

1 Soup with a quarrel

As far as I remember, I was around seven, when Grandpa first took me to a car race. He was a mechanic, getting the vehicles ready before the contest. That's why I could watch races from a noble place in my eyes - right at the finish line, in the first row. At first, I was afraid, it was loud and terrifying, later I got used to it, and we were cheering together with Grandpa for the car he took care of. Though it didn't win, that day meant a lot to me. From then, I accompanied him whenever I could, soon, I also helped him in the preparations, learned what are the mysterious metal parts under the hood do, and eventually he taught me how to drive, there, on the racetrack. I could always practice, when there were no one around, but still carefully, slowly steering.

Unfortunately he couldn't see me get my driver's license as soon as I reached the age, he couldn't cheer for me on my first race, and also missed the celebration of my first win. I missed him deeply, but he left something valuable behind - the love of racing and cars.

Dad didn't inherit this love, moreover, he turned to a completely different profession - towards biology and sciences. Due to a common class and a project, he met my mom at the university, and soon, they fell in love with each other, and I was born. They never really liked my proceedings, they both wanted me to do the same as them - going to university and get a diploma, but their attempts were unsuccessful. I finished high school with extraordinary grades, but my university applications "somehow" didn't reach the addressees. I stayed at home instead, doing repairments, and winning races on the weekends.

They only let me do this until the accident. On a Saturday, the slightly pouring rain made the track slippery. Though I could take that specific turn, but the other guy, following too close, was not that lucky, overturning us both. I only got a few scratches and a slight concussion, but his arms and legs broke several times. My parents were horrified by this and banned me from racing ever again.

It didn't stop me, and it didn't change my way. During the day, I was still a mechanic, but as soon as the sun set, I sneaked out to be one of the best drivers in town. This is the benefit of living near Houston, Texas - there are official races during the day, and almost every night, not-so-legal street runs are available. With my performance, I could gather enough to completely renovate my old, broken Mazda RX-7, what I inherited from Grandpa. I told my parents that I just do more work, I get my money from there, and they believed me. Both of them worked all day long in the nearby research lab, so most of the time we just met in the evening.

"How was your day, Liam?" Mum asked, while she put the bowl full of hot soup in the middle of the table. As a chemist, in the lab, her hands got used to the heat, so a simple soup didn't bother her.

"Just the usual. The neighbor's ignition got wrecked again. I told him to finally get a skunk trap, but he is unwilling" I answered, while I started to fill my plate.

"He is a nice man, I like him. And he works at the university... you could really ask a little favor from him, as you help him so much."

"Mum!"

"Eleanor, dear, could you pass me the salt instead? Though you are a chemist, you can never get the amount of it" Dad tried to change the subject. He has always been the justice of peace, but could never handle this for long. Just about

three minutes. So I took the opportunity.

"And how was your day? Did something interesting happen?" I asked, as I handed the salt to dad.

"Nothing groundbreaking, the Nobel prize is still nowhere in sight. Rabies is not an easy virus. The more we want to invent a cure, the more resistant it becomes. And we also have to work pretty fast" Mum saddened, "We lost another dog today. She was brought in a week ago. You should have seen the little girl's face, her owner, full of hope, that we will cure her little Fifi" she wiped a tear from her cheek.

"You see, this is also a reason why I don't want to work in that. Cars are at least repairable."

"But they take your life as easy as well."

"I have to be exactly as careful as with a rabid dog. And anyways, I am healthy and fine."

"But it was only a matter of an inch!" Dad didn't want to be left out.

"He's right. It was a close call to lose you."

"To lose me? Every day you work with more and more dangerous materials, with rabid animals" I emphasized the rabid word with hitting the table with my palm. Glasses clinked, the salt turned over.

"So I think you don't have validation for me to get slightly injured ONCE."

"Unlike you, we work in a monitored environment, in protective gear, and we look out for each other, and don't just chase success."

"But, if something is not working, then your enthusiasm breaks, and you fill this house with sorrow. What will happen, if you eventually succeed? What will you do then?"

"There will always be something to do research on. But you want to do this all your life? Repairing cars until the end of your life?"

"Still smaller emotional burden if something is not working for the first time, and there is always a second chance."

"But you don't help the world this way!"

"I don't even want to do so." I got up, and picked the way to my own room. "I just want to do, what I enjoy" I mumbled, rather just for myself, as I closed my door. I heard them finishing dinner and taking a shower, and finally marching into their bedroom.

