

A wide table sits in the center of a large pristine room, its surface a polished ivory white. The overhead lights glitter in the table's mirrored surface as two figures sat jovially in front of a wide array of cameras, each filming their every move, and recording their every word. All around the room are hanging banners and display posters, each emblazoned with the ARA's colors and logos, and all advertised today's race at New Alexandria City, on the Saturn moon of Titan.

The Accelerated Racing Association has brought yet another stellar race to the legions of racing fans clamoring for more at home, be they from Earth or as far away as Jupiter!

"I just can't express enough how bad I feel for the people watching at home right now!" Said Grace Gallant, making up half of the table's occupants as well as being the only female present.

The 41-year-old heron, just like her namesake, was one of the most graceful faces in all the Association to date with her sparkling eyes and even brighter personality. Having served as a professional newscaster for several years with LSNBC News, she was sniped by the Association fifteen years ago and has been a proud member of their team ever since.

Seated at the desk next to her was her co-host Vic Vigor, the 52-year-old wolf with a smile that was said to leave even the coldest of women feeling weak in the knees. Vic had been a talented racer in his prime, having been the driver of his only child, the Cast Iron Queen. With an impressive sixteen years of racing experience under his belt and more than a decade more time spent as one of the Association's premier commentators, Vic is one of the best-known faces in the ARA today.

Together, the pair watched with excitement as the next big race of the season was about to get its start! Today's race was set on Titan, being held at the aptly named Cold Shoulder racetrack, which was the 6th to have been built on Titan's icy surface! Though the temperatures outside were too cold for any modern bike to withstand for long, the Cold Shoulder was built like most other surface level tracks on Titan.

From start to finish the Cold Shoulder's route was encased in a protective glass tube that protected the drivers inside from the surface's frigid temperatures. Woven into the four-foot-thick glass were thousands of metallic cables that, when the generators were active, heated the glass to maintain a buffer against the outside temperature of Titan's harsh surface. With the planet reaching -290 degrees Fahrenheit it would be fatal for any driver to find themselves exposed to it, and that's even if they were still inside their bike.

"What makes you say that? This'll be a great race!" Vic laughed in reply.

"We're racing on Titan Standard Time! I think more than half the people that want to watch are asleep in their beds in their local time zones." She replied.

While the pair made small talk for those at home listening and waiting for the race to start, the drivers for today's race were all in the hanger going through the last of their preparations. As the clock ticked down to race start each team handled their duties differently, as the Association gave as much freedom to its drivers as possible. So long as every driver and team member abided by the Association's rulebook of racing virtues you were typically never micromanaged.

Some crew had their Chief Strategists going over last-minute plays with their drivers, while teams that lacked such a Strategist often left the thinking to their drivers. The Chief Technicians all double and triple checked the work of their junior Techs while also informing their drivers of anything they thought was important.

But some teams hardly spoke to their drivers, as communication simply wasn't necessary.

Nyx Mortar was the driver for one such team.

He'd been employing the same ten people for twelve years straight, and they were all qualified to be Chief Technicians in their own right, if they ever wanted to quit and join up with some other driver. And maybe someday a few of them would, but not today or even tomorrow. The money was just too good working for Nyx Mortar.

Nyx, the tall, but aging reptile that he was, had a successful career. He had the money to pay for the best without being yoked and strangled by sponsors that asked too much of him in return for their money. Being 90% self-funded had its perks, and for someone with his working-class background he had earned it all through raw grit.

"Boss, she's good!" His Pit Chief shouted, slapping his gloved hand over the hood of the Roaring Rampart before flashing him a thumbs up.

Nyx nodded back to him in agreement. He exhaled hard, watching his breath explode out like a cloud of steam. Even inside the insulated hangar the place was like an icebox. No amount of indoor heating was going to keep this hangar, or the track, at a comfortable temperature. It was around forty degrees right now, and his knees were starting to ache from the cold.

Once he got inside the Rampart, with its engine running under him, he'd warm back up just fine. It'd be a cozy race until he had to park and climb back out into the cold again.

