East Bound and Down

Chapter 6

Part 2

My body still hummed with adrenaline. This—this is the feeling I miss when I’m not driving. Better than jubilation, better than sex. Well, some sex anyway. I mean, that’s a pretty wide-ranging metric. I reached for the com, but end up tossing it to Reed, so I can swerve around a horse and cart that just pulled in front of us. I twisted the cutter up and over, doing a barrel roll. The horse is older and clearly well trained—it doesn’t spook at my maneuver. It barely twitched an ear.

Reed is getting trained, too. He put one hand out to brace himself as we rolled, but that’s it. He tried to hand the com back to me, but I shook my head.

“Say this is Slick Otter, over.”

Reed depressed the button and did what I said.

Rey’s voice cuts through static. “Who in the underworld’s bone garden is this?”

Reed ignored the question and looked at me for guidance.

“Tell him we were drawing smoke. We detoured, but we’ll be back on the path in two ticks.”

Again, Reed dutifully repeated my message, but a series of growls and clicks cuts him off.

“Shut up, Cletus!”

I can hear scuffling, like Rey has dropped the mic or is wrestling the bear for it.

“I’m trying to have a respectable conversation here and you—I don’t care if they have forty different kinds of jerky! We aren’t stopping to—.”

The mic cuts out. Reed’s eyebrows quirked up. “Cletus?”

“The bear,” I said, accelerating up an embankment and breaking back onto the main path. The path is narrower here, a single lane on each side, cut into the land, both sides dropping off steeply. Traffic here is heavy, too, a combination of the narrower lane, the time of day, and the fact that this happened to be a major trade route. I sped up, weaving through traffic.

Reed tried the com again. “Snow fox—you there?”

A soft chuckle comes over the com. “He tuckered himself right out.” We can hear snoring over the static of the line. “Where are you?”

“Main path,” Reed answered. “Just passed the turnoff for Yaltsburg.”

“Right behind us, then. I’ll keep my binoculars on my backdoor—knock when you’re here.”

Reed returned the com mic to it’s nesting spot. “These things are fabulous.” He then nestled himself back into the seat, fitting as perfectly as the com had, like the spot was made just for him. “This whole thing is delightful. I couldn’t be more pleased with how today is turning out.”

“I’m so happy to be meeting your high standards,” I said dryly.

He either ignored my tone or it didn’t bother him. “You’re quite good at this whole thing.”

“And you make a pretty good runaway groom turned passenger.”

“Thanks,” he said, digging back into his bag. “I don’t have a lot of practice at the first thing, but I feel like a bit of a prodigy at it. Nailed it on the first try.” He paused, pulling out a pair of sunglasses and setting them on top of his head. “Though I suppose you could say it runs in my blood. My father has been married six times. He’s a bit of an optimist that way.”

I tried to sort that out on my own while I cut around a handful of swifts. There were eight of them in full leathers and they’re taking up the lane. They were, apparently, in no hurry. I swung out, gliding over the side of the embankment and using my momentum to swing me back around. It’s not strictly legal and a little dangerous. If another cutter tried to do it at the same time, I could hit them. The visibility isn’t great. The leader of the swifts gave me the finger and I returned it. Once we’re settled back in the lane, I finally ask, “Optimist?”

Reed resumed his digging. “He keeps marrying them thinking that this time he’s found the love of his life. His soul mate. His other half always seems to be conveniently well off, though he never makes that connection, and if I bring it up, I’m being crass. He likes his creature comforts though, my dad.”

For some reason I found Reed’s story to be really depressing. “And your Ma?”

Reed raised up a thin cloth bag, the top tied off with purple ribbon. Triumph lit his face and my stomach dipped. I definitely needed to drop him off at the next stop, and I needed to do it soon. He pulled the ribbon off and dipped into the bag, pulling out a golden piece of candy shaped like a bee. The light catches it, and it glowed. The liquid in the bee’s belly sparkled, like magic.

“Is that—?”

“Lana Roo’s Golden Nectar. We got grab bags for the wedding. Since I had to escape through the dining tent, I grabbed a few bags on the way out.”

