Chapter 6

“This thing moves pretty fast.” Reed peered out the window. “I’ve never seen everything go blurry like that. It’s kind of pretty when it isn’t making me want to throw up.”

“I have,” I said, glancing in my mirrors.

“Thrown up?” He settled into his seat with a cocky grin.

“No, the blurry thing.”

“In a cutter like this?” He ran a hand over the dash. “Except I’ve never seen a cutter quite like this.”

I shook my head, keeping my gaze on the road. “Got into my Uncle’s still. Couple glasses of apple pie moonshine and the whole world was whipping past.”

Reed laughed, and I could actually feel the sound reaching out and hitting me in the chest with a burst of warmth. I should have absolutely left him on the side of the road.

“How old were you?”

I grinned at him. “Nine.”

“Ah, precocious youth.”

The path dipped suddenly, popping us up into the air. I corrected our trajectory, bringing the cutter smoothly back to a good level. Reed clung to the seat with a white-knuckled grip, though his voice stayed conversational.

“Any particular reason we’re trying to turn into a comet?”

I adjusted the sails, taking advantage of the breeze. “I’ve got a deadline. I only have so many hours to make it to Lanta.”

“Sick aunt? Anxious husband? Jury duty?” He paused, tapping the dash. “Some pithy fourth option I can’t think of?”

I snorted. “Nothing like that. Rey, that’s the Snow Fox on the com, is driving a Lorry. We have to get that Lorry to Bluffsdale by three on the twenty third.”

“Or the world will end?”

“No.”

“Then whatever for?” He was completely turned in his seat now, eyes on me. It was distracting as all get out.

“Because no one has ever done it before.”

Reed’s eyebrows rose. “So?”

“So I’m going to do it.” When I glanced over he was still staring at me like he was waiting for more of an answer. “For the glory.”

“That’s a completely asinine reason. That doesn’t mean I don’t support it, I just think you can do better.” He tilted his head and the light caught his eyes until they shone like a rich bourbon and no one should be that pretty. No one. I would send a prayer to the Hooded Crow for strength, but the Crow was not the best deity to pray to when you’re trying to *avoid* temptation.

“It’s not exactly any of your business,” I said, and it sounded a little surly, even to me.

“No,” he said, his eyes damn near twinkling in amusement. “It’s not.”

“Fine,” I said, adjusting our course with the path. “I have a package to deliver, and if I make it on time, I’ll get buckets of money.”

“How many buckets?”

“Enough to keep a lowland bear in fancy eyepatches for the rest of his life.”

“That is an oddly specific example,” Reed said, crossing his arms.

I glanced at him, before rechecking my mirrors. “I’m an oddly specific woman.”

“Fair enough.” He tapped his fingers on his bicep now, and I filed away that particular tell. Reed tapped like that when he was thinking. You never know when information like that comes in handy. “What’s the package? What are you delivering?”

Now it was my turn to laugh, the sound bouncing around in the cockpit of the cutter. “Aw, you’re cute—but you’re not that cute.”

He relaxed his arms then, turning back to the road. “You play dirty. I can respect that.”

“Good.”

“And in the interest of furthering our alliance, I think I should tell you that we just whipped past an esteemed member of the constabulary.”

“Balls. Are you sure?” I hadn’t seen anything. Which means the Smoke could have been hiding in one of my blindspots or I’d found Reed to distracting. Neither was good, but the latter was worse.

“The blur was very officer shaped.” He turned away and I barely caught the next thing he muttered. “And trust me I’m very familiar with the uniform.”

I checked my mirrors and sure enough an official Lanta cutter was pulling out behind me. I had a good distance on him, but how long would that last? Good time to see what my baby could really do. I grabbed my com. “Slick Otter to Snow Fox—it appears I’ve grown a tail on my six. Keep your blinkers and your chatbox open. Come back.”

Rey’s voice cut through the static. “I read you loud and clear, Otter. You play nice with the other children and be home for supper, over.”

I replaced the com and straightened up in my seat. I knew I was grinning like mad—I couldn’t help it.

“Your smile is a little scary right now, you know that?” Reed checked the buckles strapping him in. “I’ve already learned to fear that particular smile.”

“I can’t help it,” I said, adjusting the sails to catch the drafts. “I’m about to go fast.”

“We’re already going fast,” Reed said slowly.