He wasn't worried about the race any.

The Cold Shoulder only had one corner that would stress out the Rampart, due to how tight a turn it was going to be. It was something like a 45-degree sharp turn, but the mileage on the track was so great that the 45 only looked scary on paper. In the flesh it wasn't much different than checking your blind spot in a car.

The rest of the track was well suited to him, being that the Cold Shoulder had been built like a five-pointed star. That's assuming of course that you remember to lop off one of the star's arms. It was a funny looking track that crossed over itself several times just like a pencil would if you drew that same five, or four, pointed star.

The race would start at the hangar, located at the southernmost tip, then immediately open out into a very short strip of track that ended with a very generous lefthand turn, then after a lengthy straightaway there came a 50–60-degree righthand turn that would then open into another long straightaway. Repeat these two more times and you'll be pulling right back into the hangar.

The track had exactly four turns and five straightaways totaling up to about 150 total miles of track.

Nyx enjoyed tracks like these, as it was hard to get bored of the scenery when you weren't driving laps past the same landmark three or more times. The benefit of building tracks on desolate places like Titan meant that the Association could buy up hundreds or even thousands of square miles for cheap and build huge tracks on them that only required a single lap to complete.

The Cold Shoulder was going to be a one lap race, too, with the last driver crossing the finish line after maybe a half hour or so of driving. Nyx expected to finish much sooner than that in a significantly better position than where he started, though he suspected he wouldn't come in first this time considering who else was here competing.

He actually preferred it that way.

Racing against small timers was a poor way to pass the time and was always the worst part of starting a new racing Season. The early Circuits in a Season were too filled to the brim with fresh meat that were eager to prove themselves, but they always came up short next to men like Nyx. He was the old man on the battlefield that younger men too often overlooked in their hubris.

"All drivers, please make way for the taxi service. The race will start in T Minus 10 minutes." A woman's prerecorded voice called out through the loudspeakers in the ceiling.

Nyx lifted his hand and with two fingers swirled a circle in the air to signal his team to back off from the Rampart. One nod of the head to his Pit Chief was all that was needed for the man to start issuing commands. The crew would be exiting the hangar to find someplace warmer to watch the action from.

Meanwhile, crews of Association personnel began to drive taxi lifts through the hangar to pick up bikes from their respective gantries. Nyx stood to the side as a taxi came to collect the Rampart. It stopped and began to slot its prongs into the metal platform the Rampart was parked on. Much like how a forklift would operate, the taxi used the prongs to hoist the platform off the ground before retracting the entire assembly into the back of the taxi.

With the Roaring Rampart weighing nearly two tons the taxi's guts were whining from the strain. A few minutes later, and all the bikes were loaded onto their respective taxis and were being carried off to the official starting point for today's race.

Next, four man-taxis started their engines and began to slowly pick up drivers, six to a taxi. Nyx began walking towards the taxi nearest to him, hopping on and taking a seat on one of the benches. Another two drivers hopped onto the taxi with him, making it a full house. Nyx scanned his eyes around, checking the faces of who was riding with him, and then looking over at the other three vehicles which were now full of drivers, too.

None of the real competition was sharing a taxi with him. Nuka Song and Duke Odina were elsewhere sharing a taxi, and Xander Haufman was in yet another. There were others here that had talent, but not enough to put them ahead of the pack.

Though, this industry likes dropping surprises every now and again, and Nyx always welcomed a good surprise.

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“Ladies and Gentlemen, I think this race is finally about to start heating up!” Vic Vigor announced, leaning forward excitedly as he watched the plethora of television screens that fed the race feed to the News Bunker.

“Vic, honey, that’s the sixth temperature pun you’ve made in under an hour!” Grace lamented, resting her cheek into the palm of her hand.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were counting.” He laughed, leaning over towards her to give her thigh the lightest of squeezes. She rolled her eyes and tugged her leg away from his grip.

