Bluffsdale was a middling-sized town amidst a fairly rural countryside. Because of that, their arena was built to not only accommodate their own populace, but the surrounding areas. To my eye it was a thing of architectural beauty, a wood and metal offering to thrill seekers everywhere.

It was a real shame that we were going to have to destroy a small part of it.

As Rey slammed on the fuel pedal, the Lorry jumped forward, gathering speed in the short distance allotted to us. Off to the sides of the area in front of the Lorry, two entrances winged off to allow spectators access to the stands. In the middle stood a thick wooden gate padlocked closed for this particular event. The walls of the arena were thick for various reasons, most of which involved the crowd’s safety, and if we’d tried to plow directly through one of them, the Lorry would have crumpled.

But the gate, well, the gate was meant to open. Still, I held on tight and prayed to the Hooded Crow as we crashed through it. There was a crunching noise, and a rather sad metal squealing, but the gates flew open and we barreled onto the dirt track. Naturally this was a bit of a surprise to the cutters currently racing on the figure eight carved into the dirt. Rey expertly guided the Lorry into the flow, though we did cause some swerving and commotion despite his best efforts.

Across the way, one of the other gates opened, belching out several uniformed members of the Smoke. They cut into the race as well, bobbing and weaving with deft skill on their swifts and quickly catching up to our much larger, slower Lorry. Behind them came a single cutter, its lights flashing.

“Where are they?” I scanned the crowd. Big Paul and Little Paul would consider themselves to be hotshots and they said they had a driver in this race. Which meant they would also have ringside seats. Across the way I spotted an awning. Underneath it, a handful of people perched in obvious luxury. I pointed at them. “There, Rey. Head for that awning.”

“I see it,” Rey said, his voice an annoyed growl. “I’m just not sure how we’re going to get to it. All these damn cutters in the way.” He laid a palm on the horn. “Move it! You’re supposed to be fast, for Crow’s sake.”

The Lorry lumbered through, bringing to my mind the image of an aardvark standing in the middle of a torn-open anthill. I checked the mirrors. The Smoke were catching up.

Rey pulled in front of the awning keeping the Lorry parallel to the crowd. He left us a comfortable gap but kept it tight enough that the cutters would flow around us on the other side. We piled out of the Lorry and I sauntered up to the wall so I could look up at Big Paul and Little Paul.

“Your Jubilation,” I said. “Delivered, in full, with—” I glanced at my pocket watch. “Ten whole minutes to spare.”

Big Paul took out a leather satchel from under his seat and started to hand it down to me, but Little Paul put his hand on his wrist and stopped him. “What do you say to double or nothing?”

“No,” Rey said. Cletus growled. Reed frowned.

I cocked my head. “I’m listening.” Rey threw up his hands.

“We’ve commissioned a pair of suits,” Little Paul said. “Made of dragon scale. Very fine. We have a gala coming up in two days and Big Paul and I would like to show off our new purchases. There’s only one problem.”

Oh, I bet there was more than one. Dragon scale clothing, like Jubilation, wasn’t strictly legal. They didn’t have to kill the dragon to get it—that would be a poor choice if ever there were one. If you tried to harvest scales like that, you’d get eaten before you got close enough to even annoy the dragon. No, the suits were made from the skin the dragons molted from their softer underbellies. So it wasn’t actually scales, but no one wanted to wear something called a dragon belly suit.

Though it didn’t hurt the dragons, they frowned upon the concept, mostly because they thought it was weird. Imagine seeing someone walking around in a suit made from human skin and I think you might understand a little of what they were feeling. Since the dragons didn’t like it and people wanted to keep dragons happy for obvious reasons, using their shed skin for clothing was frowned upon. Not illegal in most parts per se, but I was willing to bet Lanta was one of those areas that discouraged it.

I mean, making clothes out of discarded dragon belly was just deeply strange. But who was I to judge?

“Where is it?”

“Up in Ashton. It was originally being shipped from further up north, but our first delivery person didn’t quite make to Bluffsdale.”

