

Gunma, Japan - March 1999

Tetsuko Ohama, 12 years old

10 years before the International Grand Prix

Tetsuko was watching the window of the train for what seemed like hours. She's seen the endless city maze of Tokyo melt into an army of trees standing tall on the mountains. The rocking of the train was too rough to fall asleep in, especially after having to switch lines twice to get to Gunma from Kanagawa. Eventually, the train screeched to a halt. Tetsuko squeezed herself through a maze of people stepping off the train. The station announcement droned *Ichishiro Station. Ichishiro Station.*

When Tetsuko got to the station entrance, she saw a man standing next to a black Nissan Skyline GTS. He was around his 30s. He had black hair in a spiky fashion and wore a leather jacket with torn pants. His face was covered in beard stubble. He had a cigarette in his mouth.

"You Tetsuko Ohama?" He growled, still biting onto the bent cigarette.

"Yes, that's me." She responded, walking closer to him. "And you're Masaru Nijima?"

Nijima took the cigarette out of his mouth. "Yeah, that's me," He sounded less aggressive without that thing in his mouth. "Let's go."

Tetsuko simply nodded and got into the passenger seat. Nijima got into the driver's seat and the two drove into the mountains. Tetsuko looked out of the window as she saw more and more trees, the sky a clear blue.

"I got the gist of your situation. Parents're divorcing right now, right?"

Tetsuko didn't say anything.

"No need to answer, your look says it all. I also heard you got into a fight in school?"

"Yes..." She sighed. Her mom *did* tell this guy everything.

“What for?”

“One girl got offended because I didn’t want to talk to her. We started arguing. She threw a book at me, so I hit her with my own book, and then we started hitting each other. I guess the teacher thought the other girl was the victim or something because I was the one getting in trouble.”

“Not the first fight you’ve been in, I’ve heard.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I won’t ask the details.” Niijima told her. The two sat in silence for a while. Tetsuko spoke up again.

“How did you know my mom?”

Niijima looked a bit confused at the sudden question. He smiled softly, giving a deep chuckle.

“Not a lot of people know this about me, but ten years ago, I used to be a hashiriya. You know Initial D?”

“I’ve heard of it. Never read it, though.”

“That was my life. I even raced on Mt. Haruna a couple of times. Your mom came to a few of my races and I got to know her. Eventually, I got a contract with a racing company, so I moved onto legal racing. She moved to Kanagawa and we still keep in contact, though we don’t talk as much. Then years later, she calls me and asks me to watch her kid,” Niijima scoffed, his eyes distant with reminiscence.

Niijima and Tetsuko eventually reach a two story building on the top of a mountain. It wasn’t a small house either like most of Japan. It stood tall, as if it watched over the whole

prefecture itself. Tetsuko's neck hurt at the way she craned her gaze upon the structure. She and Nijima entered the living room.

"You can set your bags down here for now. Your room is upstairs. You'll have a roommate across from you, but I doubt he's here at the moment. But we're heading back out. There's something I gotta show you first."

Tetsuko was on the driver's side of an empty mountain road further down the mountain. Nijima was in the passenger seat with his arms crossed. Tetsuko looked incredibly nervous, her hands were visibly trembling, her eyes were bugging out and she was even sweating some.

"You want me to do what?" Tetsuko squealed.

"Drive." Nijima spat back.

"Now?" She gulped.

"Yes, now."

"But I'm only twelve!"

"Why does that matter?"

"I don't know how to drive!"

"Then I'll teach you."

"Is this even legal?"

"I was a STREET RACER once. Breaking the law was what got me my career. Now go ahead." Nijima explained. Tetsuko looked at the gear shift. She was used to seeing cars that had "park", "drive", "neutral", etc. But this one was just an abomination of numbers just jumbled together with N and R thrown in the bunch.

“Niijima-san, which one makes the car go?” Tetsuko asked, hovering her hand over the stick.

“All of them.” Niijima grumbled back.

“Which one makes the car go *forward*?”

“All of them except N and R.”

Tetsuko looked at the numbers again. There were many options, but which one was the right one?

“Change to first gear. Remember not to just let go of the clutch, ease off while you give the car gas at the same time.”

She did just that. Tetsuko had to convince herself that she was making the car move herself, which felt unreal.

Tetsuko lifted up her right foot to the gas pedal and slowly pressed down on it. The car started to tumble down the road, rolling faster and faster. The scenery through the windows began to turn to colored lines to Tetsuko.

“I’m doing it, I’m doing it!” She screamed, her voice a bit more high-pitched.

Niijima smirked and looked at the speedometer. They were only going 30 kilometers per hour, but for a 12-year-old who had never driven before, it was impressive. He let her know when to change to a higher gear as she began to gain speed. They drove down the open, rural road. Tetsuko, clutching into the wheel, felt something coursing through her body like a river of energy drinks. It wasn't adrenaline, nor excitement, but it was the closest feeling she could put a name to. She felt her aggression from the past slowly melt away. The images of the girl's smug voice, her nose higher than Mt. Fuji, the pain of the book hitting her in the head, all of it was becoming hazier by the minute. Her trigger hands, the ones that turn themselves into fists at the

slightest provocation, moved down to her feet, making her press down harder on the gas pedal. She lost sight of all her surroundings until a gruff voice pulled her back.

“Turn, Tetsuko-kun.” He warned firmly.

“What?” She looked over to him.

“I said turn!” He shouted sternly. Tetsuko’s eyes glanced down at the speedometer, which now was pointing at 80 kilometers an hour. A sharp mountain turn was coming ahead. She turned the wheel slightly, which barely moved the car. Nowhere near what she wanted. “No, you have to cut the whe—”

SCREECH!

Was the sound the side of the car made as it dragged itself abrasively against the railing, forcing the car to turn. Tetsuko, hearing the screeching noise, decided to stop and pull over. She hit the brake pedal with her other foot too hard, and the car came to a screeching halt. Both Niijima and Tetsuko were forced forward and the seat belts dug into their bodies. When the smoke settled, Tetsuko turned off the ignition and they got out of the car. Niijima surveyed the side of the car. Gray streaks kissed the door.

“Sorry for damaging the car” Tetsuko trailed off, rubbing her arm.

“Eh, nothing we can’t repaint,” Niijima said. “I just want to know one thing. When driving the car, how did you feel?”

Tetsuko looked down at the palm of her hand. She opened and closed her hand a couple of times, feeling the blood rush back into her fingers.

“Amazing. It felt like all my anger and aggression channeled itself into the car.”

Niijima snapped with confidence. “Then I think we just found you an outlet.”