“But yes! You are right, and I’m hoping everyone watching has made sure to get their liquor and their licorice ready, because the race is indeed about to start! That’s what Vic should have said, instead of another of his silly puns.” Grace added, a graceful hand laid across her petite bust as she did her best to remain the angel of virtue while her co-host allowed his reputation as a charismatic lady’s man to dominate his side of the desk.

“Licorice? Who even eats that these days, let alone with liquor?” He asked, drawing attention away from the race and towards the elegant, and now flustered, heron.

“Well, if you can play with your puns then I can play with my alliteration!” She defended herself. “And I’ll have you know that licorice is an acquired taste, some might even say Avant Garde. I’m not sure you’d have any idea what good taste is, Mr. Vigor.” She replied.

“Oh, I know plenty about taste, but before someone storms into the bunker and strangles us for all this small talk, let’s bring everyone’s attention back down to today’s race! How about it!” He replied, his charm not so strong that he’d forget to mind the clock ticking down to the start of today’s race.

Turning his attention to the large screens in front of him and Grace, he reached over to give the heron another squeeze of the thigh and she stifled a giggle as she swatted away his hand.

“Absolutely! For anyone that hasn’t paid any attention to the roster, the lineup we’ve got in store for you today is absolutely incredible! It isn’t often we get so many power players in a single race like this, so this is truly going to be a sweet treat!” The heron said, reaching her right hand over to a panel at her side that gave her limited control over some of the screen overlays and transitions that were possible during race coverage.

She pressed a green button on the top right of the panel, and on the main screen in front of them the roster of drivers began to crawl upward across the screen like it was a sci-fi flick.

“Oh, you’re definitely right about that. Shave ten to fifteen years off my age and I’d be itching to be down there myself. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten to see Nuka Song and Duke Odina race against each other live and in person!” Vic added.

“And Nyx Mortar is down there, which isn’t a terrible surprise. He’s been in so many races this season you’d think he’s trying to qualify for next year’s Caelum Run.” She told him.

"I think it's a foregone conclusion that he is. Four times in a row isn't enough for The Immortal, Nyx Mortar. He won't stop until he gets his 1st place finish!" He replied.

"Oh, I don't doubt it, but there's so many people out there trying to get in, too. Why, I think even Ms. Song is making an effort, though she recently denied that she's trying to qualify. She'd be a fantastic face to see on race day for the next Run!" Grace replied.

"Oh, no doubt about it. Her, Nyx, even Duke Odina though I doubt he's got it in him. He's not as old as I was when I retired, but I see some of myself in him when I watch his races. He's trying his damndest, but it looks like something in him is giving out." Vic replied.

"We can't all be Nyx Mortar, right? I think he turned forty-two this year but there he is like he's still twenty and kicking it!" She replied, and Vic shook his head.

"That man's something else, never seems to miss a beat, but even he'll have to stop eventually before something else makes him." Vic replied.

A series of colorful green lights began to flash along the edges of the ceiling, which was a passive way of signaling to the News Bunker that the race was due to start in a few moments.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the race is about to start! Let's zoom in on that lineup! Get the drones in close!" Vic immediately shifted gears towards the here and now.

Elsewhere in the bunker, inside its own specialized command room, were the drone pilots. Twenty-eight men and women sat at their own consoles, each in control of a single state-of-the-art drone designed and built by the Association's best engineers. Each drone, fifty pounds in weight and about the size of your standard bike tire, was mounted with four high-definition cameras.

For every ARA sanctioned race, a drone was assigned to follow a driver, with four extra drones operating in tandem to capture additional footage from other angles. With Vic Vigor announcing live that the cameras needed to pull in close to the lineup for today's race the swarm of drones all launched from their own ceiling-mounted bays.

Once in the air, the swarm held steady just below the hangar's concrete ceiling, waiting for the race to start, while the four pilots that were designated as extras flew their drones down to sweep their cameras across the two long lines of bikes. In another part of the News Bunker was Camera Control, where the video feed from all twenty-eight drones were being fed to a massive room of televisions and support staff that micromanaged the live feed for the entire race.

