit my boards on. He doesn’t see what he’s looking for. “We have time, let’s go home and you can show me on your board.”

He barks but doesn’t move. Okay, I’m not sure what the bark was for. I walk to the door with him right beside me. He’s worried. “I wanted to know how training went today. You can show me with your board.”

He chuffs, paws in and goes right to the board.

When I see what he hits I realize I don’t have his signs. “Sore isn’t hurt so I don’t need the medic. Sore is when your muscles are tired.” I’m not telling him about the workout from last night. I don’t think I’d tell Zeus about all that either. They’re not women and wouldn’t get it.

“How was training?”

He hits the signs fast so I read out loud as he goes. ‘Work good. Soldiers new. Train procedure.’ He’s pretty fast getting words up there two at a time.

“That’s good. I’m glad you have something to do besides watching me in the pool. It would be a boring job.”

He hits his signs again. ‘Maiyun security swim. Perses work. Maiyun Perses command family.’ He gets the pictures of me and him up faster than I can. I’m impressed.

“Thank you. I’m glad you feel like family here. I don’t have family anymore and need it. I’m glad you’re here, Perses, but know you didn’t have much of a choice. I was like that and ended up here loving my new life. I miss my family but have so many new people it reminds me to remember to live the good they taught me.”

He watches me for a few seconds, then hits his signs. ‘Central command Luke Rayne. Good family. Maiyun and Perses.’

“I think so too. We better get to lunch before he sends security in.”

He barks and walks by my hand. I don’t think he understands sore.

Getting to the dining hall, I change that to maybe I don’t understand sore when I trip at the door. Perses stands still for a second and waits while I set myself straight. When I take a step, he does. “Thanks, Perses.”

Security pulls my chair out without saying a word about me tripping. I like Kelly. “They put a bench for you, Perses. Order so they can bring it out with mine.”

I watch him turn the board on and can’t remember anyone showing him how to do that. He did it in the rooms too. Family shows on his board as he turns to watch me. Family? He hits, ‘No Thanks. Family.’

The deep laugh has me smiling. "It's true but we'd always thank anyone for what they do. Even family," Ford says.

Perses chuffs and hits, 'Affirmative. Commander.' We watch but he turns his body and hits the food icon.

"How was swimming today?" Ford is a nice guy always asking how I'm doing.

"Good. I'm sore but not overly so."

A kiss on the head has me looking up. "I felt you close but not this close."

He sits leaning to kiss my cheek. "It's been busy. My mind was on Ops and new shells."

He makes me laugh and I'm sure the heat on my face is red. "Can't say Ops ever takes over my mind. Shells," I pretend I'm thinking about it, "they could definitely overtake my mind."

He laughs, shaking his head. "Bold and beautiful. Two traits I love."

Ford orders and the Prospect moves to Perses but looks at Luke Rayne. "His order went in. They showed me how to put his plate and bowls but said to get out here and didn't give them to me."

I smile but don't laugh at the poor guy. He's afraid Perses is going to bite him.

"Relax, Prospect. He isn't going to hurt you and they'll send his food with our order. He's served like any other Brother but the bowls have specific locations. This is Perses, he's from a base in Brazil." Luke Rayne is good with the new kids.

"Training Commander. We'll get Perses and his position here to you in training but for today, understand he's a Training Commander that's retired from Delta. At a guess, he's a trained man-eater that knows how to kill you and render you missing in a heartbeat. Show respect to him always so we get to teach you all he knows." Ford has the men from Ops laughing.

I shake my head at the poor Prospect.

Luke Rayne is shaking his head too. "Understanding he had an Officer rank is enough. He isn't killing you. Everyone on base is a member to him. He'd hold any threat and wait for Ford to shoot you." Oh, man. He isn't helping calm this kid.

The poor kid nods and I smile trying to encourage him. "Stop scaring him, he's just serving lunch. Perses isn't hurting you."

The Prospect moves through the men taking orders fast. He's a nervous wreck. Ford smiles thinking it's funny. Men are weird.

We get food with Luke Rayne explaining Perses' plate arrangement and cutting up his meals at the table and the Prospect relaxes. I'm not surprised when another Prospect shows with our plates and get to eating so I'll be done when the guys are.

They're talking about Ops when I'm finished and I see they found Tati. She's a mess and not moving. "She's alive? Tati is alive?"

Putting my hand on Luke Rayne, I don't realize I'm squeezing until my fingers are held. "She's alive. Doc and Mary are with her on the plane, sweet Em. They'll be at the ABSZ medic room tonight. We can go see her tomorrow when we're off work."

"Why isn't she moving?"

"She's sedated because she was terrified of the Brothers and Zeus. Doc thought it would be best to get her to the ABSZ with the Alpha-Bits and Chenoa. She'll sleep until they get her checked out. You saw her?"

I nod as he wipes the tears that just fell. "I'm okay, she's really skinny. Where was she?"

"Outside of a base in Virginia."

CIA is in the Meehan guy's head. "She was taken by the CIA like Perses and the Alpha-Bits?"

"Fuck. Clear your heads." Ford orders the men.

I shake my head watching Luke Rayne's eyes. He finally nods. "She was. The boy didn't make it."

"I want to go to the ABSZ tonight, I can help keep her calm. She doesn't know anyone there and doesn't have vision."

He smiles, pulling my head into his chest and I feel that energy vibration. "We'll go tonight. I can run Ops from the ABSZ Ops building tomorrow."

"Thank you. I can go with Perses or he can stay with me if you have to get back."

"I'll be with you. She'll need to know that everyone in a uniform isn't out to hurt her."

Like me, I nod understanding that, I was terrified of the uniforms. USA on it didn't mean I could trust them. "You're right. She probably needs it more than I did. I at least saw Zeus, Brekan and Alder."

He holds my face away from his chest and kisses my head. "You finished your food. Do you want more?"

Food? I look at my plate. "No, I had a fruit cup with it."

He nods watching my eyes. "Are you ready to go back to your office?" He's making sure I'm okay. I love how sweet he is.

"I am." We turn toward Perses who is scraping his bowl until it sits in the middle of his plate. "Perses is ready too."

Luke Rayne smiles. "He is. I'll pick you up at your lab and we'll head over to the ABSZ. I need to see Cort and we can get dinner. The plane's ETA is just after seven."

Okay this is good. We'll have time to meet Cort and eat before Tati gets there. "Do you want me to pack you clothes?"

"No, sweet Maiyun. I'll have a bag for us when I come for you." He's going to do everything and arguing won't stop him.

I nod. "If you get busy, I can get our things."

"Boss Maiyun!"

I can't see which little guy is yelling for me. Luke Rayne moves my chair out and I see Ezra looking very excited with a box held out in two hands like whatever is in it is made of gold, or it's a bomb. I smile, taking it. "Thanks, Ezra. What's in the box?"

"Watch to Boss Perses! Sohn send! Deliver ASAP."

I love the little guys but Ezra is adorable. He's younger than the others and it shows in his excitement. "You delivered it ASAP very well, Ezra. I'll let Sohn know you followed that order."

His head bounces up and down fast. Luke Rayne gets him talking about the supplies that came in and I put Perses watch on him. "No swimming with the watch. I can take it off when you need me to or get one of the guys to take it off."

I look at Ezra. "Do I take it off for bed?"

He shrugs. "I no make, I deliver ASAP."

"I'll ask. No, I'll get Perses to ask Zeus on the chat."

He looks at me weird. "Dog chat?"

Luke Rayne laughs and tells Ezra about Zeus chatting with me. Using Perses, I stand and bend

to kiss Luke Rayne's cheek. "I have some work to do so I'll be ready when you are."

He nods, looking ready to jump up. "It's okay, Perses and the team are here. They just got meals to go."

I move before he follows me. He's got his own work to do and doesn't need to babysit me down the hall. That's what security is for.

"Wait up, sweet Maiyun." My Badass guy is going to walk me back to my office. Maybe he has more to say. We all stop at the door until he takes my hand and walks me forward with Perses and two security following us. He doesn't say a word until the door to my office closes. "All fuckin' day this has been distracting me." He lifts my shirt and is on me before I can say a word or laugh.

The girls aren't ever going to complain and I can't say I will either. He makes me feel sexy and special because he's been distracted over my girls.

When he's done bringing me close to that point of no return, he steps back and kisses me like he's going to die without that kiss too.

He steps back out of breath, I bet. I should like that too but I'm dizzy from lack of air or something, maybe sex hormones. I'll have to ask the ol' ladies. "Dizzy right now is lack of air?" My voice barely makes it out. I guess I'm asking him.

"Yeah, if I had time, I'd fuck you over your table."

Crap. I want to do that but not if he's in a hurry. "Don't tell me next time."

He smiles, pulling my head toward him for a kiss. "Love you, sweet Em. I'll be here when I can get free."

The red light flashes. "Go, I'm back in Ops. The trainer we got is good."

He walks out so I don't have to ask or answer. I'm not sure what the question was when I spot Perses. "I hope you don't have cameras on your gear too."

His board shows 'negative'. Well, that's something.

I hit the button to open the room. "I'm here."

Natalia, Kateri and Stella are on. "Girl, you've been there the whole time. Flushed face, shining eyes, red, puffy and pouty lips mean Luke Rayne just left. Did he like the corset shell?"

