I considered not telling Rey about our current cash flow problem. I had time to figure out the Jubilation issue, but the more pressing need would be fuel. Wind was down and my cutter had a full tank *now*, but it wouldn’t forever, and it would likely be a reoccurring problem. Conveyances needed fuel, especially Rey’s Lorry. A stranded Lorry would draw the Smoke faster than anything. The Smoke would stop to be friendly and check on us, and then they’d get curious, and before you know it they’d want to check our cargo to see if everything was on the up and up. We most certainly were not anywhere in the vicinity of the up and up, so it was a definite problem.

In times like these, I’ve found it pays to be cautious. You don’t just go and blurt out the truth. The truth is almost always a mistake. So instead I met up with Rey and Cletus and decided to downplay our financial situation. I pulled up to Rey’s and slid out of the firebird. They had the Lorry up on blocks, so they didn’t see me right away.

I gave Rey’s leg a gentle nudge with my boot. “How’s it going?”

“Almost done,” Rey said.

Cletus grunted.

“I know we’d be done by now if I hadn’t dropped it,” Rey said. “You need to let that go.”

Cletus huffed.

“Any money left?” I asked.

“Hold on,” Rey said as Cletus made a few popping and clicking noises with his mouth. Low Forest Bears have prehensile lips, which they use to their advantage, especially in regards to their peculiar language. They don’t have vocal cords like humans do, but they do have a wide range of noises, body language, and paw gestures that make up a fairly rich lexicon. Rey is fluent in it. I only know the curse words and one particularly terrible joke about a Low Forest Bear, a walnut, and a whistling fish. Don’t ask.

“Well, if you held the light steady, I wouldn’t have missed that,” Rey said to Cletus. Finally the duo gave a push and came out form under the Lorry. Cletus popped his lips at me and I reached out and caught it, dragging my hand to my heart like he’d blown me a kiss.

Rey looked at my shiny new cutter as he cleaned the dirt and lubricant off his hands. “We’re broke, aren’t we?”

I waffled my hand back and forth. “Depends on how you look at it.”

Rey sighed. “Only you would consider that a question of perspective. Fine, how are we looking at it, then?”

“Our assets are currently more solid than liquid, but only temporary like.”

Rey sighed, but inspected my firebird anyway. “Which means you have a plan, one that would likely turn my hair white if it wasn’t already.”

I waved the words away. “Always worrying. I’ll handle it, okay? So I’ll repeat, any money leftover?”

Rey nodded.

“Good,” I said. “Keep it for your tank and Cletus’s belly. That will buy me a little time until I fix our situation.”

Rey drew a finger down the side of the firebird. “I hope she’s worth the money.”

I slung an arm around his shoulders. “Every single coin, I promise.”

\* \* \*

The doors to the Everlasting Jubilation Brewery were rather forcefully closed, a large, stout, and intimidating lock underscoring the point. The brewery itself was two stories high, yet looked almost squat, like someone had taken a castle and smooshed it down. The outer walls were made of deep red brick, lines of long thin windows, like the kinds used for shooting an arrow at your enemy were interspersed regularly along the upper half.

The inside was likely one big room with a catwalk running parallel to the windows. That way the mage brewers could actually shoot arrows and other things at intruders. A small cupola perched on top, where a battle mage would keep watch, so if someone approached they could give a shout to the rest of their companions…or throw a spell. I didn’t particularly want to see what was usually up in that tower, and if the Hooded Crow were smiling, we wouldn’t have to. Since it was past quitting time, I thought it unlikely that the cupola would be occupied. The temperature would continue to drop with nightfall, and if I was a guard, I’d stay inside the building where it was warm.

Cletus chuffed, settling his rump down with a stately thump in the hard packed dirt. He had his eyepatch flipped up and was blinking in the low light.

Rey rubbed a hand over his face before grabbing the back of his neck as if he was going to dunk his own head in the river. “I took too long fixing the Lorry.”

I stared at the building, turning the problem over in my mind. I could definitely see some possibilities. “Let’s not be too hasty,” I said. “This might actually be a boon.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and rocked back on my heels, suddenly feeling a little giddy. Any time I feel this light and bubbly and I’m in a delicate situation—which I often am, let’s face it—I make sure my hands are occupied. Otherwise they start touching things of their own accord, and that leads to trouble. I didn’t want to give into the temptation. Yet.

“Cletus?”

The bear delicately plucked at the patch with his claws, flipping it back over his eye. He gazed around slowly, clambering to his feet, then disappearing around the corner. It would take him a few minutes to walk the perimeter.

“How can this be a boon?” Rey asked. “No one is here. The shop is closed. I know you’re not a merchant, Bo, but you can’t purchase product from a closed shop. We can’t leave without the product. Our whole plan kind of hinges on it.” His words had a clip of frustration to them. If he’d been wearing his fox skin, he would have been nipping at my heels. “If we wait until they open, we’ll never make it. The nearest brewery is two hundred miles in the wrong direction.”

Sometimes I’m amazed at how law abiding Rey’s brain can be. It was like he had to stop and actually think about it before he took a crooked way. For me, it was like breathing. That’s not to say I couldn’t be good, though good very much depended person to person and could hardly be an objective measure. I was capable of being honest, too, if it suited me. But the Darby clan practically sent our first wails up to the Hooded Crow. Our first toddling baby steps set us on the crooked path. When you belong to the Hooded Crow, doing things crooked is essentially a holy mission. So where Rey was seeing a blocked path, I was envisioning possibilities.

