

The Brazilian sun was beating brightly on the crowded streets at eleven in the morning. The sky was a solid blue, not a cloud or contrail in sight. The starting line of the race took place on Avenida Atlantica, the street that laid next to Rio's Copacabana Beach. The makeshift pit garages were set up on the city end of Copacabana, the opposing lane of the start line being reserved for the pits. On the beach side were the makeshift bleachers. The bleachers took up the whole length of Avenida Atlantica's beachside, at least twenty people belonging to each bleacher. Hundreds of Brazilian fans filled the bleachers. Many of them had their faces painted with many different national flags, cheering on for many different racers. Britain and Japan seemed to be the most common flags, while some members of the crowd also decorated themselves with the flags of Germany, France, Italy, Kenya and China. From the bleachers, the fans weren't just screaming. They were yelling out in rhythmic chants, whistling, and performing samba music. A fruit salad of drums, tambourines, ganzas, flutes, trumpets and even the occasional congas filled the air as the crowd cheered and sang. Toronto and New York had large audiences, but the noise made Rio seem so much more crowded and lively.

It was rather hot, so Grant installed a plug-in fan for the crew to not bake alive in the garage. The boys were getting their tire stacks ready for a potential pit stop. Andre and Fernando were doing most of the heavy lifting while Lazaro was playing with a screwdriver or a wrench. Paulo was in the back, sitting on a tool drawer. Her eyes were darting left and right trying to analyze even an estimate of how many people came to this race. She wasn't really sure if it was the heat, the humidity, the noise, the excitement, or all of them that made her dizzy and nauseous. There were a lot of eyes on her. And if she messed up a pit stop again, that was a lot of people to witness any of her mistakes. She could feel the sweat collecting under her sun hat. Her legs were

feeling a bit tingly. She felt a glove touch her shoulder. Orien was smiling warmly at her from behind.

“You are the best mechanic I’ve ever known. You’re going to do great with the stops today.”

Parker let out a small sigh. “I think you’re right.”

Orien lowered his head and raised one eyebrow. “You think I’m right?”

“Alright, fine,” She conceded, giggling. “I KNOW you’re right. Happy now?”

Orien gave her a playful wink. "Only when you're happy," He turned around to face Grant, who was in his usual folding chair in front of the TV displaying the race cameras.

“All set, bud?” Grant asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Orien nodded. “I downloaded the map into my brain.”

“I’m here as a backup in case. Gotta save your ass from flying off a mountain.” Grant smirked. It was good seeing his two friends smile again. Checking his watch, he noticed it was 11:20, ten minutes before start. He walked over to the driver’s door of his car.

“Remember guys: We’re a team! You all will do great and I’m counting on you!” Orien saluted with two fingers. He put his helmet on and coasted his car out of the garage, Team Santiago waving him off. He went to the coast to his starting point.

Much further down the street was the seventh garage, where Tetsuko and her crew were. Tetsuko’s car was white all around. On her hood, the sun from the Japanese flag was imprinted on it. Her fenders and bumpers were decorated with red flames rising from under the car. On the roof of her car, a Japanese shrine was painted behind some sakura branches. “日本” was plastered on top of the sun and shrine of her car. Her car doors were either covered in sponsor stickers for various Japanese brands, games, and merchandising or neon katakana symbols. Her

crew were changing her tires and filling up her gas in perfect synchronization. Her crew chief was in the garage, trying to devise a strategy. Tetsuko stood near her car, hands in jacket pockets and pondering to herself before she sensed a shadow approaching her. It was Nigel.

“Good day to you, Ms. Ohama,” He said with a very sly grin. Since his face was naturally oily, it made him look like a snake. Tetsuko says nothing to him. “I just came here to formally apologize to you.”

Tetsuko, still saying nothing, simply looked up at him. “You’ve come in second place for two races in a row, and I know it must hurt deep down to be bested like that so many times. Rio will be no different, of course, but I wish to inform you that this is not personal. I am simply the better driver and I have the desire to win. So in case you feel any anger towards me, know this: It is merely my job and I am performing it wonderfully.”

Tetsuko, once again, said nothing to this man. She simply stared the Brit in the eye. It was a very intense stare. It was the look in a tiger’s eye before it pounced on its prey. Nigel closed his eyes and shrugged, shaking his head.

“Fine then. God forbid I try to be the better sportsman. Regardless, best of luck to you on your third runner-up finish. Cheers~!” He bowed with one arm before returning to his pit, on the very end as the number one spot. Tetsuko silently put her helmet on and entered the driver’s seat of her car. As her pit crew removed the gas pump, she coasted to the starting line.