More than three dozen people studied the video feeds and made judgment calls on which angles were to be prioritized with another group of technicians at the ready to resolve any problems that might arise during a race that could interfere with the broadcast.

Back where Vic Vigor and Grace Gallant were sitting, all their television screens began to switch views until all that was on display was the lineup of bikes.

“This should be such a fun race!” Grace said, excitedly clapping her hands and leaning forward to give herself a better view.

“Oh absolutely, just look at all those beauties down there. Nuka Song and Nyx Mortar of course there in the middle of the pack, and Duke right behind them. Honestly, apart from those three I’m really interested in seeing how well Nia Ahmad and Jozo Rask perform.” Vic replied, tapping his fingers across the buttons of his own panel to signal a request to the drone pilots for a tighter zoom on those two drivers.

The pilots in the drone Command Center complied, shifting the four drones that were surveying the lineup to locate and single out Jozo Rask driving his Little Champion, manufactured by GAW Motors, and Nia Ahmad driving the Wash Out, manufactured by Sollan Verti.

“What has you intrigued about those two?” Grace asked.

“Nia’s bike is called the Wash Out, which amuses me. I just get a kick out of people choosing names that imply they might fail. They usually have a quirky personality I can get behind. And then Jozo is a long-time vet whose proved himself a whiz on tracks like these. I think a track like Cold Shoulder would be perfect for him.” He told her.

Grace began to type onto her own panel, and as she did the drone pilots all began to rearrange themselves to bring other bikes into view.

“I see, well I see your two and I’ll raise you two of my own! I think a little spotlight is well deserved for Shadi Umar and Arlen Daniels. They’ve both been doing great this Season and I’ve been trying to follow their careers a little more closely to see how well they do. I think they’ve got a lot of great potential!” She replied.

With the drones bringing the pair into better focus, you could clearly make out the bikes of Shadi and Arlen. Shadi Umar was driving the Cold Sweat, manufactured by Janis Inc. while four rows behind her was Arlan Daniels and his Carefree Spirit, also manufactured by Janis Inc.

“Not bad. I’m not as familiar with Arlen, but Shadi has been a real sport for years. She’s a great driver, and I do think she’ll do well today, but with the kind of competition she’s got against her it’s hard to give a prediction. There’s just too much talent down there!” He replied.

“You’re not wrong, but I think both of them will do better than you think. I have high hopes for Shadi especially, but Arlen has been knocking it out of the park during the last several of his races and the Cold Shoulder will probably be one of the easiest tracks for him to tackle this year. He’s survived far worse, and he’s come up against some heavy hitting competition. He went toe to toe with Resna Kant twice and made it away without a scratch, I’ll have you know.” The heron bragged on the driver’s behalf.

Vic let out a whistle in reply, looking impressed.

“Well, maybe you’re right! I can’t wait to see.” He replied, and the running lights around the room began to flash colorfully again. The panels at the sides of the desk began to flash as well, the race authorities giving final authorization for the race to start. The drivers were now all in their bikes, at the ready, and all that was left was for the gun to fire.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I know it must have been killing you to have to listen to me and Vic kill time while the race gets its shoes on, but we’re finally here!” Grace cheered, cheerfully clapping once again.

“And do we have an incredible race for you! We are counting down now from thirty seconds! Get those drones ready people, we’ve got a race to watch!” Vic added.

Off and away from the News Bunker, the starting line was flooded with the fog of twenty hot running engines, the exhaust pumping out heat and leaving a layer of mist to hang just over the frigid asphalt track of the Cold Shoulder.

Nestled comfortably in the Roaring Rampart was Nyx Mortar, laying belly down in his mighty machine while her engine rumbled angrily around him. With eyes shut he patiently waited with hands on the grips. His bike was ready, the only thing keeping him from flying down the track was the brake lock.

“Ten seconds to race start.” The voice recording called out. With Nyx’s habit of never wearing a helmet, he only heard it because of the small earbud he’d stuck into his left ear.

