

# STRATA

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## Sampler Information

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## ONE

### *Race Heads*

Smith Poulson ducked under a thick rope of cabling, steadying himself on the skimmer's teardrop-shaped hull. The machine felt warm, the shell quivering and tingling his fingers.

"What are you hiding?" he whispered.

The skimmer sat on a shoulder-high gantry, allowing the crew easy access. With all the fuel lines, cooling hoses, and telemetry wiring it looked like a critical-condition patient hooked up to life support. It was a machine Poulson knew as well as his bum knee, and today something hidden in the kaleidoscope of telemetry readings wasn't adding up.

He shuffled sideways, pulling his crutch along with him as he scanned the underbelly. Nothing seemed unusual. The landscape of shield generators, mag feeds, and ion chambers... All of it seemed okay. But then the secondary coolant pump caught his attention. It looked different than the one that had been there two days before.

It was the enclosure... It looked newer, somehow.

He reached in to touch it—

"You believe this?"

Poulson snatched his hand back and stood as smoothly as his ruined knee would allow him. It was Kawe—a rangy black man more suited to scaling the gravity inhibitors than working the insides of a skimmer—with Muamba—the man he was about to race—close in tow. Around them, the pre-race rituals of the hangar deck continued as if nothing at all were the matter. Conversation hummed. Drills whirred. The aroma of lubricant and freezing fluid smelled both familiar and—given Poulson's past—disturbing.

Kawe turned to his rival. "My own handler trying to sabotage my skimmer."

"Sabotage or not"—Muamba laughed with his trademark rumble and slapped Kawe's shoulder—"you're not getting your ticket Earthside with *this* race."

"Poulson, you remember Fabrice?"

Poulson shook hands with Muamba, suddenly very conscious of the number of people on the hangar deck. He needed to talk with Kawe in private, but race time was fast approaching.

“Good luck, friend,” Muamba said, grasping forearms with Kawe before heading off to his own skimmer.

Kawe clattered a fuel hose free of the skimmer, giving Poulson a path out.

“Listen, Kawe...” A couple of feet away, one of the pit crew fumbled a coolant line. Liquid nitrogen spilled onto the deck and boiled into a short-lived mist. Poulson lowered his voice. “Did you mess with the coolant pump?”

“No way, boss.”

“Don’t boss me, Kawe. Did you mess with that coolant pump?”

“Poulson!” It was Laver, the comm tech. He was holding a VR mask under his arm by the handler’s cage—the gyroscopic cradle that would be Poulson’s home for the duration of the race. “She’s here again.” He nodded toward the viewing mezzanine with an expression that made it clear that these constant visits were making him and the rest of the crew nervous. “Make it quick.”

Poulson looked and found Nichole standing at the railing, watching him. He smiled and waved, a sinking feeling settling within his chest. Ignoring her for the moment, he pulled Kawe into an embrace, hoping it seemed to Nichole like a normal pre-race ritual.

“We’ve been through a lot, son,” he whispered into Kawe’s ear. “At the very least I deserve some honesty. Do I need to pull the plug?”

“I didn’t touch it, Smith. I swear.”

Poulson wanted to doubt his words, but they seemed genuine. Maybe race day—especially *this* race day—was getting to him.

He slapped Kawe’s back and broke away, hoping he was right. “Race heads, right?”

Kawe nodded. “Race heads.”

Gritting his teeth against the pain in his left knee, Poulson used his crutch to hobble toward the handlers’ area.

Nichole climbed down the steel ladder to meet him, her gaze flicking to Kawe. At the base of the ladder she stared into Poulson’s eyes with a look of distrust he’d never seen before—at least, not in such a public place, and never toward him. “Is he alright?”

Three simple words, but they were loaded with meaning. How could he answer? If he told her of his suspicions, she’d pull the plug on the race, and it would ruin any chance Kawe had of taking the Cup and heading home. He couldn’t do that, not without talking to him first, and to do that, he had to get into the handlers cage where they could speak in relative privacy.

“He’s fine.”

Nichole took another step forward. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” He glanced back at his cage, hoping she didn’t notice how unwilling he was to meet her eyes. “I’ve really got to—”

“Smith,” she said, touching his forearm.

