

RISING<sup>2</sup> SERIES



ELITE

**BROOLIN:  
REVERED**

L. ANN MARIE



BSC 25

# **Brolin: Revered**

*Elite Rising<sup>2</sup>*

*BSC West Book 25*

*By*

*L. Ann Marie*

Continuation from Michaels: Choices BSC book 24

*Michael Brolin is an incredibly talented and humble man who lost so much in a short time span. He carries that loss daily. Finding Badass gave him a reason to get up in the morning. Finding Copper Rose gave him a reason to live.*

**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

DeSeville: Vision

Knight: Heart

Michaels: Choices

Brolin: Revered

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Brolin: Revered BSC Book 25

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Published by: L. Ann Marie

Cover by Lori Birkett

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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 - (relocating)

Chris Blackhawk - VP MC Badass Colorado

Jordan Driver - President of Alpha Rising (*AR*)

Brinks Solaita - VP of Alpha Rising (*AR*)

Tucker Brighton - 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 Rising<sup>2</sup> (*R<sup>2</sup>*)  
Cliff Marks - VP of Rising<sup>2</sup>, ex FBI (*R<sup>2</sup>*)  
Jase Kalmin - SAA of Rising<sup>2</sup> (*R<sup>2</sup>*)  
Harky - Elite Head, Officer (*R<sup>2</sup>*)  
Luke Rayne DeSeville - Head FBI Ops for Badass  
Hamp Ford - Commander for FBI/ Badass Training Center - FBI  
Joshua DeSeville - Commander for FBI/ Badass Training Center - Badass  
Dillon Perez - IT Head for FBI/ Badass Training Center - Baxter  
Aylen Knight - President of Zion Rising (*ZR*)  
Brent Walker - VP of Zion Rising (*ZR*)  
Ajhil Stratton - SAA of Zion Rising (*ZR*)  
Slade Nova - President of Guardian Rising (*GR*)  
Logan Michaels - VP of Guardian Rising (*GR*)  
Axe LaPonte-James - SAA of Guardian Rising (*GR*)

**Elite Rising<sup>2</sup> Cast:**

Axton Harky - President  
Michael Brolin - VP  
Dan - Ops Control Lead  
Bridge Frank - IT Australian, need adjusted glasses for boards  
Lens - Ops Control  
Colonel T - Ops Control  
Mouny - Protector, Officer, Physical trainer  
Jammer - IT

Deneris – Harky’s second

Fly - firepower

Sarge, Diana -

Gunther - firepower

Anvil - firepower

Hagen -

Dornelious -

Blustad -

Drill – MB’s second

Beano -

Kiki - IT

Army - firepower

Flit - firepower

### **Elite Bits**

Sohn - Second to Harky

Mikhail - Second to MB

Marco - Second to Copper

### **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

Hannah McCabe - IT Head, ol’ lady to Trask, former Prince,

Alexia - Web’s ol’ lady, ex-FBI, ABSZ IT Lead, Trainer for BSC West

Seren - Cort’s ol’ lady, Mom to Caelan, trainer

Freedom - Ranger’s ol’ lady, Trainer/ Enforcer

Leya - Mag’s ol’ lady, Chocolatier, Ice cream shop owner

AJ - Jack’s ol’ lady, Mag’s sister, Head of IT for Club

Faith - D’Ability house Director, Beacon’s ol’ lady, Dreng’s mom

Carmen LJL - 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

Kateri Todachine - Graphic designer, old lady to Mase Blackhawk

Mikey - Prince Lead Protector, Nova’s ol’ lady, daughter of Cade

Harper Greywolf - Doctor MC Badass Colorado, Brekan's ol'lady

Chenoa Knight - Teller's old Lady, BR Doctor Loyalty clinic

Ginny (Thunderhawk) Marks - Marks ol' lady, Protector, Hemy's daughter

Piper (Lane) Harky - Harky's ol' lady, Dog Trainer

Mayun - Luke Rayne's ol' lady

Aylen Walker-Knight - Walker's ol'lady

White Wave Whitewater Michaels - Michaels ol' lady, chosen shield

Copper Rose Brolin - Michael Brolin's ol' lady

### **Alpha-Bits**

As - Akai (VP), Alta, Amal (SAA), Aris (SAA), Allen, Aaron, Alder (LP, Little Pres) , Asa (VP), Anton.

Now on the website @ <https://lanmarie.com/book-info>

Kids

Doctors

Alpha Bits

RI/MA members and kids



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# Prologue

*MB*

Looking up at the flash to my right, I raise the welder. “Hey, Zeus.” Pushing the mask up, I see his board and shut everything down. “They’re early. Thanks for coming to get me.” His chuff causes me to smile. The dog is impressive. I never thought I’d think of a dog as a Brother but Zeus made me a believer a little more than two years ago when I met him in Pakistan.

Harky and Zeus were on the joint base when the COS aka French SOCOM lost their minds and four short of two full teams. Sending so many in with little or no intel ended tragically as all missions without intel do. The four Special Operations Force survivors know it was with no intel because we sat in the Palais de Justice and heard the chief of staff give the stilted report as if he himself were paying for the lives of almost two full units.

As it turns out, no one paid but the families and friends of the fallen. The first Conceil de Guerre sounded reasonably disgusted with the idiot we took orders from that tragic day, but he didn’t do more than publicly, verbally disgrace the inept officer that ordered my team and friends to their deaths. There was no death sentence, not that there ever is, but if there were a time for it, it was then. Jail time wouldn’t make up for the lives lost, but it would have been more than a verbal lashing and dismissal of the officer.

I quit France that day and made my way across the pond. The FBI didn’t like dual citizenship and handed me a list of hoops to jump through to serve on an Ops team. My cousin Jules pointed me to Harky who showed up at Badass. I went through training at Mass Badass figuring the original Club was the best place to learn and have to say, Badass justice suits me better than a verbal tongue lashing.

Keeping my rank and getting better pay was a promise Harky gave that turned out to be true, surprising the hell out of me. My second surprise was seeing Zeus with a robot leg.

Jules wanted me to join Adroit but I'm a little more Americanized after the shit in France. My mom never got the chance to tell me about her country but I had been here enough to form my own opinions.

Zeus waits while I wash, getting a glimpse of the shields I had added from my wrists to forearms, a daily reminder of my reason for being here, I guess I spend more time than a glimpse when I feel Zeus's paw.

He lays a paw on my right arm over the shield as if asking about it.

“Encasing my Brothers in steel will keep every life with me. I didn't know them all well, but I knew them, they were mine.”

His eyes go right to the shields.

“Twenty-six. Four made it out. Every band is a Brother. The color shaded is my team. We better get moving.” I hang the towel on the stove and follow him out at a jog. We jog everywhere. The Squared Club is fourteen minutes away so my mind goes to the shields. The woman, Amanda, that did the ink for me, listened to what I wanted and came up with the 3D looking steel shields as I was talking. She asked about the men and added the color behind the band blocks in a way that made them blend but clearly light my team with significance. Always with me. I shake my head hoping they saw the payback, Badass style, from my last overseas mission. Badass and Adroit heard their names and made sure their deaths were avenged.

The push from Badass was unexpected, but Ricky said, “Your Brothers are ours. We're there, we'll deal together.” He doesn't know it, but he bought a lifetime of loyalty with those words.

At the door to the Club, Zeus stops and turns, hitting his board up. The list of names from the clearing Op shows,

then my picture and, 'Badass, honor men' then, 'respect honor to you from Zeus,' the Badass logo shows.

My throat gets tight. "I feel it, Brother, thanks." I wonder if Apollo would have started reacting like Zeus, then drop it. Basinger needs him more than I do and Harky said she was Zeus's handler when he had jobs Zeus wasn't needed on. I was surprised one of his team wasn't a handler, but Zeus outranked them so I guess they wouldn't be.

His paw comes up as his boards drop and I bump it. The Brother knows honor and respect, it's another reason I think of him as a Brother. He knows more than the military court of France.

Shaking my head again, I follow Zeus in. My mind jumping to the day and Brothers lost isn't going to quit today. Bastille is here. The only survivor from the other team went through hell to get back to being a soldier and he is a hell of a soldier. The only other Commander from our training class earned the respect he's shown by putting the work in. I gave his name to Ricky when I was in Mass. I'm so glad he joined and proved to Badass the Commander distinction is earned. Seeing him sitting on the training mat, I smile because he did make it back with unimaginable obstacles in his path.

The new Brothers stand when Zeus barks once. "Brothers, glad you made it early. I'm Michael Brolin also known as MB, or my call name, Fey, that's FEY." I spell it out.

Bastille smiles. "I can attest to that." His accent is thick but the men understand and look back at me with questions ready to flow.

I lift a hand before they say stupid shit that will piss me off. "I shut down sixth sense so Fey stuck. Welcome to Elite. To be clear, this is Elite Rising<sup>2</sup>, we are a Club within a Club. You all know Harky and his second Zeus." I point Zeus out and his boards pop on with a welcome.

"Don't underestimate Zeus, I can guarantee he's had more training than you and has been on more missions than all of us. Harky had a sniper job with BSC today so he'll catch up

with you later. Before you get shuffled around, do we have questions?"

"Help to speak English?" A German Brother asks. Most understand but don't speak it well.

"You've heard about the little albino Brothers, I'm told they have a virtual teacher and programs for you."

Everyone turns when Sohn and Mikhail come running in. "Boss MB, Brothers early! Zeus no tell heads-up in chat!" Sohn gives Zeus a look.

I smile watching them stop short in front of me. "You're right on time. We have a question about learning English."

"I have teacher and read program. Pres Aylen send here first I make changes to match new Brothers."

I point out the new German Brother. "Get with Elias and set him up before Zeus, then Pablo, take them on the tour."

"Roger, Boss." They run to Elias with all eyes on them.

"You've met with Alder and Mucimi and know you'll see more little Brothers. Sohn is Harky's second and Mikhail is mine so you'll see those two the most. There are four that live at Rising<sup>2</sup> and a group that show on a circuit like you saw at the east Clubs. Any other questions?"

"We were sent early and never made breakfast. Can we eat before the tours?" This is Stefan with a better grasp on English.

With a nod, I look at Zeus. "Let Pablo know we're eating." Looking up, I smile letting them know this isn't a problem. "Meals aren't usually missed even on transport. You can ask your questions while we eat. Sohn, Mikhail, explain to Elias while we eat."

The little Brothers nod. Sohn stuffs shit back in Mikhail's little backpack. "Roger, Boss MB." Sohn runs then stops to look back. "We show dining room to you." He waves

and runs, with the new Brothers waiting for me to dismiss them.

“Follow the little Brothers. Everything is at a run for them.” I wave an arm. Zeus drops his board and follows.

They all jog to catch up except Bastille. “It is good to see you, friend.” He starts in French.

I shake my head. “I quit France, Brother. I don’t speak French here.”

His surprise isn’t really a surprise. I raise my arm and show him the shields. “I have twenty-six steel bands holding that coffin closed.”

He nods. “I do not have your American paper to denounce France so easily.”

“You have your card and someone will talk to you all about keeping up with the paperwork or a more permanent residency if it’s what you want.”

His eyes show the same pain that I feel embedded in my soul. “I will speak to family of what is to come.”

With my nod, he starts walking toward the door the men and Bits ran out. I stay at his side and make the quiet walk to the dining room.

Before we sit, he says, “You do not ask about my legs.”

I smile sitting by Mikhail and Sohn. “Because I know you have the same technology as Zeus and hundreds of others. I’ve watched your progress and even saw you getting the set you’re wearing from Princes’ feeds. We’re one here, Bastille. If it’s yours, it’s ours.” I give him Ricky Callahan’s words.

“It is so for all?” Gunter asks.

“It is, Brother. Sohn and Zeus are worth the same as Ben Knight and me. No one is alone here and we’re all worth the same, we just have different jobs.”

Luis laughs. “The FBI has musketeer names but Badass has musketeer ancestry. It is in their blood.”

The whole group laughs. I can't say he's wrong. With Zeus ordering and the little Brothers explaining Badass equal, it's all redundant because every new team is in awe of the different Brothers but it's a good breakfast. Questions get answered, food gets eaten and the new Brothers' eyes are showing excitement. I remember wondering if this was real and would last too, I don't say it to them, because it will mean more when they see it for themselves, but it is and does.

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Harky comes into Ops fast. He slowed his jog so he's not stopping short but it always reminds me of the Bits. "We ran long, Brother. How were the newbies?"

His first question makes me smile. "Fine. They're getting settled and have a ride planned for later."

He nods watching the boards. "Shit. Pablo's team is still out?"

"Yeah, BSC added Zeus because of new numbers just before he was set to leave. They were glad you were on sniper and picked him up quick. They're just waiting on the chopper." I point to the BSC IT board. "It's setting down now. Blue already has the flight plan for the jet."

He nods. "Ranger's good about getting the plans up and waiting. Who's on BSC control?"

"Jessie, but he hasn't jumped in." I point to the checklist someone added for the controls. "It's how I knew the flight plan was up. I wasn't sure it was needed for us but I like not having to ask."

Jessie shows in our room like magic. "It's why I asked for it, Brother. I'm usually Lead or control on the team. FBI shit is handled by the team control and is billed out by the unit they're working for. BSC is straight BSC payouts and doesn't need confusion for who ordered what. You watch their back

and I've got line item shit we pay for." He points to the board with the new list. "That means you see what I order. If controls miss shit, they're replaced."

I throw virtual Jessie chin and he disappears. They must approve payouts as we're working. I wondered why we have two Controls.

Harky smiles. "I love the BSC."

I do too and figure he knows. "I'm on for another hour and a half. Anakin took Zeus's shift with the newbies. I've got them staying here for dinner. The Officers are showing and Charlie's been smoking meat all day for it."

He looks weary all of a sudden. "Is Cort showing?"

Cort always shows but I'm not saying it. "I didn't hear that one, but Falcon is here with Alder for Bastille and Bridge, the guy from Australia."

"Alder said something about programming his boards. Piper and Loki were making some carrot thing."

I laugh. "I got this, you may want to check on Loki." I heard yelling from Charlie when I went for a run early this morning.

He nods. "I've got four to run the stress test for Weeks. It's their last." He had those dogs jumping from the chopper last week but I didn't know they ran other stress tests. I guess if they're running Ops, it's needed. Harky doesn't miss anything.

"Go, Commander, I got this."

"You doing okay with Bastille here?" His eyes watch mine but I keep mine on the board.

Shit. "Yeah, we watched him get his new legs. He's happy with them and moving fine. Seeing it in person was good. He was laughing with the newbies and excited to settle into a new job. It was good for me to see and feel it from him." My eyes find his for the sole purpose of showing him I mean it.



His eyes go from intent to relaxed. “That’s good, Brother. I saw it but your spidey-sense needed to feel it.”

I push his shoulder away from me. “I did and I’m good. Go annoy Wecks’ new dogs so I can watch the jet fly the team back.”

He laughs walking out. The laugh is new. I don’t remember any emotion in Harky unless it was a smile at Zeus. The guy was intense and you just knew he’d be showing up after whatever job he was handed. I’m so glad we were one of those jobs.

Watching the jet fly, I play back the day I can’t seem to forget. I had pulled my second under the collapsed building into a pit I avoid giving a reason for. Not wanting to call attention with the guns, we stalked, hunted for live soldiers, collected weapons and silently killed six that were left to guard the dilapidated building *with* the dilapidated building. We had dragged Bastille and our sniper, Gerard, out from under what collapsed on them, but couldn’t find anyone else alive. I couldn’t leave my men but knew Bastille wouldn’t make another night in the pit. The dead members under a section of roof never left my mind. I didn’t know if I could add Bastille there. He was a Commander, the only other French Commander on the joint base and was in my training classes, making him a longtime friend. Zeus, then Harky showed and got Bastille chopped out. They didn’t leave until we collected the rest of the two teams. He never said a word about the mission or his orders. It wasn’t until we were back at the joint base that I was told Harky fought to recover the bodies, they were told both teams went down.

Lens pulls me back, “Ten out, Commander. You okay?”

I shake my head to clear it. “Yeah, just remembering how I got to here.”

His eyes go right to concern. “You did get to here. I was a CENTCOM control and saw a lot of shit Ops. Yours and Colonel Graywolf were the worst I had ever seen. You both made it and ended up in BSC. Every one of us knows the

sacrifices and are honored you're here and still working to show honor and respect to our fallen Brothers." He said *our* fallen Brothers.

With a deep breath my head clears. "Thanks, Lens, but we're all here for a reason."

He nods. "Your hands were shaking so I figured Bastille and Harky were a reminder you're feeling today, but you may not know a bunch of us are with you in that."

My smile is real. "Never alone feels good. I do tend to forget they weren't just mine. I'm glad you're here to point it out." I am too, he's older and respected by the teams telling me he had a memorable career in military.

Jessie shows like magic again. "We're all here and with you, Brother. There is no mine in Badass unless it's an old lady, gear or bike. Every Brother, every loss is ours." He smiles. "For me, every Alpha-Bit and slave we found, politicians locked up, gang that's no longer, is a win that helps keep me balanced. Thank fuck for the balance. Taylor says every day he makes it through is his balance, but I count the lives saved." He's a deep Brother that makes a point I feel as soon as he breaks it down simple enough for a child to understand. Harky would say Barney style.

I can feel the balance the way he puts it and nod. "Thanks, Jessie. Perspective is everything, I'm glad you showed. Today I feel it more, but I was keeping ahead of it by showing up every day. Reason wasn't important. I think I need the reason guiding me."

He nods right along with Lens. "We all do. I know it took you a while to get here but all that waiting for trials, while in your head, isn't good, Brother. You're here and we've got a list of shit to do. Clear your head and help us keep the balance."

That gets me smiling again. "Roger, Boss. It's an order I shouldn't need but glad I got it."

"If I could, I'd hug you, Brother. I owe you one. Your team is down. If you need to talk, find me. I'm at the mansion

this weekend.”

“I will, Jessie, thanks.”

“Later, I’m out.” He’s gone as fast as he showed.

Lens smiles at me. “I love virtual and like the balance perspective. When he said it, I felt relief.”

“It is new for me too. I think he’s right, waiting around for the trial was not good. Just hearing the good already done somehow helps. I see the Bits all the time. The dogs, slaves, missions...it’s all good that’s keeping the balance in check. I got this.”

He smiles. “Me too, Brother. I’m glad he showed again. The Team is in. Zeus is headed to K-9.”

I hit my mic on and give a good job to the team getting a ‘Hooyah’ and chuff back. Lens reminds them of dinner and our Ops closes down. We’re the only Ops Center that closes down unless our teams are up. Rising<sup>2</sup> does Ops for BSC Phoenix but it’s at the Club not Elite.

Lens walks out with me talking about the Ops BSC has done and the balance. It’s an enlightening way to think and has me feeling more relaxed, or maybe that’s relieved. Whatever it is, my mind is ready to be done with the gloom and doom I was feeling. I smile, *Badass shining through*, Falcon said when I was at Bravo, I guess I feel that.

Mucimi shows up on the side of me as I’m jogging back to the silo. Turning enough to see he’s not jogging but floating at my pace, I stop and laugh. “Brother.”

He spins, stopping when he’s facing me. “Mikhail said you got the insulation up. I want to weld.”

“You want to weld? You know how?”

His smile and nod make him look younger than I normally see.

I shrug. “I have to get to a dinner for the newbies. The plans are on the counter. Nothing in the kitchen is hooked up but the water and fridge. Hanging towels are for my sweat.” I warn him before he’s mopping his face with them.

“Gross. I’ll follow your plan and get my own towels.”

I start jogging again. “Thanks, I could use the help. I set up a jig to hold the beams.”

He waves it away and is gone.

Walking into the silo Harky gave me to make a house, I don’t see or feel Mucimi, so I shower and dress figuring he’ll start tomorrow.

I love the silo and saw its potential right away. They were going to tear it down. Using the barn for the trainees had me asking for the silo to keep the farm theme. Brann came and we made plans Alder approved, making the silo house a reality. I never had a plan or even saw a silo house before so this is nothing more than I thought it was a cool building and wanted to live in a cool building. Coming from a vineyard, we didn’t have silos but Badass is crazy with weird houses making my silo fit right in with the crazy. I love it and get to have a wine cellar that will remind me of the good I had in France.

The thought stops me. Balance, Jessie is right. With a smile, I jog to the Elite compound.

\*\*\*

“He’s fuckin’ crazy.”

I nod at Pres. Cort showing isn’t unusual but they all act like it’s unexpected. “He is.” I watch Cort jump with Jordan following a few feet behind like they practice the crazy tricks.

“How is your house?” Marks changes the subject knowing the crazy statement fits Texas as much as it does Cort. From what I’ve seen, just about all BSC Presidents are crazy. Maybe not Luke Rayne but the others surely fit the bill in their own special way.

I smile at Marks. “I got the first beam up and in using the jig. Thanks for helping me build it.”

He nods. “Josephine and Jacky would love the steampunk pulley system you made.”

I shake my head. “It’s coming down when the second floor and roof ceiling beams are in place. Mucimi will help weld some of the beams.”

That surprises Falcon. “Mucimi is welding?”

I shrug. “He said he wants to weld. He does everything apparently.”

“Can he weld?” Falcon knows them better than me so I don’t answer.

Ginny does. “He can learn if he doesn’t, he’s Mucimi, if he says he’s welding, he’s welding.”

That’s pretty much how I saw it. The guy had the cellar looking better than I would have. It’s all perfectly lined with brick and cobblestone as if a master Mason did it.

Cort sits surprising Pres. “Done with the bikes?” Pres asks.

Cort nods. “Raid isn’t here to make me laugh. Jordan doesn’t get funny.” He turns to me. “Why Fey?”

Harky smiles. “It’s the military sixth sense thing. He feels shit like Solaita.”

“But why Fey? That’s not military.” Cort doesn’t like the word?

I shrug. “The *Sixth Sense* movie came out and I said hell no to the name.”

His eyes change and look for something then he nods. “Steve Jobs said, ‘*Intuition is a very powerful thing, more powerful than intellect.*’ I think he was right. I can see where ‘sixth sense’ would be the wrong name for a soldier.”

I nod, glad he doesn’t point out the prophetic potential that I felt hearing it. I feel he knows and it relieves me. “So,

the team came up with Fey for their magical feeling shit or something.” I wave a hand. “It didn’t bother me and stuck.”

“Lord of the Rings is a better book.” Marks makes me smile.

I thought so.

Mucimi shows across from me with a plate full of food. “I got three left.”

Three? “Are you shitting me?”

His hand stops as his eyes raise to mine. “I’ll get it done but I’m hungry.”

He got eight beams welded. I’m shocked but don’t ask how. It took me almost half an hour just to raise the beam up.

Marks laughs. “Your face says it all. His ability is a gift to you tonight and every night you’re in your new silo house.”

Cort and the questions about everything. “Silo house?”

Marks answers like I’m not right here, then they’re both up.

“I want to weld beams. You know New York used the Bessemer engineering system in the 1800’s to construct the skyscrapers faster? It still wasn’t fast enough for the population growth of the city but thousands of workers cranked out buildings like machines. How come Mucimi is welding?” Cort turns without an answer. “Falcon, tell Fey about the Op in Morocco. Ben said Fey with Luke Rayne or Aylene on Control. Ben is on for the BSC.” He’s back to his questions for Marks. I turn toward Falcon and see Mucimi isn’t here.

“He ate fast.” Falcon points out the obvious with a smile. “I don’t know why I’m telling you about a BSC Op but he said almost as much as I know. Raid pointed out the Berber, Spanish and French of different areas but Arabic is noted as Moroccan Arabic.”

I nod. “I was dropped there young to learn dialect.”

He nods right back. “Brekan said it’s the same as Green Beret did. So, Harky came in a day early, handled sniper today and you’re in planning tomorrow then on the plane for the night. Some CEO’s daughter was stashed there until he agreed to stop production on some bomb drones. They target chemical weapons with what sounded like Bit technology.” His hands go up. “I didn’t think I’d be explaining it so I didn’t question specifics. Question specifics in planning.” His honesty brings to mind that “Badass equal’ the Bits explained to the newbies.

“I’ll get it tomorrow.” I know I will because BSC is known for gathering huge amounts of information for every Op. In Kuwait and Pakistan, we had up to the minute reports on every target.

He relaxes. “This is your Team’s fourth out of country but this one just came in.”

I nod, not wanting details out. The first two weren’t really BSC and I had four that didn’t work every part of the job with me. “Yeah.”

“The experience and versatility of whole teams is a new one for me. We had four to six members at the most and worked alone for the rest of our time.”

I don’t comment but nod. Assassin teams were known but I never met one. “Do we have a dog?” Zeus would never work there. Sunni Muslims would definitely take offense.

His eyes show amusement at the change of subject. He wasn’t saying anymore. “Courier only.”

“Good. A full Ops dog would be noticed.”

He smiles like he’s glad I pointed it out. “Brinks said that. It’s a small or normal size Shepherd that Harky said is smart as hell.”

Not wanting to sit and talk, or see what Cort, Marks and Mucimi are up to at my new house, I ask, “You want to ride?”

He’s up like a shot. “Canim, I’m on the games.” With a nod from his ol’ lady he walks beside me. The woman is

happy everywhere she goes no matter who is at the Club. It's weird and good all at the same time.

I spend no time wondering as we get to the pool of unpainted Protector bikes waiting for riders to claim them for a while.

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Hanging with the Brothers is good. The Newbies were surprised Falcon and Pres played the games then gave pointers right alongside them. It's that showing that they'll remember. My team is ready for the Op planning tomorrow and I'm ready to see what Cort and Mucimi did at my house. I haven't seen either since dinner but that's not unusual, they both come and go all the time.

Getting closer, I see they left the lights on, it's a waste I'd never expect from either. The new door handle vibrates in my hand and I know someone is still here. Why I'd feel vibration from the door is a concern that I walk in with. The insulation is good since I can now hear wood sliding. Welding shouldn't have wood anywhere in the mix causing my eyes to lift toward the sound. Steel girders are spaced in a circle drawing my eyes to the center where they all meet at a rock octagon framed by steel. The ceiling with the center framed with rock for the fire pit duct pipe, looks better in person than on the plan. I like the rock up there fanning a little wider on the new ceiling and am glad it's coming down effectively camouflaging the pipe. When I connect the fire pit, I can extend that down to the rock that's already waiting for it on the floor.

Seeing the ceiling that's done means the wood is the framing that was waiting for the second floor. Turning slowly, I see the floating stairs already attached to the wall just behind the kitchen. They're crazy so I'm not surprised. Really, the framing was in and the stairs just needed to be attached but they're fabricated I-beams with a wider top as the stair tread



and they look perfect. Unbelievable. I take them following Cort's laugh noticing that the steps are comfortable. I'll need to get the rope handrail on before the Bits try them out.

Stepping onto the new second floor landing, I'm stunned stupid. "How the fuck?"

Mucimi turns and a beam lowers.

I point at it quick. "Hold it up! Cort is right there."

Cort turns with a smile. "It can't fall on me. He gave me a shield like the force fields."

Oh, okay. Whatever the hell stops the Norse giant from being crushed like a roach under my shoe is good in my opinion, since he's in my house laying rock on the center of the new wood floor where the small mock fireplace and chimney are going. "Good to hear it. I'm not sure I want to test it out. This looks great." Following the pipe up, I wonder when the skylight was decided. "Uh, there's a hole in my new roof." Two full pie sections of roof are missing.

Mucimi walks closer with plans appearing in his hands. "The sky is nice here. Justice said you like the window and skylight."

"Window?"

"Sliding glass door. It will be nice with the balcony. I agree. Teller and Chenoa just left, they love it too. Chenoa suggested the balcony and Stella drew up plans for Maddox." Cort pipes in like everyone changing plans for my house is normal.

Since the first-floor ceiling and floor up here is done, two beams are suspended just under the new triangle cut outs for a skylight and it looks great, I'm good with plan changes. Perfect would be with glass in but I nod. "Okay. Will I have a finished roof tonight?" Just saying it is amazing to me, they didn't just do the second floor but the roof beams will be done all in one day. That doesn't include flooring and rock.

"About four. Maddox is on it but it's big. Mase said he'd get it here before his run." Four a.m. is normal for them to be up?

“I need to sleep. I have planning tomorrow.”

“Texas said there is a room at the Club or small pod at the Security compound. Your newest team just claimed everything open you had.” Cort doesn’t stop fitting rock on the floor. I wondered how they look tailor made downstairs but watch as he uses what looks like a mini pickax to cut his pieces.

“Thanks. I need a shower and sleep.”

Cort nods. “Go, Brother, it’s after one. Hit the music, Mucimi. Seren said she can’t hear it in the basement.”

The Stones blare from everywhere at once, almost causing the roll I surely would have taken, proving the need for that rope rail. As I’m going down, standing upright, my head is shaking with Cort’s, “Teach me that step you showed Aylene and Ranger. Seren is on me to do a line dance.” They aren’t leaving tonight.

I don’t want to know the step or even watch. The plan of sleeping in the basement is out so I change course and head to the garage that looks like an old mini barn for small storage. It fits my truck and bike with a room in the back replicating the real barn’s horse stalls but it’s a studio apartment a ranch hand must have lived in.

Opening the door, I hear moans and a ‘fuck’ causing me to step out and close it quick. That fuck was not Brinks but that’s the giant’s head I saw over the half wall that separates the kitchen from the bedroom. Jordan must be here but they went missing just after I sat down for dinner.

Shaking my head, I think about where this leaves me to sleep. It’s late and I’m too tired to trudge up to the Club. Now I know why Cort said the Club room is open. Hunting for a pod on a compound I’ve never been to isn’t happening either. My truck is the new plan. Walking by the boxes, I smile, clothes, bath towels, bedding and pans...not sure I need the pans and towels but I could use the bedding. The down comforter is way too heavy to sleep under but it will pad the bed of the truck nicely. With a ski parka, I make a pillow and climb into my makeshift bed. It beats the too-short front seat.

The day has been long with excitement over Bastille, sadness reliving the hardest day of my life, honest conversation about my mind's new easily accepted perspective and enlightenment from Brothers that earned the Badass legend title. I thought I had Badass down pretty good, but have no problem admitting I have more to learn and need the Brothers pointing the way. Lens knows his shit too. That reminds me of his words of wisdom in Ops. He learned from Jessie too, but I need to thank him for his part.

With a yawn I feel soul deep, I let it go and smile at Cort learning new steps for Seren. The fierce and wildly innovative giant is whipped. Losing the smile, I think of the women I've met. In Mass, Danny told us the women we want to keep are the old ladies. I knew exactly what he was saying because I've danced around it for years. Quantity has not brought about quality for me, but I've never been in a job I had a home that I'll see nightly. With a chuckle, I mumble, "Just not tonight."

# Chapter One

## ***MB***

Laying the file down, I think of this woman. I thought daughter was a kid but the woman is twenty-three. Something in all this isn't sitting right. Ben agreed but didn't use his mojo magic to clarify the details. He was my control in Kuwait so I know he has that ability.

"You're not buying it either?" Drill, my second, asks.

I push the file toward Kiki our IT guru and gunner extraordinaire. "Something is off. He's paying for extraction but the calm he shows in his voice and the person on those feeds didn't even show a hand shaking. No anger, no trepidation for his girl, nothing. What do you think, Kiki?"

Her nod has me relaxed. We all feel it. "It's what I thought seeing his first meet with the Admiral. He wasn't putting on a brave face was my initial take on him. He expects her to die and it's not touching him is what I thought."

Drill agrees. "My first thought was, *wouldn't he push more for the girl than security help at his buildings?* I get that he went to military for that help but the girl got more rise out of the Admiral than the father. It was the Admiral that called Baxter in."

It was my feeling too. "We need what's hidden. BSC jumped in fast so whatever it is hasn't been uncovered. The girl has some form of combat training because of past attempts. Dad says she stayed up on that, she's an engineer scientist, whatever that means and BSC shows a barely there social life." The training and schooling sounds similar to what I've heard from the Princes and Mass MC. I went to private school but they had school whenever they showed and a lot of it was in Labs they built robotic shit, programmed computers for what they needed, or ran experiments. Ricky said Stella had patents on whatever she made starting at seven. I didn't go to that kind of school.

Kiki gives a soft laugh. "That described every one of us until a couple of months ago."

I back up and replay what I said, not thought after and give her that barely social life with a nod. Drill takes offense. “Hey, I’ve always had a life.”

“Club chicks and drinking with the Brothers isn’t a well-rounded social life. The rides with friends, get togethers, dinners, games, the Alpha-Bits and kids all make that better now that we’re here. Base didn’t give us that. Hell, even the Commanders have real lives now and they were the biggest players. We heard all about them living for missions and to fuck everything on every base.” Kiki is annoyed with him.

“*Merde*. That’s how people think of us?”

They’re both showing surprise or shock or something.

Kiki recovers first. “You never speak French. *Thought* of you, Commander. I did say you have a life now and I haven’t heard of you tagging everyone here.”

Shit. “I guess that’s something. Knowing people thought so little of me feels like shit.”

Drill laughs hard and loud. “You and Commander Harky are legends. There were like ten of you on the bases we were at, Boss. Considering they were joint bases, and we had no other life,” he points at Kiki then goes on, “the top Commanders were talked about constantly. We knew and talked about who to stay away from too, Boss.” He’s smiling but his eyes show pain.

I met Drill in Mass and was glad he signed onto BSC in Phoenix. The bear of a man is as big as Solaita with a rep of getting the job done anyway he can. Marines are some crazy Brothers but we all do the same job, they’re just a little more flamboyant than our training would allow. I nod to give him an answer feeling that pain I see in his eyes radiating off him.

Kiki touches his hand quickly in a show of support then drops hers back on her lap. “We did, Commander. I trained then took gunner to get on a team with a better Commander. Lens and a couple of his buddies were good about letting us know units who were in need and what positions were open.”

I didn't know that. I didn't know Lens other than he was Ops control and heard of me, so I guess I wouldn't know shit about him helping the good soldiers stay alive. Fuck, I really was all about missions and fucking. What a dickhead.

Shaking it loose, I focus on the daughter and her CEO dad with no familial emotion to tie her to him. "So, can you look into the woman and company?" I feel something here but I'm not sure what.

She nods, pulling her laptop closer. "Right now, Commander."

Drill pulls the file I dropped on the table earlier over. "I'll go through this again."

Turning my chair, I roll the two feet to the computer. Watching the feeds again may give me a better feel for what's missing. I'm glad we're in the mini Ops room at the back of the plane. The rest of the team dropped into seats and were dead to the world after we lifted off. They don't need unidentifiable doubts before we even start the Op. We'll be leaving firepower with the plane to continue on to a base close to the border in Algeria. A chopper will be waiting to carry them over if it's needed for phase two of our plan. I hope to Christ it isn't needed because that would mean our target can't make it to the border.

"99% of the population is Sunni Muslim. Four wives is allowable, they pray five times a day, women can't marry non-Muslim men, left hand is the one you wipe with so don't eat or tip with it, dogs are considered dirty and sometimes evil, gold is a no-no so don't wear it and never try to shake a woman's hand." Kiki has me smiling.

"All good things to know. Petting the dog will mark you as a tourist. Since she's working, she isn't looking for your approval out in the open. Flit, Army, you're Sally's handlers, make sure she gets her good jobs behind a door. The hostel you three are at is a block away from us with the hidden dog door for Sally. She's got the layout and will meet you in the room. Kiki, you're hidden unless we need your highly

prohibited guns.” That gets a smile from her. The woman must have been a hell of a Girl Scout, she’s armed to the teeth under all those clothes she asked for.

“Drill, Beano and Young, you’re Kiki’s eyes and ears right up front, that means take in the views from everywhere so she can find local cameras to tap into. The roof has a grand terrace that will be helpful. Sally, Flit and Army, walk the area. Target’s last seen was in town of the riad and hostel we’re booked at.” With a ‘roger’ and dog’s noise, I turn the car into the alley behind the hostel and let Flit, Army and Sally out.

“Kiki will let you know when she’s up. Stay put until you get a clear from her. Beano, you’re with Kiki on surveillance in the room, then wherever she shows. Be close but away from her so she can move but isn’t alone. Use Young to switch out so you’re not tagged with her.”

With a ‘roger’, I drive the block to the riad.

“How long am I at the riad?” Kiki asks before we get out.

“Show a presence walking in to establish connection to Drill. Terrace on the roof, hall to your room, courtyard or dinner sightings if we’re here for more than two nights. Up to you where you sleep, we all have an extra bed, the hostel has a room for you. Slip in and out unnoticed. BSC booked all four rooms at the hostel for us.”

“Roger, Commander. I appreciate the flexibility.” She’s good at inconspicuous so I’m not worried.

“Ops, we’re in and up. You’ve got feeds of the hotel and seven body cams.”

BSC Ops: “We do, Brother. Knight Talker on with Luke Rayne from ABSZ. Once we’re in Ops, Prez will be on. BSC Ops room is monitoring now from Princes.”

Me: “Roger, Knight Talker. I’m on the side until the target is located putting us in Ops.”



BSC Ops: “Roger, Fey. Knight Talker standing ready.” That could be a long wait but for some reason I don’t think it will. After twenty minutes of logging faces and views of the roads all around the riad, I’m done with the roof top terrace.

Me: “Moving down. The view is nice but not getting you faces to run.”

Kiki: “Roger. Team two is on the move. K-9 feed is getting...whoa, Sally, retrace to the building I tagged. Sit across and watch it. Commander, I have a positive match on one of the MERCs.”

Me: “Get it and location on our glasses. Flit, Army, come from each side, I’ll meet you there. Is that behind the hostel?”

Kiki: “Roger, your boards are up now. Sally, down and wait for command. Two, Commander. Army and Flit are two out. It’s the next block, but yeah.”

Army: “What are the chances?”

Me: “Knight Talker, is the satellite in position?”

BSC Ops: “It is, Phoenix is pulling heat up now. Two are street side, window to the right of the door, armed. One is aimed at someone small right in front of the window, another is in the bathroom,” Luke Rayne says.

Kiki: “Sally, infiltrate, surveillance.” The dog makes a sound but it isn’t Zeus or Apollo’s chuff.

Luke Rayne: “Good call, I thought she was a retriever dog.”

Ben Knight: “Harky said she was Ops trained but runs info. Focus, Brothers. This will move fast.”

Me: “Drill, get the SUV. Army, you take the wheel when the target is loaded. Drill, get Kiki out and meet us at the bridge.” Running the stairs, I hit the door walking fast across the street. Passing a cart of fabric, I duck to the alley and run.

