

Grant and Parker were back in the hotel room by themselves. Grant was clipping his fingernails while Parker sat on the bed, looking a little on edge.

“Where did Orien go?” Grant asked nonchalantly, aligning the clippers to his right index finger.

“He went to the Parc Monceau with that Italian formula racer.” Parker replied, almost a little too quickly. Grant glanced at her from the side of his eye.

“Why did you say it so weirdly?” Grant asked, his eyebrows raised.

Parker looked around the room, feeling uncomfortable. She shrugged her shoulders. Grant shook his head, returning his focus to his nails. Parker bit her lip and started fidgeting with her fingers. The room was filled with silence for a while. Grant was finished with his right hand and moved onto his left. The only sounds that filled the hotel room were the sounds of Parker’s fingers rapidly tapping against the leather of her shoes and the sound of Grant’s nails being clipped.

“Hey, random question,” Parker asked, still on edge. “Do you think Ryan and that Italian racer lady are getting... involved?”

“Considering he just met her a few days ago, I would assume no. It’s not weird for him to be talking to the other racers, he hangs out with Tetsuko Ohama and Jabari Njoroge every few days. And besides, you know how famous he’s gotten since the last race.”

“I know, but what if he does?” Parker insisted.

“Has Orien ever had a girlfriend before? He was single the one year I knew him in community college before he dropped out.”

“Nope, never has,” Parker said, crossing her arms confidently. “I personally made sure of that.”

Grant paused. Was he... imagining things? Couldn't have been. He got an idea. A devious grin crept its way onto his face.

"Then again, they could find a nice gazebo and start making—" Was all he could say before several pillows were flung in his direction. He managed to dodge the first pillow, swat the second one away, catch the third one, but got hit in the head by the remaining few pillows. Parker picked up the pillow he deflected and began swatting him with it, screaming.

Orien and Gianna were peacefully strolling through the nature-filled paved pathways of the Parc Monceau. They passed the large, open spaces lined with trees and flowers, as well as the many statues and fountains that decorated the area. The two crossed an arched bridge before Orien broke the silence.

"This place is so pretty. It's nice, quiet, it makes me feel like I might just run into a fairy at any moment." Orien said calmly, watching the nature-filled water drift under the bridge.

"I love this place because it reminds me of my home in Tuscany. Nothing but trees, rivers and fields of grapevines and lavender."

"You've been to Paris before, Gianna?"

"Usually when I have to go to Monaco, we plan a short trip to Paris to just relax. I always make sure to go here, just to slow down once in a while." She sang gently, letting her fingers run against the marble of the bridge railing. The two continued to stroll through the park for a while until they reached a park bench, overlooking a huge lake. The sound of the water in front of them and the occasional birdcall filling the air. It was a peaceful and relaxing moment. Gianna broke the silence.

"You became a racer because of your father, right?" She asked him.

“Mhm. From what I heard, he was pretty big in Puerto Rico. He retired before I was born, so I never got to see him in his prime.”

“What was he like? As a person?” She asked him, resting her chin on her fist while looking up at the sky.

“He always made sure he had time for me. Any time I asked, he would just drop whatever he was doing and spend time with me. We had this thing every now and then called the Father-son Grand Prix, where we’d go go-karting and see who could come out on top. I told him I wanted to be a racer like him, and he supported me all the way. When I won the last race, I remember running up to him, and he pulled me in a hug, lifted me off the ground and spun me around, all the while yelling how proud he was of me.”

Gianna smiled gently at the story Orien told. “I saw a few of his races on TV in the past, so I already knew he was a good racer. But I never knew he was so good of a dad.”

“He was,” Orien chuckled sadly. “I’m proud I made it this far in the Prix. At the very least, I know he’s smiling.”

Orien felt gloved fingers envelop his chin, lifting his head upwards. He turned around to look at Gianna in her beautiful green eyes.

“I’m sure he’s very proud knowing the strong and handsome man his son has become.” She said softly, rubbing his cheek with her thumb.

“Aw, it’s nothing,” He guffawed. Gianna let go of his face and turned back forward. Orien, after a few moments of silence, looked over to Gianna. “Why do you race?”