Another race took place that night, not far from home. The reward was a substantial amount, and I really needed a new set of brakes, which were quite expensive. I had some time until start, so, as the kitchen was empty, I sneaked out to fill myself after the missed dinner. The way I found it, I ate, almost cold, straight from the bowl, the quietest I could, then took a shower and got dressed. Blue jeans, the thinnest-soled sneakers, a black T-shirt and a blue hoodie covered me that night.

Our neighbor, Mr. Grunner got home every day at ten pm, his old wreck was as old as its owner I think. It has never been properly maintained, so it arrived with loud cracking and buzzing. I used this noise to cover my departure every evening, as it fully suppressed the faint sound of the Mazda.

For some reason, this evening, Mr. Grunner got home half an hour late. Maybe he got hold up at his workplace (but why would he stay overtime in a library), or something happened on the way, but I was extremely nervous by that time. As I heard him turn at the corner, I jumped out of my window, sneaked past my parents' bedroom and jumped into my car. As soon as Mr. Grunner backed up

into his garage, I was already turning at the end of the street, hitting the gas as hard as I can to get to the racing site in time.

Preview

2 Best night of my life

I arrived five minutes before the start. I parked at the very end of the starting grid, got out, and went to find one of the organizers. On both sides, small crowds had gathered—friends of other racers—squeezed onto the narrow sidewalk. The pole marking the start was wrapped in red ribbon. Luckily, I quickly found one of the main organizers, Camil, who was talking to an unfamiliar woman. She was tall, with long black hair hanging freely down to the middle of her back, and her slim figure was dressed in black leather. As I approached them, Camil noticed me.

“There you are! I thought you weren’t coming. Keira, let me introduce you to Liam, one of the best racers in the city!” she said, handing me the tablet she was holding.

“Hi! Sorry, Mr. Grunner got home later than he should have,” I apologized, scribbled my name on the digital registration form, and handed the tablet back to Camil. As she took it, our fingers touched, and I blushed slightly. She was beautiful — her long blonde hair usually braided, and her blue eyes sparkled even under the streetlights. Next to her, my messy, pale-blonde hair looked downright unkempt. We’d never gotten too close, but I’d love to ask her out, and I knew my deep green eyes and racing skills would be enough. Plus, she loved my sense of humor.

“Don’t stare like that, you fool. Get back behind the wheel and win this race too! Two minutes to go!” she said, turning me back toward my car and handing me the map.

“Good luck!” Keira called after me. Interesting woman. After the race, I’ll ask Camil who she is. And maybe I’ll finally ask her out.

I got back behind the wheel, stretched a bit, and warmed up the engine. I stuffed the map in front of the radio, positioning it so I could see it clearly. I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then I gripped the steering wheel.

At the starting line, ten cars ahead of me, one of Camil’s friends walked into the middle of the road. I don’t know how she wasn’t cold — her shorts were shorter than my underwear, and she wore a thin tank top. She held a flag in each hand. She raised them into the air, and all the engines roared. After a few seconds, she quickly dropped the flags toward the ground.

The first two cars shot off immediately, the rest started a bit slower, which held me back. I glanced at the map. After a few tight turns, there would be a long straight stretch. That’s where I’d have a chance to climb to third, maybe even second place. But first, I had to get there.

As we crossed the starting line, the racers spread out a bit, opening a path between them for me — not the safest move, but it could work. I downshifted and floored the gas, slipping through the narrow gap. Great. Two down, eight to go.

I noticed familiar stickers on the car ahead. James, my old desk mate from high school, was trying again. Ever since he got his license, he’s entered every race he could, but always ended up last — even when starting from pole position. I admired his persistence. Knowing his driving style, I pretended to overtake on the right, and when he moved to block me, I quickly swerved left and passed him. As I got ahead, I flashed my hazard lights briefly to thank him. I grinned, imagining him fuming as he recognized my car — not hard to spot, with its turquoise color. Not the most masculine, but I loved it, and everyone recognized it easily.

Approaching the first tight corner, I hugged the inside line like the others. Until we reached the straight and the gentle curves afterward, I had little chance

to improve my position. So I obediently followed the black BMW Z3 ahead of me. At the last turn, I drifted slightly outward, and as we straightened out, I floored the gas. Before the BMW driver even hit the gas, I was already ahead. Six left.

The straight was long enough that I easily caught up to the next opponent, thanks to my recently upgraded turbo system. The stretch ended with a gentle right turn, which the guy in the red BMW misjudged, pulling too far to the center and leaving just enough room for me to pass. Another one down.