“You’re adorable,” I said, right before I pushed the pedal down and cut a sharp turn down a side path. This wouldn’t be spelled like the main path we were leaving, so we’d lose the speed boost, but so would the Smoke. The main path right now was flat, straight, and only marginally occupied. It would be difficult to lose him there, and it would be a drawn out chase as I dodged through the meager traffic. As far as I was concerned, the faster I shut this down, the better. I would have to take a chance on one of the smaller side paths.

I jogged the cutter around a clump of trees, sliding easily through the forest. This path had likely originated as a horse trail. In fact, it might still be a horse trail, and I’d need to keep my eye out for equines and cutters alike. The path meandered through the woods, curving this way and that with the landscape. Trees blurred by, smears of green and brown lit by the golden light of the sun. It was downright idyllic.

The Smoke was on me now, tearing up the path with his lights flashing an angry red, his cutter leaving a plume of dust behind it like an awkward bird. I lowered my cutter, kicking up a thick tail of my own. Ahead of me the trail split. I didn’t know where the trails went, and neither one gave me a hint to even guess with. I would just have to take my chances, because either way would be a gamble. I touched my heart with two fingers and give them a kiss, sending up a silent prayer to the Hooded Crow. Reed swore under his breath, but otherwise remained calm despite the fact that we’re hurtling at one of the biggest trees I’ve ever seen. The trunk was wider than Rey’s Lorry. The path snaked around it on both sides, and we were getting so close it felt like I could count the leaves on its branches, but that was probably the adrenaline speaking.

I dipped my cutter down, hugging the path, kicking up even more dust. A quick look in my mirrors tells me that the Smoke has turned on his wipers. The dust is collecting on the front faster than he can wipe. When I couldn’t put it off any longer, I turn the wheel smoothly, taking the left path. At this speed, if you jerked it, the cutter would spin out of control. The phoenix turned like a dream, carving along the path like a Lowland Bear in a berry patch.

Behind me, the Smoke jerked the wheel—I could tell by the way his cutter moved. He’d waited too long, likely due to poor visibility. Even if he hadn’t panicked, he probably would have crashed anyway. As is, his cutter swung sharply left, the back end spinning right into the tree trunk. After the hit, it spun the other way, careening through the trees and over the lip. We went around a curve, and I didn’t want to take my eyes of the road, but Reed was twisting in his seat to keep an eye on the Smoke’s cutter anyway.

“Anything?” I ask.

“Looks like he plowed through a fence and hit somebody’s washing, and then crashed into what appears to be a swamp.” He turned back around. “From the look of it, we won’t have to worry about that one for a while.” The grin he flashed made my toes want to curl. Trouble. I was in so much trouble.

I looked out at the twisting path a head of us. Screw it. “I should probably tell you that I’m running one hundred and twenty cases of Jubilation. It’s in Rey’s Lorry. I’m drawing the Smoke, so they don’t pull him over and ask uncomfortable questions.”

Reed blinked at me. “That’s a lot of Jubilation.”

I slowed, taking another turn and getting us back onto the main path. “One case. Two hundred. Any amount of it is too much in the eyes of the local constabulary.”

Reed considered this. “I should probably explain the wedding get up.”

I eased back into traffic. “It’s not a trade. You don’t have to tell me anything. Though I am curious. If not a bride, what? Modeling wedding wear? A play?”

“A groom,” he said.

“A groom?” I asked.

He nodded slowly. “A very ill advised one.”

“I’ve heard of wedding jitters,” I said. “But I’ve never seen anyone actually bolt before. You do realize leaving a grieving groom behind is as bad as leaving a bride? Either way it’s heartbreak, and now I’ve given it a helping hand.”

“Would have been exponentially worse if I’d stayed.” Reed settled into his seat. “Trust me when I say it was the second best decision I’ve ever made.”

“Second best? What was the first?”

Another one of those grins. “Getting in this cutter.”

The com crackled. “Slick Otter, what’s your twenty? Come back.”

I hit the button. “Lost our tail. Coming home to papa bear, over.” More static, then a series of clicks and whistles.

Reed raised both eyebrows in surprise. “Is that a Lowland bear on the com? If so, he has a dirty mouth.”

“You can understand him?”

Reed stared out the window, keeping his gaze on the side of the road. “Just the curse words.”

“Me too,” I said. “And you’re right, he does, but he’s also the best navigator this side of the valley.”

Reed gave a single nod. “Alright, then. Let’s see what we can do to keep him in fancy eye patches. Are we talking simply bedazzled or embroidered or something more?”

I maneuvered around a slower cutter, pulling ahead of it and keeping my eye out for Rey’s Lorry. “With us? It’s always something more.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”