Drill: “Roger, Commander. You want me to wait at the hotel until you have her?”

Me: “No, we’ll have her.” I hit the two MERCs with the laser and watch them fall on the little car. “Flit, get them in the car. Army, follow me in.” I stop running at the door and slide my knife to the side of the knob. The hall is empty until the door on the right opens. Hitting the MERC, I push the door in and hit the MERC at the door in the back. Army hits the last surprised MERC fast. “Drill, tell me you’re right outside.”

Drill: “Thirty seconds, Commander. Your Fey thing is fuckin’ quick, Boss, but this time it gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

Me: My eyes stay on the woman who looks tired and scared. “Cuff them, Army. Copper Rose, we’re Badass, here to extract you and get you back to Germany.” This woman started shaking her head as soon as I opened my mouth.

“Is that English?” She asks in German.

I repeat what I said in German knowing damn well that she speaks English and lived in the US before her mom died.

“No. I will go to America.” Again, she speaks in German.

Me: “Ops she’s refusing the Germany plan.”

Ben Knight: “Get her to the plane. She speaks English but has shit going through her head I’m not getting. I’ll get someone to read her from the plane. Good job, Commander. That was faster than I expected. Cleanup is on its way.”

Me: “Roger, Ops.” I nod to the woman and speak Berber. “Our plane is just across the border. You’re going back to the US with us.”

She stands fast looking relieved then freezes. I smile. “You speak Berber, German and Arabic. I heard the MERC tell you to stay put in Moroccan Arabic.”

Her eyes cut to the left as she nods and moves to collect a small purse or bag. “I will go to Arizona America,” she says in German again.

My smile doesn't quit as I speak Spanish. "Okay, get me the address when we get to the plane. We need to go now."

She moves fast but a little unsteady and waits at the door. "I am safe?" Arabic is her new language, I guess.

"You are now." I go back to German.

Laughter erupts in my ear. Army smiles then walks out in front of us.

"Sally, in the truck. Drill, get Kiki and move. Flit, cleanup is..." I point. "Here. Stay with Drill, Beano, Young and Kiki."

Army hands Sally little treats then pulls out at a normal speed. He's speaking English the whole way, getting burst of air from our pieces every now and then. Army and Flit speak Arabic almost fluently. It's why I have one in each vehicle.

Drill: "We're a mile behind you, Commander."

Me: "I've been Americanized, my eyes are rolling. I have your tracking up. Slow it to normal speed. We're three kilometers from the border, don't come in right behind us."

BSC Ops: "We've got you covered, Fey, but you're right, stay spaced out," Luke Rayne tells me what was covered in planning.

Me: "Roger, Ops."

The border crossing goes smooth with Army speaking Arabic with a southern twang. The agent smiles with a tourist comment as he waves us through.

Copper Rose doesn't say a word the entire two-hour ride but I didn't expect her to. We board and lift off with her only asking for water. She never asks about the extra men, Kiki undressing with her arsenal making an impressive pile on the seat directly across from her, the dog or the Kevlar gear we dropped as soon as we board. It's too damn hot to have it all on for long and almost two hours in a car is too long.

Sitting beside the woman while she watches Kiki fill her gear box, I ask in German, "Would you like to call your

father?”

Her eyes whip to mine and I see unadulterated fear. “No, and you shouldn’t. He didn’t authorize a rescue for me.” Her English is perfect and has no slow lag that I heard earlier.

Kiki turns at those words and I notice the men still. Shit, this is what I was feeling. I nod choosing my words. “I need to check in with BSC now that we’re up. Come to the Ops room.” Without waiting for an answer, I get up and move. “Kiki, Drill, you’ll have questions to answer. Army, no shot to clear since it was laser.”

“Roger, Commander. I’ll finish packing your gear, Kiki.” Army is a good Brother.

I ask Copper nothing as I get BSC Ops up. Ben and Christian are waiting as if they knew I’d call in right away.

Copper surprises him and me. “Ben Knight,” she says recognizing him, I guess.

He nods, changing his face to blank. “Yes, this is Christian Blackhawk. Your father went to an Admiral at CENTCOM for security help on a building in Germany.”

Copper interrupts him. “He would not have sanctioned a rescue for me.” That has my eyes on her and I see the pain she’s feeling.

“The Admiral called in Kaleb Baxter knowing you are an American citizen.”

Her head is already shaking. “I hold dual citizenship.”

Ben nods but Christian answers. “If you let him talk, he’ll give you the information we have on how you came to be an Op for us.”

Copper stills then nods. “You’re right and I’m sorry. My nerves are shot. I expected to be killed in Morocco.”

Christian nods. “He knows.”

Ben tries again. “Kaleb is a reader but couldn’t read your father and was on alert by the lack of concern your father showed for you while trying to get military as security to his

building. The Op was planned quickly before anything could happen to you. Christian tells me you were being taken to a Moroccan terrorist group to die today by those MERCs who were to be paid for delivery. While we have you traveling, your father is in meetings to garner that military security. I need a reason to stop that military support.”

“The drones. Years of research and testing have the chemical seeking drones perfected. Because we know how to identify, track and target them, we know how to build drones that can’t be identified. There is a contract for my father to build those drones and it is not with the terrorists that took me.” She says the words in a shaky voice that I feel anger and fear in. *Merde*.

Ben looks at Christian. “The security is so he can build the drones while supplying German and US Allies with the useless chemical seekers for top dollar.” Christian breaks it down for Ben.

Ben freezes then starts vibrating. Christian looks to the side. “Get here, Aiyana or Dakota. MB, we’ll need a minute or ten.” The feed goes black.

“Is that normal?” Copper asks.

“You didn’t ask about Christian Blackhawk reading you. Is that normal? Is anything normal?” Drill has me smiling.

“Everything in BSC is normal to them. The ability is called gifts but we don’t know them all and just follow orders as shit happens. You get used to it. So, you’re with us to the US and will need a safe place. What’s in Arizona?” I ask trying for information.

“My mother’s house. I can’t go there but didn’t know what to think when you showed up. They had just told me that the terrorists called and they’d be delivering me following afternoon prayers.” Her voice shakes telling me how scared she is of her father. It’s more emotion than her father showed but she just gave information to stop him.

“When they come back up, we’ll let them know. Badass has Clubs everywhere so you can work and live safely within their areas. I’m not sure if BSC is in Germany.”

Her head shakes. “I want to be in the US. I can pay for security but want that to be with security that has as many guns as appendages on everyone guarding me.”

Drill and Kiki laugh. I smile thinking she’s smart then realize why she has to be and lose the smile. “We’ll get you where you can live and work safely.”

The fear rolling off her subsides a little and she nods. “You’re not American and work for Badass?”

“Dual citizenship like you. My mother was American, father French. I moved here permanently a few months ago. Badass has an Elite Club that’s from around the world. Nationality doesn’t matter to them.”

“Military elite?”

I nod but she doesn’t ask more.

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Ben is in planning somewhere for something so Drill, Kiki and Copper leave me in the Ops room to deal with the details.

I’ve talked to Harky and Luke Rayne but neither had much to say. The Op ran perfect and no shots were fired. Since we’re on the way back, in a day instead of three is good for the schedule according to Harky. His team is going out as backup for Weeks from BSC South so my team being back for training the newbies works for us. He doesn’t say why he’s out with Weeks but it must be big for them both to be on it together.

I’m not sure what to say to Copper Rose so I stay put filling out the forms for our almost five-hour Op. The ride from and to the border was longer than the Op so it takes no

time. I save it wondering why I feel the need to say anything to Copper Rose. I never had a problem with what I remember of my parents then my grandparents. My life was a good one on a typical vineyard in France. My grandparents took me in when my parents died and raised me as if I were theirs. I was five so I guess I was theirs longer than my parents. Standing, I decide to man up and go hang with the team. If she wants to talk, she will. I'll figure out what to say based on what she does, but her father doesn't deserve much from her, to my way of thinking anyway.

Zeus sends me a 'Good job' emoji in the chat making me laugh. He's a funny Brother. I throw a salute emoji to him then freeze with the smile still in place when Cort and Alder show on the board in front of me. "Brothers."

"The smile is for the fastest Fey Op in history?" Cort asks.

"No but this one is for that name. Zeus sent me a *good job* emoji."

He smiles. "The Brother is too much. Harky says he sends him a heads-up when the reports are in. Sohn must have notices going to him or something."

Alder nods so he must.

"Sohn is good with Zeus and the programs." I shake my head at the impressive dog. "Piper thinks he's human."

Cort is done with small talk. "The woman is a scientist. Alder had questions about a paper she submitted. Is Ruth Rose in the room?"

"Ruth? Copper Rose is what I got." I look at the information on the board.

Alder speaks up. "Dr. Ruth Copper Rose publish studies I read."

"She's twenty-three. She's a doctor?"

He rolls his eyes at me. "You need me explain freaky to you?" He says on a sigh like he's disappointed.

Cort laughs.

I shake my head. “Sorry, Little Pres. Freaky shit is new to me. She’s smart and went to school like the Princes and Bits, I think. I should have picked it up. So she goes by Copper when not in doctor mode. I’ve known her for three hours and spoke maybe ten sentences to her. She’s asking to stay in the US under security that’s well armed.”

He nods. “I watch feed in IT. I have house, security, job to her she work to ABSZ Lab, virtual she like other BSC Club.”

I put my hand up. “Hold on, I’ll get her.” I open the door and call Copper in. She turns my way then moves fast. “Alder, the President of Alpha-Bits, is asking for you. He read studies you published or something and wants you to work for him at the ABSZ Lab or virtual in BSC. His compound is protected by the BSC, Phoenix and Bravo Rising - hell all the rising Clubs, the federal government with marines and navy bases are just outside so the Bits will never be fucked with.”

She’s surprised. “Alpha-Bits are who?” She asks, walking into the room.

I point to the board. “Cort Masters and Alder Ford. Alder is the President of the Alpha-Bits.”

I watch the shock on her face until Alder starts talking about some study and the work he has done with vitamins to stop some chemical something or other and that shock turns to interest. After her first question, Cort begs off leaving me with Copper and Alder’s medical jargon that makes no sense to me. Ten minutes in and she’s got a job, house on any BSC compound, smart car, security and virtual lab that gives her access to everything he’s got his hands in. I don’t say a word but Alder has his hands in everything and by the smile she’s wearing, she’s going to love her new job with Stella Callahan, Mitch and Jess Baxter as incentives. I thought Stella had Solaita in her name but Alder just said Callahan.

The board turns black so I focus on Copper hoping I didn’t miss Alder saying anything to me. “I’ll have my own lab hooked virtually to the server for the ABSZ, Stella Callahan and all the Baxter engineering files.”



I heard that so I nod. “Did you decide on where you want to live?”

“Not in the deserts of New Mexico or Nevada. Somewhere cooler? He said he’d build me a house and lab if I stay in a BSC West Rising Club.”

I lean over and pull up the Badass West map. “The little flames are BSC Rising Clubs. Pick one.”

She’s surprised. “Where does Kiki live?”

“Rising<sup>2</sup> is New Mexico almost in Colorado. We’re from the Elite Club but it’s in Rising<sup>2</sup>.”

She doesn’t understand so I explain. “It’s like a unit in the military. Our jobs are different than the Club. We train and run national and out of country Ops.”

Her nod says she gets it. “It’s BSC so I can live and work from there. I want to be anywhere that trains men to be armed like Kiki.”

I hold my smile back. “We can talk to Piper about a protection dog for you and any BSC compound has armed men. Look Phoenix Rising up and it explains the BSC and what jobs Clubs train for. We’re Elite international but we do have US jobs. The main Square Club is BSC Ops for the territory Lead Phoenix Rising Club. That’s the west coast. They do a lot of FBI Ops too.”

She’s impressed or surprised. “I’ll look it up.”

I’m standing alone watching the door close. She’s going to stay close to Kiki and her arsenal and that makes me happy.

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It’s early morning when we land making finding a room for Copper difficult. I only have Elite information to assign rooms but we’re full with the new team in.

Kiki is no help here and smiles while offering my new house. “You said Mucimi had the second floor up and you still have the apartment in the garage or your bed in the basement with the boxes of wine.”

Fucking Brothers causing shit for me is not funny, so I give her the look that deserves. She quickly ducks out leaving me with Drill and Copper. “Drill, get the gear moving and meet me at eight in the dining room. You’re on sniper training, with the Team going to BSC South tomorrow, Harky is out. I’ll find a place for Copper to sleep tonight.” With a ‘roger’ he starts issuing orders to the ground crew before he’s out the door.

“I’ve been known to sleep at work more than home. Any hotel or bed will work. Construction won’t offend me if there’s water and electric.” At least she’s easy.

“You’re not off the compound with a threat against you. There’s water and electric. I’m just hoping the skylight was put in. There’s a wine cellar that has a cot and the garage apartment so we have choices. I’ll have the Prospect on send your clothes over.”

Her surprise has me smiling. “I sent my sizes just hours ago.”

I nod, taking her elbow to get her moving again. “They’re good taking orders or they wouldn’t be here.”

The ride is quiet until we pass the Officer’s compound. “Bubble houses?”

“Yeah. They’re crazy with building different. Log cabins, Adobe style and bubbles are common on all compounds. I have a silo and the garage is a mini replica of the barn where the trainees bunk. It’s all been renovated to rooms but it’s the first to have a barn and silo houses. Every compound has shared or common rooms like kitchen, living room and library. There’s an activity center and a virtual school for the kids on the grounds, but Elite doesn’t have those or kids here. We’re just training for the Brothers before they move on to their BSC Territory Club.”

“Impressive. Since I was ten, I never went to school at a school and ate at the cafeteria for every meal until I was seventeen.” That’s fucked up.

“So, you don’t cook?” I take a quick look at her seeing a smile.

“I learned how to cook just about everything I ate. Home Ec for me was in the kitchen at the cafeteria, sewing, languages, wood shop and auto mechanics were classes I had young *so as to shape me into a self-reliant woman.*” Her voice goes low like she’s mimicking the words. “My father didn’t want to raise a needy concubine.”

“Concubine? You’re an engineer with doctor thrown in there.”

“Status is lower than a wife. Apparently, my mother was a concubine. My stepmother is a rich German socialite. I’ve never lived in their house. When my mom died, I was shipped to dad’s office and never left. The manufacturing building at the office had a room and nanny for me. When I turned seventeen, I had a one room cottage like the foreign techs working classified had.” It doesn’t explain her father letting her die over money but stepmom may be happier without the constant reminder. I thought the socialite was after Copper’s mom because the woman looks so young.

“That sucks. This is me.” I hit the button for the door and pull the truck into the garage noticing the gator in the rear view. “Your clothes and basic supplies are here.”

Sliding out she doesn’t wait for me to open her door, so I turn for the gator.

“Thanks for running these over, Cheese.”

The Brother is always smiling. “I’m on nights this rotation. The dogs are boring at night. I like delivering better.” He’s a good kid.

“I’m glad we could put you to work. You don’t go in with the dogs even if they’re sleeping.”

His head is shaking before I’m done. “I put the cleaner on their bathrooms and water fountains in the day sections and

pool. Sometimes I blow the dog fur out around the pool wall by the gate.”

“It’s good you remember. I bet they’re happy you keep it clean for them.”

“Piper said I can get a dog if I know how to take good care of him. Sampson is teaching me good.” He points to Sampson sitting in the truck.

Copper laughs drawing Cheese’s eyes. “Oh, here. This is girl clothes and the girl basket.” He all but throws the big paper wrapped package at her and gets back on the gator with an awkward wave.

I throw the Brother chin taking the package from Copper. It’s got to be more than one package that he wrapped all together. “He’s a good Brother but young and a little off. Harky took him in and has him learning different jobs sort of like you did but on a more basic level. He’ll be able to choose what he likes when he finds it. Around here, we train for everything.” I take her elbow again and walk her to the silo.

“He’s disabled?”

“Not here. He’s able to work. They don’t believe in the word. It’s different-abled called D’Ability. They have a lot of D’Ability kids and Brothers that are Goodwill Ambassadors and in jobs like that. Cort’s ol’ lady, Seren, set up houses for D’Ability kids that came out of foster care. You can ask her.”

“It’s a real silo. Cort doesn’t live here to ask him or his spouse questions.”

I nod and open the door. “It’s real and Cort lives at Phoenix but he’s here a lot. He’s everywhere a lot.”

“This is beautiful. How is it so cool in here?”

At the door, I turn to fit the package through and stop short right behind her. *Mon dieu*. Mucimi and friends got a lot done in a day. “Thick spray insulation keeps it cool. It wasn’t this far along when I left. Some friends were helping while I was away.” I guess. The copper fire pit is in and rock is finished all the way to the ceiling. It’s like everything else by looking better than I think I would have done. “Let’s see if the

skylight is in. I had furniture waiting at a warehouse by the hangar but the living room set is here and the stools for the island are in, there may be a bed up there.”

“Is this modern industrial?”

“Don’t know, I pictured steel beams and a Bit drew up plans for me adding the shit I like, then he sent it to Cowboy who picked furniture to fit in here. Some of the pictures are of the vineyard I grew up on in France.” I point to the big, curved canvas over the studded leather couch. They’re all amazing with details right down to the decorative copper flashing that’s outlining the rock up against the I-beam octagon on the ceiling. “The stairs are over here. I want to see the skylight. It was an open roof when I left.” I start walking without looking back. The island is framed but not finished. I’m glad they left me stuff to do. The rope rail isn’t up. I have the pipe to set it in fiberglass so I’m glad they left me that too.

“Unfuckingbelievable.” The wall is up for the second bedroom but the room is empty and unfinished. My room has perfect heavy wood furniture that fits like it was made for the room, a steampunk looking chandelier, the skylight and they’re right, I love it. The balcony looks grayish pulling me out there. When I open the door, it looks normal so I turn and laugh. There’s a film that looks like the tin of the silo. The details are crazy. Privacy isn’t an issue here but I like the option and it keeps the silo look intact.

“What, oh that’s different. It looks like the aluminum from out here. This is the best silo house I’ve ever seen. I’ll give more detail on that tomorrow. I’m exhausted and need a bed, or the couch will work if you have a sheet.” She’s cute.

“Take the bed. The bathroom wasn’t finished but the toilet and shower work. I have a cot downstairs and the bathroom on the first floor is finished.”

“Thank you for the bed and saving me today. I never expected to be sleeping in a beautiful silo on perfect furniture. After the mercenaries this morning I couldn’t have dreamed this up in a million years. It’s been a day and then some.”

I can only imagine. Walking back in, I point to her package on the bed, “You should have enough for the rest of tonight and tomorrow. Sleep well, Copper Rose.”

I pull open drawers and find sleep drawers and underwear then get a hanger from the closet with tomorrow’s work utilities. “I’m going to breakfast at eight in the Club dining room. There’s a golf cart behind the garage under a little carport, follow the road north and you can’t miss the Club. There’s not much food here for breakfast.”

“I’ll remember. Thank you again, Commander. Before you go, what’s your name?”

“Michael Brolin. Everyone calls me MB.”

She nods, turning toward the bed, so I take the opportunity to leave before she has another question. Coming down the stairs, I’m amazed at what they got done while I was gone, it was only one day.

Sliding the heavy cellar door to the side, I’m glad we left the stairs open, it’s cool as soon as you walk through what looks like an old oak barn door. The cobblestone and brick look nice going down. I smile at the wine already on shelves. Someone must have had the Prospects down here.

“Seren did it while Cort was working on the rock today, he wanted to finish it. Seren says you owe her a bottle and she wants a good one.” Nothing surprises me anymore.

“Thanks, Teller. The skylight makes a huge difference. Thanks for your part here.”

Justice appears beside him. “He told Seren he’d empty the last boxes. Caelan and Blue wanted to go swimming before dinner. We got done in less than a half hour, Brother. It was no problem. Everyone wanted to see the silo house. Cool as shit, MB. I’m glad you took the time to do it right. We’re out.” They’re just gone.

“Thanks, Brothers.” I don’t mention the help I had because they were part of that help and know, plus, they’re gone.

I drop my clothes on the chair and me on the cot that's against the much smaller, round utility room that has a sink, toilet, dehumidifier and it's own central heat and air zone to keep the temp consistent. It feels good down here. My eyes close for a second too long and I know I'm not getting back up.

# Chapter Two



## ***MB***

At five my eyes pop open ready for my run. Getting shorts from a box of clothes in the utility room, I change and head out. I love the early morning runs in the summer, winter may have me pushing that to six. At Bravo, I was drenched in sweat coming back from my run. Jack pulled me to the pool explaining he's a swimmer and does laps because he wasn't raised in Kenya. At Bravo, I saw his point, I do love my runs here where it's cooler.

That has me thinking about Copper Rose, aka Dr. Ruth Copper Rose, wanting to be cooler than Arizona or the desert of New Mexico.

I can't say I feel different. A week at every Club had me appreciating the no man's land about as northern New Mexico as you can get, because three miles north puts us in Colorado mountain territory. The views are pretty and weather is perfect here. I'm glad Copper thinks so too.

Shit. That's a slip I can't afford right now. She's mine and I've known it without a doubt since before I met her. The feelings I got from what Kiki pulled up, then the feeling to get to her fast, while I was running the stairs in the riad, had me telling Drill to get the SUV to us. There was no way I was leaving without her and knew I had minutes to make it happen. I did and she's safe. The best thing that happened was Kiki undressing on the plane and showing her arsenal. I'll never thank her but she got Copper to stay here without me having to point it out.

The Brother knows too. She had Copper sleeping at my house earlier this morning and I'll definitely never thank her for that one. It's a little soon for her to be in my house already. I know Cort will push her staying while her virtual Lab is being built. I'll need a plan for that one. The wine cellar or ranch hand apartment will work while Copper gets used to the silo house.

She already likes it. The soft bark stops my smile and I turn. “Brothers,” I say to Harky and the dogs.

Harky throws chin. “I’m out before breakfast, MB. You’re in until I get back.”

I know but throw him chin. “I’ve got Pablo, Ken with Helios and Anakin with Aeolus if the K-9 is needed. You said they mesh well.”

“Yeah, Aeolus takes thrown commands better than spoken and Anakin moved him in last night so they’re partners.”

This has me slowing. “I saw him last night, he didn’t say anything.” I didn’t feel anything different either.

He nods. “Anakin was waiting for Aeolus to bring it up. Anakin has been settled with it since the second Op they ran together.”

Makes sense. “Okay, I’ll have Mikhail switch Aeolus to the team and raise his rank.”

“Ken is going to South territory for a while. Weeks doesn’t have the teams he needs yet and we’re out of country.” He waits for my nod. “Pull a Protector team if you need it. Cort already knows. I’ve got a dog for you. He’s a good match for you with a clever insight.” He slows to a jog as we pass the Club.

“Clever insight?” After Apollo, I figured he didn’t see me as good with a dog. Although I’m always with Zeus.

“Yeah, like how you know shit. He’s a good match to you.”

I’m asking before I think. “Why not Apollo?” Shit.

“As soon as he came in, I knew he was a match for Lt. Colonel Basinger. It was pure luck she asked for a dog not long after. Bruce is a good match for him too. He’s got the same *use whatever is close* quick reactions as Basinger but he’s never worked with a partner.” He reminds me why I was hesitant with Apollo.

“He does jump quick. I’ll meet the new dog. What’s his name?”

He slows to a walk smiling at me. “Prometheus.”

“Titan god of intelligence and quick wit that sided with Zeus against Cronus before he got punished by him.”

He laughs. “Yeah. They’d be a good team too. If I thought Cort would let it fly, I’d have Zeus leading a team and Prometheus as his second.” That will never happen. Cort needs military Leads and sees the dogs but not as Leads yet.

Zeus chuffs agreeing with Harky.

I nod, stopping before Harky turns into the Elite compound. “Anything else I need?”

“No. Piper will have Sampson bring Prometheus over to you if you don’t show at K-9 before breakfast.”

My head is shaking as I smile. “You knew I’d take him.”

He nods. “I did. Zeus sent him your bio so he’ll know you by sight. He’s a match for you, Brother. If Luke Rayne were doing straight Ops, he’d be my second choice for Prometheus but he matches you to a T.” He sees me as sane as Luke Rayne. The only president I see as normal is a good Brother to be likened to.

“Okay. I’ll see him at breakfast. I need a shower and to deal with Copper before breakfast. I’ve got a meet with Drill to take your training classes.”

“I like that our teams are interchangeable. I told Cort no to you heading a Club.”

My head is swinging a *Hell No* for that one. “I’m not leaving and like second or VP here. If I didn’t, I’d be working a team in Mass.”

“I told him you don’t play with shit like that and Justice told him not even to kid about it, so he dropped it. You’re here for however long you want to be here. Copper is your match too, Brother, but you need to keep it from Cort until you’re sure.” The fucking Brother sees everything.

A quick about face has me walking away from his laughing ass. I jog to the silo thinking about Prometheus. I'll have a dog.

The vineyard had dogs on and off but none slept in the house or stayed like it was their home. I'd feed them and even gave one a bath in the inlet but none ever stayed longer than a couple of months. I'll have a dog.

I need a room for a dog. Maybe he'd like the cool of the basement or the office area on the first floor. I don't need an office, it was just what I said the extra room could be. One person doesn't need three bedrooms when the rooms are all decent sized, but I wanted the silo house and I didn't want to share it with the Brothers like a bunkhouse. Prometheus can have the bedroom on the first floor so I'm not lying about an office or wasting the space. I can have my silo house without feeling wasteful. Home on the vineyard was beautiful and fit us without being ostentatious. The *terrasse*, *gradins* or terrace was bigger than the house and fit us because it was used as an extension of our lives with paths and seating areas to the barn, processing, pavilion and tasting buildings. We didn't have dining at the chateau so there was no need for more than we had and from the *terrasse* at the house you could see it all. I like not having more than I need.

With it settled, I shower and plan on what I'm saying to Copper about our new dog that's more like a person. I bet she'll be like Piper and think Prometheus is human.

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## *Copper*

I get to the Club at five past eight and have to wait for security to take me to the dining room, therefore, I'm even later. The man escorting me to the table doesn't react to the two dogs sitting *at the table*. I keep walking, watching the dogs because they're watching me. The big black shepherd is a huge dog that is scary because his eyes stay on me like I'm his breakfast.

MB turns to see what the dog is looking at. "Prometheus, this is Copper Rose or Dr. Ruth Copper Rose, new member. Glad you made it, Copper. This is the Officer's table, when you're here, this is where you eat. The other men here are trainees and not well known to us."

The dog's eyes finally move off me and I relax until he makes a noise then moves making a hologram appear in front of his big head.

"The dogs are officers?" I ask while he pulls my seat out.

Commander MB's normal sized head turns toward me fast. "Yeah, Prometheus is new to me but is ranked as VP and Commander as am I. He's had the training and worked teams in Korea with a Marine Raider like Zeus."

"New doesn't mean you don't know if he'll eat me for breakfast, right?"

The whole table laughs pretty loud so I sit quickly.

Commander MB smiles looking very handsome today after some sleep and in a more casual uniform.

A woman a few seats up the table answers. "No, he's almost human like Zeus. Sampson is my little guy and keeps me sane. I'm Piper, Harky's ol' lady, Loki and Sampson's handler and I don't know what I am to Zeus. He's Harky's partner and like I said, I think he's human. Prometheus is freaky like Zeus so good luck with the hopes of having a dog that you can walk and doesn't think for himself faster than you

can. He could teach you the hologram boards and get you training for everything, so that's a plus to the freaky dogs."

"They train the Brothers and dogs?" I look from the Piper woman to Kiki. "They train people and dogs?"

Kiki rolls her eyes at me making me smile. If I didn't already love the woman, that would be enough. Lucinda finds the 'deplorable habit' one that solidifies my station as lower than dirt. I have many more but never paid Lucinda much attention because I loved rolling my eyes and causing her to get so angry her pitch jumped octaves high it was almost a squeak. The techs close always hid laughs that weren't really hidden making it a continuous occurrence at any meal she showed at, it was usually the mid-day meal so entertainment for the afternoon shift was always good. My father was never amused and I think he knew I did it on purpose. If she didn't show, he'd never have eaten in the cafeteria. Lucinda liked to think she was blessing the commoners with her presence, but it never felt like it.

"Are you okay?"

My eyes go back to Piper. "Yes. I'm tired and was thinking of the eye roll Kiki gave me. I love the gesture and used it to annoy my stepmother."

Her smile is easy and eyes light up. "You can tell us at the ol' lady meetings. I can see they'll already love you. You're an engineer and scientist like Stella?"

"Stella Callahan is more than I'll ever be, but yes. Alder will build me a lab right here."

"Beautiful Copper, before you get into all that, this is Westley, he'll take your order." Commander MB stops whatever Piper was going to say. He's so flirty with me but not the other women. It's not typical French behavior, French guys flirt with everyone, maybe it's a work thing.

I give my order and look up the table but Piper isn't there. Kiki points to the side of me. Turning, I smile at a much closer Piper. "I'm glad you're between me and the dogs. Prometheus watched me like I was breakfast."

She laughs. “This is where I started before you got here. I moved to talk to Kiki about Sally on Ops. Prometheus would never hurt you. They watch people like they’re human. They don’t know how odd it is but you get used to it.”

People around the table laugh but I get it. It’s like what they call freaky.

I get directions on how meals work, the reason for security and a better understanding of dog freaky when Prometheus eats right at the table like he’s human. Apparently, you get used to all of it. No one thought any of it strange.

With a swim date with Piper and her dogs for later, I say bye to Piper but I’m not sure what to do.

Commander MB touches my arm. “You have a meeting with Alder at nine-thirty at the Elite building. They’ll be building a virtual lab in an office at the Elite Club for now. It’s just a matter of getting cameras up and we have the room with only Protector teams allowed in the building so you’ll be safe.” He makes my questions about what to do with another day of nothing melt away. It’s like yesterday when I asked *myself what do I do now?* as the MERC was pointing a gun at me. The Commander came in with laser blue flashing all around him, talking so calm and in control, I thought it was a dream.

“Thanks, I’ve spent enough time sitting idle. My mind is full of ideas and new tests to try on failed or scrapped projects.”

“You’re like Stella. Brinks said she makes spreadsheets so her brain doesn’t explode. I don’t want that brain to explode before we learn anything about you, Copper Rose.” He smiles saying it so it’s not a bad thing.

I’m so excited to meet Stella Callahan and they talk about her like they all see her regularly. I’m going to meet her. My new home is going to be awesome. “I guess, she’s done more than I ever will, but my brain needs work time or I’m no good for anything else.” I feel like I’m getting to that point now but don’t want to tell him that.

Kiki leans over the table. “Bet hostage made that hard.”

I nod for her, but thinking I was going to die stopped my brain from going to future anything but finding ways to stop the needle they kept jabbing me with, then finding a way away from the men who called me Payday. I turn back to Commander MB. “How do I get to the Elite building and where do I get a spreadsheet program?”

The big guy, Drill, laughs. “You’re just like Stella.” He points at Prometheus so I look at the huge dog and his hologram boards.

“That’s the spreadsheets. With a link, you can send or open them to anyone. Mikhail will have a tablet and phone set up for you with our security on it,” Commander MB says. He’s like a genie granting wishes.

That’s a relief. I have no technology at all right now. “I’ll need a computer.”

He nods. “Relax, Copper. Alder, Natalia and Stella will know, the women work for him virtually too, so you’ll get whatever you need. I can take you over. I’m filling in for Harky while he’s out on a job.”

That’s odd but I stand when he does. “Isn’t he the President here?”

“Yeah, but we run jobs for the BSC so we aren’t like real Pres and VPs. We don’t do anything to earn the titles but train Elite and Lead our regular Teams. You’ll learn Badass is crazy.”

Kiki laughs following us out. “They really are. The Commanders are Teams One and Two plus run the training program and are trainers for everything, so Cort gave them Pres and VP. If you don’t know, Cort is the head crazy of Badass. You’ll see what I mean when you meet him.”

Commander MB nods and opens the door for me on the black SUV sitting right outside the Club door. Kiki gets in the back and Commander MB drives.



“Cort is the head of all the BSC Clubs in the west, right?” I read it earlier, that’s why I was late getting here.

“Yeah, every BSC Club here is a Rising Club, so their mother chapter is Phoenix Rising. He hand-picks Presidents for each based on what the Club is for. He’s also Territory Lead for the west so really all Badass Clubs in the west are his domain.” Kiki is a wealth of knowledge. I read the words but she added what I didn’t understand.

“Thanks, that makes what I read understandable.”

“I’ll send you the Bible when you get a chat name. It makes Badass easy to get.”

The dog noise has me looking back. “I didn’t know you got in, Prometheus.”

“He’s asking if you want Copper or Dr. Ruth Copper?” Kiki explains why my names are on the hologram.

“Copper Rose. My dad had to approve the papers so he added Dr. Ruth to it. Ruth was my grandmother’s name.”

“Are you a doctor?” Commander MB asks.

“Yeah, but my name is Copper Ruth Rose. I guess Copper isn’t doctor-like. I was just happy he approved the papers I wrote. It wasn’t anything we were building for him and he said it was a waste of my time so I was surprised they even went out.” My supervisor said they were good and would be good for business. Those were the magic words, I guess.

“Alder was excited to meet you based on something you wrote. He offered a job based on the papers.” He sounds impressed.

“He did. Genetic code, testing and mutation is something he’s working on. Gene editing organically for blood disorders is an area I’m interested in. Seeing him, I know his interest is personal.” I’m excited to see his results and give him what I found with the base pair in the genome that were changed to fix bleeding in hemophiliacs. The college ran tests and those results proved my research is solid. This opens the door for so many other blood disorders that can be fixed

genetically, without the harm of chemo or harsh chemicals that do damage to the body where so many don't recover.

Commander MB gets out and opens my door before answering. The man is chivalrous. "The Alpha-Bits were grown by the CIA using chemicals that caused them to have different blood and health issues. Alder is the only number seven alive, therefore, the one with the most injections. He's sort of freaky too but you'd have to ask him, he said seer to me but I don't get all that freaky ability shit." In other words, it's a *get used to it* thing. Like his hand on my back guiding me in.

I nod, looking at the building that looks exactly like the Club we left minutes ago.

"Welcome to Elite Rising. It's smaller than the Club but we don't need as many rooms and there are no cell rooms or bar here." The Commander shrugs.

I don't ask what that means and walk in behind Prometheus.

"Take her to 208, Brother, she needs to scan in. I need to check in with Ops and see who is on IT today, then I'll be down. Have fun in your new Lab, pretty Copper."

"I'm IT, Commander. Class starts in ten minutes." Kiki rode with us for a reason.

He nods, turning toward me. "I may be there sooner. Prometheus, find me when you're done."

The dog makes his weird noise as he walks the opposite way. I follow the dog giving Kiki a wave.

"See you at dinner, Copper." She takes the stairs before I can ask her where and when.

I have a swim date later and who exactly is going to explain scan in? The dog doesn't talk no matter how human they think he is.

At room 208, I learn how human Prometheus is when his hologram shows me directions on how to scan in. Then he does something touching his hologram that logs my name on

the scanner. He really is more human than dog. He walks in with me and puts his front paws on a counter. The dog is absolutely huge when he stands like that.

Looking around, I see a desk to the side with what looks like rolling shelves running behind it. This is way bigger than an office, making my excitement peak. “I love it already, Prometheus. What’s that?” I point at crates on the other side of the room.

His hologram shows again with ‘supply’ on it. Okay, supplies are going on the rolling shelves. His noise has me turning toward him still at the counter.

A computer and phone are on his hologram. I open the two boxes surprised when the tablet and phone turn on. “They’re very thorough and fast.”

His noise makes me smile this time. “Does that noise mean yes?” It’s sort of like a cough.

‘Chuff, yes.’ Shows.

“The sound is called chuff. I’ll remember. Do all the freaky dogs do it?” It’s a little weird asking him questions but there’s no one else here to ask.

His hologram says ‘yes.’

“Can you send me dog information?”

“Boss Piper, book. You dog.” I read his hologram out loud. “Okay, thanks, Prometheus.” Commander MB did say they’d get me a security dog so I guess it comes with a book.

A picture of him with his name and what I assume is a badge number under it shows then ‘work.’

“I’ll see you later. Thanks for your help.”

He chuffs, then opens the door with his mouth. I hope he’s not a slobbery dog.

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## ***MB***

Running down the training stairs, I hope Copper is still in her Lab. It's been four hours that I was Control on an emergency BSC Op with Anakin and Aeolus. They really do mesh and work like long-time partners. Prometheus meets me at the second-floor landing.

“Brother, I was stuck on Ops. Aeolus and Anakin did a great job at the drilling station in Alaska. The job went quick.”

He chuffs and walks the second-floor office hall with me. “I hope Copper is still here.” Before I hit her keypad, his board comes up with tracking making me laugh. “I like the little rose for her. Did you switch it?”

Mikhail's picture shows. “I'll thank him.”

He chuffs and hits the keypad opening the door.

I push it to fully open and follow my new partner in remembering his room. “I have your gear being moved to my house. The bathroom will be converted for you and they'll put a door so you can come and go like the other Ops dogs.” The work crew in here don't bat an eye our way.

He stops before the long counter and hits his hologram on with a ‘Thanks, Commander.’ He's quick with the answers.

I throw him chin not knowing what to say and look around at the men and women setting up lab shit I've never seen in real life. “Copper?”

A Brother points toward the back so we go that way passing shelves like a library but with smaller aisles. “Copper?”

“Back here,” she answers, then pops her head out between shelves almost at the end.

“There's not much room in between the shelves,” I say seeing smaller aisles.

She's sticking labels on the shelves as she answers. "They roll to close up when not in use. Some have refrigerated units, some medical, some organic materials and others natural elements. They're setting it up so I have the ability to work on varied projects. The electricians set up a new power source for lasers in like two hours. These people are better than the company with getting work done, everything took weeks to get done there."

I wonder why they'd need a power source for laser but don't ask. This isn't a temporary lab and I haven't seen or heard how it's virtual. Whatever she knows or is into has got to be big for Alder to have her stocked for every type of work. "They do work fast when Presidents make a decision. Alder is one of Cort's seconds and he's got his own construction people, so fast is the only speed I've ever seen from him."