The top five cars were now in a tight pack, leaving everyone else behind. I had to push hard to win. Damn Mr. Grunner for getting home late tonight. I glanced at the map. I had to be fast and skilled. There would be one last turn before the finish. If I could catch up by then, I might pass them all.

"Come on, come on, come on..." I muttered to myself and the car, pressing the gas so hard I nearly broke the floor. The gods of fate changed their minds and helped me — I caught up to the convoy before the turn.

"This is going to be tight," I gritted through my teeth. I sped up a bit, shifted to second gear, and kept my right foot hovering over the gas. I took the last few meters with momentum, yanked the handbrake, turned the wheel right, and drifted through the corner, overtaking everyone.

A sound like no other rang out — I miscalculated and scraped the now-second-place car, leaving a turquoise streak on it and gaining a black one on mine. I imagined how angry he'd be, and I was too, but I had to focus. As I straightened out, I slammed the gas. Taking the corner wasn't enough — I had to hold the lead. Luckily, only a short straight remained to the finish. Though the black car behind me was close, I held on and passed the girl waving the checkered flag first.

As I finally stopped and shakily got out of the car, Camil threw his arms around me.

"Congratulations!" she shouted in my ear. "This is part of your prize," she said, and gave me a quick kiss. I was completely confused and blushed, which she clearly noticed, pulling away quickly.

"Come," she said, leading me toward a nearby podium. The crowd cheered loudly, celebrating both my win and Camil's kiss. Once I calmed down a bit, I managed to speak.

"Would any other racer have gotten that?" I teased.

"Of course not, you fool, that's only for the winner," she winked.

"You know what I meant," I mumbled. I stepped onto the podium and received my prize from another girl, wrapped in a white envelope. I didn't count it — it didn't matter. Then Keira approached me.

"Can we talk somewhere quiet?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, confused. I didn't know what she wanted. I doubted I was her type, and she probably saw the quick kiss with Camil. We slipped away from the crowd to the edge of a nearby park and sat on a bench.

"Have you heard of Thundervale?" she asked without preamble.

"Yes, I think every serious racer has. Or at least should have."

"Great! Less explaining for me," she smiled. "I'm one of the organizers. I was passing through and heard about the race, so I came to watch."

She hesitated, uncertainty in her voice. I raised an eyebrow.

"Usually, this goes through official competitions and thorough background checks, but based on your performance today and what I heard from Camil, I'd like to invite you to join the newcomers."

She would've continued, but I was so thrilled I jumped up and punched the air.

“YES!” I shouted. “I’d love to go. Thank you!”

She smiled at my joy and continued.

“That’s great! But it’s not enough that I invite you here — you’ll have to go through several trials in the valley. And people won’t look kindly on you, since we already have enough newcomers.”

“I don’t care. Just being invited is enough for me. And don’t worry — if the trials are full of amateurs like here, I’ll win everything!”

“Don’t get cocky!” she smiled, then stood up. She rummaged in her black handbag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. She searched a bit more and found a pen. She knelt beside the bench, spread out the paper, and started writing. When she finished, she handed it to me.

“The first race is in a week. When you arrive, this will get you past security. I wrote my number too — call me when you get there. See you there!” she said, then walked away. I unfolded the paper:

I, Keira Thorne, hereby declare Liam Davis an intern to Thundervale and grant him permission to participate in the qualifying race held on July 3rd. This right was earned based on his performance in a Houston street race and previous placements as reported. He may freely enter the Thundervale valley, his skills are sufficient, and I vouch for him.

At the bottom were Keira’s signature and phone number. My eyes welled up. I’d heard a lot about Thundervale and dreamed of showing my skills there, but I knew my chances were nearly zero. Yet even that tiny chance proved enough. I could prove myself in a place that mattered. If I had to, I’d run away from home.

I found Camil and told her what happened, then showed her the letter. She was visibly excited and admitted she knew.

“She told me who she was, and I tried to present you in a good light. When you won, she just said: ‘You convinced me.’ Still, congratulations again!”

“Thanks. And for talking to her too. You know...” I began, a bit embarrassed, “I’ve wanted to ask you for a while... Would you like to go for coffee sometime? You could help me plan the trip to California,” I tried to disguise the date invitation.

“I’d love to spend time with you anytime, even without planning,” she said. “But would tomorrow at 2 PM work?”

“Perfect,” I replied. My face was burning from her direct answer. I looked up to hide it and noticed we were standing in front of a café. I grinned.

