

Episode 3: Go!

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Aetherdrift*
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Art by: Wayne Wu

“So, boss ...”

The sudden sound of his teammate’s voice over the speaker nearly makes Daretti drop his soldering iron.

“Not right now, Redshift.”

The goblin’s voice is tinny over the crackling transmitter. Among the many things the Rocketeers had shelled out for—twelve-chamber engines for even the smallest ride, custom pictograph control schemes, no less than twenty separate payloads of cherry bombs for each goblin—communications had not ranked highly. Only the insistence of the Grand Prix executives inspired Daretti to try for them at all. He had put together their transmitters himself with the leftovers from their failed attempt at sticky bombs. Maybe that was why they crackled and popped all the time.

He grunts. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to coordinate a triple barrage on the fly? I’m compensating for all kinds of things here. Torque and ... what’s the word again? Track ... no ...”

Did the word matter? Probably not.

Daretti’s guys are getting absolutely *slammed* out there. As he glances past the windshield of his all-terrain tank, he spots poor Racket’s rickety ride getting torn in half by the piercing neon bolt of a Cloudspire cycler. Daretti *told* him he needed to shore up the frame on that thing. Now look at him—crashing headfirst in a sand dune.

Rocketeer rides are meant to go fast and blow things up. What they’re not meant to deal with is heaps of sand clogging their engines.

Neither the Quickbeasts—so far ahead that their great gryphon wings are only a speck against the sky—nor the Amonkheti teams have any problem with this. He expects that from those two. *Those two play fair*, he tells himself.

The Endriders do not.

Swarming around Daretti’s tank and the pack of goblins he keeps as attendants are no less than a dozen Endriders on bikes and tanks and cars. Rugged, fearless warriors surf atop the larger vehicles. Some protect their eyes from the swirling sands with goggles. Some dare the desert to do their worst, barefaced and teeth bared, with whirling chains in hand.

“Boss, you’re smart. Real smart. Like, you must have come first place in the smart-boss contest every single time you entered. But we’ve got a problem.”

Daretti scoffs. *These guys! Here he is, doing his best to help, and all they do is distract him. They’re racing! He had a strict policy of no questions while on the road! And especially not when—*

Is that guy revving up a chainsaw? What does he think he’s gonna do with—

Daretti blinks. The Endrider aboard the biggest, meanest of their rides ... is now juggling three chainsaws in the air and hurling them at the goblins, who of course keep trying to catch them. Worst of all, a flick of a switch on each of the roaring weapons sets them ablaze. The only thing worse than a chainsaw is one that’s on fire and shooting out curtains of flame with every revolution of its blades.

And the only thing worse than that?

Tons of them.

Where in creation are they even getting that many chainsaws!

“The only problem we have is hitting those guys. Now let’s see, leaves the tube going at a sixty-a-second—”

Get the missiles going, get the missiles going, that’ll drive them off and give them some breathing room ...

“Boss!”

Daretti slams his hand on the dashboard. “I’m telling you, I don’t have time for—what’s that?”

He sees it then, emerging from the sands: the glowing, ghoulish explosion of demonic energy that can only be the Speed Demons.

“That right there ... is what we’re calling a problem.”



Art by: Zezhou Chen

“Who do we fear!”

The war-chant, the boast, the prayer. Among new sands, an old comfort. The Endriders speak as one—for if they were anything else, the apocalypse would long ago have consumed them.

Far Fortune stares into the face of death. The shaking, glitching surface of the demon’s veil is an assault to the senses. A spectral maw threatens to swallow her and her ride whole. All around her, the chaos of the race: goblins screaming, their vehicles erupting in barely contained explosions; chordatan shanties fill in the empty spaces between cannonade barrages; the Quickbeasts caw as they swoop in on distant prey.

It is chaos.

It is life.

“We fear *no one*!” she screams.

And with that, she unleashes the blaze.

Flamethrowers. Explosions. And worst of all, off-key shark songs. Spitfire expected better from her competitors. Maybe they’re letting pragmatism overtake their sense of style. That’s all right if you’re not looking to make a name for yourself.