"Natalia said basically the same thing. She's on her way, Stella and Alder will meet her here for lunch. They said we'll get lunch then they'll explain the virtual and Alder will make sure all my supplies are in. I'm just getting the labels on so they know where to put everything. I can't believe they'll have it stocked after lunch." Excitement is rolling off her. That is more than fast.

"Did you get a priority project from Alder?" It would tell me what the push is for.

"Testing all types of genetic editing, a more detailed plan on laser capability for satellites and material for shielding were what Alder mentioned. Stella and Natalia had other projects Alder nodded for but they each gave three. Natalia had two coding projects that I've already worked on and pulled Jordan in to talk to me, so I guess he's doing that leaving me one for her." She looks and feels let down by one project from Natalia.

Alder, Stella, Natalia and Jordan are some of the biggest geeks here. Adding her experience to theirs must be a find and a half. I nod realizing why she's in this building of all places. "They're always doing weird shit so you'll end up with more before you know it. Security is upped in here?" Like the

Club in a Club wouldn't be safe enough with Elite being the Club.

She stops with her labels to look at me. "Yeah. I showed Alder and some guy named Web how to cover anything I do. The power source gets distributed throughout the BSC so it would never show outside unless the satellite managers look for it. Alder said he's one of them with Ben Knight, Cort Masters and Hemy Thunderhawk. Alder's the only one that would know how to get into it."

I shake my head. "I wouldn't discount the Presidents of Territories because they all know more than they say and Web is on that list but he'd never be a threat. He took in the A line of Alpha-Bits years ago and hid them in the city Badass Club. Years later he took the rest when Badass found more on a ship or something."

Tears show in her pretty brown eyes but don't spill. "I didn't know that, Web looks so young. Alder said they only found 143 Alpha-Bits."

"It's sad but true. They did find them and they're all here and protected."

A few quick blinks has her eyes and face clearing the sadness of that harsh reality. "They're happy here. I met Sohn and Mikhail." Her smile says she already loves the little Brothers.

"They're good Brothers to know. If you need something..."

"Alder is bringing a little guy named Marco here to be my assistant. He helped build all kinds of printers. Alder said he's a wiz on the computer and with engineering."

*Merde.* This is a bigger push than I've ever seen from the Brothers. "The Alpha-Bits are impressive. I'm surprised he isn't sending a medical Bit."

Her smile is a carefree and easy look I'll remember. "Marco helped Carmen in the big lab and did sensitive information at IT but likes engineering more. They're funny little people that bounce around more than I do."

“It’s a good match then. I’m glad you’ll have an assistant as impressive as you are. Cort will be here tonight. He wants the dog we had in Morocco with you. Harky agreed so Piper will explain it and you can add another to your team. Sally is known as a courier and can carry information for you but she’s a trained Op dog so Security when you’re out will be her job.”

That carefree smile has me hooked. “She’s normal sized, I like that, no one will expect her to protect me.”

I nod. “Ops dogs are trained to kill so, yeah, she’ll protect you and no one will expect that. You need training before she’s with you full-time.”

Her look turns to surprise. “I’ll train. Can I go to the dining room with just Sally?”

“Yeah, now you need Security but with the dog you wouldn’t need more for the dining room at the Squared Club, Copper.”

She giggles sounding young. “I like Squared for the Rising Rising Club and the way my name sounds with your accent. Having a trained dog will make it easier for me to move around. With the way virtual worked this morning, I won’t be leaving the grounds much.” She’s back to her labels starting on the back shelf.

I don’t agree. “Parties are everywhere in BSC. You’d pick up a team before you go to one. Badass is crazy but they know how to keep Brothers engaged so we’re all not cave dwellers outside of work.” That doesn’t look or feel like it makes her happy.

“I don’t do much outside of work.”

I don’t either but I show for a while. I throw right back, “You have a better class of people here that are excited to get to know Copper Rose. Aside from the geeks you met this morning, we have Cort’s ol’ lady that’s like Google with recall, Prince Protectors, an Indian Marine doctor, an Olympian that now trains by imprinting horses or something,

the FBI's old director and his daughter is Web's ol' lady, IT head for Bravo, a chocolatier..." I stop with her giggle.

"Okay, okay, they sound way more interesting than the techs I was around and Stella said I need to meet Faith, Maiyun, Aylen and Jeti. Are they in that list you gave?"

I shake my head smiling. "Aylen is President of the advocacy Club."

She nods. "Zion. I saw it but haven't read about it yet."

I keep going. "Jeti was a trainer at FBI Badass but is now a trainer and SAA for Veritable. Faith is a social worker that runs D'Ability houses and a sort of adoption service for Badass and Maiyun is an Indian that was used by the CIA, but ended up here doing something for Alder with the freaky gifts the ancestors gave her." My smile at her shock has Prometheus hitting my leg. I look down.

Copper reads his board. "Information slow. I agree with Prometheus. That's a lot of people that are nothing alike. How do they get along?" She throws it out but I feel anxiety coming off her.

"They all believe in Badass and the objective, but they call the objective the vision because they're mostly Indians, I think. I'm not sure how all that works. A lot of the women here are drawn here. Badass protects Piper, Natalia and Jane, hell mostly all the women for one reason or another. You'll get it when you meet them. Anywhere you go, you can leave at any time. It's good to be seen and talk to new people but you don't have to stay forever because you think you should. I go and leave without anyone giving me shit for it." Now I feel her relief.

"So, I'm not the only one here just for protection. That's good to know. I was starting to feel funny about all the money Alder is spending to set up the Lab. I have money but he doesn't want it." She looks my way before turning to the last aisle.



I'm not telling her they are all ol' ladies now. My head is shaking, I'm a shit. "The government gave them a ton of money for what was done to them. Alder's always giving it to good causes. They make money with recycle and computer shit they build so they don't need it."

"Commander MB, ABSZ, Alpha, Honor choppers setting down in five." My watch says we've been here long enough.

"Roger, Flight. We'll meet them at the portico. It's time, beautiful Copper." Going around the shelf, I see she's almost done with her labels.

"One row and I'm done."

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I spend the afternoon back in Ops. It's an easy shift after my training shift with the Team for Mass that's leaving next week. The trainees here are nothing like the Club trainees. Our elite teams are known and vetted before we see them. It always surprises me that we don't have overblown egos filling the classes, it's just the opposite, the men are appreciative for the chance to do a job they spent years training for. It's not easy finding jobs that military were trained for in the public sector.

Bridge sits back. "Phoenix has the plane, Commander. We're out unless you're called in." Phoenix always lets us know they're up.

I look and see the board showing we're not on the Ops board in Phoenix. I swipe boards until I find BSC.

"Thanks, Bridge. BSC IT has it. Phoenix Ops is the actual Club."

He looks then nods. "Thanks. I'll fix the way I say that. BSC IT is outside of the Phoenix Club. I've been there

and think of it as Phoenix. Phoenix would have told us not sent it on the board.”

I nod. “Some of the Alpha-Bits type more than speak. It’s how I knew to look. You didn’t have a problem with the boards?”

“Not at all. I’ll get the names and lingo down for here but it was an easy shift with no problems.” He’s watching me and I feel anxiety rolling off him.

“It was for me too. I was just thinking about the level of Brothers we end up with. I’m glad we’re not a regular training Club. I’ve seen assholes trying to prove themselves and don’t think I’m up for the retraining boot camps Phoenix does.” The Adroit Paxton ass comes to mind here. He was paying people to talk him up. I’m glad he was never even an option.

He relaxes. “I haven’t seen anyone like that here, Boss. Even the Club Officers are easy-going Brothers.” He came from a shit Club in Australia after a tour in their military.

I’m glad he put an app in with BSC International. “They’re doing a good job of picking them. A Prince Brother told me there’s over fifty apps for every job that they post. I think their readers know just what to look for because we end up with great support and teams.”

“I didn’t know that. They picked me even though they had to write special code for me to see the holograms.” He’s asking, not telling me.

“Code for the Club is nothing if they get the best Brother for the job. Look at Bastille, they got him new legs knowing he’s a Lead for an Elite Team. You need more than good stats to get here.”

“Making it here feels good, knowing that feels better. Thanks, Commander. I’ve got a date for dinner.”

I throw him chin and check the time walking out.

Harky and Wecks land in Germany tonight. They’re getting proof for the FBI and the plan is blowing up the

manufacturing site before drones can be built. Web and Geek say they just started them. I didn't ask how they got their information, I'm just glad they got it.

I get to the Club just after six and I wish I'd taken more time on that shower. It's wall to wall people again. I find Pres and Marks in front of the grill Charlie is manning.

"Pres, Charlie, VP." I throw chin then look at the food. "It looks good, thanks, Charlie." Her smile and nod is her answer before she moves away.

"Good job with Alaska today. The jets get you everywhere fast." Marks mentioned it before.

"Yeah. It wasn't a full team so it worked. Where's Cort?"

Pres smiles. "With your girl checking out the new Lab."

Sonofabitch. "She's not mine and got here less than twenty-four hours ago."

They both laugh. I'm not uttering another word about it and hope the Justice League keeps it to themselves.

Mucimi shows in front of me and not a second later Teller is there with his hand over Mucimi's mouth. "Brother, no one is talking about anything that would fuck with your life. Justice warned the Protectors."

I'm relieved and throw him chin. "Thanks, Teller. I'm not freaky and need time to build trust for a life with someone."

Mucimi's head shakes but Teller doesn't let him talk. They're both gone a second later. Pres and Marks laugh. I look for anyone not freaky to sit with and see Brinks with Jinx so I leave them laughing.

"Brothers." I sit while they throw chin.

"That Alaska job was quick." Brinks was my BSC monitor today.

I nod. "Thanks for getting us in and out quick."

“Anakin and Aeolus are like watching Zeus and Harky. I think Harky is going to put a dog with every Team Lead.”

Harky said he was when he found the K-9 matches so I nod.

Jinx laughs. “They do the job and love the work. I’d add a K-9 to every team if I were Harky.” He’s a smart Brother.

“He’s waiting for matches to the Leads. I got Prometheus. He said he’s my match.”

Brinks shakes his head. “I thought you’d get Apollo. How does he know a match?”

“Apollo was quick to jump to weird shit I didn’t order. Harky said he was Basinger’s match. Those recons are crazy and use whatever is close to do the job. I wasn’t trained with the over-the-top crazy they think up like that. Harky sees everything and knows dogs.”

Jinx nods. “He’s a sniper so he’d see everything. He knows Marines better than I do so he’d see the different training or habits the K-9’s would get. I’m glad he’s pairing them up with the Leads. Where’s Prometheus?”

“With the Prospects moving him into the silo. They got his bathroom switched out and were putting a door in for him.”

“They’re fast with that shit. Luke Rayne said they put a big shower tray on the floor that’s already got the keypad and computer for the dog wash and grass rinse.” Jinx is impressed.

“I saw the dog bathroom at the K-9 compound. I didn’t know they put the wash in houses. The compound’s is big enough for ten dogs.”

Jinx smiles with his eyes swirling before it settles on light blue. “Stella made it one piece because everyone is getting dogs. Adroit had a woman that took what Knight came up with and made it as a one-piece unit Stella perfected.

Champ has his own bathroom now.” They’re crazy in an efficient way.

“Convenient,” Brinks says smiling at me. “They’re still crazy.”

I nod.

Jinx hits my arm. “What’s with the scientist?”

“Father was letting the terrorists have her so he could build different drones that can’t be detected. He went to the military for protection on his building without mentioning the contract he took for the undetectable drones. His plan was to collect from the US for the useless ones he was supposed to supply to us.”

“Jesus, her father is a dick.”

I nod at the swirling eye as it stops on me.

Brinks leans forward. “She gave Jordan something today that he told Cort she needs protection for.”

I bet. “She’s into all kinds of building and projects so I guess it fits.”

Jinx laughs. “Keep it vague. Stella said she’s a national treasure. She got her clothes and has everything the woman will ever need at the Lab.”

“I heard some of the projects she’ll be working on. She’s already done most of what the geeks asked.”

They both laugh but stop when Cort pulls the chair beside me and sits. “Your girl already blew the geeks’ minds.”

I shake my head. “She’s been here for less than 24 hours. She is in no way mine. She needs a house.”

Cort gives me a look. “You’ve got the only open rooms on the whole fuckin’ compound. Give her a room. She’s not living at the Club. Do you know who she is? She’s like Natalia, Stella and Jordan. Web said more like Mitch. She’s not anywhere unprotected. They’ll try to get her back once they realize she’s alive.”

That surprises me. “They don’t know?” The terrorists would have made threats when she didn’t get delivered.

“BSC wiped the cell out and didn’t leave anyone to make that report.” Cort isn’t explaining so I nod. We weren’t the only ones in Morocco, apparently.

“So, give her a room and make sure she’s covered. She fucked with power and shit making sure whatever she’s doing isn’t drawing attention. Alder will be her Lead. He’s excited, Brother, meaning he’ll show here regularly.”

“We could build her a house.” I’m not owning her in less than a day.

The look I get from those eyes stops my breath. “Elite doesn’t have a compound, you have a silo and barn with training tracks and shit. Harky lives at the Officers Compound. You didn’t get her a room at the Club to sleep in knowing she needs to be protected. You knew it without knowing who the fuck she is. You didn’t send her with your assault geek, you took her to your house on the Elite compound knowing full well that she’d be safest with you. Keeping her safe was already in your head. She stays with you. Fey means you know it. Freaky isn’t talking but I bet they know it too. I’ll call Mucimi if you want the future pictures.”

My head is shaking no before he’s even done. Mucimi may show those pictures if Cort asks. They can’t lie to Cort. “I could be gay.” I throw out with no other idea to slow this down.

Jinx almost falls out of his chair laughing. Champ pushes him up and Brinks shakes his head.

“You’re a player. You’re not gay and you already knew she was yours. I’m finding Caelan.” Cort stands and walks away happy about finding his boy with Jinx still laughing.

Brinks gives me a shrug. “He sees everything. Take what you need but don’t prolong it. Mucimi might help if you need to convince her. He helped with Maiyun but she’s Indian so I don’t know how that works. Justice is the best to help the

Brothers with this shit. He got Nova a week's reprieve and slowed Ben and Cort down for Michaels." Michaels has a house full of freaky kids that showed like a week after the woman.

I stand up. "*Merde*. You're all fucking crazy and don't even think about putting fucking kids here." My French accent comes out more pronounced and sounds like I'm growling, causing eyes to swing our way.

I shake my head and walk away from the insane twins laughing like the rest of my life is a fuckin' joke. It's not a joke to me.

My only family is Jules and he's eight years older than me so he was always the older cousin that showed up for holidays but not for much more. Since his sister Francesca died two years ago, I lost the closest family I had left. Francesca always picked the worst men and died trying to get away from one of them. I know Jules had a hand in the missing man but never asked. I miss my cousin and our long talks about what makes us tick to a different clock. Francesca always kept me grounded.

I can't say I've had great taste in women and need to know more than her name to base a lifetime commitment on. Granted, before I just wanted to bed the women not live with them.

The thought has me stopping at the pool gate. I knew she was mine. Something in me knows that but I don't know the woman. My feet won't move. I knew she was mine. Turning, I look for her, Cort is here so Copper must be back. She's sitting with the women with a peaceful look on her face and eyes just bouncing from one face to another. When her head turns my way, I smile. She knows. She's mine and I better learn more about the woman before they start planning the party that begins the rest of our lives.

# Chapter Three



## *Four days*

### *MB*

Because I know the command lines, Sally lives with us now, which is why she's on the morning run. Prometheus seems to like the company. I take no offense when they race to the river. Zeus and Aeolus pass me catching up to Prometheus and Sally faster than I do. Aeolus jumps off the bank with my two but Zeus sits on the edge by the three watches I didn't see them drop before jumping in. The dogs are smarter than me.

"Glad you're back. You want to go in, Brother?"

He doesn't look my way but his board shows 'no towel.'

"I'll carry your leg back. It's not far to K-9 from here on the back path."

His chuff and turn has me smiling as I bend to take his leg off. It's two straps that release quick and he's jumping. The dog is impressive in his form as if he's a diver jumping in a pool. I shake my head noticing Prometheus poking Zeus with his nose when he gets closer to the other three. They seem closer than any dog I've seen Zeus with yet. Maiyun is still his closest friend but she's human.

I look back but don't see Harky or Anakin. My phone shows Harky at his house and Anakin at Elite.

I call Anakin wondering if everything is okay. It's early for a training class. "Brother, anything happening that I need to know?"

"No, Brother. We're off and waiting for Teller to pick us up." It's a Protector Activity day.

I don't ask what crazy they're doing today. "Have fun, Brother. Aeolus is at the river with us."

"He was headed to K-9. Zeus must have snagged him to go see Prometheus. They got in a half hour ago, Zeus's

happy to be home.”

“Thanks, we’re headed to K-9 after their swim. Have a good day, Brother.” I don’t ask the freaky anything knowing shit just shows in their heads. It’s like me and the feelings but they get a whole lot more than feelings from what I’ve seen.

I sit by the watches on the ground and watch the dogs play for a good half hour. They race and paddle, treading water like people. I wonder if Copper Rose would like this. Happiness with everything here and that’s new for her seeps out, even for mundane things like making the silo more livable than a construction site. I smile thinking she’d like watching dogs act like people. Weird dogs. Zeus barks once and they all head to a low section with rocks leading up to the bank. I collect the watches and Zeus’s leg and walk their way while they shake water off.

“The K-9 path is right there. When we get there, you should be dry enough for the watches and your leg, Zeus.”

Zeus sits signing, ‘thanks.’ The others chuff.

K-9 has more dogs than I’ve seen here or maybe it’s that they’re all bigger than I’ve seen. I ask Zeus while getting his leg on. “Where’d they all come from?”

As soon as he’s strapped up, his board pops on. ‘Germany, stolen. Breeder send BSC. Immortal, Deity, king, oracle name. Ops K-9.’ *Mon dieu*. Someone wants an army of dogs. That’s not a comforting thought. It dawns on me we have an army of dogs now.

“How many?”

‘31 + 8. 2 Ops’

This includes Prometheus’s group. *Mon dieu*.

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I come up to Attiquin and Copper on the mats. Cort wants her in training and a status for where she's at. Apparently, I'm his newest assistant and have been sent to get his information for two days now. Hourly, I hope for a new Club to open.

"I don't know Krav Maga. Wing Chun and Jeet Kune Do are what I was taught. Wing Chun for hurting the central area of the body and Jeet Kune Do for adaptable fighting in different situations." Copper is good with the explanations.

Attiquin looks at me with her eyebrows raised. Copper turns and a smile appears. I like the smile appearing at the sight of me.

"I never heard of Jeet and Wing training."

I nod for Attiquin. "Jeet Kune Do is similar to Krav Maga, everything and anything is a weapon. Wing Chun focuses on close range damage to the trunk or center of the body. I've seen a man try to rip a heart out but he was not successful. If he'd been trained correctly, he would have succeeded."

"That's just gross. Since you know what the heck she trained for, show me." Attiquin doesn't look like a fan of Wing Chun.

"Sparring is part of training so I can help you get a better idea. What level are you at, Copper?"

"Second degree black in Jeet Kune Do and level eight in Wing Chun. I wasn't interested in weapons for it so I stuck with Jeet Kune Do." *Mon dieu.*

"I'm impressed. Ready, Baby Ruth."

I just bend my knees when my head is slammed and I'm looking at the mat.

"What the fuck are you doing? Sparring isn't knocking him out. How'd you do that? Commander, are you okay?" Attiquin slaps my face until I stop her hand.

Shaking my head, I turn so I'm on my back. "My head has bells ringing in it. Other than that and I'm on the mat, I'm

okay.”

Attiquin is up and spinning. “Why’d you sucker kick him like that?”

Copper leans over me. “Baby Ruth is a candy bar, national symbol or something for baseball. My name is Copper Rose. Use it right and know you are the only one that thinks Baby Ruth is cute.”

She walks away to Attiquin’s hands on her hips. “Hey, I’m supposed to assess you for training.”

I shake my head. “Let her go. She’s somewhere around Freedom and Stella’s training. Elite will be good for her to spar with.”

She gives me a look. “She knocked you on your ass first shot.”

I smile. “She did. She didn’t ready herself, just kicked. In a fight, you don’t stand readied. You fight with any advantage you can use. She did that.”

Attiquin’s not impressed. “She was kidnapped by terrorists from work.”

“They had help inside and she was drugged. There’s no way anyone would have gotten her without her being drugged.”

She looks at me. “Is that why she was giving you a hard time?”

I start walking, still holding the side of my head. “Hard time?”

“Kiki said she wasn’t speaking English and didn’t say a word on the way back. Knight couldn’t read her, was she drugged?” Her father probably mentioned her training to the terrorists to make sure she was, but I’d never say it to Attiquin. They all already know he was a piece of shit.

We didn’t check her blood when we got her on the plane and we should have. She said she’d been drugged when they took her. “Probably. She was clearer on the plane after the ride to the border. Christian told Ben what she’d been through

because Ben said she had shit flying in her head but he couldn't get it."

She nods and checks her watch. "I'm calling Freedom. I'm not sparring with Copper the nut."

I shake my head. "She's not a nut, she's effective. I can get Elite to spar with her."

She shakes her head. "Pres wants her trained and sent me."

I stop her at the door. "Cort sent me. I'll..."

She laughs. "I'll call Cort with the feeds." She runs. "I'm calling Freedom too!"

Sonofabitch.

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Forty minutes at my desk was spent talking to Cort then Freedom and of course, comments from the peanut gallery. The Brothers sending laughing or laid out emoticons took up most of that time. I sent them all thumbs up emoticons back. What else can I say? She used the advantage open to her and kept herself from being touched. I also know Baby Ruth is not an acceptable nickname and will never say it again. Dr. Ruth isn't passing my lips either. Maybe her father using Ruth pissed her off more than I heard or felt but she wasn't kidding when she lectured me over Baby Ruth, I felt that annoyance as if it were my own.

I smile at the surprise I felt and, as if he planned it, Harky has to come in to see it.

"Brother, you're not pissed about Copper." It's a statement not a question.

I shake my head at the Brother. How does he see shit like that? "How would you know that?"

“Cort said you’re smarter than him and saw it for an advantage. I guess he polled the Presidents.”

Cort is crazy. I nod. “It explains why I got the peanut gallery comments.”

He smiles. “What’d you say?”

I shrug. “Nothing. I sent a thumbs up back. There isn’t much to say. She demonstrated a second-degree black belt response to being readied. There is no readied.”

He nods. “That’s what I told Cort. Freedom said the same thing and is impressed with the instantaneous jump, spin and kick. She said Copper is like Jack at Bravo.”

I nod. “Cort had Freedom on with him when he popped in. I sparred with Jack, Freedom is right, but I didn’t see her full move until Cort showed the feed.”

His nod says he’s done with the Copper rehash. “The team going to Mass are being pulled a day early. I need help with the new dogs. I think the eight we got from Lithuania were part of the group. Prometheus gets them settled as quick as Zeus does.” Zeus would be recognized as alpha here so Prometheus would fall to beta.

“At the river, I thought they knew each other. Zeus seems to be closer to Prometheus than the other dogs.”

He nods. “Piper said that but Zeus has been with me for all but his first year or whatever. When he wasn’t with me, he was on base with Piper seeing him regularly. Apollo is older than Zeus, so is Perses, so they’d have been leads with the younger pups.”

I shake my head. “Not if they were already in training. You separate the dogs out based on their level. Wouldn’t someone growing an army? We do it with people right here.” Our trainees are the top of the boards but we test and assess every move they make including interaction with fellow soldiers. Group dynamics are a huge part of our testing.

Everything on him stops like he’s in the middle of an Op and doesn’t want to be detected. When his energy spikes he smiles. “We do and they would have. I need to talk to the

breeder. He was distracted by Zeus but never said why. He didn't know the others with deity names."

"Zeus said deity, immortal, king and oracle names. It fits with the names I've heard."

Harky is surprised. "How would he know that? Are they names based on levels or ages?"

I put my hands up. "He wrote it this morning when I brought them back to K-9. You obviously didn't give it to him, so I'd say he knows it from whoever had him before you or the Op. Who was on it with Zeus?"

"Anakin and Mucimi. It was during the BSC job Ben sent you on in Brazil. I couldn't leave and Wecks didn't have a full team."

"How did Wecks do?" I don't want to talk about the job and need to know if they're ready to run in the south. We sent two teams back to them but one Lead clashed with Hemy. Wecks dropped him on the spot and called Harky unsure about leading men he didn't know. Ken got him settled and showing more confidence in the job.

"He's Wecks. He knows the job and now the men. He ran the Op perfect and was guiding his Lead from the plane." So Harky was there to assess.

"The Lead?"

"Gone. He was right to drop him. Hemy said spastic or something that is offensive in England but not here. It was a warning about freaky being normal there and Hemy wanted them to be aware of it."

"Shit. I liked both Leads but that one kept to himself. I thought he just needed time to bond with his team." His scores were low with interaction but he was new to the team he was sent with.

He's shaking his head. "I thought the same thing. The three weeks they had didn't loosen him up. Hemy said he thought he was better than Wecks."

He wasn't. Harky nods like he knows what I thought. "So, I need help with the dogs. They have all the command lines and respond to Zeus, Prometheus and me. It's like they know us all and weird as hell. I need Brothers with all the commands and Ops training to run with them. Anakin, Luke Rayne, you and Mucimi are all I'd trust with them. Wecks and Taylor are taking the elite jobs for the week. We're training but free to test the dogs for the rest of our time. I want real Op scenarios and we have our trainees and teams to provide the scenes."

I'll be here for the week. "Okay."

He laughs. "How are you doing with Copper?"

"The woman knows a lot of shit. She told me why French wine has a more earthy or mineral taste than the US's younger fruity flavor."

He laughs. "Did you know?"

I roll my eyes at him thinking of Copper's stepmom eye roll story. "Yeah, but she's not a wine drinker. She read about it." I'm changing that daily.

"So you've been talking and getting who she is." His happiness in that surprises me because he's not showing it outwardly.

"Yeah. She's been helping me finish the kitchen in the silo. It's a good buffer that's comfortable and makes talking about anything easy." She loves working with anything and had cabinet pull-outs installed in no time.

"That's good. Piper and Kiki love her. How's she doing with Sally?"

I'm surprised he'd ask me, Piper is training her. "Piper said she's a natural and was running her in the simulator already." It took me a full week before I was in the simulator with Apollo and Zeus.

"I've been out and haven't seen Piper yet. She's at the ABSZ with Perses for testing the Security dogs he trained." That would explain why he's asking me.



“Copper said she trains later today. I didn’t ask. So, when are we starting with the dogs?”

“Today. Our Teams are the trainers for Elite. Tomorrow we’ll have Anakin, Luke Rayne and Mucimi. They’re all off today.”

I stand and check that my gun is on laser. “We’ll hear where they went for the Protector activity day.”

“Swimming or swimming to caves that are deeper than I’d ever swim to.” He knows everything for a Brother that’s always busy and just got back.

“We found quite a bit of treasures in caves.”

He nods walking out with me. “You can have every bit of it. Scuba isn’t my thing and Jacques Cousteau never caught my interest.” He doesn’t know what he’s missing. There’s a peace below the surface that you never forget.

I know he’s done jobs in water but would never ask. Some of the jobs we were sent on will never be a source of pride, never be sanctioned and definitely never owned by the higher ups that gave the order.

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## *Copper*

I get to the K-9 compound and see Sally sitting by Commander MB and Prometheus. Great. I need to apologize but was hoping to do that with the French dinner I looked up and threw in the oven for him. A Prospect is bringing bread, meats and cheeses from the delicatessen in town Three. I even got the two wines to go with the cheeses and the meal out of his cellar. He's got a lot of wine down there. I'm embarrassed I went on about wine to him. He said he grew up on a vineyard but he went into the military and never took a job with his family.

I'm stalling like I'm twelve. Moving through the compound, I go right toward the section he's in but Piper stops me.

"We're back in the simulator, Copper. Get Sally and bring her over," she yells from the first door of the big building.

With a nod, I turn back to see Commander MB walking to the gate. "I didn't see Piper come in, beautiful Copper. I was just dropping the dogs and getting the next group." He looks back at the dogs sitting and opens the gate for Sally. "Sally, Train, simulator one, Copper Rose Lead." He closes the gate as soon as she passes him. At least he isn't mad. I still got the beautiful Copper flirt.

Sally comes out with her eyes on me. "Attention." I hold my hand out like he showed me and Sally sits at attention. "I'm sorry I kicked you earlier. I have a dinner in the oven and had a plan to show you, never expecting to see you here."

His smile has me relieved. "You showed what a second-degree black belt would do with an advantage. Readied is not in your repertoire. I'm sure dinner will be perfect but it wasn't needed."

I smile at that. "No, it isn't, but I was angry with the Baby Ruth name and should not have jumped to anger so

quickly. It's never happened before and I'm normally not ever angry when sparring."

He's still smiling. "I'll never say the name again, beautiful. Freedom is coming tomorrow to meet you. She'll get you training material that will work for you virtually and we have men here that you can spar with."

I can't help smiling. "Just not you?"

Now he laughs. "Cort said no and Freedom is against it."

"The we belong to each other thing?" Their '*you get used to it*' saying seems to cover everything. The women told me I was his. He didn't deny it and I know French men move fast. I can't say I'm broken up about it. No one has ever decided I was theirs. He says he feels it and I can't say I don't. There is something about the Commander that I want to be close to and have no idea why. He's handsome, intelligent, funny, has the sexy light French accent, is always a gentleman, touches me whenever he's close and is very considerate to everyone. I guess when you put it all together, he's a good guy to want to be close to.

"Yeah." The answer comes with his mesmerizing eyes. I nod and he smiles. "I need to get the group moving but like that you accept that so easily."

Now I'm smiling. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel it. Piper is waiting. I'll see you for that apology dinner."

His nod releases me or something. It's like his eyes hold me hostage sometimes. As Sally walks beside me, I hear him command the dogs. I'm not surprised when he jogs by with them all following in a single line. They don't even look our way as we get to the first door.

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On the walk to the Officers compound, I get complimented again for the citrus veal and the quenelle mousse thing that's more like a fish soufflé. The veal went in the oven for eight hours and I didn't touch it. The soufflé went in when I got home and was done when Commander MB walked in with Prometheus. The dogs liked the food too but they're dogs, I'd think they like everything that's food.

"You said you felt the connection we have." Commander MB pulls me out of my dog musings. He's always so direct about his feelings. Not something I'm used to from men.

"I do. I did the day you rescued me but thought it was a form of hero worship. I wasn't quite clear and the dream-like rescue had my head spinning. The more I learn about you, the more connected I feel. You understand me better than my family does and have never said how repulsive they are. It tells me you don't feel the need to point out all my flaws." I sneak a look to the side, surprised to see his face darken.

He stops and turns me. "Your family is not you or a flaw you ever have to own. They make their own decisions just as you do. I heard you tell Ben you went to your father about the new undetectable drones. That was you watching out for the unsuspecting world. It's a commendable and courageous decision you made that you can own proudly. It's also the decision that almost got you killed." He's angry?

Words like that keep me repeating them over and over. Those eyes hold mine hostage again, so much so, that I don't realize it until his finger softly grazes down my cheek. The motion has me nodding as I put the words he said away. He's like a dream with everything.

"*Mondoux*, you have a beautiful soul with the courage of ten men and, Copper, that soul had me hooked before I met you. The need to find and keep you safe was a feeling I had reading the job objective."

"*Mondoux*, my sweet, my gentle, my gracious," I translate seeing him smile. Oh Lord, I said it out loud. "Thank you, Commander." He really is a dream.

His face moves closer and I have to close my eyes. It's so unbelievable, like the rescue dream. His lips on mine are real. My arms move to hold him right there, then move as the heat running through me intensifies.

When he steps back, I realize two things, I'm having trouble filling my lungs and now I need to concentrate to keep his lips from holding me hostage.

"*Mondoux* fits the feelings you invoke well. Perhaps you can call me Michael now you've kissed me like I matter." His bent finger softly grazes my cheek again, it's hypnotic.

I nod. "I've avoided it so I'm not making this more than it is, but I think you just convinced me it is more, Michael."

He laughs shaking me out of that dream-like moment. "It is so much more and I'm glad I convinced you. I'm sick of sleeping on the cot, *Mondoux*." His lips brush mine and we're walking again with my hand in his.

Sleeping on the cot? I don't get to ask anything because he talks about the silo and dogs. I have no idea how long the walk took but we're at the fire pit when Kiki and Attiquin pull me over to Ginny and Piper.

"Dinner turned into dinner and bed?" Attiquin asks.

Oh no. I shake my head.

"Leave her alone. She's dazed, not in a sex stupor." Mitena sits by me. She's from the Zion Club but comes to see her cousin Ginny and twin brother Anakin so she's here a lot.

I'm glad my brain is working again and nod. "I felt like a hostage when his eyes hold mine and now when his lips touch mine.

"It's new and we get it. You don't have to explain. So how was the French dinner?" Piper asks.

"He loved it and hasn't said anything else about me kicking him. You're right he was never angry about it."

Attiquin laughs. "He wasn't. I was until he said you proved your rank by using the advantage. Freedom agreed. I

just started Krav Maga here, the FBI didn't teach it and we never sparred."

I nod. "Freedom called me and is coming tomorrow. I never learned it either but she says it's similar to what I know." I watch them talk wondering why I never felt this closeness with the techs. They avoided me mostly but I never tried to get closer to them. They weren't open like these women. I just met these women and think I love them all already. Years with the techs in Germany didn't feel anything like this. Maybe Commander Michael Brolin's connection opened a floodgate. It's been a long time since I lost my mom and felt connected to another person, now I have more.

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## ***MB***

Ribbing from the Brothers over getting laid out by Copper is what I expected, so none has me smiling. Marks said I was right and everyone must agree by not bringing it up. I'm okay with this and move right along with them.

"How was dinner? Piper said she made a real French dinner to apologize." Harky asks.

"Perfect. It was like my grandmother made it."

"Not a favorite?" Marks sees everything.

I shrug. "It was very good and authentic. I've changed since I was a kid."

He nods. "French food is rich and meals made to last over conversations and connections." Marks is pretty smart too and reminds me that Copper recognized our connection tonight for the first time.

"Yeah. While the food reminded me of being in France, the time and setting just felt off. We talked but it wasn't a lingering meal that the familiar taste calls for, I guess."

He nods. "I know what you mean. Clam boils and bakes were on beaches and taste the same here, but the feel is different and it isn't a whole day of fun in the water like when I was a kid."

That's exactly it, so I nod.

We all watch Pres and Charlie come in. Pres sits her with the women then moves to us throwing chin at the acknowledgments. "How'd it go with the dogs?" He asks Harky right off.

"Good, they're all Ops trained as if we did it. I'd think the breeder's dad was their trainer. It's everything he told me to do for Zeus. They even eat like Zeus."

Pres groans. "What are we going to do with thirty-one more dogs? You think we'll find thirty-one more handlers?"

Harky told me Pres wasn't happy with the twenty Ops dogs Cort wanted here. Now there are just over fifty.

"We could use them here for compound Security and I know Ben and Hemy wanted a couple. Falcon wants two."

"Compound Security? Security is nowhere near Zeus's level." Pres is right about that but not seeing the potential of having dogs as Security for the compound.

Harky nods but I know he doesn't agree. "Piper, Ginny and now Copper need Security off the compound, added to their details, it saves the Brother-hours and a shit load of benefit pay. For Piper and Copper, moving around the compound they'd need an Ops dog with their own. Neither is helpless and both know command lines."

I nod and Pres catches it then turns to Marks. "I think they'd be an asset and save us the Brother pay for standing jobs. Harky is right. When Brinks hears how they're trained, he'll want one for Stella."

Harky's eyes shift to me stopping me from jumping in.

Pres thinks about that. "Yeah, Cort will want one on Caelan's detail, maybe even Seren's. I can see them being more cost efficient on the standing jobs. I was never Security and would hate standing jobs. I didn't love the standing jobs as an Enforcer but never had many of them." Marks said Pres was on the Op side of Security in their old Club while Marks was IT for Ops.

I was going to point out the benefit but he got it. I throw chin to Harky. He knows Pres better than I do.

"Something you should know, Pres. Prometheus and Zeus know each other and the other K-9s know them both. Not just the seven others from Prometheus's group but the thirty-one."

"One short of forty. Did a dog get left behind? Prometheus came with seven Ops dogs but you took Prometheus out of the group. Is he a higher level?"



Harky nods. “He is, Pres. I saw it before we got back but Zeus let him out of his crate halfway through the flight. He had the flight crew getting water for him. Alder has their blood to test but I haven’t heard anything yet. I handed the vials for the thirty-one over to Alder when he was here.”

Pres looks from Harky to Marks. “Find out what’s going on with the eight. Were they injected like the Bits?”

Marks nods. “They were. I know they had paperwork for them but I was on FBI.”

Harky is nodding. “According to the paperwork that was brought back with them, the thirty-one weren’t injected before they were picked up. They do have the same as Zeus with the focus and longer life but they aren’t Zeus, they’re just trained like him.”

“You’d trust them with Caelan?” Pres is skeptical.

“No but I’d trust the group Prometheus was in. They’re more like Officer or Leads than the others. I’m waiting on a call back from the breeder but think he was their trainer. They weren’t kennel dogs.”

“They were bred and trained by him and his father,” Ben Knight says as he sits. Jessie throws chin behind him. “When his father died the son came to the US for answers. His dogs were gone and house burnt down when he got home. His workers scattered and nephew missing. The neighbors told him trucks drove away with the dogs barking which was notable because they never heard them bark. They heard yelling before that and questioned getting no answers, the workers were scared and not talking. I sent readers but this was almost a year ago so I’m not sure what they’ll get.”

*Merde.*

“The blood?” Harky asks.

“The first group are the Alpha’s, the second he called work dogs. His father had videos of Zeus that he watched and used for training. Those were injected like Zeus, Perses and Apollo. The work dogs weren’t injected with anything until they were stolen. Brantley said the paperwork shows injections

but not the same as the first dogs. The bad part of that is Brantley thinks it's the same as the Alpha-Bits. The first got good drugs and chemicals, the ones after were similar but not the same. A few were with new handlers but Marines collected them before our pickup so we have the entire group. Because they spent more time with the breeder, they aren't vicious by nature but do have the command lines right from your book."

"What?" Pres asks.

Ben nods.

"Wait, the injections were over two years, weren't they?" Harky has me trying to run this all on a timeline.

