

The serpent groaned, twisting his back as he slowly roused himself from sleep, feeling as much as hearing his spine pop in a few different places. He exhaled, then lifted himself up and out of bed. The room was cold, too cold for his bare skin as he padded across the room to find the bathrobe he'd slung over the back of the chair the previous night. Resting on the table was his breakfast, right where he'd left it yesterday evening.

Thak Jypsun, serpentine extraordinaire, now stood bare assed at the window of his hotel room with a glass of whisky in his left, and a cigarette in his right. A real breakfast of champions.

Anyone with the idea of looking up from the dingey street below would have seen the serpent's carefree spirit, his bathrobe left open to expose the world to as much of him as anyone could bear to stomach. The tabloids never needed to work hard to find dirt when it was Thak Jypsun they were reporting on. He often waved to the paparazzi like they were good friends of his, just to irritate or confuse them.

But his view from the hotel's full-length window was shit, as he was on Lagrange 4. Everything was shit here, but it was within spitting distance of Earth and Luna, so it was easy to show up to squeeze in a quick race before moving on to the next one.

That's about the only reason people came to this shithole colony.

The interior of Lagrange 4 was just a dirty, dingey, trash heap of poverty and working-class struggle. Before Thak had been born, many decades ago now, Lagrange 4 had been a major hub of transportation and trade. People and goods flowed through it like water passing through whatever that river is called in North America. The Missilippy, something like that. He was from Ganymede, so the only names from Earth he knew were cities he'd raced at before.

But Lagrange 4 had once been a lively, prosperous place with excellent pensions and benefits.

Now, with Thak living life at the ripe age of 33 years of old, Lagrange 4 was what happened to a colony after space flight gets a few good engine upgrades. People didn't need to make pit stops here like they used to, as ships were much faster now and could just go straight on to their destinations. This left Lagrange 4 a deep hole filled with people too poor to climb their way out of the colony and on to greener pastures.

He squinted his eyes, seeing the distant flickering of lights on the other side of the colony's cylindrical body. The grey and brown sea of metal and industry flickered like the nighttime horizon of a planet side city, except carved into it was now a single straight road that made a big ass loop around the full circumference of Lagrange 4's interior.

The Lagrange Loop, the colony's only sanctioned racetrack, was what Thak was now watching. It was short, sweet, simple. An easy race, and they ran them 24/7 without stopping to accommodate people like Thak who wanted to get in and get out before the shit could cling too long to his shoes. As he watched the flickering of lights through the window, entire rows of them speeding along that narrow road running a loop around the colony, he could see the bed behind him in the reflection of the glass.

A lump in the bed began to move about under the covers, until a porcelain white and petite little figure poked her head up to look for him. He half watched her as she slipped out of the bed, just as naked as he'd been, with her white fur a matted mess from the night before. He took a sip from his glass, savoring the sharp burn of alcohol, listening to her footsteps as she approached him from behind. She reached him both in the reflection and in person.

"Good morning." She told him in a whisper, and he hummed back in reply.

The little white rabbit stepped around him, squeezing between him and the window, before slipping herself into his robe. She hugged him tight for warmth as he took a drag on his cigarette.

"It's early again." Mary, who was his wife, told him.

"Just doing some thinking." He replied, exhaling a plume of smoke over the window and his own reflection.

She coughed from the smoke, hiding her face in his chest while he took another sip at his glass.

It was such a simple race. Do fifteen laps and the race would be over in about half an hour, maybe a little more. It was like the fast food of tracks, a quick in and out with fries in the bag. He just needed to figure out how dirty he'd allow himself to race today.

He couldn't be as cutthroat as he used to, as he needed to maintain the appearance of being a changed, God-fearing Christian man. There would be no sideswiping today, or sneaky tricks. That would have to race honest again, too honest. It would be a terribly boring half hour of him driving in a straight line for fifteen laps!

"You should eat a real breakfast." She told him, and he hummed in reply.

"When I'm down in the garage I'll down an energy bar and protein shot." He told her, making reference to his other favorite breakfast of champions.

