

“Run it again for me, Ryan.” Parker requested, looking under the hood. They were in the pits of New York, the week after the Toronto race. The sky was tickled in hues of orange, pink and purple, the sun peeking its head out before it turned in for the night. The New York buildings sparkled with a star show of yellow lights emanating from the army of windows. The distant sounds of car horns and swishing by the barriers permeated the air quietly.

Orien nodded. He was already in the driver’s seat, but hadn’t put on his helmet yet. He slammed his foot on the gas pedal. The engine started making a weird rattling noise. It was like a small marble being dropped through a crazy straw. Parker took her wrench and scratched the side of her head with it.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Parker admitted. “Should we take a look before the race starts?”

Orien checked the time on his dashboard. It’s 6:24, meaning the race started in 6 minutes. “No time, Parker. I got a race.”

“You’re going to drive with your engine sounding like my dad’s snoring?” Parker shrieked. Orien shrugged.

“It’s whatever. We only have five minutes before the race, anyway.” Orien said nonchalantly, beginning to put on his helmet.

“I have to take Parker’s side on this one, big guy,” Grant walked up. “Dirk said if we have any issues, we can postpone the race.”

Truth be told, the rattling and shaking of the engine worried him too. Especially with how it felt like the whole car vibrated. Maybe he should’ve taken his time. Then he remembered where taking his time got him in Toronto. 72nd. He would’ve been fine if he cleared the race with 72nd again. But he kept hearing a voice in his head telling him no. 72nd would last him for

another two races before he'd get the boot. Not to mention his lukewarm reception. He looked to the stands. Nobody cheered for him in Toronto, and no one cheered for him in New York. He was a complete stranger to the professional racing world. Nobody knew he was Mateo Santiago's son, and his lukewarm performance certainly didn't do him any favors.

Orien shook his head and put his helmet on, taking his car to the starting position. Whatever position you ended up in the previous race was the position you had to start in for the next one. Since Orien finished in 72nd place and there were 90 racers remaining, that put his starting position near the very back. Even though those are a lot of cars to pass, he was confident he could perform much better in this race. After all, he was the best racer in Colorado Springs. And this time, Parker's snail pace pit stops and Grant's fickle advice wouldn't slow him down this time. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and gave his gas pedal a double press. The lights turned green, and the cars flew off. And Orien, eager to slither his way up, let his car jump off the position, sending asphalt pebbles flying from the force.

Orien rocketed his way through the split of Times Square, slowly but surely overtaking a lot of his opponents. He drifted past Central Park in the second section, gaining a few more positions. It took him until crossing the Brooklyn Bridge with about five other cars for a cacophonous sound to clutter his ears. The engine was rattling again, this time making the car shake a little. It was like the car made tiny hops every few seconds. A lump caught itself in Orien's throat as his grip on the steering wheel loosened a bit. He didn't like the sound or feeling of this at all. He pressed the "Leader." button on his dashboard. 55th place, the farthest he's ever been, even higher in Toronto. Judging by the way his opponents seemed to be almost magnetized to his car, he can climb even higher. He clutched onto the wheel until the tips of his fingers turned yellow, and eventually pinkish red. He was locked in now.

More and more monuments and landmarks became an afterthought to Orien. Wall Street, Battery Park, the Intrepid museum, he paid none of them any mind. Orien managed to crawl up to 45th place up to this point. He was about to return to Times Square, completing the first of three laps. While on the final stretch, a low-quality, digitized voice buzzed itself into Orien's right ear.

"Yo, this is Grant," He said, nonchalant. "Parker wants to talk to you."

"Ryan, I'm not trusting that engine a second longer. You NEED to pull over for a pit stop!"

"And stop now? Are you kidding me? I feel great right now!" Orien shouted back with enthusiasm. The engine sputtered.

"You feel great, but your car doesn't. And if something happens to the car, you won't feel so great, either.

"I can't help but agree with the PROFESSIONAL MECHANIC. You wanna add a bunch of hospital bills to your mountain of burdens?"

Orien lowered his head and instinctually eased on the accelerator. Who knows how high his hospital bills could cost back home. He considered the reality of going back home without the ten million. Rents, bills, groceries, all the stuff he calculated until his fingers bled. He had to go back home to where he scrounged any dirty coupon off the street, racing his car for any cent anyone could've given to him. The days of having to walk everywhere to save money on gas. The days where he couldn't even buy a pack of noodles without having someone hand it to him. If he couldn't get the money for his mother's dialysis, his mom's swollen ankles would return. He'd have to help her walk up and down stairs and help her in and out of the car again. And if her ankles swelled again, he'd have to listen to her whimpering cries for every step that she took.

“Orien, are you—” Were the last words he heard from Grant before he took two fingers to cut off communication. No more distractions. He wanted that money. He needed that money.

All of the second lap, Orien saw New York through tunnel vision. Nothing was important except the road ahead of him. He could even ignore the loud rattling and shaking his car was making. He could ignore the occasional sputtering. He ignored the occasional bump that felt like the car was getting a bit more off the ground. He could ignore all of it. As long as he made sure the car was pointing towards the finish line.