But by the end of the Grand Prix, the whole Multiverse will know the name Spitfire. Fireballs slick the sands with glass, but Spitfire accelerates anyway. The roof of her car hisses with heat as she drifts

right under the fire—and straight toward an oncoming cannonball. No worries. Keep it cool. Instead of grandstanding on the hood of the car like *some* people, Spitfire flicks a button on the steering wheel. A bladed arc of lightning shoots from the grille to slice the cannonball in two.

And, of course, she times this all perfectly (who would doubt that?) so that the two halves of the cannonball crash into a pair of Voyager racers about to overtake her.

Efficient. Perfect. Driving no one else can pull off. Let Chandra Nalaar do her best. She's never going to be able to execute a hairpin turn like this one.

That's why Spitfire makes a point of glaring back as she passes Avishkar's favorite daughter.

Okay, maybe this isn't Chandra's best showing. But it's not her *worst*, either, so why is that girl staring at her? What a weirdo her mother's working with. Maybe there weren't many people with the right skills available on short notice. *Who takes the time to do one of those smoldering stares like that in the middle of all this chaos? Especially when your goggles kind of ruin the whole effect.*

Well. Sorin might have. But he doesn't seem like the type to race.

Chandra thumbs her nose at the masked racer. And that's another thing! *Spitfire*? That's biting Chandra's whole gimmick! Maybe Pia picked it as a jab? Hard to imagine any other reason.

Of course, the second that she looks the other way is the second a chordatan tries to cut her off. A huge, howling hovership rams against the side of Chandra's bike. Before she can think to call for help, two of the other Cloudspire racers close in around the chordatan—one in front and one behind.

"Thanks, you guys!" Chandra shouts. "You're great!"

"Just focus on winning, Nalaar!" comes the answering shout.

These guys are all business, aren't they? For a good reason. Maybe they have a point. She's letting herself get distracted. She touches the pin Nissa gave her.

Remember the stakes.

Chandra pulls away from the Keelhauler ship—and from Spitfire—on the other side. This time when they link eyes, she's more than ready to meet their gaze.



Art by: Brian Valeza

“Amonkheti! Remember why we are here! Amonkheti! From the sands, draw life!”

Where the other racers see a harsh world, Zahur sees opportunity, growth, and home. Where the other racers have eyes for naught but competition, Basri finds himself awestruck by the familiar unfamiliar: ruins, ancient and newly uncovered.

Beneath the strip of track: a seemingly endless ravine lined with the mouths of tombs, each entrance a glittering cavity in the rock. Surrounding them: the warm brown faces of the living, the cool gray of the dead, their voices united in a single cheer. Above them: the endless blue sky, the towering idols to gods long forgotten now remembered. Behind them are the unworthy, ahead are the worthier, but on this land, there can be no question of the worthiest.

Flittering insects ply their stingers and strange lances against the Champions of Amonkhet. But to what end? For death is no impediment to glory, only a veil to be crossed. Basri watches an older member of the Champions throw himself before a wicked slice meant for Zahur. The man knows the blow is fatal, yet he smiles, looking up at Zahur with nothing but awe and dedication.

Zahur kneels. He closes the charioteer’s eyes with his great hand, the touch of his claws as delicate and light as the fall of a feather. He looks up from his fallen comrade to address the rest of the Champions.

“What is the greatest honor granted to us?” Zahur roars.

“To draw breath, to die brave, to persist!” Basri answers. On a conjured cloud of sand, he lifts the fallen charioteer. A bit of focus is all it takes to send him to the largest of the chariots, where Lazotep servants, eager to welcome another of their own, wait to begin their work.

Let the insects do what they like to try and throw them off the mark. The Champions of Amonkhet will not yield.

Basri will not yield.

Wings and stingers lay siege to the golden chariot.

Basri looks to Zahur. “Old friend, will you look after the vanguard?”

The leonin lets out a chuckle, one that has a touch of bone. “I’ve been leading the vanguard since before your great-grandfathers drew breath.”

“That is precisely why I woke you up,” says Basri.

Without waiting for further banter—they cannot afford the time—Basri clambers atop the chariot. He leaps from one to the other, like stones across a pond, while turning the sand around him into slicing blades. Most are meant only to deter. Still, where the lives of his fellows are threatened, he feels no remorse in acting decisively. Husks and shells fall into the ravine like drops of rain.

Amonkhet’s living champion brings death to those who would challenge them.

Sixth place.

Ugh.