He turned back, a chill running through him at the touch of her hand. Did she know? Was she testing him? Or turning a blind eye? He didn’t know what to say, so

he said nothing.

“Good luck,” she said finally. She squeezed his arm and headed back up to the viewing platform.

At the cage, Laver said, “Poulson—”

“I know, I know. Race time.” He moved to the cage and allowed his crutch to clatter to the floor before hoisting himself up. He usually felt powerful when he got into the cage, but today he was riddled with doubt. I should climb out, he thought. I should call the commissioner over. But in the end he released a pent-up breath and nodded to Laver. “Ready.”

Laver snapped the VR mask over Poulson’s face, cutting off the world. Both the darkness and silence were complete. He took a deep breath—inhaling the musty smell of his old sweat—as the fastening clips dug into the back of his scalp.

Static, then Laver’s voice. “Standby for visuals.”

Straight ahead, a point of white light grew until it encompassed Poulson. The white light faded, replaced by a thermal map.

The pit crew around the skimmer glowed sunset red against the midnight-blue of the hangar deck. Poulson clenched his fists—sending the view spinning—before re-aligning himself with the skimmer’s main axis. He altered the scale and switched to the mag-field channel, adding the wire-mesh overlay for material objects. Everything was working fine, including the suspect coolant pump. That, at least, was a relief.

“Mean and clean,” he said.

“Patching you through...”

More static, followed by a pop of audio.

Poulson couldn’t speak freely, but he had to gauge Kawe’s state of mind. “You ready for a race?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Kawe said.

“You don’t sound so sure, son. If you’re not here to win, you might as well drop out now.”

Kawe knew exactly what Poulson was talking about. Only yesterday Kawe had promised there would be no movement involvement in the race. He promised he’d fly to win—he’d fly to get back to Earth.

“I’m here to win, Smith.”

His voice sounded strange, but he sounded like he believed his words. All Poulson could do now was trust him.

Laver chimed in. “Race heads, guys. Do Exx-Pac proud.”

The view seesawed as the skimmer, accompanied by the attenuated whine of the thrusters, lifted off. As the craft slipped through the deck’s forward iso-field, the image of the sun changed from blood red to white hot before settling back to a deep, frenzied orange.

At the base of the photosphere, structure danced at all scales, from the impossibly long rollers to the thin, mile-high spume. High above, ISPF Cutters glittered as they hunted for human traffickers or contraband runs while circling the

Exx-Pac and Pan Africa platforms.

To port, Muamba's skimmer glided serenely on in lockstep. Ahead, the spinning buoy that marked the start of the race grew closer. A dozen clicks below, the convection layer's surface seethed, loops and streams of ionized gas endlessly forming and reforming.

Autonavs took control of the skimmers for the final approach, synchronizing their flight paths so that neither team gained an advantage.

The race was only seconds away.

Kawe was usually a chatterbox, but today he was dead silent, and Poulson felt his own unease growing.

"Nothing stupid, Kawe."

"No," Kawe replied, hitting the thrusters hard as the autonav disengaged. "Nothing stupid."

The foamy surface advanced fast. Poulson's stomach lurched. To three o'clock the first aurus triggered, throwing tons of solar mass spaceward. It speared straight up, then twisted, caught by a powerful kink in the local magnetic field, causing it to morph into the familiar horseshoe shape.

A dozen more auruses bloomed in rapid succession, changing the initial gate from a slim arch into an extended tunnel.

So much for a gentle start.

The trick was to keep on the right bearing, but not so slavishly that you lost speed in the chop. Kawe had lightning reactions, but he couldn't change the laws of physics. Instead of curving into the main hollow axis of the tunnel, the skimmer slid wide, slamming into its choppy walls.

Nice work, Poulson thought.

He moved fast—relaying commands through a combination of finger movement, retinal scanner, and skullcap pickups to the skimmer's shielding system—as he attempted to keep Kawe in the race.

