

The night before the fourth race in London, Parker and Grant sat at a conference table in London. The venue was quite large, with dozens of tables scattered across the entire room. Hundreds of people, a mix of London natives, people from other UK cities and international tourists, attended the event. At the front of the venue were three tables. At the left table, Tetsuko was sitting in front of a Japanese flag. Orien was at the right one and sat in front of an American flag. And of course, in the center was Nigel, sitting proudly in the center in front of a huge UK flag.

Dirk snuck into the conference room, sliding through people horizontally to reach the table Grant and Parker were sitting at.

“Did I make it? Did they start yet?” Dirk whispered.

“No, they’re about to.” Grant said, turning over to him. Dirk went over and shook Parker and Grant’s hand. Grant lazily shook Dirk’s hand while Parker grabbed his hand with both of hers and shook very fervently.

“You must be Parker and Grant, his pit chief and mechanic. Gotta say, love the work you guys do for Team Santiago.”

“You’re Dirk, right?” Parker asked, pointing to him. Dirk went into his lapel and pulled out two business cards. He flung them on the table like ninja stars, perfectly drifting in front of the duo.

“Dirk Kennedy, Orien Santiago’s agent and chief advisor for the International Grand Prix. Pleased to meet the both of you.” He said, sitting down. He threw his arm over the back of the chair. “Not to brag, but I was the one who got him his first sponsor at the Ferreira market back in Rio. In fact, Joao and Lucha called me and said that thanks to Orien, their sales have gone up

250%. They should have enough money to get out of Rocinha, or at least enough to upgrade the store.”

“I guess we have you to thank for his comeback in the public eye,” Grant said. “Thank you.”

“But why did you come to *this* event? We would’ve seen you before.”

Dirk began tapping on the clothed table with his index finger. “Well normally, I either sit events like these out or watch ‘em on TV. But this time is different,” He looked over to the press conference table the three racers were sitting at. “I got a call from Nigel Thorne’s agent inviting Orien to sit in a press conference for the IGP.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? He’s getting more and more publicity,” Parker replied.

“Personally, I’m happy for him.”

“I am too. I’m his agent; more money for him is more money for me. But that’s exactly what concerns me,” Dirk explained, crossing his arms. “Orien is a total newbie, so he doesn’t know how to conduct himself around the press. I’m here to signal Orien on when to shut his mouth.”

Nigel tapped on his microphone with his gloved hand. He spoke, his voice echoing through the hall.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I called a press conference to invite Mr. Santiago and Ms. Ohama to speak on recent events for the International Grand Prix. I understand I may or may not have made some comments that alienated them on television yesterday, and I want to give them a chance to speak their mind. I don't think I speak for myself when I say we're all happy they decided to show up today.”

The venue clapped for Nigel's supposed altruism, the British racer nodding his head like he was bowing at a stage. A writer for a British news network stood up.

"A question for Ms. Ohama, what are your opinions on the result in the Rio race?"

Tetsuko ignored the question. The writer asked again.

"Um, miss?"

Tetsuko remained silent. She simply stared her in the eyes with an unchanging expression.

"If I may butt in," Nigel cut in, leaning in closer to his microphone. Tetsuko turned her head to look at Nigel. Her gaze was not filled with anger, but instead, with apathy. "It seems that just because she managed to get a first place tie with me, she's too good for this interview that I've painstakingly set up. If she believed this, she could've just told me no. No need to act all cold in front of the lovely people."

The people in the room began murmuring to each other angrily. They expected to hear at least a word or two from her, but there was a dead silence from her.

"I'll ask again," Nigel said, turning to Tetsuko. "What did you think of our tie?"

She stayed quiet. Nigel sighed, leaning back into his chair, chuckling.

"Since Ms. Ohama is keeping silent, I'll speak my own opinion on our tie in Rio," Nigel said. His tone was light, but he had a smug grin. His eyes had a sense of arrogance in them. "For those of you who are fearful that I'm losing my edge or getting close to a loss, I can assure you, you needn't worry. That was an unfortunate event, a momentary blunder, and it's not going to happen again. The London track won't have sand this time, and I was born and raised in this fine country, so I'll take the lead as I usually do."

The crowd got up and clapped some more for Nigel. To Orien, it was scary that so many people could just mindlessly clap for one person, almost as if they couldn't think for themselves.

"I wonder, are you just staying silent because everything I've said has simply been true? In that case, you really are just an opportunistic vulture who can only trump me at my lowest point? Is that how the people of Japan do things? How about you beat me fair and square on an asphalt track before you go on this high and mighty shtick?"

The flashes from the press' cameras felt like an army firing machine guns into her eyes. They were all clamoring so loudly, from singing euphonic praises about Nigel to outright hurling cacophonic insults at Tetsuko. They got closer to her with their cameras, ganging up near her table. Tetsuko lowered her bangs, obscuring her eyes. Orien noticed her arms trembling slightly and her gloved fingers clutching onto the table. Only part of her teeth were visible in her mouth, but some people could see her clenching them shut. Parker and Grant looked at the chaos surrounding them.