What good is sixth? No one gets a trophy for it. You don’t even end up on the podium. Did Spitfire come all this way, weave all these lies, and put herself in such danger for *sixth*?

No. She’s got to remember what all of this is for. What the Aetherspark means to her.

No more visits to her family’s mansion unless she wants to be there. No more being told what to do. If she doesn’t like the way things are, she’ll leave, going wherever she wants.

No one is going to make her wait on them ever again.

Nalaar pulls away from the rest of the pack. Spitfire is hot on her heels, boosting herself over the swarm of Speedbrood racers. Basri Ket’s sand magic is an obstacle, but it’s one that she can overcome.

There’s always a way forward. There’s always something you can do. Every game can be won if you’re perfect.

Spitfire can’t be anything less.

Quickbeasts, Goblin Rocketeers, Endriders, Keelhaulers, Cloudspire, and Aether Rangers.

No, it won’t do at all. And when some explosion knocks the goblins off course, Spitfire sees the chance to show them what she’s about.

On the upcoming turn, she boosts herself not onto the lip of the lane—where everyone else is bound to go—but onto the outstretched arm of a god’s statue. Throwing herself and her ride into overdrive, she launches off the tip of the old god’s spear.

Her ride lands smack on top of a shattered goblin vehicle, right in front of some kind of huge storm of blue energy.

The Speed Demons?

No way. It doesn’t make sense. She’s sure of where everyone is, has to be sure, and she saw them in tenth not long ago. *What’s going on here?*

But the moment she has the thought—the moment she allows herself to doubt—is the moment they strike. Ghoulish glitch ghosts fly toward Spitfire. Throwing her full weight into the turn, she tries to swerve out of the way.

Spectral claws threaten to rake her vehicle asunder—

Until a scintillating fireball blasts them away, replacing one threat with another: Even in the environmentally sealed cockpit of Spitfire's ride, the heat is like a blast furnace. Unbearable, searing—the steering wheel gets so hot that her gloved hands offer no protection—but she holds on, anyway, gritting her teeth against the burn.

Gods, it *hurts*. But she can't let go. Spitfire could never! She's a hardened racer, a mysterious competitor who has never walked away from a fight. Who would she be if she let go now? Just Sita—a consul's daughter too spoiled to put up with a little bit of pain. She can do this.

Spitfire hates how perfect Nalaar pretends to be, how everyone upholds her as the best and most famous daughter of Avishkar.

But beneath the mask ...

Beneath the mask, in the privacy of her own ride, Sita mutters her thanks.

How had that weirdo pulled ahead?

He wasn't here a second ago! Chandra's sure of that. She would have smelled the brimstone and clove from a mile away. Yet there he is, sitting melancholically in the driver's seat as the demon tries its best to kill whatever teenager Pia talked into leading the Aether Rangers.

Chandra won't stand for it. She patches into the racer-to-racer radio, the one the GP crew made sure to emphasize they should use. Good numbers, they said. People like rooting for their favorites, they said.

Chandra's going to give them someone to root for.

"Pick on somebody your own age, Winter!"

Winter only revs his engine, the bray of his machine in and of itself a taunt. "If they're old enough to race, they're old enough to die."

Who says that! Man, this guy makes her blood boil.

She's so focused on hating him, in fact, that she doesn't even realize the Champions are pulling up next to her. The cracks of whips and old chants register as background noise. No. Her eyes are trained on Winter, and her ears are too attuned to the crying little guy she'd heard earlier.

Sure enough, there's the creature: his cage tightened again, his big eyes reddened from tears. As the Amonkheti throw bolts of magic back at Winter, the little guy can't do anything but curl up and hope he doesn't get hit.

Chandra stands up in the seat of her bike.

"You're the worst kind of person," she says.

"*Nalaar. We need you to focus on the race,*" Kolodin's voice comes over their comms.

But she doesn't want to. It wouldn't make sense to. This guy is terrorizing the Aether Rangers, and that little critter, too. And if that's not enough, the Amonkheti are pulling up! This whole thing is going to go left if she doesn't do something about it.

"I'm the kind of person that survives," Winter shouts back at her. As he speaks, he revs his engine again. This time, blue flames sear through Winter's skin. Within seconds, he's surrounded by an otherworldly azure conflagration.



