After we cleared the blockade, I ran into a different but equally unavoidable problem—that glass of iced tea from Momo’s had caught up to me and I suddenly had to pee in the worst way. I cursed myself for not using the rest stop when I had the chance, but there wasn’t much I could do about it now, and it’s not like peeing in the cutter was an option. We really needed to put distance between us and that blockade, but it would have to wait a few more moments.

I pulled into a dingy service station. We both climbed out of the cutter, this looked like the kind of place that only let customers use the bathroom, so Reed was going to buy something while I grabbed the key from the owner. The bathroom was dingy and the light flickered several times; it looked like it hadn’t been seriously cleaned in the last year. I washed my hands after. A lot.

I met Reed outside the front doors. He had a small bag in his hands that he seemed to have forgotten about and was staring blankly at an empty space. “I could have sworn that was where you parked the cutter.” He scanned the rest of the lot. “I paid attention, because with the cloaking in place, it didn’t look like it’s usual stand-out self, but maybe I’m wrong?”

A cold feeling filled my gut. The cutter was gone. My cutter was gone. I broke into a sweat. Maybe I’d accidentally flipped Lin’s toggle and made the cutter invisible? It only worked when the cutter wasn’t moving, and I *had* parked it. I walked over to the empty space, but didn’t bump into anything. Oh, no. I must have been breathing fast because Reed walked over, nudged me to a bench, and made me sit down. Then he pushed my head until it was between my knees.

“Breathing is good, but you need to slow it down.”

“The cutter is gone,” I wheezed. “We can’t. We won’t—.”

Reed put his hand flat on my back and made small circles. “Don’t think that far. Break the problem down. What’s the first thing we need to do?”

I breathed in and out, dragging out each inhale and exhale. “We have to find the cutter.” As soon as I said it, my brain started to nudge its way out of shock and actually work on the problem. “Lin would have installed a tracker. We need somewhere with a private com so we can call Lin.”

“Okay,” Reed said, handing me the bag. “Here, eat this. I’ll be right back.”

I watched Reed walk across the lot to an idling Lorry. He rapped his knuckles on the window and the driver leaned over and started to talk to him, because Reed could charm the King of the Underworld if he wanted to. I opened the bag and was greeted by homemade caramel corn. I was beginning to think Reed had a sweet tooth. I shoved a small handful into my mouth and chewed, a little surprised to find it good. This was not the kind of service station that I would have pegged for hidden culinary delights, but then I hadn’t pegged it as a hot bed of criminal activity, either. I grabbed another handful and started making a mental list to calm myself. I prayed that the Hooded Crow knew what he was up to, and that this setback wouldn’t completely screw Rey, Cletus, and me. First, I had to find the cutter. I also needed to contact Rey and give him a head’s up. That wouldn’t go over well. After we found the cutter, we’d have to get it back as soon as possible and get back on the road. I hoped we found it in one piece. If we didn’t, well, I didn’t even want to go there yet.

Reed came back over and joined me on the bench.

I tipped the bag towards him. “Well?”

“Now we wait,” Reed said, taking a handful. “Which I know is your favorite thing to do.”

I shoved another handful of caramel corn into my mouth. It was either that or say something unhelpful.

We’d just finished off the bag when two swifts pulled into the lot. The machines were flashy—all shiny chrome and bright neon lights that were on one hand unnecessary, but also made the swifts stand out more in the darkness, which would likely keep them from being sideswiped by other vehicles. They stopped in front of us, leaving the swifts idling, both of them pushing open the front panel of their helmets. The one of the left was a tall black woman, her form lanky and her expression serious until you looked into her eyes. They caught the light of the station and I could see nothing in them but sharp intellect and amusement. Her cohort was about the same height, white, and the exact same stern expression until you hit his eyes as well. They were both dressed head to toe in black—leather boots, trousers, leather jackets, shirts. If it wasn’t for the eyes, I would have made a joke about badasses and their fashion choices, but the eyes changed everything.

I nudged Reed, who was crumpling up the empty bag. “You got us a Crow escort?”

“No,” the woman said, her voice, like her eyes, was also full of that barely contained amusement. To Crows, the world was one big joke, and they were the comedians. “He got you Aunt Bea and *she* got you a Crow escort.”

“Color me impressed,” I said as I stood. The man handed me a spare helmet and motioned for me to get on. Reed climbed onto the woman’s swift.

“If you were anything besides impressed,” the man said, his voice gravelly and deep, “you wouldn’t be getting a ride, Aunt Bea be damned.”

That was the other thing about Crows. Arrogant bastards the lot of ‘em. But seeing as how they’d earned the right to be so, I would give them a pass. I climbed onto the swift and snapped my helmet on.