Orien had to go all the way to the end of Avenida Atlantica for his 79th position, the second to last position on the track. 78 cars stood tall in front of him on the road, all waiting for the lights to switch from red to green. He had no idea who the 80th place next to him was. Needless to say, that was a lot of ground for him to cover. Since this is the third race in the International Grand Prix with 80 remaining racers, he just needed to land at 69th place or higher

to secure his place in the next Prix. But something was different with Orien today. He didn't feel the usual pre-race jitters. He wasn't feeling the sweat collecting under his helmet. He could actually breathe in his racing suit. All he felt was a sense of calm and confidence. He wasn't gripping the steering wheel this time. His hands were gently placed on it. His muscles weren't tense. He felt himself sink in the driver's seat. He had something now that he didn't have before in the last two races. He had faith in Team Santiago. He had the Ferreira boys to help Parker be calmer during pit stops. He was armed with two pieces of advice. And he was ready to test it out. He looked to his right, where the bleachers stood on Copacabana Beach. Hundreds, maybe thousands of spectators were there, cheering for one racer or another. As usual, no one for him. He was used to it by now, but it did hurt just a little. As Orien scanned the crowd, something at the end of the bleachers caught his attention. There was a Brazilian couple standing in front of the guardrails. The end of the bleachers were dirty and crowded, so they were getting smushed. It was Joao and Lucha. They most likely didn't have money for tickets, so they managed to sneak in anyway. They were holding up signs. Joao's sign said, "Go Orien!". Lucha's said, "#1 Sponsor!" on it. Orien could feel a tiny spark within him. It usually took 30 minutes to get from Rocinha to Copacabana by car, but with the racing traffic? At least an hour. Joao and Lucha managed to leave the favela to support him, even if they could not afford tickets. Orien was touched, and a smile grew on his face.

11:30 came and the lights promptly turned green. The line of cars took off Avenida Atlantica, Orien eventually getting his opportunity to bolt down the road. He didn't take off aggressively this time, easing his way into the race. The other cars going over 100 miles an hour (150 kilometers per hour) looked like they were leisurely coasting when Orien passed them, even though the trees and buildings blurred by. Down the street, Orien managed to overtake about ten

cars, bringing him back up to the qualification threshold at 69th. However, Orien wasn't satisfied with staying there. He knew he could go higher than that. But he also knew his time would have to come later.

About a third into the first lap, Orien came across his first obstacle: Corcovado Mountain. He memorized the roads of the track before the race as per Tetsuko's suggestion to him, so he knew where he was going. The roads of Corcovado were very narrow and full of trees, meaning excess speed would be punished severely. Not to mention half of the road is an uphill climb. Two cars couldn't pass each other comfortably, so one had to overtake the other.

"Corcovado's coming up," Grant said through Orien's earpiece. "It should be simple, but make sure you don't leave yourself open."

"Copy that, chief." Orien said back. Orien was somewhere in the 60s by the time he climbed the mountain. The cars were very spaced out, so for a good section of the race, Orien's car was the only thing on the mountain. Tree branches kissed his windshield as he quickly zipped up the roads. His engine was the only sound coming from the mountain, so the roars echoed into nature. It was actually kind of peaceful. As he got higher up the mountain, he could see the imposing Christ statue standing above him, casting a shadow over him. Tourists who were up at the redeemer statue were jumping up and down, cheering loudly.

When Orien reached Estrada Redentor, the downhill street descending Corcovado Mountain, he noticed a myriad of other cars in front of him. They were going much faster than him. Orien felt his foot instinctively reach for the gas, ready to zoom past. A voice played itself in his head.

*Let the car take control.*

Orien remembered Jabari's advice during their practice race. They were already downhill, so gravity was pulling his car downward. The roads were also very narrow and had a lot of technical turns. So he let the other cars temporarily gain more speed than him. His engine quieted while his speedometer slowly climbed up. As he turned his wheel to pass other cars, it felt like he was driving on air. The turns felt so light and easy, as if he were driving with his mind. It was as if he and his car were one, a singular unit. It was so calming. And it felt... natural. The trees melted into a green wall and the other cars could only brake and watch as Orien slid down the wavy roads. More cars awaited him as he was about to jump back on the main road to descend to Rocinha. A sharp turn was quickly approaching. The other cars were accelerating. Not Orien. He prepared his foot to step on the brake. He remembered the downhill roads all have sharp turns, except he'd have more room than on the mountain. Right as he's about to turn left onto the street, his brakes squealed and he cut his wheel as far left as he possibly could. His car seamlessly shifted into the main road while the other cars had to slow down to avoid slamming into the wall. Shifting gears, Orien sped up, turning his car into a rocket. He checked his leaderboard. He was now in 45th place.

On the second lap, Tetsuko was in the lead by a wide margin. It was her second time driving on Corcovado Mountain, the only sound in her vicinity being her own engine. A foreign sound crept its way into the quiet mountainside. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw another car slowly climbing the mountain behind her, decorated in the Union Jack. Nigel.

