When I was little, I tried to fly. The birds could do it. Crows could do it, throwing on their feathered skins and escaping gravity’s greedy clutches. In my child mind, I figured since the Crows and I looked the same, all I was really missing was my own wings. So I cut up a few flour sacks—even I knew better than to mess with my parent’s precious linens—and sewed them together. I gathered feathers for weeks, sewing them carefully into the fabric, anchoring them with resin. I did this in secret, which is a difficult thing to do in a house full of siblings. My work was meticulous, and I couldn’t wait to share my surprise with everyone. They would have no idea until they saw me zipping around, my face lit with triumph. My brothers would sit there slack-jawed, their eyes fiery with envy as I flapped and dove. Maybe, just maybe, if they were real nice and did some of my chores, I would let them try the wings. That might be too much. I would let them touch them, with one finger, for just a second, if their hands were scrubbed clean.

As for my chores, it was a Darby tradition to try and get out of them. My parents encouraged this as long as the work got done by someone. My older sister, Andita, managed not to scrub, dust or sweep a single thing for six months once. She was very proud of it, flaunting her prowess every night at the dinner table. Praise showered down on her from my parents, and each and everyone of her siblings wanted to throw her boots out the window.

Once my wings were finished and the resin dried, I made my move. I’d kept my secret well and my family had no idea what I was up to until I leapt from the first floor balcony. It was less impressive than I imagined. I got a sprained ankle and fractured wrist out of the deal, and my mother refused to let me try again, going so far as to confiscate my wings. It didn’t matter how well I pled my case. My parents weren’t having it. I was convinced that by tweaking a few factors, I could try again. Clearly, I should have used all of the same kind of feathers for the wings instead a hodgepodge of whatever I could gather from the ground. The first floor wasn’t high enough, and if I could just take a running jump from the roof—

My mother would not hear one word, because clearly she didn’t support science and glory. No more jumps for me, no more wings. As I lay in bed that night, I thought furiously of other arguments, other adjustments. With my uninjured hand, I put two fingers to my lips, holding them in the air in silent apology to the Hooded Crow for my unintended slight and poor planning. My cunning had been lacking, and there is nothing the Hooded Crow despised more. I was supposed to be *clever*, hang it all. I was a Darby.

My father wouldn’t listen either, and I ended up grounded, my wings confiscated. In retrospect, I feel a little bad about the whole thing in regards to my parents. It is no easy thing, raising Darby children. The next day my brother, Wendell (he prefers Wen, so of course all of us make sure to use his full name whenever he’s in earshot), took it into his head to shimmy up a pine tree with an ax in hand. Made it all the way up to the spindly top of the tree, the tip swaying under his weight. No one knows why he did it, but he was awfully huffy when my mama demanded he drop the ax.

Even with a splinted wrist, a wrapped ankle, several bruises and my ears blistering from mama and papa’s firm rebukes, I would have tried again. Rather suspiciously, I couldn’t find a moment to myself for any other clandestine craft projects for several weeks after that. “Bo Duty” had been added to the chore roster, and between my siblings (there are five of us, including me) and my cousins (who can even count?) I was easily managed.

I’ve always had determination in spades, and for a brief moment, not even a fraction of a breath, I had known what it was like to fly. I’ve spent a lot of my adult life trying to recapture that feeling, and a cutter is about as close as I could get. This cutter? It felt like I’d grown my own wings like one of the Crow. She damn near floated over the path.

Cutters worked best on paths, flat trails of land that cut through the cities and countryside. You could take the cutters off a path, but they wouldn’t work as well and besides you could crash into any old thing. The paths were kept clear and maintained by the locals. Some were made of packed dirt, some cobblestones or bricks—the mages were working on new materials that would work better. On a basic path, the cutter used fuel to propel itself along, “pushing” off of the ground below. As such, cutters had to stay a few feet from the ground. You could hit the pulse button, which was a fuel booster. You’d burn a lot of fuel at once and shoot up higher, but it didn’t last and unless your cutter handled deceleration well, you could crash on the way down, or hit another conveyance that had slipped below you. So while pulsing wasn’t illegal, it was highly discouraged. Most of us kept to the regular fuel pedal and the sails.

Most country Paths were compressed dirt and nothing more, but a lot of places, Arkana and Lanta included, had certain paths spelled and maintained by specialty mages. These Paths pushed back, doubling your speed as you flew along. These Accelerated Paths, or APs for short, were the obvious choice for our current run, so Rey and I were making our way up AP-135 at a good clip. I had the top down, my ponytail whipping in the breeze, my soul light and happy. This was how I was meant to be.

Rey’s Lorry blended right in, the black paint job sparkling in the sun. His Lorry was situated between a long line of other Lorries of different colors and murals, my personal favorite being a half-naked barbarian man in an embrace with a lady mage on top of a mountain with lightning flashing in the background. Rey wanted a mural on his someday, but in this particular case, I’m glad he didn’t have one. A mural would be easier track should the Smoke get wind of us.

I picked up my com, depressing the button. “Snow Fox and Pirate Bear, this is Slick Otter, do you copy?”

I let go of the button, listening to a spatter of static before Rey’s reply cut through,

“Breaker, breaker this is the Snow Fox. We’re snug as a bug, here, all cozy like. You?”

I hit the button. “I’m getting itchy feet, so I’m taking a powder. Holler if you need me.”