Rings of ionized gas flashed past. Tunnels within a tunnel. The entire structure was constantly shifting, shafts narrowing or looping in unwanted directions, cathedral-sized cavities shrinking to nothing in an instant. Sometimes the walls were porous, allowing the skimmer to slip between adjoining passages, while at other times they felt made of stone.

Kawe was skimming joules near the edge, but then, in a move that either betrayed his nerves or baited Muamba to overconfidence, he hit the wall.

Muamba sprinted ahead.

After several more twists and turns Kawe finally shot free of the tunnel, but Muamba was a good half-click ahead, closing fast on the next gate.

"No more mistakes," Poulson said, breathing hard.

Kawe went silent. That was good. He was at his best when he was silent. Like an assassin. And to Poulson's surprise, there were no more mistakes. None. Kawe was brilliant—in the zone, literally—slipping the gates and tunnels neither too close nor too far from center. Muamba didn't make any major blunders either, but Kawe was

clawing his way back, gaining ground with each gate.

Poulson's earlier nerves vanished. He dare not speak, terrified as he was of breaking Kawe's focus. Five gates to go. Not far ahead, Muamba's tail thrusters supernovaed white, dominating the thermals. It was a simple ploy, aimed at throwing Kawe off as he aimed for his approach.

It didn't work.

Three gates.

Kawe edged into the lead.

Two.

The platforms would be silent, the gangways empty, the spectators' tongues stilled, necks craned, eyes glued to the race. The penultimate aurus bloomed from the sun's surface.

And then it happened.

Instead of hitting the sweet spot, Kawe ploughed into the thick chop. The skimmer tumbled sunward.

Poulson's fingers went cold.

No, Kawe, no.

Around Poulson the world spun, every hue of fire dancing across the sky that never ended. He battled hard, cycling the stabilization couplers in an effort to arrest the spin. He tried to assume the controls, but with Kawe still conscious, the overrides wouldn't allow it.

"Help me, dammit!" Poulson cried.

Kawe was doing nothing, content to let the skimmer tumble closer and closer to the roiling surface of the convection zone.

With a sickening feeling he realized what the backup coolant pump really was: another trigger designed to set off a solar eruption.

Kawe had lied—had *been* lying for days. When he came close enough, he was going to launch it into the boil of the convection zone, and then, at some point—maybe minutes, maybe an hour—it would trigger an eruption that would force Exx-Pac and the other platforms in the vicinity into dormancy.

Kawe was risking his life—his future!—all for a stupid long shot, and he was trying to drag Poulson into it as well.

He had to call Kawe's bluff. He had to. He stopped fighting the descent, allowed his eyes stare ahead, passive, hoping the shock of near death would force Kawe into doing the right thing. Let him see what dying for the cause tasted like.

The skimmer arced downward, accelerating.

Poulson waited, his breath coming in great gasps as he stared at the readouts, willing them to show some sort of action from Kawe.

"Poulson! Get him out of there."

Laver's voice.

Poulson ignored him. A little more time...

Come on, Kawe! Come on!

"Now!" Laver cried.



Goddammit! Poulson threw himself back into action, couplers pinging on and off around the skimmer. This was going to be tight—tighter than he'd meant it to be.

He felt Kawe join in, but now he was spooked, his actions messy and rushed. Poulson could feel his fright, the race-head calm of moments ago now shattered.

"Focus, Kawe!"

"The base, Poulson! The base!" Static punctured his words, Kawe's voice disintegrating into a meaningless hiss. "Poulson, can you hear me?"

"Shut up and fly, Kawe!" Poulson screamed, redoubling his efforts.

The hiss of Poulson's audio became a banshee wail, and then a pop—the telltale sign that he'd lost audio with Kawe's skimmer. The telemetry graphs all flatlined.

Then the whole screen novaed.

**Bradley P. Beaulieu** is the author of *The Winds of Khalakovo*, the first of three planned books in *The Lays of Anuskaya* series, published by [Night Shade Books](#). In addition to being an L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Award winner, Brad's stories have appeared in various other publications, including *Realms of Fantasy*, *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Writers of the Future 20*, and several anthologies from DAW Books. For more, please visit [www.quillings.com](http://www.quillings.com).

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