Art by: Daren Bader

The demon roars. Chandra throws her weight to the right, and the bike swerves along with her. Only its internal gyroscopes keep it from falling over. Asphalt grinds Chandra's knee pad to a flat plane.

Chandra avoids the demon's arm, but the Amonkheti are not so lucky. The claw that would have torn Chandra apart instead knocks a wheel free from the lead chariot. All Chandra can do is watch as the Champions shoot off the track. A blast of sand from Basri is all that keeps them from plummeting into the abyss below, but even that won't save them entirely. Basri can only keep them going for so long before they crash into the shoulder of a massive statue.

The bike's stabilizer whips her upright. Standing on the seat, she ducks the oncoming chains and hooks from the Speed Demons. Winter wants to play? All right, they'll play.

"Chandra! Remember why you came here!" crackles one of her team members.

She does remember. And she knows for a fact how much Nissa would hate a victory paid for in blood. She touches the pin on her chest.

Ripping flame from the Speed Demon's exhaust, Chandra lets the fire flow through her. When her hair ignites, when she smells burning, when the air around her shimmers and distorts—when she becomes the fire—that is when she feels most alive.

"Hey, asshole!" Chandra calls.

Chandra hurls the fireball so hard that only a desperate grab for the handle keeps her from becoming a bright orange smear against the pavement.

Momentum blurs what happens next. An explosion, shrapnel flying; a wayward spike slicing her arm; a wheel shooting out like a cannonball; the Speed Demons spinning out and landing in a dune.

All of that is blurry—but one thing is clear.

When her fireball hit the Speed Demons, the little guy in the cage yelped.

When Chandra settles back into her seat, it's with a pit in her stomach. *How can she say she's any better than them?*

"Got it out of your system?" says Kolodin.

Chandra frowns. "Yeah ..."

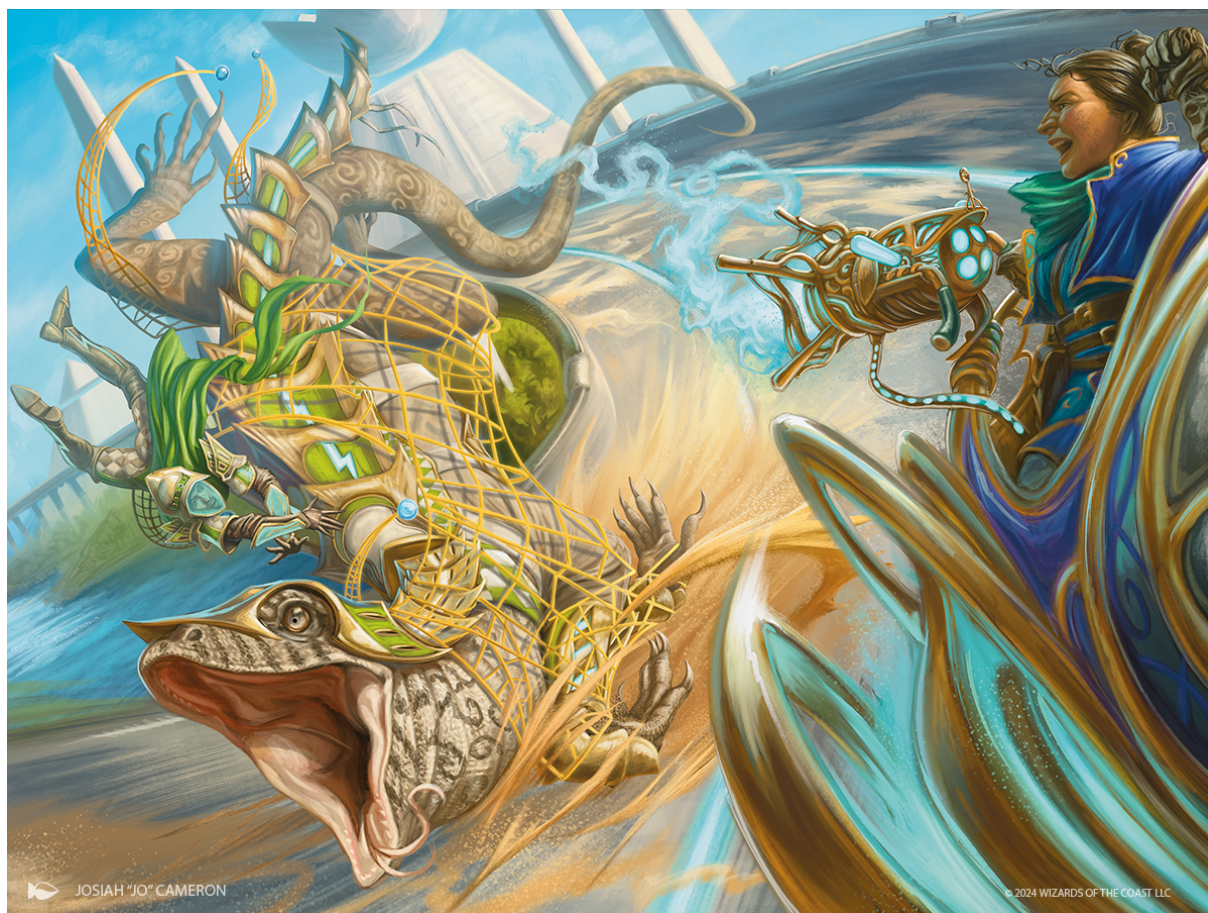
If Spitfire could shoot fire from her outstretched palms and fancy gauntlet, she'd *never* miss. It's just math! Gods. Nalaar is cool, sure, but doesn't everyone see how much cooler she could be if she really tried? If she focused?