"Don't let him slip past you." Her crew chief told her in Japanese.

"Understood." She chirped. Nigel's car snuck behind Tetsuko. He was drafting, taking advantage of the lessened wind resistance to gain speed without having to accelerate on the tight mountain roads. Nigel tried to turn to overtake Tetsuko, but she blocked him. Nigel tried again

and again, but Tetsuko kept blocking him. It was her only way to stop him from gaining on her. Nigel exhaled slightly, fogging up his helmet. Tetsuko was by no means a dumb opponent. She was an expert at defense. But he smirked underneath his helmet. He got an idea.

“Shall we give her the dance?” His crew chief asked him.

“Naturally,” He chuckled. “Time to show her true British excellence.” Placing both hands on the wheel, he continued to go from the left end of the road to the right. Tetsuko matched his turns, but hit a snag. Tetsuko could easily just focus on the road ahead of her, but Nigel could easily pass her if she did. Or she could continue blocking him, but then that would be less focus on the road. Her mind was perfectly divided between defense and herself. As Nigel made her turn to the outside, it was time to activate his plan. It was a bit risky, though. He stomped on the accelerator and turned on the inside, giving him a burst of speed. He shot past Tetsuko, who could only watch through her window as Nigel slipped past her, waving with his fingers as he flew away. Tetsuko chose not to follow him. She let him have his little lead.

Nigel made it to the final portion of the second lap, Ipanema Beach. The drivers had to drive on the sand to get back to Avenida Atlantica where the finish line was. Tetsuko wasn't exactly behind him, but she wasn't too far away either. Nigel hated racing on anything that wasn't a road. There were no dirt or sand tracks in England that he raced on, so he never got any opportunity to practice. Plus since Toronto and New York were big cities, he lucked out by having to drive in big cities. That's the only reason Tetsuko managed to even dominate the first lap. He had to slow down a lot. He was still in the lead, but this kind of speed made him uneasy. He hated being slow, but at the same time, Tetsuko had to match his speed to avoid spinning out as well. The distance between them was tight, but Nigel was still able to keep his speed. Then a turn came up. It was the turn to get back onto Avenida Atlantica. Nigel put his foot on the brake,

but found his car wouldn't slow down. His car was just sliding down the beach without slowing down. His brakes locked up. The tires were spinning uselessly in the sand.

"Tetsuko-chan! Now's your chance!" Her crew chief yelled at her, again in Japanese. "It's time to pull off your signature move!"

Tetsuko nodded silently. This whole time, pumping her brakes steadily allowed her to get closer to Nigel without him realizing immediately. As she approached the turn, she pulled her gear stick, shifting to a lower gear. She needed the torque and momentum to prepare. She cut her wheel to one side, shifting her whole car. Sliding on the sand, she cut the wheel to the other side. Her car slid gracefully on the sand diagonally, leaving a misty trail of sand particles flying from her left side tires. The drift allowed her car to go sideways around the turn, allowing her to catch up and pass Nigel. Shifting back into a higher gear, she returned to the asphalt roads of Avenida Atlantica, leaving Nigel in the sand.

"You have a whole lap to best her, lad," His pit chief told him. "Just get back on the road and we'll spray her car."

"Very well," Nigel scowled. "Ohama won *this* round." Nigel's car slid on the asphalt again, and he drove for the pits.

Back further down in Rocinha, Orien was gaining a lot of traction. He made it all the way to 25th place. He already thought the streets of the favela were tight just from walking through them, but racing was a whole other beast. The street corners were very tight, and there were so many technical turns to make. Orien made it through most of the favela without much incident the first lap, but he noticed the road got really bumpy as he picked up speed. As he passed through the end, his side hit the side of a building. He heard a loud POP and the rear of his car began to jump, like the car was limping.



“Grant! I caught a flat!”

Grant looked over at the TV screen in the pit garage. He saw Orien on the road heading for Ipanema, the final hurdle before he could safely reach the pits. He had to guide Orien to safety, making sure nothing bad happened to his car. Luckily for Orien, 26th place was still navigating through the wire-coated maze of the city.

“Just drop your speed some and stick to the edge of the track. Try not to apply too much gas, it’s going to warp your rim too. You have another lap after this to get ahead, don’t push it. Just make it to the pits safely, and we can change your tire. It’ll be okay. I promise.”

“Got it, thanks.” Orien nodded and hung to the edge of the track, rear of the car jumping up and down from the flat tire. A couple of cars passed him on the way, dropping him down to 27th, but he didn’t care. He focused on the beach section coming up. He coasted carefully onto the sand, covered in tire marks from the other racers passing by before him.

“If you can, try to find sand that’s untouched. Compacted sand is going to make your life a whole lot easier.” Grant’s voice came through. Orien followed Grant's orders. He spotted a patch of pristine, white sand and turned his car towards it. He found his car wasn’t jostling as much, so his speed increased. He was able to coast onto Avenida Atlantica, turning into the pits.