"How do you know he even saw it?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "You had no chest yesterday and looked like a football player with padding, today you have a chest. So he liked it and that's why your T-shirt is showing and you took so long to answer?"

Perses barks and Natalia leans against a table laughing. Kateri shakes her head and Stella smiles.

"Don't answer her!"

They all are laughing now. "Everyone, meet Perses. He's my new dog who works here but will be left outside the door when Luke Rayne comes in unless he promises not to answer your questions."

Perses hits, 'Affirmative,' getting a nod from me.

"Holy shit, he's like Zeus?"

"Yeah. A year older but trained by Zeus and a Delta Training Commander in Brazil."

"Wow, that's impressive. They get promoted with their handlers so he's a training Commander?" Natalia asks.

Perses stands but sits back down and looks at me.

“Thanks, Perses, you can answer for you but don’t answer for me.”

He barks, making me smile. “That’s what Ford said, he’s a Training Commander and deserves respect for the work or something. He scared a poor Prospect half to death.”

I’m surprised they don’t laugh at that. Their shaking heads make me feel normal. “What did you all show for?”

“Chenoa called for some clothes for a friend of yours.”

“Tati. She’s bigger than us. Closer to Josephine’s height. I don’t really know her well. She worked for Brewster but came in after we got there. She didn’t speak English but did speak Arabic. When we got locked down, I didn’t see her anymore but she must have got the language phone thing we did. I know of two there that had it. They were Navajo but only one was from my tribe.”

“Maybe Chenoa knows her. No, she didn’t speak Cheyenne or Navajo.” Kateri says.

Stella stands straight. Damn.

I ask hoping she isn’t looking for memories. “How do you know I speak Navajo?”

“You speak everything, Mase said. You have books in all languages.”

I nod. “I’m not clear on all Naskapi words but mom wrote in the language of the people. I translated them to English for Christian. Co will help me for the Sioux languages and Cree.”

She nods. “Lakota and Arapaho are Sioux?” Stella asks.

“Lakota makes up most. I know a lot but different tribes sometimes had different words. Arapaho I know.”

She nods. Kateri looks thoughtful, then asks. “My grandmother taught me many things. If I repeat a phrase, can you tell me what it means? She never explained.”

My eyes go right to Natalia who shakes her head so Kateri doesn’t see it.

Stella answers. “No. You can ask Mase or Justice. Maiyun has been cloaked too and you may fuck with that or the cloak you have. I don’t understand how it all works but if Mase or Justice think it’s safe they’d ask Maiyun anyway.”

Kateri nods. “It doesn’t feel hazy but I don’t want to hurt you, Maiyun. I’ll ask Justice, he’d know better than Mase.” She’s afraid to mess up her relationship with Mase.

I nod. “Thank you. I feel the same and don’t know enough about the cloak thing. I know they spent time building it or something. Whatever is under it isn’t important for me to know as I move forward to my future.”

She smiles. “You sound like Aiyana, Jeremy and Mucimi. Are you a prophet?”

“I think just a voice for the Indian tribes to hear. I’m not real clear on titles but that’s what Aiyana said.”

Stella laughs. “Just be you. They have titles for everyone.”

Perses moves into their lab spaces trying to sniff at them. Stella bends. “You’re as big as Zeus. We’re showing in a virtual lab. Maiyun sees us as holograms from the computer that puts a picture of our lab up with us in it. You show in my room as a picture that’s a hologram. Like Ops glasses show you everything but without them you don’t see it.”

Perses sits and barks. He puts train and a computer up and she laughs. While she talks to him, I look at Natalia and Kateri. Natalia is watching me but Kateri is watching Stella and Perses.

“I’m writing my questions for you.”

She looks at her laptop screen. “You’re all kinds of freaky. The program builds whoever is in

the room. It's something Stella got from Mitch. I wrote it into the labs so everyone in the room is seen."

I nod thinking they're all kinds of freaky. "So, we need clothes for Tati but she looks so skinny it was hard to recognize her."

"A zero long?" Natalia asks.

"I don't know what that means."

"Her size. You're a zero. She's taller so long means longer length."

I look down. "I guess so. Am I really skinny?" Tati looked bad being so skinny from the girl I knew.

She looks at Stella nervously.

Stella rolls her eyes. "You are but not sickly skinny. Your frame is like Dean or GJ, Jess Knight. They're small and thin but not too thin."

I nod. "Thanks. Sam bought my clothes but I didn't ask about size. She sent something to the Nancy woman and said to add for the skeleton and shell."

Stella jumps in excited. "Nancy is my grandmother. She's amazing with clothes."

"Who are your mom and dad. I need to add everyone here to a book."

They laugh. "It's in the Bible."

Damn, I have that one but don't understand it. I should read the front. Maybe I'll understand it. "Luke Rayne gave me one. I'll read it tonight. I'm going to the ABSZ in case Tati is scared. She's going to need a familiar face."

They all nod looking serious. "I can be there. Mase is off early today and taking the boys to see Garren and Michael for model toys." Kateri is sweet.

"She's probably going to sleep. They had her sedated." I don't want them hanging around for nothing, these are busy and amazing women.

She smiles. "I wouldn't be a familiar face. I'm going for you."

Without warning tears roll down my face. "Thank you. The plane is coming at somewhere around seven." I swipe my face like I'm twelve again.

"I'm in. Brinks is taking me out but we can eat on the ABSZ. He said Parker wants a fish from the pet store."

I smile loving my new friends then just tell them. "I love you all."

Perses chuffs getting my attention from the book I'm on. "Sorry, Perses. Oh, hey, Zeus. Let me get you on a board. Click on the link."

I send it through my laptop and pick the main camera and front board. Zeus pops on with signs and words but they can't be for me. "Is this training for Perses?"

Zeus signs 'Yes' with his robotic.

“I’m working on a Naskapi book while you guys are busy.”

They both chuff but aren’t paying attention to me, so I get back to my book. For like ten seconds. No one ever calls me on the phone. “Hello.”

“Maiyun, it’s Joshua. Do you have a minute?”

“It depends. If you’re going to be a jerk, I have books waiting for me to translate. If you’re calling because Luke Rayne told you to and you’re going to be a jerk, I have quotes I just don’t understand to get in the book I’m translating.”

He laughs, making me smile. “And if I’m calling because I was an asshole to everyone on a recent trip to Nevada and need to apologize?”

I stick the paper I use to list words I need to look up in the book and close it. “My book is closed and I’m ready.”

I hear the smile in his voice as he starts to apologize, then it’s gone when he tells me why he was so mad. He was supposed to make a decision while he was here but still has it looming over his head. I don’t think it’s looming but it’s his word. He sounds miserable until he tells me what Luke Rayne says. There’s hope back in his voice making me think Luke Rayne is a good big brother to Joshua. I don’t know half the crap he’s talking about but he’s happy about the idea and excited to talk to Rayne about it. Rayne apparently is the go-to-guy when the guys have problems. He sent Alder files of his back so I could walk again. He must be a smart guy. When he stops talking, I have to think of what he just said.

“Yes, I forgive you. Are you going to talk to Rayne now?”

He laughs at me. “I’ve got time. You have something you don’t understand? Can I help?”

“I don’t understand more than I do. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing but I heard the trainees talking and they have all kinds of stuff from the Bible that I don’t understand. There are quotes all through it that don’t explain the lessons to me. I haven’t told anyone because everyone reads it and gets it right away. I read it and don’t get it so if anyone asks, I say I didn’t. How can I have read it if I didn’t understand what the hell it said?”

He laughs again. “Email me what you don’t get and I’ll explain it. Badass is a belief we’ve grown up with so it’s in our DNA. They added the quotes and easier language to help Brothers not brought up Badass, but they have training that covers Brothers coming into Badass. That training wouldn’t be there if it was easy, Maiyun. I can help. Take a section a night and send me your questions. No matter where I am, I’ll be able to answer and get it back to you.”

That’s perfect. He can be my Mary for the Bible. “Thank you. Can you text me your email? I’ll send the first today. I made a doc for my questions with the section it’s from.”

“I will or you could put your doc on a hologram board and I can answer from there.”

“The doc is on the board, or it can be if I do the view thing.”

“Then you’ve already done it. I just need the link to the sheet.”

“You can get it from my link?”

“Yeah, we’re all on the same satellite. I just sent you a chat. Do you see it?”

I move to the laptop too fast and trip, hitting the shell on the edge of the table. As my breath comes out in a gush he asks, “Are you okay?”

Perses is against my leg pushing it over. “Thanks, Perses.”

Righting myself, I click the chat, then Joshua on. He looks worried.

“I’m okay. I tripped and hit the shell on the table.” I cut and paste the first box to a new page

and label it Joshua, then copy the link and paste it to the chat. "I'm okay, Perses, go back and train with Zeus. There. I'll read your answers and reread the section so I get it right. I don't understand all the phrases. Even dumb ones like pure as driven snow. Your mom explained when I asked. Snow is gross when it's been driven on."

He laughs. "She's a good one to get answers from. She grew up deaf with just her mom. She didn't go to school with other kids so I bet it's questions she'd get and can answer easily. I'll try to keep phrases out of my answers. Who is Perses and isn't Zeus a dog?"