"Yeah, when the father came to the US another vet and trainer showed and worked with the breeder. He said his dad knew them from school but he noticed the dogs more focused after they left. His dad took the three-month training job on the island but died there." Ben looks around the table and stops on Harky. "They had been breeding for the military for a while but the father wasn't happy with the way they were using some of the dogs. Brantley said he'd made complaints but they were never answered. He loved Zeus and how you were treating him."

Harky nods. "He was a team member. The other dogs were crated together until a job. Zeus stayed away from that unit and the dogs. They barked constantly."

Ben shakes his head. "I'm here because I want a dog from the Alpha group. My dogs passed last year but it's time. It would be better than four Officers with me. At least I won't get shit from one."

I heard about his dogs in Mass. We all laugh but it's a little strained. I RIP his dogs.

"Thanks, Brothers."

I guess everyone feels that loss for him. I don't know that anyone would live if they gave him shit.

"I have one I think would be a match for you. We're testing the new ones using the Leads or Alphas. They all

seemed to know me and Zeus, do you think it's from the videos?" Harky asks.

Ben nods. "I do." That answers one question.

As Harky and Ben talk, Jessie sits by me. "How are you doing, MB?"

"Good, we're on K-9 for a week testing the new dogs. Not running jobs should bother me but I like the K-9 compound."

His face changes to more relaxed. "Take the breaks when they show. There were times we were at war for years. I'm glad it slowed down and we have so many Brothers helping in that fight. Back-to-back Ops wears you down."

There's something about this Brother that draws me in. I admire them all but Brothers like Jessie with advice that's based on experience get noted with every word they give me. "Thanks. I just asked Harky today about the south. With three Territory Leads we may get those breaks. It was a guess but you saying it means it's real."

He smiles. "Soon. We need five teams for each Lead. Then everyone will have schedules and breaks built in. How is Bastille doing?" They're smart to add more than three teams for each location, it's the last I heard but I'm not in the planning side.

"He's doing good without a problem keeping up. I expected his legs to slow him down but they ran the mountain in full gear with him in the lead."

His smile is genuine and I feel his excitement. "He's coming to Princes after training. Taylor is stoked for another good Lead."

"I hoped he'd relocate here but know his family stayed up there."

He nods. "His wife is working at the clinic with Taylor's old lady, Beth. Kaleb was doing something for them to stay long enough for his kids to get through school."

Shit, he'll stay up there. I smile. "It's a good place to base out of. I love it here but would take New England if Cort tried to put me in a Club. He's crazy."

He laughs. "Justice warned him and Ricky said he'd take you for whatever job you want to do. Cort's crazy but not stupid, you're here for life."

"That's good to know. I'm looking for a home and this feels right." My eyes scan the women. Copper is laughing with Anakin's twin.

Jessie stands throwing chin when Ben and Harky stand.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Brother." Harky is happy so they must be going to see the dogs.

I throw chin and stand seeing Copper watching them leave. Her nod tells me she's done.

The walk back is full of women information and excitement over Freedom's visit tomorrow. I'm glad she's bonding with the women and finding her place here. When she says she's going to Zion with Mitena tomorrow afternoon, I wonder if I'm the one getting her coverage for about ten seconds. Ginny is going with them and has a team. Marks will make sure Copper is covered is all I needed to hear. She smiles when I say it.

"Does everyone cover me? Ginny said Marks is who covers the Club."

I nod. "He's VP of Squared and schedules teams. You're technically his to cover but I had a second there that I wondered. We don't have choppers and teams to cover any form of Security. Elite is strictly National and International BSC Ops. Every other Club has teams of Protectors, Enforcers and Security."

She shakes her head. "Cort must be a busy man. I was surprised to see Ben Knight here."

"He wants a dog from Prometheus's group."

She nods. "I'm testing the other group for Alder on Friday. I did the eight today."

Opening the door, I can't believe my luck. "Anything in their blood that should be a concern?"

"All of it. Injecting such harsh chemicals into people and animals is just mean. They shouldn't have a problem but they never asked for it. I have the build out of the older dogs and Zeus for reference but it's all so wrong. They weren't grown and I count that as a plus."

I nod and spin her so she's against the door. Her arms go up as if it was her plan too. "Fuckin' perfect, *Mondoux*. Every reaction is fuckin' perfect." I feel her happiness with those words.

"I love the French biker." She pulls and my mouth is on hers feeling it from her. It takes no time for her to be over my shoulder then naked by the bed.

When she shakes her head as if to clear it, I realize she isn't clear and I need to slow this down. Everything is feeling with her. My brain isn't thinking at all, falling into feeling is dangerous, but she isn't out to hurt me. "*Mondoux*, tell me your beautifully naked body is where you were headed."

She looks down then up at me with a big smile. "I kind of thought you'd be beautifully naked with me." Her hands on me has me naked with her in seconds.

Losing my mind with feeling guiding me should have my brain stopping this. There is no slow, time doesn't exist and all I know is my body is home.

Trying to steady my breath and think isn't easy. Shaking my head, I see from the big steampunk clock that time did indeed pass. What we did, what we said to get us right here is a blur. Sweet nothings being forgotten is unusual for me. What I felt is incredible.

I say the words getting a nod before I'm flipped and she's doing a better job than I did, telling me what she feels and how I can make that better. Wanting everything in her

world perfect, I make that better and think she's got magic like Harky says. My feeling world settles and I find the words.

“*Mondoux*, the first is supposed to be awkward but you made it explosive, I love your way.” I can't replay it yet but the home feeling settled in my bones.

“*You* did. My sweet, my gentle, my gracious all begin the same. I felt every bit of it in a dream-like wonder.”

I'm glad I'm not the only one guided by feeling. “My *Mondoux*. Yes, I'll claim that tomorrow.” My breath catches at her movement.

She shakes her head sliding down on me with a look. “Day after. Friday is the party. Ask later, I can't think when we're touching. Now that you've added appendages, like the one in me right now, I can say, absolutely everything about you holds my brain hostage.”

I laugh knowing that feeling well. I pay more attention to the sweet nothings. Fuckin' women know how to make you want more.

# Chapter Four

## *Two days*

### *Copper*

Being alone in the lab with a smile that must look clownish is probably not good but I can't help it. I'm testing blood and waiting for Alder to show with specifics, it's the waiting, I decide.

Michael Brolin is claiming me today. I love him, or worship him, whatever. I've never been in love, never felt love from a man and I'm glad the women say this is normal. Piper crushed on Harky and Stella said her mom crushed on her dad. They all are still together and the Badass men learn how to keep it going for life. There is no divorce in Badass '*all in*' and Michael said he's *all in*. French men move fast is an understatement but the women here think it's normal.

I will never be a concubine or have to deal with one. Instead, I am treated like a glass princess. The man is so thoughtful and considerate, it touches me deep inside and I'm always blinking tears away. He hasn't said I'm bonkers yet and always has a small smile when he grazes the back of his finger down my cheek. It's like he knows and likes being the first man to love me.

He told me he's lucky no one ever saw how amazing I am before we met. Who thinks like that? I guess I do because I feel lucky he never met and claimed anyone else. That stops me with a pain that sears deep. I'm the lucky one. Since mom, no one has ever loved me. Not even my family.

I turn away from the hologram board that's building the new dog DNA and the door opens as if on cue.

Alder stops short. "Boss Copper, I no expect you to wait for me."

I smile at the little guy. "I turned to get another sample going. I have twenty-two building."

"You quick." He's happy which is good.



“I have the blood and you built the program. Once I plug in the DNA lines, that part of my job is done and I can get to the good stuff.”

He smiles. “I have list to questions.”

I’m relieved. “I was hoping for something to test. They’ve been injected but it isn’t anything that hurt them, just the opposite, they’ll live a little longer and may have more concentration reactions.”

His head tilts looking adorable. “Concentrate reaction.”

I nod. “The alpha dogs have learned to concentrate deeply from young, cementing those pathways in the brain to fire faster. More collisions between two reactants mean more opportunities for reactions based on whatever they have in those cemented pathways.”

His smile must be as big as mine was, but I don’t think it’s clownish, it’s angelic or something angel-like. “Too many words to focus based to knowledge, experience.”

I laugh. “Yeah, that’s basically what I said but they’re not on the same level as the alphas. The injections weren’t using the same chemicals. They could have gotten the same results with some Japanese plants.”

He laughs. “Ginkgo good to focus. I like you reaction to cemented pathway words.”

I’m smiling again. “Good, give me some work.”

He nods, pulling glasses on as he walks to the counter. Kicking the bottom close to a leg, a shelf pops forward. “Alpha-Bit stool built in.” He starts typing with my nod. It’s a cool option for them that I didn’t see before, but I need something to do with all this DNA that his program is building so I watch the hologram board.

“First, plant stop blood thirst. Inject to liver production dog always have aversion.”

Michael told me about the plant for the dogs and Zeus using candy to get the blood taste out of his mouth. I nod

thinking about what will work to get the liver to start that production.

Alder shows why he's my boss. "Same to block hemophilia bleeding. You use liver production to block bleeding."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about the how. That would be the easiest and fastest way. Do I have the plant?"

"Your wish my command. Marco, Kadeem here one-hour, live plant, dry, powder, liquid."

"Michael is claiming me tonight. If he weren't, I'd beg for you to adopt me."

His eyes light up. "Congratulation. Commander MB good Brother. I honor to work Ops to him. You need guarantee to job security?"

Wow, he's offering long-term work. "I'd take it. I'm a little nervous about how much work you'd have for me."

He nods. "You in my ol'lady harem. Ol' lady harem work to life. Pres Cort say I offer retire benefits you see it for life. I offer house, car, medical, security to ABSZ, all new technology we build offer to you free. Commander MB get same offer to BSC today."

"So, I'm part of your harem like Stella and Natalia. I accept, Little Pres." This is the best day of my life. I'm getting claimed by the sexy and oh so romantic Michael Brolin and have a long-term job with people that want to make the world better. "Did Michael accept?"

He nods once and starts typing. "He did. I have all test, question and plant to you job sheet. You think new idea to help, add to list, order plant test. We no use chemical, no change personality, traits, only change is better to dog life." He turns from his hologram keyboard to look at me.

This is the second time he's told me so I think he wants my answer to that. "I agree a hundred percent. If it is organic and poses no threat but gives a better life, it's progress. If it's adding in a way to market, it's based on money. I have no need for more money and like that we'd help guarantee the

dogs a home with the aversion to blood. There's a bunch of plants and herbs to stave off heartworm, fleas and ticks. I definitely want to test them out."

"All good to me. I have meet K-9 compound see new dogs. Commander Harky say no aggression."

I nod. "I was in with them last night and didn't see anything off. Piper said it's because they were raised as a family. Sally is the first dog I've been close to so I'm no expert. I know she's trained but haven't seen it come out of her. The focus is weird."

He smiles, putting his glasses in his little backpack. "Focus is training. Cemented pathways you say."

I laugh at the little guy. "Yeah. Thanks for the work and harem status. I'll test out the plants when I get the last built."

He stops, turning back with his angelic smile on, "and Marco, Kadeem show with plant to you test." This is true.

"That too."

"Later."

I'm smiling again when he runs out the door. I have job security and at least a month of short-term work with a ten-minute conversation. My boss is awesome. That short term work will turn into a lifetime of testing and retesting. The harem status will be earned. Since this is my first official job for BSC Alpha-Bits and Alder has another meet set up for the satellite next week, I'll never be bored or trying to carve time out for my own interests. Alder is way more diversified than I'll ever be but he has Stella, who's the ultimate engineer, working for him and she's happy. Natalia is too but she's more into computers than science. I can see where adding me into their specialties will challenge us all to do more. Just the thought is exciting.

I never wanted a job as just an aeronautical engineer. My father grudgingly gave me permission to work my 'little experiments' in my lab, if I bought everything myself and it

didn't interfere with my job. Engineer for him paid for everything I did.

I shake my head. He'll never understand making the world better and I have real work to do. I smile. A lot of real work to do.

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## ***MB***

Jumping out of the pool, I call the last group. “Group Six, Attention.”

Harky calls Group Five to him. “Loki and Sampson have Four on a run with Anakin.”

I nod. Piper has Group Three in a hostage simulator, Luke Rayne has Group Two in heavy fire and Mucimi has One in the section running the obstacle course nonstop.

“You want me in with One or the simulator when I’m done here?”

“Take Group One so Mucimi can watch Group Two come in.”

“Roger, Commander.”

He rolls his eyes walking away. I smile and jump in getting scuba gear on the five dogs then me. We swim until Prometheus and Aeolus jump in and distract the dogs every way they can. They are good trainers bumping gently and blocking in rounds so every dog is tested. Forty minutes later my alarm goes off. I watch while Prometheus and Aeolus block the dogs from getting to the sides. Two dive down deep and go under them, while the other three paddle quick to the steps on the low end. None make a sound or push the two alphas away. This is good. I’ve had two that got annoyed but no aggression has shown all day.

A Brother handles the gear while I get the dogs out and ready for Harky. He’s running late so I help.

“They’re all calm like the Lead dogs.”

“Yeah, Brother. I’m headed to Group One but don’t expect a problem.” I think this Brother is Plowski or Polanski but I don’t know. I’m glad I get to use Brother.

The Brother isn’t done. “The Commander said he’s pushing them harder than regular stress testing. I didn’t know the Leads would jump in like that.”

I nod noticing Harky coming my way so I drop the tank with the rest and stand. "Attention." The dogs sit at attention. "No issues."

He nods and calls the group to him. I grab a towel and head to the obstacle course with Mucimi.

Luke Rayne is running the dogs our way before I'm in the gate. "No problem," he says turning before I can answer.

It's funny that every one of the Brothers Harky picked for testing doesn't talk much. I keep the dogs from Group One busy playing with toys while Mucimi runs Group Two through the course. Alder comes to the gate while Cort keeps walking to the simulator building. I don't see what door Cort goes in because my eyes are on Alder.

"Little Pres, you just watching?"

"I meet to Pres Harky, Pres Cort soon. Now I watch aggression."

I nod, leaving him outside the gate and throw three balls toward Group One. "I had water with no issues at all. Luke Rayne said Group Two had no problems."

He nods with his eyes bouncing from dog to dog in the different groups. "Pres Harky say he no expect it. Leads no aggression at all."

"None. They do a job and take nothing personal." It's odd but true.

"Like you, Pres Harky. Job is job."

That stops me. "I can't say I agree, LP. I'm wearing bands for men I took personally."

He stops his dog assessment and looks at me. "No, you wear arm band to honor Brothers you lose. Six time more Alpha-Bit die than live. I know pain to lose Brother. You feel always, no change you job. Make you better, determine to never lose more. Better focus to job. Same to me. I work, focus to better life to my Brothers, my Alpha-Bits. I work to happy all, happy mean I no lose more either."

I have to give him that. “I agree with that. It’s like the balance Jessie told me about. I never thought about it like that.”

“Pain stop it. Now is time you see. Boss Copper show you more to life. More to you. You see she lose everything keep move forward. Badass, Boss Copper good teacher to you, to Brothers. Ol’ ladies live hard like Alpha-Bits, still move forward, still look for happy.” His smile has me smiling.

“I’m claiming her and see it, Brother,” I say so he’ll see I got it.

His little laugh surprises me. “I no wing man to Pres Cort. I say what I see.”

“It’s noted, LP.” I turn toward Mucimi.

His bright eyes and smile make him look younger. He likes working with the dogs. “They’re done. No anger at all in them.”

I nod.

“They work to ABSZ Security?” Alder asks.

Mucimi shrugs. “You should ask Harky. I’m just watching for anger.”

Alder nods then runs.

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Jogging over to Elite I’m thinking about my new ol’ lady. She’s excited about her harem status, finishing a DNA build and some plant that can be added to a liver. I have no idea what and why but she’s excited. That excitement makes me happy that her claiming day is already memorable.

She didn’t want a wedding and feeling her sadness, then seeing the pain in her eyes, I agreed to the name change on paper but have plans of giving her a wedding next year when she’s not new to the Club, friends and her job. She loves

her new friends but they're new friends who don't know much about Copper Rose. They'll know her better by next year.

Banks got a judge to sign the marriage license and will bring her the paper tonight. I'm glad he is so she'll see this is real and she's mine. I like that she took Rose as her middle name dropping the Ruth of her paternal grandmother. She wanted nothing linking her to her father.

Copper's mom took him to court for support when she was born and agreed to a higher amount covering education and medical expenses for not changing her name. Copper thinks her mom used Ruth just to piss him off. The ass wouldn't even give her his name so I'm glad she had a good life with her mom.

Cort had her house boxed up and said she lived in a nice house in a gated neighborhood. The house hadn't been lived in and still had toys around the pool as if it was just waiting for the occupants to come home. Copper lived at her dad's office since she was ten and didn't want anything but pictures. Cort said there isn't many pictures but he's getting them here for her.

I'm glad I ran as his assistant for a couple of days and got to see that side of Cort. I always just think of him as crazy but he's a considerate and compassionate President. Another eye-opening experience within the Badass ranks. I'm grateful for that experience. After Alder today, I know I need to stop and look around. Waiting for a justice that didn't happen, then anger and moving so quickly into Badass was all done detached. Getting settled here and finding Copper, I'm feeling again. Noticing the shit I miss means I'm feeling deeper than I have in a while. I knew the first time in bed with Copper but when Alder said it, I felt the rightness of his words, '*Boss Copper show you more to life. More to you.*' Those words couldn't be truer and I'll take the time to stop and look around because Copper needs me to be the best man I can for her. She deserves better than her father and the men who took from her but never gave her anything back. She deserves everything.

Anakin coming up to my side has me turning quick. "She does. She's happy, Brother."



I nod wondering why he'd say it. "Yeah. She's got work and harem status from Alder."

He stops. "I mean with you, Brother. She's happy you're claiming her."

I tilt my head. "Why are you saying it?"

He starts walking so I do, figuring he doesn't want me to see more of the pain in his eyes. "Because her dad is worse than Ginny's mom. She lived in the back of some industrial building with babysitters when her mom died. The shit people do to their kids is never easy to see. I've seen it and can't wait for them to blow the place up. You're the only man she's ever connected with."

"I don't need more, Anakin. I can feel it from her."

His head turns my way fast. After a couple of seconds, he nods. "Are you a reader?"

I smile. "No, but I think Copper is getting me back to feeling again. I spent too long detached from life."

He stops again, looking in my eyes. "You've been detached? Jesus." He shakes his head and starts jogging.

I do too, but with a smile this time.

We get to the Elite Club as Cort, with Alder on his back, are walking through the door.

"Just in time." Anakin has me nodding.

In Harky's meeting room, I'm surprised he's here with Zeus, Prometheus, Luke Rayne and Mucimi. His eyes show amusement. "Sneak attack freaky ride."

I know Harky's not a fan and smile. "Anakin likes me and ran."

They all laugh as Cort and Alder come in. Alder runs to a seat pulling his glasses on. It's not ten seconds and a board pops on. "All K-9 stress test."

Looking at the worksheet, I see heart rate and turn to Harky. He's surprised. "You have them hooked to monitors?" He asks what I'm thinking.

“Boss Copper build to collar. All dog have monitor, throw alert to stress,” Alder answers distractedly.

Harky’s eyes go wide as he looks at me. I shake my head. “I didn’t hear that one.”

Cort laughs. “Thomas Edison said, ‘*Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.*’ Alder is using the Alpha-Bits so that genius is effective. It took her like an hour to build a waterproof monitor. She built one and the Bits printed enough for all the dogs. She’s testing plants and shit right now.”

I nod, stunned. “To be added to the liver?” She didn’t think enough of the monitor to mention it, I guess.

Alder’s hands stop on his hologram keyboard. “Yeah, blood aversion done. We wait simulated long-term effect test. Boss Copper run her test to flea, tick, herb add to snack bars. Safe, good to all animal. Heartworm,” he waves his hand, “other medical issue she know start Monday.”

“So they won’t need the plant to stop...”

Alder is shaking his head before Harky finishes. “Lifetime, liver produce. Block to DNA, plant add is no antibody to be attacked.”

I look at Cort. He’s not a geek but gets more than I do since his head is nodding. “Banks has a Mason that is a big wig at some pet company. His science guy said adding the plants to the ingredients for the bones already being made is huge. It’s all natural and will be a massacre to what’s out there for flea and tick shit. The same for the blood aversion. The production of whatever in the liver won’t fight whatever plant and will add to the production.”

Repeating that leaves me with a question.

“Yeah, MB. Alder’s first thought was that the blocker will allow the plants to be accepted. It won’t allow others but something they’re exposed to regularly will if it’s in the initial injection. Like a vaccine.” Luke Rayne answers that.

“Jesus, fuck.” Harky turns my way. “She’ll have a whole line of animal industry nuts after her.”

I smile, shaking my head. “She’s not mass producing them. She’s testing to help. She’ll never be into making anything but what she needs for whoever is close to her. Sally is hers.” Like the monitor.

Cort rolls his hand. “That’s why Alder has the Alpha-Bits there. So, the dogs.” He points at the board.

Luke Rayne laughs with Anakin and Mucimi. Harky shakes his head. I’m still stunned but follow along.

Ben Knight is taking Adonis. Harky gives Cort Priam as Caelan’s match. I think the deity of life & death and the king of Troy are possibly prophetic but don’t say a word. When he tells Cort Thrasos is his match, I hide my smile. The spirit of boldness works for Cort. Zeus chuffs but Cort isn’t buying it.

“Prez is taking Adonis to replace a Protector on his detail. If he had him sooner, the schedule shit wouldn’t have happened,” Justice says as he appears in Cort’s open seat.

I smile right out.

Mucimi agrees causing Cort to stop pacing. “He’s right but the ancestor’s crazy shit would have gone on longer. It happened as it should have. Aquyá’s home and happy to be running HR under Sebastian. He has no anger in him.”

“And no ability,” Cort says but it’s more like a question.

Justice nods. “No ability but he’s smart, Boss. It’s like having Lorelei in HR here. He loves the job like she does but he’s got ancestors, Princes and my dad watching his every thought. Aiyana said he’ll marry and live a happy life with his one.”

Cort nods and moves on. “You didn’t show for nothing. Do I have a need for Thrasos as a Protector?”

Justice looks at Mucimi. “You do, Pres Cort. Now is the time that his presence with you is seen for what it is.” Shit. Something is coming.

Cort nods. "I'll get Caelan here for training. What happens to Blue?"

"He stays with Caelan but will move to Seren as Caelan gets older." Justice is sure in that.

Cort nods. "The rest?"

"Alpha to Protector Teams. Thirty-one work dog good to Protector, Enforcer. Pres Falcon want two."

Cort stops again. "They'd make Protector?"

Alder nods. "Seventeen Protector. Twelve Enforcer. Two Security."

Two. "They showed annoyance in the water?" They didn't show anger but wanted to get out like the training was just done for them.

Alder nods. "No aggressive." He shrugs. "Annoy good word. Human I say not same work...ethic?" He looks at Justice.

"Yeah, no anger but not as focused."

Cort nods. "Harky, do you agree?"

"Yeah, Boss. We need to keep the rest of the Leads on Protector teams here. I have seven I want from the thirty-one for Elite teams on the east coast. Taylor and Wecks agreed."

Cort looks surprised. "Isn't Jessie running Elite up there?"

"Until Bastille gets through training, Taylor is running it but Jessie is splitting the jobs with him so I guess they both are." Harky surprises me.

"Bastille doesn't know," I say then regret letting it out.

"He wasn't ready. Here, he sees he's the same soldier. They'll tell him when he goes home," Justice says like it's written somewhere so I nod. It feels right.

Mucimi makes me laugh. "It's written and feels right."

“Get the fuck out of his head,” Harky says with a smile.

Cort gets us back on track. “When do the dogs move?”

Justice is surprised. “The alpha’s that can, tonight. They go home with their handlers.”

Cort stops, looking stunned. “Tonight? Ben is here?”

Justice nods. “Colorado. Christian is at the MC but will be here with Prez and Jessie.”

Cort watches him for a good twenty seconds then nods. “Caelan isn’t here tonight.”

“No, Boss.”

“Zeus, get a message to Amal in Phoenix Ops to cover the ABSZ, Phoenix and Bravo on high. I want double coverage in the air for all BSC Clubs.”

Zeus chuffs and his board shows. ‘? High Rising<sup>2</sup> Club?’

That stops Cort. “You see a reason for that?”

Zeus chuffs. ‘Freak, Command Ops, Copper Rose, warning, boy stay home, K-9 handler home...’ Zeus stops hitting shit on his board.

“Fuck. Get all BSC on high alert. I want all Presidents on a board. I need a meeting room.”

Harky stands. “First floor. Am I with you?”

“Get your teams on high and ready to jump in. Make sure the dogs are ready. Justice, get him freaky help with what you can. Someone show me where the meeting room is.” Cort bends and Alder climbs on his back.

“Prometheus, go with Cort and get anything Cort or Alder need.”

Prometheus chuffs and opens the door.

I watch the freaky crew fill seats. “He knows so it’s better?” Axe asks.

Seeing Justice close his eyes, I don't think it is.

"We follow orders and do the job," Teller answers. Justice's eyes open and he nods.

"Prez and Co..." Teller clamps his mouth shut.

"Stop!" Mucimi says louder than I've ever heard him. "We do not interfere, we make sure the feeds work, make sure we do what Cort orders and help where we're needed. You have the plan. New orders are going out, follow them, then what Justice gave." His voice has a faint echo to it.

It's nothing I've ever heard before and by the look on Harky's face, him either. I see Zeus's board and move my eyes back to Harky then Zeus's board for him to look. He does then nods at me. Zeus has the teams getting ready for a search and rescue mission.

The Protectors don't say more and leave quickly. Mase hits my back. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Brother. Congratulations."

I smile. "You got someone to watch the kids?"

His smile grows. "Yeah, they're all with JC tonight. Stay alert."

I shake my head when he's just gone. "We got it."

"They showed so we'd see that?" Harky asks.

I put my hand up. "Mucimi, you have force fields in your future?"

A weird 'yeah,' sounds in my head so I nod to Harky. "They showed so we'd see that. We need the teams and dogs ready."

He stands and we follow Zeus out. "What's your Fey say?"

Since we have force fields on everything here, it's something that makes it through. Copper knows that technology. "It's bad but an ending. I need to see Copper. I'll meet you at K-9."

“Stay here. I’ll get Prospects to help get the gear ready. You’re seeing Copper for a reason, make sure the teams are set for that reason.”

I nod. “Stop at the meeting room and have Pres safe-room families at the alarm.”

He stops and looks at my eyes then nods and walks away.

Zeus chuffs and follows him.

Copper is excited about pictures. I shake my head. They followed the pictures is my first thought. “Where are they?” I interrupt her excitement.

“Here, Cort had someone drop them off for me.” She points at three boxes against the wall behind the door.

“There’s tracking on them. They were waiting for them to be moved. How close were the drones to being finished?” I feel it like it’s on a report telling me how we get hit.

“Oh Lord. We need to get them out of here.” Fear laces through her words,

I stop her from turning. “*Mondoux*, listen, we have a warning. The Brothers have to follow orders given. I need what you know about the drones and how close they were to being finished.”

She gives me the three-month build because of whatever the fuck she says about rewiring something. Before she’s off again in technology workings, I ask, “Would a prototype be built?”

Her head snaps back. “Always. We tested everything.”

“So it’s possible it’s just the one?”

“Three. There’s always three. It took forever so I know there can’t be more yet. I found out they were ordering the parts and went to my father. Nothing works fast at the factory. It takes forever to get parts in. It’s not like here.”

I nod and kiss her. “You can’t say anything to anyone. I’ll get the pictures moved and pick you up later.”

She’s in a fog but nods. I’m out the door typing on my phone and know she’s going to have a million questions when she’s not in a fog. I’ll deal with that when I pick her up. She’s going to be a help.

Harky answers right back that he’ll call Nova, Jordan and Marks while Zeus is with him.

He’s got a geek in there so he understands more than I thought he did. Zeus is the only one I’d think is freaky in there but he gave us the heads-up. I stop. He’s smart like Aquyà. That’s why Justice threw all that out today. Zeus is smart and has us watching his every move. It’s a warning we’d see and can’t ignore. Nova, Jordan and Marks are all different but all loyal to Badass. They all have Protector women too.

I get back to the meeting room and see the Brothers on the board. Zeus has his board up with tracking from Arizona to here.

“Why can’t we just tell them?” Jordan isn’t happy.

Marks surprises me answering, but his ol’ lady is Ginny and she’s freaky. “It would change shit they need to happen. If Mucimi, Justice, Christian and Mase are aware of our shit and not stepping in, then we’re a help where we don’t change whatever needs to happen. I’m in but how do we track an undetectable drone?”

Copper shocks the hell out of me walking in the door. She smiles, probably because I’m showing her that shock. “Zeus sent me a chat.”

We all look at Zeus. His board says, ‘understand work.’

I nod at the Brother. “Good call. Jordan, can you get with Copper to find a way to detect an undetectable drone?”

“Can it work by the GPS? That’s what Walker gave to stop the cars at my Club. And wouldn’t it be good if Alder were in this?” Nova isn’t sure here.



I shake my head. Everything in me says no to that.

“Didn’t Cort save them?” Copper asks.

“Crow did save the As and Alder is their Pres but they’ve been with Cort longer than they knew Crow,” Jordan says then asks her to explain how the drones are undetectable. She sits turning the chair toward the board Jordan is on.

Marks smiles at us. “The pictures are moving now. Peak will find the trackers and move them into the little barn.”

Shit, that’s still close to the silo. It’s a house, not a person so I throw it out. “She said they make three prototypes. Where would the other two go?”

Harky answers before I poll feelings about it. “Colorado Badass and Rising<sup>2</sup> I’d think.”

Nova shakes his head. “Phoenix and Rising<sup>2</sup>. It’s BSC.”

My eyes go to Zeus. “Where do you think, Zeus?”

“Badass, home,” Harky reads his board.

“Kids will be with JC. Find JC and Brekan’s kids and we know if it’s Badass.”

Marks shakes his head. “JC is at Sentinel, flight plan from Colorado says Harper and the kids are headed to Sentinel. Nice catch, Brother.”

I throw chin thinking. “So, Brekan is aware. Christian was there today.”

Harky nods. “They said that. That’s one. We have two more.”

“Brinks is texting me. I need to get to the chopper. I’ll send my board. Can you work from there?” Jordan stands packing his laptop in his bag.

“My lab then I’ll bring the laptop to the pool.” Copper is up.

He nods. “We’re running out of time. Germany was the Op yesterday. Whatever is happening tonight means

they've been deployed. Your father would be pissed but he has to know someone that can deploy and track them. We'd need if they can be rebuilt."

Marks shakes his head no. "We fried the computers with a worm and have the paper."

Jordan nods. "Let's hope we have it all. Who can track them?"

Copper moves fast. "The tracking on the pictures will tell us. I'll pull up your link." She's gone before he can answer.

"That was smart." He walks out of view.

Nova laughs. "Geeks are unbelievable. We may stop them yet."

I shake my head. "I don't think we're supposed to stop them all. Colorado feels right. I think we need to change the target here but let what's supposed to happen happen."

Zeus chuffs getting my eyes on him and his board that says, 'ancestor order.'

Harky shakes his head. "Where the fuck are you getting information?"

A picture of little kids flying in the air shows. I laugh. Fuckin' Brother.

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Just as I turn, I see Jordan hit Brinks. "Women in the safe room with the dogs!" Brinks yells.

Copper is pulling Stella and Attiquin telling them about the safe room. My woman is good at getting people to listen. Piper calls the dogs to her while moving toward the gate.

Harky yells. "Zeus, get the teams here! Sirens on!"

Marks is pulling Pres toward the gate.

“Where’s Cort and Ben?” I stop him as the alarm blares for the families.

He points toward the back of the pool bathrooms. “Dogs needed to go. I’ll get everyone safe-roomed and be back.”

The training part of the Club explodes. I run toward it. “Harky! Zeus, Prometheus!”

Brinks catches up to me and the dogs at the engulfed building. “Track!” I yell to Zeus.

His board pops on and off. He runs to the side and jumps through a blown-out window. “Brinks!” I run in pulling my shirt up over my nose.

The ceiling fell in but it’s like it all landed in the center. I look up at the sky with the edges burning all around us. Brinks hands me a face mask, tank and gloves. “Don’t ask. I don’t fuckin’ know!” He yells over the alarm blaring again.

Magical tools didn’t show for nothing. I don’t ask and get the shit on. We move pieces of wood and steel in constant rain from the firehose for what feels like twenty minutes before I see Thrasos. Zeus barks at the same time from the other side where he was moving shit with Prometheus.

“Here, Brinks!” I yell swiping a chunk of shingles out of thin air. “What the hell?”

He laughs while swiping wood away. It falls but there was nothing holding it up. “A shield. Thank fuck.”

“Mucimi’s force field.” I shake my head and check on Ben while Brinks checks Cort. As soon as my hand touches his neck, he pops straight up.

“What the fuck happened?” His voice sounds normal. He was held down?

“Best guess, it would be the most damage to the Club. Undetectable drone. There were three prototypes. Jordan and Copper stopped the one meant for the MC but didn’t have time

for more than dumping the chemical out on the two aimed here.”

He raises his hand up and Cort is up. “We’re fine, Jessie. Stop the water. We’re coming out.” Ben calls his dog to him bending to see if he’s okay. I like that. Zeus and Prometheus come to me.

Cort kneels and rubs Thrasos down. “We’ll do springboard next time, Brother.” They’re acting like however long they’ve been under debris from the caved in ceiling and the whole back and side walls didn’t happen.

Brinks laughs and starts following them out. I hold his arm. “They need to walk out together with their dogs.”

He doesn’t ask but pulls the mask off. “Why do we have masks?”

“The drones were meant to send biochemicals out. Copper discharged the load while they were high. The bomb in them didn’t spread anything through the buildings but the initial blast.”

I start walking and drop the air tank behind a piece of wall. “This building shouldn’t have been hit.”

Brothers are moving from Cort to Ben and the dogs. I walk to the side and catch Zeus before he takes off. “The other drone?”

He hits his board and I see tracking. Fuck. I run following him to the other side of the Squared Club.

Security has the Bits and women together. We pass them right by and see Harky directing the Elite teams and dogs. Mase catches my eye and throws me chin. I see Marks and run to help him move a piece of wall.

“Pres?”

“Guarding healers.” He juts his chin out to the right. Justice is sitting by a Brother with Pres standing over him.

I smile moving more wood. “He hates standing jobs but I bet he loves that one. The Brother will make it.”

He stops. “How do you know?”

“I feel it. No casualties.”

Dogs bark just to the side of us drawing the Elite Teams closer. We move faster.

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Watching the fire is settling me.

“The Brothers are crazy. They have to have a whole RV lot out there.” Pres sits not really looking for agreement. “Where are Cort, Ben and their army?”

I smile at that one. “Riding. They took bikes to the mountain pass.”

“It’s pitch black.”

I look at him. “The Justice League, Prince freaks and Protectors are with them.”

Harky sits with Zeus beside him. Prometheus moves from me to lay down by Zeus. “They thought Ben and Cort were in Ops. They’re all relieved they made it out of training so they’re celebrating. Copper still with Alder, Jordan and Stella?” That’s why the one section of building wasn’t hit. They had a field around Ops. Shit, that could have been bad.

“Yeah. They’ll be working all night Stella said.”

“Why? The father is on his way here.” Pres is as bad as Cort with the questions.

“The buildings didn’t have the tracking in them. If Cort and Ben were the targets we need how,” Harky answers.

Marks sits. “Do you think they were?”

I look over seeing he’s looking at me. “No. Copper dropped the biochemical and they’d have seen it. They may have shot for a building she could have been in. They picked the biggest building closest to where the tracking was. They’d

have seen the MC's drone veer and hit a mountain too." She's incredible. I'm glad I got to claim that incredible before hell broke loose.

He nods. "I thought the lighter drone would change where it dropped."

I shrug. "Could be that too. Her father will be here and someone will ask or read him."

He nods. "Yeah. The kids are showing Ben and Cort all over the internet."

There's got to be a reason they're put out there so I nod. "I'm taking a nap while I can."

"Copper has a team on her with Sally."

I know but leave it alone. "Thanks, Brother. Prometheus, I'm going home. Down-time." I'll miss my run but we got everyone out and there's nothing left to do tonight but replay. Sleep will be good so I'm ready for the *planning what's next* meets tomorrow.

Prometheus chuffs not moving.

# Chapter Five

## *Two days*

### *Copper*

The circus tent is odd but Michael says it's cooled and works for training. It's weird how only parts of the building were demolished. There is a section going straight up that wasn't touched by fire, water or the drone. The weird part is the opposite side of that one section is gone. Today, that's completely gone. They've cleared all the debris away and machines are where the rest of the building was. I'm glad we didn't all go to the Club. The safe rooms kept people safe but it took forever for them to be dug out.

Seeing it early yesterday morning when we were too tired to keep going, I was sure people died in that blast. Thank God, I was wrong and no one died. There were injuries but only three were sent to Chenoa at the medical facility on the ABSZ. Alder said doctors from the surrounding Clubs would set a schedule for their care. I love how they take care of their people.

Seeing the men at the new Officer table, I smile. They're all here and look comfortable and calm. The only one I saw go postal was Stella and that was in the safe room at the dog compound. Once she saw Jordan and he said Brinks had Marks get him there, she calmed down until she demanded her laptop.

We spent all night looking for how the drones hit the building. My father is in one of the Rising Club's jail cells. He deserves it. Michael asked if I wanted to see him but I have no intention of ever letting him see my face again. He gave me to terrorists so he could sell-out what we spent years building to stop innocent people from being killed. The man is lower than dirt.

"You okay, Copper?" Kiki asks getting my feet moving while everyone turns to see me.



“Yeah. I was thinking we all made it and in a day are rebuilding. Badass is a good world to live in.” I signal Sally that it’s down-time and she moves to the end of the table with Zeus and Prometheus. The table does a military ‘hooyah’ thing as I sit in the chair Michael pulls out for me. I really love it here.

With a kiss to my head, Michael says, “You made sure our Badass world was able to move on.”

Marks and Pres agree. I thank them and order, glad to see Cheese by the dogs getting Sally’s food in front of her. She must have ordered it on the ride over.

“How come Sally eats like they do?” Sampson eats from a low table closer to the floor.

“She’s one from Prometheus’s group. I knew there must be another one. Ben said the trainer didn’t know a Sally but Luke Rayne said she’s Athena. Her last handler changed her name.” Texas looks happy to know this.