He opened his eyes and revved his engine. The thunderous roar of the Rampart sounded its call. The name of his bike wasn’t just him being cute. It was a custom-built machine made just for him, and his engine had to be powerful enough to carry a bike as heavy as his at a top speed of 310mph. It took him a few weeks to settle on a name, but Roaring Rampart had proven perfect.

It’s engine literally roared, much louder than other bikes that drove the tracks each Season, and just like the ramparts of ancient European castles, the Roaring Rampart was a fortress. Built like a tank he could wreck it in every race and never have to worry about it being too totaled to drive again. It was nearly indestructible.

The red lights that held everyone back turned a rich shade of yellow. He revved his engine again, staring forward at the bikes ahead of him. He quickly recounted the roster, rolling through the names of the drivers he had the most to worry about. It didn’t take long, since the number of threats were so few today.

The lights flashed to green.

“Race Start!” The pre-recorded voice shouted at max volume over the loudspeakers, and every bike on the track launched forward.

Nyx felt himself sink backwards against the padding in the Rampart, his bike slower than most, his competition quickly overtaking him in ones and twos until the precious seconds passed by that allowed his bike to reach its top speed.

Almost every race was the same, with the pack overtaking him due to his heavy weight and poor acceleration. The Rampart was just too slow to pick up speed as quickly as other bikes, and his top speed wasn’t the highest either. What he lacked in speed, however, he made up for in his head. He knew how to drive and had nearly twice the experience of the majority of drivers on the asphalt today.

He won his races by being the patient elder, the old man on the battlefield that understood when to move, where to move, and why to move. With the Rampart being an unstoppable force of nature, he never had to worry about being forced off the track. His bike was nearly two tons in weight, the legal maximum for any bike. There was no bike tough enough to knock him off course, and the drivers that were dumb enough to try were always left ruining themselves as Nyx knocked them to the floor like a boxer in the ring.

And the best thing about single lap races like these was that they were easy to plan for. You only had to navigate a hazard once, and the second a problem fell behind you it was gone for good, never to bother you a second time. Nyx favored tracks like the Cold Shoulder.

The first leg of the race went about as he expected. No one was fighting each other, just every driver trying to take advantage of the long straight away with all the fastest bikes pulling ahead of the pack. It was a natural sorting process, like blood in a centrifuge separating all of its components into neat little layers.

But soon the process would get an ugly shuffle when the front runners reached the first major turn of the track.

Here is where Nyx expected things to improve for him. Every time the route hit a tight turn, of which there were four on this track, Nyx would naturally gain in position as the less experienced drivers struggled to hit their turns at top speed, too hungry to eat at the Winner's Circle table to throttle their speed back to safely make the corner.

He'd already predicted the outcome for today's race, he was just checking in to see if he was right. Far up ahead of him the drivers in front all hit the first turn, and half of them fumbled, skidding into the left side wall violently where they then had to struggle to recover as the ringing in their ears subsided. Only the more seasoned drivers survived the turn without missing a beat.

And just like that Nyx feathered his brake and cut the corner, making the turn himself with little to no loss in speed, passing by faster bikes driven by rookies that bit off more than they could chew. Driving a faster bike doesn't mean much if you don't know how to drive, and all that speed doesn't make ice any less slick.

The Rampart passed by several more bikes while they fought to recover. As he sped off on the second straightaway for the Cold Shoulder, he figured he knew which bikes behind him would recover first and overtake him. He was just wondering if they'd screw up again at the next corner or if they would learn their lesson.

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"Oh no!" Grace lamented, putting her face in her hands to violently shake her head.

Down on the track one of her favorites, Shadi Umar, had just joined the list of drivers who'd wiped out in today's race. Three drivers were now out of the running, each having been taken out by the sharp turns on the Cold Shoulder. Today's track was deceptive, tricking drivers into believing that its lengthy straightaways were their friend, but that was in fact a lie.



