

ALPHA AWAKENED

Shifter Special Forces: Reaper Pack 84 #1



CHRISTA
TOMLINSON

Alpha Awakened

By

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Torlina Press

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Cover Design: Christa Tomlinson

Publisher: Torlina Press

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Acknowledgement

It's no secret that this story was first inspired by Ghost and Soap from the Call of Duty Modern Warfare reboot. Because of that I'd like to give a shout out to two creators even though they'll probably never see this.

First to Amanda Golka from Swell Entertainment. Thanks to her hilarious video I was awakened to the awesomely bad ass character that is Ghost from Call of Duty.

And to UmikoChannart. Her gorgeous fan art of Ghost and Soap first made me fall in love with those two, individually and as a ship.

Also, a shout out to all the COD fan artists, writers, cosplayers, and video editors. Your amazing fan works lit a fire in my brain that burned brighter than the House Hightower beacons. I couldn't ignore the call.

Thank you Call of Duty fandom for the inspiration. Always keep creating. For yourself and for everyone who enjoys your fan works.

Story Facts

The United States Legion is a fictitious military force created for the Reaper Pack 84 series. However, the ranking system is based off of the Army and Marine ranks. Legion ranks are listed below from lowest to highest.

Enlisted Soldiers

Private – Lance Corporal – Corporal – Sergeant – Gunnery Sergeant – Master Sergeant – Sergeant Major

Officers

Second Lieutenant – First Lieutenant – Captain – Major – Lieutenant Colonel – Colonel – Brigadier General – Major General – Lieutenant General – General



The ranks for our main squad.

Squad 448

Major Samantha Ortiz

Captain Royce ‘Ice’ Anderson

Corporal Noah ‘Jax’ Jackson

Corporal Dylan ‘Hazard’ Mitchell



Pack Majoras

There are thirteen major wolf shifter packs in the United States. Each major pack is represented by a councilor that serves on the United States shifter council. This council is a governing body for all shifters and represents the major packs within the US government. For a map of the shifter territories, visit ChristaTomlinson.com/ReaperPack84.

Playlist

These are some of the songs I listened to while writing Alpha Awakened. I included songs from the 80's to set the vibes since the book is set in 1982. Of course I had to start off with the Top Gun Anthem, the iconic theme from an iconic 80's military movie. The playlist is on Spotify if you would like to listen.

Alpha Awakened Spotify Playlist

Top Gun Anthem – Harold Faltermeyer, Steve Stevens

Left, Right, Left – Drama

When the Lights Go Out – The Black Keys

When Doves Cry – Prince

Free Fallin' – Tom Petty

Hurt – Johnny Cash

Love is a Battlefield – Pat Benatar

Outlaws of Love – Adam Lambert

Wolves – Selena Gomez, Marshmello

Make You Mine – Public

Prologue

May 6, 1982

2015

US Legion Base - Fort Grove

Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

Dusk slowly fell across the sky as Hazard crossed the large, unfamiliar military base. He'd been offered an escort to his destination but declined it. All he had to do was head toward the one building where music and other sounds of revelry spilled out into the coming night. It was the largest rec hall on base, where he'd been told they were celebrating the retirement of Master Sergeant Mildred Grayson.

He was there to speak with Major Ortiz about signing on to her special forces team, the 448, to replace their retiring member. Fitting that he'd arrived for the meeting during that member's retirement bash.

By the time Hazard started up the direct path to the rec hall, the sun had completely disappeared, taking most of the spring heat with it. The area around the hall was dark, lit only by the amber light above the glass doors of the entrance.

When Hazard reached those doors, he noticed a man lurking in the shadows near the entrance. He was tall. Big. Clearly an alpha. The man was in casual, civilian clothes, every stitch of it solid black. He even wore a black, three-hole balaclava. That wasn't terribly unusual, plenty of soldiers in the Legion chose to keep their faces covered. Although most of them only did so during missions, not while on base. There was just enough light reaching the alpha for Hazard to see that he had dark eyes, but whether they were brown or black he couldn't tell.

They'd made eye contact, so out of politeness, Hazard stopped to exchange a friendly word. Besides, he was nervous about this meeting. A few moments of small talk would help him steady his nerves. He smiled at the soldier before he spoke.

"Out here by yourself. Is the party not to your liking?" he asked.

The mystery soldier was silent for a long moment, his dark eyes direct on Hazard's, before he answered in a deep, rough voice.

"I don't do parties."

For some reason, the sound of that voice tugged at something in Hazard's chest. He brushed the odd feeling off to ask his next question. "Why not?"

This time the answer was immediate.

"Mind your business, soldier."

An officer then. The snap of authority in the stranger's voice was a dead giveaway. And clearly he didn't want to be bothered, so it was time for Hazard to leave.