That's a relief. "Thanks for making it easy and Perses is my dog. He's a training commander from Delta in Brazil. Does that mean Badass has Clubs like here in Brazil?"

He smiles. "They do but Delta is a branch of military elite. Like SEAL, Marine Raiders and Rangers."

Luke Rayne was a SEAL. "Okay. That makes more sense. Ford said he should be treated with respect because he was a commander. Zeus is a commander but from Marines like Piper."

"Luke said Raider. He worked a job with him and Commander Harky but I don't think he was a Commander then."

That's more than I needed but maybe good to know. It sounds familiar. "All the titles get confusing. I just call Ford, Ford and Harky, Harky. Do you always call Luke Rayne Luke?"

He looks surprised. "Only to him. My mom was big on both names so I use them."

I smile. "You said Luke. I'm glad I'm family and won't tell your mom."

"Since you're my sister now, you call her mom. She'll love it."

I wipe away the tears that brought and nod with a croaked, "thank you."

"Fuck, should I call Luke?"

"No! He's in Ops. If you call him, he'll show up here."

He smiles. "Since you're done with the waterworks, I won't call."

I roll my eyes after I wipe them once more. "Don't be a jerk now. I miss my mom and your mom helped me see she's always with me. I guess like your grandmother is always with her. She said even without her ears her mom is there. Your mom feels like mine when she's here."

"Jesus, that's sad. She told me she wears her ears as long as she can so her world isn't silent."

"It's sad but she's got the tools to make it better. She said it's like my skeleton and asked Stella to make the one for bed. It's not as technical as the daily contraption but it works to give me normal for longer. Today, Perses rolled me so I got the skeleton on alone. He's another tool." I smile over at the wonder dog learning whatever he's learning from Zeus and his pictures.

"You're both amazing, I'm not so sure I'd be happy with tools if I couldn't hear or walk."

My eyes find his fast. "Yes you would. The alternative would never be enough for Badass brought up men and women. You're all driven to push forward. My mom and your grandmother taught us the same. Your mom is a doctor."

He smiles. "Yeah. I never thought about it like that. I need to find Rayne. Thanks for forgiving me, Maiyun. I won't forget to answer you every morning. Have fun with the translations."

I roll my eyes at him. "Indian is worse than English with the words and phrases. It is interesting and I keep learning more." I shrug and put my fingers on the mouse.

"Because you're Badass." The screen goes black. He beat me to it.

"I am and got the cut to prove it." I say to the black screen. I think I'm going to like the new Joshua. He'll be a good big brother. My cousin would have liked him.

Luke Rayne

My phone vibrates letting me know I have five minutes so I wrap up the class. Perses comes in just as the men are standing. “Brother, how was your class?”

He chuffs, wagging his tail before he sits. Hitting his watch, he throws up, ‘Good. Trainees Shoot Fast.’

I smile, bending for my bag. “Did they move up?”

‘Eight Level Up. One Two Level.’ His board tells me.

“Impressive, Brother. I’ll see about scheduling you to the other trainee class for Maiyun’s therapy. You’re more effective at the pop ups and Hogan’s Alley.”

“He trains to get us faster?”

I nod to Perses, ‘Affirmative’ and turn to the FBI trainee. “Yeah.”

Turning back, I tell Perses, “Get to Maiyun before she starts hunting for me. I’ll be right there. Your room is done at the Protector compound and our clothes are there.”

He chuffs and shows me a skeleton and question mark.

“The bed skeleton is coming with us but she doesn’t have therapy tomorrow. I’ll send for the water skeleton if we stay longer.”

He chuffs and runs.

Some of the men laugh. “What’s a skeleton?”

“Exoskeleton. She’s paralyzed from the chest down but has sensors in her back and can walk with the skeleton.”

“I’ve heard of that. How does the dog know?”

I move them along so I can get out of here. “He’s her service dog and Security. He’s a Delta Training Commander from Brazil.”

“Like the Ops dogs. What’s that Marine one? He’s got like every commendation.”

A man in the back says, “Zeus. I saw him here.”

I nod. “He’s Maiyun’s buddy. Today he was training Perses on his boards. That’s how they talk to us. I need to go. Ops was a rescue today and my ol’ lady worked with the woman we rescued.”

‘I hope it’s all good’, a slew of ‘shit, fuckin’ crazy’ and ‘Jesus’ follows me down the hall.

Maiyun comes toward me with her Security and Perses in tow. I love when she’s smiling, which is almost always. “Perses said we’re packed and ready.”

“We are, sweet Em.”

“You’re paralyzed?” Comes from behind me.

Perses jumps with a bark pushing the idiot away.

I turn giving the trainees a look and they move back. “Perses is right, stay away from my ol’ lady. I may not be so gentle.”

Maiyun laughs.

Putting my hand out, I walk her to the chopper. “Your chair is on the chopper and there’s one at the medic building if you need it.”

“Thanks, Carmen called, they have one on the compound so Security doesn’t have to keep lugging it around.” She’s disgusted by it. That’s a good point but not going to cover her when she’s

tired while we're out.

"We're going to Phoenix first. We can bring the chair or I can carry you when you get tired." I smile at the look that gets knowing damn well she doesn't want to be carried through Clubs.

"Fine. Phoenix is too big for me to walk. I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever get strong enough to walk without a chair following me around. If I won't, any freedom from the chair would mean more and I wouldn't keep thinking I won't need it. I hate that there are chairs everywhere. One should be enough."

I remember her annoyance with entitlement, sloth and avarice. "We'll see Alder at the medic center, I'm sure. We can ask and know to bring your chair everywhere like Tyson does. It's not a problem to bring it along. I'll send the one at the Protector compound back. The one at the medic center is always there."

"Thank you. There is just too much of too much in my life lately. Thinking I won't need it has me expecting to not need it. *I'm* too much with feeling entitled to not need it. I avoid people like me."

I laugh and pull her closer. She trips so I lift her up, kiss her lips and suspend us into the chopper. "I love my girl with an aversion to entitlement, sloth and avarice. You're not any of them, but I can see how not knowing what to expect may feel like it. This is new for Alder so he may not know the answer you're looking for."

"Damn, you're right. I'll just have to suck it up and show my warrior woman. My whining won't solve anything." She's too much alright.

I kiss her lips and sit her in a seat. "Love you, baby. I don't hear a whine but love that you're watching out for that."

"You're not flying?"

"Not today. I have a report to go over and send before we hit Phoenix."

She nods looking around.

"Ma'am." Vane holds her bag out.

"Thanks, Vane. I didn't see where you went. Do you stand the whole flight?" She's curious about everything.

"No, ma'am. We stand until we're in the air and just before we set down."

My girl nods. "I'm glad you get to sit too." She pulls her tablet out and swipes it on. Vane steps back to the door.

Pulling my laptop out, I get to work. Cort is waiting for this report.

Fifteen minutes is all it takes before I hit send. I check on my girl and smile. She's reading the Bible again. I like that it's important to her. Since she's busy, I check email. Cort wants the report. The next is Cort asking for thoughts on a Head for Elite that could work for Harky. I'm surprised. I thought Harky was doing fine as Head of Elite. I send back that I'll be at Phoenix in thirty and have questions. Next is Joshua. Rayne said to present his idea to Baxters at the meet tonight. I'm glad he's going for it. Other than normal questions, all that's left is an FBI email forwarded from Ford. "What the fuck?" The Director is asking for names of Brothers qualified to run for me? Where the fuck do they think I'm going? I like training and Ops here. Looking for Justice on tracking, I see him moving too fast for him not to be in a chopper. I'll wait.

I stow my laptop wondering what the fuck is going on.

"Is everything okay?"

My girl surprises me. "Yeah."

She watches my eyes. "Something isn't."

"The Director asked for names of Brothers to replace me."

She doesn't react or answer.

"I'm surprised. I like training and we're running more Ops lately. I haven't heard any complaints." I think that's what's bugging me.

"Everyone says you're a good Commander. Maybe they have a position you'd fill that no one else can."

I realize where we are and nod. "We can talk about it later."

She looks around and nods back understanding.

What position is out there that anyone else can't do? I have some impressive Brothers surrounding me.

Putting it aside, I think about the report I just sent. Cort needs to get more IT techs and Controls in here for the Ops we're running in order to keep it all going. We're still running short.

At Phoenix, I leave Maiyun with Lisa in the lobby and head up to Ops.

"He's in his meeting room. Justice just got in with Alder," Raid tells me so I turn around and head back down to the Officers floor.

Justice and Alder are here plays through my head. This is a BSC meet? Cooper and Spano are walking toward the stairs at the front. What is going on?

'Changes to BSC/FBI Ops, Brother. It's all good.' Justice has me relieved before I even get to the door.

Nova opens the door smiling. "I was told you might be here."

Smiling, I walk through. "I didn't know we had a BSC meet. I thought I was meeting with Cort."

"You are, Commander." Harky has me turning.

I see no concern in anyone so I throw chin to the Brothers and sit.

'Why are you concerned?' Justice asks in my head.

'FBI email asking about Brothers to replace me and Harky needing someone to work for him.'