For short races he preferred being on the hungry side, and his crew would be shipping out shortly after the race was concluded, so he could eat a real meal once they were on the shuttle to Luna.

"When do you need to leave?" She asked him.

He glanced over at the bright red letters on the wall clock.

"Half hour, but not in a hurry." He told her.

His attention was then pulled away from the lights in the distance, and to his own reflection in the glass. The petite white rabbit began to slide down his legs and onto her knees in front of him. That took another long drag, watching the embers burn brightly in the reflection. He exhaled, blowing smoke across the glass while his wife started blowing something much larger than a cigarette.

“Ladies and gentleman! Our next race is due to start in one hour!” The announcer crackled out over the loudspeaker.

Thak navigated his way through the throngs of people crowding the streets. His wife had been left behind in the hotel room where she would be watching the race. Safer for her to be there than out mingling with these unwashed masses. A dumb girl like her would get into trouble here.

And that race being called out on the loudspeaker was his.

His phone buzzed in his jacket, Thak pulling it out to check it, then flipped it open, lifting it to his ear.

“I’m just walking up. How’s the Valiant?” He asked, dodging a burly rhino in a jumpsuit as he made his way forward through the mass of bodies.

Technicians, crews, custodians, and even children were clogging the grounds today. It was probably like this every day, since this is what it looked like every time he was here. The children weren’t here to watch the races though, most of them were either pickpockets or trying to sell you worthless crap. That’s why he kept anything important in his inside jacket pocket.

At least when you feel a woman touch your ass from inside your back pocket it’s for pleasure. You feel anything like that anywhere around here and you’ll leave the colony minus a kidney for how quick they can fleece you.

“She’s good to go, just waiting on the officials to clear her for the race. Got two of them snooping over her now.” The voice of his Chief Tech replied.

“Copy. Be there in a few minutes.” He replied, then snapped the phone shut before slipping the skinny device back into his pocket.

Of course they were snooping, they always did. He made damn sure to make a stink about it, too, whenever he was in public. Privately, he’d be snooping himself, too, if he were anybody else. But that was him being the pragmatic sort of fellow that he was.

The serpent dipped the street and down a well-marked alleyway that led to a junction in the footpath. Ugly scenery was everywhere to be seen, the only thing that was missing were the homeless, but that was an Earth Only sort of thing that even the two Lagranges didn’t have. They put your ass to work on the colonies whether you liked it or not, put a shackle around your neck if they had to. You worked or the only thing you ate was a hard foot into your ribcage until you learned to enjoy the taste of blood.

He rounded the corner and made his way towards the equally well-marked back entry to the garage where he’d had the Valiant taken. There were a pair of burly doormen, and they were already buzzing the door open for him even as he was still pulling out his wallet for the ID check. IDing Thak Jypsun was more of a formality these days.

They let him in, and once he was inside the garage the dank air from outside was replaced with the fresh, crisp aroma of oil and fuel. At least everything was about as clean as a garage could be

expected to be. He knew he was looking for Garage Bay 17, which was on the other “north” end of the garage from where he was at.

Eyes followed him as he moved, most people steering clear of him as he made his way through the garage. Thak didn't need an introduction, even without his bright orange jumpsuit. He was dressed casual, the only iconic thing about him being the grey jacket he liked to wear.

“Mr. Jypsun!” A vaguely familiar voice called out, several nearby conversations falling silent at the sound of Thak's name being shouted.

“No.” He replied more to himself than to anyone shouting at him, not even bothering to direct his voice or increase his volume any louder than a whisper.

The voice called out again, even more familiar now as it drew closer, the sound of two pairs of feet clapping their soles on the concrete floor approaching him from behind.

“No.” He replied again, a thread of irritation tugging inside him like the pull string of a child's toy. His tail flicked in response on its own, producing a quiet rattle.

“Mr. Jypsun! It's a pleasure to see you again!” The owner of the voice appeared beside him suddenly, Thak looking sideways with an ugly sneer stretched across his mug.

The smiling face of a reporter was now beaming all his disgustingly pearly white teeth at him, framed by the russet red face of a certain male fox he'd come to hate.