Another short burst of static then, “Will do. Don’t let your wings melt, over.”

Which meant I needed to stay close. And I would. But first, I needed to see what my new baby could do.

Wind knotted my hair as I accelerated, leap frogging over a slower cutter. The sun was bright, we had a sketchy plan, a full Lorry of contraband, and the air was sweet with promise. Life was good. Which always makes me suspicious. Whenever you’re at your highest, that’s when life likes to kick you in your teeth. That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to enjoy myself. The Firebird cruised along, the ride smooth as glass. Lin was a genius.

I stayed within the posted speeds. Now was not the time to pull the Smoke in my direction. So I kept an eye on the speed gauges and on the side of the road, in case any of the Smoke decided to lay in wait. Up ahead I caught a glint of light off metal, something large and silver resting among the grass. I squinted. Looked like a stalled cutter. Next to the cutter stood a man, his thumb out. He was hard to miss as he was decked out in wedding whites, a crown of flowers in his hair. He looked like trouble. I didn’t need trouble. Things were moving our way and the last thing I needed was a complication.

I deployed the brake, slowing the Firebird. I couldn’t help it. I’m a Darby. Trouble is our due north.

As I pulled the cutter to a stop, I got a good eyeful of him. Tall. Leanly muscled. Dark hair, brown eyes, and a crooked grin. Well, shit.

He didn’t even wait for me to wave him in, but tossed a small bag into the back and started to clamber into the cockpit with me. “Thanks,” he said as he buckled himself in.

“No problem,” I said, not even trying to hide my amusement. “Where you headed?”

He settled into his seat with another grin. “Anywhere but here?” He had a good voice, a charming smile, and I really wanted to see him naked. Double shit. Troubled waters here for sure.

“Was that supposed to be a question?” I tapped the flowers on his head. “Nice crown, your majesty. You late for something?”

He cursed, ripping it from his head, and leaned over to throw it back at his dead cutter. “I’m exactly on time and where I need to be. As for my destination, it is anywhere that isn’t here.” His tone was maniacally jubilant. In fact, I’d say the man was giddy.

I started the cutter back up, revving the engines. “What about your cutter?”

He shrugged. “Someone will get it.” He didn’t particularly seem to care who that someone might be.

Oh, I was going to regret this. “I’m not leaving behind a weeping bride am I?”

He snorted like I said something particularly funny. “I can assure you, no bride left behind.”

I stared at him a few seconds longer, then shook my head. Even though it was likely a mistake, the Hooded Crow smiled on travelers and hitchhikers, so I couldn’t exactly leave him. Add in his get-up, and he was tailor-made for my patron god. “Alright, stranger. I’ll take you to the next fuel stop, and that’s it.”

He stuck his hand out. “Deal.”

I shook it. “Shit.”

We rode in silence for the first few miles, neither of us feeling particularly like filling it. I was kicking myself for picking him up, and he seemed absolutely joyful that I had. After we’d put his dead cutter behind us, he turned in his seat, grabbing his small bag. Gripping it in one hand, he turned back around and unbuckled his safety belt. He pulled his white wedding shirt over his head, the silver embroidery in the cuffs catching the light. The work was well done, the shirt clearly made specifically for him. He threw it out the window.

“Was that necessary? Did it insult your mother or something?”

“Very necessary,” he said, digging around in his bag. “It was an insult to my whole family line.”

“I see,” I said, trying to not look at his chest. Someone had painted him with henna, the traditional arcane symbols for marriage intricately detailed on his skin, and underneath those was a chest that would make sculptors weep. “You sure we’re not leaving a bride behind?”

“On my honor, which I know might be very suspect to you at this moment, but it’s all I got.” He found a black t-shirt and yanked it over his head. Then he looped his thumb into the waistband of his white trousers and I decided now would be a fine time to keep an eye on the road. In the periphery of my vision, I saw the pants follow the shirt.

My com crackled. “Slick Otter, this is Snow Fox. I’m on your six. You seem to be shedding.”

I picked up the com and clicked the button. “It can happen to anyone, Snow Fox. Surely Pirate Bear is leaving his own fluff as we speak.” I let go of the button.

“Pirate Bear is offended that you would malign his grooming habits in such a way. Pirate Bear is a clean bear.” The stranger laughed softly.

I ignored him and hit the button. “My apologies to Pirate Bear.”

There was a pause before Rey jumped back on the line. “Pirate Bear reluctantly accepts. Now you want to tell me why it’s snowing?”

I stared dryly at my passenger. “I’ve picked up a tick.”

A low whistle came back over the com. “You should get that looked at, Slick.”

“Plan to at the next stop.” I put the com back. The breeze was dying down, so I shifted more power into the thrusters. “You got a name, tick?”

“Reed.” He stuck a hand out.

I grabbed it. “Bo.”

“Nice ride you’ve got here, Bo.”

“It is a nice ride,” I said. “It’s also been a quiet ride. I’m hoping it will stay that way. You got anyone that’s going to come looking for you, Reed?”

Another crooked grin making the skin around his eyes crinkle. “No, Ma’am.”

My stomach flipped. Damn it. “I don’t believe that for a second.” He laughed, and I felt it like a jolt of energy down my spine. Cursing myself for a fool, I put more fuel into the thrusters. Suddenly I wanted as much path between that dead cutter and me as I could manage.