Reaching your top speed on cold asphalt that required an underground heating system to prevent ice from forming was a bad idea. Try as the Association might, they weren't gods and mother nature had a way of making sure that ice was a constant threat on tracks built on Titan. Entering one of the Cold Shoulder's tight turns at a bike's top speed risked putting a driver on a road that had less grip than expected, and skidding and slipping was an ever-present problem.

Every turn the drivers took, several of them were threatened with a loss of control, until finally one driver after another started crashing into the side walls. Most recovered, but bikes like Cold Sweat, driven by Shadi Umar, could only handle so much abuse after slamming into the wall twice in one race. Her wreck was gentle, her machine sputtering out of control after an engine failure that left her losing speed and stopping dead on the track and awaiting a Retrieval Team.

The previous two crashes had been significantly more violent and one of the drivers was being escorted to the on-site emergency room to be treated for a concussion and broken femur.

"Oh, none of our favorites are doing well today!" Vic lamented as well, dropping his elbows to the desktop, reaching over to his panel to thumb the controls.

"No, no they haven't! I'm usually a better guesser than this, Vic!" Grace replied pitifully, using her own controls.

Together, they began to update the screen with updated positions for the remaining twenty-one drivers now zooming across the live feed. With less than an estimated five-to-six-minutes left until the first bike crosses the finish, the pair of commentators were distraught over their favorites lagging in position.

With Shadi Umar now out of the race, Grace's remaining favorite Arlen Daniels had stalled out. He'd started today's race at the back of the starting lineup and had steadily climbed in position until the halfway point for the Cold Shoulder. It was there that he seemed to stay, never finding himself able to climb further ahead than 10<sup>th</sup> place, and the gap between him and current 9<sup>th</sup> place driver, Youko Ho and her Stone Scout, was widening by the second.

Vic Vigor's fan favorites were doing poorly, too. Nia Ahmed was lagging behind, having started strong near the front of the pack but every turn cost her dearly with her falling further and further behind. She was currently in 12<sup>th</sup> place, but she was now forced to fight tooth and nail with her fellow driver Rent Tile, driving his Cue Ball, to keep it.

Jozo Rask was faring far worse, having just lost 14<sup>th</sup> to Felicity Dare, driving the Dour Behemoth, and now struggling to keep himself ahead of rival Fez Tulli and his bike, the Piff Pow!.

With so little time left in the race the final results were almost all but set in stone, but all that could change should the unexpected occur, and there was always a chance of that in the Accelerated Racing Association!

"Do you think we can still brag that we were right about the Winner's Circle?" Vic asked his co-host, leaning over to comfort her with a hand on her thigh.

She reached down to pat his hand, no longer interested in pushing it away, instead choosing to let her hand rest over his.

“I don’t think we can brag over stating the obvious, Vic, they were obviously gonna win!” Grace replied, reaching with her other hand to signal that she wanted to bring up the front runners.

The camera feeds began to change, swapping out displays until the footage from four different drones began to show the action happening at the front of the pack. For Grace and Vic, they had a wide array of television screens to watch, while viewers at home had to use their remote controls to switch manually between the different available feeds.

“Nuka Song is of course in first, and she’s so far ahead there’s no way anyone else is catching her!” Vic replied, then pointed at the center display.

The view ahead of him was a zoomed in shot of the Hot Ice Hilda, Nuka Song’s bike built by Olympus Mechanics. The large red and pink monster was a heavy weight behemoth with an incredible engine that kept it moving at high speed, while leaning into its own weight class to maximize its grip on the track to bolster its handling performance.

“Nuka Song and the Cold Shoulder are a great example of two things being made for each other. With how fast she can go, and how good her grip is, there was no chance of her lagging behind anyone else. This entire race, go check the replays when you can, will show that she never missed a beat at every corner the Cold Shoulder threw at her.” Vic began to sing the distant woman’s praises, Nuka Song being a long-time veteran of the Association with more than two decades of experience.