Athena. “She’s related to Zeus? I can check her DNA but she’s nowhere close to their size. I saw Perses yesterday and know she was from his litter.”

Michael tightens his hand on my leg. “It fits her, wisdom, reason, warfare and strategy are strong in her.”

Sacred animal is owl. It fits, she watches everything. I nod. “I’ll check her bloodline later. I wouldn’t have guessed that one.” She must have been the runt of the litter.

“Alder said she’s a match. He does family DNA shit on the ABSZ,” the big Mingo guy says.

I can only nod. Alder is amazing. He’s got campers lined up outside with solar, water and sewerage running behind them, people in his medical facility, new jobs for his Alpha-Bit members with what we’ve found from the testing and sent me new work this morning. The man mustn’t sleep. He was here in a hard hat drawing the new building out just yesterday.

“Then I’ll just get back to work.” They laugh so I shrug. There’s no sense wasting time if it’s done.

“You really are just like Stella,” Drill has me looking down the table. Most everyone is nodding.

“I’m in awe of her and her work but seeing her angry, I hope you’re wrong. She’s difficult to calm when she’s angry.”

Attiquin laughs. “You slammed Commander MB to the mat when he called you Baby Ruth.”

Oh no. I look at Michael. “I will apologize in advance for making your life difficult.”

They’re all laughing again but I’m sincere in that apology.

His smile has me relaxing. “You’re not Stella, *Mondoux*. We deal and move on no matter what happens.” He’s still a dream.

“I love the French biker in you. I will try to keep the outbursts to a minimum.”

His eyes show love as his finger grazes down my cheek. “I’ll thank you in advance.” His lips brush mine sealing it with a kiss.

I do love the dream man.

My food comes out quicker than usual. “Thanks.”

As soon as the Prospect moves, Texas asks, “Did you find anything on the tracking?”

The first thought was of someone tracking Ben and Cort but that was dropped when my father was questioned. He changed coordinates to the biggest building because they got information that visitors and Presidents got rooms at Clubs.

“No, Alder and Web have the IT part but they went for the biggest building because it houses visitors. I was helping with the new safe rooms and steel beam placement yesterday. Today I’m back to lab work.”

He nods. “That’s true for other Clubs but not Phoenix Rising Clubs. Every Club has VIP houses.”

I nod because Stella said it yesterday. Whoever knew about the VIP rooms doesn't know the Rising Clubs. This is very good news to me. I eat listening to them make plans for the Brothers in the campers. A ride for essentials is planned along with meal rides and a day of barbers. They take care of everything.

I lean closer to Michael. "How do I give money to help?"

His eyes shine as he looks at me. "I love that you care and want to help, *Mondoux*. You can transfer from your Badass card. Banks makes donations easy. Type Essentials Ride and the amount and they'll get the total raised at the end of the ride. If they need more, Banks will add whatever they need, if they get more, he'll put it toward other causes that need it."

That's convenient and a great way to help people in need. My father did this so he should fix it. "What is reasonable or a normal amount?"

"Prospects and Brothers are giving anywhere from \$50-\$500. It depends on what they can afford. Squared is rebuilding the Club but Marks said Phoenix will pay for most of it." He takes my hand. "Don't stress over this, *Mondoux*, they'll rebuild with help from everyone. It's not all one Club's burden and Phoenix won't even feel it. Cort has Clubs building everywhere."

Phoenix shouldn't have to pay for any of it. They make all the programs that help and protect people. People like me, the Alpha-Bits, D'Ability people, Indians and women who were slaves. My father did this. I shake my head no and lean forward to see Texas. "You said they got me money from my father?"

Texas is surprised but nods. "Yeah, the manufacturing accounts were emptied."

"Who do I see to make sure that goes to rebuild and replace all that was lost in the Club?"

He shakes his head. "It's in your account. We can rebuild, Copper. That money is for you to live happy. It's to make up for how you had to live before."

I'm glad he didn't tell everyone the details but don't agree. Michael's grip on my hand tightens. I bet he thinks I'm hurt. I'm just pissed and give his hand a squeeze. "I will never spend a penny of that money. It was never mine or going to be mine. I have always made enough for what I did and need. Here, I get more, work a job I love and have protection so I'm not bargained to terrorists again. Who do I see to get that money to Badass for Rising Squared to be rebuilt?" I watch his eyes go to Michael before he nods to me.

"Banks and Cort. They'll tell you it isn't needed. I understand your reasons and will say it too, but will accept it with the honor you show in giving it. Here, you will never be a piece on a chess board. Copper Rose Brolin is worth everything. Your value is equal to me, Sally and Alder. Payment for you being here isn't needed."

Tears blur his face but I smile. "Thank you. I need to use his money for the good he never saw in the world. Badass is about as good as I've ever dreamed the world can be, even if I'm worth the same as a dog. She's an impressive dog and I'm glad I'm not the only one that thinks so."

He smiles with his eyes crinkled around the edges. "Everyone is equal here and we count the dogs. Thank you for the new Club."

I nod getting a squeeze from Michael. "I love that, Copper Rose Brolin. You sure you weren't brought up Badass?"

I smile wiping my eyes. "I wish. I need to talk to Cort and Banks."

"They'll be here today. I can send them to the Lab," Marks says in a soft voice that has me looking across at him. He nods his head at me showing he's touched.

I'm not sure what to do so I jut my chin out like they do. They all laugh but Michael squeezes my leg with a smile. I

roll my eyes and eat.

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Sally moves from her little dog cot by the counter and I take my eyes away from the microscope to see what she's doing. The alarm hasn't gone off yet. She's sitting facing the door as Alder, Cort and another man come in making me think of XX-Small, Medium and XXX-Large.

Cort is smiling. "Someone gave you a heads-up?"

"Sally moved from her cot so I watched. She normally doesn't move unless the alarm goes off. It's set for every two hours so we stretch and get a drink."

Alder approves. "Smart."

I nod looking at the other man. "Are you Banks?"

"Yeah. Texas said you don't want your father's money." He doesn't look happy about that.

"No. Use it for whatever you need but I don't want it."

"The company isn't a small mom and pop, war is a billion-dollar industry, Copper."

I nod. "I know. Badass must be too. It will serve Badass better than war." He's going to argue so I shake my head at him. "Stopping innocents from dying is how I got to Badass. Use it to replace the Club and whatever else is needed to stop other innocents from dying. I don't need anything more than the money to be out of my account and working toward a better world. If I knew how, I'd do it myself but I'm an engineer. Badass knows what to do with it so I can be an engineer. I love my job." I smile at him and Cort laughs.

"It's billions." Banks isn't giving up.

I look at Cort. "Can you use it to grow this Badass world?"

His smile gets bigger like he's been posed by a photographer. "I can."

My eyes bounce back to Banks. "Rebuild the Club and give the rest of it to Cort."

Alder walks toward me pulling his little backpack off. "Flea, tick result?" He's all done with money too.

"Yeah, I was just looking at it. Adding it to the bar will work. No long-term side effects in Italian humans so the dogs will be fine."

Cort walks closer to the counter. "Italians?"

I smile back at him. "Yeah, it's a normal herb they use daily. They consume a lot more than the dogs will and they're fine."

He laughs. Banks finally moves and starts asking about what I'm doing.

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## ***MB***

It's odd to have nothing to do on my day off. Harky is in and told me to take it while I can because a job is coming down for me.

No one needs my help so I get to the garage and start rolling the strips I made out of copper. The smallest is the hardest, not because the copper is so hard it can't be bent but it's the little bud that will only be seen in the center as a point. After what feels like an hour, I don't like the scrawny shape and pull the pieces apart one by one. Getting a ball bearing from an old tractor, I wrap it seeing a better bulb like shape after two petals are on.

Cort and Marks come in surprising me.

Putting the rose down, I take the safety goggles off. "You're a surprise. Am I needed?"

Marks shakes his head. "No, Brother. Cort wanted to see how the house came out. What are you making now?" He helped with the jig I built for girders in the silo and finds my crazy ideas fun.

"A copper rose."

Cort smiles. "She's going to love it."

I nod. "I figure if she does, I can make one every year for her."

"It's a good plan." He picks up a petal. "It's not too heavy but looks thick."

I nod. "Copper is fairly light. You want to see the house?"

"Finish this. I've got time." Cort has time to watch me make a rose?

I'm not asking. I slide the goggles back on, pick up the next petal and add it to my little rose. Since I put the pieces in order as I dismantled the last rose, I'm moving quicker than the first time. Cort mills around the garage looking at shit I've

collected in here. Now the house is done, it's a lot of tools and odds and ends to see.

"You don't care about her giving the money to Badass?" I've never seen Cort not ask questions so this isn't a surprise. He's relaxed but always carries curiousness. I feel stress in there today.

"It's her money and I wouldn't want to touch it if I were her." I take the next petal from Marks who turned into my assistant.

"I can see that. Alder was with us and had Akai send the government money to Phoenix. He said he won't have to deal with it anymore. I didn't realize it bothered him."

I roll the rose on the last two petals and smooth the bottom rolling it against the aluminum table, then heat and buff it out with an old piece of T-shirt. "It's a constant reminder of what they'll never forget." Like my men, the anger is gone, the day is faded, but they'll never be forgotten.

His hand crosses my view surprising me because I was looking at the shields I wear to show they're remembered. "Like you."

"No, Boss. I'll never forget but honor them daily. There is no obligation for me to decide on or weigh outcomes. There's only honor left for me. Alder and Copper would have to make decisions on that money for as long as it lasts. It's money they got because someone fucked with them. There is no honor for them to see with that money, but a duty to disburse it. The only honor they'd feel from it is knowing it's helping someone else. Giving it to you means something. For them, that honor comes with relief that they aren't touching any part of it for that to happen."

"Huh, the shit I learn. I see their need to give it away but didn't think about the burden. Are you a reader?"

His question has me smiling. Everyone asks lately. "No, Boss, or not the way you're thinking. Since I was little, I've felt emotions, anxiety, warnings but I don't read minds. A



doctor told my grandmother I read feelings. It's about as close to reading as I come."

"You knew Copper was yours before you met her?"

Shit, he's asking so I have to answer. "The objective and her background had me feeling something. Running the riad stairs, I knew she was in trouble and we needed to get her away from her threat within minutes."

"You knew where the MERCs were walking in the door." He sees everything.

"I felt them. The anger on the first and shock on the other."

He nods. "This is why everyone wants you as a Lead."

They do? "I didn't know anyone wanted me as a Lead but Commander Harky. I trained in Mass and they didn't ask. I know they felt a bond with me but never spoke of it. FBI handed me a list of hoops to jump through. Harky was genuinely happy to hear from me when I called and relieved when I got here." I smile remembering. "It was the first time I saw him smile and thought this has to be home. Harky was happy."

He laughs. "He's happy. You're smiling more too. I'm glad you like it here. Harky needs a partner he can trust and worked to get you here. Adroit wanted you."

I shrug, "I think I needed to make a bigger impact. My cousin told me about Adroit but I'm more of a background dweller. My training didn't come with Marine Recon crazy stunts and paparazzi at every job."

Marks laughs. "They do end up on the news regularly. FBI used to hide from the media."

I nod because we did too.

Cort points to the rose I've been spinning by the stem. "You're done?"

"Yeah. I have a test tube bottle for it. I made the stand the other day." Handing him the rose, I reach back for the long

tube and chain holder.

“That’s cool.” Marks takes the holder. “Is it real chain?”

“Yeah, I tacked it together. I like the naval look it has.”

Cort puts the tube in the holder then the rose in the tube. “You’re talented. It symbolizes she’s protected by you. I like it.” He doesn’t miss anything.

Pulling the overhead light chain, I take my copper rose back and start walking. “We finished the house the day before the drones. I’m glad it wasn’t hit.”

“We’d rebuild it and I bet it would be as fast as Lincoln logs because we know how it should look,” Marks says adding another reason to stay right here. They’d just rebuild it.

Cort laughs. “I’d do the floors and rock again. I’ve never done anything like that.” He did a great job, I assumed he had experience.

“You made a table with the fiberglass glowing.” Marks points out.

“Yeah. Jack is good with wood and gave directions to Amal. I never made a table either. I can weld and do shit for bikes and cars but never worked with wood and rock. I had the time and liked the work. I’m going to take the metal out of the outdoor grill area and make it wood and rock.”

“That’ll look nice.” I can see it. “They have thatched roof shit that’s fire resistant.” I looked at it for the little back veranda I want to build.

Cort stops at the door. “It would fit the area and look better than the kites. Send that to me.”

I nod, opening the door while I pull my phone.

“This looks perfect. It’s like walking into another realm. I’m glad you left the silo alone outside.”

While they look around, pull drawers and doors open, I find the thatching material I saw and send it to Cort's chat. The last thing I sent was a thanks and pictures of the copper fireplace and the upstairs mock one that's really just a vent that heats the room from the center.

"How'd you make this? This is why you used the naval look." Cort and the questions. The rope handrail did come out nice.

"His military training is equal to Green Beret and SEAL. They kind of overlap the jobs they did." Marks knowing that is a surprise. Most think GIGN is SEAL alone.

"It's a good way to put it. I was in a police tactical unit, GIGN."

Cort nods. "Elite, national threat unit. Brinks gave me that but not the Green Beret and Navy thing. I thought it was just army or like the Marines."

"It is in a way but we trained for everything. The jobs are diverse, secretive and we're never to be photographed in public. At the trials, I was behind the cameras and avoided our team members."

"Huh. I can see why Adroit wasn't an option for you. Bruce strikes me as a background dweller. Falcon always was too. He said it's how he was trained. I can't believe he agreed to the Club."

My eyes go right to Marks. I'm not going to run a Club.

Cort doesn't miss it. "Relax. I'm just connecting you to Brothers I know. You're happy here with Harky and he'd kill me if I took you away from him. He likes running Ops and you give him a way to do that. Since it's your thing too, it all works for me. You both have experienced Teams that slide into training when needed. It's weird how well it works but it works. I'm not fuckin' with it or you." He's being honest and sincere.

I breathe. "Thanks, Boss. I'm not sure Copper would like New England weather and I can tell you I hate the

humidity in the south.”

His pose-like smile comes out. “Nope, you’re happy here for life and it will be a long one. The freaky told me so.”

That’s about as good of a guarantee as I can get. “I’ll take it, Boss. I’m not Falcon and would hate it. Being the center of attention doesn’t work for me.”

He nods. “The training and no pictures explained that. Falcon was like that and I don’t think he likes Church. He does the job like it’s a team he’s running. He’s always been a little weird.”

I’m not saying a word but I’d probably do the same. I throw chin hoping we move along.

“How’d you get the rope so stiff?” He asks.

“Fiberglass. At night it has a faint glow. I used PVC as a form and sanded it down close to the rope, then by hand to make it look like rope. I can’t believe the glow worked but it did.”

“It looks nice with the I-beam stairs.” Cort agrees.

They check out the upstairs and back where I put the cobblestones for the little veranda I want out there and another dog bathroom then leave.

I put the copper rose on the island thinking about them being here. Cort wanted to know how I felt about the money and let me know I’m home for good. It’s the only time I felt stress and relief from him. I feel everything from his curiousness to his excitement, he’s rarely stressed. I’ve felt his anger and can say I’ve never met anyone but Ben Knight that’s as intense in that anger. It’s like they’re working to contain it before it’s unleashed. I’d hate to be close when they lose that battle.

I like the copper rose in the silver chain holder. The tube reminds me of her lab. Cort was right, it symbolizes me protecting my Copper Rose Brolin in her world.

Just thinking it I see her pretty face with big brown eyes and her easy smile. She’s got the softest pin straight black

hair I've ever felt. I'd think she was Indian but her skin is too pale and eyes are more like Solei than Ginny or Aylen. I'll get to see her eyes light up and smile pop out when I give her the little copper rose.

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## *Copper*

The man is talented and so damn thoughtful. “You’ll make me a rose every year?” I say with a smile. I’m getting one every year.

“I will, *Mondoux*. Next year I’m dipping the tips of the petals in red because you married me.”

“We’re married.” We got the paperwork the day he claimed me.

“Okay, because we’ll have a wedding. It’s not much of one, but there will be a wedding.”

My eyes burn. “You wanted a wedding?” He never said he wanted a wedding.

“Next year on the day I claimed you. Yes, I want that wedding. I’m new here too, *Mondoux*. By next year we’ll have more connections than us and our dogs.”

Now he’s got me smiling. “I’d like that and will find out what we need to do.”

With a nod, he pulls my hand to his lips and kisses the pretty copper rose he made for me, then my fingers. “How was your day?”

“Not as interesting as yours but I saw Cort, met Banks and got more work from Alder. I added the herbs to the snack bones so the next batch they make will have them fending off fleas and ticks without the smelly shampoo and collar.”

His arms let me go as he turns for the oven timer. “What herbs?”

“Lemongrass and Basil. They’re common and not harmful in the amounts we’re using but consistent consumption will stave off fleas and ticks. Piper is happy. It’s another cost she’s not paying for and the dogs will be covered. Ticks cause so many problems. That looks and smells great. What is in it?” The man does everything.

“A breakfast skillet. I used pork chops I cut up but it’s normally made with sausage or bacon.” He’s serious.

“I’ve never had a breakfast skillet. I like the onion and apple in it.” I love the adorable sheepish look he gives me.

“I added the apple too. They go well with the pork chops.” The man is inventive.

“You’d have made a great engineer.” I get a look like I’m crazy. “Your mind thinks like one. It’s not always about machines. The pairing of tastes,” I point at the rose, “the ingenuity in building, even the material for the holder has reason and fits perfectly with your surroundings. You wanted a silo house and made it happen fitting in with your personality. Outside is a silo but inside is your world of comfort, thought and invention. I love your world and Kiki tells me you’ve always been like this.”

He shakes his head. “Always been like this? She wasn’t on my team until we got here.”

I shrug. He’s humble, almost to a fault, so I tick points off on my fingers. “You were a Commander young, a good one from France which was a surprise, you were known for getting the job done, known for shielding your men - which she said not many Commanders did, you never bragged about you or the jobs you did that were crazy and you had women falling at your feet but never talked crap, ever.” I raise an eyebrow at him, daring him to dispute it. He wasn’t at lunch and even Drill agreed and added to MB stories.

He puts the plate he was holding down and shakes his head at me. “We weren’t trained to brag about anything. If I did, you wouldn’t be here,” he says it with a cocky smile that I have to smile at.

“You’re probably right. I was never into the conceited jerks.”

With a nod he pulls my chair out. Even at home he pulls my chair out. The man is definitely a keeper and I’m keeping him. “Thank you.”

“When did you get information about me?”

“Lunch today.” I put the first bite in my mouth and moan. The man is a good cook. Apples, potato, onion and egg all work with the pork.

“Cort was there.” It’s not a question.

I nod, thinking I should ask how he knows but put another bite in my mouth. When I can talk, I tell him, “This is great. I’ve never had anything like it before.”

“It’s called a skillet in the dining hall. That’s with bacon or sausage. No apples.”

I’m getting it tomorrow. We clean up talking about his job tomorrow. He’ll be gone for a few days to a week. I have my lab here. When I tell him, he smiles and shakes his head.

“Piper and Attiquin will drag you out of it. Prometheus is going with me so they’ll bring Zeus for backup.”

I laugh but that feels good. “Okay, I’ll make dinner or go to the pool. They’re always at the pool.”

“They are. Maybe you can get something for the dogs to splash around out back. We have pools everywhere but we’re not living at the compound. There are splash pads but I haven’t looked at what’s out there.”

There’s a thought. “I think I can come up with something.” I have no idea what but I’ll find something.

He takes the refilled wine glasses from the table and my hand in his other. “Wine, bed, you, me and our bodies fused so neither is able to talk.”

“My sexy French biker is out tonight. I love that guy.”



# Chapter Six

## *Two days*

### *Copper*

We finished the testing for heartworm as far as we can for now. Adding the three plants to the blood was fast and easy because they got me every form to test the plants. I'm working with Stella on the satellite capabilities tomorrow. Today I have nothing else to do so I look for ways the dogs can splash around in our backyard.

Since they aren't puppies but at times may like a little splash jumping, I look for ideas on Google. Lordy, this is already a thing. There is no way that plastic crap is going in our yard. It doesn't fit with all the work done here making it look like an authentic farm. Inside is an amazing world of ingenuity and thought. There is no thought to gaudy colored plastic and rubber mats. I reword and add *best* to the search and see Disney. Not caring what Disney, I play a video and laugh.

Marco comes over and watches with me. When it's over he touches my arm. "Boss Copper, Pres Alder make splash to Vision. Kids play to water. No color, music. I show Pres Alder, we make music to splash."

I nod but think. "This is for the dogs. Something not so grand using so much water but for the older dogs to watch getting misted and younger to play in. I like the lights, dimmer lights at night but we'd need bold laser colors for day."

He nods fast. "Vision to kids, fun, happy. Only open night to Clubs, Alpha-Bit special day."

"Tell Alder. I think I need to see the Vision and how they did it. Seeing always sparks ways to make it more. I'll need that smaller and applying to all age groups."

He smiles. "To all dogs." He runs. "I get chopper."

"I guess we're going now, Athena," I say. I like Athena better than Sally and she does too. Her board said it

yesterday under her picture.

Ginny and Soter meet us at the chopper pad when we get there. It's been like twenty minutes. They do everything fast. The Mingo guy and one I don't know are behind her.

"Mario was off but wants to see the Vision. You know Mingo and Soter." Ginny tells me.

"You're my Team?" I've never been off the Squared Club grounds without Michael.

She waves for me to go in first. "Yes, Mario is a Lead and my second had Flight training so he stepped in for today. You've never been off Club grounds?"

"With Mitena to Zion but Mucimi brought us saying it was a freaky transport. He brought me back too. You were going to be my team but got called for something else. In the choppers, not without Michael. I've been to Phoenix and the ABSZ but it's different when he's with me. The team met us at the chopper landing in both places." I sit and strap Marco then myself in. Michael did this both times.

She nods. "Their Elite teams on flight are Protector level. Without Commander MB, or the freaky ride, you leave with a team. You'll like the vision, they have everything, the Brothers like it as much as the kids do."

I nod. "I want to make a splash area behind the silo and wanted to see theirs."

Marco is excited. "To all age dog. Mist, music, light, to older. Splash to younger."

"I've seen a show in Vegas like that. You don't get close because it's in the center of a river but it's a riveting show." Mario has my brain running through ideas.

I nod. "It may not work for the backyard but should be easy enough to put up drawing a crowd to areas in need of commerce."

They all look at me. I shrug. "I watched a Disney water light show. The impact is awe inspiring but can be made with little cost for low-income areas needing to raise money in

towns that otherwise wouldn't get that money. The community can plan for the influx three or four times a year and get that income to sustain roads, open new businesses and put people back to work."

"Jesus, another President?" Mingo asks.

I laugh at him. "I'm an engineer."

He nods slowly. Thinking about small towns I pull a sketch pad out of my bag and draw out a fountain that would work for different seasons. Marco points at one of the bump outs I have on the side.

"Firehose to run it. The force can power lasers. It guarantees it's not nightly entertainment and cheap enough to be worth the hassle, water, storage and advertisement costs."

He nods. "I code to build. Recycle light, big need wheel?" He points to the base. What a smart boy.

"I didn't think of moving it. That's a good idea. A flatbed trailer that's low will work. Plants or a curtain can cover the wheels. It would make a good decoration point for different seasons or holidays."

"You're making it? You thought it up like ten minutes ago." Mario asks.

"Yeah. I need to get music on it. The jets and lights are done."

Marco shakes his head. "I do music to light, water blast. Note control easy. Same to paint, paint printer."

I have to think about that for a few minutes. Paint with shades would need time in between intricate jet sprays. "That will work. You do music." I hand him the sketch. "I need to do the dog splash for my backyard. I told Michael I'd figure something out. The bump outs are there for water pressure, the pump to run it and solar. We can add an electric outlet and transfer for different areas by using the battery storage."

"I have," he says offhandedly.

"Okay. I'm excited to see the Vision, someone said they have a cone building. Oh, you could give options for

waterspouts. Fish for around water, trees or plants for farm areas, factory stacks for industrial.”

Marco looks up. “Choice to connect to area job?”

“Yeah, chances are the people in small towns work for whatever is closest to them.”

“I build one same you draw. Small Alpha-Bits research give new picture to me I build.” He can’t think of others? The little guy is brilliant.

“Three, use mine and do flowers for the second and fish or small boats for the third. Music is in there so you could do music notes.”

He nods. “I make flower and notes. Small Alpha-Bits make more to me we give choice. What I do to three?”

“Use them to demonstrate then send them to low-income towns that could use them with a video of how and why. Make sure the Alpha-Bits’ logo is on it.”

He nods. “Badass Innovation. Pres Alder say keep Alpha-Bits safe we use company to you new product. Cold fan sell to Badass Innovation website. Tyson, Dreng send to south heat dome.”

I nod. “He said that about the bones. You didn’t tell me about the A/C being built. It’s easy enough to build. I should have known you’d be done with it.”

“Done, tested, sold. Same to glow rock, kid laser toy, bones no flea, tick.”

“You guys are quick with getting it out. Bet the south loves it. We could do a dehumidifier like that. The honeycomb shaped recycle board could separate and collect water.” I shake my head. “It’s humid in the south but I need the splash area first.”

He smiles like I’m funny. “Boss MB first. South be humid centuries. Next week de-humid.”

I laugh with Ginny, Mario and Mingo.

“You’re right. It hits me and I think of a million other things. I’m glad you stop and focus me.”

“I glad you help to people need help. Honor to be second to you.”

Aww. I hug him. “Thank you.”

“Sohn put glowing stones all the way up to his pod. You made those?” Mario asks me.

“No. I told him how to make them so they last. He said the dogs know the path better than him. I didn’t know he meant a walkway. We can make them with solar stones in them. They pour them from what I’ve seen.”

He nods.

“I send to VP Asa.” Marco is so good for me.

“Thanks. I don’t need more in my head right now. Well, I do. Can I get a printer to make what I’ll need for the backyard? Michael is industrial or kind of steampunk. I don’t know where to get parts like that but I can make them.”

Ginny leans forward. “Josephine went to a steampunk store. She’s been like three times and I was on one of her and Jacky’s details.”

“Can we go on the way back to Rising Squared?”

She types and waits for someone then smiles at me. “They’ll have another Team there when we land.”

They’re unbelievable. “Thank you. I don’t get to shop often.”

“Get with Aylen or Jeti. They like shopping but don’t go often.” I love Ginny.

“I will. Thanks. I order everything but haven’t seen many stores.”

We’re told we’re setting down and I get my pad back in my bag. This is going to be a great day.

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## ***MB***

I see my girl's serious look in the picture I saw of her as I slide behind the Russian. Pictures of plans for undetectable drones were on his phone. I didn't ask how Badass got that but found out his name was on a visitor log for Copper's father's factory then office. When I saw the picture of her mixed in with shots of the factory, I started planning how I'd make it the last face he'd ever see.

Holding the needle in my mouth, I put one arm around his neck and hold the wet cloth over his mouth. He freezes and I feel his fear. At home alone means he has no help close. Using the Moskovoye proiznosheniye dialect, I say, "Not a sound." Removing the hand at his mouth after two full minutes, I take the needle from my mouth and put it in the skin behind his ear. "I read a study from 2002 that said Russia has the highest heart disease and stroke death rate in the world. It's an old study but we have not learned much, while CDV is being taken seriously, it is costly and the impact of throwing money at it is not lowering the numbers fast enough." Pressing the plunger down I release the serum. "The serum will induce both heart attack and stroke. Modern medicine is great but I made this with plants from an era long past."

He doesn't need to know about the molecular component I needed. His body goes lax as if he's happy to let my arm around his neck hold him up. I step back laying him on his side and pull a new glove over the one that held the cloth. Patting down his chest I find his phone where I saw him put it earlier. Scrolling through his pictures, my Copper shows so I hit it to enlarge, then set it so it stands directly in front of him. "Copper Rose. I call her *Mondoux* because she's mine."

Checking time, I clean his face with alcohol wipes then go to his safe and pull the contents out. Whatever he just put in now belongs to Badass. There are four other envelopes that are bulky along with passports, cash and some small cloth bags. I take the envelopes, leaving the cash and jewels. Just as



I turn, I notice a small gray box that blends in with the inside color and drop it in a lower pocket.

Feeling for a pulse, I take the phone he's no longer seeing and walk through the house going out the same second floor window I came in.

An alley gets me to quiet side streets that finally empties into busier main roads. I'm a good two miles from the safe house before I call a clear.

Me: "Ops, Fey clear."

Taylor: "Roger, Fey. ETA."

Me: "Seven."

Taylor: "Roger. Ghost in thirty." So Jessie will be in right behind me. I'll have time to get rid of the plants and vial of stomach acid I used to simulate digestion of one of them.

Walking in the door, Drill looks up at me from his laptop. "Jessie's on his way."

I nod, going right to my room and start packing. I lost bits and pieces of the needle, wipes and gloves on the way back so it's just the vial and plants. Opening the window, I climb the balcony and drop a little potted plant in a window box. The second plant is whipped over the roof into a busy road. Back in the room, I take the stomach acid into the bathroom and dump it in the toilet. Washing my hands, I walk out snagging my bag from the bed and sit by Drill.

"That was the last. I held shit for the camera but didn't open anything."

He nods. "Jessie did the same. You two are quiet and boring as hell. That's our four. Kiki got the German bitch talking about the drones and finding Copper, to your last target. She said she's the only one left that knew about them."

I nod. She's dead when she goes home. My target's last call made sure of it. The only good thing I learned was no one knows where Copper is. They think she's hiding out in Mauritania or Mali.

Drill looks at the door and a second later Jessie comes in. “Let’s clear out.”

I stand lifting my bag while Drill stows his laptop and Jessie gets his bag.

“The plane is waiting. We’re in Germany then home.”

Jessie didn’t hear the target’s last call so I ask. “For the stepmother?”

He nods.

“My target gave the order to remove her.”

He doesn’t smile often but does now. “Maybe just home. Prez said we’d get it on the plane.”

I hope we’re going home too. I don’t like the little jumper planes and long car rides. Military bases everywhere had our travel times a hell of a lot shorter. I think about that as we get down to the car. It’s knowing Copper is waiting for me not the rides because it’s never bothered me before. I smile, I miss her and want to get back now that this threat is gone. This is the passion I read about in the Bible. ‘*With passion comes a fierce fight.*’ Ben James said. I feel it and know he’s right.

Copper has no clue but passion drives her. I’ve seen it in her work for the dogs or innocent people getting hurt, position on right and wrong with her father, need to apologize for putting me out and in bed; my girl is nothing but pure passion. I bet if I said it, she’d argue the point.

Before my job was a job, now I need it done so my Copper Rose Brolin can live and work safely, because it guarantees me more nights of the passion that fuels me to get the job done and home so I can make her life perfect.

The circle of my life with passion as its center is never what I thought having an ol’ lady would feel like.

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Finally, on the plane I empty my pockets, laying everything on the table in a line. “I didn’t waste time opening anything at the house. The envelopes were standing side by side so I took them all. The box was odd. Something told me to take it so I did.” I look up at Ben and Cort set side by side on the board. They’re in their meeting rooms but from different sides of the country.

“Open the box.” Cort is as curious as I am.

Lifting the lid, I want to close it. “Single dose shot.” I show them the pen like needle. “Nothing to identify what’s in it. It’s clear and full.”

“Jessie, get it bagged for the lab,” Ben says looking at the table. “Not knowing which one was last I’d have taken them all too. Open the first.”

I end up opening them all, putting flash drives or letters and contracts on top of the envelopes they came out of.

“What was in the shot you gave him?” Cort and his questions.

“Dolls Eyes. It sedates the heart muscles. The plant for stroke was Atropa Belladonna. It needs to be ingested but I used stomach acid for a liquid form that would cause the molecules to turn gaseous. It opens blood vessels in the brain. With the heart beating so fast it causes an aneurysm or stroke.” It’s odd a sedate heart would beat fast but the gas overrides the muscle reaction.

“You were trained with plants?” Ben asks.

I nod wondering where this is going. “Yeah, some I read beyond training, some I learned on the vineyard. My uncle was into plants.”

Their eyes move from me to the sides so I’m guessing they’re looking at each other. Cort’s eyes turn back to me. “You did a good job. Since they think she’s in Mali or wherever, Ben sent a team to back that up.”

I nod, relieved they paid attention to that and gave it some help.

“Are we headed to Germany?” Jessie is done with waiting, I guess. He hasn’t emptied his pockets yet. I have no idea what he’s collected and wasn’t in on his part of the job other than knowing we each had two.

“No, Brother. MB’s target took care of it. Good job, MB. You’re headed back. Go get some sleep, Brother. It’s been a busy couple of days.” Ben dismisses me.

I throw chin and go sit with Drill. I slept last night on the ride into Moscow. “Was Cort my Control?”

“Yeah. I was just on the feeds. No one said a word until you cleared with Taylor. Ben was Jessie’s. I didn’t know what to expect with no team here.” He points to a Prince I’ve seen before. “Josiah explained. He was on the plane the whole time.”

I throw the Brother chin. “Thanks. I like when they’re not talking my ear off.”

He smiles. “None of our Leads talk on jobs. It wasn’t that long ago that they didn’t have a second to watch out for them. We do the job without comment unless you need it. Drill ran it perfect.” Why would he say Drill ran it perfect?

I nod. “He did. Thanks to you both. I never had feeds for jobs like these. The first felt weird but I got over it when no one talked. Having someone watching my back feels good now. Was he requested to train as IT for me on jobs?”

Josiah smiles. “Yeah. Harky doesn’t like the small jobs like this.”

I nod knowing Harky is more about full Ops. He likes Zeus by his side. “I don’t mind them but wouldn’t want only the small jobs.” I get another nod.

“You’re like Jessie. He doesn’t care but doesn’t want to be stuck to doing the same job every time out.”

It’s good to know I’m not alone in thinking grim reaper was never a job I wanted but I’ve seen too much and know it’s a job that needs to be done. Leaning the seat back, I’m glad to be on a Badass plane and close my eyes. My

Copper Rose Brolin will be happy I'm home early. I smile knowing I'm just as excited to see my girl.

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## *Copper*

In the little shop, I'm at the die grinder when Athena barks. I'm glad she didn't lean against me. Looking back, I see the light flashing and drop the gear to grab the phone.

"Copper," I say thinking I should have looked first.

"You went to the steampunk museum without me. You're a bitch. Josephine always goes when I'm working. Did she go again?"

I smile at Stella and the pout I can just about see in my mind. "No. Ginny was with me. We met up with AJ and Alder at the Vision and they came too, but they had to get back before us. That place has everything. I'm not going to have to print much. Michael has all the tools to work with metal. I didn't see anything but the drill press and bench grinder." She's not making a sound so I shut up.

It's a few seconds before she says anything. "I want to go next time you make plans."

"I need to go back tomorrow. I didn't know he had a lathe and die grinder. I can get the rest of what I need. You want to go after our meet about the satellite?" I want to tell them about the spiders silk that's stronger than Kevlar. It may be worth researching for new gear that's not so expensive and heavy. The poor men have to carry a hundred pounds or more around. I'm not wearing gear off the compound that weighs as much as I do. They're crazy. No one even mentions it.

"Yeah. I'm coming up there. I need to find Brinks. See you tomorrow." She is just gone.

I smile at Athena. "She's not mad anymore. I need to get this done. Marco said he'd have help tomorrow to get the pipes and wires run."

Getting back for the die grinder I edge out the half circle so it's smooth. Water blast need the lens for color. It's a little primitive, but with it clearly seen, that primitive will look impressive and fit in with Michael's style.

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I drop the box in the back laughing. “Marco, what is all this?”

“Filter to water recycle. Boss MB want ter-ah-say. He show Mikhail plan. I follow plan.”

Ter ah say. *Terrasse*. I love that he’s trying to say it like Michael. “I’m glad you checked. Does it show where he wants the splash area for the dogs?”

“No. I look French garden see area separate but see from back.” He points to the cobblestones behind us.

“I like it. So we’ll add the splash area to his plan?”

His head nods quickly. “I have plan to pipe, wire, sensor to walkway.”

That’s a lot but I have so much to do, I need to get this moved so I can finish the other parts. “Where am I putting the pieces I finish? It’s too much in his little shop.”

“Ready to assemble?”

I nod looking at the slope he’s running pipe on. That will look nice down there from the back of the silo.

“To stake I put.” He points so I walk not seeing a stake until I’m a good hundred foot away from him.

I don’t have time to ask. Dropping the box, I hurry back to finish the next section of lights and waterspout gears, this is going to be awesome. The misters are done and Mario knows someone to get the plants and trees in. I can’t wait for Michael to see it.

# Chapter Seven



## *Four days*

### *Copper*

“Boss Copper! Commander MB, Boss Prometheus back to dinner!” Marco runs down the slope to the dog’s part of the garden.

I’m smiling like a clown again. Michael called and said he was in Mass for a day then they were going back out. He’s texted me, but I haven’t heard his sweet and sexy French accented voice in too long. Reading his texts, I can hear it like he says it, but it’s just not enough. Tonight, he can tell me in person.

I put the pieces I’m holding down and bend because Marco doesn’t look like he’s slowing down any. I’m glad I did and laugh when he jumps on me. Marco is like my own little brother. Yesterday he said he’s got so many brothers but I’m his only sister. I felt that so deep. I’ve never had anyone but my mom, then the sperm donor and his wife. Now I have Michael and Marco with a ton of friends.

Holding on then kissing his head, I lean him out a little so I can see his happy little pink eyes. “I’m so glad he’ll be home too. I’ll be done in about an hour.”

“I happy to you. Tonight, I sleep to ABSZ. Pres Alder say I work IT tomorrow.”

“I’m at Alpha for the satellite coding. We’re working with the ABSZ and Princes.”

He nods, disentangling himself from me. “I work money to Akai. I finish fast, I come home to dinner. VP Marks take Alpha-Bits ride to ice cream.”

They have an activity scheduled for every night. I had to negotiate two hours from Michael for playing games with the little guys. They’ve never played Chutes and Ladders or even Candy Land. “I’ll see you at dinner tomorrow. When do you leave?”

“Chopper two hour. Pres Alder, VP Asa meet to Honor now. I ride to them Phoenix and ABSZ. Little Alpha-Bits have new fountain, river, shape, theme I add to BI.”