“How about here?” I pointed to the building, and she laughed. She was beautiful. She laughed more and more, and I didn’t understand why. I looked up again. The café’s name was “The Hand of Fate.” I laughed too, and the people around us looked at us strangely. I didn’t care — this was the happiest day of my life.

3 Convincing

When I woke up the next morning, the first thing I did was read Keira's letter again. The whole thing felt like a dream, yet the proof was right there in my hands. I couldn't believe I could be this lucky. I was grinning from ear to ear all morning — during breakfast and afterward while checking over my car. Although I loved it, it unfortunately needed constant maintenance, especially after a race. The engine devoured oil, and with the new turbo, there was a higher chance of clogged air intakes or fuel lines, so it always needed a thorough inspection and servicing.

So I spent the whole morning in the garage, working while the radio blared. I usually work in silence, but I was in such a good mood that I didn't know what to do with myself. By the time I finished, there wasn't much time left before my date, so after a quick shower, I grabbed my laptop and drove to the café called "The Hand of Fate." When I walked in, Camil was already sitting at one of the tables. She waved when she saw me, and I walked over. She hugged me before letting me sit down. That had never happened before.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Never better! And it's not just because of yesterday's win..." I replied, a bit mysteriously. She smiled, then suddenly her face turned serious.

"What about your parents? From what you've told me, they won't let you go."

"I know," I sighed, "but I don't care what they think. I'll tell them tonight, and if they say no, I'll sneak out and go anyway. They've never been able to hold me back, and this is the biggest chance of my life."

"I hope they agree. They must understand how important this is to you."

"Eh, they've never understood, unfortunately."

"What can I get you two?" asked a tall, brown-haired guy in a black apron.

"An espresso, please," Camil said.

"I'll have a ham sandwich and a black coffee," I ordered, then turned to Camil. "Sorry, I was so busy with car maintenance this morning I didn't have time for lunch."

She just waved it off. We got our order quickly and had a pleasant chat. Once I was full and had finished my coffee, Camil looked at me curiously.

"Do you have a plan for how to get to Thundervale? I looked it up a bit yesterday — it's pretty far, all the way on the west coast, above San Diego."

"I know... That's why I brought this," I said, placing my hand on the laptop. "To help me plan the trip."

I opened the map and, a bit shyly, moved to sit next to her so we could look at the screen together.

"You'll definitely need at least one night's rest somewhere," she said while planning the route, "maybe even two."

"Why? Can't I drive at night? You know how well I drive," I looked at her challengingly.

"Only that well if you're not already exhausted from driving all day. But..." she paused, studying the map.

"Yes?"

"My aunt lives in Arizona, not far from New Mexico. She'd be happy to host you — for my sake. Or even us."

"Us? You're coming too?"

"I'd love to go with you, but no — I mean I could accompany you there, we'd sleep over, and the next day you'd continue while I find my way back. I haven't

visited them in a while, and it'd be less weird if I were there too."

"I'd be really happy if you came with me."

"Unfortunately, that would make the trip uneven," she continued, "because driving straight through would take a full day to reach Thundervale. But this way, it'd be fifteen hours one day and nine the next."

"That's not a big deal. But how would you get back?"

"By plane. There's an airport near them, and of course one here too."

"Would it be worth it for you? I'd be happy if you came, but it's a long trip, and the plane ticket isn't cheap."

"Fifteen hours locked in a car with you is worth any amount of money!" she exclaimed, and I blushed deeply. I managed to reply, stammering a bit.

"Alright, if your aunt's okay with it, then let's go together. Will you talk to her?"

"Of course, today. I know that regardless of your parents' attitude, you'll go anyway," she nudged me.

That evening, I nervously waited for dinner. I prepared myself for a long argument and confrontation, as much as I could. I had looked up tons of information about Thundervale, especially accident statistics. I knew the only way I might convince them was by showing how low the injury rate was. Luckily, that was true — injuries were rare, about two or three per year, and there hadn't been a fatal accident in the past five years. That might give me a chance.

But I didn't want to rush it — I wanted the conversation to flow naturally. Being Friday, my parents had already ordered pizza on their way home from work, so it arrived around the same time they did. I had just placed the fragrant boxes on the table when I heard them park outside. We quickly sat down, opening the large and regular-sized pizzas. I shared the large one with Dad, while Mom had the regular.

"What happened to your hand?" I noticed a small bandage on Dad's arm.

"Just a scratch. We had a German shepherd in pretty bad shape, even though we gave him a new formula. During cage cleaning, when I tried to take him out, he jumped at me, scratched me, and ran off. Somehow he got out of the building, and they haven't found him since."

