Juliana's was in an area of Arkana where you made sure to put a ward lock on your conveyance, but didn't worry too much about lightfingers picking your pockets or a blade getting friendly with your organs. It was nice, but not problem free. Rey didn't bother to ward lock his Lorry. After all, Cletus was still in it, and no one in their right mind messed with one of the Low Forest Bears. On his hind legs, Cletus stood about nine feet tall and he weighed about eight hundred pounds, making him on the smaller side for a Low Forest Bear. He was still mighty intimidating, even with the eye patch.

He was currently stretched out in the main cab taking a nap, his large feet sticking out the window, easily deterring anyone who might want to commandeer the larger com set built into Rey's Lorry. One look at those massive paws and everyone usually decided they didn't need anything in the Lorry that badly.

Rey leaned his head in and whistled, tossing the large bag of food into the cab. "Get up, lazy bones. We got a job."

A series of grunts and growls issued forth, but they sounded mostly of the grumbling type and not the angry type, so I didn't interfere. I counted off a few of the bills and handed them over to Rey.

He held my gaze and kept his hand out. "The boosters need to be looked at, as do the stabilizers. The left rear one is acting up, and you don't want them crapping out, especially not with Cletus riding shotgun."

The downside of having an eight hundred pound bear as part of your driving team was that you had to keep everything in tip-top shape. That was a lot of extra weight, and without the stabilizers, the Lorry would drag. Having Cletus along more than made up for the extra maintenance. I threw down a few more bills. “I much preferred this set up when I was the one taking the cash." The nice thing about being an established team was that you didn't have to state the obvious. I knew Rey would haggle, but he wouldn't skimp. Bootleggers that bought shoddy boosters and stabilizers didn't remain bootleggers for very long. So Rey simply saluted me while I took off on my own errand. I had to see a woman about a cutter.

Growler’s was a twenty-minute cutter-ride across town, if the Pantheon was smiling on you and there was no traffic. While the Darby clan usually held the good will of the trickster god—the Hooded Crow being one that delighted in their antics—the rest of the Pantheon was often indifferent if not actively working against them. Or it felt like that, anyway. While Rey would be able to get the parts and help he needed closer to home, I had to get a whole new machine, and I needed the best, and that meant Growler’s.

It took me twice the time it should have to get there, even taking shortcuts, mostly due to an overturned Lorry that took up most of a common path. This was partially because of the Lorry itself, but mostly because of the goats and chickens that had been freed when the conveyance had tipped over. Everyone was either slowing down to watch, or slowing down to grab a goat. I could already feel the time ticking against me, so I left the livestock alone, but appreciated the chaos hoping that it was a sign that my patron god was smiling on me.

By the time I made it to Growlers, I was impatient, and I had to take a minute to tamp that down and leave an easy smile on my face. If I reeked of desperation, Therian would know, and I’d end up paying more, and I needed cash for the Jubilation. After I pulled my cutter into an empty spot in the dirt lot where Growler’s squatted, I kept my demeanor easy as I made my way to the doors. It was an odd building, a haphazard accumulation of tin and steel, like a small shed had grown fungus-like over the dirt. It didn’t rightly make sense to my eye, but then it wasn’t my business, so what did I know?

The doors were wide open, letting in the fresh air and heat of the day, while letting out the sharp tang of oil and metal and a hint of brimstone. Therian Grace was the best mechanic in Arkana. She was also shrewd and while she wouldn't exactly cheat you, she would make the sharpest deal she could and blame your own ignorance if the deal was bad on your end. I could respect that. That didn't mean I liked it when that particular skill set was aimed at me. So I smiled and waved her over so she could take a look at my cutter and tried to calmly and professionally make a deal. Which went about as well as one could expect.

"That is banditry, flat out," I said, crossing my arms.

Therian crossed her arms, her welding goggles shoved up high on her forehead, pushing back the tight riot of black curls that surrounded her head. She was maybe one hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet, though most of that was muscle, and she was probably five inches shorter than me, but she was still scary as a rabid Low Forest Bear. With people and dogs, it was the little ones you had to watch out for. They had to fight dirty to compensate.

"It's a fair deal," Therian said.

"Only in the loosest concept of the word. I'm trading in my own cutter--"

"Which is three years old and using outdated tech, not to mention that you've gotten 'creative' with some of the circuitry."

I spluttered at her.

She barreled on, her brows furrowed, her arm waving a rather large wrench at my little metal baby. "It's a wreck. You've ridden it hard, Bo." She tapped it with her wrench. One of the mirrors fell off into the dirt. She looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "You're not going to make it to Bluffsdale in this hunk of junk." She raised a hand at my arguments. "This was a fine machine when you bought it, the best machine. But it isn't now."

My stomach dropped. “You heard about the bet already?"

Therian snorted. "Everyone has heard about that bet. You're not just going to need a new cutter..." She trailed off, her eyes going hazy. "You're going to need the best cutter, and if you win..." She stared at me, tilting her head this way and that. "You might just win." Therian waved her wrench at me. "Follow me."