Spitfire slaloms through the wreckage of the Speed Demon. The crackling aether leaves a pattern in her wake, one visible to all the onlookers back home.

Chandra might be braver and stronger. But Spitfire?

Spitfire has elegance.

Her complex path lets her sneak up alongside the Quickbeasts. Unlike Chandra, Spitfire's done her research. These proud racers aren't just trained for speed, they're trained for war.



Art by: Josiah “Jo” Cameron

Chandra’s learning that the hard way as she tries to muscle into second place, only for the Quickbeast to easily bat her away with a wing.

Spitfire sees an opportunity. Chandra’s sharp turns and direct lines are no match for Spitfire’s expert handling. This, coupled with the sharp and sudden pecks from the Quickbeast in first, means Chandra can’t get ahead even if she tries.

Spitfire grins. Precision, control—that’s what it takes to win.

Up ahead, an Omenpath ripples at the end of the track. Beyond ... Spitfire can’t make it out. She’s heard the name of the place before: Muraganda. Her father said something about it possibly becoming a tropical vacation destination one day in the future, taking up Ghirapur’s precious tourist money—

No. That was Sita’s father, not Spitfire’s.

But the sky overhead, blue as a dream, starts to darken, and Spitfire hears the crack of lightning behind her.

What?

She flicks on her comms device. “Spitfire to Renegade Prime. What’s going on? I thought we had a clear weather forecast.”

Nalaar tries to rub her off the track. Spitfire maintains balance.

“Well, about that. We did. But I think they’ll be updating that forecast any second now,” comes Pia’s voice. “Seems Amonkhet has its fair share of dust storms? Fascinating. I’d love to study the place—”

“Some other time!” Spitfire says. She flicks the comms back off and adjusts her mirror. She can’t waste the time it would take to look over her shoulder.

And the second she spots it, she understands what Pia meant.

This is no simple storm. The heavens themselves tremble in fear of it: A rolling cloud of black and gray and brown that swallows up all it touches, lightning flashing and fire burning within. Vast, wing-shaped shadows soar inside the storm. Marshals are herding the Amonkheti around them into shelters beneath the earth.

But there can be no shelter for the racers. In the rearview mirror, Spitfire watches the Guidelight Voyagers, automatons captained by Mendicant Core, as they’re swallowed up in the storm. The gleam of Mendicant’s eyes is the last she sees of them.

And, suddenly, winning doesn’t matter so much anymore.

Getting out of here does.

Spitfire floors it. Wherever that Omenpath goes, it has to be better than falling into the dust.

“Woah! Now *that’s* a stormy end to our tour of Amonkhet, wouldn’t you say?” Vin sits at the commentator’s desk with one of Avishkar’s best racers, but not one who made the final cut for the GGP.

“If you were on my ship, we would have thrown you overboard for that,” says Kari Zev. Her monkey is swinging from the boom mics overhead, lending all of their voices a warbly quality. Vin is pretty sure the tiny mug she’s holding isn’t just high-concentration Amonkheti coffee.