The fox wasn't ARA, but a member of Lagrange 4's local news. The ARA didn't dump any more money into L4 than was necessary, and they seldom sent their people here to cover races in person. The local news boy was no different than most other locals to the colony, an unwashed body mass of poverty who'd crawled on his belly until he found a job that paid well enough to keep him just barely on his feet.

Except this one spent all his income on his teeth and not one penny anywhere else. Perfect teeth framed by a face in desperate need of a wash and comb.

“No.” Thak replied for the third time, another rattle produced by his tail.

“When I saw your name on the roster, I just had to find you! Can you tell us what you've got planned for your race today! What tricks are you planning, should we send out a warning to the morgue?” The fox hit him with a flurry of questions, shoving a handheld mic in Thak's face.

The serpent's hand shot up and snatched the fox by the hand, catching and twisting the mic back around and toward its owner's own face. He squeezed with a tight grip.

“I said no.” Thak replied, twisting around to glare at the shorter man.

The fox replied with a bigger smile, lifting his free hand to reveal he'd slipped a taser from his pocket. Thak sneered again, licking one of his fangs with his tongue like he was scratching an ugly itch. He let go of the fox.

“The world wants to know what the infamous Thak Jypsun has in store for the Lagrange Loop today! What do you say!” The fox replied, lowering the taser and tucking it back into his pocket, twisting the mic back around to aim it at Thak.

This one was a frustrating, persistent, prick. Just like the belly crawlers that try to sneak product into your pocket to swindle you into a sale, or the pickpockets that follow you for hours until finally you let your guard slip, this reporter was tenacious. He just wouldn't take a hint and scam every time Thak was here.

“No tricks. I'm just here to race clean, just like I have all Season.” The serpent replied, molding his sneer back into the approximate shape of a proper smile, because right next to the fox was a cameraman with a handheld aimed right at him, capturing the entire interaction on film.

“Oh, but that can't be true! You're Thak Jypsun! Surely, you've got some kind of scheme! Everyone watching is hoping and praying to see you do something exciting today! The Lagrange Loop needs some spice to punch up its flavor!” The fox told him with a toothy grin, his face a mockery of aesthetics.

The serpent quietly inhaled, trying to maintain his smile even as his tail continued to quietly threaten the fox with the occasional stress induced rattle.

“As I have said many times over, I've turned over a new leaf. I have no intentions of playing tricks on the track and will be racing as clean today as I have this entire Season. The Valiant 03 is being inspected right now to ensure that there is nothing funny going on, and the ARA will be reporting later that my bike is 100% clean, same as its driver.” Thak replied calmly, making a similar speech to the ones he'd been making all Season.

It was getting old.

“No one believes that, tell me what you're planning.” The fox replied, his smile gone and voice now a deadpan.

A sneer was the first thing given back in reply, but then the showman in him was starting to come out, which happened any time the camera lingered on him for too long.

“Why, that's an offensive thing to say! I recognize that my track record for many years has been rife with scandal, but I would like to think that this year I might have convinced a few people that I'm being very sincere!” Thak replied almost like it was intended to scold.

“And you've built up a big reputation for being a bald-faced liar, so what good does half a Season of clean races do? It wouldn't be out of the question for Thak Jypsun to pull a long con!” The reporter shot back animatedly.

His tail rattled once in reply.

“There is no long con, I can assure you.” Thak replied, tapping himself on the chest while reaching his free hand over to catch his elbow.

Now that he had his one hand elevated, he began to enunciate his words with little waves of his hands like a form of ASL that only he could read.

“I’ve been worked painfully hard to correct my old habits, as my dear wife can attest to. I cannot say I’m free of sin, nor that Saint Peter would let me through, but I’m young yet and I have taken many serious vows to atone. I’m not just racing clean to fool anyone into thinking I’m a righteous man, as I know that’s not possible. I have to clean my insides out first, so to speak, before anyone on the outside can even start to think I’m being honest. I’m doing this for my own salvation.” He told the fox, his eyes passing a glance at the camera propped over the shoulder of the cameraman.

