

Blowing across the harsh Martian landscape was a Category 6 sandstorm, and every Dome that stood in its path was on lockdown until it passed them by. All civilian travel had been put on a temporary hold until the weather conditions improved which, according to the weather reports, wasn't soon to come.

And from within Mars' many domed cities, you could watch as the famously red Martian sand slid and swirled like wet paint across a canvas, moving violently over the glass barrier that protected the people living within from harsh elements without. Manmade machines could weather such a storm, but to step outside in just a protective suit would be fatal. Your visibility would be close to nonexistent in storms like these and your sense of direction would vanish. If you lost your way you'd eventually tire and collapse from fighting against the harsh winds, and search and rescue would find your lifeless body underneath several inches of sand.

And ladies and gentlemen, what a perfect time to host a race!

Welcome to the wild and wonderful world of the Accelerated Racing Association, where there's no track too dangerous, no road too foul, nor storm too deadly to stop hot wheels from driving across even the hottest asphalt! The ARA prides itself on being the Solar System's No 1 source of racing entertainment, catering to each and everyone's particular entertainment needs! Bringing you the hottest action, the finest drivers, and presented to you for free by the sexiest John Does and Jane Dames to ever step before a camera lens.

Today's race is being hosted on the infamous Rust Circle, the third track to be built on Mars since the Association first signed its agreement with the Martian Government twenty years ago! Now, thirty drivers from all across the Solar System have gathered to test their metal and see if they have what it takes to advance to the 7th Circuit of this year's Season!

This race has been generously sponsored by Martian Heavy Industries, Star Commerce, and JetSetters, your one stop shop for every musical taste no matter how niche.

All of today's sponsors are offering discounts on orders and services purchased during today's race at both corporate and civilian levels. Please visit the ARA's current discount offerings at: www.AcceleratedRacing.ara/SponsorshipDiscounts/.

As the sandstorm rages across Mars' northern hemisphere, the pack of thirty drivers down on the surface were racing for their chance to stand in the winner's circle, and for their very lives! Already eight racers have been eliminated by the elements, and another five by their fellow drivers! Though the wind in a Martian storm doesn't blow nearly as harsh as the ones on other planets, the danger here comes from the low visibility and the very sand itself! You can't afford to lose sight of the track when you're traveling at hundreds of miles per hour, and if the sand gets into your machine, you can expect any number of malfunctions, all of which could turn fatal!

"Look at that!" Shouted Cliff Chaser, one of the three ARA Commentators spectating today's race, and all from the safety of News Bunker 03.

Though presently retired, the middle-aged cougar had once been a talented driver in his own right. He was most famous for driving one of the fastest bikes to hit the track during his time, the bright blue Soul Stealer, manufactured by Olympus Mechanics! After his retirement in 2213 he was brought in as a commentator by the ARA.

Today, he is being joined by two other veterans of the Association.

Seated to his right is ex-flag girl Paula Preen, a bright blue jay of great beauty and a voice to die for. After serving as a flag girl for more than a decade she's now been a proud member of the ARA's family of commentators for fourteen years running and gunning for more!

And sitting to Cliff's left is fellow retired driver, and his one-time rival, Neveah Nitro!

Neveah was best known for her performance in the lead up to 2208's Caelum Run where she ended her career early after crashing out on the Earth racetrack, Zeus' Gambit, located in Athens, Greece.

With her bike, the Blind Justice, totaled and herself in the ICU, Racing's favorite hyena chose to retire instead of pursuing any other races. She was lightning fast and had a great eye for strategy, and the ARA made sure she wasn't going to leave racing without a fight, and ever since then she's been a strong member of their family of commentators for the last fourteen years!

As today's race explodes on the track, the trio of commentators were gawking at their array of television screens, each feeding them live video footage taken by the ARA's expert team of drone pilots. Dozens of state-of-the-art drones were now flying through the harsh storm to make sure that everyone at home got as close to the action as possible in both standard and infrared vision!

It's unbelievable how much effort and expense is put into every race to make sure that everyone at home feels like they've got the best seat in the house, no matter what or where!

"I can't believe he pulled that off!" Paula shouted, too, covering her mouth with worry. The blue jay was antsy in her seat, feathers ruffling at the action unfolding in front of her. Sometimes hiding her eyes from the carnage she was witnessing on screen. Though she was a veteran to the ARA, she was no driver and had no taste for the blood and danger of the track, only for the glitz and tinsel of stardom.

Her counterparts were both on the edges of their seats, watching intently, understanding the danger and skill on equal display as the remaining drivers struggled to gain and maintain position. They were now in the final lap, and there were no more second chances. With only five days left in the 6th Circuit, most of the drivers out there today were fighting tooth and nail so they could claw their way into the 7th Circuit of this year's season!

But, to understand the race, and its many dangers, you needed to know a little about the track itself, The Rust Circle.

The starting line was located at the north exit of ARA-D 01, a protective micro-Dome designed and built by the ARA for their exclusive use on Martian soil. It was a large structure that had garage space for as many as sixty bikes and plentiful housing for both their crews and drivers. The Association spares no expense for its diverse teams of racers! Staying on ARA property was like staying at a resort if you had the skill to earn your place there!