Gianna closed her eyes and sighed. “Originally, I was a journalist for my university’s newspaper. I was sent to cover a F1 race, and it was the best day of my life. All those cars going so fast, the drivers, the cheering crowd, and the speed and danger mixed together. It was an

exhilarating experience. I went back a few times and interviewed the racers, and found a love for racing. Eventually, I was given an offer to join the Formula 1 league and I jumped at the opportunity. And now look at me, one of Europe's best female racers." She bragged, throwing a flirty smile at Orien. They hung out for a while until the sun began to wander off into the west, preparing to set the scene for the evening.

"Wow, it's been two hours already?" Orien commented. "Felt way shorter than that."

"But I don't want to leave you just yet," Gianna pouted. Orien rubbed the back of his neck, a little flustered. She got an idea.

"Do you have anything to do later?" She asked.

"Not really. I usually chill before races," He responded. "Why?"

"If it's not too much trouble, want me to come to your hotel room?" She offered. Orien, once again, felt his whole face burn up. Parker and Grant were there, so they'd have company. But on the other hand, he didn't see how or why they'd have a problem with it. He just gave her a simple nod yes.

Parker was sprawled out on the bed, exhausted from the previous pillow assault. Grant simply worked on the Paris map at the coffee table, surrounded by pillows. They heard the hotel room door unlock and the door jiggled open, the sounds of Orien and Gianna's giggling creeping through the door slits. The two sat up and looked at the door. Gianna was slapping Orien's back as the both of them came in laughing.

"Oh hey," Orien said, catching his breath. "This is Gianna."

Grant went up and offered a hand. "Hey, how you doing?"

"You must be Grant. Orien told me about how good of a crew chief you are."

Grant chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Well, I *did* help him get through Rio.”

Gianna then moved over to Parker, who had her arms crossed. Gianna still offered a handshake “And you’re Parker, right?”

Parker hesitantly shook her hand. “Parker. You know Ryan and I have known each other since we were 7?”

“Ah, yeah. He told me you two were close.”

“Yeah,” Parker laughed lightheartedly. She stopped suddenly and looked Gianna dead in her emerald eyes. “We’re VERY close.”

Gianna promptly let go of Parker’s hand, ignoring her vaguely threatening tone. The two of them sat on Orien’s bed. Grant continued to draw on the map for the Paris race, devising the optimal route of the race. Gianna, while teasing Orien and joking with him, kept glancing over at Grant’s map. She couldn’t get a good view of it from there, but also couldn’t get closer without drawing too much attention to herself.

After a few minutes, Grant placed his colored pen down on the task. “Alright, Orien. I finished the map.” He didn’t hear anything other than the quiet humming of the air conditioning. “Orien?” He asked again. A few giggles permeated the air of the room. Grant looked up and saw Gianna’s finger tapping Orien’s nose, causing him to giggle. His body kept going limp, melting from the playful experience. Grant slammed his palm on the wooden table.

“ORIEN!”

Orien jumped, snapping his neck over to Grant. “Did you say something?”

“Yeah I did. The map for the race is ready.” Grant bit back, a little bit of bitterness seeping through his voice.

“Oh, I can look at it before the race at some point.” Orien dismissed, turning his attention back to Gianna.

“Oh, no rush,” Grant threw his hands up in the air sarcastically. “We only have a day to prepare, it’s not like we’re in a hurry or anything.”

“No, your friend is right,” Gianna said, letting go of Orien and standing up. “I should let you plan for the race. I’ll be in the bathroom.” She gave Orien one small peck on the cheek before going inside of the room bathroom. Orien walked over to Grant’s table and sat down next to him on the sofa.

“Finally.” Grant sighed.

“What’re we looking at?”

Grant’s finger traced across the red lines he drew on the map. “Paris’ gimmick is that there are multiple paths and shortcuts in the circuit. However, the main circuit is full of technical turns and sharp corners. And knowing how much you hate those, just take all the shortcuts. Now the good thing is that you can avoid unnecessary slowdowns and keep your momentum up. The bad thing is that the window for these shortcuts is very narrow, so you have to time the entry *just* right. But you’re Orien Santiago, you can do it.”

“Team Santiago.” Orien chanted, preparing his arm for a bro handshake.