"Enjoy your lurking. Sir." Hazard caught the narrowing of those dark eyes at his not-so-subtle impertinence, but slipped away before the man could dole out a reprimand.

* * *

Ice watched the soldier disappear into the rec hall. Most soldiers showed him deference, either out of respect for his rank or fear of him personally. That one seemed to have neither.

He didn't recognize the soldier, and Mitchell, the name on his uniform, didn't ring any bells.

Not that he knew all the personnel on base. But something about that one, with his hair as dark as the night around them and eyes that he could just barely make out were green, stood out in a way that he knew he would remember him if he'd seen him before.

His bearing was too seasoned for him to be a fresh new guy arriving with the latest batch of recruits. However, soldiers were transferred to new bases and new units all the time. Or he could be a visitor. Maybe he was a friend of Grayson's stopping by to see her off. Whoever he was, it didn't matter to him.

Ice pushed off the wall and straightened. He'd put in an appearance at the party and said his goodbyes to Grayson. He didn't need to spend any more time socializing. Ready for peaceful solitude, he left the shadows and headed back to the quiet of his barracks.

Chapter 1

July 29, 1982

2100

US Legion Base - Fort Grove

Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

Ice walked into the strategy room and sat down at the table. As usual, he was the first of their team to arrive for the pre-mission briefing. His squadmate Jax came in next, giving him a nod before he took a seat. The door opened again and Major Ortiz, the leader of their squad, arrived.

“Major,” he said in greeting.

“Ice.” She returned his greeting before sitting at the foot of the table.

The door opened one last time as Lieutenant Colonel Gibbs, their team’s executive commander, entered. He was accompanied by his aide. Ice, Ortiz, and Jax all rose and stood at attention until Gibbs nodded at them to be seated. With the colonel and his aide’s arrival, Ice expected the briefing for the upcoming mission to begin. But the aide didn’t begin his usual tasks of turning on the monitors and passing out mission briefs and both Ortiz and Gibbs remained relaxed in their seats.

It was Jax who asked the obvious question.

“What are we waiting for?”

Ortiz leaned back in her chair before answering.

“We’re waiting for the new member of our team. Their transport is running a few minutes behind schedule.”

At the major’s answer, Ice looked at her in surprise. “Why are we getting a new member? We don’t need one.”

“We do. Now that Grayson is retired, you need someone to watch your six,” Ortiz explained. “And it’ll be more efficient for you to have a partner.”

“Been efficient just fine on my own these past three months.”

“But you can’t watch your own back.”

Ice didn’t have anything to counter that. There were many situations where having someone to watch his back could help him stay alive. But he preferred working alone. And he didn’t want to deal with training a new guy to properly work alongside him. But knowing the major was right and respecting her decision, he bit back his annoyed growl and nodded instead.

The matter settled, Ortiz nodded back.

“His name is Corporal Dylan Mitchell.”

That name pulled up a recent memory in Ice’s mind. The soldier he’d spoken with the night of Grayson’s retirement party wore the name Mitchell on his uniform. Mitchell was a fairly common name, however. It was unlikely to be the same person.

“Shifter or human?” Jax asked.

“Shifter.”

“Another alpha?”

“No. An omega.”

Jax raised an eyebrow. “That’s a prize you’ve managed to nab for us.”

Omegas were often an amazing asset to have out in the field. They were fast and lethal. Their

small size let them slip in where alphas and betas sometimes couldn't. And heavens forbid an enemy hurt someone an omega considered as part of their pack. An omega protecting one of their own was vicious - borderline feral.

"Yes. We're lucky to have him."

"Let's not be hasty on that assessment," Ice said. "We'll know if he's a prize after we see how he does in the field."

Ortiz smiled. "I'm sure he'll do just fine. I helped train him a few years back. He was stellar then and I'm sure he's only improved since." She looked at her watch, then drummed her fingertips on the table in a sign of impatience.

A minute later, the door opened once more and a young soldier walked in. Ice took in the new arrival. Black hair. Green eyes. And a familiar smile. Ice clenched his jaw in annoyance. It was him. The impertinent soldier from that night. Fuck.

After closing the door behind him, Mitchell saluted and greeted Colonel Gibbs. Ice was half surprised that he showed respect to an officer. After Gibbs returned his greeting, Mitchell saluted Ortiz next before walking over and clasping her hand in what looked to be a firm grip.

"Major Ortiz. Good to see you again, ma'am," he greeted the major in a friendly voice.

"You as well. Let me introduce you to your new team. This is Captain Royce Anderson and Corporal Noah Jackson. Otherwise known as Ice and Jax. Boys, meet Corporal Dylan Mitchell."

The corporal smiled at them both and gave a salute to Ice. "Call me Hazard."

Behind his mask, Ice raised an eyebrow, mildly curious about the nickname. He didn't voice his curiosity aloud however, not wanting to invite the man to share a story that he had no interest in hearing. "We've met," he said coolly.