Cort walks in so I stand and throw him chin.

'That's why we're here.'

I throw chin to Justice.

"Brothers, I'm glad you all made it. Hannah and Mase will be on the boards." Cort nods to Brinks and he moves to the computer pulling up the Brothers.

"So, I need someone in Ops that can run when I'm out or busy. Everyone came back with your name, Luke Rayne. You know FBI and Badass. You're an Ops Lead, Flight Lead, pilot for Ops and were a Lead for an MC ground team. You're freaky and can connect or talk for the freaky. Did I miss anything, Brothers?"

Mase smiles at me. "He's always calm no matter what's happening and can cook?"

I laugh at the crazy Brother.

Justice keeps us going. "He's a trainer that grew up Badass and can cover both me and Teller when we need him. The only other sub we have is Aylen and she's no longer an option. Teller isn't flying full-time but he's been up twice this week and I need a fuckin' break."

So I'm flying?

"I wanted him for Elite," Harky says, surprising the hell out of me.

"Wait, you want me here as a second to you and on Ops?"

"No, I want you heading FBI Ops Controls and flying for Justice or Teller one day a week. We need a trainer at the Training Center to cover him on Flight Training and a Commander to replace you before my ol' lady replaces me. There isn't another Brother that knows FBI besides Cooper and he doesn't fly, doesn't run Flight Ops and said fuck no to heading FBI Ops."

Heading FBI Ops? "All FBI Ops?"

"Yeah, I'll keep my Ops shifts and you run it. The government is fuckin' crazy. I'm not dealing with their drama. You get Kaleb and can read those other dickasses enough to shut them up. Ben is the only reason I haven't pulled us out of their fuckin' drama." He's ready to hit someone. Justice throws calm out so I try it.

I stand and hope that calm works. "I hear you and think I'd be honored to run Ops for us and even take the day a week for Justice or Teller. I have questions but think I need to say this first. Without FBI Ops running, we have over three hundred trainees between Harky, the FBI/Badass Training Center and Hemy's new Quantico Center. That's one round of training for eight weeks on military and three months on Badass/FBI. If we pull out now, we fuck with Clubs across the country. That doesn't include Phoenix training. Where are all those trainees going if not to cover Clubs who are covering FBI?"

Justice stands fast. "He's right, Boss. We don't have enough Club positions to move Brothers today. Everyone in training will be screwed."

Cort relaxes and nods. "Thanks for the calm. Is Teller helping?"

Justice points to me. Cort throws me chin and paces. Alder stands up. "Pres Cort, Boss Luke Rayne, Pres Justice right. Government not easy. Boss Luke Rayne qualify and honor to head FBI Ops, help schedule to Pres Justice, VP Teller. You have answer."

Holy shit. Cort turns and throws chin to Alder. "I know he's right and still feel trapped. Being in bed with the dicktwats that can't oversee their own military and departments isn't sitting well."

I get it and stand. "I don't have a problem dealing with them. Kaleb does the work so I don't have to do more than show we're educated Brothers. Slapping them down by showing they aren't educated as well as we are, is all Kaleb ever looks for."

He nods. "I didn't realize you had a system worked out."

"I grew up with Kaleb on the Baxter compound, Boss, it's just that I know him, I don't think we've ever talked about it. He says to show them and I do. He never says what or how." I sit and watch.

Cort looks at Justice getting a nod. "That's how he's got the IT. Joshua is the same. He wasn't military, but with Baxters, he might as well be."

I look for why Joshua is named here. "Holy fuck. He's talking to Baxters tonight."

Justice nods. "All but International are MC-Baxters. With Badass doing more International, Baxters is stepping back. Joshua knows IT. Dillon will move to the Training Center with him to run it like a Club with all the same paperwork. Saber is all for it and wants changes made before anyone can fuck with oversight shit again. Since Rayne thinks moving Joshua out of the country is redundant to what BSC is doing, the Baxters agreed."

Joshua is going to love this. I shake my head smiling. "Where am I moving?"

“ABSZ, Bravo, Phoenix...” Alder starts a list.

“Wherever gets you to work running the crazy fuck’s mess.” Cort finishes.

I nod. “I’d be honored, Boss.” I look at Harky. “Sorry, Brother. I think I’m needed here but would have loved Elite.”

“No. He needs a paper pusher. Ben has two he’s sending that worked international. You’re here dealing with the dickasses.” Cort isn’t asking if I want to be here, he’s telling me I’m here.

I nod clamping my jaw tight. Mase, Brinks, Nova and Hannah laugh. He’s fuckin’ funny but the Senators know me and Generals I’ve met respect the jobs Ford and I do. It will be seen as a smart move that was made to appease their oversight shit.

‘Don’t mention that but you’re right.’

I throw chin to Justice.

“Where do you want to live? We can put a house on any Club compound and build you an Op room but your girl is under a threat. They were questioning the girl we just got out about Ember Faye. The girl doesn’t know the Maiyun name. Wherever you land, she needs cover, so I need to get her team’s houses or rooms.” Cort is getting her teams housed? It dawns on me he would. He’s like me or any other President.

“I need to ask her. My preference would be here or ABSZ. I can work right from Ops there and she’d be covered without needing more teams on the ABSZ. We run two-man teams on base and her off-compound team.”

Justice fist pumps. Mase yells. “No, come to Honor! We’ve got a house, Ops and plenty of Security.”

“Alpha, Stella loves her and we’re covered.” Brinks puts his hand out.

Cort puts his hand up. “Stop! He’s asking her and wants to come here, so she’ll be here.”

“Zeus will be heartbroken.” Harky throws out.

Zeus barks, making me laugh. “I’m asking her and will let you know. When is this move planned for?”

Cort looks surprised. Not a normal look for him. “Tomorrow.” He’s crazy.

“Tomorrow? Ford has too many trainees to run alone and no one on flight. He doesn’t fly.”

“You train flight?” Now Nova is surprised?

“Yeah, Brother. He does chopper, Officer training, Badass and training military. Joshua knows Flight but we have a Brother from Bravo that can handle it.” Justice answers so I watch, wondering where Maiyun wants to live.

Dismissed, is Cort walking out as Brinks tries again for us to move to Alpha. I push to my girl and Lisa in the lobby and smile when I see Cort coming down the stairs.

He shakes his head at me but talks directly to Maiyun.

“The girl coming here said they were questioning her about your location. The threat on you has not ended and I need you covered. Luke Rayne said he prefers here or ABSZ. Do either of those places work for you?”

She looks from Cort to me. “I’ll live here and you work like Ford, going back and forth?”

“No, sweet Em.” I’m relieved when Cort steps back. “I’ll be working all FBI Ops and can live at any Club. There’s an Op Center right on ABSZ so they won’t have to build another, so here or ABSZ works for me.”

“They’d just build another building?” She looks like the excessive building hurts her personally.

I nod. “I told you they were crazy. Where do you want to live?” I know she won’t want excess and all this sounds like excess.

“We already have a house on the ABSZ. Can we live in it?”

I nod. “We can.”

“Told you,” Justice says, taking money from Nova.

She watches, noticing Alder. “This is the Brother crazy you told me about?”

He nods but doesn’t say more. She turns to Cort. “You said the ABSZ works for you.”

He nods with his politician smile on. “It’s covered in security, so yeah. Between Alder and the Clubs surrounding us, we can keep you covered. That doesn’t mean you’re not free to go to any Club but you’re not in fuckin’ Nevada.” He’s getting pissed again and I feel Justice throwing calm. It must be a full-time job keeping Cort calm.

Justice laughs. “Especially with FBI Ops, Brother. You can help.”

“I’d be honored. So, we’re moving to the Protector Compound tonight. My new job starts tomorrow and Joshua is moving down.”

“Do you do this often?” Maiyun has surprise in those big, beautiful, blue-gray eyes.

Everyone laughs, Lisa takes her hand. “No, but Cort does. Luke Rayne has his house on Baxters compound and the Protector compound. He just takes rooms everywhere they send us. I told you it’s nuts here but it’s safe and you’ll have women close.”

My girl smiles. “The Alpha-Bits, tribe and bakery are on the ABSZ and everyone is closer.”

Lisa laughs. I nod to Cort. We’re all set. Justice and Alder are gone but the Brothers go by slapping my back. They’re happy for me and think Maiyun will love it here.

Perses barks, stopping everyone. Cort steps closer to him and nods. “You can still train. We have the dogs running with Security, every tier of training and Flight. What do you want to do?”

I hold my laugh in watching shock hit my girl’s face. Cort isn’t paying attention. “Yeah, Piper does Security training for the dogs. She’d probably like you taking some of that travel from her. They don’t get the kill...”

Harky comes back from the door. “He trained Security dogs, Boss. He can do maintenance.”

Cort nods, turning back to Perses like he’s a person. “Get with Piper and get her schedule for maintenance. I’ll get you the day Luke Rayne is flying, you’re with Maiyun those days.”

‘Roger, Command Ops’ shows making me smile. He’s a respectful dog. Cort turns, then turns right back. “Do you run Ops?”

“No.” Harky isn’t playing. “We have enough Ops dogs and he’s meant for Maiyun. Let him do the three jobs he has without adding more on his plate.”

