

Orien's near miss in Paris only served to make his comeback all the more satisfying. It felt like every time the young rookie's career would fall apart, a divine clue would piece it all back together, and reinforce him even stronger than before. In fact, the moment they arrived in Rome, Team Santiago could barely make it off the plane without being swarmed by hundreds of Italian fans, cheering them on from every side. The crowd was so loud and thick that Orien thought he was going to be swallowed whole, and he found himself clinging onto his agent and sole translator, Dirk. Dirk tried his best to calm the beast in his Americanized Italian. Stopping by to talk to a few fans and news reporters alike, they were able to reach their limo and drive all the way out to the countryside of Tuscany, where the sixth race would be held.

While spending his time with sponsors and fans in Tuscany, Orien kept hearing left and right about how much he resembled his father Mateo during his racing prime in the 70s and 80s. In fact, Orien used this to his full advantage. He would constantly bring up old anecdotes of his own childhood and many stories Mateo told him when he was still alive. He exploited it in every joke, every question, or even when someone commented on a thing he did in the previous five races, he would say something like "Sounds just like my dad." and everyone would burst out laughing and cheering. He even had a few reporters ask him, while he was signing autographs for fans, if he had any advice from his father in mind when he was on the track.

"He said probably the best thing for a racer's spirit are their fans. They start off as your family and friends. But as you prove your worth to the world, they grow in numbers alongside your morale. Then nobody can stop you."

On a Tuesday morning, Orien met Dirk in the hotel's office. Dirk, being an IRC agent, could reserve any space to have private meetings with Orien at any time. The hotel was on a mountain overlooking the track they were going to be racing on Saturday. Dirk placed two

glasses of limonado on his desk, one for Orien and one for himself. He propped his feet up on the desk.

“Gotta say, Orien. The Italian countryside has some beautiful weather.”

“And we have a killer view.” Orien added, taking a sip of his limonada.

Dirk leaned forward, propping his arms on the desk. “And this weather matches my mood *perfectly*. I think it’s safe to say your career as a racer has truly taken off.”

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Orien asked, his voice light as a feather. “I think the Italians love me more than the French did.”

“It’s not just your imagination, either. People worldwide are looking at you. To think you began in Toronto as a no-name nepo-baby. And now, from nothing, you’ve truly risen to the top. You’ve proven your worth, constantly beat your rivals, absolutely NOTHING can bring you down!”

Orien offered a high five, to which Dirk took. The two sat in silence for a bit, letting the joy in the air dissipate. Orien’s face flattens in confusion.

“So... why did you call me in here, again?”

Dirk began tapping his fingers on the dark mahogany desk. “I had a question for you. Regarding your relationship with Gianna Romano.”

“Dirk, c’mon.” Orien blushed, not wanting to divulge further.

“Orien, I’m your agent. You can tell me anything. Actually, I would *prefer* you to tell me everything, considering I control the direction of your career and all.”

Orien looked around before leaning into Dirk. “So maybe we’ve been flirting around a bit. I mean, I think she might like me.”

Dirk sighed with a slight smile. "I had a feeling that's what it was. Y'know, you're not as subtle as you look, Orien."

"But I'm 22. I'm a grown man and what I do with another racer isn't anyone's business, is it?"

Dirk rubbed his temples. He was hoping Orien wouldn't get too defensive about this. But it was too late to stop now. "I'm just looking out for you as your agent. Believe me, I'm 45 and I've been in this agent game for at least 20 years, and I've seen careers come and go for a variety of reasons. Relationships tend to be the maker or breaker of careers in this world. In fact, the first racer I ever sponsored had his leg broken by his jealous girlfriend, who then proceeded to cheat on him on national television. He was so ashamed, he wore a bag over his head at all times out of shame. And he still does to this day."

"Well," Orien hesitated. He had to admit in his mind, this relationship *was* moving a little faster than he expected. But he couldn't help but feel his mind was chained to her. Like a spell, he couldn't free himself from her. He had to follow through. He was determined to prove his worth, even in this situation.

Orien stood up, walking over to the window facing over the racetrack that was still under construction. "I remember the story my dad told me about when he and my mom first met. He had a stock race in San Juan in 1982. Mom was a racing fan, so she would often watch him race. Out of the ten other racers in the pack, she had eyes only for my dad. The design of the car, his unpredictable racing style, his handsome looks, everything. So one day after months of watching him, my mom asked him on a date. He told her that he would only go out with her if she could beat him in a race. She lost to him so badly, it wasn't even funny. But you know what? He still agreed to a date. And you want to know why?"

Orien looked Dirk in the eye. “He admired her spirit and passion. And said that any woman with that amount of fire in her belly would make a good and devoted mother.”

Dirk was nodding along with Orien’s story, trying to follow what he was saying. He had two fingers under his lips. “So, this relates to Romano, how?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If such a sweet love story happened to my dad, it could happen to me. I have the fame and I have the respect. This is just the last piece of the puzzle.”

Dirk groaned, rubbing his sweaty neck. He readjusted his body in the seat, placing one leg over his other knee. Orien hesitated a bit.

“Aren’t you happy, Dirk?”

“Orien, if I may,” Dirk began. “I have just one teensy, weensy little bit of criticism as your agent.”

“And that is?”

“I think you’re leaning way too heavily in this father direction.”

Orien’s face turned sour. It wasn’t quite an angry look, but he did look a tad offended. “What do you mean? I became a racer BECAUSE of my dad. I wanted to honor his memory.”

Dirk threw up his hands in surrender. “Don’t get me wrong, I think that’s a very admirable thing. Your dad was a great racer and a great man, from what I’ve heard. But you’re not him. I need to help you build your brand as your own racer, not just a clone of your dad. It’s going to hurt your image in the long run.”

“But they love me for being just like him. Don’t they, Dirk?”

“Yeah, but that’s going to grow stale at some point. I don’t want to see you throwing away moments to craft yourself as a unique racer just to play Daddy Simulator. And I ain’t no

therapist, but it's sounding like you're only dating Romano simply to craft your own version of your father's love story."

Orien didn't respond. His eyes were shifting, like a child caught doing something bad. Orien looked away, staring at the floor. Dirk took a deep breath and continued. "At the very least, have you ever watched one of his races on TV?"

Orien froze. His eyes bulged but his pupil remained fixed, only trembling in place. Dirk cocked his head to the side. "No VHS either? Not even a CLIP of it online?"

"We're done here." Orien muttered gravely, shooting up from his chair. His black wavy hair dangled over his eyes. He didn't want Dirk to see his pain.

"We're not done, kid! I booked this place until 1:30!"

Orien grasped onto the doorknob before turning toward Dirk. His voice was unusually steady, like a bridge holding still before its abrupt collapse.

"You're just my agent. You only give me *advice*. And I don't have to take just *advice*."

Dirk slumped his shoulders in surrender. "The others were worried about you."

Orien lifted his head some, his eyes finally visible again. "The *others*?"

"Nevermind, forget I said anything. The point is, I've been in this game a long time. I've seen so much fresh talent fall and crumble before it even had the chance to blossom. You're a damn good racer, kid. But I can tell something's eating you up inside."

"Let me guess, as my agent?" Orien asked sarcastically, cracking open the door.

"As your friend."

Orien looked at his hand gripping the doorknob one more time before slipping out of the office. Dirk checked the time on his watch.

“I’ve got this place for another forty minutes,” Dirk mumbled, leaning back in his chair.

“I’ll call up the massage girl.”