And from the starting line the racers exited out into what was nicknamed 'the Barrens', a six-mile stretch of flat track that led to another much smaller micro-Dome, ARA-D 02, that housed emergency

crews should they be needed, and they always were. Racing in the Association was often as dangerous as a war zone!

And after passing through the center of ARA-D 02 drivers would emerge out into the aptly named 'Death Valley', an eighteen mile stretch of track that dove into a narrow manmade crevasse that threatened to devour any driver that wasn't as good as they boasted, and once free of the Valley there was the final micro-Dome, ARA-D 03, built the same as the previous and populated with additional emergency personnel.

Then, there at the end was the final stretch: the Pillars of Salt.

Here, the track suddenly opened up to a flat field of manmade stone pillars, each carved from imported stone that was strong enough to withstand the constant battering of Martian storms with little need for maintenance. Without any flagging or reflective signage to aid a driver in spotting the pillars in a sandstorm, it was up to every racer to duck and weave their own way through the Pillars.

And right now, the remaining drivers were scattered across the track with some so far behind that they were doomed to fall short of what they needed to qualify for the 7th Circuit. If they hadn't already secured their place in today's race, then they'd be forced to sit the rest of the Season out. Better luck next year!

But in the lead was Mars' own fan favorite, Richard Killroy of Dome 18! Richard, an eight-year veteran of the Professional Circuit, was driving his famously gaudy yellow and teal monster, the Fair Duke, manufactured by the Tellis Motor Company! And right behind him was Charles Lawson, the Ganymede born, yet Luna raised, veteran with eleven years of racing experience, driving the Ruby Rocket, manufactured by Mortis Freni Industries!

However, the true favorite for today's race that's got the ratings shooting sky high is the one and the only, Valeria Ren! The daughter of the legend, Maximillian Fairchild, is back with us again driving her ivory white beauty, the Noblisse Oblige! She's setting the net ablaze with her performance today, starting in the middle of the pack at reaching the front before the first lap had even finished! Mrs. Ren has already qualified for the 7th Circuit, and it's expected she'll sail clear through to the 8th as a finalist!

"What is Michael doing! What the hell is he doing!" Neveah slapped both hands to the desk, the hyena pushing herself to her feet to gawk with awe at the young Michael Dagggers, currently in 7th place and playing a deadly game of chance with his fellow racer, Felicity Dare.

"That was a lot more than paint just now, there's sparks flying!" Cliff shouted, standing up alongside his cohost to get a better look at the center screen.

What they were watching were two bikes, powerful machines each, fighting for dominance in the hungry maw of Death Valley. Michael Dagggers was playing it risky by trying to force his way through the narrow openings between the rock face and Felicity Dare's bike.

"Oh my God, there are!" Cried Paula out, still covering her mouth as they watched Michael tap his Nitro, the sudden burst of speed forcing his way ahead in a mad gamble to overtake the older, more seasoned Felicity. The Death Valley section of the track featured two sheer rock faces that widened and narrowed

so fast at these crazy speeds that it would look like the walls were vibrating as you flew through the gaps!

Driving the newest gen model of a Tauros chassis, manufactured Tauros Unlimited, Michael was teetering on the edge of disaster as his bright green Total Recall darted through the narrow gap between Felicity's own Dour Behemoth, manufactured by Terran Machine Solutions.

His bike scraped against the rock wall of the Valley, sheering off paint and metal alike as he collided into Felicity in an attempt to shove her bike to the side. Both bikes lost speed, but the Dour Behemoth was a much heavier machine and hardly moved in response to the push from Michael's own. Though he had the acceleration to recover faster than her, and in turn take the lead, the Total Recall was forced to scrape yet again into the rock wall to his side, the Dour Behemoth's weight and bulk keeping him pinched between a rock and a hard place.

Even more sparks were spitting out the side of the Total Recall as the end point of Death Valley finally came into view. Emerging out into the storm, both machines exited the valley at the same time and broke away from each other.

Michael's bike was instantly buffeted by the high winds and biting grit of sand. More sparks exploded out the side of the Total Recall as sand entered in through the fresh holes in his chassis, and like the Titanic of old the sand broke through wall after wall, sinking the bike from the inside as sand worked its way into places it didn't belong, grinding and gnashing deep into the Total Recall's rear axle.

By the time both drivers were entering ARA-D 03, Michael Dagers was flying out of control through the micro-Dome, fire belching out the rear of his machine until a single pop was heard by all the on-site personnel, followed by a flash of light from inside the rear wheel well. His back wheel ripped free and went flying, slamming into a wall inside the dome, destroying everything in its path. What was left of Michael's bike spun and skidded across the smooth asphalt until it, too, slammed into the wall on the opposite side of the Dome at more than 150mph.

"Oh my God, what a wreck! I hope there wasn't anyone in the way of that!" Cliff shouted, retaking his seat as he held his breath, Paula Preen covering her eyes with her hands while Neveah stood and watched silently, making the sign of the cross over her chest with a grim look on her face.