They revved their engines unnecessarily and took off into the night. I wrapped my arms around the Crow so I didn’t fall off. The wind whipped around us, cooling in the evening air. The Crows weaved their swifts in and out of traffic with a practiced ease. As we tore through the streets, a few more swifts joined us. I didn’t even see them pull up, but every time I looked around, there would be one or two more. By the time we stopped, there were twelve in total.

I swung off the back of the Crow’s swift, and handed the driver my helmet. Reed did the same, and I was surprised to see the Crow’s powering down and following us across the gravel path. Beatrice’s Earthly Delights was a three-story building that took up a rather large chunk of real estate. A wrap-around porch skirted the front, a handful of rocking chairs left here or there. Two of them were occupied by Crows—at least they looked like Crows. Black clothing from head to foot, except for a few glimpses of shiny silver jewelry. They relaxed in their chairs, chatting, but their eyes were constantly scanning. To someone who didn’t know better, they looked like two friends shooting the shit. To everyone else, they were guards. They saluted our group, though they stopped Reed and I, patting us down swiftly and efficiently. We may be friends, but Bea wasn’t stupid and as always the safety of her people came first.

Bea’s is a place of classy excess. People lounged in overstuffed chairs, servers wandered around offering drinks, and everything—even the people—begged to be touched. I stuffed my hands in my pockets. The Crow next to me snorted. He could ridicule me all he wanted, but when I left, I was leaving with both my hands, thank you very much.

The Crows escorted us to a small, but empty, parlor. Reed and I sat on a high-backed couch, our two Crow escorts taking chairs. The other Crows dispersed, except for a tall man who had lighter brown skin and looked like he could crush my skull with two fingers. He leaned against the wall by the door, idly rolling a silver ball between his hands. It looked like a child’s toy, but I’d seen one of those before. One quick movement and it flattened into a rather wicked blade, one that went around your hand, the blade a half-moon shape that covered your knuckles. The Crow saw me watching and gave me a tight-lipped smile.

Two women entered. The first one was gorgeous—all golden skin, big violet eyes and long black hair with green streaks pulled back into a knot. She exuded grace the way some people exuded authority. Everything about her made you feel grateful to be let in her presence. He face split into a wide grin and she waved.

“Tella!” Reed jolted to his feet and enveloped the stunning woman into a hearty embrace, lifting her off her feet. This must be Reed’s ex, then.

She returned it, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Long time, stranger.”

The second woman had held back while Tella had greeted Reed. She was very different than Tella. If there was one word for her, it would be generous. She’d been put together by a loving hand, one that preferred curves over straight lines. Medium height, with hair a deep, rich red that fell in waves around her. Her dress was an emerald green with panels of lace that did little to obscure anything. A thick gold rope necklace and a solitary gold ring appeared to be her only jewelry, her smile impish. If Tella embodied grace, this woman was temptation incarnate.

Reed set Tella down gently and bowed smoothly before the other woman, taking her hand and kissing it. Or he tried to. She gave his face a shove and held her arms out.

He grinned sheepishly and gave her a hug as well. She kissed both his cheeks. “Welcome home, trouble maker.”

Reed took her hand and led her over to me, dropping it when he got close. “Madame Beatrice, may I introduce Bo?” We shook hands. Her grip was firm and I couldn’t help but smile back at her. “And Bo, this is Tella.” Tella flashed me a dimple and shook my hand as well.

“Hi,” I said.

The Crows stood lazily, vacating the chairs for Tella and Madame Beatrice. They didn’t leave, but instead stood behind the chairs.

“Welcome.” Madame Beatrice’s voice was sultry and honeyed and I wondered if she talked like that naturally or if it was a skill she cultivated. “I wish we were meeting under better circumstances, of course, but I’m pleased nonetheless. We’re all big fans of Slick Otter in this house.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Now,” Madame Beatrice said. “Tell me how we can help.”

I quickly went over our problem, trying to not kick myself for my own carelessness as I did. Once I was done, the ladies both stared at me thoughtfully.

“Well of course you can use our private com to call your mechanic. Once you know where it is, we can go from there.”

I left Reed to catch up with his old friends and followed one of the Crows—the one who had given me a ride—to Bea’s com. We went to the back of building, taking the staff stairs up two flights to a cozy entryway. From there the Crow led me to a study and the delicate machinery that made up Bea’s private com. The study itself held a large oak desk, bookshelves, and a small loveseat. The Crow leaned against the doorway and waved me toward the com. This was about as private as I was going to get and I knew better than to argue. After all, this was Bea’s personal study. It wouldn’t do to let people poke around in her business and Crows were a lot of things but sloppy wasn’t one of them.