He saw his tiny, warped reflection in the lens, and noticed that he was wearing a smug grin. He quickly corrected it, his face morphing from one expression to another to appear genuine.

“A cleansing diet would be a lot easier if that’s all you wanted to do, and it would make your races a lot more fun to watch for the rest us!” The fox shot back, shaking the mic at him.

His face morphed back into an ugly sneer.

“Go fuck yourself.” Thak replied, his tail snapping, an aggressive rattle echoing across the concrete before he pivoted on his heel to march away and towards his destination.

“Oh, I assure you Mr. Jyspun, I can afford to have someone else fuck me with my salary. I don’t need to marry a whore to get laid!” The reported mocked him from behind, and Thak kept walking, his tail rattling angrily all along the way.

As the serpent moved through the crowded garage, the ugliness of his mood was worn right on his face.

Life was honestly so much easier and less stressful when he was openly, brazenly, a villain of the ARA. He found it so easy to just smile and lie through his teeth at every junction, to slither his way through any impasse. Being forced to race honestly had been the hardest thing he’d ever done, even without all the pitfalls and difficulties of bribery, rigging, and cheating. Being slimy had a charm to it, a challenge that made him walk with pep in his step.

The only silver lining he had was the fact that being married wasn’t as hard as he’d thought it’d be, though he supposed that was only because of who he married. Had he picked anyone else as a prop he’d have probably divorced her by now, but God had smiled one gift down at his wayward son by talking a prostitute into turning herself over to Jesus, who then started writing him crazy love letters while he was in prison.

A sharp, yet lyrical whistle sounded out from further down the busy garage. It was a familiar tune that could only be sung by one of Thak’s junior techs. The cardinal was standing further down the way waiting for him, the bird lifting his hand and waving. Thak locked eyes with the bird and nodded, his pace quickening with purpose as he closed in on Bay 17.

“Boss, the snoops are gone, they’ve cleared you to race.” The cardinal told him as he walked by, the bird spinning on his heel to fall into line behind his employer.

“Good. Richard and Jimmy got her ready?” He asked in reply.

“Yep! She’s as good to go as the starting pistol.” The bird told him, provoking another nod in reply.

They reached the open hangar bay door and walked inside. The Valiant 03 was loaded into its gantry with his crew milling about lazily. She was a beaut’, looking pristine with a fresh coat of paint and polished up wheels, the font for the manufacturer a pearly perfect white on glossy black rubber.

He pulled off his jacket and handed it over to the cardinal, who took it.

“Got your duffel back there already, Boss.” Jimmy told him, and Thak replied with another nod, already snapping the button on his pants as he approached the door to the private facility in the rear of the Bay.

He entered, kicked the door shut and changed out his slacks and shirt to swap it out for a jumpsuit. Thak was already a minor celebrity in any circle where wheels met pavement, so his bright orange jumpsuit wasn’t something he wanted to wear any more than necessary, especially on Lagrange 4 where everyone assumed he likely had money on him.

He tucked his clothes back into the duffel and emerged with it in hand back out into the Bay. He handed the bag off to the cardinal in exchange for his jacket, Thak checking to see that his wallet was still in the inside pocket, it was. He pulled it on, zipped it up.

“Have that taken back to holding locker at the shuttle, then go help Mary pack my room.” He told the bird, who then darted off with the duffel bag.

They were all leaving as soon as the race was done, so the sooner their luggage made it to the shuttle the faster they could all leave.

Outside the Bay an alarm began to sound. It wasn’t an emergency alarm, but a warning for everyone to clear the walking space between the two ends of the garage. They were going to start collecting bikes soon to be brought out to the starting line.

“Did you tinker with the nitrous any?” Thak asked Richard, his Chief Technician, a large bear of a man.

“I played with it, but I couldn’t get it to replicate what you described without wasting more nitrous than you’d be happy with. I think to do what you want; we’ll have to start looking into getting a new injection system.” The bear replied.

Thak sneered.

His current injection system was a burst model, giving him three chances to dump nitrous into the engine and no more. He’d hoped to throttle back that injection so he could squeeze a few extra doses out of the tank without swapping out for an entirely new system. He didn’t mind a boost being a bit weaker if he could get about five of them instead of three.