A frown of confusion creased Mitchell's forehead as he tried to figure out how he knew him. When the memory hit, the frown cleared and his eyes went wide for a moment. He had the grace to look embarrassed, a hint of red appearing on the tops of his ears when he acknowledged their prior history — brief as it was.

"I remember our meeting, Captain Anderson. It's nice to see you again, sir."

"Mmmm." Ice answered with a noncommittal hum.

"How was your ride in?" Ortiz asked.

"Uneventful. I could use some action after the long trip."

"You'll have plenty of it here. We're briefing now for tonight's mission."

"Sounds good."

Ice noted the eagerness to Hazard's expression. The young soldier didn't complain about being put straight to work or ask for a night's respite after being transferred from his previous post. He respected that. While Mitchell walked around the table to take a seat and the aide began passing out mission briefs, Ice assessed their new team member.

The corporal wasn't what he'd expected. Usually omegas were short, with petite, slender builds. Mitchell was smaller than the three alphas in the 448 — a whole head shorter than Ice — but he wasn't *that* short. And his build wasn't anywhere close to what you'd call slender.

This omega was solid, with thick thighs, wide shoulders, and a firm, broad chest that tapered down to a flat stomach and tight waist. Muscular arms made it clear that he put in good time in the gym. Mitchell wouldn't be slipping into any small, tight spaces with his sturdy frame.

His ink black hair was buzzed close to his scalp. And the barest hint of a five o'clock shadow darkened his jaw — another difference from the omegas Ice usually saw with their smooth, bare cheeks. Of course, Ice didn't care about any those non-typical traits. He only cared if Mitchell could do the job he'd been brought in to do.

An odd warmth started to tingle in Ice's chest. Ice rubbed his knuckles over his breastbone. It was probably mild heartburn from the jalapeños the mess hall cooks had sprinkled in that evening's dinner.

Still feeling annoyed, Ice opened the mission brief. He didn't want a partner at all and he certainly didn't want this one with his cheeky attitude. But Ortiz had brought Mitchell in, doing it in a way that left Ice little room for refusal. For tonight at least, he would have to work with him.

* * *

Hazard looked into the eyes of the man sitting across from him. He recognized those deep, dark eyes. They belonged to the officer he'd run into three months ago when he'd visited Fort Grove to speak with Major Ortiz. The big alpha hadn't been wearing his wolf skull mask that night and he'd been in casual clothes so he hadn't realized he'd been speaking with the infamous Captain Ice Anderson.

Going by the cold stare the captain was giving him now, he'd probably pissed him off with his flippant exit from their brief conversation. Fuck. Not the best way to start off with his new team. But, what was done was done. No point in dwelling on a minor misstep. He might not be off to a great start with the captain, but he already had a good rapport with Major Ortiz, the leader of the team.

He liked Ortiz. He'd first met her three years ago when she'd led an advanced training course. From what he remembered back in training, the tall brunette was smart, highly skilled, and laid-back when not in the field. Her light brown eyes were always calm and often friendly, a trait he admired in an alpha of her rank. It had been a surprise and an honor when the alpha had recruited him to join her squad.

His fellow corporal Jax was another alpha. He had smooth, mahogany brown skin and bright, copper brown eyes. He'd given off a good vibe during their introduction and seemed glad to have Hazard on the team. Hazard looked forward to getting to know him.

Jax was dressed in a loose fitting Legion pullover shirt, drawstring pants, and slip-on footwear. It was standard uniform for soldiers who planned to shift during a mission. Ortiz was in the 448's specialty black uniform. There was a dark green band on the collar and cuffs and a 448 patch sewn onto the right arm. Hazard wondered when he would receive his 448 kit to wear instead of his standard US Legion uniform. Major Ortiz would probably have him go through a few missions to earn it first.

Then there was Ice. He'd heard tales of the man. Everyone in the Legion had. The tales all said that he was big, bad, and deadly. A lone wolf with an unmatched kill count. And that he was rarely seen in public without the hard-shell wolf mask covering most of his face.

Hazard could verify that the *big* part of Ice's reputation was accurate. The night they'd first met, the alpha had towered over him by more than a head, making him easily six foot four. Sitting across from him now made it clear that his muscular bulk was massive. He wondered how big Ice was when he shifted into his wolf form.

The alpha was wearing the infamous wolf's skull mask. This one was painted pitch black, except for the sharp white teeth. Another part of the legend that was true. The night they'd met he must have caught him during one of the rare occasions he didn't have it on. If Ice had been wearing it that night, he probably wouldn't have been cheeky when he spoke to him. Or maybe he would have.

As far as bad and deadly... Well, he'd find out if that was true soon enough. However, Hazard

couldn't lie to himself. Even before seeing Ice in action, Hazard was slightly intimidated by him.

