



VELO

CITY

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-94494-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First American edition, March 2017

Book design by Christopher Stengel



Over the line, into the final lap, ambushed by the rough raw howl of the crowd. The bleachers were a dusty smear, faces lost in blurred chaos, gone in a moment. Then there was only the race.

Cassica slid up through the gears as they sped along the straight, chasing down second place. Her eyes were calm, mind all angles as she drifted across the track to find the line into the next corner. She was never so still as when she was racing. Only in the driver's seat did she know exactly where she was.

Shiara, strapped in the seat beside her, had her eyes on the dash. Needles quivered behind grimy windows; counters rolled with numbers. Everything was moving there, everything alive, reporting from the hot heart of the car. Her car, built with her own hands. Maisie was a mongrel of so many parts that nobody could tell which had come from what. Nobody but Shiara.

The leaders jockeyed for position beneath the low red glare of a poisoned sun, tires billowing parched and powdered earth. Ahead, the track swerved left, lost behind a rock outcrop the color of rust. They took the corner and were gone.

“Wreck ahead, right side,” Shiara called over the noise of the engine. “Trim your line.”

Cassica's face was unreadable behind her goggles and the dirty bandanna that covered her mouth and nose. Likely she needed no reminder; Shiara reminded her anyway. It would only take one little slip to finish them.

Cassica decelerated hard, dropping down gears as they hit the corner. The track lifted beneath them and tipped out of sight. They took the rise just slow enough to keep all four wheels on the dirt, then plunged down the other side.

Lying half off the side of the track was the ruin of a Jackrabbit, tail buckled after it almost backflipped coming off that rise with turbos firing. The driver and his tech were safe, having scrambled clear, but the car remained as an obstacle to the unwary.

Cassica slipped past it without a glance. Shiara spared a moment to check her mirrors and saw the car behind them cresting the rise, too far to the right. They'd forgotten about the wreck. The driver's attempt to correct their course as they skidded down the slope was desperate but doomed. The car clipped the wreck, fishtailed, and went into a bouncing roll, shedding fenders, wheels, and engine panels as it flipped and leaped, until it was consumed in a cloud of red dust.

"Scratch the Desert Wolf in camo paint," said Shiara flatly.

The track dove and swooped through the cracked hardpan of the badlands, now dipping into a dry trench, now rising

to show them the wide, shattered plain all around. Eerie guardians overlooked them, ancient stones worn by the wind into shapes watchful and menacing.

Five laps in, Cassica knew the course by now. She knew the corners where she could shave off half a second, where to ease off the speed, and where to hit the gas. But the racers ahead of her knew those things too, and she couldn't gain ground.

"What've you got?" she demanded of Shiara.

Shiara was studying the miniature route map stuck to the dash, a squiggle of lines without detail. Ahead, the track split, one way obviously shorter than the other. They'd learned on previous laps that the shorter way was packed with obstacles and the longer route was smoother. One was better for vehicles made for quick turns, the other for speed merchants.

As ever with these unofficial boondock circuits, there was a trick to the track. A cut-through, not marked on the map. Shiara, sharp-eyed, had spotted it before anyone else had. It allowed them to take the shorter route but switch off it before they hit the worst of the obstacles, saving them precious seconds. They'd made a lot of ground that way before the others caught on.

Shiara brushed away a whipping frond of milk-white hair that had escaped her helmet, her brow furious with concentration as she tried to calculate a better route. "Left," she said at last, defeated. "Take the cut-through."

Cassica shot her a frustrated glance. She needed something better, a way to claw back the advantage and get ahead of the competition. Shiara had nothing to give her.

The track divided, split by a tall wedge of rock. The two cars ahead took the left route. In the lead was Guyden Cross, a local kid, slight and well-mannered with a rich daddy who had bought him that C9 Quantum he drove. His car was faster than theirs, low and flat and built for speed, dirty cream with dark red flanks and spoilers. Pushing him from behind was Ren Tubbock in a scarred black Terrorizer, its tail bristling with exhaust. Tubbock was a Mohawked thug and drove like a bully, but the Terrorizer's wide axle and superior suspension won him a fraction of a second every corner he took.

Maisie, built on a shoestring, couldn't compete on specs. So that just left them with skill and smarts to win it.

Pillars of scrap crowded the track ahead of them, decayed girders driven into the ground, a forest of metal with earth walls to either side. Cross and Tubbock darted in, swerving and sliding, throwing up dirt. Cassica followed, slamming the wheel left and right, riding the skids as metal columns flashed past her with a thump of air. Then Cross pulled hard right, driving toward the wall, and disappeared behind a bulge of rock. Tubbock went next and Cassica after, rounding the obstruction. Beyond, hidden, a narrow fissure drew them in.

Hot wind, exhaust fumes, and stinging dust blew over them. The bellow of the engines became a low, threatening

roar. Maisie rattled and shook; Shiara hung on to her roll cage. Stone shouldered in close. Just a tap on their flanks and they'd never reach the light at the end.

It was a matter of moments, but they stretched like snakes.

Then they were out, bursting into the bruised light of the morning, skidding hard and shedding rubber as Maisie's wheels scrabbled for grip. They tore away with open track ahead of them, and they hadn't made an inch on their opponents.

"Give me something!" Cassica snapped.

Shiara didn't need telling. Up ahead was a short run along a dry riverbed. They were down on turbo fuel, just enough for one good burst in the final straight. Maisie's settings were already at optimum; no wriggle room there. Opportunities for improvement looked slim. They'd have to rely on their opponents making mistakes, and that was a bad situation to be in.

They took the curve leading down to the riverbed: a smooth-sided trench, its surface crazed with cracks. The terrain favored Cross's faster car; he'd gain time on them. Tubbock's Terrorizer was at least as fast as Maisie was. The other racers were so far in the dust that Shiara couldn't find them in her mirror.

Third place, then. But that wouldn't be good enough. Not for Cassica, anyway.

In the distance, another route peeled off left, rising away from the riverbed. The first of three exits. Cassica traced it

with her eye, following the hump of land until it split, a knife-slash gap in the track through which the mad sun glowered.

“No,” said Shiara, following her gaze. “Can’t do it. Maisie ain’t fast enough.”

“We can win it if we make that jump. We’ll get ahead of them.”

“Can’t do it.”

“Says you. Nobody’s tried.”

“She ain’t capable. Wishin’ won’t make it otherwise.”

Cassica stared ahead resentfully as the exit neared. Shiara turned her attention back to the dash, the matter settled.

Then Cassica slammed the wheel to the left, throwing Shiara against her belts, and Maisie slewed out of the riverbed and up the exit ramp.

Shiara turned to Cassica in horror and alarm. But Cassica’s eyes were hard behind her goggles, and Shiara knew that look. No sense in argument, no question of pulling out. She was decided.

“Make it happen,” said Cassica.

Shiara set herself to it. Angle of ramp, length of approach, distance to jump, all unknown. Nobody had tried it because nobody wanted to risk it. Maybe it was easier than it looked, maybe harder. Some track designers had a sadistic streak, and the crowd liked a crash. You never knew till you went for it.

But get it wrong, and you’d most likely cripple yourself. If you came out breathing at all.