Cort looks let down. “I was just asking.”

Harky nods. “He’s a trainer, let him train, be Maiyun’s Security and service dog.”

Cort walks away disgusted like there may be another minute to schedule for the poor K-9 Brother. Everyone is trying to cover their laughter.

“Good job, Harky. Congrats, Luke Rayne. I’m glad you’re closer. Harky needs help keeping Cort in check.” Jinx slaps my back walking out.

Harky shrugs and walks out with Zeus. My life is crazy. Lisa and Maiyun are at the bike display

talking.

I wait for Maiyun, surprised when Brinks steps closer. "I thought you left."

"Stella is on ABSZ all the time. I think this is safer for Maiyun. I was watching the rescue and heard Alder have Mikey pull files. Ember Faye is one of them. Cort needs you but Alder and Justice think she needs to be closer, cementing you closer."

Fuck. "Justice didn't say but I feel the pull to be closer."

"He isn't able to tell you everything he sees. You know better than I do how that works."

I nod but fuck. "So, the job is to cover her?" I know Cort wasn't hiding anything from me.

"No. The job is because Saber is making changes that get him more Ops units faster. Cort met with them yesterday and Saber said BSC can't keep stealing the dogs. Don't ever say Cort can't do something. Today the Op for the girl was bumped up on the schedule. That's why Mikey was even there. The Prince Protectors are running nonstop. Cort knows it's going to burn them out and needs someone running for the government while he does all the shit they say he can't do."

I smile at that. "Without burning the Protectors out. I get it. Thanks for telling me. He left without answering my questions."

"You get a bump in pay because FBI don't make shit but he had to match Ford's pay, anything you want, Maiyun is covered and you're closer to your Brothers." He ticks that all off on his fingers.

"I'm heading FBI Ops. Cooper and Kristos are the go-tos now, am I getting an objective, job description, some kind of directions?"

He smiles. "Bet you will tomorrow. Just show up at the Ops Center. Cort or Alder will show, email or chat links over. This just happened but Cort doesn't waste time so he'll have answers when you show. Don't drag it out or he'll find a way to punish you. Be clear and only ask what you need to know. Read everything else and ask Brothers that would have your answers."

I nod. "I can do that. We do it now."

"Let me know if I can help and congratulations, Brother." He hugs me and walks away.

This is good. I hope. I'd like to see the job before I show up for it but I've been running FBI Ops right along. Maiyun moves my way with a smile. Lisa waves heading up the stairs.

"All set, Sweet Em?" I love the smile.

"Yes. The teams are Nomads from Phoenix except Owens' team, they're from Bravo."

Lisa checked? "Besides the cut on them, how would you know that?"

"They need places to live too. Lisa said only Protectors live on that compound. There's no security house there because you're all Protectors."

I smile at the logic. "Yeah. Security has housing at the Bravo Club or Alder and Webs compounds. I know some Brothers took houses in the little towns they have. The Brothers have choices just like us."

"Lisa said they're moving, I didn't poll them, I just asked how it works. I'm glad I don't have to change to people I don't know."

I bend and kiss her. "I'm glad you like your Security. Let's get dinner before the plane lands. Do you have a preference? We're closer to Phoenix than Bravo."

"Are there restaurants close?"

"Here in Phoenix or on the ABSZ?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "Pick somewhere. I'm hungry and don't have any snacks."

Turning her, I start walking. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll remember to carry snacks.”

She hits my stomach with her skeleton covered arm. “Ooh, sorry, but I’m not asking for you to carry snacks. I just want to eat before the plane gets here. I don’t know where anything is.”

Shit. “I should have given you a rundown on what’s close. I’m new at the ol’ lady thing.”

My girl gives me a smile when I lift her in the SUV. “Me too.” She pecks my lips and calls for Perses.

It could be worse but I did get a kiss. Perses doesn’t get anything but a smile.

Maiyun

On the drive to the medic center I watch the different sections before the IT building. That's where Luke Rayne will be working. He's worried about not knowing what Cort wants from him but the big guy has people moving in one night. I'm sure he's got the job worked out. I think it's a better job and he's closer to his family. I like the ABSZ too. Carmen and Chenoa live here, Reggie is closer, the tribe is near Bravo and Alder lives close to the Protectors. I didn't tell him but the bakery is right here too, that's a big plus in my book, they have the little cupcakes.

He closes his laptop and turns. "Joshua will be here early tomorrow morning. He's staying at Bravo in the BSC section.

This unbelievable just keeps getting better. "I hope I get a new office. Joshua will have the virtual room on the base, he's helping me with the Bible so I'm not always wondering what everything means."

"If I know Alder, it's already done somewhere. Why don't you just ask me?"

When? I guess he could but we're already so busy. I like our sitting times without him having to explain everything to me. "It's going to be our thing. He'll teach me and you show me."

He laughs hugging me. "Good. He'll need to remember those lessons and reasons dealing with trainees. Thank you for including him. Joshua is a cool brother when he's not acting like an ass."

"I like him and he called me his sister. I never had siblings. Your unbelievable is a good place to fall into. I even got Perses and Zeus in the deal."

Perses chuffs making me smile.

Luke Rayne points. "They're here." A truck is in front of the medic building. "That's Patchers ambulance."

Ambulance. I've heard of that and look for it. "It's a rescue vehicle like we rode in?"

He looks confused. "Yes. We call them ambulance."

"You've said ambulance before but I thought I'd figure out what it was later. I didn't look it up." I shrug. This is why Joshua should teach me the Bible.

We walk into people talking and moving fast. I see Teller and relax because that means Chenoa is here.

He turns our way. "She is, Maiyun, but it's too late."

No. "She died?"

"She stopped breathing on the plane. Doc and Mary did all they could. There were no healers with them."

"Fuckin' hell. I'm sorry, baby." Luke Rayne lifts me in a hug.

She's gone. She didn't get the chance to live. "Where does her family live? She spoke Arabic."

He sets me down and holds my face. "They had files, we can find out." He looks at Teller, then closes his eyes. "She was a slave. She spoke Cheyenne but was told to speak Arabic always or she'd go back to being a slave."

What? "She was Cheyenne?" We can celebrate her life. She was a slave so it wasn't much of a life but we can make sure she knows we're celebrating her changing worlds. "It is written, '*There is no death, only a change of worlds.*' We can celebrate that."

Luke Rayne kisses my head. "We can give her that tonight at the reservation, sweet Em."

My arm is pulled so I turn and get hugged by Mucimi. “*They are not dead, who live in the heart they leave behind.* I read that in one of your books. She had you in her heart and hoped you’d remember her.”

“Always. Thank you, Mucimi. I’ll never forget to remember.”

“Let’s go home. They don’t need us in their way.” Teller turns me for a hug, then Chenoa hugs me.

Luke Rayne lifts me up and carries me out but I don’t complain. It’s a moment in my life that I’ll smile about because he cares enough to do it.

Luke Rayne

Of all the shitty unfortunate things to happen, my girl is hit with another loss. Teller says she's fine but it's Chenoa that settles me. She thinks celebrating the passing to the ancestor world is a better place for Tati. Since Teller threw me she was a slave, I can see the reason. Sweet Em has a heaviness, like getting her mom's things and celebrating her family passing, but she's not crying or even angry. I think I'd be pissed. A day sooner and she'd have been here with us tonight.

Justice sits beside me. "It wasn't meant to be, Brother. They injected shit in her. She wasn't stopped from speaking Cheyenne, she lost it. Alder is still at the lab. He thinks he knows and wants proof but it doesn't matter. Phoenix and Billy are working on the files. They'll find what we need on Maiyun. The rest are dead."

Jesus. "Maiyun is settled. She knows?"

"She does and she is settled with it. Kateri, Mikey and Stella being close are a help. They're in a better place surrounded by ancestors. It's done and we can't change it. Maiyun wouldn't change it if she could. It's more than they've had in years and the girl was a slave."

I breathe deep. That's true. I nod, my girl gets all this better than I do and has her girls close. I need her to teach me Indian.

Justice hits my leg. "I'm not doing so bad, Brother."

"No. She got it right away. I'm just now understanding what she knew at the medic center."

"Yeah. Let's jump the cliff." He pulls me without waiting for an answer. I must need it. My sweet Em is still at the circle with her girls, Teller and Mucimi.

"The babies sleeping?"

"Yeah, we have new babysitters with you here."

I laugh going right over the edge.

Epilogue

One week

ABSZ

Luke Rayne

When Cort shows on my board, my mind goes right to my sweet Em. She's a couple acres away from this building in her new office. Alder even built Perses a K-9 training area for maintenance. He said it's so the Security dogs have training away from their houses like the other Brothers. Since Asa had his horse in a house before the stable was built, I just nodded not wanting to encourage whatever wrong he sees with dogs having a training area close to their igloos.

Shaking that out of my head, I watch the Op Kristos is running. His teams are trained well, which surprised me because they were staying at Clubs around the country, so they're not on long flights to locations daily. Harky's teams are doing the same, but I'd expect that from the Brother that's training elite. Kristos was a good surprise.

