

Orien was now in Brazil, in the vibrant city of Rio de Janeiro. Jesus Christ himself stood tall over the whole city. Hands in the pocket of his racing suit, he walked up and down the hilly alleyways of the city, thinking to himself. Many people around him were doing various things. Vendors were shouting out their special sales, children were playing soccer, and the occasional bike passed by. All in Portuguese, a language he did not know. He could've picked up some through knowing Spanish, but it wasn't like he was going out of his way to listen. The events of New York kept replaying in his head. Grant and Parker never said a word to him after that. Not in the hotel. Not on the plane there. Now they were staying at the same place, and even then, not a word was uttered between them. Parker and Grant spoke to each other as usual. Not a word directed at Orien. The most he'd get was they'd say something a little too loud and he overheard, following either of the two saying "sorry", before they continued to ignore him. Even if Orien tried to apologize now, it would come off too shallow. So, he thought the best course of action was to stay silent. Let them calm down. But that isn't apologizing, that's letting them swallow their anger towards him. Who knew how much longer they'd hold that against him?

Orien looked up at the sky as he strolled the street. Not a cloud in sight. He didn't have to be at Avenida Atlântica for the race for another five days. He had to find some way to kill time. He felt a buzzing in his pocket and grabbed his phone. It was from Dirk.

"Hello?" Orien droned, despondent.

"Hey, hey, hey! How's my favorite Orien?" Dirk's voice beamed cheerfully.

"Oh, Dirk. What's up?"

"I've got two pieces of great news for you, buddy! The first thing is I had the repair boys from the IRC take a look at your car. The engine damage isn't too bad, so you should be good to go before the race."

“What’s the other good news?” Orien asked curiously. He could hear Dirk chuckling on the other end.

“Let’s just say I managed to pull some strings and got you a sponsor!”

Orien’s eyes widened. His first real sponsor. “A sponsor?! For real?!”

“Mhm, right here in Rio! I’m actually with them now, and they’d *really* like to meet you.”

“I’ll be there right away! What’s the address?”

Dirk listed the address for Orien to meet him and the sponsor at. It was a place somewhere in Rocinha, Rio’s largest and safest favela. That also happened to be where Orien was already, about a ten minute walk away from his current location. He found a discarded map of Rocinha on the street to navigate his way through the maze of multicolored buildings. While walking through the streets, his head protected by a webbing of electrical wires extending from the buildings above. He just walked down the patterned road, sometimes moving to the side for a bus or car to drive by.

After ten minutes, Orien finally arrived at the address Dirk described to him. It was a one story building, most likely a grocery store. It didn’t seem like a chain location either, more locally owned. The building was a dirty brown, with dark splotches seeping through multiple parts of the wall. The windows looked thin and had a dirty rim. He could also see bars behind the windows. There was a faded sign, the words long since lost, and the paint job chipped away. Orien slowly entered the store, a tiny bell ringing as he slipped inside. For one, the store was incredibly tiny. There was just enough space for him to squeeze through the aisles, but it was very easy to accidentally tip over an entire aisle. They mostly had canned goods, snack cakes,

chips, and one cooler on the left wall where they kept the drinks. Again, all of these products were in Portuguese, so Orien could only use context clues to figure out what the products were.

At the front counter was Dirk. He was leaning on the register, talking to a middle-aged couple. The man had dark tan skin, slicked-back black hair with gray strands here and there and a thick mustache, also graying. The woman was a lighter-skinned woman, with black hair that was mostly straight, but had split ends. Orien never knew Dirk could speak Portuguese, and was impressed at the speed at which he was speaking the foreign tongue. He wished he knew what they were talking about. Dirk noticed Orien approaching him and turned around.

“Hey, hey, hey! There’s our man of the hour!” Dirk announced in a smooth and deep voice. The couple approached Orien while whispering to each other in excited Portuguese.

“You.. You’re Orien Santiago!” The man yelled. He had a moderate accent. “A Grand Prix Racer! In our store!”

“We’re so excited to work with you!” The woman said, barely keeping her body still. Orien leaned past the couple to look at Dirk, who gave him a thumbs up and a wide grin.

“Dirk, can I talk to you for a second?”

“Oh, for sure, pal.” Dirk said, making his way to the front of the store. He yelled to the couple, most likely telling them they’ll be right back. The two exited the store, the bell jingling.

Orien and Dirk were now alone, and they couldn’t hear them.

“THIS is my sponsor?” Orien asked incredulously.

“Yessir! That is Joao and Lucha Ferreira, the proud owners of this fine establishment! Nice folks, too.”

Orien forced a smile, but he felt his gut sting a little. “I appreciate the thought, Dirk, but... this was the best you could do?”

Dirk's cheery smile and tone evaporated completely. His face became 100% stone. His eyes closed to half-lids, exposing the thick, pudgy bags under his eyes.

"Buddy, I'm going to level with you here. Your little mistake in New York is a PR *nightmare*. You've become a laughing stock of American racing. Hell, possibly worldwide, and no company in their right minds would want to touch you with a ten foot pole."

"Oh jeez." Orien mumbled in response to Dirk's comment. It was mostly for his own ears.

Dirk brought a hand up to his forehead and angrily continued, "I've been calling hundreds of people left and right to do damage control on you and your image. I've made so many calls, I'm starting to hear voices in my head! Not to mention I haven't gotten even a WINK of sleep in the past two days, because I had to be up working, or else your career is DOOMED. Do you SEE these bags?!" He shouted, vigorously pointing to his own eyes.

"Okay, okay," Orien tried to soothe, placing his hands on Dirk's shoulders. "How did you get them to sponsor the 'engine failure guy'?"

Dirk brought a hand up to the back of his now sweaty neck folds. "That's the thing. I scoured Rio's bigger local businesses to look for people to sponsor you, but the moment I mentioned your name, I got kicked out of the building. A bar owner, who happens to be a Nigel Thorne fan, sicced his bulldog on me. So when talking to this nice couple, I had to be *very* vague about which racer I represented. And it worked."

Orien turned back and looked at the window to the grocery store. Joao and Lucha were looking through the window. Both of them were waving fervently, huge smiles on their faces. Lucha was even hopping in place while holding onto the window bars. They looked so ecstatic to even meet Orien, let alone get to work with them. Their shop was small, smelled like a bizarre

blend of mildew and fruit, and had several buckets to contain leaks from the roof. But these people looked so happy to even be meeting him, let alone get to personally work with him. The store looked like it didn't get many local customers as is, and with an event as grand as the International Grand Prix, their customer base wasn't changing that much. So, it was a good way for the couple to gain some exposure for their store, as well as have the experience of a lifetime.

“Okay,” Orien finally spoke up. “I’ll do it.”

Dirk clapped his giant hands, a clap that was so loud it could shatter the sound barrier. “I knew you’d come around. Trust me, this’ll be more than worth your while. All you have to do is shoot a quick commercial with them.”

Orien stroked his slightly hairy chin. “What kind of commercial?”