What was left of the Total Recall was now on fire, Felicity Dare zipping past him with only minor damage from her earlier collision with him. Seconds later the rest of the pack began to fly by the wreckage in ones and twos, and thirty seconds after that emergency personnel were on the scene and working to put out the fire and free the driver from his bike.

On the rightmost video screen one of the EMTs turned to look at the CCTV camera and shook his head as they removed the broken body of Michael Dagers. Neveah sat down solemnly. He was deceased, time of death 2:31 PM. He was only 23.

Meanwhile, far ahead of the carnage at ARA-D 03 the contenders for 1st through 3rd were in heated debate. In first place now was Charles Lawson with his Ruby Rocket, having only just overtaken Richard Killroy's Fair Duke with a well-timed burst of Nitro fueled speed. As they wove through the Pillars of Salt in their pursuit for 1st place the threat of collision hung like a specter around all three drivers.

Behind the front runners, but not by much, was Valeria Ren who was firmly in 3rd place with the 4th place driver a full eighteen seconds behind her.

With only a few miles of track left, the results of this race were going to be decided soon! The storm was doing its best to stop them, the high winds and poor visibility forcing each driver to strain their senses and push their machines to their very limit! Valeria Ren could only just barely see the competition ahead of her, but she had the track memorized.

The maps provided by the Association were always accurate, and she was counting each pillar she drove by, painting a mental image in her mind of where she was and where she needed to go to maintain as straight of a line as possible to cross the finish line.

She didn't know if it occurred to her opponents to do the same, but it didn't seem so! She could just barely see them through the sandy storm, the lights on their bikes, the tell-tale sign of sand being thrown up behind them in their wakes. They were drifting further and further towards her righthand side, probably too preoccupied with trying to overtake the other instead of focusing on the most efficient path towards the finish, and that suited her just fine!

Precious seconds were passing. Great pillars of stone flashed past her like bolts of white lightning. To her right side, then left, left, right, left again. Bam, bam, bam, she counted them all and kept the score on her mental map. The storm continued to rage at them all, her hands tight on the handles, her grip holding a steady pressure to keep her bike driving against the wind so she wouldn't be forced off course and into a Pillar. If she were to crash in the Pillars of Salt it would mean almost certain death, as no emergency crew could get to her fast enough to keep the storm from devouring her if her bike broke its protective seal, venting her only source of oxygen out into the wasteland that was the Martian surface.

A hundred feet to her right side she saw the sudden flash in the sand, the light of an explosion followed by a boom! Had someone crashed? And that wasn't far away from her either! She let her thumb drift close to the ignition switch for her Nitro. Ahead of her the Pillars were a becoming a dim glow in the storm as the winds picked up around her and threw even more sand into her field of view, everything becoming that much more difficult to make out as her bike sped forward with her last rival hiding somewhere in the red mist around her.

Her odometer was quickly counting up to 153 kilometers after nearly three laps on the track, and that put her too dangerously close to the finish for her to not know where her last opponent was!

Suddenly, to her right side, a yellow blur ripped through the red haze, its reinforced chassis crashing against the side of her bike. Valeria screamed in shock, the Noblisse Oblige getting shoved violently sideways before her tires bit back down into the sandy asphalt. Darting her eyes across her dashboard cameras, she saw the massive bike grinding against her own like a monster. Her tires were barely holding their grip on the asphalt, the rear of her bike fishtailing for a moment before she regained control of her bike. The yellow and teal monster, driven by Richard Killroy, was bigger than Valeria's own and a full two hundred and thirty pounds heavier!

The collision had lasted only seconds, and then her moment of panic faded. Now Valeria knew she only had one other driver to worry about before making it across the finish line. The explosion from before had to have been Charles Lawson, and she knew he was no longer a threat to her.

Though the Fair Duke was a more powerful machine, it wasn't as nimble as the Noblisse Oblige!

She pressed her thumb on the ignition switch for her Nitro, dumping the last of her reserves into the engine. There was an instant surge of power roaring up from beneath her seat as her engine rapidly pushed the Noblisse Oblige to its top speed. The G forces hit, pulling her body back and against her safety restraints. Her hands were tightening on the handles like she was clinging for her life, the yellow rival at her side falling behind as her bike now outpaced it by more than 100mph.

As Richard's bike faded into the storm behind her, the Pillars zipped past her at frightening speeds as the odometer reminded her of how close she was to the finish. A thunderous roar exploded behind her, and her rival suddenly emerged from the storm in hot pursuit. Richard's bike was now being propelled forward by his own Nitro reserves; his engine roaring red hot to reach its top speed in these last precious moments as the large silhouette of ARA-D 01 crept into view ahead of them through the storm.

Her bike wasn't as fast as his, and the Fair Duke was now pulling up next to her with nowhere left to go but the finish. She was still pushing the Noblisse Oblige hard at close to 400mph, and two of them were now exiting the Pillars of Salt; the rest of the track would be open asphalt from here on out with no obstacles to face except your fellow driver. Richard was now pulling ahead of her inches at a time as her engine began to flag, the Nitro in the tank now dropping to fumes while her rival was still pumping fresh fuel into his engine to carry him to victory.

