

On Wednesday night in Tuscany, Orien invited Gianna and a bunch of his friends out to a fancy restaurant in the same plaza as the hotel. It wasn't just Italian food, but all sorts of Mediterranean cuisine. Orien and Gianna sat at the table's head, with Jabari and Dirk sitting next to each other. Grant and Parker were opposite of them. The only person missing was Tetsuko, but no one had realized she'd stepped out. The head of the table had only one seat, so Orien just let Gianna sit on his lap. The rest of the crew were *very* uncomfortable, but they had to hide their cringe.

"Um..." Grant cleared his throat. "Do we need to grab another seat for you, or...?"

"I'm fine right here, thanks."

"Alright," Grant surrendered, not wanting a confrontation. "Just checking."

"Man, I'm so excited for the race on Saturday," Orien beamed. "Racing on this beautiful countryside, a bunch of people cheering my name?"

"I've spoken with a bunch of people," Gianna turned to Orien. "All of them are saying how good of a racer you are, and that they'll all be rooting for you."

"You really didn't have to do that." Orien melted.

"Anything for, tesoro mio." Gianna flirted.

"That's treasure, right?" Orien recalled. Sometimes during their dates, Gianna would teach Orien some Italian words. Since his other native language is Spanish, Orien could pick up the language pretty easily. He's learned enough to where he can flirt back in Italian, to the cringe and uncomfortability of the others. Dirk had his arms crossed and would switch between his food and glancing over at Jabari next to him. Jabari still had a smile, but it wasn't his usually "evryting is gonna be alright" smile. It was his "wadda hell is happnin" smile.

Dirk leaned over to Jabari. "This is so weird."

“I know.” He whispered back.

“Could you use some of your Jabari Njoroge Words of Wisdom™?”

“Even if I tried, I don’t tink he’s willin’ to listen.”

Grant didn’t say anything at all. He just focused on his black spaghetti and wine. The room got really awkward so he occasionally would tug at his dress shirt to get some more air. Meanwhile, Parker was barely holding herself together. She tried her hardest not to focus on Orien and Gianna flirted. It was like a magnet. No matter how much she tried to pull away her attention would always go back to them. Her leg would bounce, and her hand was constantly twitching. She hated everything about Gianna. About how she would always butter him up about how much like his father he was. She was just buttering him up and taking advantage of him. But she had no proof, and accused Gianna publicly of foul play. She’s been Orien’s best friend for 15 years, and doing that to his first real relationship would’ve definitely alienated him. It would’ve been best for her to keep her mouth shut. But for every Italian pet name she was forced to listen to, more bile rose in her throat. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to vomit right there on their dinner table. Maybe she should’ve. At least then, everyone would have an excuse to leave.

Parker stood up. More like shot up, kicking her chair over in the process. She ran for the bathroom before Grant nabbed her arm.

“You okay?” He whispered, concerned for her.

“Bathroom. Now.” She choked back.

“You’re going to leave me here to watch the lovebirds go at it?”

“Don’t be a baby, I’ll be right back.” Parker bit back before rushing to the bathroom still.

The first thing she did upon entering the bathroom was turn on the faucet and splash water onto her face. Then she turned off the faucet and sat down on the floor. This whole thing

just felt completely wrong to her. But was that because she had good reason to be suspicious? Orien was her friend. Just her friend. It's natural for friends to be concerned for another. But for some reason, she kept thinking about the Prix. The moments she and Orien hugged. The time in Rio where he gave her his pingado and pão de queijo and sat on his hood alone. The fact he refused a real pit crew and invited only her simply because he wanted to show her the world. Helping her believe in her abilities as a mechanic. Giving her compliments when she thought she deserved it the least. How they've been around each other for so long, Orien is really the only other person in this world who understands her. It was only in these past five weeks she's been beginning to have these recurring thoughts. Thoughts of her and him. Just them. In his car, under the stars. They would just sit and talk—

“Are you okay?” A familiar Japanese-accented voice snapped her out of her daydream. Tetsuko was leaning against the wall. As always, she was wearing her racing suit.

“Oh, Tetsuko,” Parker tried her best to sound like she didn't have the wind knocked out of her. “How long have you been in here?”

“I'm trying my best at making friends. I lasted for about 20 minutes before I got overwhelmed. Normally, I'd leave, but Jabari-san asked me to power through this time. So I'm just resting up a bit before going out there.”

“Oh. I, uh, was just a little overwhelmed.” Parker chuckled.

Tetsuko raised her brow.

“You're going to think this is really stupid, but I don't trust Gianna Romano.”

“How so?”

“Well, she keeps bringing up his dad and how much he would be proud.”

“Is that not a good thing?” Tetsuko asked, confused.

“Ryan never got over his dad’s death. It’s always been a sore subject for him. And this lady just comes in and fills his head with fantasies. It’s not healthy and it’s hurting him even more.”

Tetsuko just stared at Parker blankly, not giving her much of a reaction. Parker thought she must’ve said something wrong or got a little too emotional. She just tapped her index finger against the gray bathroom counter.

“I don’t trust her either.” Tetsuko finally spoke up.

Parker’s eyes widened a bit. “You don’t?”

“Let me ask you something,” Tetsuko began. “Did you notice how in Paris, Orien had no access to his shortcuts for most of the race?”

Parker nodded.

“Not just that. But it was the same two cars who conveniently blocked him off. Jacques Montreal and Felix Schroeder. And who do they hang out with? Nigel Thorne.”

“Yeah, but what does Nigel Thorne have to do with this?” Parker pressed further.

“Nigel Thorne had a perfect win streak for 8 years, including the first three races of the IGP. All of this weird stuff going against Orien has been happening since then.”

Parker thought to herself. Then the realization hit her. “Gianna hangs out with him too, doesn’t she?”

Tetsuko nodded simply. “You see the problem too. She might be manipulating Orien to destroy him.”

“Why don’t we tell the IRC? We can have Dirk tell them to look into the situation.”

Tetsuko crossed her arms and sighed. “I doubt that’ll work. All we have right now is just pure speculation, and without any proof, they won’t do anything about it. And besides, Nigel Thorne is already in hot water. If he’s cheating, he’s trying his hardest to cover it up.”

“So what can we do?”

Tetsuko walked over to the bathroom door. “All we can do is keep a close eye on things. Be alert.”

Parker fiddled with her fingers. She never expected Tetsuko to be so observant. Sure, she knew that Tetsuko had the ability to show her true self underneath layers and layers of stoicism. Having a friend share the same concern with her lifted a huge weight off of her chest. Maybe she could even trust Tetsuko with her secret. Maybe she had an answer to her predicament.

“Thank you, Tetsuko.” Parker confessed, smiling with her eyes closed.

Tetsuko didn’t return the appreciation and began to walk out of the bathroom door. But she closed the door and slipped back into the bathroom. “One last thing. How did you know Gianna Romano was suspicious?”

Parker froze. She looked away. Didn’t hurt to confess now.

“Um, maybe my reasons are kind of stupid, but—”

“You have a crush on Orien.” Tetsuko deadpanned. Parker went pale. Completely pale. Then the redness came. A bright red. And the heat. “And before you ask, I picked up on it weeks ago. You’re not subtle at all.”

Parker deflated, embarrassed. “Oh.”

“Pro tip. Every time you think about him, your finger twitches like you’re holding an impact wrench. If you want to be more subtle, start with that.”

Tetsuko let the bathroom door flop on its hinges on her way out, leaving Parker to melt in the bathroom.