The thing about a brewery such as this one is they always have more than one exit. It’s a safety concern. Magic can be unstable in even the most knowledgeable of hands. If something goes “boom,” they need to be able to evacuate efficiently. So while Rey fretted and worried unnecessarily, I waited patiently for Cletus.

The bear finally ambled around the corner. He clearly saw no reason to rush. He lumbered over to where we were standing and plopped down on his rump.

“Eye patch tell you anything? I asked.

Cletus grunted, pointed, gave a few clicks and a short whistle.

“He says the back door is warded and locked like this one, but there’s a cellar door that’s covered in a glamour,” Rey translated.

Wards and padlocks weren’t quick exits, but a hidden cellar door? Now that would be a nice, speedy emergency escape route and perfect for our needs. I clapped the bear on the shoulder. “Excellent, Cletus. Lead on, please.”

We followed the bear over to the side of the brewery. As far as my eye could tell, there was nothing special to be found—just a long wall and the occasional bush. Cletus walked right up to one of the bushes, brushed past some wicked looking thorns, and pulled. The bush blinked out of sight revealing two wide doors coming out of a tilted side entrance.

I hugged Cletus and kissed his snout. “You are the best bear.” Then I climbed in quietly, Rey following and Cletus staying outside on guard duty. Once we figured out the status of the possible watchmen on duty and disposed of them, Cletus would come inside to help.

The cellar door led to a short set of stairs, then on to the brew floor itself. When they’d built the building, they’d dug down, so the floor of the brewery was actually about five feet underground. We were greeted by gleaming copper vats, and rather inexplicably the overwhelming scent of blueberries. The inside of the brewery was humid, the air much thicker than it had been outside. The lights inside were dim, only a few on for safety, and the fading light from outside that petered in through the windows. It was so quiet we could hear the soft footfalls of our feet. I stayed back by the wall, motioning at Rey to do his thing.

Rey pulled a worn leather pouch out of his pocket. He opened it up, taking out what looked like a tightly rolled piece of white fluff. Unrolled, it revealed itself to be the pelt of an arctic fox, only a very small one. Rey shook it out, and the pelt grew to its proper size. Then he put it on, and suddenly where Rey had been stood an adult arctic fox. He shook his feet out, sneezed, and then padded around the brewery, sniffing out the guard on duty. His paws made no sound as he moved. That was all there was too it—skin on and *poof.* No glittering light, now magical sound, no nothing. While the final product is amazing, the shift itself is pretty mundane.

I’m a little jealous of shifters. What must it be like to have a skin you can take on and off, changing yourself into something entirely different? I’d love to borrow Rey’s pelt and try it out, but would never ask. The skin really is part of themselves, and I’m told that wearing a shifter’s pelt is as intimate to them as sex. It’s not something done lightly, and something I’d never ask of Rey. We’re close friends, but not *that* close.

The fox came back, tugging on my pant leg, telling me he had something to show me up on the catwalk. I was hoping to find an empty guard station. Sadly, my hopes were for naught. From the low moan that issued from under the crack in the door, the guard was not only very much present, but had company. I carefully peeked in the window. Two men, partially naked, and very much not paying attention to the brewery around them, were making good use of a leather couch. Part of the guard’s uniform had been discarded onto a low table, which had an empty bottle of Jubilation next to it.

I moved away, digging through my pockets for anything useful. Nothing. While I’d been searching, Rey had padded away, and now returned with a ball of twine. Perfect. I used my pocket knife to cut of about a yard of twine, then wound it around the door handles, finally tying it in a nice knot. Rey and I tiptoed away and left the two lovers to some privacy.

Rey went out the cellar door to get Cletus, and when he came back he’d returned to his human skin.

“I’m not sure how long they’ll be distracted,” I said. “But I’d prefer they not see us. So quiet as mice, yeah?” Cletus and Rey nodded, and we quickly split up, looking for a storeroom of finished Jubilation. Cletus found it first, and I had him check out the room with his eye patch. When he didn’t find any magical alarms or wards, we padded into the storeroom and started unloading crates of the bright green elixir. As far as I was concerned, we were doing them a favor. The storeroom was near to full and we could barely move around at first. After we were done, they’d have a little more wiggle room.

We didn’t fill the Lorry. We weren’t greedy. Rey counted off the boxes as he secured them in the hold. “We took too many.”

“No we didn’t,” I said, handing him the last crate.

“We needed one hundred crates to fulfill Big and Little Paul’s order. We’ve got one hundred and twenty by my count.” Cletus clicked and whistled in apparent agreement.

“Perfect,” I said. “One hundred cases for the order, twenty to help us with our little funding problem.”

Rey jogged after me as I made my way to my shiny new cutter. “But if we only had enough money for the order as is, how are we going to pay for the rest of the order?”

“They can bill us,” I said.

“But how will they know who to bill?” He asked, watching me strap myself into the pilot seat.

“You go on and leave them a note.” I checked my mirrors.

Rey, bless him to the Hooded Crow, started patting his pockets for a piece of paper, found it, and pulled out a stub of a pencil. He started to write. Stopped. Looked at the cellar doors, then back at me, before swearing and shoving the whole mess into his pocket. See what I mean? He gets to the crooked path, but he has to think about it to get there.

“Hurry up and shut those cellar doors, Cletus. We need to get high-tailing.”

Cletus moved with a speed that was surprising for his size and shut the doors, leaving the uninterrupted image of the building and bushes once more.

“Keep your com on channel two for now,” I said. “We’ll work our way up.”

Then I kicked the cutter into high gear, moving smoothly along the road, Rey, Cletus and a Lorry full of Jubilation chugging along behind me.