Thinking about that, the Presidents are all good surprises, maybe it's Kristos' age and look that has me surprised. Considering I'm the one the FBI always found so young, I guess it's a bit hypocritical. Seeing the Presidents all in my head like a slideshow, I can understand the Senators reluctance to let the oversight go. Our Brothers may be young, but they're fuckin' good at their job and know how to get answers quick when they're in need.

I smile at Joshua telling Anakin to cuff a walk-in fridge closed, that the dick he was looking for hid in, so they could finish the job without hearing him whine about being innocent.

Cort is settled and turns toward me. "Anything I need before I start the Protectors?"

"No, Boss. They still like the new set up. Marks is on next and everyone will be starting new for his shift."

He smiles that politician smile. "You didn't mention the dickass from Washington."

I nod keeping my face serious but I'm pissed. "He isn't worth mentioning. I said two sentences and Kaleb shut him down."

He smiles right out. "I like this new setup too. Good job, Brother." He points at his boards. "Marks is up. I'll see you at dinner."

Why? "Dinner?"

"You're at Phoenix for dinner."

When the fuck was that decided? "Roger, Boss. You have a time?"

"Seven. Don't be late." He turns, answering Raid.

"Roger, Boss." I don't look in to see why we have a dinner at seven in Phoenix because, being

this close to Cort, I just don't want to know. The Brother is crazy.

Marks steps closer. "I'm up, Brother. This change over will run like clockwork. I'll ask how you got them all ending together later, that will help with the schedule. Brekan had a question about the Senators calling in. I told him they wouldn't be calling anyone but Saber, you, Ford or Joshua."

I nod. "That was right, Marks. I threw to Kaleb that I'd talk to him when my shift is done and I will. He's having fun with them but I'm not getting distracted by their stupid shit regularly. I'll stop it before he has them all calling us."

He finds this funny. "Good luck with that. Ginny said Kaleb is a different kind of crazy but he's crazy."

Ginny knows. "She's not wrong, Brother. Cooper's team is in so you're starting fresh. Watch LA and Seattle. They have protests that have PD but they're both bigger than expected."

He looks at the map and nods. "We have teams close. Thanks."

"If you're up, I'm out."

"See you tonight. I got all my rooms up." He throws chin looking at his boards. He'll see me tonight?

I see his board fade and look around my room. Cooper is just turning my way. "They're down, Luke Rayne."

"That team ran fast today. Let them know I appreciate them working the two jobs."

He nods. "I'll pass it on, they're back here tonight so that will be in person."

I smile, glad they're getting time off because they ran like machines today. "I bet that played a part."

"Yeah, they've been out for a week. They like the new schedule. Protector Ops for the Clubs every other week gets them all a chance to see home. They love it."

"So do I, Brother."

He throws chin and closes me down.

I bend and breathe. I wasn't sure if this would work. A week of Brothers based out of FBI Ops Units costs the FBI nothing but food, gets the Brothers out of Clubs that aren't BSC and they're able to respond quicker. We had two Brothers that couldn't make it in the FBI buildings but Ford got me replacements right away. Cort likes the two on his Protector Ops so it worked out.

"Luke Rayne," Kaleb singsongs.

I straighten up fast. "The first week is done and you're a dick. The more calls you send through sets a precedence. That stops today, Brother. Your moronic Senators are yours to educate. Do your job and stop dragging me into it. I took a job running FBI Ops not educating the fuckin' senate."

He laughs, turning his view to the room. "You're still a dick, Kaleb. Prez, Brothers." I throw chin and acknowledgment out to Prez, Ricky, Rich, Devan, Brantley, Christian, Dakota, Jessie, Justice, Jacob, Aaron, Hemy and Joshua who are all smiling. He's really a dick for putting me out there.

"Good job, Luke Rayne. You're right, Kaleb should be answering those questions or bringing them to us in a formal meeting."

I nod. "They aren't going to want an audience, while being schooled by bikers, so that will stop."

Kaleb looks dejected. "They're just questions."

I shake my head at him. Prez nods to me. "No, they're not. The precedence tells every member

of the senate that they have a right to question FBI and Badass procedure and protocol. The Badass I grew up in does not explain shit to anyone. We do, we don't explain."

"Fuckin' shit. Sorry, Brother. I'll stop calling for them or call a meet."

I nod. "You call that meet with Prez and Saber. I'm not a fuckin' lapdog."

Jared laughs. "The 'rents are finally retiring. He's looking for some fun before they show at his house."

Prez shakes his head. "Meets will go back to being set up through Saber and Luke Rayne isn't taking a handler job for Aaron. Brothers, this week with the changes and new schedule ran easy. What do you think, Hemy, Aaron?"

"It was easy and while we aren't spread like the west, we did use the Units down south. The Brothers like the schedule and the air-conditioned buildings." Aaron has me smiling. I bet Alabama with air is a damn sight better than no air.

Prez takes a minute to answer. "Clubs with no air would be a problem for me to sleep at too, Brother." He turns my way. "Justice said the schedule is running well and the Brothers are happy there too."

I nod. "Yeah, Prez. Cort is happy he's not dragged into Kaleb's calls and likes running Protectors for the west better than FBI. We have the Presidents and they spent a week showing us what they can do with the teams we have. It's been good and like you said, easy."

He nods. "Moving teams to the FBI Units works for Saber. His men are stepping up and training on their off time. He's using our Control feeds for his Ops room training. Is there anything you'd change after seeing the way this week played out?"

"No, Prez. The Brothers mentioned the FBI calling out no specific jobs but that stopped before the week was through. Presidents and Brothers like the way it works and I'm ignoring critiques from men who can't do their jobs."

He smiles. "Brekan mentioned that. What are the specific jobs?"

Hemy lists them starting at breacher like he's bored. Aaron and Jared laugh. When he's done, I wait for Prez.

"I don't see us needing all that. Saber will change it and bring costs down." He throws out like it's not his to deal with and takes a minute to collect thoughts from his Brothers. "A week of new with no complaints works for me. Does anyone have anything they'd change to be considered here?" Prez is a smart Brother and I'm glad he said *to be considered*. The west has the biggest area and population, so changing what works needs consideration.

No one has anything so I relax.

Prez smiles at me. "This was an easy fix no one saw and works well, Brother. Kaleb will direct calls to Saber. Is there anything you need to keep this going?"

"No, Prez. Joshua stepped in seamlessly and Ford loves having Dillon running the IT like the Clubs. There wasn't a problem before but having one Brother heading that runs smoother. We all can do IT but we're not IT. Ford had to call Web for training every time something new came up."

He smiles. "I'm glad he's there. Saber changed his stance on the IT and is looking to implement it into the FBI. With Cort settled there, I've noticed Cort is focusing on the Clubs again. Do you need an assistant for your times on Protector Ops?"

Justice sits straighter so I nod to him that I got it. "No, Prez. I spent the first day getting everything set up and men moved. This week I've run four-hour shifts and one Op flying. I've had

plenty of time to get feedback and read the reports coming in. The reports are the same as we were getting before the changes so it's not adding to my day. Bradenton and Brantley keep New England and South the same as we have so it's less than an hour a day. Saber and the Presidents haven't had a complaint and I have the time to train at Phoenix. Cort has me on the virtual classes for Officer and Badass so I'm only on Flight."

"Good. He has a habit of overloading Brothers."

Justice laughs. "He gets everyone assistants. With FBI streamlined into Badass, that will let up, Prez. Cort is settled and it took no time and little effort."

Prez nods. "I'll take it. Let me know if you need help, Brother."

"I will, Prez."

He turns to Joshua. "No problems with the move?" Prez is smiling and knows Joshua is happy with the move,

"No, Prez. I like adding the training to my days and love the pace. I didn't know I'd be so busy on a base but it's a good busy."

Prez nods. "We should have done this a year ago. You fell perfect when we needed you. Thanks for that, Brother. Does anyone have anything?"

"Rich stands and Jessie pushes him down and stands. "We're honored you both stepped up and offer anything you need. I speak for all of us." He gives a look around the table.

Joshua looks down. I smile right out. "Thanks, Jessie. We're honored to be asked and will call if we need that hand. I speak for both of us."

Prez laughs. "Good job, Brothers. Keep being fuckin' Badass." He nods and the board turns black.

Justice shows not thirty seconds later. "Virtual meet." He smiles. Their technology is getting really good. He nods. "Yeah, so with the schedule and Ops running right, I'm able to do the Flight at the training center."

I shake my head at him. "We had Nash on for four hours three times this week making sure the Brother is a good fit. He is. You've got Protectors coming in that need you and Teller available. Use the time for Protectors, Flight is handled."

"I can do both."

"I bet you can. How often are your kids seeing you while you can? This wasn't just about the FBI fuckin' with the Club. Every Protector needed an easier schedule, including you and Teller. Cort wanted a way to get you help. Take the help, see your kids grow up and brace for whatever fuckin' new they come up with next. We don't need you training Flight, if you want to fly, take the family somewhere."

He hugs me. "I will. Thanks, Luke Rayne. I didn't see that."

Mucimi shows and hugs us both kissing our heads.

I laugh when he's gone a second later. "Mucimi is getting stronger. I guess it was a surprise."

Justice is gone but I hear him laughing. My life is crazy. With that thought, I push and lean into my girl typing at her book table.