“Oh absolutely, and I can’t see either Clay or Nyx catching up to her, though I’m honestly a little shocked to see Clay is there at all. His bike just doesn’t seem well suited to this track at all.” The heron replied.

Vic pulled his hand away from her thigh, his technical expertise demanding that he talk with both hands, lifting them high to gesture.

“It’s not, but I think Clay must have known that going into it, but I was noticing that every time he’d come to a corner, he would risk it all to pull off a wild turn. The Thunderclap is a good bike, but it’s still a Triple 7.” He replied.

“I always hate those, every time someone I like starts driving one of those goofy things, I get nervous!” Grace told him, her hand working the panel again to shift the attention away from Nuka Song to Clay Claw, who was now neck and neck with Nyx Mortar.

Nyx’s blue beast, the Roaring Rampart was casually driving down the middle of the track, while Clay’s own Thunderclap was weaving in an effort to squeeze himself into any opening he could if it meant putting more distance between him and his rival.

“See, right now he’s fine and I don’t doubt that by the time they reach the finish that Clay will take second. His bike is rated to have a slightly higher top speed than the Roaring Rampart. But the Thunderclap has such terrible steering that he had to think up ways to take those turns without sacrificing his top speed, and I think he was gambling the entire race. Every turn he was shaving paint off his hull by brushing up against the inside wall.” Vic continued.

"I just love how Nyx doesn't seem to care what's going on around him." She replied, changing the subject a little.

"No, he doesn't! Even if he was racing against Valeria Ren he wouldn't be sweating. He knows he's safe in that monster he's driving. He doesn't need to do anything now except floor it and wait for the flag to drop." He told her with a smile.

Down on the track, the three front runners were barreling ever closer to the finish line with the last turn of the race now behind them. It was a straight shot to the finish with only minutes to go.

Just as Vic and Grace had said, Nyx Mortar was driving down the center of the track, drawing a steady line down the frigid asphalt while Clay Claw struggled to gain enough inches to firmly put him ahead of his opponent. It was a certainty now that Nuka Song would take 1<sup>st</sup>, the Hot Ice Hilda now a full thirty seconds ahead of her rivals. Meanwhile, Clay had secured 2<sup>nd</sup> place by only a fraction of a second over Nyx Mortar's 3<sup>rd</sup> position.

The reptile driving the Roaring Rampart did not seem to be bothered by being in 3<sup>rd</sup>, as he made no effort to stop Clay's advance.

Nuka Song then crossed the finish line, taking 1<sup>st</sup>, the black mamba slamming her brakes to slow her approach as she entered the hangar.

Waiting for her were the drag nets, massive constructions of synthetic webbing that were used to catch bikes and force them to a rapid halt when they entered compact spaces like the Cold Shoulder's hangar. There were thirty-two nets in operation, one for every driver in today's race with extras as insurance, though due to the three crashes earlier, only twenty-one of the nets would be seeing use today.

The Hot Ice Hilda slammed into the first net she came to, the thick elastic cables stretching, the gaps in the web yawning wide as her speed dropped sharply from over 300mph to around 50mph. Her bike was still driving forward, the momentum and grip from her tires keeping her from being slingshot backwards as she feathered her brake and let her speed naturally come to a crawl to safely stop.

Clay and Nyx then each crossed the finish line to slam into nets of their own.

The Roaring Rampart hit its net, the cables straining under the bike's monstrous weight. The Hot Ice Hilda was similar in weight, but her drag net had held the line, the synthetic material the drag nets were made of having been rated to catch bikes as heavy as two and half tones without snapping.

But unlike the Hot Ice Hilda, with its smooth rounded exterior, the Roaring Rampart was angular with many sharp edges on its hull.

The drag net that was struggling to catch the Roaring Rampart snagged on one of the bikes many sharp edges, and for the first time in Nyx's career a drag net actually tore. With that first snap, the rest of the net gave out under the strain and his bike ripped through the rest of the net and flew through the webbing at half its top speed. Nyx slammed his brakes, bracing for impact while ARA personnel fled the scene to avoid the crash as the Roaring Rampart slammed nose first through a bike gantry and into the wall opposite the finish line.