Unfortunately for Richard Killroy, Valeria took notes on what everyone was driving. The Fair Duke was built using a 5th generation Ulysses Le Grange chassis, and they were notorious for their front heavy engine placement with most of drive coming from the front tire.

Her opponent was an idiot to let himself get this close to her so near the finish line! She leaned forward and stared at her rightmost dash camera and waited. It took only a half second for Richard's rear wheel to line up flush with her front tire, and when she saw the rubbers line up, Valeria smashed her thumb onto her Nitro ignition, dumping whatever fumes were left in the canister. A small jerk came from her engine, the needle on her speedometer spiking. She slammed her controls hard to the right and smashed her front end right into his backside.

A collision like this at such a high speed, especially for a bike whose center of gravity was set so far forward, forced the Fair Duke to pivot on its front tire. His bike might have been heavier, but not his behind, and Valeria's pit maneuver sent her opponent into a violent fishtail. She briefly lost control of her own bike, but Richard Killroy was doing worse! He tried to regain control of his bike, but his heavyweight machine caught its grip perpendicular to where he'd started, and all that Nitro fueled speed sent him rocketing sideways across the track. It would take him several precious seconds to steer his bike back towards the finish!

The Noblisse Oblige wobbled briefly, Valeria feathering her brake and handles until she regained full control over her bike. Her loss of speed was considerable, but she floored the pedal and dug ruts beneath her wheels, the Noblisse Oblige rocketing back on track and staking her claim on 1st place. Twenty seconds later she passed the finish line at the entrance to ARA-D 01.

"And there we go!" Cliff Chaser shouted, standing up from his chair to applaud the first person to make it across the finish line with the ARA judges behind the scenes officially declaring Valeria Ren as having claimed 1st place, updating her racing profile in the process for everyone at home watching to see for

themselves. With today's big win her Driver Score increased from 6 to 7, further cementing her odds of being selected to participate in next year's Caelum Run.

Today's race drew to a close with all remaining drivers crossing the finish line safely, but it did not come without a cost. Of the thirty drivers that started the race there were fifteen crashes, and four of them resulted in fatalities. The deceased were: Michael Dagggers, 23, driving the Total Recall, Nines Drocker, 21, driving the Course Correct, Brum Aslen, 27, driving the Poker Face, and lastly Charles Lawson, 29, driving his Ruby Rocket.

As the race results played out on everyone's television screens at home the bottom chyron was reporting that riots were now breaking out in several of Mars' Domed cities. Valeria Ren's use of a pit maneuver against Martian favorite, Richard Killroy, had left much of the Martian population incensed. Fortunately for all parties involved, Martian civilians are not allowed into the ARA's Domes, and all personnel hired locally from Martian cities were subjected to rigorous background checks and vetted for their political and social affiliations.

Once all drivers were back inside the safety of ARA-D 01, there were no problems in extracting the drivers from their bikes and delivering them back to the safety of their waiting team members, and the eager gazes of the Association's news crews.

Apart from some superficial damage to the Noblisse Oblige's outer hull there wasn't much to do for refit on the bike apart from the usual post-race maintenance. While she'd been busy with the ARA officials and news crews, her team had been able to quickly assess the condition of her bike and schedule the repairs and cleanup, all of which would be done after they reached their next destination due to time constraints. There simply wasn't enough time to do it all on Mars before they had to catch their flight off planet.

"Mrs. Ren, I'd like to congratulate you on your victory, although I wish you had chosen a more politically correct method to do so." The ARA's Martian liaison told her in the hallway.

The liaison, a tiger, was a tall and lean man, dressed in a black tailored suit with the iconic red and white trim common amongst ARA staff. He hadn't been the one to escort her and her team from the garages, but he had been the one to greet them in the hallway on their way to the elevators that would take them to the Dome's upper levels.

"A pit maneuver is hardly impolite when you compare it to what he did to Charles Lawson, don't you think?" She replied with a smile. Standing at her side was her husband Oliver, a big grizzly bear, who was also her team's Pit Chief, or her 'Chief Technician' if you wanted to use more modern terminology.

Her husband had only just pressed the call button to summon the elevator that would take them to the top floor of ARA-D 01 where they would be celebrating their victory in the Winner's Circle. It was always customary for the ARA to treat the winners of 1st through 3rd to a post-race celebration. The other teams could celebrate on their own in whatever fashion they chose, but often on their own dime or the dime of a sponsor.

“While it is true that being dead is tragically worse than being forced into 4th place, Martian pride requires us to sneer when an outsider plays tricks on the track.” The tiger replied, leaving her to lift her eyebrows.

She’d not seen any video clips from the race yet, but members of her team had told her about how Richard Killroy had pulled a ramming maneuver on Charles Lawson, the very same one he had done to her! The bike Charles had driven was lighter in weight than the Noblisse Oblige, and so she imagined there wasn’t enough weight on his wheels to keep Richard from shoving him off course and into the pillar that killed him. Dead on impact, so she’d been told.

The tricks were only bad when they weren’t the victims!