"Damn. I need to finish this page and I'm done." She doesn't stop typing so I step back, hit the jammer on the room and look at Perses schedule. He's with Maiyun in less than an hour. While I wait, I look at her new office. She's got virtual the same as the base but now Perses has an area for his own board. She says it's for training with Zeus but I saw him throwing pictures and words to Apollo at

Adroit yesterday.

“Done.”

That gets me right behind her again. Leaning, I kiss her neck and take the book. “On the shelf?” I look at the front. It’s not one I’ve seen.

“The cabinet, sixth book in.” Of course, she knows right where she wants it.

I picture it there and it’s gone. “Sixth book in. How was your day, Sweet Em?”

“Busy, but I got everything done. The virtual going to the tribes gets more questions but Amal got them all going on sheets for me to answer when I’m not busy. I like how the form separates them by tribe. Stella and Natalia started sending questions like Alder. I think Stella gets a question that turns into seven. She’s going to keep me busy.”

I smile, turning her and lift her onto the table. “Her brain never shuts off. Brinks and Jordan started using the sheets for her ideas to calm her. Your meet with Co?”

Her eyes shine brighter. “He sent Mase and someone from his tribe to get me more books to upload. These will be from Sioux.”

“They’ll keep you working for life if they’re gathering tribal books.”

She laughs. “I know.”

I kiss her smile only moving to lift her shirts off her. “The door.”

“I shielded the building.” My mouth travels down until her hands pull me up.

“Tell me you aren’t here just for a quick girl check.”

Kissing her lips, I move her fast so she’s facing her table and feet are on the floor. “No, sweet Em. I feel the ancestors and haven’t even slid in. I love the skirt.” Her panties drop on the side of the table.

“Ooh, I like when they pull us there. Everything feels different.”

“Hard and rough only happens there. I’m all for it.” I slide in feeling the pull. “Hold on, beautiful.”

Sitting on the rock she burrows closer. “I love you and how you give me time to think straight before moving me on.”

My arm tightens around her. “Love you too, sweet Em, that’s why I give us time to think before moving *us* on. I like holding you close, even if you’ve got clothes on.”

She giggles. “It’s a little obscene to be laying around naked.”

I don’t agree but keep that. “You once said something about not feeling whole. Do you still feel that way?”

She takes a minute to answer, that isn’t playing well in my head. “That was the week before last. I guess at the time I didn’t understand how you felt. You’ve never done anything that makes me feel less so I don’t feel less. While my mind took time to get that, you didn’t need it and have been the

same since I met you.”

I’m so fuckin’ relieved. “It’s been on my mind since you said it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t ask me that day, I didn’t have it worked out.” She’s cute.

I kiss her head. “I am too. I never want you feeling less. You’re everything and the perfect other half to me. If I fuck up tell me so I can fix it.”

She sits up and turns toward me with her smile in place. “I will but that’s not today and we need to get back for Perses. I have to stop at the greenhouse today. We have a new thing to try tonight.”

I kiss her seeing grapefruit in her head. “We have dinner at seven in Phoenix.”

She nods. “Okay after that, but it’s tonight.”

I don’t get the excitement over a grapefruit but nod and jump back.

We spend a half hour with Security dogs so Maiyun can see where they live, an hour with the tribe and another hour at the bakery and greenhouses. I’m glad when my girl is done. The kitchen is packed with chatter and I’m looking for why.

Fuckin’ Cort. I park behind our pod so we’re not walking through the excited Brothers, but I’m smiling at Perses new section, stuck like a big bubble to the older pod. It has a paw print window just above the dog door.

“What’s going on?”

“They’re all going to the dinner at Phoenix. Some are going early for games and shit. It’s a party not really a dinner. Cort is crazy.”

She nods. “You keep saying that.”

I usher her in and smile because I do. “Yeah. What the fuck?” Bags and packages are all around the small living room. “They’re all fuckin’ crazy.”

“They must be. What’s all this for? There isn’t enough room to put all this.” She points to a set of shelves on the chair. “But I like that and will find a place for it.”

I laugh and lift a shirt. “One heart. This is like the clothes Mase made for the family. Look at this one, sweet Em. It says BSC Commander with the flag above it.”

She smiles. “We should wear them tonight. I like the flame on mine.”

I got a shirt with just Prince BSC on it at the wedding. This is better, mine.

She holds up a chain with a gold compass. “This is like Mucimi’s chain. There’s a charm with your name. It’s the same but a little smaller. Do you want this one?”

“No, beautiful, it’s yours because you have a connection to the spirits. The charm gets added to my chain. It’s part of me but not what defines me.” I show her the chain with the tomahawk, feathers and motorcycle. “I’ll add it.” Closing my eyes, I do and get her necklace on her.

She laughs. “I love the freaky.”

I smile at her easy use of the words. “Me too. I’d put all this away but think we need to see it. Let’s get changed. We can deal with this tomorrow when we’re both off.”

She nods, closing her eyes while holding her arms up. “Do your thing.”

Seeing her in new breeches and the ‘spark’ flame shirt has me smiling. I switch her shoes to the moccasins Stella had made with the solid bottom. Her necklace is showing so I add some of the jewelry I had made. A twist of gold and her blue stones go up from her wrist like a snake.

She giggles looking at her hand and smiles up at me. “This matches perfect. The one that goes

on my ear would match.”

I hold out my hand. “I don’t know how it goes on.”

She takes it and does the clip thing so it sits at the top edge of her ear going down. “Thank you.” Leaning to the couch she lifts my clothes. “Your turn.”

I get the shirt on. “I never wore breeches.”

She shakes them out and smiles. “They look like your utility pants but they’re way softer.” They do.

I try them out. “They feel lighter.”

She points. “Your boots go with them. How do you get pants on without taking off your boots?”

Good question. “I don’t know.” That clarity still isn’t with me, I guess.

“Why do we have a thousand presents?”

“The party is a claiming party because we didn’t get one. I don’t know about claiming parties. They always do games and food. Sometimes those parties last for days but we don’t have to stay. I think it’s a Cort thing.”

Her eyebrows hide. “Cort is crazy. We already had a party at the base.”

I nod, glad she sees how crazy he is. “There were no games and food was the grill in the back.”

“That’s not a party? We danced.”

I smile. “Apparently not a Cort party.”

Mucimi shows and we’re all moving. “Cort said you can’t be late.”

Maiyun laughs. “Thanks for the necklace. When we land and I open my eyes, I’ll kiss your head for it.”

Opening my eyes, I’m surprised we’re in front of the Club. “Thanks, Mucimi.”

He kisses Maiyun’s head, then lifts and kisses mine. “You like walking in places.”

I nod. “I do.” I’d have been proud walking in with him but he’s gone so I’m proud walking my girl in. Joshua hugs me first. The building is packed.

Mase lifts me right up. “Put me down, Mase, we already had a party and you were there.”

He laughs, stepping back to kiss Maiyun’s smiling cheek. “It’s a claiming party. I claim you both.”

I shake my head and smile at my dad with Kevin Baxter. “Invitations went out everywhere?”

Joshua moves to my side. “Yeah, Hemy keeps saying he wants a shirt.” He doesn’t understand.

Mase laughs. “Mucimi, get Hemy a shirt.” He turns. “Got it covered.”

“Thanks for the clothes, Mase. Where are the women?” Maiyun is bored with us.

“They were waiting for you to get dressed,” Joshua says.

My girl isn’t having any of it. “I’m dressed in clothes I like and not changing.”

Mikey pulls Nova around us and drops his hand while taking Maiyun’s. “Kiss her goodbye. We’ll be at a table.”

I kiss my girl with the big smile on and she’s floated beside Mikey. Aylene goes by us smiling. “I’ve got her.” She’s in breeches and a cotton shirt. Very cool.

“Blond Indian looks good on her.” Cort has us all turning.

“It does, Boss. Thanks for the party.” He’s in his shirt from Mase and I see a theme here. Mase always dresses like an Indian so I didn’t notice.

I see why. “Oh fuck. Does Prez know?”

Teller's hand is over my mouth. "Aiyana, Dakota, Mucimi, cover that shit!"

Chatter around the room stops and the quiet is noticeable. "Where's Walker?" Prez yells.

Aiyana stops in front of us with a smiling Walker. "You may remove your hand from Luke Rayne's mouth. Walker is ready to claim her."

They're gone and Justice yells, "Throw calm!" as Walker raises his hand up and the building shakes. Christian, Dakota, Jacob and Justice are surrounding Prez, then they're gone.

Holy fuck. I throw more calm.

Cort laughs. "I knew it would work. Martin Luther King said, '*There can be no justice without peace, and there can be no peace without justice.*' I'm adding LJI onto that." He has quotes playing through his head all the time, this was a good one to share.

"I claim Aiyana Walker as my ol' lady!" Walker yells.

The cheer is deafening. I throw chin then move to where Mase is standing by the ol' lady table. Maiyun feels me and turns with a smile so I return it. "The pressure is off of us at least."

She laughs. "You're all crazy."

She's right so I don't answer.

Thanks for reading Luke Rayne and Maiyun's story. The freaky keep getting freakier. I hope you enjoyed this, I have to say they were longwinded and had me frustrated for most of this one. Until the next one, faithful readers...