"This is horrible," Parker marveled at Dirk. "What kind of press conference is this?"

"That's the other reason I came. Nigel Thorne only called this press conference to humiliate Orien and Ohama. The British media loves him and the fans here are some of the most animalistic and die-hard fans known to racing. And Orien just fell right into his trap." Dirk explained. The press began hounding Tetsuko's agent, pit chief and pit crew at another table. They were asking them questions, but her staff didn't know English, so they stared at the legion of cameras like deer in headlights.

"God, this place is a nightmare." Grant complained.

"I feel bad for her, but my priority is Orien and his image's safety. Luckily, I won't have to intervene unless he says something stupid or reckless."

Orien saw Tetsuko trying to hide her emotions, but her body language was betraying her. He felt something surge within him.

“Of course, if this is indeed false, all you need to do is communicate with us. And verbally, body language isn’t good enough.”

“Hey, if she doesn’t want to talk, she doesn’t have to.” Orien barked aggressively. Nigel’s smile faded slowly. He cracked his head toward Orien.

“Excuse me, is your name Tetsuko Ohama?” Nigel asked, sounding offended.

“No, and I don’t care,” Orien declared, a fire in his eyes. “This isn’t a press conference, it’s a clown show.”

The press all turned their direction and camera flashes at Orien. Tetsuko lifted up her head, looking at Orien with hesitancy and confusion.

“Well, that was quick...” Dirk muttered to himself before he began making a T with his fingers to signal Orien to stop. Orien didn’t see him.

“Well, since you’re so excitable today, Mr. Santiago,” Nigel began conspiratorially, lacing his gloved fingers together. “Let’s hear your opinions, since it was urgent enough to stop this entire conference.”

Orien cracked his knuckles with an air of confidence. “I think Rio was an omen. Tetsuko or I will make sure after the Prix, you’re returning to this country empty-handed.”

The spectators began to grumble to themselves. They glared at the Puerto Rican with palpable malice. Nigel scoffed, which turned into full blown laughter.

“*You?* Even the thought of you of all people beating me is laughable. Tell me, what makes you so great of a racer, tenth place boy?”

Orien crossed his arms. He pointed at the table Parker, Grant and Dirk were sitting at. Dirk was waving in front of his throat in panic, trying to get him to stop talking. “My TEAM. I couldn’t ask for a better one, and it’s because of their love and support that I’ve even made it this far.”

Nigel laughed even harder at this line. “You *cannot* be serious. Your team?”

“That’s right. I love them all.”

“Let’s take a look at your ‘team’, shall we?” Nigel chuckled. He pointed to Grant. “Your pit chief is some lazy, unemployed mooch who probably doesn’t know the first thing about racing.”

His finger drifted to Parker. “A little girl who managed to get a hold of daddy’s toolbox. It took her 40 seconds to change all of your tires, she doesn’t even have an inkling of what she’s doing. Plus she has to train a bunch of Brazilian street punks how to change a tire.” Parker had her bag in her lap. She instinctively clutched it as the racer mocked her Toronto performance.

Lastly, he pointed to Dirk. “Hell, even your agent reminds me of a third rate lawyer. Probably just some washed-up loser who was a failure as a racer so he became an agent so he could be the closest he could be to fame. That and he’s sweatier than a schoolboy’s gym shorts,” He then pointed to his own pit crew in the distance. All of them were uniform and in perfect sync, like an idyllic lie. “Meanwhile, I have a full team of FULLY EXPERIENCED professionals and an accomplished agent. What does your clown troupe have that my pit crew doesn’t?”

Orien closed his eyes for a solid five seconds. He grabbed his microphone and stood up with it. “They’re my friends, and they’ve proven to me what they can do. Grant is a smart and clever guy who I can look up to in a pinch.

Grant played with his fingernails. "I'm pretty cool, I guess." He smirked.

"Dirk, as sleazy as he is, has stuck with me even after I nearly gave him a stroke in New York."

"I still haven't forgiven you for that, by the way!" Dirk yelled back at him. "I'll never get my two days back!"

"Yeah, whatever," Orien rolled his eyes, continuing. "And you know what? I bet nobody on your crew has Parker's heart, kindness, work ethic, and cuteness."

Parker's face slowly faded red like a powerpoint presentation. She hid her face into the table cloth.

"And how she can train those four boys, her speed has improved considerably. They're the only people I could ever want by my side."

"Does this platitude have a point?" Nigel yawned.

"I'm saying watch your back. Because the way you were bullying Tetsuko earlier? You're no Prince of Racing. You're just a common street racing thug. And I've beaten my fair share of those."

"Well then," Nigel threatened, getting in Orien's face with a mean scowl. "Some big words you have. But we'll see tomorrow if they have any weight to them."