“As I am becoming more aware of by the moment. Perhaps if they started teaching humility in your schools the people here wouldn’t riot so often when they don’t get their way?” She replied, it being common knowledge that Martians threw tantrums any time their teams didn’t win.

It was so bad that everyone in ARA-D 01 had to have their personal devices placed under a media blackout. It was for the personal safety of the drivers and their crews, just in case things got too out of hand and some Martian born employee started getting ideas.

The tiger twisted his expression into a tight smile.

“I’ll be sure to vote for that in the upcoming election, ma’am.” He replied. “The Winner’s Circle upstairs should be ready for you and your crew by the time you arrive. Felicity Dare and Van Thresh are already there, so I am told.”

“Thank you. The ARA’s hospitality is always appreciated.” She said with a smile and a nod, both of which she hoped would come off as condescending.

“As are your ratings, Ms. Fairchild.” The tiger replied, putting emphasis on her maiden name, before pivoting on his heel and walking away briskly. Her smile tightened, and she felt her husband put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

When she first started racing, she was still single and wearing her father’s name, but after marrying Oliver there had been a small adjustment period where everyone had to learn to start using her married name. Now, the only people still calling her a Fairchild were the ones that hoped she’d die on the track like her father had.

It was like a kind of death threat. Being famous often meant your detractors were as intense as your fans.

“Rude.” Muttered one of the members of her team.

“He’s Martian.” Said another dryly.

The elevator dinged just before the doors began to slide open.

“Ok, elevator is here, pile in!” Oliver said with authority, commanding everyone to step into the large steel cylinder that would be taking them upstairs. They all entered, and once inside they had some relative privacy.

“Ma’am, is that something we can report to the ARA?” A younger member of her team asked.

“Just drop it, Lily.” Oliver told her calmly, but with enough briskness to make it clear he was serious.

The subject of discussion quickly turned towards what the Winner’s Circle was going to look like on Mars, since this was the first Martian race Valeria had participated in where she finished in the top three. The last time she had raced on Mars was when she was still a Fairchild, and she’d come in 6th in a twenty-four-seat race. Her performance in that race had actually been incredible, but the rules for the Winner Circle were the same then as they were now. Only the top three were permitted to join.

When they arrived at the top floor, they had expected to find a festive mood waiting for them. It was the Winner’s Circle, after all! These functions were always pleasant to attend, and Valeria came in the top three so often that she knew what was and wasn’t normal for them. What they found instead was...

An uncomfortable, muted affair. The Association always hired locally when they needed to fill low level positions like custodians and servers, and there was no reason that habit would change just because they were on Mars.

A quick survey of the visible staff revealed that they were an irritated looking and sour bunch. Stern faced, here to do their job and nothing more. Winner’s Circles were normally staffed by people that wanted to be here, and who wouldn’t? The Accelerated Racing Association was the largest sports corporation in the Solar System and in the Winner’s Circle you got to meet with the most famous drivers from Earth to Jupiter.

When you waited a table in the Winner’s Circle you were waiting on celebrities! But from the mood in this room, it was clear that the celebrity everyone wanted to wait on was absent. Martian pride, indeed!

Like the tiger from before had told them, the room was already occupied by the 2nd and 3rd place finishers and their teams, each seated at the tables assigned to them with food and drink already spilling out from the kitchens to satisfy them all.

Though they were on the top floor, the whole floor was not dedicated to the Winner’s Circle. The room they were in was more like a pie slice cut from the top level of the Dome. It was furnished like a small dining hall, fit for maybe fifty people if you wanted everyone to stay comfortable. With the Dome of ARA-D 01 being round like all the others on Mars, the inside corner of the ‘slice’ was the door that likely led to the staff areas and kitchens, and on the opposite wall were the windows that looked out at the sandstorm that still raged outside.

The sides of the room were white, but they’d been decorated with large painted panels, alternating in color from red, to white, and then to grey, which were Valeria’s team colors, since she was the 1st place winner. Everyone in her group could tell that the staff had been hasty with their decorations, because one of the panels was crooked by just a hair, which was not something the ARA would have normally let slip. There were other decorations in Valeria’s colors, but everything seemed slipshod with its placement.

As Valeria's group of eight entered, the rest of the room noticed their arrival. A few people began to clap from the two occupied tables, which quickly caught on until everyone seated was clapping for Valeria, a few even standing. It was very polite of them and greatly appreciated considering the sour mood radiating off the staff.

The first of them to stand up from their seat was none other than Felicity Dare, who'd clawed her way into third place after Charles Lawson's death and Richard Killroy's fall from grace. Taking Felicity's lead, the 2nd place finisher, Van Thresh, stood up to join her while all the rest of their team members kept their seats as the top three finishers approached each other in the center of the Winner's Circle. Behind her, Oliver was herding her own team towards the empty table that was meant for them.

Now that the three drivers were alone, it occurred to Valeria that this was the first time the three of them had been within ten feet of each other since the race had started. Drivers seldom had a chance to mingle right after a race as the news crews all wanted their pound of flesh as soon as they left their bikes.

"Congratulations, Valeria!" Van Thresh broke the ice with a charming smile, sticking out his hand with a flourish.