The way the captain kept his face covered by a replica of a wolf's skull gave off vibes that had the hairs on the back of Hazard's neck rising in a primal warning. *Tread lightly*, his Instinct whispered. *This one is dangerous*. But Hazard was a dangerous man too. And being intimidated wouldn't fly if they were going to work together.

Dark eyes that peered out from the eye sockets of his mask with cool detachment were the only parts of the alpha that Hazard could see. The rest of his body was covered with long sleeves, pants, boots, and gloves. All of it in black.

Other than his size and eyes, Hazard couldn't determine any of Ice's physical characteristics. He couldn't even see Ice's lashes or eyebrows thanks to the shadows cast by the eyeholes of the mask. And the balaclava he wore beneath the mask hid his hair, making it impossible to tell his hair color or skin tone. Was he tan like Hazard or lighter? Was he a redhead, blond, or a brunette? Hazard had no clue, but he wondered what made a man lock all of himself away like that.

When the corporal's assistant flicked off the overhead lights and turned on the two large monitors set into the wall at the front of the room, Hazard shrugged off his thoughts on the mysterious Ice and gave his attention to the briefing that was beginning.

Gibbs rose from his seat at the head of the table. The lieutenant colonel was an older Caucasian man, human, with faded red hair cut short, and silvered battle scars on his hard face. He was dressed in a sharply pressed green officers' uniform with the requisite gold bars displaying his rank.

"Corporal Mitchell. Welcome to the team," Colonel Gibbs said in a crisp tone.

"Thank you, sir."

"You've joined the 448," the colonel continued. "An elite squad formed for one reason. To get shit done. Whenever we have a situation that needs a lightning fast, no holds barred response, the 448 is called in. I hope you're ready for that responsibility."

"I am, sir," Hazard said firmly.

Colonel Gibbs nodded and moved on.

"We have an important person from the shifter community who has been abducted by Vengeful Claw, a fanatical shifter cell," the colonel began. A picture flashed up on the screen of a young Black woman with short brown hair. "Councilor Doucette, the councilor for the Blood Valley pack, contacted the Legion when her daughter Jessica Doucette was taken. Blood Valley territory covers this region so we got the call. Ms. Doucette was grabbed leaving her aerobics studio and is being held at an abandoned warehouse in Kansas City."

The aide clicked a remote and the screen advanced to show a picture of a five-story brick building. Some of the windows were busted out, and the parking lot surrounding it was cracked and choked with weeds.

"Do we know why she was taken?" the major asked.

"No. The abductors left their calling card but thus far they've issued no demands. But because of who she is, we're working on the assumption that there is a political motivation behind the abduction. Your job is to get in, rescue the hostage, and gather any intel you can on this group. If the leader is on site capture them if possible. But everyone has authorization to kill. The hostage is your main priority. Any questions?"

Not a sound came from the team.

"Major Ortiz will take over from here." The colonel closed his folder and sat down.

Ortiz rose and walked to the front of the room to stand next to one of the in-wall monitors.

“Intel has her on the fourth floor.” The screen changed to show blue prints of the building they’d be entering. Ortiz used a laser to point out the area where the hostage was being held. “When we approach, Ice will take out the exterior guards. Once we’re inside the premises, he and Hazard will secure the package. Her family uses a code word so they know it’s safe to go with someone they don’t know. Hers is tuxedo cat. Make sure you give it when you find her. Jax and I will sniff out the leader and any intel that might be on site.”

His mind already shifting into battle mode, Hazard listened intently while looking over the blue print on the screen.

“Everyone clear on their role?”

“As a bell, Major,” Jax answered for them all.

“Okay then. Let’s go rescue the princess.”

Chapter 2

As they left headquarters, the setting sun cast an orange glow over the sprawling military base. Hazard looked around, taking everything in as they headed to the armory. Fort Grove was similar in design to many of the other bases he'd either been stationed at or visited. There were multiple blocks of barracks, various admin buildings, and training areas with PT centers.

After a short walk, they reached the armory. The space was neatly organized with rows of weapons secured in lockers, racks of armor, and shelves filled with ammunition. All of it was attended by the armorer, an older soldier with a sharp gaze and gun grease under his fingernails.

"This particular armory is for our use, along with two other special units stationed here," Ortiz explained as they gathered their weapons.

Hazard nodded in understanding. It made sense for special teams to have a space separate from the general weapons storage for the rest of the Legions on base.

In the ready room, the three alphas applied blockers to their scent glands to mask their scents. Stealth was required for this mission, and they didn't want Doucette's captors to sniff out their arrival before they were ready to reveal themselves. Hazard's blockers were already applied out of politeness for the close confines he'd been in on the transport truck.