“If it’s in the budget, research new injectors and new tanks. Find something economical.” He replied, getting a quick agreement in reply.

Outside, the walkway was clearing out and taxis were beginning to zip by to start collecting bikes from the end of the garage where he’d started and moving closer to Bay 17. Lagrange 4’s garage was long, the place he’d entered in from being near the halfway point. Something like seventy bikes could be stored here in gantries before they needed to be cleared out.

He exhaled, staring now at the Valiant and wondering if he’d have to upgrade her from a 03 to a 04 someday. He hoped not, as he liked the attitude of this one.

A taxi swung into their Bay and began the process of lifting the Valiant up and into its bed. Once he was given the go-ahead, Thak jumped up into the bed himself and stood with a hand on the Valiant as the taxi began to move.

“Good luck, boss!” One of his crew shouted, and he wordlessly nodded his head in reply as his mind began to whirl into motion about the race that was soon to come.

As boring as a race like this could be, his mind was still a collection of cog wheels that turned at speed, scheming and planning. He’d be going up against seventeen other drivers in this one, but half the roster were nobodies, as far as he was concerned. He’d already skimmed the dossiers of everyone he was competing against and found only three names that were notable enough to leave him raising an eyebrow.

Van Thresh worried him, because he was driving a tightly tuned 777, and the Lagrange Loop wasn’t going to stress out a bike like that at all. He’d have great acceleration and speed on his side to carry him along.

Belle Demure was also trouble, since her bike was rated to have the highest top speed of everyone he’d be competing against. In a previous life, Thak would have taken measures to knock her out of the running early, but he’d have to bite his tongue and keep his hands to himself. He’d have to outrace her the old-fashioned way instead of turning her into a smear on the pavement.

And then Gloria Dunlop, again because of a high top speed, but her bike was a heavyweight. Terrible acceleration but once she got going, and she would, she’d be unstoppable. Even if he raced dirty, he’d struggle to knock her out with the Valiant. He clapped his hand gently over the hood of his bike, irritated that he was risking a loss to two women and an effeminate man.

The taxis all began to drop their cargo off at the starting line with Thak waiting in line to be placed in the middle of the pack. Half the drivers had done as he had, which was ride out with the taxi carrying their bike, but the rest came in behind them on man-taxis. Everyone was now on the move, ditching their rides and allowing the crews to deposit each bike into its designated starting position.

Thak lingered at the periphery of his own zone, a trio of white clad jumpsuits riding in on a taxi of their own. One of them approached him with a tablet and quickly showed him the screen. Thak just nodded and waved the man off before he returned to his companions. The three began to do a walk around the Valiant, waving small wands around its components and checking the insides of the

wheel wells with little mirrors. They were humiliating him with yet another round of scrutiny to make sure he didn't have any aces up his sleeve.

As if he needed to go that far to cheat. If he'd felt the inclination, he could just drive another racer into the side wall and force them to crash. Most of his stunts were tricks like that. Just be a good driver and know what your bike could handle on the asphalt. The Valiant 03 wasn't a stock model bike, even if it looked like it was. He'd spent a good amount of money tuning up her chassis so that it was rugged enough to put other drivers through some ugly abuse.

The race suffered a slight delay due to the scrutiny, but finally the suits all gave their approval, then cleared out. Thak approached his bike, thumbed the cockpit release with the hatch swinging up and out. Everyone else was mounting their machines, and so Thak did the same, his mind back to whirling away at the race that was about to start.

His helmet was resting in the seat, and as she squeezed his tail into the back and his body right behind it, he slid the helmet over his head and secured it. The noise of engines starting came from all around him, then he silenced it at all with a push of a button, his cockpit sealed him in. Lights flicked on, illuminating the interior, and all his viewscreens came online.

As he ran through his routine pre-race checks, his Chief Tech was talking to him through his helmet, giving him a quick rundown of what his team had picked up from the garage via their own snooping. Two nobodies were driving bikes that looked like they needed repairs, probably too broke to afford proper maintenance. He didn't care about either of them.