I gave a low whistle. “So not a cheap wedding.”

Reed leaned over and I reached out a hand. He tsked, holding one in front of me until I dutifully opened my mouth.

“Not cheap, but not the most expensive, either. My no longer father-in-law wasn’t keen to part with his money, but I refuse to give out poor gifts. I don’t care about much else, ceremony wise, but I think if you’re going to give someone something, you should mean it.” He frowned, examining his own piece of candy. “Or perhaps, like my father, I also enjoy the creature comforts.”

I hummed, unable to form words. The candy melted on my tongue, the hard shell vibrating softly, like I’d trapped an actual insect in my mouth. It tasted sweet, almost like spiced butterscotch. The flavor was delicate, though, not cloying or overpowering. After a second the hard shell busted and the liquid hit my tongue. Warmth flooded me. Whereas Jubilation is a joyous kick to the ribs—an all night kegger of sensation—Lana Roo’s Golden Nectar is a warm sweater on a chilly winter evening. It’s a hug from your grandma after a hard week. It’s the gentle first kiss from someone who thinks you hung the moon. Golden Nectar offers comfort, and I can feel it sliding all the way to my toes.

“Even if you don’t like everything your dad does, this? Taking after him like this is okay.” My words came out like a sigh.

Reed still hasn’t eaten his candy, turning it around in his fingers. “You asked me about my mom. She’s more of a pragmatist. She still goes through men like locusts through a hay field, but she doesn’t marry them. She wants adventure, nothing more, and she’s clear about it. I’m not even sure where she is right now. Her invite came back.”

I wanted to melt like the candy right down to the floor of my cutter, it was so good. “What about you?”

Reed huffed out a breath and put his candy back in the bag. “I think I’m somewhere in-between—a hopeful pragmatist.”

“You get halfway married and then go on adventures?” I said it jokingly, but he grimaced and I can tell my words hit too close to home. Suddenly I didn’t feel so warm and fuzzy. I opened my mouth to apologize, but the com crackled before I could get any words out.

“Breaker, breaker.”

I frowned, picking up the mic. “This is Slick Otter. Go, breaker.”

The voice that came through was unbearably smug. “Otter, I got a smoke report coming your way.”

It’s not uncommon to get spectators jumping in on your channel, but the chatter had been pretty quiet so far. I’ve mostly been tuning it out. Something about this man’s voice, however, kicked my adrenaline back up. “Go on, breaker.”

“Your future, it sure is hazy, Otter. Like one of them crystal balls fortune-tellers use.”

I broke into a sweat, casting a quick look at Reed, who’d gone a little green. He stared at the com like it was a poisonous snake rearing back to bite.

“You got a handle, breaker? A twenty?”

The voice has surpassed smug and was practically crowing now. “My handle is Justice and I got your tail, Otter!” Sirens and lights flash right behind me and he definitely had me by the tail. His cutter was practically kissing mine. I chucked the com at Reed and he reacted as if it really were a snake, lunging away from it.

I looked at the Smoke’s cutter behind me and frowned. The smoke get their cutters from a large manufacturer and as such they are all the same make and model. The only variance you ever see is the color scheme and the identifying decal on the side of the nose and the back right tail. That was all that set them apart. Between the decals and the green pin striping, my fear started dancing double time. “That’s an Arkana smoke. What’s an Arkana smoke doing in Lanta?” The question was rhetorical and I’m surprised when Reed answered it.

“How would I know? Maybe he’s on vacation.” There was a snap to his voice and he was jiggling his leg. He was nervous. Nervous because I have a tail, or for another reason? An Arkana smoke in Lanta. Something was up and I don’t like it, but I knew better than to complain. The Hooded Crow didn’t appreciate whiners. I hit the fuel pedal and prayed.

The phoenix burst forward, quickly leaving the smoke behind. He was catching up fast, though, and ahead of me I had the large back end of Rey’s Lorry. I couldn’t even see around it, but I could see the lane of traffic on the other side and it was even heavy than ours. Next to me Reed emptied the bag of Lana Roo’s Golden Nectar into his hand. I managed a quick count right before he popped the candy into his mouth. Four bees were going to pack quite a punch, but he didn’t seem to care. He chewed, his gaze flicking to the mirrors as the candy crunched.