He geared up with quick efficiency, pulling his armor-plated tactical vest over his head and buckling it around his waist. Hard shell knee and elbow pads went on as well, and he finished with a pair of leather gloves. His helmet he held on to. He'd put it on once they were en route.

Once everyone was geared up, they headed for the tarmac where a transport helicopter was waiting to fly them to the target. Hazard fell in step with Jax.

"What pack majora are you from?" Jax asked him in a lyrical New Orleans accent.

"I'm from the Wild Defiance in Texas."

"Get out!" Jax said excitedly. "My grandfather is Wild Defiance. When he was young he went on a pack exchange full moon run in Coeur Amer — my home pack. He saw my grandmother and that was it. He mated her before the next full moon and they've been together ever since."

"That makes us pack cousins. Nice," Hazard said with a grin.

Jax grinned back, and they bumped their fists together before jogging up the ramp to enter the rear door of the big military helicopter. Hazard took a seat and quickly strapped in, ready for the flight. It would be a short one. Just under an hour from their base outside Broken Arrow, Oklahoma to Kansas City. The helicopter blades spun to life and moments later they were rising into the air.

* * *

The flight was uneventful, calm with no turbulence. Hazard spent the time talking to Jax, getting to know his new squadmate. Ortiz split her time between reviewing intel and joining in on their conversation. Ice sat on his own, not engaging with anyone.

"Five minutes to drop point," the pilot said over the comms.

At her announcement, Ice unclipped his safety belt and stood. He held on to the hand strap hanging overhead, feet planted wide to maintain his balance.

Hazard was in his battle-ready head space, mind focused on the mission. But as he looked up at the captain, he was hit with a completely out of the blue tingle of attraction. It was odd to feel that way about someone when he couldn't see anything but their eyes. And even those were

shadowed. But Ice's powerful build and the aura of strength and command that emanated from him had grabbed Hazard's attention and wouldn't let go. The alpha's chest and shoulders were broad, easily carrying the weight of his fully equipped tac vest. And his long legs and thick thighs gave him the stance of a warrior.

Throughout the night, his gaze had been drawn to the captain again and again. It had been a struggle not to get caught staring at him. At least now Hazard had a reason to look at the big alpha since he was speaking to him directly.

"Hazard. You're with me from the second our boots hit the ground until we're back on this helo. Understood?"

Another tingle shivered down his spine at the captain's voice. It was deep and rough, no doubt from time spent shouting orders in the field. This time the tingle was followed by a flare of annoyance. What the fuck was going on with him? This wasn't the time, the place, or the person for him to be feeling attraction. Hazard cleared his throat and answered.

"Yes, sir."

Those dark eyes behind the wolf mask stared into his for a long moment before they moved on. From his talks with Ortiz, Hazard knew he'd been brought on to work as Ice's partner. But after meeting him, Hazard suspected that Ice didn't want him, or anyone for that matter, as a partner. This mission was probably a test. A way for Ice to scope him out and see if he was up to scratch. And if he didn't keep up, Ice would have him booted from the team.

Hazard wasn't worried however. He was confident in his skills. He didn't know Ice's standards or if he would meet them his first time out. But he knew he would get the job done.

Jax rose and slipped out of his clothes and shoes. As a shifter, Hazard wasn't bothered by the nudity, but since he was still basically a stranger to the other corporal, he politely averted his gaze. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jax stretch, then the flash of white light that accompanied a shifter's transformation. When he looked back, there was a large alpha wolf standing in place of the man. Jax's fur was a rich, dark brown with black on his muzzle and streaked down his back and tail.

"Nice coat," Hazard said.

"*Thanks*," Jax replied telepathically.

Jax's voice sounded in his head, faint but clear. Hazard was in human form and they weren't bonded as pack members yet so their connection was weak. If he were in wolf form too he would be able to hear Jax as clear as if he'd spoken out loud. Once they'd strengthened their bond as pack mates, their wolf to human telepathy would grow stronger as well.

Ortiz took up the wolf body armor Jax had set aside before shifting, buckling it into place over his head and around his torso so that he would be protected during the mission.

The helo hit the drop spot exactly as timed. They landed to the east of the abandoned warehouse, far enough out that anyone inside the building wouldn't hear the chopper approaching. Ready for action, they went the rest of the way on foot.

They ran through a commercial district, past dark, industrial buildings. At this hour, most of the businesses were closed up for the night. The area was lit by streetlights, moths fluttering beneath the bulbs. There were few pedestrians out and only the occasional car drove past. The further they went, the more dilapidated the buildings became until they passed several that were abandoned. They stayed low, keeping to the shadows to remain hidden from any lookouts.

Halfway there, Ice found a good spot to set up his long-range sniper rifle. Hazard took up position next to him and got out his night vision binoculars to scan for the guards. They'd need to eliminate them first in order to approach the warehouse undetected.

“Guard number one on the roof,” he said quietly.