It takes a second for Badass Innovation to register then I laugh. “You guys are so smart. I didn’t think of the river or different shapes.”

He nods helping me get the thread covered in tape on the last mister bars. “I no think to shape. Small Alpha-Bit think more to fun. Big think to computer.” His pause and little smile make me smile. “Boss Anton think to fun. He build waterspout to zorb track. Track shoot water zorb bounce wrong side to hill.”

I laugh connecting the pipe on the old-fashioned mechanical bird. “Anton’s a little crazy but fun. Josephine said he asked about a park for the jet packs. I bet he’s got laser lights and waterspouts shooting at some obstacle course on it. Oh, maybe he’ll do laser tag up in the air with random laser blasts coming from everything he can think of.”

Looking down when he doesn’t give me the second pipe, I’m surprised he’s not there. “Marco?”

“I research to tell Boss Anton!” He yells from the top of the slope.

Oh, Lord. I probably shouldn’t give Anton ideas. It would be a fun obstacle course after zorbing.

I laughed so hard zorbing with Josephine and the ol’ ladies. Everything we do has me laughing. I’ve come to love them all but Leya and Mitena text me almost daily. I love the random conversations and funny things they do throughout the day.

Finishing the last pipe, I pull my phone and text them what just happened. Leya sends an emoticon rolling on the ground laughing right back. The words below make me laugh out loud. *‘Priceless! Don’t tell the men!’*

Cleaning up and boxing the tools and parts we don’t need, I feel my phone vibrate and see Mitena’s text, *‘Don’t tell anyone else. I can’t wait for this one.’*

I'm laughing again. They love surprising the men even when they aren't the ones surprising them.

Athena follows me up the slope to put the tools back. I drop the parts in bins Marco made for the house. He's got irrigation, mechanical and electrical separated so it's an easy and quick process. Once the box is empty, I'm ready to test out the finished section all together. Everything's been tested but it was all separate. I can't wait to see it move all at once.

Athena follows me back out to the silo. "Alright, Athena, it's you and Prometheus' section, go test it out before he gets here."

She yips like Loki making me laugh as she runs down the hill. I've never heard her make that sound before. Hitting the paw pad, she darts around the little blasts of water and color then lays on a cloud that's a cot-like bed near where the bird leans forward and stretches it's mechanical misting wings. The fire colors are perfect even during the day. What looks like a full blast of bright white against the metal, settles to yellows, oranges and reds. It worked great when we tested it but seeing it altogether is awesome.

Looking around from the cobblestone walkways that Mucimi finished - between when I went to bed one night and the next morning - I can picture Michael's idea taking shape. Cort came and put up a sort of tiki hut of beams like the silo with a thatched roof, but there's nothing in it. I know water and electric are run to it but that's it. To the right will be flowers in raised rock beds. The cobblestone is stacked but not installed. To the left is a few rows of dirt that look like they're ready for plants or something.

The plans didn't have anything but a layout, nothing was labeled, which I find odd and annoying, He's not an engineer but thinks like one for everything but plans. Marco showed me the house plans. They were the same. The man needs to label and show the bump out sections so everyone knows how he wants it put together. I shake my head. He isn't an engineer. The man is talented and should be able to do his own thing without me driving him crazy. Everything he does is

more than I'd ever dream up. I'm keeping my outburst to myself like I promised.

A shiver runs down my back, he's coming home for dinner. The clown smile is back on my face just as I see movement down the slope. That clown smile will be with me for a while. Loki, Sampson and Athena are running around the splash area. I can see this being the new dog hang out. I'm going to make a couple more clouds for cots. My dogs should have friends just like me.

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## ***MB***

Ben is as crazy as Cort and just as compassionate. To give Jessie and Taylor time off and a day of regular Club Ops, he asked me to cover them. Knowing my Brothers would and have covered me, I agreed. Picking Prometheus up in Mass as soon as I got back felt good. He's not *Mondoux* but he's familiar and it was good to have him by my side again. We've been out on mostly FBI jobs on the east coast with their teams and new-to-them dogs. Prometheus is a good Lead and made a couple of adjustments but let the dogs run. They're not Zeus and Prometheus but they're good. Harky is happy with them but says their teams need to stop following them so closely. I think he's right and they'll get it but they aren't used to K-9 Leads.

Today's job ran perfect with me and the three dogs. They got the objective and commands and each carried out their part while I was using their feeds to get through the office and finally to the target. It was longer than I expected but cameras had to be frozen or shut down in order for me to move. Doing that with the office open and completely undetected was a major feat. Without the others, me and Prometheus would have been there all day.

I feel us lowering and look out the window. We're at Princes Security.

"Attention." I stand at the door with the two dogs behind me and Prometheus. Jumping out they follow. "Team Intel."

I don't give them anymore and they follow to the meeting room a Brother points us to. No one talks much here. I like it.

My thumb gets us into the meeting room we've been in after every job. I look back to make sure the dogs hit the pad then sit. Ben comes in with Ricky, Taylor and Bastille. I'm up and hug Bastille. "Glad you're here, Brother. I had hopes

you'd stay in the west but you're a Lead that needs to Lead a territory not just a Team."

He looks so much better with some color to his face and happiness surrounding him. "This job and location feels right." The first sign of nervousness I've felt from him shows.

"It is, Bastille. The job is one you've done forever without the politics, lousy food and sand."

Everything in him lifts. I feel excitement from him again. He just needed me to agree.

We sit while Ben stands. I've never seen him sit in this room. "You did a great job with the K-9's. Is there anything you'd change?"

I shake my head. "Harky thinks the team needs to step back from them. They understand objective and follow commands. They're not as quick to interact but they're new."

Prometheus chuffs and shows 'bond' and a soldier on his board.

Taylor laughs.

Ben nods. "Like that." He points to Prometheus but looks at me so I nod. "I can see they're not bonded with a handler. Prometheus is new to you but already has a bond, it shows by him giving input here. Bastille?"

My old friend nods. "I am open to the K-9 Lead. Harky said he'd send a match for me and I've seen the K9s for years wishing France had such a program."

Ricky nods. "Knight didn't want him out with MB but he has him. He'll be here tomorrow."

Why didn't he want him with me? Ricky looks right at me. "Brothers are in awe of you. The K-9s are too." He shrugs. "They're Brothers. You've had Prometheus for what? two weeks. He's already your partner and accepts his place in meets."

In awe of me? All the freaky around them must make them blind to ordinary men.

Ben and Ricky laugh. “You’re just as blind if you don’t see how gifted you truly are, Brother. Revered is what Aiyana said. You’re like Commander Basinger. She used the same words for her.”

I shake my head. I’m just a soldier doing a job I was trained for. Nothing flashy, special or different than any other soldier.

Ben shakes his head and Bastille laughs. “I told him what you just thought.” Ben explains the laughing.

Bastille turns toward me with a smile. “We trained in the same class and I did not learn all you did.” His hand waves by his head. “Feelings aside, you saved three men with whatever you could find in a bombed-out building. You fashioned medical equipment from rubble.” He shakes his head. “Two days we waited for help to arrive but you kept us alive with debris as traps for enemy soldiers so as not to alarm.” He shakes his head again, his accent becoming thicker. “Your jobs are done with precision and insight I did not learn in our training. Watching com video from here, they all believe you to be gifted as the Indians are but I know it’s just feelings for you, my friend. Your mind is gifted as no one I’ve ever known.”

My throat closes. He’s one of the few soldiers I’ve felt the common mindset with and I’ve always seen him as an honorable and trustworthy man. Those words mean everything. I throw him chin trying to swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Jessie, Taylor, Cort, Harky, Justice, Falcon, Marks, hell everyone who’s met you thinks the same, Brother. Half of them were trying to find a way to show you they see it. Teller even emptied boxes for you.” Ricky shakes his head smiling. “It’s funny to us that you don’t see it but you’re a Brother we feel Lead, Teach and Enforce rolling off of before you’re even close. Dakota says that’s with a long story so we’ll get to see it for years.”

*Mon dieu.* “Thank you.” My accent is coming out thicker because that lump has it sounding like a growl.

Ben steps closer to the table. “The purpose here was to tell you, *Good job*. Thanks for stepping in so Jessie and Taylor got some time with their old ladies, Club Ops time and Bastille could get the layout here. The Brothers were hoping for you to show at the Club for status and a beer but I know you’re anxious to get home. Your flight is leaving when you get to the airfield, Brother. It’s been an honor for all of us to have you here this week.”

I throw him chin and stand. The dogs do too, making me smile. “Down-time. Prometheus, you’re with me.” I look at Bastille getting a nod. “Commander Bastille is your Lead.”

Bastille stands saying, “Attention,” and the two dogs sit beside him.

Ricky, Taylor and Ben hug me with another thanks then Bastille and the dogs walk with us to the chopper. I have no words and he doesn’t seem to expect them.

At the chopper, he hugs me again. “*Dieu vitesse.*”

I say it right back and board. It’s not until I’m sitting that I smile. God’s speed or good fortune and success are what is said in all the choppers as they lift. It’s usually in Mohegan but Bastille said it in French and I gave it back in French. He’s going to pull the French out of me whether I like it or not. I laugh getting looks but I don’t care.

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It’s been a long flight or maybe I’m just impatient to see my girl. She’s excited about the splash pad. I would have ordered one from the pet site but thought she’d like to do something as ordinary as shopping, which she told me she never did much of.

I hope she’s had fun. Every day she texts me little things that make me smile so I’ve been doing the same. Sweet nothings are now recorded in our chat. I shake my head



remembering a time I would have scoffed at that. I'm whipped and love it.

I was out early and late, at jobs or for recon and didn't want to bother her during her work times so texts are how we've communicated over the last few days. She's good at sweet nothings but I hate not hearing about her days. Everything is exciting to her including Alder giving her new work. I think it's different work that excites her but never asked. She likes bouncing from her lasers to her microscopes.

I can relate, while not wanting to be a BSC grim reaper, I like being a Lead. This week it was a Lead for other Clubs and the position suited me just fine. Prometheus' bark has me slowing. We're just coming up to the K-9 Compound. "Harky said to go to the silo. Copper must have the splash pad in."

He gives me a look then runs. When I called, no one was at Elite because no Ops were running. I think Prometheus was hoping for Zeus to show at the Squared Club where the chopper dropped us.

While I noted the Club was rebuilt in record time, we didn't go in. I miss my girl. Turning toward Elite, I smile at the golf carts and bikes lining the road to the garage and barn. Prometheus sees them and speeds up. I park in the garage noticing the new shop is more organized and has new bins against the bathroom wall. It's the only thing left of the old apartment.

Inside, the silo looks the same. Dropping my bag at the stairs, I go right out the back then stop. Brothers are everywhere, most must have walked over. I see the Justice League point me out and throw them chin.

Aylen shows in front of me with Copper. I hug her before she even opens her eyes. "*Mondoux*, I've missed holding you."

Her squeeze feels good. "Lord, you feel better than I remember. I missed you too, Michael."

I don't want to let her go but she steps back. I smile when it's only to pull me down for a kiss. I missed that too.

Cat calls and yelling has her laughing. "Did you plan dinner for here?"

"No, *Mondoux*. My plan was you, a chair, some wine and listening to all you did this week. I missed you telling me about your days." I'd never plan hundreds of Brothers at my house.

"I've missed that romantic Michael. You make everything I do important to you. I love my texts and read them from the beginning every night." The sweet nothing had a purpose.

I smile walking her toward the Brothers at a new hut. When she moves to take my hand, I don't let her go. "Your body against mine is important to me, *Mondoux*."

She looks up with a smile and those pretty brown eyes amused. "I was going to get you some of that wine but like your idea." She holds the hand I have around her waist.

Cort smiles. "Mikhail showed me your plans, Brother. We all supplied some work but know you need shit to do when you're not working." The Brother is crazy but thoughtful.

"I do and enjoy it like you do. Thanks for your help here."

He throws chin. "Copper did the most, finishing a whole section."

I smile at my girl. "You found a splash pad for them?"

She looks surprised. "I made one with Marco." She made one. Of course, she would, the plastic alone would make her crazy.

"Show me, *Mondoux*. I'm excited to see what you came up with."

Brothers around us laugh as they part showing me a new walkway. "I love the cobblestone." Music starts but it's faint and a classical piece. She put music in?

“Your plan showed walkways but not what material. Mucimi left me a note that he did his part.” She points. “I don’t know who did that or what you’re planting.”

They’re all showing me like Ricky said. Clearing my throat, I tell her softly, “a small vineyard.”

She looks up quick. “Perfect. The raised beds are on the other side.” She points the other way and I see the area for the garden.

I shake my head. “It was the last thing I added hoping for an ol’ lady that would like it.”

“Really? It’s for me. I can plant what I want there?” Her tears are ready to fall.

Turning her into me, I hold her face, sliding my finger down her soft cheek and kiss her head. “Really, it’s for you to plant whatever you want. It was never my section, *Mondoux*. It was meant for you.”

“Your vineyard, my garden and the dogs’ splash area.” She shakes her head and pulls my shirt. “I love everything about you, Michael Brolin. You’re a dream that comes true daily. Thank you.”

I don’t know what to say so I kiss her again. Brothers yell to hurry it up, making her smile again. I turn her and we walk toward the slope where I see light and laugh. The Brothers move to the sides and I see a good ten dogs running around through light and water blasts just in front of clouds and a metal bird sitting on the biggest. Harky and Piper are smiling up at us from a chair set to watch the dogs.

“You’re an amazing woman, Copper Rose Brolin. I’m so fuckin’ glad you’re mine. A Phoenix?” It’s what I thought of her when she started opening up right in front of my eyes.

“In Morocco you busted in the door like a dream and every day you grow in a new way. It reminded me of the Phoenix. The color works in the day and at night.”

I laugh. “So fuckin’ glad you’re mine. This is way beyond the splash pad I thought it would be.”

She nods. “The dogs have been here all day. Sohn and Mikhail put in an automated dispenser for their treats. It’s paw access so they don’t eat too much.”

I laugh with Harky’s shake of the head. “Loki’s been trying for more for an hour now.”

“How did you come up with this?” I look at the clear glass section of walkway inside the area and can see gears and colored glass flashing. The Phoenix is a whole mechanical bird with metal feathers that quiver when the bird stretches as if to get comfortable with mist coming out of the wings. The droplets of mist catch light making it look like a magical fire glow against the light playing on the metal wings.

“Your industrial look. You seem to like the mechanical aspect of whatever you’re making. The clock you love in our bedroom has that section of the front missing showing how it works, so I used that. Ginny took me and Marco to the museum store and we found all kinds of parts. It was a fun project.” She shrugs like it was just a thing to do. This took her hours of building just from the gears I got a glimpse of. The wings quivering is over the top.

“I love it and you.” It’s more than I ever imagined it could be.

Just as I think it, the music changes and dogs dance. Copper is laughing hysterically to, ‘*Who Let the Dogs Out.*’

“Sohn said Marco left you a surprise.” Harky shakes his head when Piper claims Copper and they’re both walking away. “The Justice League are on dinner, Brother. I’m starving. You’re late getting here.” He stands pointing to the side of the hut up on the hill where grills are running.

I nod. “We stopped in Indiana for a Badass drop off.” I don’t tell him what or who. The backpack was heavy but I didn’t open it to see what was in it. I assumed money the old-fashioned way. The Flight Lead gave me the bag and the name of who it was going to.

“Glad you’re home. Bastille is happy?”

“Yeah.” I stop, so I don’t walk into Mucimi. Teller shows on the side of him with a hand over his mouth, then they’re gone a second later. “Freaky here isn’t anything like at Princes and Mass. I love the toned-down Justice League.”

He laughs at me. Fuckin’ Brothers just don’t know. It’s crazy up there.

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It was a great welcome home from my Brothers who are amazed by my girl. I was pleasantly surprised when they all left just before ten. I made sure to get Seren her mixed case of wine and handed bottles to the Brothers who helped or asked for them. It felt good giving back to them for the work and support they show. I can do their crazy parties when they don’t drag it out.

The Lead Ops dogs stay to sit around the splash area. As I’m watching them, I tighten my arms around her again. She’s surprised they all showed. “You amaze me too. I thought you’d buy a splash pad and add a little something. You built a beautiful mechanical sculpture.” As I say it, the bright flashes then changes to fire, lighting off the shiny copper color of the bird showing the feather-like wings. It’s an impressive piece of art.

“I told you I’d think of something. Cort likes the Phoenix. He told me all his Officers remind him of the Phoenix and the Club went down but rose again as Phoenix Rising. I didn’t know the history but he explained when he was building the tiki hut.”

“They all came to help again. Ricky said everyone was showing me honor for who I am. Tonight I felt it. Thank you for your part there. I think of you as the Phoenix and thought of it again on the flight. You came into my life and show more every day. I felt that awe and honor from the Brothers for you tonight. They see and feel you too.”

She looks up with tears on her face and sadness in those beautiful brown eyes. “I was never anyone until I met you. The boss’s kid was never included in anything at work or outside of it. Here, I have you, my new little brother Marco, real friends in the ol’ ladies and dogs. I love this world and want to help make it perfect like you do for me.” My woman never sees how talented and intelligent she is. She’s a doctor, scientist, engineer and IT geek but sees none of it as special.

I wipe her tears and kiss her lips. Bastille and Ben’s words replay in my head as if they’re talking to me right now. “You belong, *Mondoux*. Not just to me but to all the Clubs. Your new family is Badass. To me, you are everything, everywhere. I think we’re a match made by the heavens. You don’t see anything you do as more than a day in your life. I was told today that I am the same. It’s a day in my life that I want yours to be perfect, the job I love to carry out and our world a better place. To me it’s just a day too.”

She giggles and I’m relieved tears are not in those beautiful eyes. “Everyone loves you. They all show it when they’re here and tell me about you. Maiyun said you brought Zeus to visit her all the time and helped on a job to stop whatever someone was planning for her. Cort knew Harky needed a second as President and you’d be the second President but don’t like the word. When Harky is gone you run the training program and Ops. When you’re gone Harky does. Cort said it’s like you have one brain and even the dogs feel it.” She giggles again. “I just love you. I don’t see all you do and I’m not sure I’d want to. You keep people safe and I’ve seen that firsthand. My world is safe and deliriously happy because you’re in it.” With a pull, she kisses me in a way I feel the love and acceptance she spoke about.

I show her I feel the same for her until I hear a drone. “Fuckin’ cameras.” I’m up with her giggling in my arms. “Prometheus, shut it down when you’re done.”

He chuffs from his cot with multiple skewed metal circles resembling clouds as a façade front. Every little detail amazes me. Shaking it off, it’s time for my amazing woman to

feel it. “My turn, *Mondoux*,” I say no more as I carry her in and upstairs.

“I’ve missed getting lost in you.” Her whisper against my neck has me breathing deep.

Control is needed to show my *Mondoux* how much I’ve missed her. My sweet, gentle and gracious girl that means the world to me needs to feel it. Standing her in front of me, I freeze. She’s programmed to be less by her father and stepmother. My hands hold her face so she sees herself through my eyes. “You’re beautiful, *Mondoux*. Inside and out, your heart, soul, very being, are all beautiful.” I match her whisper.

Tears form but she’s calm and I feel love. Her hands hold my wrists. “With you, I feel it,” she says just as softly in her whisper.

“Always, in everything you do, there is love and determination that I feel. You show that love in spectacular ways. Thank you.”

Her lids drop, reminding me of a bow. Before I can go on, her hands are sliding under my shirt and up my chest. “Seren is right, chiseled is the best way to describe you. She meant all of you but I don’t know them.”

I shake my head and pull my shirt off deciding on how to stop thoughts of anyone else on her mind. Every touch, every caress has words for her. Sweet nothings have a new purpose as I undress and taste my beautiful Copper Rose Brolin.

Her first word comes out when I take her nipple in and suck hard. “Ye-ahh.” Is all I let her have.

My words stop more with a hand sliding down and finger sliding right in her. I like the soft mewling moan better and follow my hand down her body. A taste is all I take before I lean her back so her ass is on the bed while telling her how much I love her scent and taste on my lips. Kisses and little bites keep her little mewling moans going until I’m back for another taste.

My *Mondoux's* hands grab onto my hair and hold me in place causing all control to be lost. All that's in my head is feeling her body, sounds and words as I devour her.

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Walking the towel back to the bathroom, I smile, she's barely coherent and all that's come out of her is love, my name and those fuckin' hot little mewling moans.

Getting shorts on, I sit on the bed and watch her drift to sleep. My *Mondoux*.

Realizing what I'm doing, I move to the balcony and sit thinking about the area she made. Shopping for a splash pad never entered her mind. She did get to shop for her parts and the happiness of those trips was obvious but I felt it deep in her. I'm surprised when she comes out half asleep. "*Mondoux*, I can sit with you in bed."

"No. I can sit with you until you carry me in." She's so fuckin' cute.

My arm goes out and she sits on my lap curling up to get comfortable against my chest. "I love you, Copper Rose Brolin."

"Mmm. I feel it every time we make love or you breathe on me, whatever. If you're close, I feel it."

I hide a laugh kissing her head. "Good, you're supposed to."

She reaches and pulls my arm around her tighter. "I do."

I know when she falls asleep but hold her loving the feel of her body against mine. My passionate woman draws feeling out of me. The perfect circle.



# Chapter Eight

## *One week*

***MB***

“Reporters are at the Club?” I look at Harky.

He shrugs. “BSC meet is from here. I’m glad the tent is still up.”

I don’t say anything but bet that’s why I delivered in Indiana, the meet was supposed to be from there this month. It’s a huge draw and the community benefits from the influx of Brothers. When it was at Zion, Harky told me it was like hosting bike week. Brothers from other countries were there. Luke Rayne said it took two weeks for the last tents to leave the fairgrounds but they have a huge campground that’s always busy. But reporters?

“Why would I talk to reporters?”

“I’m not sure you are but they’re at the Squared Club under Security with readers so Piper and Copper aren’t anywhere close to them.”

The relief I feel isn’t for nothing. “Meals and the dog runs?”

“Dinner is at Elan with the ol’ ladies and the dogs run is tomorrow. Cooper and Luke Rayne have BSC choppers scheduled at three starting with Perses and the BSC Ops Leads we have. It’s a full day and night. Alder called to let me know it’s a K-9 getaway.”

I laugh but it’s a good idea for the Leads to be seen by the other dogs. Maybe some have more to give but never saw what they’d be earning. “We’re off for the meet and because the dogs have a getaway. I love the fuckin’ Brotherhood.”

He laughs pulling into the Squared lot but doesn’t get out. “Yeah, Ben has emergency Ops running through south and east. Next month is us and south. With four teams everywhere and Luke Rayne covering FBI, Ben says it’s time to start

working a schedule giving time off to territories. We have six teams we can pull to cover the west and we cover International without any stress here. Ken got his dog and met his girl so he's staying in BSC South. I think Ben felt bad we lost a team so we got the first scheduled time off. I wanted Ken here but know Wecks losing a team will hurt us all. We can train a new team for us but are working fine here."

Shit, I asked about the teams to figure out how long we are from consistent schedules. Harky must be feeling that loss. "You're okay losing him to the south?"

"Yeah. He's good but we train and run with no problems. He'd have been more of a buffer for us. In the south he'll shine and they need him." He's settled with it.

That's true so I nod. "So, the time off?"

"This is for four days that I could use. Zeus wants shit added to his gear, Piper wants to spend a day and night at the ABSZ and I've got some gold I need to..."

"I can make the rose gold." I jump on it having heard him talk about needing jewelry for Piper.

He looks from the windshield to me. "Mucimi said Jacky can do it for me but I want to learn."

"We can do it at the shop. With the time off, I can finish the *terrasse* so I'll be there. It's a couple of hours that will be a good break." I'm glad I opened the shop up so the new machines and old tools have room to be used.

He throws me chin. "Thanks. I was hoping to show up at Jacky's place and watch."

"No need. You can do it yourself." I really want to do this for him. He has a thing for gold and it will be something he'll remember.

Happy rolls off him. "Yeah." He opens his door so I do. "I used the truck so we could talk. I have no clue who's here and what equipment they have."

He's not taking chances which I agree with. "Thanks. I'm glad we're dressed in gear." Pulling my hat lower, I don't

waste time moving to the door.

“This is why I said it. Training gear isn’t as good as Ops but we blend this way.”

We think alike.

Seeing Security Brothers open the doors for us, I relax and feel Harky’s relief. “Brothers Meeting room,” Security says as we pass.

“Thanks, Brother. Is it only Brothers?” I ask not wanting to walk into a crowd of reporters.

“Officer only.” He leans to open the door for Marks.

Marks is surprised then pissed making me stop a couple of feet down the hall. “You were called in?” Marks is moving faster while looking beyond us. “You didn’t bring Zeus and Prometheus. Thank fuck for that.” Marks pissed doesn’t let up but he’s relieved the dogs aren’t here.

My eyes snap to Harky. “It would mark us. They should be here already but no one would have seen them. Pres sent a text to get here.”

Marks nods. “Let’s get to the meet so we’re not in the hall.”

Harky’s eyes bounce to me. Marks doesn’t want us seen either. At the big meeting room we use for Church, I feel anger the closer to the floor we get. “Why the fuck are you here?” Cort is pissed now. Everyone turns our way. Fuckin’ Brother doesn’t do quiet.

“Text to get here.” Harky points at Zeus and Prometheus coming in from the back. “I sent them forty minutes ago to get here in stealth.”

“You were supposed to show on a board.” Ben indicates the board with Luke Rayne, Wecks, Hemy, Bastille, Taylor and Jessie.

“No one sent that. I got the email about Piper and Copper at Elan then the text. I sent the K-9 Brothers not wanting to walk in with them.” Harky hands his phone to Cort.

“Fuck! I had Amal send the email. I didn’t give him you on virtual.”

Harky shakes his head. “We can change and leave out the back in running gear.”

Ben doesn’t like that. “The shields on MB will show. The Justice League can get you out.”

I nod. Flight gear, a long T...

Ben laughs stopping the list going through my head. “It’s seconds with no chance of you being seen.”

I nod not wanting Ben pissed while Cort and Marks are. They all have that pissed that radiates off of them. “Effective and quick.”

Cort nods. “Sorry, Brothers. I never thought you’d show here.” He’s resigned. That’s better than all pissed.

Harky smiles. “Orders are orders, Boss. We’re here and didn’t cause a stir outside. I parked in the first place not numbered for Officers so we came up from the side.”

“Good. The shade over there would cover you.” He’s done with pissed and Marks relaxes.

Ben gives us the reason we’re here. “This meet was setup so the BSC Ops Brothers are not seen in public or on camera.” He smiles at Harky and me. “We’ll get Harky and MB freaky transport to leave. The night the Rising Club was hit with missiles, I learned of a threat to Badass and all Officers. Unbeknownst to Cort and me, a handful of Officers here gathered with a warning from the Justice League and figured out what was going to happen and how to cover us without changing an outcome that hurt others in the future. Because the threat that night was us, the Justice League couldn’t tell us but sought council and followed it hoping the missiles would be stopped by the Officers. With MB’s insight, Harky’s planning, Marks understanding of the vision, Nova’s quickness in organizing Brothers from other Clubs without knowledge of what was to come and Jordan and Copper’s coding, we are still here and grateful that the Officers covered

our asses.” He pauses while Brothers are throwing chin everywhere.

“I named them in the order it happened according to Justice. The Brother that picked up the biggest part of that threat was Zeus. He understood more than the humans and got the Officers to listen.” He turns. “Brinks is also a Brother with insight that didn’t miss the warning signals right before the drones bombed the building. Thank you, Brothers.” Ben steps back and Cort moves forward.

“Brinks, MB, Zeus and Prometheus stood in a burning building with fire hoses running for close to forty minutes moving debris that fell covering a shield that Mucimi had us safely inside. They had no idea but they weren’t leaving a Brother behind. The biochemical that Copper dumped never registered in the building. Alder tells me the fire would have cleared any droplets since the tank was emptied somewhere in the stratosphere. MB and Zeus knew of the chemical but never hesitated. Brinks was sent tanks, gloves and masks and didn’t hesitate. From the feeds, they entered the building behind the K-9 Brothers, but only because they needed a bigger hole to climb in.” The Brothers chuckle shaking their heads and chin is thrown everywhere again but Cort isn’t done.

“Christian, Mucimi and Justice held Ben and Adonis, me and Thrasos down under the shield from the reservation where we were told the Protectors from everywhere gathered to make sure we didn’t leave the shield until it was safe. It fucks with my head to say it like this, but MB, Brinks and the K-9 Brothers were in the building long enough for the Protectors to get confirmation that the biochemical was not an issue.” He shakes his head. “They knew about the chemical and never hesitated to come in and find us. The Prince Brothers outside were told of the chemical and held out on orders from Ricky and Hemy. I can’t tell you how that feels, with all the quotes and words I have there is nothing that covers the honor I’m feeling for you four Brothers that put your lives out there to save ours. Anything you need, anything you think of, tell me and it’s yours.” Cort hugs me and bends to the dogs with thanks and honor words before stepping back.

Ben waits but I feel his emotions like he's sending them out purposely. "I offer the same. The honor we feel is immeasurable and should be spoken but finding the words isn't easy. Anything always is the best I have."

I feel it and hit his back before he steps to the dogs. I'm relieved when he stands and moves us along.

Looking at us on boards and here in the room he does move us along. "It is as it should be and happened the way it was supposed to. If something were to happen to Cort and me, we need Officers that can go on and steer Badass. We need that insight to guide our new Leaders. MB, Harky, Marks, Nova, Brinks, Zeus and Prometheus are now Inner Circle to BSC planning Brothers. Their opinion holds weight and should be heard."

Everyone nods and the dogs chuff. I look at Harky. We're already in the planning meets. Well, I went to one of them. This is only my second.

Teller and Justice laugh causing Ben to smile my way. "Your opinions will be heard as if you are Cort, Ricky, Hemy, or me. Every one of you have different backgrounds and worked together to keep us alive, understanding the sword-edge of fuckin' with a vision. Jordan said he'd help BSC planning whenever he's needed but was completely against keeping it from Cort and Alder. Copper came in and he was lost in code until the missile breached Rising<sup>2</sup> airspace. You were right to keep it quiet and you were right to hold Brinks back when we walked out. Every Protector showed here to get a picture or video of us walking out unscathed, from different views, before they went to help Harky and Texas on the other side of the building. While the drones were not part of the threat to Badass Officers, the pictures, feeds and videos will be a help against that threat. I'm told the pictures will be a help to lives saved for another issue but not how that happens."

I just nod. *Merde*. Jordan got lost in code or he would have told Cort and Alder. That could have gotten them killed or we could have fucked someone else's life up. Shit.

Ben nods then turns back to the Brothers. “So, the BSC Inner Circle is new and you know the Brothers. All BSC Ops Leads are not seen or pictured as a safety precaution. Since they are not seen, they will not be part of what’s next.”

I smile at Harky. I like not being part of the crazy. Luke Rayne catches my eye with his smile and shaking head. He’s looking right at us. I shrug and bet he’s happy too. He nods making me cough to cover a laugh.

“All the Protectors that could be here, are. They’re in with the reporters demonstrating abilities and healing as the video Aylen labeled plays and has questions answered until there are no other questions. Mase is moderator so we may want to finish this up.” Ben looks back.

Everyone laughs. Cort steps forward. “The pictures and feeds of us walking out of the blown-up Club will be added to whatever Mucimi gets from the tent today. Dreng will send it out without ever answering who has freaky. If you have something to add, do it now, Brothers. You’re in the tent answering questions and to get the point across that it’s insulting to ask who has ability. Not everyone with ability shows it.” He smiles like he’s posing for it. “That’s a true statement.”

Everyone laughs at the politician smile and even say *politician smile*. I can see that. Ben dismisses the Officers not long after that.

With relief, Justice gets us to the silo. It’s really just a second. “Thanks for doing your part that night. We couldn’t say and were warned about getting help. We would have lost kids so changing any part of our involvement wasn’t happening.”

*Merde*. “I’d hate your job, Brother. I’m glad we didn’t fuck it up.”

He smiles and I feel that happiness. “You and Harky made it better than we saw. Bringing Jordan in was perfect. He never told Stella or Brinks.” He shakes his head and disappears.



Harky laughs while my head is shaking. I'm not asking. I do have a question. "Did you know all they told us?"

"No. Seeing the Prince Officers on that side, I went to the other and was working with the Brothers until the Protectors showed. You came over right after them. You were there when Mucimi showed to tell us where the last safe room was."

I nod. That's some crazy shit. I'm glad I'm not answering questions in the tent. "Is this why Cort said everyone wanted me as a Lead?"

"Think about that." He walks around the new shop.

Adroit was before. Mass was before. Bastille was way before. He's right. It has nothing to do with that night. I'm glad it ended well. No casualties.

I smile. "Copper's dad must be back in Germany. Have you heard?" Whatever they rolled in him had him barely able to talk and he didn't know his name. I nodded and explained it was a name no one wanted anyway. He nodded back making Cort laugh.

"Nope and you shouldn't either." His delivery of that has me looking at his eyes. "Badass has places for people like him."

I don't ask. "So, this is the metalworks section." I point out the machines hoping Copper gets home soon. I'm going to Elan with her.

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## *Copper*

Ben and Cort thanked me for the night the sperm donor bombed the Club. I shook my head at them. He bombed the Club is no reason to be thanked. Ben explained they were destined to die and I helped change that. I shut up.

Thinking about all they said, I'd hate to be Justice. He organized his Protector people from around the country to hold Ben and Cort still until they were sure the chemical and fire wouldn't hurt them. From what I saw of Justice and them at the K-9 compound and dinners here, Justice is like a son to both of them. He wasn't supposed to interfere but covered them from the second the missile hit the building. Ben was smiling when he said he followed orders. I guess he did. I laugh out loud getting Athena sitting up.

"Justice is a good man. He's also so smart he found a way to keep them alive without going against visions and his elders. I like that word. They say it a lot here, bikers and Indians have elders. I had a supervisor that was my elder, I guess. He wasn't very friendly but always helped when I needed something. I'm sad that he died." I feel that deep. He was a good man.

My leg is touched making me look down. "I sort of got lost there. I started my new life here, the book says to keep going forward. It's magical here and no one sees it. Well, Kateri and Maiyun said the men have no idea how special they make life and Leya said it's true. Forward in this magical place is my new plan. I have the perfect man, new family, home, job and you. My dog knows more than I ever will. Let's move forward."

Her board says, 'yes', making me laugh.

"The drones have enough components to track. We'll start there."

Using the aero simulated program, I start. They have jammers everywhere, even jammers that stop jammers. It's crazy. The force field had the best coding so I pull it up and

start listing how's and why's until I realize it's already too much. Going back to the beginning, I think about what we need to do and how we can incorporate it all or the majority of uses into one single strand of coding.

With the drones in Germany, they had everything added until it was too heavy to move effectively. The point was getting lost in ways to fix the weight and trajectory. I started from the beginning and put in only what was needed to use the drone for its purpose, stopping another drone or missile from hurting innocents. I can do it again.

Bouncing back and forth from the build simulators, I start a new satellite and jump into the existing satellite coding with a smile. They used strands on the solar array covered in Kevlar. The New England women did this I bet, they all complain about Kevlar clothes. I need to get on the spider web silk but for now, Kevlar will serve my idea well. We'll need another extendable support structure and more solar panels that can hold the coding for the new laser. It still won't add much weight with what's redundant so I'm not adding it. The payload module can hold the new components easily if it's not filled with wires and computer boards. Lasers that can move by mechanical arms can be attached to the X-band and S-band antennas.

This will work. I'm excited and get to building the new satellite code to hold the new solar array component with only the laser and jammer code added in. It's going to take a couple of days but I get the biggest part done today.

Building from scratch means I have to get through all the little crap used to build a satellite. They went with lighter material so I use their specs and parts. The code is clean so I copy and paste the solar section. Using the Phoenix force field code, I copy and rewrite two sections encompassing the satellite and all Rising Club locations. They cover towns so I paste the locations in not wanting to rewrite everything they already did. I don't add code that's already covered.

I send it to Alder, Web and Jordan when my new watch alarm beeps. "It's time, Athena. The K-9 getaway starts soon. Let's get you to the chopper."

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## ***MB***

Bending I kiss my girl's cheek from the side. She smiles turning my way. "Athena is excited." She's cute. Her beautiful brown eyes are lit with happiness and excitement.

"It feels like you're excited too, *Mondoux*."

Her bigger smile has me holding in a laugh. "Jane is an Olympian and trains horses now. I get to meet her and Faith said she'd be there. Almost all the women will be there. I can't wait to meet Hannah. She's IT known as Coder2. Everyone knows her." Yep, she's excited.

I run a finger down her smiling cheek and kiss her lips. "I got a text from Hannah asking if you'd be at Elan. They're all just as excited to meet you." I can feel her humbleness as her face changes to match the feeling.

With her eyes bouncing away from me she says, "I'm just an engineer."

"No, you're Copper Rose Brolin who saved Ben, Cort and hundreds of Brothers. Everyone is in awe of you including Ben and Cort."

She rolls her eyes but I feel her excitement building again. "They came to see me and thanked me. I didn't know we were helping a vision or something. I don't need anything so I told them to save it for someone that needs help."

I nod. "You did and everyone is honored and grateful that lives were saved. Ben and Cort's most notably. They're how we got here. I didn't know what to say when we were thanked so I threw chin."

She pulls my shirt getting me to bend. "Thanks, that's what I'm going to do." She's so fuckin' cute. With a kiss to my lips, she lets me go and looks up.

"Where are you eating tonight? Cort said you know I'm at Elan Rising."

“At Elan rising. Rising<sup>2</sup> has a chopper scheduled for eleven.”

“We have an ol’ lady meet.” That bashful look doesn’t fit her excitement.

With a nod, I guide her to the chopper. “I’ll see you for dinner and after your meet at the fire. I have a meet too. I don’t know why but I’m supposed to be at the meeting room at seven.”

She’s relieved. Too cute.

The chopper bounces to K-9 and Athena gets out while Piper, Attiquin and Harky get in. Marks and Pres are getting picked up by the MC chopper. Athena is with the K-9s.”

I nod watching two teams of Enforcers board. Harky talks to the men while Piper and Copper talk. I listen and watch. Everyone is excited but an Enforcer sitting across from Harky.

“You okay, Lemon?”

He looks up from the floor fast. “Yeah. I was thinking about the Alpha-Bits. I don’t like the reporters hanging around. Ben did the statement so they should have left.”