That sounded a little familiar. “Why is that?”

“For unconnected reasons, they are now enjoying a year under the tender ministrations of the local constabulary.”

I could hear the sounds to the Smoke now through the buzzing of the passing cutters, their sirens almost up on us. “Okay,” I said. “We’re going to need fuel money.” I jerked my thumb behind us at the Smoke. “Right quick.”

Little Paul smiled, took out a wad of bills. “Info is on the top.” He tossed it down. “As is the time and date.”

I snatched it out of the air and glanced at it. The top one wasn’t a bill, but a thick piece of paper that gave an address in Ashton and one in Bluffsdale in neat block lettering, along with the timing details. Cocky bastard had anticipated that we’d take the bet. My estimation of Little Paul went up a hair. There wasn’t much wiggle room on delivery, either. We’d have to leave right away.

“How you going to shake the Smoke first?” Big Paul asked.

I winked at him. “You let us worry about that.”

Then the Smoke descended in a swarm of flashing lights and dust. The crowd yelled and stomped their feet, though I’m not sure what in particular they were either rooting for or against. I shoved the wad of cash into my pocket a second before someone grabbed my wrists and shoved me into the back of the waiting cutter. Rey, Cletus, and Reed followed suit. It was a tight fit, two of us having to sit on the others, but we made do. It wasn’t going to be a long trip. Rey waved goodbye to his Lorry.

“How are they going to get it out of the arena?” Reed asked.

I shrugged. “Not our concern. We had to delivery it. Now it’s their problem.” And if they didn’t move quickly, they wouldn’t get any of the Jubilation inside.

The constables got in, easing the cutter forward. We waved to the people as we were taken away, surrounded by an escort of swifts. Out of my window I spotted Sheriff Allen T. Justice, his face red, his cheeks puffed out. He took off his hat and stomped on it. If it wasn’t him taking us in, I guess it wasn’t a victory in his book.

Reed blew him a kiss.

We eased out of the arena, slowly moving along the path until it spit us out into the parking lot. The constable in the passenger seat leaned forward and turned off the lights. Then we turned onto a back path, curving back into farm country.

A sharp-eyed spectator would have noticed a few irregularities about our arrest. The total lack of interest in Rey’s Lorry, for example. We weren’t cuffed. None of the constables took off their helmets, and the two in the cutter in front of us still had theirs on, even though you didn’t need one in a cutter.

Our driver pulled onto a meandering horse path that led to an old, abandoned barn. The doors were open and we pulled into it, the light dimming as someone closed off the entrance. Hints of sunlight drifted through cracks between the wood planks, enough for us to see clearly. We clambered out, watching the constables take off their helmets. Demetri and Min, who came out of our cutter, quickly removed the lights on top and tossed them to a waiting Crow. Without them, there was nothing that stated it was an official vehicle of the constabulary—all the stickers and identification were missing. Of course that was because it had never been one of them, just a regular cutter that the Crows slapped some lights on too. They figured with all the hubbub, no one would notice right away.

Liv rested on her cutter off to the side, shaking her head at the whole operation. “I don’t want to know where those came from.” She held up a finger. “I only had one spare uniform and then the one you took off the mouthy constable guarding the gates. Where did you get the rest on short notice?”

Demetri didn’t answer, a slow smile spreading onto his face right before he winked at her.

Liv threw up her hands. “Crows.”

“I can’t believe you took that bet,” Rey grumbled. “I was looking forward to real sleep. And a decent meal.”

“You don’t have to go. I mean, we don’t actually *need* a Lorry driver on this one.” I kept my expression and voice carefully neutral.

Rey scowled. “The hell I don’t. Who will keep you out of trouble?” He jerked his chin at Reed. “Him? Please.”

Cletus’s low rumble of agreement filled the barn, followed by two sharp clicks.

“Filthy bear,” Demetri said. “There are ladies present. Actually, the ladies are probably fine, but my sensibilities are delicate.” He tossed me the keys to the cutter. “It’s clean. We’ll keep an eye on the Phoenix for you.”