There was a soft *thwip* as Ice fired his silenced rifle. Through his binoculars, Hazard saw the guard fall back and lay on the roof unmoving.

“Next one is left corner of the building.”

Another *thwip* and that guard crumpled to the ground too.

Hazard scanned but didn’t see anyone else. He was about to give the all clear when he saw a shadow move in a window on the third floor. “One more, Captain. Third floor window. Two over from the right side of the building.” He’d barely finished speaking when Ice fired. The shadow jerked back and disappeared from sight.

“Didn’t think you saw that one,” Ice said as he started breaking down the big rifle.

Hazard grinned. “Did I impress you with my thorough scan?”

“No.”

“Ah. I’ll keep trying then,” he lightly teased.

Ortiz snorted. Hazard heard a quiet laugh from Jax in his head. Ice didn’t respond.

They resumed progress to the target location, Jax in wolf form loping alongside them. Moving with quiet stealth, they reached the brick warehouse. Hazard peered inside one of the grimy ground level windows. Ice had eliminated the guards on the perimeter, but there were men stationed inside. He silently indicated their numbers and positions to his new teammates.

Ortiz nodded and readied her weapon to breach the door. It was old, but had been fitted with two brand new deadbolts and thick, heavy duty strike plates.

“Breach in three-two-one.”

Everyone stood safely to the side while Ortiz blasted the reinforced locks with her shotgun. There was a flash of fire, followed by the acrid smell of gun smoke.

The locks destroyed, Ice shoved open the door and the team swept inside. They had the element of surprise, and they took advantage of it to drop the first few members of the cell. But it didn’t take long for the rest of the crew to regroup. Bullets flew across the dim, cavernous space as the two sides engaged in a fire fight. Unfortunately for Vengeful Claw, they were no match for the 448.

Hazard stuck to Ice’s heels as ordered, watching the captain’s back. The position treated him to a front row seat of Ice’s renowned prowess. Ice moved forward with deadly, single-minded intensity. He was careful, but there was zero hesitation in his progress cutting through the enemy. He fired twice, taking out two cult members with a single bullet each before the first had even managed to raise their weapon.

A door opened to their left and a target stepped out with a Glock in hand. In one smooth motion, Ice pulled a knife from the sheath on his thigh and sent it hurtling across the room to strike the target in the wrist. With a howl of pain, he dropped his gun. Ice took him down while he was mid scream.

If Hazard wasn’t busy taking out his own targets, his mouth would be hanging open in awe.

Hearing footsteps approaching from behind, Hazard spun around. Three Vengeful Claw members were running toward him. One got off a shot. Hazard quickly side-stepped and ducked behind a support pillar to avoid the bullet. At the same time, he squeezed the trigger on his own weapon multiple times, eliminating two of the targets. But the third was still there, shooting wildly at the pillar Hazard was using for cover.

Hazard was preparing to peek around the column to try and get off a shot when a blade sliced through the air next to his right ear. A second later there was a grunt, followed by gurgling. Exposing himself as little as possible, Hazard looked to see that the knife had found a home in

the third gunman's throat. The man clutched at the weapon, but there was nothing he could do to save his life. He fell to the dirty warehouse floor, dead.

Hazard turned back, not surprised to see Ice standing there. The alpha spoke two words.

"You good?"

Hazard nodded. "I'm good."

"Keep moving then."

Once they'd cleared the first floor, the pairs split up. Ortiz and Jax took off in search of the leader of the group.

"On me, Corporal," Ice ordered.

Hazard followed behind the captain, racing up the stairs to the right to ascend to the fourth floor. When they reached the room where the hostage was supposed to be held Hazard tried the doorknob first. It was locked. Ice pulled a sledgehammer from the holder on the back of his tactical vest.

"Jessica Doucette!" he called out loudly. "If you're on the other side of this door stand back!" He gave her a few seconds to clear before he swung the sledgehammer against the doorknob. The lock broke under the force, and the door went flying back to bounce against the wall.

The entrance breached, the two of them moved inside with their weapons at the ready. A young woman dressed in hot pink and yellow workout gear stood on the far side of the room, her back against the wall. Her face was dirty and streaked with dried tears, but it matched the picture they'd been shown during briefing.

"Jessica Doucette, we're here to take you home," Hazard said.

"What's the code?" she asked.

"Tuxedo cat," Ice answered in his gruff voice.

The tension bled from her shoulders. "Thank you, Mother Wolf," she whispered in relief. She took a step toward them but her knees started to buckle before she took the second.

Hazard leaped forward and caught her before she could fall. "Are you hurt?"

Jessica shook her head no. "A little light headed but I'm ready to go."

"Okay. I need you to stay on your feet until we have you out of here. Okay?"

She took a deep breath and straightened her posture. "Okay."

"Good." Hazard got on comms. "We have the package, Major."