Haley Hardball was driving a brand-new bike, similar model to her previous one. He wasn't concerned about that. Then Klixon Swank was overheard as saying he was enjoying his new injection system. That made him sneer with jealousy. He wondered what sort of system it was.

"All drivers, please prepare yourselves! T minus 5 minutes to race start!" The loudspeaker crackled, Thak barely hearing it from the inside of his bike.

All he cared to pay attention to were the overhead signal lights suspended over the starting line.

"Your wife is wishing you good luck." His Chief Tech told him through the radio.

He hummed in reply, staring forward with his hands now wrapped around the handles.

Time ticked by, and finally the bright red lights switched to yellow, the loudspeaker shouting that the race was about to start. When the lights all flicked to green, the sound of a fake gunshot blasted from the loudspeakers, and then Thak slammed his accelerator.

He shot forward along with everyone else, but the Valiant only needed about three seconds to reach its top speed. He quickly pulled ahead, the long straight track affording everyone plenty of room to reach their respective top speeds.

Thak knew he was now hovering at 300mph, too slow to whip some of his opponents, and he'd have to endure this for 15 painful laps. He checked his viewscreens, then jerked his bike to the side and

blocked a faster bike from pulling ahead of him, brake checking the other driver and forcing them to tap their own. Thak quickly regained speed and put distance between him and the other driver.

He had to race fair and square, but a little jockeying for position was normal for even the most strait-laced of drivers. His thumb hovered over the ignition switch for his nitrous, but with so many laps to sit through he wasn't ready to start dumping fuel just yet.

And as he'd suspected, the drivers he knew to worry the most about were giving him ulcers. Either too fast or too clever, they were being thorns in his side every single lap until finally halfway through the race he touched his nitro and dumped his first third into the tank. That briefly secured him 2nd Place, but then he fell back to 5th until he had to dump another third. The slower competition were all stuck fighting with each other behind him, but now he was far ahead of the pack with four drivers all trying to jockey for position to steal his spot.

Belle Demure was pulling ahead of him again, and she was too heavy for him to risk trying anything funny, especially with the cameras watching. Lagrange 4 was cheap, but they still had a fleet of drones following the track to record everything. He probably had several drones aimed squarely at him, watching his every move.

He jerked his bike to the left and cut off Fez Tulli, forcing him to feather his break and try to find a spot to pull ahead. Thak kept himself planted in his way while giving up on doing anything about Belle Demure. Gloria Dunlop was beside Fez Tulli with Van Thresh right behind her.

As they all sped through another completed lap Thak was fighting the urge to slam his break and knock Fez Tulli to the floor. His bike, the Piff Pow!, was a lightweight chassis and the Valiant could easily throw that bike to the side with a well-placed brake, and then Fez might skid itself into Van Thresh and they'd both stop being problems.

He couldn't do that though, so he purposely jerked to the right, giving Fez a false opening to pull ahead on Thak's left side, only for Thak to jerk back the other way. He tapped a switch next to his left thumb, shifting the Valiant from all-wheel drive to front, and then let his bike fishtail, its rear end swinging with the front wheel as its pivot point. This spooked Fez into thinking he was about to be hit, and he slammed his brake and backed off hard.

Thak tapped the switch again, catching the road with his all-wheel drive, then hit his nitro, dumping the last of what he had and quickly corrected his fishtail into a straight shot forward. Fez was in his rear screen falling behind Van Thresh who was now pulling to the side to wisely put distance between himself and Thak.

Gloria Dunlop and Belle Demure were ahead of him, but not by much. He was in 3rd Place and likely to keep it, but the gap between him and the women was going to start widening now that his nitrous was dry and he'd drop back to 300mph with three laps to go.

By the time he crossed the finish line, still in 3rd Place, Fez Tulli had caught up and pushed Van Thresh back into 5th. The gap between 3rd and 4th was small, irritatingly small. He really wanted more chances to dump nitrous in the tank, three just wasn't going to cut it anymore if he seriously expected himself to play fair in a race from now on.