“That’s why we’re not on your ship, Captain Zev! I guess you’ll just have to ...” Vin looks directly into the camera, “*Amon* —get over it.”

The monkey screeches. Kari Zev’s glance silences him.

“Are you going to actually ask me any questions, or ...?” Kari asks. “I didn’t come here to be a sounding board for your little jokes.”

“W-well I’m not really,” Vin starts, but a tug at the collar seems to summon his common sense.

“Right, so! Captain Zev, how’s it feel to see the Aether Rangers so high up? Your advice is seeing the Keelhaulers to a solid position, but it’s gotta hurt to see others doing so well.”

“Pia Nalaar can do what she likes. She might have revolutionized our country, but I saw her fly during the invasion. She’s going to crash and burn.”

Is ... is the monkey miming a throat cut?

Vin, sweating, laughs. “But it’s not just Nalaar Senior and Nalaar Junior out there! We’ve also got Spitfire to account for—”

“She knows where to find me if she really wants to prove herself,” Kari Zev cuts in. “But she won’t.”

“You heard it here first, ladies, gentlemen, and friends!” Vin says, slapping the table. “Kari Zev challenges Spitfire to ... what are you challenging her to?”

Kari smirks. “Whatever she likes.”

“Hah! As abhorrent as this excess is, I have to admit, the little eyeball is funny.”

“Mohar ... some things never change, do they?” Harshad shakes his head. “I never did understand your sense of humor.”

“You don’t need to understand it, old friend. All you need to know is that our fortunes change today,” Mohar says. He pours Harshad a new peg of liquor. “Today, we toast to the glorious past of our nation, to Kaladesh restored.”

“To the future we all deserve: one with strong foundations,” Harshad answers. “Mohar. I cannot tell you how it’s rankled me to see the state of the city. The debauchery. A ‘night minister.’ Who ever heard of such a thing? And the so-called equality that’s been brought on! There are street urchins who oversee guard units now. It simply isn’t right. You say your new friend here will solve those problems for us?”

Mohar throws an arm around the cloaked man’s muscular shoulders. “There is no one finer to bring our dreams to fruition. We needn’t worry about the finer points of statecraft with him around. No red tape, no nonsense debates. Everyone knows tradition is right, in their hearts. Our friend will help them see it.”

Harshad eyes the man. Or tries to. The hood of the cloak makes it difficult. “And how will you do that?”

“I’ve spent all my life studying minds,” he answers. “It’s as easy for me to force them into the shape I want as it is for you to breathe.”

He speaks cold and cool, as if studying them from a parapet.

A chill runs down Mohar’s spine. He doesn’t let it show, not when Harshad is so close to signing on.

“I want to see you do it,” says Harshad. “I want to see you crush their will, as they have crushed my country.”

Hours later, the cloaked man is bare. He rests in the arms of a woman who loves him dearly, the one who toys with his hair as easily as he claims to toy with the minds of others.

She is the only one permitted to see him this way.

No apocalypse could tear the two of them apart. No cataclysm could rend their love for one another. Her hands, which have known such blood, have only tenderness for him; his mind, always scheming, rests when she cradles him tight.

And yet in life there are not always cataclysms and apocalypses. Sometimes there are simply ... cracks.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he answers, for he is too comfortable with her to realize that he is pulling away. “It’s what needs to be done.”

“They’re going to trample the city underfoot. Revolution rarely comes easy. There’s going to be a lot of blood over this, and it won’t be coming from tyrants. Regular people are going to suffer.”

She is a little more forceful this time, her touch a little heavier.

But where he is, he does not hear her, does not feel this.

“It won’t matter,” he says. “None of this is going to matter in a couple of weeks. All you have to do is trust me.”

And she does.

Or she thought she did.



Art by: David Alvarez

For the last two years, Spitfire’s dreamt of the places she’d go if she was Chandra Nalaar. The things that she could do with a Planeswalker’s power.

There are the obvious things. If she could control fire, she never would have left Avishkar in its time of need. When New Phyrexia invaded, Spitfire would have met them on the rooftops and the alleys. Slag. She would have turned all of them to slag, and fewer people would have been hurt, fewer families would have been—

Best to focus on the other things. The less-obvious ones.