The driver of the Quantum Pain was a short and agile looking rat, his features looking like they were the inspiration for his own sharp and deadly looking bike. Valeria was impressed he'd made it to 2nd with his bike, as anything built by 777 was notoriously bad at making tight turns and the Death Valley section of the track would have been murder on a bike like his. She was eager to watch the recordings of the race to see how he might have pulled it off.

There were a lot of things she'd need to watch from this race, but that could all wait until they were on their shuttle tomorrow. She did most of her research while she traveled as there wasn't much else to do in those in-between moments of time between being planet side.

Valeria took his hand, shook it, finding his grip to be a bit effeminate. Felicity was already extending her own, and when she took the eagle's hand into her own the grip was noticeably stronger, though the interaction was made suddenly feminine when the other woman drew herself close for the typical side hug to which women were accustomed to giving each other.

"And congratulations to both of you! I'm happy everyone made it up here in one piece." She told them both.

"Only just barely, my bike will be in the shop for a week just to clean the sand out from its guts." Felicity replied.

"I fared remarkably well for such a track like this. I was expecting far worse, but I think I was fortunate that I lagged a little behind in the first half so I could start exploiting everyone else's blunders." Van added, unwittingly helping Valeria figure out how he might have reached 2nd with a 777 bike.

"I was surprised to see up ahead of me, you did good with that slippery thing you drive." The eagle replied.

“Have they tried to poison anyone yet?” Valeria interrupted the other two drivers before they could argue the sins and virtues of driving a 777 Vehicular Technologies bike on a track that was better suited to something with a tighter grip on the road.

Van Thresh answered first with a wry smile.

“Oh? Why, I’m shocked you’d suggested they’d be capable of it.” Van said with a little laugh.

“They,” Felicity then added with an emphasis on the staff with a glance of her eyes, “Have been quite moody since we arrived. They were ripping down Richard’s colors when my team got here.”

Valeria glanced around, looking again at the staff again. All sour, indeed. She wondered if they actually knew the real results of the race yet, since the ARA sometimes kept their staff in the dark to avoid favoritism or retaliation. Surely, being on Mars, the media blackout might have been enforced a little more heavily on some staffers more than others.

They’d obviously know that their favorite to win had to have lost, since he clearly wasn’t here with them, but that didn’t mean they would know why.

But, of course, that tiger from before knew, and there was always a chance that someone else could have let something slip. It was certainly something Valeria felt rightfully anxious about.

“Oh, I missed that. How confident must they have been to think that their boy would have taken 1st? I hope they humble themselves.” Van said, reminding Valeria of her own comment she’d made to the tiger from before.

“Pride before the fall, as they say.” Valeria added, knowing that things weren’t going to change any time soon on Mars if the local news reports were anything to go by.

“Ah, but not today! I hate Mars. Now, though it has been a pleasure chatting, I would like to get back to my table and celebrate being the highlight of my own evening!” Van said, lifting his hand with a flourish to bid his farewell before excusing himself with a nod.

The two women nodded to him in reply as he left, Felicity being the one to utter a parting goodbye before returning her attention back to Valeria. When the woman next made a sigh, Valeria knew she was about to excuse herself as well.

“I should be getting back to my table, too; it was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Ren. And thanks for that pit maneuver you pulled. It’s not often I get to enjoy the Winner’s Circle.” She said with a wink and returned to her table.

Valeria said her own goodbyes, smiling. She’d skimmed the career history of every driver she raced against today, but Felicity was one of the ones she’d known about prior to this race. The eagle was a competent driver, for sure, but tended to hover in the middle of the pack in most races. Competent, yes, but lacking the grit where it counted most. Even after taking 3rd in this race, the eagle probably didn’t have the results to qualify for the 8th Circuit.

With the pleasantries complete, Valeria walked back to her table to find an open seat reserved for her between her husband and Randall, her team's Chief Medical Technician. She sat, and a waitress appeared next to her asking what she would like to drink. She looked around the table, saw there was already a glass of water present, and then turned to the waitress to ask for a small bowl of lemons. She made it a point to not drink at social functions like these, even if she was celebrating.

"You could let yourself have a little of something." Her husband told her after the waitress left.

She shrugged.

"Are you trying to be a bad influence on me?" She asked, and he smiled back at her.

"No, you do that plenty on your own, but I'm having a few beers." He told her, and she looked at what he was drinking and confirmed that it was some kind of beer judging by the color and the foam.

"What kind?" She asked, unable to figure out the drink just by its look alone.

"No idea. I just asked for a good beer, and they brought this. Don't recognize the flavor so it might be something Martian." He told her.

"It any good?" She asked, almost longing for a chance to unwind with a beer no matter how much she was loathe to admit it.

To answer her, he picked up his glass and offered it to her for a taste, and she reluctantly took it for a sip before quickly handing it back. It was especially bitter for a beer, and too strong. She couldn't tell if it was supposed to be a cheap or expensive beer, since the flavor was too different from what she was used to. If it was Martian in origin, then there was no telling how much of this drink was actual alcohol and how much was some kind of artificial substitute.