The race was only 15 laps, but everyone who hadn't crashed out always drove one additional lap to let their bike slow down to a snail's pace. He did just that, then parked the Valiant in an open spot on the track, and once every bike had come to a complete stop the taxis all began to drive out to collect everyone's bikes.

Thak exited the Valiant, then moved aside so the taxi could do its job. As he waited, he walked a circle around the taxi to give the Valiant a go over, seeing that it looked no worse for wear. He'd not done anything too strenuous with it today. As he walked, he could see a few drivers were giving him dirty looks, or at least the ones who'd removed their helmets. Fez Tulli didn't look happy with him, but he should be grateful that Thak was an honest man now. He could have been made into a pancake if Thak felt so inclined.

There was a kind of smug satisfaction to be felt when he finished a race in the top three without pulling any stunts. Thak knew he was a talented driver; he didn't need to blow out someone's tire to win. Trickery was just a tool, but there were many tools in the chest to use.

When the Valiant was loaded up, he hopped onto the taxi and put a hand on the Valiant to keep himself steady, then waited to be driven back to Bay 17.

His crew were waiting for him, giving him a round of applause as the taxi backed up into the bay. Thak hopped off so the taxi could safely deposit the Valiant back into its gantry, but as his foot touched the concrete, he lifted his hand high and then gave a little bow to his team, a little flourish with a smile.

"We breaking out the champagne on the shuttle, boss?" Richard asked him.

Thak barked a laugh in reply.

"Not for this race. When we get to Luna City I might consider it." He replied.

"Mr. Jypsun!" A familiar voice shouted enthusiastically from behind him, and the tip of Thak's tail began to rattle.

Thak's mood immediately soured as he tightened his smile and turned around to look at who was behind him. The reporter from before was beaming a broad grin as he approached, his cameraman in tow right behind him film.

"Go away, not doing interviews." Thak told him, then turned back to face his crew.

The fox appeared at his side, mic uplifted and shoving it towards Thak's face, testing his patience.

"Mr. Jypsun, congratulations on your 3rd Place finish today! But don't you think you could have taken 1st had you driven the way you used to? How can you feel confident about your performance this Season when you aren't racing at your best?" The fox spat out quick questions.

Thak flexed his jaw, tail rattling enough to put his crew on visible edge.

“Taking 3rd out of 18 positions is a good finish, but I don’t expect a reporter to understand the difference between success and failure. Now leave before I have one of my boys toss you out of the Bay.” Thak threatened the fox, his sour mood no longer permitting him to even humor a camera.

“Oh, I don’t think that will be happening, because the story is that you’ve gone soft! Everyone saw how you raced today, and you could have pulled some incredible stunts, Mr. Jypsun, but you turned coward the whole way through! How do you expect to keep up your reputation with a performance like that?” The fox grilled him.

Richard started to step forward, being a big man and easily capable of tossing the reporter and his cameraman out of the Bay. The fox slipped his free hand from his pocket, revealing the taser from before. Thak lifted his own hand and directed Richard to stop. He was actually starting to lose his temper now.

“Go back to getting everything ready to ship out.” Thak told Richard, darting his eyes across his team to lock eyes with each of them. They all backed off and zipped back to handling the matter of getting the Valiant packed up along with all of their equipment.

“So, what do you have to say to all your fans that were expecting better! Have you actually gone soft?” The fox stuck the mic further into his face, igniting a sharp burst of anger, which the fox must have noticed because he started wiggling his taser back and forth like a warning.

“My reputation is whatever I want it to be, no business of yours. I race for my reasons and today I raced exactly as I had intended to.” He answered the fox sharply, keeping his tone even, even as his tail continued to signal a warning of its own.

“You know, some rumors say you’ve been pussy-whipped ever since you married, do you think that’s true? Is your wife the reason you don’t race the same anymore? You say you found God, but I think most people would agree your choice of partner isn’t very convincing! What does a born-again Christian man have to say about marrying a hooker?” The fox replied, dragging up on camera his wife’s history.

“You’re deliberately asking for something I don’t think you’re prepared to get.” Thak told him.