“Alright, I’m coming in.” Orien said. His car coasted briskly down the pit lane. Grant looked over to Parker.

“Is it time?” She asked, fiddling with her drill.

“You know it.”

Parker closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She can do it. Orien told her he thought she could. No. He knew she could. She looked over to the four boys.

“Alright, boys. Ryan’s coming in. Let’s show him what I taught you.” She commanded. Each one of the boys grabbed a tire and placed them in a small square. Grant hopped off the chair and grabbed the jack from the storage. Once everyone was in place, they peaked their heads out of the garages, watching the American-painted car slide over to them. Parker prepared her drill, pulling the trigger twice to reassure herself. Orien’s car arrived, and they got to work. Andre held up his tire, and Parker quickly changed the bolts. He dropped the old tire and brought up the new one, Parker secured the bolts and moved onto Lazaro’s. One by one, she quickly changed his tires. With each bolt screwed and unscrewed, she felt her confidence and adrenaline going up. Once she finished Paulo’s tire, Grant kicked the jack away. Orien’s back tires squealed as they grinded against the road. In a trail of smoke, he took off again.

Near the end of the third lap, Tetsuko saw Nigel catching up to her on Avenida Atlantica, right before the end of the race. They were completely parallel to each other. Whenever one gained an edge, the other one gained two. First, Tetsuko was in the lead. Then Nigel. Then Tetsuko again. Nobody in the bleachers knew who’d come first. Their engines aggressively roared over each other, like if their cars themselves were arguing verbally. They both crossed the finish line, no visible distance between one or the other. Nobody knew who was first.

The third lap for Orien was a breeze. He knew exactly which hills to accelerate and decelerate on Corcovado were. He seamlessly overtook opponents without even having to slam on the pedal. In Rocinha, he meticulously navigated between the tight alleyways, gently pressing on his gas. And when he cut through Ipanema, he saw Jabari’s car in front of him, coasting on the beach without a care in the world. Jabari guided Orien’s car to the finish line. Orien slammed on his brakes and pulled to the pits. He pressed the “Leader.” button on his dashboard.

1st (TIE) - Tetsuko Ohama - #7 (JPN)

1st (TIE) - Nigel Thorne - #1 (GBR)

2nd - Jacques Montreal - #5 (FRA)

3rd - Isabella Moreno - #3 (BRA)

4th - Felix Schroeder - #8 (DEU)

5th - Jia Zhao - #10 (CHN)

6th - Kris McLeod - #19 (CAN)

7th - Francesca Rossi - #14 (ITA)

8th - Juan Chavez - #20 (MEX)

9th - Jabari Njoroge - #26 (KEN)

10th - Orien Santiago - #31 (USA)

Tenth place. He actually scored tenth place. Obviously, he still qualified for the race in London next, but since he scored top ten, he got to show up on TV. He was going to get interviews. He could get more money from sponsors. Orien stepped out of the car. The first thing his ears are greeted with are people cheering his name. Not a lot of people, but a small section from the bleachers were chanting “O-RI-EN!” Over and over again. He let his own name soak in his ears. He had a good feeling about tonight. Tonight, maybe some people would still be making fun of him. But he’s shown a glimpse of his true talent. He wasn’t just some lucky Colorado boy anymore. He was a real racer now.

As he got out of the car, Parker immediately ran up to him, trapping his arms in a hug. Grant walked over to him, clapping.

“Damn, where has this Orien Santiago been?” He chuckled.

“You did it, Ryan! I’m so proud of you!” She shouted with glee. Orien pushed her away from his body gently after a few seconds.

“No, you did it, Parker. If it wasn’t for your snappy tire change, I wouldn’t have done it all on a flat.”

Parker’s cheeks became tickled red. “Me? No, I—”

Orien looked her in the eye. “You’ve come so far. I’m very proud of you.”

Parker looked away bashfully. “...Thank you.”

A jovial voice came from behind Orien. ““Ey, dere! Mind if I join da party?!” Jabari was waving at Orien as he was walking towards him. More like limping. He was sweating heavily and he was out of breath.

“Mr. Jabari, are you okay?” Orien asked, concerned. Jabari sat on the hood of Orien’s car, panting.

“Im okay,” he said between pants. ““Dis happens usually after a race. I got meds for it, but I forgotta take ‘dem dis mornin’”

“I’ll get some water!” Andre elected. He ran to the cooler, grabbed some bottled water and handed it to Jabari.

“Thank you, young man,” he thanked breathlessly. He took a sip from the condensing water, a bit of it dripping down his chin. “I told ya, didn’t I?”

“Yep. I definitely feel unstoppable now.” Orien laughed lightly and modestly.

Jabari leaned forward, one arm on his leg. “Welcome to da real racing world.”