Up until the end of the third lap, Orien secured himself in 35th place. A major improvement from the letdown that was the Toronto race. He made a final sharp turn before the final straight, bringing him back home to Times Square where the finish line was held. It was so easy. One straight drive. He’s come so far from 72nd place. All he had to do was hold this position. No one was in his way. The only thing in his sight was the finish line. He had it in the bag. He already thought about how he’d spend his ten million. Maybe he could finally eat out at a real restaurant without Parker or Grant paying for him. Maybe he could finally get a real bed instead of sleeping on crates with a blanket draped over them. He could finally pay for gas money again.

BANG!

Orien’s eyes were burned with a white flash. The whole car rumbled. Orien’s helmeted head would’ve smashed against the car roof or windshield if his seatbelt didn’t catch him. He could feel his car slowing down, like how a car could drag its feet. Orien smashed his foot on the gas over and over, trying to give it a final push to the finish line. But the gas pedal kept going down with no resistance, the pedal touching the floor in a second. He can’t accelerate anymore. He looked up to his windshield to check his position. A pillar of smoke billowed from his hood,

obscuring the whole view of his car. Like a lone boat adrift in the sea, he was no longer in control. All he could do was pray his car could roll over to the finish line.

Orien glanced helplessly at his mirrors. The racers formed a perfect split in their strategy, taking to either side of the road. They could effortlessly overtake him from both sides. With no other options left, he looked to his left window to gauge how close he was to finishing. But his view of the city, the spectators and even the road were drowned out by the rainbow show of cars zooming past both of his windows. They assaulted his ears from a full 360 degrees, to the point where he couldn't even hear his internal screams. He clutched onto the wheel again, trying to keep the car straight. His knuckles were now a pearly white. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. He slammed his forehead against the wheel and shut his eyes so tight, some tears squeezed out of the corners. He kept them shut for a while. He kept them shut until he could feel the car finally slowing down. He could hear his surroundings again, the roar of engines dissipating. The race was over. He looked at the leaderboard on his dash for the final results. He looked for his name.

#### #79 - Orien Santiago

That was the last name in white on the leaderboard before the pool of red names, the poor souls who got disqualified. Had Orien's engine failed even a second earlier, name would be swimming in that pool. The pool of losers. The pool of those who wouldn't see even a penny of that ten million. Orien threw off his helmet, revealing his shiny caramel face and slick, wet black hair. He could barely breathe. He could barely swallow. He could barely move. For a few moments, he leaned back, letting him sink into the soft leather of his seat.

He eventually mustered up the energy to open his car door and exit the smoking vehicle. A tow truck with the IRC's logo came by. Orien distanced himself from the track and returned to

his pit. He had hoped Parker and Grant would at least be happy he still qualified. He reached the pits and looked up. Both of them had furrowed brows. Grant had a more salty look on his face while Parker was the more angry one.

“Do you want to explain to us what the hell just happened?” Grant demanded. Orien simply played with his fingers. Parker stepped forward.

“Ryan, I told you to make a pit stop. You were ONE place away from losing out on that ten mil. Hell, it was a miracle your engine didn’t fail sooner. What were you thinking?”

Orien looked away. “At least I still qualified.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Ignore your mistakes and just focus on the little victories,” Grant mocked. “I feel so calm now.”

Orien clenched his fists and looked at his feet. “I didn’t want you to slow me down.”

Parker and Grant raised their eyebrows in unison.

“Slow you down?” Parker asked.

Orien lifted his head to face them. “If I was doing fine in Toronto, I would’ve landed in 60th. But then Parker took too long to change my tires, and dropped me to 68th.”

“Hey, I tried my best, okay?! It was my first time, I’m really nervous, I’m the only mechanic while the others have crews—”

“But then what dropped me down to 72nd was Grant’s wrong call! How did you mix up ‘stay inside’ with ‘go outside’?! And then you just brushed past those mistakes and congratulated me anyway.”

Grant squinted his narrow eyes. “What are you saying?”

Orien took a deep breath. He barely had enough to keep his voice steady.

“I didn’t want you guys to waste my time again and cost me the race.”

Parker and Grant stayed silent. Their faces returned to their original color. Nobody said a word. All they could hear were the chatters of the spectators, the multicultural tongues, the barely-audible New York traffic, and the sounds of cranes, forklifts, and big trucks.

“So we’re just a burden to you?” Parker asked. She tried her best to sound calm and stay quiet, but her voice broke a little at the end. She changed his tires in 40 seconds completely by herself, and this is the thanks she gets.

“Come on, Parker,” Grant nudged, no inflection in his voice. “Let’s just go.” The duo walked out of the garage and along the pits, to where the bus was. Orien followed them at a distance.

“So... who’s paying for the bus this time?” Orien asked in a cheerful tone, trying to skip past their heated argument. Parker stopped and turned to Orien.

“No, *we’re* taking the bus,” She said in a cute tone. The tone was a shield, and little cracks of venom were oozing out of her voice. “We don’t want to slow you down, so *you* find your own way back to the hotel. We’ll just meet you there.”

With that, Orien was left completely alone in the pits. Their garage was empty as the crews were about to take them down. He didn’t know how that happened. Why did he say that? He didn’t mean a word of what he said. Maybe it was the dizziness, the lack of air in his lungs, the adrenaline leaving his body. He felt like he was standing on a thin sheet of air. He could’ve called back to them before they left, but the lump in his throat returned. The other racers didn’t know him. He was a new racer, so he had no fans. No family out here to support him. No media coverage. All he had were Parker and Grant out here. He could only watch as his only two friends left him by himself.