Spitfire has always loved to travel. As a child she’d decorate her room with schematics, yes, but also travel posters from across Avishkar. Her father was so tied to the Consulate—and her mother so tied to him—that there was never any time to go anywhere but Ghirapur.

Yes—if she had the power to go anywhere at all whenever she wanted, she’d do it all the time. No one could hold her back.

No amount of daydreaming could have prepared her for Muraganda. For the flowers big as people, petals thick as rolled carpet. The air tingled with energy; the impossible beauty of a sunset shimmering through a curtain of suspended rain.

From the sounds of the base camp, she’s not alone in the thought. The great trees, each alone larger than the highest spires of Ghirapur, create cities all their own to the gathered racers. Overhead boulders and

rivers float in suspended animation. Speedbrood flit from one of the boulders to another; the remaining Voyagers seem to be taking notes on some of the local flora. Redshift and some of the goblins are competing to see who can surf a rocket the farthest.

Spitfire tells herself that she has her reasons for walking through the camp. She tells herself that there are tactical advantages to be gained here. Seeing the Keelhaulers meet to talk strategy, she gets a feel for the tension between Kari Zev and her captains. It's tension she can exploit on the track. Kari Zev's going to try to muscle ahead however she can, and that's going to put her in a precarious position. The Quickbeasts are examining some of the local mushrooms to see if they're safe to eat. Perhaps they won't be and the great, noble creatures will be a little less noble when it comes time to race.

She tells herself all of these things, and maybe part of her even means them, but the truth is more complicated than that. If it was just a fact-finding mission, she wouldn't be paying any attention at all to the casual gatherings throughout the camp. She wouldn't notice the smiles. The shared mugs of warmed wine. The laughter.

But she does. It is because she notices these things that she spots Pia Nalaar sitting with the Amonkheti team.

Pia perches on the mobile engineering vehicle she uses to follow behind Spitfire and the other Aether Rangers, parked next to an ancient Amonkheti chariot. Zahur is speaking to the gathered team; it is a great speech in their native tongue that Spitfire can't understand. Pia isn't listening to it, either. Her attention is focused on a member of the Champions: a dark-skinned man with gold-adorned dreadlocks. Bright white linens are wrapped around his body; there is a great divot in his chest.

Ah—the pieces are falling into place.

That's the man who died earlier.

Spitfire stands at the edge of the camp. For a little while, she watches. She's not sure why. Nothing notable happens, not really. Pia and the man continue to talk while Zahur gives his speech. The other Champions are rapt with attention. Only he and Pia are exceptions.

But even that comes to an end. Zahur says something—Khuru, it sounds like—and the Amonkheti break into a cheer. The newly risen man nods to Pia and leaves to stand at Zahur's side.

It's then that Pia spots her. The old renegade closes the distance in a couple of quick, stealthy strides, not looking to claim any more attention for herself in what is clearly an important moment.

"I didn't take you for the type to take in the sights," she says. Pia keeps her voice low to avoid speaking over the speech.

"I've always wanted to travel," Spitfire says. A slip. Her real voice. She's quick to pitch back down and follow it up before Pia can ask about it. "What were the two of you talking about?"

From Pia's smirk, Spitfire's gruff persona has already fallen apart. "What? Do you fancy him? He's a little worse for the wear these days, but he has a good heart."

"That's not what I meant," Spitfire says, glad the mask conceals the ruddiness in her cheeks. "I thought ..."

"On Amonkhet, they have rituals to raise their dead," Pia explains. She starts leading the two of them away—whatever is going on, it must be something only for the Amonkheti's eyes. "That young man, Khuru, is the first one they've raised during this race. He offered his life for Zahur, and they repaid him with this honor."

A pang of sympathy in Spitfire's chest. "Some people would give a lot for that, wouldn't they? To see a loved one that way."

Between them, a silence that is not a silence. "I among them," says Pia. Then, she sighs. "I wanted to be sure he was all right with it, and he was kind enough to chat. Call it a mother's overprotectiveness. He's only Chandra's age."

What is this Spitfire's feeling? This spike in her chest? Play it off. Play it off.

"As long as you remember why we're here," she says.

But her voice is shaking.

And she can't help but think, *If I get everything I want, and they lose, what will he have died for?*