“Team Santiago.” Grant accepted, their arms locking in. The trio continued to hang around the room and talk for a couple more hours. Gianna never came out of the bathroom. Eventually, 10 PM came and the trio got into their beds, turning the light off.

“Gianna still hasn’t come out of the bathroom yet?” Orien asked, craning his neck up from the bed. Parker and Grant both shook their heads no.

“If we wake up tomorrow and she’s passed out or something, we’ll call the police.” Grant mumbled, getting under the cover of his blanket as he laid on the couch. Orien nestled into his bed. After a few minutes of silence in the dark, Parker’s voice spoke up. She sounded hesitant, almost sad.

“Ryan?”

“Yeah?” He responded, not moving in the bed.

“What do you think about Gianna?”

“I think she’s a nice and interesting lady. Why?”

“No, not like that. I meant like—”

“Like what?”

Parker sighed in resignation. Maybe the exhaustion was just making her think things. She couldn’t bring herself to ask. “Nevermind. Good night.”

The room remained in silence for the night. About ten minutes after Parker and Orien stopped talking, the darkness of the hotel room was sliced open by the light glowing from the bathroom. Gianna quietly slipped into the room. Grant was snoring on the couch. Orien and Parker were bundled in their luxury beds, snoring softly. Now was her chance. She snuck over to Grant’s coffee table where the map and colored pens laid on the table. She took two fingers and slid the map closer to her to avoid making any noise. One by one, she picked off the pens and placed them away from the map, making sure the whole thing was clear. She turned off the flash, silenced her phone, positioned her phone and took a clear photo of their map. With her job done, she carefully slid the map back onto the coffee table, put the pens back where they were, and snuck out of the hotel room for good.

Nigel, Jacques and Felix were in Nigel's garage. Nigel had a wheeled table in front of his GT car, where he tapped furiously on it with his index finger. The table still made loud tapping noises where his nail made contact under his glove. After a while, the shutters of the garage door rang out, and the three men looked over at the source. Gianna came back, with a huge grin on his face.

"Did you get it, love?" Nigel asked, trying his hardest not to bite his gloved fingers. Gianna brandished her smartphone. Nigel rushed over to the table and unrolled his own blank map of the Paris circuit. She set her phone down next to Nigel's left hand while his right fervently redrew the lines on his one map. He paused occasionally to glance over at the phone to make sure he didn't make a mistake. He would occasionally giggle or mumble to himself, something about how genius his plan was. Jacques and Felix simply stood at a distance, looking each other in the eye with confusion. With a final stroke, Nigel set his pen down and spread the map open with both hands.

"So what did you need Santiago's map for?" Jacques questioned.

"The plan wouldn't have worked without it." Nigel answered, in a very slimy and devious way.

"What even is the plan, all you've been crying about is 'get the map' the entire week." Felix pressed.

"It's simple," Nigel began to explain, pointing his fingers at each shortcut in the circuit. "Observing four of the ten races in this International Grand Prix, I've noticed a pattern with Santiago's driving: He is really bad with technical turns. Dare I say it's his biggest weakness. He either ends up scratching the side or has to slow down unnaturally. Either way, he loses tons of momentum. And Paris has multiple shortcuts, so he's found the perfect route to gain and sustain

his momentum for possibly the entire race, keeping him in the lead. What do you think our course of action will be?”

Jacques and Felix stood there with blank expressions. It was obvious, but they had no idea how that connected. Nigel groaned.

“Seriously?! Do I have to spell it out for you two dolts?! We cut him off! We keep him trapped in the main circuit, where he won't be able to get any of the shortcuts! With him unable to gain his precious momentum, he'll lose it quickly and get left behind. And boom, his fame will be a fleeting memory,” Nigel chuckled maliciously. He pointed to Jacques, then Felix, then switching between who he was pointing at. “I'll need one of you to be on his tail at all times. Whenever he tries to take that shortcut, cut him off. Got it?”

The two men nodded. Gianna simply stood to the side, crossing her arms.

“Once the world sees that Orien Santiago was no more than a lucky upstart, they'll lose all faith in him and drop their support. His morale will be crushed, and with it, any hope of him having a career. All he can do is disqualify, cry, and run back home with his tail between his legs. And I'll be in the spotlight once again. The way it should be.”