“A good and married, Christian man has what to give me, Mr. Jypsun?” A smug reply with a waggle of the taser.

He so desperately wanted to sock him, to lash out. The adrenaline from the race was still fresh in his system and he would love nothing more than to throttle the fox and send him packing to the infirmary. He had to draw in a deep breath to control himself. It wasn’t worth it.

“Nothing you’ll succeed in getting, I assure you.” He swallowed his pride, backing off from his worst impulse.

“That doesn’t sound like the Thak Jypsun of old at all! Marrying a whore really did a number on you, Mr. Jypsun, why-“ And then the fox was sharply cut off by Thak’s hand snatching him by the throat, his patience now a severed cord.

The fox jabbed out with the taser, but Thak caught him by the wrist, spinning the smaller man around and slamming him up against the Valiant with the taser now painfully pressed into the fox's crotch, Thak's finger resting over the fox's own to hold it down over the trigger.

"You wanted the old Thak Jyspun so badly, that you came to my fucking doorstep and insulted me to my face to see it!" He shouted at the fox, who was gagging and choking under his grip, desperately struggling to break free and failing.

The fox lifted his mic high and dropped it to strike.

The cheap plastic of the mic shattered across Thak's head, which sent his tail into a ferocious rattle. Thak let go of the fox's throat, smashed his fist into the fox's perfect teeth, then slammed his palm back down onto his throat to grip him again. Richard had already leapt in to assist, dealing with the cameraman, the camera now smashed across the concrete with the man pressed to the floor next to it, pinned under Richard's full weight with an elbow dug painfully between his shoulder blades.

Thak pulled at the fox's wrist, forcing him to raise the taser up higher and higher, the smaller man too weak to stop the full strength of Thak's rage. He made the fox press the end of the taser against his own temple.

"I've been trying so hard to change, but if you want to see the devil I've been trying to suppress, I can show it to you!" Thak spat, glaring into the fox's now terrified eyes.

He started to push down on the finger that would fire the taser.

"No!" The fox choked out from behind Thak's grip.

For a small moment Thak was himself again, right at home. He wanted to pull that trigger and pump every single volt into the fox's skull and leave him foaming at the mouth on the concrete floor. Give him a kick in the ribs, make him taste the iron of his own blood as his belly filled with agony and the end of Thak's boot.

But he leaned back from the fox and let go of his throat. The fox quickly tried to jerk himself free, but Thak just struck him across the face again, those pearly perfect white teeth now richly stained with blood.

Thak reached his hand over, and forced the taser from the fox's hand, and once it was in his own grip he lifted it up high and tossed it to the floor as hard as he could. It struck the concrete and shattered.

"Now get the fuck out of my sight." Thak told the fox, letting him go.

The fox bolted, stumbling and scrambling away. Thak pointed at Richard and gestured with a hand to let the cameraman go. The bear did, and the cameraman bolted the same as the fox had, the pair now out of their collective sight.

Richard rushed over to him.

“Boss, you alright?” He asked.

Thak lifted his hand to his head, felt the spot where the mic had hit him. There was a thin layer of blood on his fingertips when he looked.

“Probably, that mic was cheap as shit. Get someone to toss the camera in one of the garbage bins outside then light the whole thing on fire.” He told Richard, openly telling his team to destroy video evidence.

This was Lagrange 4, local news couldn't afford to do their own live broadcasts, and the fox wasn't ARA. All the evidence was about to go up in smoke when the camera finished burning.

“Want me to phone in the authorities?” Jimmy asked, handing Thak a clean rag to touch up his head.

“No, leave it.” The serpent replied.

It wouldn't matter, and he wasn't worried about any consequences.

He could have put the fox into a coma, and nothing would happen, because Thak Jypsun was a driver for the ARA. The people in charge only cared about the gruesome bottom line, keeping the cogs in the machine turning even if it requires a public beating to make it happen. The ARA didn't account for the majority of their revenue, but it was a large enough minority of it that they couldn't afford to lose it. Drivers had more rights than the people that lived here.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't just, but if there was one place in the solar system where God's absence could be felt, it would be here on Lagrange 4.