Ortiz's voice crackled to life in his ear piece.

"Good work. There's no intel here and neither is the leader. We'll meet you back at the entrance."

"Roger that," Hazard replied.

They moved out, Ice in front, Hazard in the rear and Jessica in the protected space between them. Jax and Ortiz joined them once they reached the ground level. While Ice collected his knives from his kills, the major gave Jessica a quick once-over. Seeing she was weak but uninjured, Ortiz got on the comms to their pilot.

"Major Ortiz to transport. We are on our way to the extraction point."

"We're ready and waiting, Major," the pilot responded.

Jessica gasped when she got a look at all of the dead bodies littering the floor. But she didn't falter in her progress through the warehouse and outside to freedom. She was clearly weakened from her ordeal, moving slowly and sometimes stumbling as she ran. Hazard gave her encouragement to keep her going for the long run back to the helo.

"Almost there. You probably burn more calories and work harder in your aerobics classes than you are in this measly little run."

The young beta wolf gave a breathless laugh, but lengthened her stride.

A minute later, they were sprinting up to the helicopter. The hatch opened and the five of them hustled inside. They'd made it. Pleased at the success of the mission, Hazard knocked his fist against the captain's shoulder.

"Not too shabby for my first time working with you," he said with a proud grin.

Ice looked first at the spot he'd punched, then at Hazard.

Hazard could see the irritation in those dark eyes, but the captain didn't deny that he'd done well. Hazard decided to take that as a win.

Chapter 3

The mission over, they flew back to base. Jessica had revealed that they'd injected her with a serum to prevent her from shifting. She'd stayed awake for most of the two days of her captivity out of fear that they'd give her something else while she was unaware. Now she slept, wrapped in a blanket and safely sandwiched between Mitchell and Ortiz, her head resting on the major's shoulder.

Ice believed she'd been afraid. She'd stank of fear when he'd smashed open the door to her prison. But now, the scent of calm wolf was breaking through that sour smell. It made it past his mask to his nose as she snored her way through the flight.

Twenty minutes later, they began their descent to land and Ortiz shook the exhausted young woman awake. The bird touched down on the tarmac, and the rear hatch opened. After thanking the pilot, the team and Jessica disembarked. Medical staff was waiting to attend to Jessica, the blue lights of their van joining with the lights of the airstrip to brighten the dark night. But before the medics could get to her, two older women rushed forward.

"Jessica!" they cried out in near unison.

Councilor Doucette and her wife. Jessica burst into tears and sprinted across the tarmac to meet them. When the two women reached the young beta wolf, they enveloped her in a tight hug, their sobs revealing that they were desperately relieved to see their daughter returned safe and whole.

When the 448 members drew abreast of the crying trio, the councilor broke away from her family to speak with them. Councilor Doucette was as well put together as she always appeared when Ice saw her on TV. She wore a dark purple suit with padded shoulders, with a white silk blouse beneath, and high heeled black pumps. Her long braids were coiled in a bun at the nape of her neck, secured with pearl tipped hair pins. But while her clothes were impeccable, the lines of exhaustion and worry on her light brown face showed how stressed she'd been. And the bitter smell of worry still tinged her scent. Tears brimmed in her eyes even as she gave them all a genuine smile.

"Thank you all for rescuing my daughter. The past two days were the most difficult I've ever had to face."

"You're welcome, Councilor Doucette," Major Ortiz said. "I'm happy we were able to return her safely to your side."

"She was brave throughout the trip out of the warehouse. You should be proud of her," Hazard added.

"Jessica is a tough cookie," Councilor Doucette replied with a tired laugh. "Thank you all again. If there's anything I can ever do for you, please let me know."

"You're welcome, ma'am," Jax said.

Ice nodded in acknowledgement of her thanks.

She shook each of their hands before returning to her wife and daughter.

Their job done, the 448 headed across the base to gear down in the armory. In the ready room, Ice removed his combat gear — night vision goggles, helmet, tactical vest. All of it came off and went back in his equipment bag.

"Well, Ice, what do you think?"

Ice raised his head from unbuckling the straps on his drop leg holster to look at the major. What did he think about what?

At his silent question, Ortiz jerked her chin toward Hazard, making it clear what —*who*— she meant.

Ice turned his gaze to Hazard. He watched the young corporal talking with Jax, noting how well the two had already meshed together. He'd been grudgingly impressed with Mitchell's work tonight. Mitchell followed orders well. The omega was maybe a little too chatty but it hadn't detracted from the mission. And he'd done a good job keeping Ms. Doucette going until they had her securely on board the chopper.

But that was one mission. It was too soon for him to give a complete assessment. Turning back to Ortiz, he gave her his answer.

"No complaints so far."

Ortiz snorted but let it drop. She knew him well enough to know that she wasn't going to get anything more out of him right now.

