

Orien, Parker and Grant arrived at The Maple, a five-star hotel in Toronto. This was where the Racers' Welcome Reception took place. The inside of the hotel was golden. Golden pillars, golden walls, waterfalls that had a golden glow to them. It was so gaudy, it actually made their eyes hurt.

Orien had on his best clothes: A gray blazer with an off-white dress shirt underneath, khakis and brown loafers. Parker had on a simple black short dress with a cranberry-colored purse and black heels. Grant brought a polo shirt and black jeans. They looked at the people surrounding them, dressed in tuxedos and gowns.

"I feel like we're underdressed for this," Parker commented, her eyes scanning the dining hall.

"So many fancy pants here. Maybe we don't even need to race, we can just beg these rich guys for money." Grant theorized, stroking his chin.

"You two can eat if you want. I'm going to meet the other racers." Orien said, walking off to the drink dispenser to pour himself some tea in a clear plastic cup. He began strolling around the hall, looking for racers. Upon looking closer, he saw all the racers had their uniforms on. They had the designs of their country's flag decorating the suits. Truth be told, Orien already had his. He was just so excited to meet the others, he left it on the hotel bed. That wasn't going to stop him, though.

He spotted a group of them talking near a potted fern. A guy in a British racing uniform was telling a story to three other racers. A French guy, a German guy, and an Italian woman. Relaxing his grip on the cup, he approached the group.

“So the fool’s engine stalled right at the startline! That was the easiest victory of my life!”

The British racer laughed. He was a young looking guy around Orien’s age, almost babyfaced. He had flowing blonde hair and deep blue eyes.

“Hello.” Orien’s voice blissfully rang. The British racer paused. The four of them looked at him. Not with a warm, welcoming gaze, but rather with an annoyed glare.

“Do I know you?” The British racer asked.

“No, but—”

“Then why are you speaking to me?” He pressed dismissively.

“He, man. We’re both racers. I just wanted to talk for a bit.” Orien offered.

“You?” The racer sneered. “A racer?”

“That’s right! Orien Santiago, Number 31! The American rep!” Orien flexed.

“I’m sorry, your hair is so ratty and your eyes look so dead, I mistook you for one of the janitors. Where’s your uniform? All racers in the Grand Prix wear them to events.”

Orien scratched his head. “...I left it in my hotel room.”

“Amateur.”

“Well, who are YOU?” Orien interrogated.

“Number 1, Nigel Thorne. Britain’s top racer. I’ve won over thirty trophies and had the honor and privilege of having dinner with the Queen of England herself. I don’t fraternize with the competition.”

“But aren’t they in the Grand Prix too?”

“I meant I don’t fraternize with low-rate, small-time racers.” Nigel sneered.

“Hey, I’ll have you know I beat the qualifying race for the Grand Prix.” Orien crossed his arms, expecting praise.

“That’s how every racer had to participate. If you didn’t pass the test, you wouldn’t even be here right now.”

Orien’s shoulders sagged. “Oh.”

“Any real accolades you have?”

“I’m the best racer in my to—”

“On a *national* level?”

Orien looked down. “None.”

“That’s what I thought. Now go find your tricycle, I have an anecdote to finish.”

Orien exhaled through his nose. This tactic of starting a conversation usually worked for normal people. But this man clearly isn’t normal. He looked for any icebreakers he could use to talk to his pompous windbag. He noticed his drink cup was running kind of low.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Orien walked closer. “Here, let me get you a re—”

Orien’s foot got caught. His body lunged forward and planted onto the carpeted floor, landing on the floor chin-first. He could feel shockwaves of pain emanating from his face. He craned his head up. His cup of sweet tea found a new home: On Nigel’s racing suit. It left one, long river of brown liquid from his chest all the way down to his lap. Uh oh.

“I’m so sorry!” Orien panicked. He shot up from the floor, searching frantically for something to help clean it up with. Orien noticed Francesca had some napkins next to her on the clothed table. He roughly snatched a bunch and tried to wipe Nigel’s suit wildly. Nigel’s fair-skinned face turned into a peach pink. His hands got twitchy before he took one arm, and struck Orien with the back of his hand.

“Get out of here, you bloody idiot!” Nigel screamed, a small shower of saliva escaping from his mouth. Orien, rubbing the new red mark that had formed on his cheek, decided to sneak

away. Nigel went right back to talking to his European racer friends, laughing as if the ordeal never happened at all.