We wove our way around different conveyances in various forms of disassembly, the heat bringing out the sharp smell of various oils and magical compounds Therian used on a daily basis. I followed Therian through a low door, which opened up to a room that was long and wide, almost like a hanger for some of the flying conveyance. Skylights were interspersed regularly along the roof, letting in a ton of natural light. Several long metal shelves held various machine parts, while half the space was full of various conveyances covered up in canvas drop cloths. Lin, Therian’s wife, stood over a table in the corner, her mask down and her welding leathers on as she worked over a large sheet of copper.

“Lin!” Therian banged on the wall with her fist, the sound almost gong-like.

Lin clicked off the torch, turning toward us as she pushed up her helmet. Lin was taller than her wife, though just as muscled from her work, both arms covered in tattoos. Her long, black hair was pulled back from her face in a haphazard knot, her tan skin showing off the bright white of her teeth as she grinned at us. “If it isn’t my heart and the sucker.”

I liked Lin, usually, but I wasn’t feeling overly charitable to her at the moment. “You heard, too?”

Lin pulled off her gloves and tossed it onto the table with her helmet. “I figure everyone in Arkana has heard by now.”

I crossed my arms, trying to not sound petulant. “It just happened!” Nope, totally sounded petulant.

Lin untied her apron. “The downside of the com system,” she said. “Everyone and their grandmother’s know everyone’s business almost instantly.” She raised an eyebrow at her wife. “I take it you’re here for the firebird?”

When Therian dipped her chin, Lin motioned me to follow as she moved to the far end of the hanger. Several machines rested there, all covered in drop cloths. With Therian’s help, she yanked off the cover. The sun from the skylight came down and beamed off what had to be the most beautiful cutter I’d ever seen. I swear I could hear a choir of children singing the Hooded Crow a praise chorus. Surely this cutter was made for mischief. I felt the overwhelming urge to hug it and cry.

The firebird was sleek, the body made out of various strips of copper with the outline of a phoenix burnt into the hood. The body was long, with two bench seats that could fit four. I gave into temptation and ran a hand over the buttery-soft golden leather. I made a sound that could have been a choked sob, but wasn’t. Okay, maybe it was.

Lin handed me her handkerchief. “I know. I’m amazing.”

Therian slipped an arm around Lin’s waist. “Every time I see this cutter, I want to marry you again.”

“I thought you loved me for my pretty face?” Lin asked, batting her lashes.

Therian tilted her chin at the firebird. “Lots of pretty faces out there in the world, but only one pretty face could make this.”

Lin waved a hand in front of her face. “Stop, you’re giving me the vapors.”

I handed back Lin’s handkerchief. “Tell me about her.”

Lin pulled away from her wife, suddenly all business. “The sails are retractable. There are six magic boosters, which is an improvement over the usual four, but it means we had to build a bigger tank. To offset the extra weight, we used some—” she pursed her lips, searching for the right word. “Let’s say experimental materials and leave it at that. So despite the larger tank and extra fuel, she’s surprisingly light. She has one large main sail and two smaller side sails like wings—you hit this toggle if you want the upper one, this toggle for the sides, and simultaneously for both.” Lin pointed at the series of toggles set next to the com system. “This toggle uncovers the front lantern beams, and this one—” she gently tapped the last toggle which was painted a bright red. “Be careful with this one. It’s a new booster system. Fast, but it will eat up your fuel.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “It’s experimental.”

Lin nodded. “When the sails are down, there’s a retractable cover you can put up, to make the main cabin cozy-like. It’s a new polymer, lighter than glass, but durable. There’s an emergency chute if the brakes aren’t working—the button is down by the floor there.” Lin leaned into the cockpit of the cutter. “And this is a thing of beauty.” She pressed down on the flat panel and the metal flipped up revealing one last hidden toggle. Lin flipped it. The firebird disappeared. “Like the smoke, it only works when it’s not moving.”

“It’s also highly illegal,” Therian said, her voice dry. “So I don’t recommend getting pulled over. The Smoke might not find it, but the Crows will.”

I finally gave into the temptation and hugged the firebird. “Lin, you’re a genius.”

Lin shrugged. “I know.”

Therian nudged me with her boot. “Genius costs cash.”

“How much?” I asked, still hugging my new baby. Therian quoted me a price, including the trade-in of my old cutter. It would cost every last bill I had from Big and Little Paul, plus the emergency cash in my boot. I didn’t bother to haggle. We all knew the firebird was worth it, and it wasn’t like I could pretend disinterest when I was hugging the damn thing.

“You win,” Therian said, “and you tell everyone where you got her.”

“And if I lose?” I asked.

“Then you tell everyone it was your fault and not the beautiful piece of machinery sitting before you,” Lin said.

“Deal,” I relinquished my new firebird to hand over my cash and shake their hands. I now had a brand new cutter that could certainly handle a break-neck trip to Lanta. Of course, I was also flat broke and still in need of quite a few cases of Jubilation. I’d worry about that when I got to the warehouse. No sense borrowing trouble. After all, I was a Darby. We didn’t need to borrow trouble—we usually made enough of that on our own.