The only beer she regularly drank was CockMilk and that was just a cheap novelty beer that owed its existence to the fact that a much younger; and much edgier, Valeria Ren drank it almost exclusively. It wasn't a good beer by any stretch, but it had a high enough proof to get a girl drunk and that's exactly what she'd been drinking it for when she was still in her early 20's. The fact it was called CockMilk just made it that much more attractive to a younger Valeria, since it just sounded too perfect for a depressed young woman that was trying to self-destruct.

In the present day, for a much-matured Valeria in her 30's, it was the only beer she could tolerate out of habit. She was also still taking their sponsorship deals, since they were one of the very few companies that stood by her when she was fishtailing her way through depression and substance abuse.

"Not my first choice." She told him, and he chuckled back before taking a big drink from the glass.

Valeria turned her attention back to the table, her team, and the appetizers on display. There was food on the table that she didn't want to trust. Mars wasn't known for its seafood, and yet here there were bowls of boiled shrimp that everyone else seemed to be enjoying. She avoided the shrimp and instead chose to instead pig out on the cheese smothered French fries. Potatoes were probably Mars' only valuable crop, considering their economy was primarily built around mining and fabrication.

Their celebration consisted mostly of food and drink, which included main courses that were brought out after everyone had put in an order; the menu selection being a mix of seafood and North American inspired cuisine.

After the meals had been eaten a news crew arrived and they took photos and video of the festivities before settling down for some brief exit interviews with the three drivers and select members of their teams. Oliver was briefly interviewed for his role as Pit Chief for the Noblisse Oblige. This was the ARA's last chance to milk them for all they were worth as they'd be leaving early the next day, and the Association loved to fill their film reels to the brim, so they'd have plenty of footage to play on repeat in future segments as they prepared the headlines for upcoming races.

Valeria didn't know where the other drivers in the Dome were going after this, but she was scheduled to participate in a race on Titan, and then after that she'd be flying back to Earth for two additional races before leaving again to make a trip to Ganymede. A twenty-four-seat, two thirty-seat, and then another twenty-four-seat race respectively. She was going to be very busy for the next few weeks. In order to race in the ARA's Professional Circuit at this high of a level you had to be willing to travel constantly and make personal sacrifices to put your career ahead of everything else.

Having her husband by her side made things easier, but with them having three small children at home there were complications. It would be too rough on their kids to make them travel so much, so they stayed with her sister and brother-in-law while she and their father were away. Valeria and her husband did their best to schedule her races so that they could make regular trips back to Earth so they could see their kids and be there for a few days before leaving again. She kept herself so busy preparing for every race that it dulled the pain of being apart from them for so long between races.

Whenever they were home, she tried to make up for her absence by spending as much time with her children as she could, but next year was Caelum Run XIII and she couldn't afford to slack off and spend too much time at home. She had to push herself and make sure she had as much racing time under her belt as possible. She already knew she was qualifying for the Run, but so were hundreds of other drivers and the Run only allowed twelve people to participate. She had to push even harder to push her Driver Score as high as it could go so that there would be no questions about it.

The Selection Committee would be forced to pick her as one of the twelve drivers for the Caelum Run.

Once the news crews had finished getting the footage they wanted, the three teams of drivers were finally free to return to their rooms. Oliver had, as he'd said, drank a few beers. He was a big bear so it had little effect on him, but Valeria could tell by the sound of his voice that he was feeling a buzz. She'd managed to avoid all alcohol save for the one sip she'd taken from her husband's drink.

Normally, she let Oliver be the one to issue directions to her team, but since she was the only person sober in their group, she told everyone to head to their rooms and make sure they were ready to head out the following morning. Shortly after the Martian sunrise they'd need to take a land ferry from ARA-D 01 to Dome 07 where they would then board a mag-rail that would take them to the Martian Solar Spaceport. It would take at least three hours to reach the spaceport, since the ARA had been required Martian Government to build their tracks as far away from civilization as could be achieved comfortably.

She and her husband exchanged goodnights with the rest of the team, then broke away to their own private suite. Once the door slid shut behind them her husband grabbed her roughly from behind, his

thick arms wrapping around her shoulders to hug her back tight to his chest, making her 'oof' as the wind left her lungs.

"I'm glad you're in one piece." He told her quietly, dropping his muzzle down into the crook of her neck. His arms relaxed their grip, and she could breathe again. As he kissed her neck, she cocked her head to the side to give him more room to plant even more kisses while holding her tight to him.

"I am, too." She replied, knowing he'd kept his concern for her bottled up until they were alone.

"You need to stop doing that maneuver, Val." He urged her, and she reached up her hands to find his, wrapping her fingers tight around them, clinging with affection.

"I needed to come in 1st." Was the only answer she could give.

She knew it was dangerous and could have easily wrecked her own bike in the attempt, or damaged the Noblisse Oblige in such a way that the storm could have gotten into the interior. Of all the drivers that crashed in today's race eight of them were directly caused by the storm, the rest were a combination of the storm and other drivers. Valeria could have also caused the death of Richard Killroy, like he'd done to Charles Lawson.

A pit maneuver was a deadly tool to use on any track, but as everyone in the ARA knew, it was her signature move.