I flicked the com to another channel and hit the mic button. “Hey there, Snow fox. I’m going to bob around you. Smokey is pulling my tail. Come back.”

For a second I’m worried that Rey hasn’t thought to bump to another channel, but then I hear him. “Snow fox hearing you loud and clear. You’re going to have to make your own lane, though. We’ve got a regular party going on around here.”

Reed shrugged and closed his eyes, which I took as a signal to get on with it. I floored it, sliding around Rey’s Lorry, hugging the very edge of the path. At this speed, I didn’t have much of a reaction time, so I crossed all my fingers and toes that no one got the same idea we had. I plowed through a sign, the wood splintering and flying behind us.

Reed’s eyes were still shut. “The thing about my parents, you know, is they didn’t set a very good example. I grew up thinking that marriage, weddings, all that sort of thing, well, they were no big deal. Ephemeral, even. Love is fleeting, but an excuse to party is eternal. I didn’t think much of it, really, and when Junior asked me, why would I say no? I wasn’t doing anything, not really. He was a looker, you know? Good teeth, treated me well, so I thought, why shouldn’t I say yes?” His words were coming out a mile a minute, and I listened, but I was also glad that his eyes were shut because we were about to plow through a row of mailboxes. There was no way for me to maneuver around them.

“But then I was walking down that aisle and I thought, ‘what am I doing?’ Sooner or later Junior and I will spend time outside the bedroom and have an actual honest conversation and then what? I once watched him spend ten minutes trying to open a window before I finally told him it had been painted shut. If I hadn’t been there to tell him, would he still be yanking at it? Beautiful, absolutely. Kind hearted? Surely. But dumb as a sack of hammers. I can’t marry someone who can’t string together a conversation.” We hit the mailboxes and Reed jerked with each one. “Sorry, I babble when I’m nervous.”

“Understandable,” I said, gripping the wheel. I slid back into the lane, pulling right in front of Rey’s Lorry.

In my left mirror, I see that the smoke had tried to slip around the other side, attempting to take advantage of a momentary lull in oncoming traffic. As I watched, his cutter rode between the two lanes and I can tell he’d misjudged even before he sent several of the oncoming cutters out of their lane and into the weeds. He’s about halfway up the side of the lorry, when Rey slid the big machine over, edging the smoke further into oncoming traffic. One of the mirrors hit the side of the lorry and came off in a shower of sparks. When I checked the oncoming traffic I saw a large gondola heading right at the smoke. The gondola was huge, four or five times the size of my cutter and utilized a large balloon, reminiscent of a zeppelin. They’re used for moving large groups of people long distances, they were also very sturdy and would likely turn the smoke’s cutter into scrap.

The smoke gunned it, and I heard his motor screaming. He barely pulled in front of Rey’s Lorry in time.

Rey’s voice filled the cab. “You copy, Otter?”

I punched Reed. “You’re alive, now thank the gods and make yourself useful.”

Reed grabbed the com. “We copy.”

“You got a smoke trail all the way back to Arkana. Now, why is that?”

I yanked the com from Reed. “If you figure it out, please tell the class.” I slammed the pedal down, my speed gages shooting up into the red zones.

“Bo?”

“Yeah?”

“We just passed another smoke.” He put his forehead against the window. “It’s hard to tell, but I think this one is local.”

I checked my mirrors, and sure enough, there was another set of lights behind me. In front of me, the traffic moved sluggish and thick.

“Looks like you got twins,” Rey’s voice cut through the cabin. “Congratulations.”

Reed picked up the com. “I think things are going to get dicey for a minute, Snow. We’ll check back in when the coast is clear. Over.” Reed traded the mic for another bag of Lana Roo’s, calmly tossing another handful into his mouth. “We’re going over the edge again, right?”

“Still think you made a good choice getting in my cutter?”

“Yes ma’am,” Reed said, sliding his sunglasses down. “Wouldn’t trade it for the world.”