Please leave a review or hit the stars on your way out,

Thanks,

L.

Acknowledgments

Readers, family and friends, thank you for the support, the encouragement and wellness checks...lol. Its been a hell of a year. This makes book number 61, I think. I'm glad it's out before Christmas.

My beta readers: Pam, Allena, Kande, Sherry H, Sherry P, Maria, Lynne, Ellen, Sandra, Tonya, worked hard to get this back to me amidst life, shopping and sickness. They are simply the best. Ladies, we all wish you heartfelt appreciation, thoughts, prayers and holiday cheer.

Jo-Kat Author Services, thank you for another one, number 61. I never thought I'd make it here, glad you're along for the ride and hope you feel my appreciation for that dedication and loyalty. It's been a long ride, but I'm fun so it isn't all scenery.

Jenny and Anne Marie, I'm honored to include you in here helping keep me mindful of my character's mystical nature and correcting what I miss.

Mel and Christine, who work to keep me in social media, thank you. That dedication, work and commitment is appreciated and never far from my heart even as you live so far away. <3

So, with another down, I wish you all a great Christmas and easier new year to come.

L.

About the Author

L. Ann started with the Baxters and followed that with multiple series and genres. While her books feature paranormal, FBI, ex-military and Badass Bikers, L. Ann is writing about the strong women that these men need in their life to help right the world's wrongs and keep their small part of the world safe. The women are extraordinary, strong and determined to make a difference.

The men fight for right in every book. Yes, they kill people. Yes, the MC shoots at the bad guys' feet to cause them pain. Yes, some throw tampons at each other regularly.

That being said, they do these things while stopping human trafficking and experimentation, bringing their world into legitimate businesses, fighting gangs to keep drugs away from their town and kids, keep women sheltered safely while trying to stop domestic abuse. These are men that don't leave a pack, Team member or Brother behind. They don't treat women as possessions and they don't cheat. Respect takes on an honourable meaning. Women and kids are cherished. Everyone is looked out for and everyone is equal.

L. Ann has made amazing worlds, tackled the taboo subjects and made it easy to imagine living in a world where your protection comes from the vampires, shifters, freaky kids, albinos and orientals, military turned FBI and some Badass Bikers.

With readers writing about rereading the series over and over, she feels like she's told her characters' stories in a way that would make them proud.

Every book will make you laugh, every book will make you angry for the wrong that happens in the world. Every book will make you cry for the pain that a character feels. Every book gives you hope that we may just get it right yet.

Author contact links

Connect via email: l_ann_marie@aol.com

Connect with me on Facebook: [L. Ann Marie Pen Page](#)

Check out my website: <http://www.lannmarie.com>

Check out the YouTube videos: [videos](#)

Other books by L. Ann Marie

The Baxters

She Found Us: myBook.to/baxtersbook1 .99

Our Wife: myBook.to/baxtersbook2

Our Angel: myBook.to/baxtersbook3

Jake: myBook.to/baxtersbook4

Rayne: myBook.to/baxtersbook5

The MC

Knight: myBook.to/mcbook1 .99

LaPonte: myBook.to/mcbook2

LaPonte-Karr: myBook.to/mcbook3

Pres: myBook.to/mcbook4

Blackhawk: myBook.to/mcbook5

Tailley: myBook.to/mcbook6

Callahan: myBook.to/mcbook7

Brighton: myBook.to/mcbook8

Moniz: myBook.to/mcbook9

Ricky: myBook.to/mcbook10

Behind the Scenes: myBook.to/mcbook0

Princes of Prophecy

Prophet Book 1: myBook.to/princesbook1

Reader: Book 2: myBook.to/princesbook2

Leader Book 3: myBook.to/princesbook3

Enforcer Book 4: myBook.to/princesbook4

Coder Book 5: myBook.to/princesbook5

Sniper Book 6: myBook.to/princesbook6

The Protectors

Christian: myBook.to/protectorsbook1

Aiyana: myBook.to/protectorsbook2

Jacob & Jeremy: myBook.to/protectorsbook3

D.C Security: <http://a.co/cSZ36kz>

Stand Alone

Spying Eyes: myBook.to/spyingeyes

The Providence Series

Saber's Vida: myBook.to/providence1

Saber's Porthos: myBook.to/providence2

Saber's D'Artagnan: myBook.to/providence3

Saber's Sombra: myBook.to/providence4

Saber's Aramis: myBook.to/providence5

Saber's Athos: mybook.to/providence6

The Other World Order

Princes' Reward: mybook.to/OWO1

Fated Mates: mybook.to/OWO2

Princes' Pack: mybook.to/OWO3

The BSC Series

Master's Rise: mybook.to/phoenixseries1

Benga's Rise: mybook.to/phoenixseries2

Ranger's Rise: mybook.to/phoenixseries3

Jack: Honour: mybook.to/bravohonour

Falcon: Respect: mybook.to/bravorespect

Mag: Loyalty: mybook.to/bravoloyalty

Allegory: myBooks.to/allegory

Endue: mybook.to/endue

Conform: mybook.to/conform

Justice: Tenacity: mybook.to/Bravotenacity

Ford's Rise: mybook.to/phoenixseries4

Driver: Grit: mybook.to/alphadriver

Christiansen: City Boy: mybook.to/alphacityboy

Nova: Cred: mybook.to/alphacred

Blackhawk: Heat: mybook.to/honourheat

Cooper: Gunslinger: mybook.to/elangunslinger

Teller: Connect: mybook.to/bravoconnect

Maverick: Insight: mybook.to/Deltainsight

Spano: Foresight: mybook.to/sentinelforesight

Marks: Enforce: mybook.to/Rising²Enforcer

Harky: Elite: <https://mybook.to/Rising²Elite>

Adroit Force: Sealed: <https://mybook.to/Adroit1Sealed>

Adroit Force: Hunted: <https://mybook.to/Adroit2Hunted>

Adroit Force: Saved: <https://mybook.to/Adroit3Saved>

Luke Rayne: Vision:

Boxed Sets

Baxters Series Box: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0776G4XZ6>

MC: Boxed Set 1-4: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B078TSKH7D>

MC Boxed Set + Jake: Books 5-7: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079BLCZVF>

MC Boxed Set + Rayne: Books 8,9, 0: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079HJ778R>

Princes of Prophecy Books 1-3: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079PS6PFX>

Princes of Prophecy Books 4-6: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079PY4Z9K>

The Protectors Boxed Set w/ MC10 + DC: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079V9L3FV>

The Providence Series Boxed Set 1: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07J5884KD>

The Providence Series Boxed Set 2: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JB3HK11>

BSC

Badass Security Council Phoenix Rising: BSC Box 1: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08WQ41TWD>

Badass Security Council Bravo Rising: BSC Box 2: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08WRLRP1G>

Badass Security Council Champion Rising: BSC Box 3: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08WVQPR83>

Badass Security Books 11 & 12 : BSC Box 4: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B097WRNK18>

Badass Security Council Alpha Rising: BSC Box 5: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B097WPWYKK>

Reading Order

It is better to read them in order so you don't miss anything. The *boxed sets* help keep them straight. I answer questions from previous books as I go along (the not easy thing). So, here is the order in which they were written.

She Found Us - Baxters
Our Wife - Baxters
Our Angel - Baxters
Knight - MC
LaPonte - MC
LaPonte-Karr - MC
Pres - MC
Blackhawk - MC
Tailley - MC
Callahan - MC
Jake - Baxters
Brighton - MC
Rayne - Baxters
Moniz - MC
Behind the Scenes - MC
Prophet - Princes of Prophecy
Reader - Princes of Prophecy
Leader - Princes of Prophecy
Enforcer - Princes of Prophecy
Coder - Princes of Prophecy
Sniper - Princes of Prophecy
Christian - The Protectors
Ricky - MC
Aiyana - The Protectors
D.C. Security - Baxters/MC/Princes
Jeremy & Jacob - The Protectors
Saber's Vida - The Providence Series
Saber's Porthos - The Providence Series
Saber's D'Artagnan - The Providence Series
Saber's Sombra - The Providence Series
Saber's Aramis - The Providence Series
Saber's Athos - The Providence Series
Spying Eyes - Standalone
Princes' Reward - The Other World Series
Fated Mates - The Other World Series
Princes' Pack - The Other World Series
Master's Rise - The Phoenix Series
Benga's Rise - The Phoenix Series
Ranger's Rise - The Phoenix Series
Jack: Honour - The Bravo Series
Falcon: Respect - The Bravo Series
Mag: Loyalty - The Bravo Series
Allegory - The Champion Series
Endue - Champion Series

Conform - Champion Series
Justice: Tenacity - Bravo Series
Ford's Rise - Phoenix Series
Driver: Grit - Alpha Series
Christiansen: City Boy - Alpha Series
Nova: Creed - Alpha Series
Blackhawk: Mase - Honour Series
Cooper: Gunslinger - Elan Series
Teller: Connect - Bravo Series
Maverick: Insight - Delta Series
Spano: Foresight - Sentinel Series
Marks: Enforce - Rising² Series
Harky: Elite - Rising² Series
Adroit Force: SEALED
Adroit Force: Hunted
Adroit Force: Saved
Luke Rayne: Vision