Harky takes notice and answers. “They’re getting explanations on the Clubs. They’re out after dinner tonight but have scheduled information sessions. The Bits are hosting the K-9 getaway so they’re all at the ABSZ or being choppered to Elan.”

Lemon relaxes. “Thanks, Harky. Pres canceled the Security meet and I was on the towns earlier. I have no fuckin’ clue what’s going on. We rode in and were told to board the chopper. Pres and VP are in a meet with geeks now.”

Harky pulls his phone. “Redman, you have the day for Lemon?” He waits. “He’s been out and hasn’t gotten the new shit. A Lead not knowing what the fuck he’s leading isn’t good. Here, tell him so he’ll relax.” He hands Lemon his phone and looks at me. “Thanks. He was added last minute. It would drive me crazy to have no clue.”

I throw him chin and Copper squeezes my hand. “I’m throwing chin,” she whispers making me smile.

“It works.”

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## *Elan Rising*

***MB***

“They’re fuckin’ crazy. When did they all get flying suits? I thought it was just Anton.” Pres has my jaw clamped tight so I shrug looking away from the hologram board Teller has open. He was showing Cort and his dad the Alpha-Bits flying over a field. I know it’s not on the ABSZ because of the trees and grass.

Marks laughs. “They’re testing the jet packs so Alder can see and decide on the park Anton wants to build.”

Pres looks at him for a good twenty seconds. “This is like the swords, isn’t it?”

Marks’ jaw tightens and he nods. I turn toward Harky so I don’t laugh. His eyes say he’s ready to laugh too as he shakes his head and looks away.

Ben finds this interesting. “If they make them bigger it would add a whole new dimension to Security.”

Oh shit.

Justice and Teller laugh, Brinks and Jinx just about fall over.

Trask shakes his head looking at Luke Rayne. “A new next. Cort’s going to open another Club for flying Security. They’ll need new gear so the geeks will be busy too. There’s no way they’d carry the weight of our gear.”

I turn right to Cort. His politician smile is out and he’s curious. “I bet they could come up with new shit fast. We have a Club in Washington that just got clean. Brekan, did they take the new Bible?”

I shake my head. He’s already got the Club. Harky hits my arm. “Let’s walk.”

I stand fast. We head toward the lot. “Thanks. Their next shit is always crazier than the last.”



He laughs. “World domination plans usually are. It’s true but it always works. I thought the lasers on the jets was crazy.”

I bump his shoulder with mine. “You came up with the biker swordsmen.”

He laughs more. “I did but pussies fight with swords too. Being able to defend against crazy pussies isn’t a bad thing.”

“Where are we going?” I get on a bike for visitors with no number.

“To check on the dogs. Zeus hasn’t sent me a chat.”

I nod thinking I haven’t gotten one from Prometheus. We ride up to the campground the Alpha-Bits put together. I’ve never been but saw the drone shots. They’re as crazy as Badass so I wasn’t surprised to see the hammock seats hanging from chopper blades. I did wonder if they spin like a ride but never asked.

Parking by a small bridge I don’t see the campground but do see some Bits by the water watching dogs swim.

“They have a mechanical water fetcher. They’re so fuckin’ smart.” Harky points to buckets moving along a rope right into the water then they make a u-turn and go back alongside of the ones coming down. That is smart.

“How far is the campsite?” I ask taking a step on the rope bridge every time Harky does.

“The other side of the trees. This is new, it was planks before.”

I follow hearing music before I see light flash around trees and branches. They couldn’t have. We make it by the trees and Harky bends forward laughing. I scan from right to left not believing this is the same campground I saw on the drone, it’s obviously an old video.

Alpha-Bits and dogs are everywhere. There’s a section with a fire going and Bits handing the dogs whatever they’re making shaped as bones. Just beyond them is a splash area

with a big Zeus misting from his robot leg as he lifts it. The light flashes aren't fire but blue in every shade. I smile seeing the bursts of water coming from little dog statues, as if they're spitting it straight up and in color. They're amazing little Brothers that not only could, but did and did it with honor to the K9s. I keep going to the center with round bed like swings where hammocks used to be and they do spin slowly as if to watch all the way around the campsite. Alpha-Bits and dogs are on the swing beds. A group of dogs are running everywhere at the edge of the trees but I don't see why. Enforcers and Security Brothers are out there watching. Making it to the left, I smile with Alpha-Bits and dogs dancing in lines. They're as crazy as the Badass Presidents but it looks like both Alpha-Bits and dogs are having a great time.

Mikhail comes running toward us with Sohn following. I bend but keep scanning as I do. There is a section with the Leads on those round beds but they're not connected to chopper blades. It's a circle with a video playing in the middle. Smaller dogs are on lower cots watching. "Is that Ops?" I point for Harky as Mikhail gets to me.

"Feed, simulated train." Mikhail answers.

"Show to Security dog different job to Op dog. Prometheus show Op dog Security job. Op dog like Op job." Sohn makes me laugh.

"It's good they get the option," Harky says low but I know he wants to laugh.

"What are they doing?" I point to the dogs in and out of the trees.

"Treasure hunt. Op dog find everything. No fun to others. Pres Alder say do group. Security dog have fun now." Sohn makes me laugh again, he's a funny little Brother.

Harky hits my arm. "Good job, Brothers. This is amazing, where's Loki? Sampson is with the Leads."

Sohn looks at the Lead group. "He there to show training to dog want trainer job." Sohn's eyes are huge and nervousness rolls off him.

I stand fast. “Where’s Anton?”

They both look up and scan the sky. “Break?” Mikhail asks.

Oh shit.

Harky pulls his phone. “Fuck! He’s moving along the river.”

Sohn looks at Makail. “Horse orb!” They run toward the trees.

Harky pulls my cut. “They’re going northwest.”

I go northwest. Zeus, Prometheus, Perses and Athena pass us. I guess Sohn and Mikhail got help.

I point to the right. “Flying Bits.”

Harky looks up from his phone and turns toward the flying Bits. We follow a barely visible path that is not cleared for walking and jump over holes, stumps and downed branches. I almost tip over trying to stop when we get to a field with horses in it.

“Loki!” Harky yells, Zeus bites Loki’s ass - it’s the only thing not in the zorbing orb - Loki yelps, horses are being herded by flying Alpha-Bits, but one horse doesn’t want to quit their game and kicks the orb sending it flying toward the fence. The top of the orb is sliced right off and it deflates with Loki sprawled on the ground still with his ass up. That was the funniest ten seconds of my life. I’m laughing as I run the fence line behind Harky. He’s not laughing and anxiety is rolling off him.

Alpha-Bits lower to the ground around Loki. I’m surprised as hell to see Alder, Asa and Anton. Alder is checking Loki for injuries. I have to stop and turn. Loki looks like his bell was rung and rung hard with his tongue hung to the side of his mouth, ears flat and eyes glazed. Breathing deep, I get control and turn back.

Alder stands and steps back. “He need minute.” He looks up. “Pres Harky, VP MB, you fast. Akai send Loki run off to us. We follow tracking.”

Harky nods. “Thanks, LP, he could have gotten hurt out here.”

Anton shakes his head. “Zorbing tomorrow. Juan build dog orb.”

I clamp my jaw tight at his anger. Harky nods. We all turn when Loki shakes with a moan.

Anton goes off. “You stay to K-9! Horse could kill. You die, Boss Piper, Pres Harky lose you, Badass lose trainer. You too important. We lose you, have no dog trainer. Who train? What you think?” The little Brother is pissed. It’s good to feel he means it. He was scared for the dog.

Asa starts laughing. Zeus and Perses chuff and Alder pulls Anton back. “You learn Badass lessons. You make park to jet pack, keep Brothers safe.”

Anton is stunned. “You say yes?”

Alder smiles. “Yes. I trust you keep Brothers safe. Bigger pack need test to bigger Brother.”

Anton nods seriously. “I will test. Prospect agree to Tuesday.”

Alder nods. “I proud you learn security, safety to Brothers. You earn respect, trust. No crazy...stunt...you lose trust.”

Anton hugs him. “I make you proud, Pres. I learn Mucimi lesson same to Mucimi.”

Asa pulls him off of Alder and gives him a quick hug. “You make mistake okay, not mistake to safe, security. We trust you.”

Anton turns toward Loki. “I walk you back. K-9 zorb tomorrow.”

Harky smiles. “We’ll take him back, Anton. The trail isn’t cleared for you. We’d be carrying you half the way.”

Anton looks at Alder getting a nod, then he looks up at Harky. “I lecture at campground. Rule say stay to Brothers. No K-9 ice cream to Loki tonight.”

Loki hangs his head and wobbles to a stand. I turn fast and start walking. That was good to see but no dog ice cream is funny. Prometheus and Zeus flank me. As I get to the trees, I look back. Athena and Perses walk with Loki behind Harky. Perses bumps his ass to make Loki move faster. I can't wait to tell Copper.

“I hope there are feeds of this.”

Zeus chuffs.

Prometheus stops, so I do. His board says, ‘all area covered’. He sends a chat to Lens and I give the time to look for the field, ours and Loki's feeds, then laugh at his excitement. He'll send it to me when he gets it all. He has no idea what he's in for. Ten seconds. I shake my head. *Mon dieu*. I'm glad I saw those ten seconds.

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“This is good?” I ask Cort. I have no idea what the hell they're talking about. The computer training I learned obviously wasn't enough.

Justice laughs. “She's coding a new satellite that will detect drones by the metal components. They can jam signals but not the metal. It's like the GPS signal.”

Teller nods. “She's got that in there too. It covers everything. The force fields will track the metal coming in so there's no such thing as undetectable. For the rest of the world, she can use the code she wrote for the drones they were originally making. No other undetectable drone has been built.”

Cort stops pacing. “We can make the original drones and sell them.”

Hemy nods from the board. “That's what I thought too. The ones they were making got blown up.”

Ben shakes his head. “The point being, she wrote code for a new satellite that has the capability to shoot the drones down with laser right from the satellite, or other drones that she has on a planning board for remote areas.”

“The simulator but, yeah. I can finish the drones in hours. She’s already got the code. She doesn’t have our security on it but it’s not on anything she’s built yet,” Jordan says.

Cort nods. “Meaning the satellite?”

Everyone nods. So I guess this is good to a point.

“Brother, she’s building a satellite that’s light and does more than Maverick’s lasers.” Justice has happy all over him.

I nod. “So, I’m back to this is good.”

Cort and Harky laugh.

I shrug. “I don’t even know what they’re saying. It’s good that we’d have the capability to stop innocent people from getting hurt by the biochemical drones, even stopping bombs and missiles, but the coding shit and security on it is lost on me. I’m not an engineer like Copper.” I’m just a soldier.

They all laugh. “She’s not just an engineer either. She’s like Mitch. You’re not just a soldier. You’re a BSC Op territory Lead with Harky. You just won’t acknowledge it. You do the job so we don’t give a fuck what you acknowledge.” Ben has me smiling.

“Roger, Boss.”

They all laugh again but I’m wondering why I’m here.

“The money for a new satellite is agreed on by all territories. We need input from our Brothers.” It’s the Inner Circle thing.

I look at Cort. “She told you to use her father’s money to stop innocents from being hurt. Everything they’ve said was to do that, right?”

He smiles. "It was." He looks at Ben. "I'll get Banks on manufacturing for the drones and pay for the new satellites. We'll need the security on them and Maverick to burn them up when the new is in place."

Ben nods and looks at Hemy getting a nod. Ricky says he's in and Marks agrees then hits Brinks arm.

"Yeah. It's saving lives. That's all she wanted to do. Justice, put this on the board if we're done." Brinks slides his phone across the table.

Ben smiles at the boards. "They just need that it will help. We're done." He shrugs.

Cort nods then types on his phone. "Jordan and Web, can you meet with Banks tomorrow?"

Banks pops on a side board. "I need this early. We're selling to the government?"

Everyone stops when the campground shows on the main board. I look at Harky. He throws me chin and we walk out. We can hear them laughing from the hall.

"Copper will be happy."

I nod. "I'll tell her on the way home."

# Chapter Nine



## *Two days*

### *MB*

Once I finish untangling and attaching the grapes to the arbor, I go in for a drink.

Copper looks up from the table. “I just have to finish this section and I’m done for today.”

I smile at her. “Do what you need to, *Mondoux*. I just came in for a drink.” Leaving a kiss on her head, I get my water.

With a glass of water, I stand under the thatched roof hut and look out at the miniature vineyard. It’s more like a façade of a vineyard. I mixed older grape vines with new so we have the start of a decent arbor. The middle has a ten-by-ten section of brick flooring and half wall that I made for a small seating area. A seating area only for me and my *Mondoux*. My grandparents had their own spot in their vineyard. While we don’t have the whole vineyard, I hope this new area becomes our special spot. It makes me second guess the newer grapes, but I wanted a sweeter grape for my *Mondoux*.

Her arms wrap around me. “I like the doors open to the outside. You finished!” She laughs pulling me toward the little faux vineyard.

“For now, beautiful Copper. The vines need to grow and I need to bring down the chairs and copper pit.”

“The little one you were making?”

“Yeah, it’s for in the center.”

She stops fast causing me to bend forward before I right myself. “Thank you. I wondered what it was for. You never build anything without a home for it.” After kissing my lips she moves forward again. I follow shaking my head. She’s cute when she’s excited.

“Why does a vineyard need a...Oh this will be perfect. It’s like a secret room. You’re putting the stove in here?”

“Yes, the pit. It will burn wood.” I love watching her when she sees something new.

Turning in a full circle right in the center, she’s blinking back tears. Love radiates off her. “You are so talented and thoughtful. I can picture us hiding away in here.” Happiness has those pretty brown eyes shining my way.

“I can too. My grandparents had a spot on the vineyard. They always showed a devotion to each other but in their spot, I could feel them relaxed, content and that love flowing through them. Even young, I’d never bother them knowing it was their time. I want you to always feel that connection here on this land and with me. I want time for us, *Mondoux*, so we can be as happy as they were.”

She takes two steps then launches herself at me. “I love my romantic French biker. Devotion is a good word to describe the way I feel. Do you feel it from me?”

“I do, *Mondoux*. It sparked the need for this special place.”

“You’re an amazingly talented man. You can build with anything and make it perfect. I love that and you.” She thought the old grill pieces I cut down were funny for the copper pit but it keeps the wood off the copper so just ash will collect in the bottom. I like using old shit that can be used in a different way.

“Your plants came in and will be here in an hour or so. Do you want to build a garden?” I get a kiss that doesn’t lead to garden building.

“I did but it can wait.” Her legs unwrap so I set her down.

“One minute, beautiful Copper.” Getting a sawhorse and drop cloth from my earlier post painting area just outside the far doorway, I carry it back hearing the giggle. Dropping it beside the pit rocks I pull her hand toward it.

“I love your world.”

Turning her so I can bend her over the sawhorse, I lean down to her ear from behind. “I love you in it. Step up on the rock stand, beautiful Copper.” Nipping her ear, she gives me that little mewling moan that sounds like it’s coming from deep in her soul. “Hands on the sawhorse, *Mondoux*.”

Her shiver makes me smile as I slide my hands down to unbutton her pants. Getting her ready is never a long journey. Every touch and any sweet words give me the reactions I crave. Danny was right, the ol’ ladies are the ones you want to keep and you work to keep them.

My hands on her pussy and breast, my dick sliding between her legs from behind, sweet words laced with kisses down her neck is work I’m always willing to do for my *Mondoux*. In a low growl, I tell her all about it as I’m moving.

“Michael,” she whispers as her body freezes then shakes.

Never a long journey. I love that, then love my Copper Rose Brolin starting with that sexy mewling moan as I slide in.

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## *Copper*

Believing is easier than when I first got here. Just a few short weeks ago, a dream broke into my pathetic life and saved me. Today, he helped me build a garden. The two big round then three chair swings are perfect with the plants and flowers. I imagined this looking like a beautiful picture and it does. The trees look like they were placed just for this garden. It's unbelievable but it's here and we did it with some Prospect help from the greenhouse. The men delivered the plants then wanted to help. That never happened in Germany.

His hand waving a glass of wine in front of me snaps me out of the dream world or maybe wakes me up to live in it. I want to live every minute of my new unbelievable life so I smile snaking my arm around his back and look at the new garden that was a blank canvas this morning.

“Thank you. We need a picture.”

“I have Lens getting a drone shot so we have the beginning marked. We can get more as it grows and we get new in.” Unbelievable.

“Perfect.”

“You made it perfect. I like the two-seater swings. I never saw the round one until I went to the Alpha-Bit campground in Elan. The kids and dogs love them.”

I laugh. “Their campground is the ultimate play area. Marco got the swings for me. They had extra and the chair swings came down. They have hammock swings too but I didn't think they'd work here.”

He takes my hand and leads me to a swing. “You're right, this looks good. I love it and I love how you fit into it.”

When I sit, he steps back to the edge of the garden walkway. I wonder what he's got planned now. The man is adorable. With his phone, he takes a picture of the garden. He just said drones will get us a video.

He comes back and sits beside me typing on his phone. “You fit very nicely.”

I smile shaking my head at him. He’s adorable. “Where is Prometheus?” Athena is on the round swing with Sampson.

“With Marco and Mikhail at the Officers compound. We’re due there for dinner.”

“Oh. I thought you threw dinner in the oven.” He took a break as I was planting the last annuals saying he had to throw something in the oven.

“No, I made dough earlier then took them out to rise when you were showing the Prospects the plan for placement. I went in later to put the risen cinnamon rolls in the oven. I made the frosting glaze just now.”

A dream, unbelievable. “You make me tired. You started the vineyard before I got up.”

“I weather treated the posts so they’d be dry for the plants. The Prospects were good Brothers helping. I told them I’d drop some rolls for them tomorrow.”

I look around the garden and nod. “Five hours and everything is planted and the swings are up. They’re really good.”

His body shakes so I look. “You had a plan and what plants went where. You even had the bigger plant holes dug.”

I shrug. “It’s easier to picture the whole garden when you have everything spaced out. Plants grow, I dug where they’d go so I knew how many to order.”

“They asked if you were a landscaper. I told them you were today. Tomorrow you’ll be in your lab playing with DNA or satellite lasers.” His smile is sexy.

I laugh using Stella’s words, “You’re a nut. Tomorrow I’m looking at silk from spiders. Let’s go to dinner before we end up in bed. I’m hungry.”

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## ***MB***

Our hands clasped walking behind the dogs is a common part of our lives. I can see this being a memory that I play back often.

“I love the dogs.”

I know she does. “I do too. They seem to like the down-time relaxing and meandering around just like we do.”

We get to the kitchen and I know it’s packed before I open the door. *Merde*. One step in behind my *Mondoux* has me holding a groan.

“Brolins!” The Brothers yell.

Copper giggles.

“Brothers, ladies, kids.” I throw chin.

“You went missing all day but never left your house.” Peak is IT. He’d know if we left on a chopper and tracking is part of his life.

I nod taking the tray of rolls out of the bag. “You pointing it out is for...” I wait while Brothers laugh at his surprised look.

“Sorry, VP. I just hoped you had a good day without crazy raining down on you.”

“We finished the garden and Michael finished the vineyard. It was an awesome day.” My *Mondoux* is excited and all but pops with her news.

“You got the vineyard finished?” Pres asks.

I sit Copper with the women and catch Marks shaking his head. Pres and the questions. “Yeah, Pres. It’s not big and I got the walkways in yesterday. I bought grape vines from a vineyard in California so we’re not waiting years for them to mature. Because they were already long, I built a pulley system to lower as I attached them to the arbor. It went quick

with the pots all on a board lowering at once.” Adding food to Copper’s plate I slide it in front of her and start one for me.

Pres just nods.

“So, you just have the hut left. What are you planning for that?” Marks moves us on.

“I’m not sure. I like the steel like the silo and think I want rock half wall with wide openings. I’m going to make something to lower stairs for a loft like setup.” I shrug but think the same as the silo fireplace and chimney rock will look nice and tie it all together.

Ginny nods. “I can see that.”

I don’t ask if she means literally. Anakin laughs but doesn’t answer that unasked question.

“Did you talk to Cort today?” Marks asks as I sit.

“No, I haven’t talked to anyone but Harky before they left for the ABSZ.”

“Kids from Princes are coming down to get the satellite built.”

*Merde*, they’re moving fast again.

“They’re building it? I just finished this morning.” Copper has me smiling.

“They’re crazy,” Mitena tells her.

I nod agreeing because they are.

They start talking about the satellite and I focus on Pres and Marks. There’s a push for the satellite. I bet the Officer threat is that push. Pres confirms that. I would never ask but wonder what the warning was. We know it isn’t undetectable drones.

“Justice says it’s bad and all Protectors are on high.” Anakin shakes his head. “We’re always on high but we’re supposed to stay alert.”

“We live in alert,” Ginny adds. “It could be a year from now and we’ll be alert then too.” She has a point.



Ben told me of a threat that took three years to actually happen. He said visions aren't easy. I feel for them.

"You made cinnamon rolls?"

I look at Pres. "Yeah. I have some for the Prospects that helped plant the garden today. They were just delivering and asked to help put them in. Copper had the bigger plant holes dug so it was quick. She placed them and we had all the big shit planted in two hours."

Pres is annoyed. "How the fuck do you do everything in a day and make cinnamon rolls?"

"I made the dough then let it rise while I was working, then put it in the oven when we were cleaning up. They were done when I went in for a drink and I made the glaze. It wasn't hours at anything, Boss. Making the dough and spreading cinnamon was all that took more than 3-5 minutes."

Marks laughs. Pres takes a bite of a roll and groans. I shrug.

"Goodness gracious, these are light and fluffy." Charlie likes them too.

I look at Marks. "They rose a little longer than they were supposed to."

He laughs then bites into a roll.

Copper laughs drawing my eyes her way. "Keep making that mistake. I think Attiquin just fell in love with a cinnamon roll."

"They're all crazy. They get rolls from the bakery all the time, that's why I made them. I had Athena chat Anakin, he said no one brought dessert."

She looks around the table. "Yours are better." With a bite of potatoes, she's done with roll talk.

An extra almost-hour of rising makes a difference, I guess.

"I save to later, VP MB." Marco is cute.

“Yeah, Brother. I can wrap it.” All the Bits are saving theirs so I’m wrapping while Copper starts cleaning up.

“We swim first, VP.” Mikhail let’s me know the schedule.

“They’ll be good after a swim.”

Ranger and Freedom come in surprising me until I see Mag and Leya. “We brought some ice cream and chocolate.” Leya holds a Bravo bag up.

I smile watching my *Mondoux’s* face. She’s excited and shows that happy. “You didn’t have to come tonight.”

Leya shakes her head putting one of the boys down. “Cort and Web are at Bravo. We grabbed the boys and went out to dinner then decided to see your new garden and splash area. Mag was working the night everyone showed. Ranger jumped on board when Mag called for a flight plan.”

Leya is always happy, the woman takes everything as a gift. I look at the small rolls I made for the Bits. “We have extra. Can the boys have some?” I ask Xavier since he’s the Lead for them here.

“You make two each. Small Alpha-Bits can have. Only one to us.” He’s cute.

“Thanks, Brother. I made the second for breakfast.”

He shakes his head no. “Fruit, yogurt, protein.”

I nod, matching his serious look. “I’ll remember. Brother. I’m glad the boys showed.”

I get a serious faced nod and offer the rolls to Mag for the boys. “They’ll want to play in the water. They’ll look for something later. Thanks for sharing, little Brothers.”

“Play splash area to VP MB?” Mikhail and Marco stop right in front of Mag who looks at me.

“They’ll love it. The dogs do.”

He laughs. Bits are running everywhere. I’m glad Loki is with Harky.

When I turn everyone is smiling. “No pool tonight and Loki isn’t here so it’s already calmer. I’m going on record to say you’re my favorite.” Pres has everyone laughing. He says it all the time. He’s got a lot of favorites. “We’ll go for a while so Charlie can see the garden.”

Everyone calls in and cleaning is moving fast.

Marks hands me two rolls to wrap for Harky and Piper before Peak and Cabot take thirds. I wrap and hand them back. He gives me a look.

“I don’t live here, Brother.” He gets it and puts their names on them.

The bits come in with suits on and we’re off. I hold my *Mondoux’s* hand again and think I’ll never forget this walk. Brothers, kids and dogs all doubled in number from when we walked in the kitchen.

“I love having friends. Leya and Charlie can’t believe we got the garden done in a day with no Bits.” Beautiful Copper is still excited.

I smile, glad she’s happy with her new friends. “They don’t know you yet. The holes were dug for all the bigger plants. They’ll learn by our wedding.”

She giggles then runs when Marco pulls her other hand. I gladly release her and watch her spin him around in the air before they’re running to catch up with the little Bits out in front. I love seeing that carefree smile.

Marks walks beside me. “I’m glad she’s happy here.”

I am too but figure he knows. “She is. Marco told her she’s his only sister.”

He chuckles. “She needed family. They’re so smart.”

That has me thinking. They always know weird shit like that. I’ll never tell her but I thought it was that Marco wasn’t really connected to anyone. No that’s wrong. He’s close to Mikhail. He hasn’t been here long and I never saw him before that. “Was he on Alder’s compound?”

“No, he was from Web’s old house. He’s been here for a while but his twin died. He came in with Maddox, Mario and Mateo. His brother was a seven.”

*Merde.* “I thought he needed someone to connect to like Copper.”

“However it happened, they do need each other. I’m glad they have the connection.”

I am too.

Once the kids and dogs are settled at the garden, that’s closer to the splash area, with drinks and towels, I show the Brothers the vineyard.

Ranger laughs when he sees the room in the middle. “It’s not a vineyard.”

I shrug.

Mag disagrees. “It’s growing grapes over and around the little room. It’s still a vineyard with rows all around this. They aren’t mass-producing wine. He’d go home if he wanted to run a wine company.” He’s right so I stay quiet.

“You have a wine company?” Cabot asks.

“No, I gave it to the foreman. The land, house and *terrasse* is still mine but he’s been in his house since he was born. I gave him the front with his house and buildings. Instead of leasing the vineyard, he’ll send wine from every harvest. His dad was my grandfather’s foreman. He retired just before my grandparents died.”

He shakes his head but I don’t let him go on.

“He’s worked it longer than I did. He was my dad’s best friend and used to tell me stories about the shit they’d get into when they were younger.”

He nods. “You’re a good Brother, MB.”

“Wasn’t your dad in politics?” Marks knows a lot about everyone so I’m not surprised.

“Yeah, my mom was an artist. She did the vineyard painting in my living room.”

He nods.

“What’s this?” Ranger lifts the rope up over the half wall.

“A pulley so I could attach the vines in a line. It made this a hell of a lot quicker.” I’m glad all the Brothers didn’t show or I’d be answering questions from everyone.

He smiles. “Like window washer or painter gear.”

I nod. “We used it to paint buildings and the foreman said they’d use it for harvesting the sections with special grapes. They had arbors like this. When I was a kid, we had machines.”

Marks smiles at Pres. “He works smart not hard.”

I throw chin for the compliment. “It’s how I grew up. I’d watch how the adults did shit so I wasn’t doing my job all day. Even young, my grandfather would make me redo whatever I fucked up. I learned quick to follow every step the men took.” I smile. “We had the river right by us and the inlet called my name all summer long.”

They laugh but it’s true.

“I lived by the harbor and spent every free minute there. I’d watch that water in the winter, spring and summer. Didn’t matter to me.” Marks knows.

“I’m going to the lagoon. Mase said it’s got a couple of caves if you’re interested. I’ve got the gear.”

“When?” He’s up for it.

“Tomorrow. We leave at nine tonight.”

“Shit. I’m off the day after.”

“Go. It’s better than the ABSZ every time you’re off. You’ll have a story to tell the kids and Garren.” Pres makes it easy. “Take Ginny. She needs a break.”

“Thanks, Pres.” Marks has his phone out. “Luke Rayne will have Tucker cover me. Thanks, MB.” He moves out the door fast.

Pres laughs. “I think he misses water. I’m surprised he didn’t become a SEAL.”

I shake my head. “He’s all his mom has. His dad died when he was young. He became a detective like a year out of college, so he wasn’t on the streets as a beat cop.” Marks is a cool Brother. He’s smart and knows different shit that I like learning.

He looks at me for a few seconds then nods. He doesn’t ask a single question but I feel sadness around him.

I point out the back. “The vineyard goes twenty foot back. Four rows on each side are fifty feet. It’s not much but will be enough to supply grapes to the Clubs. Kadeem said they’d come harvest them.”

Cabot and Anakin go out the back with Ranger to check it out.

“You want help taking the pulley in? I don’t know about vineyards.” Pres surprises me.

Jase calls in and helps us bring the rope, pulley and boards in.

“That was a smart way to get the plants up.”

I don’t correct Pres. I’m not sure how the Club in a Club works but he’s Pres. I smile sliding wood onto a stack. “I’m lazy and look for the fastest way out of manual labor that doesn’t require me touching it more than once.”

He laughs with Jase. When I hear a laugh behind me, Mag holds two buckets up. One is for tools, the other had supplies. “Thanks, Mag. I didn’t know you followed us up.”

“I stopped to take in the view. It’s laid out perfect to almost match the picture over the couch.”

I smile. No one else noticed. “Yeah, without the water view, but we have the splash area.”

“It’s a pretty view.”

I agree with him.

“You got an extra tank?”

I smile. “Yeah. You’re welcome to join us.” I like Mag. He’s easy and quiet like Marks. When he talks, I always learn something.

“I’ll have to fly up but I can be there at six if you’re shooting for early.”

“Make it seven and it will work. This will be great.”

His excitement hits me. I love the fuckin’ Brotherhood. My friends will know me better by the wedding or reclaiming or whatever we’re doing.

# Chapter Ten



## *Four days*

***MB***

On the plane, everyone was reading and talking about the article in *Bike* magazine. I didn't know there were more articles in there but the teams did. Harky was surprised by it too, so I didn't feel too bad. He saw the first but nothing after. It showed the bombed-out building behind Cort and Ben. They both looked like they'd been sweating but it was water from the fire hoses.

The article used, "*Prophecy is not just a name,*" and "*Badass shining through.*" Making me smile. I've seen and heard both. While how it happened was glossed over, the picture of the new building going up gave a timeline showing we weren't down for long. The new programs and help available followed that with a call out for help getting clean water and seeds to kids in need, with pictures of the filters being handed out with the Badass logo on them. I felt good by the end and shook my head. Still, I feel like it showed that no matter what gets thrown our way, Badass will shine through.

Looking around the delivery truck at the teams who just got the plan, I realize the magazine has everyone ready for this Op. Putting me and Harky together told me we're in for some shit. They had a possible four to six assassins in with the soldiers we're getting ready to detain or kill. We're outnumbered and don't have Brothers with the same skill set they do but we have Badass backing us and military precision that is second to none. I bet the magazines were put there on purpose. Cort and Ben are smart Brothers.

Prometheus puts his paw on my arm. I smile at the move being so like Zeus. "Brother, you got the objective?"

He chuffs and hits his board on then an emoji with a thought bubble over his head.

I nod. "The article had me thinking about Badass shining through."

He chuffs and shows me his bio pic.

“Thought provoking to everyone, I guess. It’s a good thought to carry with us.”

Harky felt it too. “It is, Brothers. We do the job and walk away knowing Badass always shines through.”

The teams agree with a, “Hooyah.”

I smile at Prometheus showing the word on his board. He’s feeling the Brotherhood along with us.

The truck slows and Harky stands. “It’s time. We come from both sides and meet in the middle. Kiki and Jam, keep us updated.”

They’re already up with holograms on and ‘roger’ together. I drop Prometheus’s monocle down and catch Harky’s eyes on me. He feels it’s going to be a battle so I nod then return it when he throws me chin. We’re ready for a battle.

“Godspeed, Brothers.”

I smile and repeat it in French making him laugh.

His team jumps out as we’re rolling. I hold the team back until we’re around the corner. “Go!”

Running down the street in full gear would draw too much attention so our drop was by the side door. “Prometheus, infiltrate, clear one if you can. Stay to yellow,” I say softly.

He chuffs, then he runs past the door we’re headed to. There’s a guard walking this first floor.

Kiki: “Alarms down, feeds jammed.”

Me: “Roger. Go.” I nod at Drill when he gets the door open without a sound.

Kiki: “Two dogs roaming the building.”

Me: “Prometheus, stealth, clear the dogs in yellow zone. Use that new laser you got if you can, Brother.” I wave the Team forward and sign for Drill to go left.

Prometheus: Chuffs. I smile. Zeus shot Loki with it so we know it will stun a dog for about three minutes.

Me: Seeing Prometheus's feed from the side of my shield, I wince. "Good job, Brother. Find the dogs." There were no dogs mentioned before.

Harky: "Zeus, clear dogs in blue." I'm glad he's not a talker.

Prometheus: Chuffs

Kiki: "Holy shit, Prometheus." Comments aren't happening today. Prometheus ripped the guard's throat open but everyone doesn't need that.

Me: "Just the job, Brother." I see Sarge from Harky's team and hold Army and Beano. Blue light has me turning fast. Prometheus has the dog down at the doorway to my right.

Kiki: "Roger." She sounds embarrassed.

Me: "Drill, I'm clear."

Drill: "Clear, guard hidden, ten to you."

Harky: "Moving up. Second floor dog clear."

Me: "Roger." He heard about the first so I don't say it. Pulling a loaded pen, I shoot the dog with tranquilizer. "Good job, Brother. Second is down." I hand Army the water and he falls back to clean Prometheus' mouth. The team follows me up the back stairs. Guards fall before they can alert anyone. I love when shit works the way it's supposed to.

Me: We clear three from the first room and one two doors down. "Yellow clear. It's off. Guards only."

Harky: "Get out. Transport at the ready. Ops send cleanup. Nine guards and what looks like hostages."

Ben: "What's...? Fuck. I see their board, Brother. I'll get transport set up and plans for the palace." *Merde.*

We're back in the truck with Jam and Kiki within two minutes. "We need a new plan. We're not all making it through the palace and there's no way they're storming it."

Ben: “Brantley’s sending the plans now. Web is hacking feeds with Jason to get us location. Kaleb is getting permission. Their PD or whatever is at the building you just left. They had the map and shit there so they’ll be open to it.” Our intel said this planned attack will happen tomorrow.

My eyes find Harky’s.

He nods. “Me, you and the dogs. Teams outside weeding out the soldiers?” He’s right, there’s no way they all are going in so they’d wait for a clear outside.

I nod. “Drill, command the team from outside. Kiki, switch our coms so Deneris gets Drill.” I look over. “You want Drill on yours?”

“Yeah. Drill as Lead so the teams are working together. Deneris, drop to second for Drill.”

She nods throwing Drill chin. She’s not at all put out by this. Drill gets the team partnered up with Deneris and Beano as snipers from rooftops giving eyes to the teams on the ground. Jam gets feeds from outside and I relax. They’re not going in blind.

Harky nods. He gives both dogs commands then looks at me. We’re going in blind. The dogs jump out when the truck slows.

“Kiki, as soon as you get plans, guide me.” I get a roger and jump out hearing Harky say ditto.

Ben: “We don’t have the palace plans, Brothers.”

Harky: “The assassins do and they’re here. Zeus tagged three soldiers carrying on the street.”

Kiki: “Prometheus had two by the trees at the fence. Commanders, sensors at the doors and windows. Side has open doors that aren’t on.” Armed palace Security is by the open doors.”

Harky: “Any word on them working a Badass plan?”

Ben: “Nothing yet.”

Harky: “Fey. Make it by the guard and find our target.” He’s going for another in.

Me: “Thanks for the gift and roger. Prometheus, infiltrate, get me the layout and clear a path.”

Prometheus: Chuffs.

Kiki: Three minutes are quiet. “Prometheus is in through a window. Zeus is at the open doors.”

Me: “Are my coms on?” Zeus passed by me like ten seconds ago.

Kiki: “Roger. I’m watching guards, feeds from the teams and you.”

Cort: “Get the teams on with me. We have IT here for them. Web, throw them the inside feeds.”

Harky: “Thanks, Boss. Kiki, guide Fey and Prometheus. Jam, guide me and Zeus.”

Me: Rogers come in as I step inside the palace and right through the first door I see. “I need a security room tagged if you see it, Prometheus.” His chuff has me smiling. He’s running blind too.

Ben: “Harky, that guard isn’t a guard.”

Harky: Doesn’t answer.

Ben: “Jesus.” Ben is good for preparing me. I pull my garrote wire sliding the ring around my thumb and keep moving.

Me: Four doors down I see a guard slowly inching toward a door that must lead to another room. I’m too far away so I throw my knife.

Ben: Breathes deep but thankfully isn’t talking.

Me: I pull the jacket and see Korean. “Ops, they’re not Russian or Arabs, they’re Korean.” Feeling someone close but not a threat, I turn, seeing Harky across the room at another door. He signs, ‘together’. I wipe my knife on the Korean and stand readied.

The bark has us moving.

Busting in the door, I see Zeus and Prometheus in the air. I flip and shoot before the gun wielding idiot Palace Security guard hits Zeus or the Prince. Zeus knocks the Prince down and holds him. “BSC, Prince. Stay down. Zeus, attention.” Watching what’s happening, I’m glad Zeus jumped. Two guards that aren’t guards are...Harky shoots so it’s just one held by Prometheus. Or dead by Prometheus.”

Palace Security pour in the room from every door. I help the Prince up. Harky stops them from getting too close.

“Zeus, Prometheus, guard the Prince.” He smiles when they sit and growl at the brave Palace Security members.

I turn the dazed Prince. “Who is head of your security?”

He points.

“Who do you trust, your friend? Is he in the room?”

He points again to the guy on the side of his security head. Harky cuffs them both.

A woman runs in nodding at the cuffed men without stopping. “You’re okay?” her Arabic is not from here.

The Prince turns my way without acknowledging the woman. “What is the meaning of this?”

Zeus jumps and we all turn. A couple of Security pull guns and point at the man under Zeus.

Harky smiles. “I’d say that.” He points at the dick on the floor. “You need to pick from the Brothers holding guns. Your security head didn’t say a word seeing someone he didn’t know with his men and your best friend would know your security. Why is your best friend here with your head of security?”

The Prince looks from one to the other. “Remove them.” I would too, they’re both terrified.

Harky's hands go up. "I don't work for you. We came in and took down three before getting into this room. Zeus, he's cuffed, release, attention."