“Oh my God!” Grace was screaming, her hands trembling over her mouth as she watched in real time as the famously Immortal, Nyx Mortar, suffered his first crash in six years. The ruined remains of the bike gantry sparked and smoked from being torn through like paper, the impact of the bike against the concrete wall having shaken other nearby gantries and work zones so hard that tools and debris were now littering the floor.

“Jesus, what the hell happened! Why’d the net break, they’re not supposed to fucking break!” Vic shouted, standing up from the desk and outraged at the failure of a such critical safety measure.

You couldn’t run a single lap track like the Cold Shoulder without drag nets in place to catch bikes as they crossed the finish line, because there was seldom enough room to let a bike come to a stop naturally without something present to catch them.

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There was a loud ringing in his ears, and then a terrible headache began to split his head wide open. He opened his eyes only to blink as a chorus of voices were shouting all around him. The bright overhead lights of the hangar bay were blinding him, and he lifted his hand to shield his eyes, but another hand took him by the wrist and forced him to lower his arm.

“Mr. Mortar! Mr. Mortar, can you hear my voice?” An eagle wearing the white uniform of an ARA EMT was hovering over him, now shining a small flashlight into his eyes, forcing him to blink even more.

“Did I crash?” He asked.

He immediately tried to remember what he’d been doing. He’d been close to crossing the finish line.

“I can’t remember finishing the race.” He quickly added.

“Mr. Mortar you have a concussion and we’re going to take you to Medical for evaluation. You might have other injuries we can’t see right now. You crashed into the wall after the drag net failed.” The EMT began to rapidly, but calmly, explain.

Suddenly, there was a stretcher being brought next to him, and Nyx began to become more aware of his surroundings. He was lying on his back a few dozen feet away from what looked like the Roaring Rampart, its front end dented almost flat, concrete and metal scattered across the floor from what looked like a dead-on impact with the wall.

Now, suddenly, he was wide awake and very aware of himself and his surroundings, blinking at the obvious wreck that he’d clearly survived.

“Oh, so I survived.” He laughed, now in good spirits and pointing out the obvious.

“Sir, please remain calm, we need to get the rest of you checked out.” He was told, and a team of three carefully lifted him up and onto the stretcher.

Panning his eyes around he saw that the race must have just ended, bikes were still tangled in their drag nets with drivers and their crews crowding around Nyx and his crashed bike. They were being held back by armed security personnel to keep the EMTs free from interference. His own team was within the crowd watching with concern.

“What place did I get?” He asked.

“3<sup>rd</sup> place. Sir, can you tell me exactly what you remember? I need to know if you’re suffering from any amnesia. Have you also ever had a concussion before?” The eagle asked him, and as they took him away to the medical wing of the facility, he answered all the EMTs questions, and then answered them all again when he was presented in front of a doctor.

Today’s race at the Cold Shoulder had ended with a thunderous bang, with the famous Nyx Mortar suffering a terrible crash, but miraculously surviving due to the sheer durability of the Roaring Rampart. Martian Heavy Industries had built the bike so rugged that apart from external damage to the front of the bike, and the twisted front wheel, the Rampart had limped away with shockingly little damage for such a high impact crash, a testament to its impeccable design.

Its driver Nyx Mortar was diagnosed with a mild concussion, whiplash, and a broken collar bone. The interior of the Roaring Rampart’s air bag system did deploy, catching its drivers and preventing the worst of the potential injuries he might have suffered. His stubborn refusal to wear a helmet ended up being the primary cause of all his injuries.

The Cold Shoulder track was put into retirement immediately after the accident so that an investigation could be performed on all drag nets to ascertain the cause of today’s failure. The results are still pending, but the current assumption is that a combination of long-term exposure to cold temperatures alongside the angular design of the Roaring Rampart created an unsafe combination that resulted in the drag net failing, prompting a review of all currently in-use drag net safety systems.