"I've got something to handle up at HQ. Can you show Hazard to our quarters?"

Ice flicked his gaze from the major to their new member. It was obvious that Ortiz was asking him since they'd be working together the closest. She was probably hoping they'd make some kind of connection. Ice knew that they wouldn't. Still, he nodded. Seeing that the omega was geared down, he called his name to get his attention.

"Mitchell!"

Mitchell immediately turned from his conversation with Jax to respond.

"Sir?"

"Get your stuff. I'm showing you to our barracks."

"Yes, sir," Mitchell answered with a nod.

Ice turned and walked out of the ready room, not waiting to see if Mitchell was following behind him. Outside of the armory, he crossed the base, heading toward the small building that exclusively housed the 448.

"No general barracks then?" Mitchell asked.

"No," Ice said as he opened the door and lead his new partner inside. "It's not pretty but it's home."

"Looks good to me."

"There's two empty rooms." He nodded at the two rooms with open doors. "Take your pick."

Mitchell didn't move to choose. Instead, he looked up at Ice. In the bright indoor light, Ice saw that the corporal's eyes were a pale jade green with flecks of gold.

"Which one is better?"

"What?"

"Does one have a draft? Does one have an odd smell and no one can figure out where it's coming from?"

Ice stared at him, not comprehending why the answers to his questions mattered. "They're rooms," he said gruffly.

Another smile, this one with a hint of cheek as one side of Mitchell's mouth quirked up higher than the other.

"Alright then."

He watched as Mitchell poked his head in one room and then the other before choosing the first. He'd picked the one right next to Ice's room. They would share a wall.

"Settle in," Ice ordered crisply.

His job done, Ice went in his room and closed the door. Corporal Mitchell could explore the rest of the place by himself.

* * *

Hazard looked around the small room that was now his own. There was a bed just big enough to comfortably fit an alpha, with plain, serviceable sheets, a blanket in non-descript gray, and a single pillow. Against one wall was an armoire on short, stout legs for his belongings. On the other wall there was a small desk and ladderback chair. The floors were gray tile, the walls white and unadorned.

He opened the door on the opposite side of the room from the bed to see a small bath with a tiny walk-in shower. The room was bare and boring. But no worse or nicer than others he'd lived in.

Ortiz had specified that on-base housing was a requirement for this special operations unit. He appreciated that the 448 was all housed together. Wolves needed that closeness to help build a pack, but far too often they weren't given that opportunity in the US Legion. As he started to unpack, Hazard hoped that he would bond with his new team the way that wolves needed to bond.

Once he had everything stored away with standard military neatness, he checked out the rest of the 448 barracks. The gray tile floor and white walls were repeated in the common areas. The closed doors he left alone, understanding those were the private quarters for his new team members. There was a fully equipped kitchen with a scarred butcher block table and four ugly mismatched chairs. In the common area, a big, overstuffed couch, two armchairs, a coffee table made of an old door sawed in half and set on top of two packing crates, and a TV crowded the room. Like Ice had said, it wasn't pretty but it was his home for the foreseeable future.

Hazard sniffed the air. To his surprise, the scents of the 448 members weren't layered together in the common area. Ortiz's sharp and minty scent and Jax's scent of fresh grass were there but they were separate, as if they didn't often hang out in the space at the same time. And there was barely a trace of Ice's — a warm cedar scent that was at odds with what he'd observed of the man so far. He detected the faintest hint of an old scent, something chalky, it must belong to the member who'd retired.

He'd just finished his inspection when the front door opened and Ortiz and Jax walked in.

"Pick your room okay?" Ortiz asked.

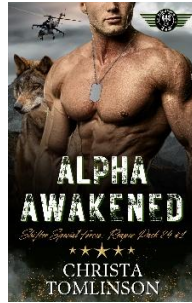
"Yes, ma'am. And all unpacked."

"Good. We'll eat dinner, then you can get some sleep. You've earned it."

Hazard nodded. He was tired. A meal, followed by a hot shower, and then bed sounded like the perfect way to end a long day.

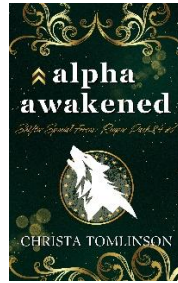
Before he went to sit down, he cast a glance at Ice's closed bedroom door. He wondered if he'd passed the captain's test. It'd be nice to know if he had Anderson's approval. If he didn't have it yet, he'd have to continue doing what he'd been trained to do until he earned it.

Thank you for reading! If you would like to check out the full story, Alpha Awakened is available on Amazon in ebook and Kindle Unlimited. There are also paperback, discreet cover paperback, and large print versions available.

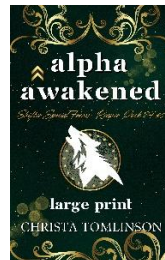


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