I took a breath, dreading the conversation. Then I depressed the button and keyed in the short code for Lin’s com. No answer. I clicked off and then tried again. She finally picked up.

“Yes?”

“Lin, it’s me—is your line secure?” I didn’t have to ask if Bea’s was. She didn’t make it this long and far in her business by being careless with information.

“Yeah,” Lin said. “This who I think it is?”

“As long as you think it’s Bo, then yes.”

“What did you do, Bo? Did you wreck my baby already?”

“First, it’s technically my baby now, and no. At least, I don’t think so.” My voice had become defensive already and the Crow behind me gave a dry chuckle.

“What does that mean exactly?”

“Someone stole it while it was under a cloaking spell to look like a junker. Naturally, I would like to retrieve it. Please tell me you have a tracker on the phoenix.”

“Of course I do. I’m not new, Bo, and your question is insulting. I will assume it’s the grief at losing my precious baby talking and not an assessment of my competence.”

I rubbed my hand over my face suddenly feeling quite tired. “Can you please track it then? We’re on a bit of a timeline if you remember.”

“Give me a minute.” The line went quiet. I looked up and noticed that two more Crows had joined the first. One of them, the other swift driver from earlier, had a bowl of popcorn. Three sets of eyes openly stared at me and didn’t even try to pretend that I wasn’t entertainment. Crows.

I made grabby hands at the bowl. “At least share the popcorn.”

The Crow held out the bowl and let me take a handful. I wasn’t even hungry. It was the principal of the thing.

Lin came back on the line. “Okay, got it.” She rattled off the coordinates and I used a scrap piece of paper to write them down. After that I thanked Lin quickly and signed off. The first Crow walked over to one of the bookcases and pulled out a folded map. He flipped it open while I made another call I’d been dreading.

“Snow Fox, this is Slick Otter—you copy?”

“I thought you might have gone to the underworld,” Rey replied.

“Didn’t mean to ghost,” I said. “We just ran into another minor hitch.”

“How minor?”

“Let’s just say I’m temporarily grounded and leave it at that.” Rey let out a squawk and I talked over him. “I’ll explain later. I’m handling it and hope to be back to blocking soon. In the mean time, you might want to lay low. Okay?”

There was a long stretch of silence, and then Cletus came on the line with a series of whistles, clicks and a growl.

The Crow with the map tilted his head. “That bear has quite a mouth on him.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s salty. I don’t suppose you understood all that? I mostly know the bad words, which means I only got half.”

“He said not to worry. Your friend is upset but he’ll shake it. Apparently the bear has more faith that you’ll stay on task and not get distracted.”

“I’m glad someone does,” I said, hanging up the com. To be honest, I agreed with Rey, but it was nice to have Cletus’s support.

The Crow ran a finger along the map. “These are your coordinates here. Min?” He looked at the Crow with the popcorn. Min handed her bowl to the third Crow and leaned over the map.

“Bad news and not-good news.”

“Doesn’t “not good” also mean bad?” I asked.

“No, because it could mean great, or bad, or somewhere in between. This time it means somewhere in between, but not quite bad.”

Crows. “Okay,” I said. “Please continue.”

“The area Demetri is pointing to is the Junkyard—the place you want to go for black market parts and vehicles when you don’t want anyone asking too many questions. This means we need to act quickly to get your cutter, and we’ll need to do so in a stealthy fashion.”

“Good, because I don’t have any money to buy my own cutter back and I can’t exactly bring in the law.” I kept staring at the spot Demetri had poked in the hopes that it would magically tell me what to do.

“They wouldn’t deal with us anyway,” Min said.

“We have a history,” Demetri said. The third Crow nodded and kept eating popcorn.

“The good news,” Min said, “is that you can capitalize on our history.”

Demetri nodded. “We would almost help you simply to spite them. *Almost*. You will also owe us a favor.”

It was a bad idea to owe the Crows anything, but I wasn’t exactly in a position to argue. I held out my hand. “Deal. The favor is within reason, though. No first borns, no killing people, nothing like that.”

Demetri shook my hand. “Naturally.” He rolled up the map. “Give us two hours.” I opened my mouth to argue and he cut me off. “I recognize you’re on a tight timeline and two hours is a lot to ask. I also realize that you’re worried that your cutter might be scrap by then.” He tapped me on the nose with the map, the condescending jerk. “So I will remind you that we are Crows and there is no one else who could get you your cutter back faster or in one piece.”

I wanted to argue with him, but couldn’t. The Crows had earned their reputation. “Two hours,” I said.

Min jerked her chin at the popcorn Crow. “Take her back to Bea, then come find us. We have work to do.” She grabbed her popcorn from him and left, dismissing us both. I followed him back down the stairs and all the way back to Reed. For now, there was nothing left to do but wait.