Ben: "He's to call his father. New Security is on its way to him. The palace is going on lockdown. The teams outside collected twelve. The local PD is picking them up."

Harky: He repeats and cuffs the guard in the wrong coat.

More Palace Security storm the room and move all Security out. The Prince hugs the woman then lectures her on running through the palace without security in Arabic.

Harky smiles at me. I shrug. When it clears out, a suit guy walks toward the Prince. Harky steps in his way.

Harky: "Ops, do we know him?"

Ben: "The king." I can hear his smile.

Harky: "Roger. Member." He waves an arm out and steps to the side.

The suit guy doesn't take offense. "My Security is scouring the building." His English is good.

Ben: "You're clear, Brothers. Good Job!"

Harky: "Roger, Ops. We're clear, Brothers."

The woman isn't happy. "That's it. You're just leaving?"

The Prince pulls her over. "Father is here."

The king nods to us. "Thank Mr. Baxter for me."

Harky nods. "I'll pass it on. I don't see anyone but Ops Brothers, they'll get him the message."

That gets a smile from him but I follow Harky out with Ben laughing in our ear. We walk out the side door. "I expected more."

I stop and look at him. "We aborted a mission and ran another going in blind with four of us ending in one room with fucked security on the Prince and three assassins in the room."

He smiles. “Why’d you ask for a friend?”

I shrug. “They had to have someone close to him. He’d tell a friend the threat and give BSC’s mission. Why would they go a day early?”

He smiles at me. “Yeah. You and the Fey shit. I’m glad you caught the friend and head dick.”

I smile and shake my head. “You knew they were bad.”

“No. Even the dogs didn’t get it. They would have had them down. I knew as I cuffed them. Neither fought or said a word but looked scared. Let it go. I was just saying you did good picking it up.”

I let it go. “We need to clean the Brothers up.”

Ben: “On the plane, Brothers. They’ve got alcohol for the gear.”

I look at Harky. Ops isn’t usually so vocal. He shrugs. “Home early is good.”

Getting off the grounds takes a minute, with Harky saying BSC, someone gets the message and we get a nod to pass through. I’m glad the dogs are black. Harky would shoot his way out if they held them for being full of blood. The delivery truck stops and we jump in. I love when it all works. That was crazy but easier than I expected.

On the plane, we get good jobs and Ben running feeds. His intake of breath was Harky throwing his knife when I did. Weird but we didn’t miss.

Ben looks at me. “It was just outside that room. They played them together because you both move the same way.”

I look at Harky getting a shrug. There are a lot of ways to throw a knife but straight at the target has always worked for me.

A few seconds go by and we hear laughing. I roll my eyes. Ben smiles. “I told them what you just thought.”

I nod. “I figured.”



He shakes his head. “You were outnumbered, took five known assassins and planned on the run. With no inside feeds and no palace layout, you did good. Collecting the soldiers went easy with Cort happy your people know how to extract information.” His smile says it all. They told us about the ball grabbing for ID on other soldiers.

Harky nods. “Whatever it takes works for me.”

“I can’t believe you saved a Prince and possibly the King and you’re not elated or even impressed.” Ben is annoyed but showing a smile.

Harky looks at me and I know he isn’t answering. “We’re the Brothers in the background, Boss. We’re elated that there were no casualties and we carried out the objective. The Team outside did a great job and we all will make it back without a scratch. Being in the background, we’re not used to recognition. We’re never the center of attention and like it that way. We do the job then go home to our regular jobs. It’s never talked about.”

Jessie laughs. “He’s right and they’re normal. You’re impressed with the king so you’re excited. Who can you tell? They can’t say shit to anyone about the job. No one ever does.”

Ben nods. “I guess I’m impressed that you came up with a plan, went in blind and made sure the Prince wasn’t taken as ransom or killed. Know that I’m proud of every one of you. Jessie is right, you can’t talk about it, so it’s just another job for you. I never talked to a king so it’s different for me.” He shrugs with a real smile on.

Now Harky wants to talk. “I’m glad I didn’t have to say much to the guy. I’m not good at taking credit. The teams outside did most of the work. It’s like a sniper job when you take one shot and the whole team is working their asses off.” He shrugs. Everyone is smiling while shaking their heads.

“You’re back home tomorrow, Brothers. There’s a refuel stop overnight. Sleep well and know we’re proud you keep showing that fuckin’ Badass.”

The table erupts in, “Hooyah!”

Ben laughs and the board goes black. Harky smiles at me. “I talked to a king. Until he said it, I didn’t think about it.”

I laugh. “You talked to a king. You’ll never be able to say it again but you did.”

He stands. “Yeah. Let’s get the Brothers showered.” We did our good jobs after watching the outside coms so we’re done.

Army stands. “I can clean Prometheus’ gear.”

Blustad stands. “I do Zeus gear.”

Harky nods.

“Thanks, Brothers they’re a mess today. Prometheus used the laser. That was different and effective,” I tell them.

“I’m showing the dogs again!” Kiki yells.

I roll my eyes for the second time today. Definitely Americanized.

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## *Copper*

Because my part of the satellite and drones are finished, I check in with Stella and Natalia. They're both busy working on the machines to build the drones while the kids are on the satellite. Kids on the satellite strike me as funny but I worked in the lab young, it's just that I was the only kid working there.

Stella and Natalia had a whole group that came to play in the splash area last night with Marco and some of his brothers. Maddox and Juan caught me and we talked about the printers and how to build them. I even got the plans for different printers.

Shaking my head before I start building a printer, I call Alder.

He looks distracted. "Boss Copper."

"I have no work today and nothing added to my sheets."

He looks surprised then starts typing. "All test waiting."

I nod. "I have them in the simulator but they need real time so I can put the results by time in. The spider silk is even in there to build."

He nods. "Proof needed."

"Yeah."

He takes his glasses off. "Later, I have A7 send work to you. Now, I work DNA, cancer gene edit to block... predetermine?" A7 is his hologram.

I smile remembering the whole A7 convo. "Hereditary?"

"Yeah, breast cancer, ovarian," he rolls his hands, "woman cancer hereditary genetic code. Block code, stop predetermine chance to cancer."

Holy Moses. “Yeah. Can I help?”

He freezes. “Women win bet to pay me to research. I say I no need pay. Important I work to them.”

“I’m a woman and my mother died of cancer. It’s important to me and I will work on this for free for as long as it’s needed. The shot for hemophilia is one shot. If you can find the genotype, phenotype, then dominant and recessive will be easy to block.”

“I accept. Ol’ lady bet to pay. I send half you no need either.”

I laugh while he types. “Whatever makes you happy. I’m excited to help. If you do this, Alder, the mortality rate for cancer will drop more. Can you imagine a world without leukemia? I’d get on kids right away if that was part of our future.”

Tears are in his eyes when he smiles. “You help to me, we make it happen. VP MB be happy to baby same to Boss Copper Rose.”

My eyes burn. Damn. “Send me what you’ve got and I’ll work with you.”

He pulls his glasses on, blowing out a breath. I do the same grabbing my glasses.

“Boss Copper! I have printer, Cuyler bring three to print bowl, plate, cup, tray... oh, you new work?”

I turn smiling at my little buddy. “I do have some new work. It’s the cancer DNA Alder is working on.”

His smile is lost quickly. “You help to bleed. Cancer bad. Cuyler stay to help make supply to hut? Dog play to splash?”

I’m not sure who Cuyler is but it’s not an adult, he’d say Boss, Miss or Mister. “If Cuyler doesn’t mind. My mom died of cancer, I’d like to help while Alder is working on it. He’s going to be with the satellite kids this week.”

He nods seriously. “Work to cancer. I print.” He hugs me tight.

I love my little brother. “Thanks, Marco. I’ll come down when I can.”

He lets me go and runs. “Pres Alder busy, you work you need. Tomorrow he off to Clubs everywhere.”

I smile at the closing door. He’s cute. I am so glad he’s here. We need the dinnerware for the tiki hut. Michael will be home by the end of the week and the Brothers will be here again. The poor Prospects had to bring a truckload of serving ware down when they were here the last time Michael was out.

Flipping my glasses back down, I look at what Alder has and hit the ABSZ Lab on, so I can ask if I have questions.

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Jumping on the golf cart with Athena running beside me I notice it’s already after five. I hope Cuyler and Marco are still here. As I turn from the Elite Club, I laugh. They’re still here. There are eight golf carts, 4 small bikes and two pickups. I don’t even have to be home for my house to be the *in* place. Stopping the golf cart in the little carport for it, I wonder if that’s good or bad. It’s probably not good that I’m not the reason people visit my house.

I walk in the silo seeing Alpha-Bits run through the house and right out the open doors. I don’t know who they were but they have white hair so they’re Fords.

Hearing a girl’s voice as I get closer to the back, I know at least one of the little people aren’t an Alpha-Bit.

“Boss Copper!” Someone yells making me laugh.

I see eight little guys I don’t know. “Yes. I don’t know your names or I’d yell it back. How about I yell, “Fords!”

They giggle. That is adorable. Marco comes running so I bend. He launches himself at me and I stand and spin him.

It's our thing. His giggle always has me smiling. "You brought help."

"Picture to you, Boss Cowboy make. Tomorrow, he deliver. Today Boss Jacky paint to you hut."

Uh oh. "Show me."

He takes my hand and little smiling people part so I can see what Boss Jacky painted. There are quite a few people inside the hut that aren't all under four feet.

"Hey, I'm Jacky, that's Stan, he came with the Alpha-Bit dudes and me because he wanted to see the silo house. It's a nice house."

I smile at the young guy that talks as fast as Maiyun when she's excited. "Hi, Jacky. I've seen your work on the outside of buildings at Delta."

He nods. "I paint everything but the solar system was a request from Maverick."

"Josephine told me."

He's not done. "I love the pulley system to get to the loft. Jojo has one made of shelves in her house."

I nod. "She sent me the video. Michael is crazy with building so he had me glue the stuff on the shelves so it could flip as the steps."

The little guys laugh and Jacky is wearing a clown smile that I always imagine I wear. I like him immediately. "That's what I like about them. Check out the walls before you go up. The kids helped print some pictures for you. The Officers have some coming tomorrow, I think. These are just decorations but it's enough that you can switch them out when you're tired of seeing them."

Marco pulls me to the mini bar. The mirror has Brolins etched on it. They're amazing with details. He hits the old toggle switch and the panels lift out dropping down chains holding poster-like pictures but they're small and high in the opening so it doesn't mess with the view.

I laugh. “He’s going to love them. I do.” One is a huge old fashioned air balloon in front of a small building, the other a ship that has mechanical oars. It fits with Michael’s mind. He loves the old ingenuity of the industrial mechanical era.

“More to house you put where you like. See loft. Boss Jacky paint wall, ceiling. Color change paint same to bikes.” Marco’s little pink eyes are shining with excitement. Color changing paint would have me excited too.

“I will if you come with me.”

“Deal.” He pulls me along as I’m laughing at the ‘deal’, that’s new for him.

He waves a hand so I pull for the pulley that’s an old arm switch from an electrical box or something. The shelves turn and I step on the first pushing the arm to the lower notch. I’m lifted with little people eyes watching. I wave to the Ford brothers.

A little girl is up here, this is the voice I heard earlier. “I’m Cuyler from Guardian Rising. My mom and sister Shay are with the dogs. We used stuff like this in our house when we were hidden. I like your house and now it’s painted, I love the loft.”

Nodding to her I can’t take my eyes off the walls. There are no pictures here, it’s a mural of our backyard but it’s older or something. “Light is reflecting off the splash area.” The mist looks like it’s shimmering.

She giggles with Marco. “The sun is coming in the skylight. It changes in the sun and at different temperatures. I never saw paint like this before.”

I look at the little girl and smile. “Me either. It’s like an old hologram. It’s nothing like the computer holograms we use now. This is amazing.”

“Jacky showed me a card from when he was little. I never saw the old things either.” Cuyler is cute.

Marco shakes his head. It’s new for him too. “I’m amazed. Jacky is a talented painter.” My eyes roam around the

room feeling like I'm outside looking at the vineyard, garden and splash area. Unbelievable just got bumped higher.

“Boss Copper, see up.”

I look up and laugh. The dusky sky is up there with the moon faintly showing. Wait. “It’s going to look like a night sky when the sun isn’t shining in the skylight isn’t it?”

“Light off, sky look dark. Light on, light.”

“Lighter,” Cuyler corrects him. “The moon doesn’t really show in the middle of the day. I didn’t see it at three.” She points. “I see it now that the sun is moving lower.”

Unbelievable. “I want to live here. We should go down so I can thank Jacky for this and see what you printed today. Thank you for printing today.” My eyes never leave the life-like walls.

Cuyler laughs. “It snags your brain like the ancestors, almost like you feel their presence or power.”

That gets my eyes on her and not the walls. She’s Indian.

She nods. She’s also a reader. She nods again.

“Let’s go downstairs because your freaky makes me feel like the room has a presence or power.”

They laugh at me.



# Epilogue

## ***MB***

The plane landed twenty minutes ago and we're done clearing it and on our way home. I'm glad Cort put a landing strip at MC Colorado. It's closer than the ABSZ for us. The chopper ride goes by quick. Drill and Deneris have been talking the whole ride. Harky catches my eye. They're next. I'm glad he doesn't say it.

As we're lowering, he hits my arm. "Trainees coming in the end of the week. They're Protectors from around the country. While Mass is getting biker into the International Brothers, we're on Protectors. They're all military."

I nod relieved they're military. "They're going to have the five teams in each territory quick. Are we getting another?" We already have more with the Protectors.

"Yeah, we'll have five international and our three freaky Protectors for national as we need them."

"Why aren't the freaky working the other territories?"

"They may but they're not Justice League level yet. We have Anakin with International Brothers because he was trained by military and is comfortable there. Not everyone is comfortable with the stringent guidelines and training we live by."

I nod getting that. I went on a couple of Ops for Princes and heard laughing and members talking about a dinner over the coms.

At Elite, the teams wait for the dogs to jump before they move. I'm always the last to get out and Harky stays with me. "We're early so we have today and tomorrow off." Happy is rolling off him.

I nod jumping down. "Five teams means we'll get more of those days off."

He smiles. "We will. Running constantly will wear us down. I'm happy to take the days when I get them. We ran

back-to-back for a couple of months, but it's leveling out now." He points at Drill and Deneris. "We may need the time, she's tough as nails."

I laugh heading toward the Club as I pull up tracking. Copper is at home.

"Brother, no Ops ran from here while we were out."

I turn back and climb on my bike as Harky pulls away, I bet having the same thought as me. I missed my *Mondoux*.

Leaving the bike in front of the house I run the stairs. She's not in the room. She must be in her garden. She usually leaves the doors open when she goes out.

She's not in the garden or vineyard so where the hell is she? I message Athena and hear her bark closer to the house. She can't be in the house.

Prometheus runs by me. I guess Zeus is busy. I follow him to the hut smiling. She must have made her printer for her serving ware. I stop short just inside the entrance. A mirror with our name on it catches my eye. I hit the arm to open the front and laugh. Wine glasses are hanging with a shelf of tumblers and shot glasses just below them. They all have Brolins on them in gold to match the mirror.

When I turn, wondering where the fuck Copper is, I see the pictures hanging from silver chains. She's done more than serving ware. It's too still for her to be in here.

Prometheus barks once from the other side in the front, so I go that way noticing the tray on the counter. Copper isn't on this side and Prometheus is waiting for me at the wall of shelves. I show him the ladder paw button and he pushes it. I pull the handle down to spin the shelves then lower and step on the first shelf. As I go up, I'm stunned. Prometheus is stopped at the top of the ladder. Copper is sound asleep on the daybed in the middle of the backyard. Athena sits watching us.

"*Merde*." I whisper. Walking to my *Mondoux*. She slept here, not just slept here but slept late here. It's eight in

the morning. She'd normally be at the Squared Club for breakfast or at her Lab by now.

I take everything but my pants off and squeeze in beside her. She rolls right on me making the fit better. I kiss her head watching the backyard twinkle as if the sun hits dew drops. It's amazing.

The room comes alive as the sun moves over the one pie shaped section of ceiling that's glass. I've seen bikes that have what looks like moving paint but this is our yard on the walls.

"Michael." Her sleep laced whisper fills me with pride for being her first thought.

"Right here, *Mondoux*." I kiss her head and tighten my arm around her.

"You're home early? It's not Friday, right?"

I laugh, hugging her to me. "I'm early. The room is magical but time is still running the same in here."

Her giggle has me kissing her cheek. "How did you do this?"

She sits and stretches. "Jacky did. Cuyler had a printer that paints and did the room for him and he added paint that responds to light and temperature. It's unbelievable. At night it's darker and the moon shows. He said he's not freaky but he did this in like six hours." She doesn't believe he's not freaky making me smile. "He came back up while I was looking at what the Fords and Cuyler printed but I saw the splash area misting like flames already. He's freaky."

I laugh and hug her, pulling her back onto me. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. I wanted to surprise you like I was."

"You didn't do the glasses and mirror?"

"No, the Fords and Cuyler did. I worked with Alder. He found a strand for hereditary markers that he's going to try blocking."

“Why?”

“Oh, for cancer.”

Oh, that’s all. *Mon dieu.*

“Did you see the pictures? They made us more with printers. There’s got to be twenty. I thought you’d like a couple for your shop.” She’s excited, up and pulling me.

I go to see pictures. “No work, *Mondoux?*”

“No. I’m off because the Officers have pictures coming. I’m supposed to point where I want them.”

I don’t ask. I hold her as we go down and get pulled right out of the hut. “They left the pile behind the couch so they’re not all over.”

I watch her ass as she leans over then smile when she shows me one she thought I’d like. It’s pulleys carrying I-beams. “That will look great in the shop. I love it.” This is similar to a picture I saw in New York from when the skyscrapers were being built.

“Look at this one, it’s all gears but I kept going back to it. It will look great by the bins. Oh, there are bins with gears and old pistons in them.” She hands me a new picture and bends for more. I love my girl excited for gear pictures.

“*Mon dieu.* This is perfect too. The light hits it at the perfect angle.”

“I know. There’s something about it. Look at these.”

I lean over the couch and help her get all the pictures out.

“These are great. They were printed?” Some look like paintings, others high quality photos.

“They printed them on a printer that they used to build the big house printers. Those Fords are unbelievably talented.”

We spend an hour talking about pictures then an hour putting four up in the shop, pipes in the bathroom and crates on rolling conveyors in the wine cellar. Prometheus liked a

picture of an old red truck in a field so we put that one up over his bed. Athena doesn't care about pictures.

I come up from getting the hammer and nails put away with a plan for the day but Copper is making breakfast. "We're too late for breakfast at the Club."

I help make breakfast that turns into brunch. Forty-five minutes later brunch is done. Pulling her chair out, I wait for her to sit but someone is knocking.

I drop my head when she runs to the door. Cheese has a delivery. Of course, Copper offers him brunch. I take the picture wrapped in paper and set it aside for when we're alone while Copper sets a place for Cheese. He's happy to eat at the table with the dogs today.

While he's telling Copper how he feeds the little dogs sometimes, they don't eat at the regular table, Zeus and Aeolus come through the front door and go right to Prometheus and Athena's room. Prometheus leaves the table and follows. My head goes down again.

Prometheus is back with his boards telling me, 'dogs, food'. I help Cheese and Copper make more French toast. Marco, Sohn and Mikhail come running in so I make scrambled eggs to go with the French toast. I haven't said a word since Cheese got here, mostly because he's still talking. Copper loves this kid. He's making Copper laugh and I love seeing her laugh so I'm good watching and listening.

Everyone finally sits and Zeus's board comes up. He wants pictures. Sohn, Marco then Copper are all over it so I eat while they go through pictures for his room.

Aeolus wants one that Copper puts up and Marco wants the same picture.

I clean up as they're in deep discussions over pictures dogs like. Cheese gets called for another delivery and leaves saying a diner would be good so the pictures take another turn into food shots. As I'm wiping my hands, the old bell rings. My head drops.

Zeus chatted Piper for pictures. She wants pictures for the dogs' rooms. I open the door wide not saying a word then look out the door for Harky but he's not here. Sampson and Loki look at pictures for about ten seconds then they're out the back.

I unwrap the picture of Copper and Athena in the garden and get a kiss watching Copper show everyone the picture. They have to hang it so I go back to the utility room and get the hammer and nails.

I nod for it going in the living room on the chair side and they're all talking again, so I just hang it. Stepping back, I put my arms around Copper and admire the garden with my *Mondoux* on the swing and Athena on the round bed swing. They're sitting like they were posed for it. I love it.

"Perfect," Copper says looking up at me.

I kiss her head. "Yeah, beautiful Copper." I hang my head as the bell rings.

Thrasos, Blue, Caelan, Seren and Cort are standing outside. I close my eyes when I hear bikes, a lot of bikes. Since I can't see around Cort, I open the door wide and throw chin. As they pass by me, I hang my head seeing more feet pass by.

"I like the tile too." The interior decorator wannabe Raid pulls me into the room to explain about the rock chimney. Cort answers him so I stay quiet.

Copper wants to show everyone the loft in the hut. I follow noticing Jack and Ranger carrying kids. Freedom must be here but I haven't seen her. Raid doesn't think the shelf will hold him. Cort yells down they're painted pieces of I-beams. I have no idea how he knows that and don't ask. Raid goes up. I go to the bar section and make lemonade in a new pitcher with Badass on one side and Brolins on the other. I like it.

Brothers come and go asking where shit is and I point. Prospects come in and set food up on the counter. I don't ask. I do notice it's fruit, snack food and pastry. When the beer and water coolers get filled, I hang my head.

“MB, smoker on the side of this?”

I have no idea who this Brother is and why we need a smoker but I nod as I walk back to the house. Aylen stops me to say she has Copper. I nod and keep going. Seeing more people here, I keep walking and smile when I meet Harky in the shop.

“They’re crazy,” he says.

I nod. “More rose gold?”

We get to melting copper and gold. He must have a lot of gold. I don’t ask but tell him about molds for the rings and bracelets. He’s interested so I pull up some videos and hand him my phone while I pound out a piece for a ring then melt the ends to connect. He likes that it worked so fast and I pull punches with different pictures and shapes. Cort comes in and wants to make a ring. I just start another in my gold and he follows without talking. I like this and make a dainty ring with crossed stemmed roses.

“Isn’t that thin?” It’s the first thing Cort has said in a while so I answer.

“It’s for a necklace. I’ll dip it in a high copper and gold mix.”

“You’re good at this shit.”

I don’t answer. My grandfather made jewelry as a hobby so I had all his tools shipped over. I bought new machines but love the old hand tools knowing his hands held them working metals just like I am right now.

Marks comes in with Knight and I throw chin but don’t ask. Knight jumps right in showing Cort how to buff the ring he made. Cort wants to stamp the inside so Knight shows him how. The guy doesn’t talk much but he knows a lot of shit.

He bumps my shoulder. “You too.”

I nod.

“Not gettin’ you don’t like attention? Me either.”



Cort turns from his stool. “That’s why you’re out here?”

Harky answers for me. “Yeah, Boss. I saw the bikes and didn’t even try for the house. I knew he’d be out here and he showed not five minutes after I got here.”

“Huh. I thought he didn’t like pictures and shit. We have pictures but I told them to lose the feeds after they were made so no one else would have them.” He’s a funny Brother.

“It’s hard to relax in a crowd. My brain doesn’t stop scanning.”

“Sniper, ingrained,” Knight says.

I nod.

He looks at Cort. “Needs to trust the crowd.”

“It’s all Brothers.” Cort makes me want to hang my head.

“He know ‘em?” Knight asks.

I shake my head no and Cort gets it. “Fuck. You know the Officers.”

I nod. “I spent a week at every Club for Officer training.”

“You’re going to stay out here until they leave?”

I shake my head. “I’ll go out when Harky does. Zeus and Prometheus will be here soon and will stay with us.”

Cort looks surprised. Harky nods. “They’ll know we’re unsettled.”

“You too?” Cort makes me laugh.

Harky nods. “I spend more time at the K9 compound than I do the Club. Meals or training are when everyone sees me. Unless I’m ordered, down-time isn’t around the Brothers or it’s at the pool with Brothers I know.”

“Jesus. Justice and Mag are snipers and hang with the Brothers.”

I shake my head. “The Justice League isn’t big on the huge parties. Maybe the Blackhawks but Justice, Teller, Aylene, Luke Rayne.” I stop when his head falls forward.

“Fuck. I never noticed. Mag left when we were at Bravo. Fuck.” He’s stressed,

I nod. “Mag came here that day but Ranger showed so they didn’t stay too long. We’ll follow orders and hang for a time, but crowds are hard to spend hours in. I don’t think Mag said much while Pres and Ranger were here. He talks to me when we’re alone or with just a few people,” I point, “like Harky.”

Harky looks up and nods. “Yeah. We’re not good taking credit either.”

Cort smiles. “Ben said that. He couldn’t believe it. He said you’re like Jessie.”

I nod right along with Harky.

Knight laughs. “Might wanna move the party. Princes here.” He points and Ben comes in with Adonis, Dakota and Jessie.

“Brothers, everyone is looking for you.” Ben is happy today. “I love your house and the...” he looks at Dakota. “We can move Brothers to the Club. Tiny is out there with Uncle Danny,” Ben says looking at me then Cort.

“Officers only.” Cort looks at Harky getting a nod.

I smile when Zeus comes in with Prometheus following. Cort laughs when they sit by me and Harky.

“This is going to be fun.” Jessie says. “So, they planned a wedding because the old ladies told them how you’re waiting for next year when you know Brothers better. I didn’t agree but they say everyone loves you so it will be fine...in those words.” He points to Dakota.

Harky starts laughing then Marks and I do. So much for any plan I had for the day and night or even our wedding.

I hear bikes and Brothers talking loud about games at the Club. “I guess we better get back. Less Brothers means

we'll be missed. How'd the ring come out, Harky?"

He hands me his first ring. It's actually good. "You do good work. Buff it out."

Prometheus stands when I do and walks with me to the little safe under the end of the workbench. I get a gold chain out and slide the ring I made on it. It's not dipped yet but I'll get it done another day.

I turn, surprised Cort is right here. "Is this like Aylen and Christian with too many emotions to work through?"

"I never thought about it. I've never liked crowds. The military put me in sniper because I worked better alone. They had me leading the team in training."

"You don't have a problem taking second for Harky." He says it but it's like a question.

"No. We think a lot alike and work the same."

"That's why your teams are interchangeable. Justice said it's like him and Teller."

I shrug. "I guess. I never met anyone freaky. I heard the stories but people didn't say much to me because they thought I was."

"I can see that. Are you okay with the Officers?"

Harky backs up so I can see him and nods to me. He'll stick close.

"Yeah. I'll deal."

"I'll plan the next party at the Club."

I smile. "Thanks, Boss. I'll show for it if I'm in."

"Can you fix this?"

I take his ring and sand then buff his inside stamped letters out. He's a happy Cort.

\*\*\*

## *Copper*

I look for Michael and see him watching the Officers talk. He's been surrounded by Ben Knight, Cort, Falcon, Mag, Harky, Justice, Walker, Dakota and Jessie. Justice looks just like Jessie. Every guy over there is holding a baby. I'm not sure what's weirder, Michael weirdly still or the babies not making a sound.

Aylen hits my arm. "He's calm."

That's odd. "Yeah. He usually looks around when people are here. It's weird that he hasn't moved either."

"They're calming him, Mag and Harky. My dad throws calm for me when there are so many Brothers close."

I look at her. "The feeling thing?"

"Yeah. I'm calming you and Maiyun. She's not good in crowds either."

"I didn't know he isn't comfortable in crowds. Mag and Harky too? I'm not used to so many people around."

She smiles looking like her dad. "That's why I'm throwing you calm. They all aren't big on so many Brothers around. Harky and Mag aren't empathic or whatever. They're just loners like Walker and you. So you went missing for a while there. We all ate, checked out the loft paint and danced with the dogs and Brothers."

I laugh at the dancing with the dogs. I saw the whole dog dance and still laugh at them shaking their booty. "My new life is unbelievable and I love living every minute of it. Look what he made in a couple of hours while I was doing the bride margarita ritual thing." I show her my rose ring on the chain.

"He made it?" She's surprised.

"Look what I got. Knight and MB taught Cort how to make a ring. Harky made one for Piper." Seren pulls Piper's

hand to show their rings off, making me laugh. Poor Piper is still talking to Leya with her arm stretched across the table.

“He’s talented.”

I nod. “He’d be a great engineer but he’s a better soldier. I think he likes that job better.”

She laughs. “He’s really good. My dad said Brothers are in awe of him.”

I wave a hand. “I married him like two hours ago. He stopped me from getting killed by a terrorist group. I thought it was a dream.” I smile. “It still is.”

They all laugh. “Let’s move to the swings, no one is drinking.” Seren is up and we all follow.

The men watch us move, so I point to the garden getting a nod from my new and old husband. Women putting on a wedding because they know and love me was a new unbelievable to add to my life. The pictures they had of us right here at our house were the perfect gifts. They had two of us alone, I snagged one of him leaning against the hut post for my desk and Michael took one of me planting in the garden for his office. We are so much alike it isn’t even funny. They’re very thoughtful people. I would have hated posing all over for pictures.

I stop in the middle of sitting. Michael would have hated it.

Aylen pulls me down on the swing. “He’s fine with the pictures. Cort had them delete the feeds so no one else gets them.”

I nod like that doesn’t sound all kinds of crazy.

“You shouldn’t be seen and his job says he shouldn’t be seen.” Aylen has a point.

She’s right, there’s a reason for me not to be seen. Everyone from Germany that knew about the drones are dead. It’s been so long that I haven’t thought about that old life.

“Since you’re here, safe, sound and over the moon in happy, let it go.” Aylen makes good points.

“I’m going forward.”

She smiles. “It’s the only way.”

“My handsome Prince! When am I getting a ring made by your hands?” Lily can be heard everywhere apparently. An odd quiet falls all around us.

Aylen groans. “Piper has a big mouth.”

I laugh seeing Jess Knight shaking her head. “I don’t get why he says she’s like me. Aylen is more like me.”

Aylen nods. “I’ve always been the quiet one.”

I laugh bumping my shoulder into her. “Madam President.”

She giggles sounding so young. “Yeah. I didn’t need to be loud, just competent. Mom taught me everything but loud.”

Carmen nods. “You’re more like Ben, a wisdom whisperer.”

“You have the weirdest phrases,” Chenoa says.

Wisdom whisperer? I look at Aylen. She busts out laughing with Jess, Leya and Solei.

\*\*\*

## ***MB***

We all look up at the yell from above. It's Anton's voice but I don't know which little one is Anton. There's a big someone with them.

Cort and Ben laugh moving to the walkway. I look at Harky. His head is already shaking. They got lighter gear made and it works. A new Club of flying Security is around a very short corner.

The women come up and take babies then stand with Ben and Cort. I follow Copper. "I can't believe how fast they are."

She has no idea.

I smile holding her as helmets come off.

Maverick shocks the hell out of me. "The plating works. I got shot like eight times." He pulls his coat then long T off. He's got a red mark where his hand brushes his arm. "This one was the worst but it didn't feel like a regular shot."

Ben turns my way. I realize it's Copper he's looking at. "The silk and Kevlar?"

She nods with a huge smile. "The plating is all silk then wrapped in Kevlar. I took the 100 nanometers and built it up to three millimeters. Alder made it like a waffle frame..."

Ben shakes his head in disbelief. "Alder, this works?"

Alder who took his coat off, lifts his shirt and points to his chest. "Asa shoot chest three time. No skeleton, no mark."

Cort lifts him so fast I'm shocked. "Don't stand in front of bullets, Brother. No skeleton to help you walk?"

Alder swings his coat around. "No heavy. No heat, Pres Cort."

Cort turns still holding Alder. "Thank you. They've been looking for almost two years. The women and Alpha-Bits will be safer because of you."

Copper shakes her head. “It was Marco and Alder that helped me do it. I didn’t do it alone. Without them testing all they did, I’d still be working on it.”

Alder nods. “Badass, never alone. We test, try, data fill spreadsheet.” He shakes his head. “Boss Copper read all, use design, code, Marco help to me code to print. Today, Juan, Maddox make fabric sheet. Soon new gear to ol’ lady, Protectors.” He looks around. “Boss Mase, no more scar to you, ever.”

We all laugh. They’re amazing. I squeeze my *Mondoux*. “You’re all amazing.”

Everyone wants to feel Maverick’s coat. I think Ben and Cort are in shock. Copper pulls me back to the house. “I have something for you, sort of. We made three prototypes. Alder asked that you get one but noticed you’re the same size as Ben Knight.”

“No, give it to Ben.”

“I told him you’d say that so he built two.”

Maverick took his coat off right away and won’t put it back on until Cort and Ben have their gear. You’re giving them theirs.” She opens the coat closet door and I smile.

Three full sets of gear are hanging. I take the biggest thinking it will be the heaviest but it’s not even the weight of my coat. “The helmets too?”

“They have the Ops glasses thing. Alder coded them for the person. You have Elite and Squared on yours.” She takes Ben’s gear and easily swings it over her shoulder. She’s walking out like this is all normal daily shit.

*Merde*. “Unbelievable. *Mondoux*.” I follow because lately it is.

Everyone moves seeing the gear we’re carrying. Alder pulls a shirt from his backpack. “Prez Ben, you deliver shirt to Pres Hemy?” Everyone laughs.

They get quiet when Copper steps forward. “His is being made with Harky’s because Michael won’t wear his



unless Harky has one.” She swings the gear from over her shoulder and hands it to Ben. “As fast as we can grow the material, we’re getting the Presidents and Officers done. We’re printing from New England and here. The Bits all have new gear.”

Ben hugs her. I hand Cort his gear. “Full gear that doesn’t weigh as much as my coat makes it easy to say, wear them always, Boss. You never know when buildings will explode and Mucimi may not be close.”

Everyone laughs. He hugs me then takes his gear. “Jesus. This is light.”

Brinks takes Cort’s helmet. “Stella said Alder coded for the helmets.”

“Need coat to get Ops. Wave on board work to band,” Anton tells him.

Ben then Cort put the helmets on and both turn their heads from side to side.

“These are incredible.”

“They look impressive, Prez.” Jessie touches Ben’s arm.

Cort raises his arm and swipes to the side just missing Raid. I notice the vents under the arms and Raid asks. Alder starts explaining it’s the blend just a different color. They’re unbelievable.

I laugh and pull my *Mondoux* to a swing. “Mrs. Copper Rose Brolin, Stella said you were a national treasure when you first got here. I have to agree. I told you I was glad no one saw how amazing you are. I was partly right, I’m glad they didn’t see it in Germany but I’m so fuckin’ proud our new family sees you now.”

She looks at me with the most thoughtful look in those beautiful brown eyes. “I never felt it before, but you’re right. They’re my family now. They’re all amazing so I fit in here. They make me better, like you. Alone I wasn’t much, but here, I’m more.”

*Mon dieu.* “That’s deep and I think true. Alder said, “*Boss Copper show you more to life. More to you.*” It was the day I realized I was feeling more from everyone around me. I told you the heavens matched us perfectly.”

She laughs at me. “You did. Jess made a cake. I’m getting some before it’s gone.” Pulling my shirt she kisses my lips before she walks away.

Prometheus watches her then looks back at me.

I shake my head. “It’s just a day in her new life. I’m not sure I’ll get used to this daily. She made suits out of spider web shit, says the most profound shit like it’s nothing and is helping find a way to block hereditary cancer genes. This is not the normal I thought having an ol’ lady would be.”

His board comes up. ‘No. Ol’ lady more.’ A picture of dynamite shows and his board shuts down. I blink and he’s running toward Zeus.

I laugh. She is more. A Phoenix, dynamite, explosive...like she says, whatever. It will never be boring. I want cake or maybe I just want to see what’s next with my *Mondoux*.

I love the fuckin’ Brotherhood.

***Thanks for reading MB and Copper Rose’s story. This isn’t really freaky but the story of two lost souls finding their way to each other, Badass and their new family. Dogs, Brothers and Bits make them better, more. I hope you enjoyed the laid-back engineer and Ops lead as much as I did. I wonder what’s next. Until the next one, faithful readers...***

***Please leave a review or hit the stars on your way out,***

***Thanks,***

***L.***

# Acknowledgments

Moving across the state just after the 100-year storm hit wasn't easy. The roof was replaced and I can say, is working well. The heat, finding a new way to write and emptying boxes all happened slowly but did happen.

I'm happy to say, this one was fun, different and now done.

Thank you, betas and readers for working so fast to get it back to me.

Thank you and positive thoughts to Mel for keeping the Facebook page going while recovering from surgery and not missing so much school. Ladies, send those thoughts and prayers her way. She's an amazing woman.

Thank you, Christine for the SOS room and connections.

Finally, thank you faithful readers. Your emails and chats doing check-ins made the new easier to handle and lit the fire in me to get new done and over with...lol <3

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 honorable 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 Twitter: [@LAnnMarie1](#)*

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*Maverick: Insight:* [mybook.to/Deltainsight](https://mybook.to/Deltainsight)

*Spano: Foresight:* [mybook.to/sentinelforesight](https://mybook.to/sentinelforesight)

*Marks: Enforce:* [mybook.to/Rising2Enforcer](https://mybook.to/Rising2Enforcer)

*Harky: Elite:* <https://mybook.to/Rising2Elite>

*Luke Rayne: Vision:* <https://mybook.to/bravovision>

*Knight Heart:* <https://mybook.to/zionheart>

*Michaels: Choices:* <https://mybook.to/guardianchoices>

### **Adroit Force**

*Adroit Force: Sealed:* <https://mybook.to/Adroit1Sealed>

*Adroit Force: Hunted:* <https://mybook.to/Adroit2Hunted>

*Adroit Force: Saved:* <https://mybook.to/Adroit3Saved>

### **Boxed Sets**

*Baxters Series Box:* <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0776G4XZ6>

### **MC Badass**

*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**

*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 - Honor Series  
Cooper: Gunslinger - Elan Series  
Teller: Connect - Bravo Series  
Maverick: Insight - Delta Series  
Spano: Foresight - Sentinel Series  
Marks: Enforce - Rising<sup>2</sup> Series  
Harky: Elite - Rising<sup>2</sup> Series  
Adroit Force: SEALed  
Adroit Force: Hunted  
Adroit Force: Saved  
Luke Rayne: Vision

Knight: Heart

Michaels: Choices

Brolin: Revered