"And they patched you up quickly."

"He calls it a scratch, but it bled a lot. I patched him up," Mom chimed in.

"You're exaggerating. It didn't bleed that much."

"Sure," Mom laughed, "you were dizzy from blood loss and had to sit down."

"But I'm fine now, as you can see."

"Good thing. And what about the dog?" I reached for another slice.

"Nothing yet. A team searched for him this afternoon, and tomorrow they'll place medication in the surrounding forest as a precaution. They'll also announce that people should avoid the area for now."

"Hope it doesn't cause trouble," I said.

"And how was your day?" Mom drenched her pizza in ketchup.

"I worked on the car in the morning, then met a friend in the afternoon." Since I only knew Camil from the races, I couldn't tell my parents about her in detail.

"That's great! What did you do?"

"Had coffee, talked."

"And will there be a next time?" Mom looked at me teasingly. I grinned.

"There will, for sure," I replied. After a brief pause, I continued, half-changing the subject.

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything, sweetheart, you know that."

"Can I tell you something from start to finish without being interrupted?" I got surprised looks in response, then Dad nodded. I took a deep breath and began.

"Last night I took part in a race. Nothing dangerous happened," I quickly clarified, seeing their darkening expressions, "but there was a woman there who talked to me after the race. She saw me win and gave me an invitation to an event in Thundervale. It's a huge place, exclusively for races, with top-notch safety," I started speaking rapidly, "where only the very best drivers get in. Keira — that's the woman from last night — said they don't usually invite people like this, but I impressed her so much that she thinks I deserve it. And the girl I went on a date with today — I know her from there too," I added, slightly out of breath.

There was stunned silence for a few seconds as my parents processed everything. I started trembling from nerves, my palms sweaty.

"No," Mom's voice cut through the tension.

"But..." I began.

"No. We've talked about this — you're not racing anymore. I'm disappointed in you."

"Thundervale hosts the world's most prestigious races. I'd finally have a chance to do something with my talent! If I impressed someone in charge there, that must mean something!"

"She was probably drunk or something. Otherwise, she wouldn't have done that. You're not going — it's dangerous."

"It's not as dangerous as you make it out to be," I snapped. "I looked it up — only two or three injuries a year, and they're not even that serious. The worst I found was a guy who broke both legs, but he fully recovered!"

"He was just lucky. A serious accident could happen anytime," Dad joined the argument.

"It won't! While safety here is barely considered, there they practically have a squad dedicated to monitoring car and track safety. I read about many events being canceled or postponed due to poor conditions."

"If it's such a big deal, why haven't we heard of it?"

"Maybe if you cared about something other than work and pushing me to go to college, you would've heard of it."

"That's what you should be doing — not this."

"I'm not going to college. I'm sure of that. I won't give up my dreams. You didn't," I looked into Dad's eyes, "and look what you've achieved. Grandpa supported you, even if he didn't like the idea. You could do the same," I sank into my chair. I was out of arguments, too tired to keep fighting, though I needed to. I glanced at Dad. I had planted a seed with my last sentence — now it was up to him. Mom, seeing I was out of steam, attacked with renewed force.

"Would it be worth dying for your dreams, or at best getting seriously injured? We don't want to lose you, so you better give this up."

Since I had nothing left to say and had finished my pizza, I stood up, thanked them for dinner, and retreated to my room. I lay on the bed, burying my face in the pillow. Tears stung my eyes. I couldn't believe they were so insensitive. All the hope I'd had since last night suddenly vanished. One option remained — running away. But I didn't really want to. I'd rather say goodbye and leave with their support. But that didn't seem likely. As I lay there, Dad's voice snapped me

out of my thoughts. I usually don't hear them talking in the kitchen, which meant they were arguing. I couldn't make out the words, but a small hope flickered inside me. I scolded myself — *no, it's probably about Dad's injury. He doesn't want Mom to disinfect it again or something* — I tried to talk myself out of it. But that little spark of hope stubbornly remained.

I was almost asleep when the door quietly opened. Dad stepped in and sat on the edge of my bed. I turned toward him.

"Your mom's in the shower. What was the name of that place?" he asked, holding out his phone. I quickly typed "Thundervale" into the search bar and handed it back. He glanced at it, then put it in his pocket.

"Good night," he said, leaving the room.

"Good night," I replied. It seemed the seed I planted had started to sprout. So they really were arguing because of me. Or worse — Dad was interested in Thundervale because he wanted to find Keira and report her. That thought made me grin, then I rolled over and fell asleep.

PREVIEW