He was right—I needed to leave my new baby for now. The Smoke was looking for the phoenix. This cutter was nondescript and sneaky. Still, I would miss my own machine.

Demetri bent to the ground and used his index finger to write a series of numbers. “That’s our private com line and the password you’ll need to use it. It’s safe.” His lips tilted in a smirk. “I’m not saying you’ll need it, but just in case.” He let us look at it for a minute before he scuffed his boot over the dirt and erased the message.

“Yeah, but what will it cost me?” I would definitely keep his offer in my back pocket, but I was wary.

Demetri’s heat tilted in a very birdlike movement. “Stay interesting Otter, and it won’t cost much.” He looked at Liv. “Same goes for you, Chipmunk.”

She glowered at him but didn’t respond. For some reason her dismissive anger made him smile wide.

“I’ll just add it to your tab,” Demetri said, swinging on to a waiting swift. Min climbed on behind him, give us a small salute. One of the Crows opened up the barn doors. “Until then.” He kicked down on the fuel pedal, easing the swift out of the barn. The rest followed until it was just us and Liv left.

“I don’t trust him,” Liv said.

“You shouldn’t. He’s a Crow.” I hugged Liv. “Thanks, cousin.”

She sighed. “I’d say anytime, but let’s maybe keep my interactions with your schemes to a minimum.” She climbed onto her swift.

“You’re not going to stop us from going to Ashton?” Reed sounded surprised, but really, he shouldn’t have. I mean, Liv was a Darby. That implies a certain level of moral leeway.

Liv shrugged. “Not my jurisdiction. Good luck.” She put on her helmet, waved, and took off.

“We should bring her back something nice from Ashton,” Rey said, climbing into the cutter behind Cletus.

The bear whistled and rattled off a response.

“I don’t think she’d care for that at all,” Rey said. “She doesn’t seem the type.”

Cletus grunted and hummed while Reed and I settled into the front of the cutter and buckled in.

“Not everyone shares the lowland bear’s casual approach to sexuality and the discussion thereof,” Rey said, buckling in. “That’s just not the sort of thing you buy someone you aren’t already sleeping with.” I glanced in the review mirror and caught Cletus’s questioning head tilt. He made a low, trilling sound.

Rey slouched into his seat. “It does not make us prudish, it’s just a different approach. Look, buy her what you want. I’m just warning you that if you get her *that* it’s going to cause an awkward conversation.”

“I don’t want to know,” Reed said, checking out the com on the new cutter.

I looked over the dashboard, making sure I knew how it was situated before we took off. “Think we should tell Justice about our plans? He might appreciate the adventure. He’s going to be so bored and lonely without us.”

“No,” everyone said at once.

“Fine,” I said, easing us out into the sunlight. “I’m hungry.” I looked at Reed. “I hear they have some good clam chowder up in Ashton.”

He slid his sunglasses down onto his face and grinned. “I could eat.”

“It’s a date,” I said, hitting the fuel pedal. The cutter shot forward.

Rey let out a whoop. “Double the cash!”

I grinned at him in the review mirror. “Double the glory.”

Reed picked up com, setting it to an open channel. “This is Silver Tongued Devil looking for a clear path from Bluffsdale to Ashton. Holler back.” He let go of the button.

The line crackled, a deep baritone filling the cutter. “Silver Tongued Devil, this is Eye in the Sky. You with Slick Otter?”

Reed hit the button. “Always.” No hesitation. I tried not to smile.

“That is lovely to hear, Devil. We’ve all been rootin’ for Otter. Now it’s hot where you’re at, but if you take back paths up to Lawrence and swing east—”

I turned the cutter onto a bigger path, avoiding the main ones through Bluffsdale as the man suggested. Rey and Cletus settled down in the back for a nap, Rey in his fox form to make more room for the lowland bear. I concentrated on the path, since I didn’t need to pay attention to the com. I was just the driver.

My navigator would handle it. Always.

I gave up trying not to smile and grinned.

The End