The Association's pundits would no doubt be taking sides and arguing for and against her decision to use it. Some would say Valeria had been deliberately trying to kill Richard Killroy, others accusing them in turn of victim blaming since Richard had struck her first. Others still would be accusing her victim of being stupid, as 'everyone' knew that Valeria Ren only used a pit maneuver when she was on the last leg of a race and wanted to guarantee her place. It was an effective weapon to make sure she got the position she wanted, to knock someone out of her way and keep them there.

In any other instance, the mere threat of a pit maneuver was enough to keep other drivers away from her since they all knew her history with the ARA. The little girl that had watched her daddy die to a pit maneuver had grown up to master the weapon that took him from her. They knew she'd do it to them, too. So far, no had died from her using the technique, but no one wanted to be the first.

"You also need to come home." He reminded her. She knew he and everyone at home was concerned about her using it.

"Oliver." She said, with a tone of voice that told him to stop, the bear breathing a sigh into the crook of her neck, but he didn't break his grip on her, nor did she let go of his hands.

"We both stink, let's hit the showers." He told her suddenly, pulling away and moving his hands to her shoulders to push her towards the bathroom door.

She allowed herself to be herded into the luxurious bathroom provided for them by the Association, and then for the next hour the two of them vented their frustrations by putting their room's sound proofing to the test. Once they were both finished with each other, Oliver told her it was time to drink, which meant he thought they needed to get drunk before calling it a night. The ARA was well aware of her love

for trashy beer and always made sure there was a case of CockMilk beer in the minifridge waiting for her, and maybe she had a few too many of them that night. Her husband had certainly hit the liquor a little too hard considering he'd already drank a couple beers at dinner.

When morning came, she was glad that she wasn't the only person on her crew nursing a hangover. She and her husband looked the worst off, but none of her teammates could deny that they'd dipped into the complementary booze the ARA stocked their rooms with. The ARA could be accused of many things, but refusing to pamper their highest ranked drivers and their crews was never one of them. All the hard work she put in to qualify for the Caelum Run had pushed her out of her old Platinum Rank and into the rare and coveted Diamond, the highest Rank in the Association.

Once they boarded the land ferry, they all quickly snapped into high alert as the media blackout that had kept ARA-D 01 isolated from the rest of Mars broke down. The news of violent rioting came quickly to everyone's phones and tablets. Five riots had started shortly after the race ended, turning four different Martian Domes into miniaturized warzones as the local population vented their outrage on the streets. During the night those riots grew in size until eleven Domes were under martial law with law enforcement battling rioters in the streets in a vain attempt to wrestle back control.

The land ferry that carried them to Dome 07 was stopped in the middle of the desert so that a company of Martian Armed Forces could link up with the ARA security personnel that was already present.

Of all the Domes to break out into riots, Dome 07 was one of the few that didn't, and that was only due to the overwhelming military presence that marched through the streets as Valeria and her crew disembarked the ferry at the station. She, and everyone else that was leaving ARA-D 01, were escorted by armed guards to the mag-rail, and then towards the space port where they were allowed to skip all security checks so they could be on their shuttles and off Mars as soon as possible.

Once they were on the shuttle, owned and operated by the ARA, everyone was able to stop holding their breaths, and once they'd launched with the captain telling them they'd achieved Martian orbit, they all relaxed for the first time in close to four hours.

"I'd scold you, but they'd be doing this no matter how you won yesterday." Her husband told her, having taken a comfy seat next to her in the passenger cabin. Since they were going to Titan, it looked like Valeria's team was the only group taking this shuttle, apart from some ARA personnel that had their own reasons to be going in the same direction.

"It's such a lovely place." She replied sarcastically, referring to the wonderful planet that was Mars.

As she settled herself down in the luxury of ARA private transportation, she took out her digital tablet and began to review the footage of yesterday's race in detail while the rest of her crew took naps, ate snacks, or otherwise enjoyed being treated like celebrities by the shuttle staff. The ARA took good care of the drivers and crews that made them money in ad revenue and good ratings.

After a while of watching the footage, she asked her husband to grab out her notebook. Oliver reached down, rummaging through one of their carry on bags until he found a thick, worn out looking pad of paper like you'd buy for a child. Her kids were still in school, so they always had spare supplies to steal if mom or dad ever needed a pencil.

He handed her the notebook, and she flipped through it until she found the first blank page in the booklet. She wrote the name of a driver from yesterday's race at the top of the page. Below his name she started writing everything she saw him do right and wrong during the race, and then wrote down what killed him. When she was done, she turned the page and repeated the process with another driver.

She did this for the next couple of hours until she had twenty-nine new entries in her notebook. When she turned the last page, she wrote her own name at the top and started critiquing her own performance.

After she finished her own performance review, she counted the blank pages that were left in her notebook, then asked her husband to pull out an empty one she'd packed. He did, and then she opened to page one, double clicked her pen, and then used her tablet to look up the roster for her next race on Titan. She had twenty-three rivals to study before she got there, and only so many hours left in the day.

If everyone knew how meticulous she was about studying her opponents then they might have feared her for something other than a pit maneuver.