

Orien's time at the store was a rather peaceful one. His jobs were very simple: Mop the floors, restock the shelves when they get a little empty, and on the rare occasion empty out the leak buckets whenever they got too full. He didn't really interact with customers so much because he couldn't really converse with them beyond simple vocabulary like "Olá!" or "Bom dia!" From the Portuguese that Joao and Lucha taught him, he was actually really good at it, considering how similar Spanish and Portuguese were. The few customers who did come by found his accent to be absolutely adorable. It didn't help that Orien already looked young for his age.

The Ferreiras didn't let him work for free, either. Lucha prepared Orien her homemade pingado, a milk drink made with just a splash of coffee. Orien looked forward to his breaks just so he could drink the sweet, warm drink. She always served it with a side of pão de queijo, or Brazilian cheese bread. During his breaks, while he's sipping on the warm, milky drink and taking a bite in his warm, gooey break, either Joao or Lucha would tell him about their children. They had four sons: Andre (15), Paulo (13), and the twins Fernando and Lazaro (11). From what they told Orien, they were huge sports fans, especially of soccer and motorsport racing. They actually learned English with American racing just to understand an in-person racing event, if they ever got the money to go. They were such huge fans of Orien, they kept the sponsorship and his temporary employment a secret because they were afraid that they'd bother Orien on the job.

It was the end of his second day at work, about four days before the race in Rio. It was almost 6 P.M., so the sky was painted yellow as the sun was clocking out for the day. Orien was doing his final sweep before returning to his hotel for the night. During his rhythmic sweeping, he heard the bell ringing from the front of the store.

“Boa noite! Bem-vin—” Orien began to say before a lump caught in his throat. Tetsuko stood in the doorway, scanning Orien’s whole body silently. Her eyes were especially fixed on the slightly dirty apron he was wearing over his racing suit. After a long, silent stare, she finally spoke.

“Was New York that harsh to you?” She asked, rather quietly. It was the first time Orien has ever heard her speak. She didn’t say anything to him in Toronto, and in every TV interview or sponsorship, she just gave the camera the same dead-eyed look. He expected her to have a deep, mature, or even commanding voice. But it was actually very squeaky, like if a mouse learned how to speak. She did have a Japanese accent, but it wasn’t immediately obvious.

“Huh?” Orien uttered, barely audible. He realized she was talking about the apron and mop in his hand. “Oh, no, I’m not retiring. I’m just killing time! Heh heh...”

Tetsuko’s blank face didn’t even shift a little. She just went to a shelf and picked up what seemed to be a pack of instant noodles. She took it to the counter, where Lucha excitedly rang up her stuff.

“Welcome, menina! What brings such an expert racer to our little store?” She asked, rotating the cup to find the barcode.

“I wanted something quick and easy to eat in my hotel room.” Tetsuko said carefully, monitoring each word.

“Good, good.” Lucha nodded as she shined the checkout device on the barcode. Joao was standing next to her, holding a digital camera.

“Excuse me, but may I take a photo? It’s such an honor to meet another Grand Prix racer.”

“Sure...?” Tetsuko consented, albeit hesitantly. Joao lifted the camera to his eye and squinted. He hovered one finger over the capture button while preparing the perfect angle. Pressing down, the camera beeped once before a blinding flash filled the small store. When it died down, Tetsuko blinked several times, her eyes readjusting to the lighting. She pulled out some Brazilian reais to pay for the noodles. Lucha handed her back some change and waved her off as she left the store. Orien put his mop away and walked over to the register, taking off his apron and handing it to Lucha, who accepted it.

“Thank you for your work today.” Joao nodded. Lucha turned around and grabbed a to-go cup and something flat and round in tin foil.

“For the road.” She said, handing him the food items. It was yet another cup of pingado and pão de queijo. Both items were still exuding warmth in his hands. He thanked them once more before using his shoulder to open the door. The sun was shining its final rays onto the white buildings of Rocinha, painting them as colorful as the rest of the buildings. Various balls were in the street from kids going back in their houses and vendors packing up their wares. While Orien descended the downhill street, occasionally sipping from his pingado cup, he noticed Tetsuko wasn’t too far ahead of him. She was walking at a sluggish pace, instant noodle cup in hand. Orien jogged up to her and matched her speed as he caught up.

“Hey, uh...” he started. He only realized halfway through that he had absolutely nothing of importance to say to this woman. But he was already in too deep. He had to think of something to fill the gap. “Congratulations on your second place. For both races.”

Tetsuko turned to him, still wearing that stoic expression. “It’s not that great. It meant I still could do better.”

“But to finish second in both races alongside some of the world’s best racers? That’s amazing! I’m not a good racer, so—”

“No. You’re not.” She said tersely. Orien felt a little pang in his chest. He wasn’t expecting overwhelming praise or anything, but he expected her to at least tell him not to be so hard on himself or something.

“E-Excuse me?”

“I meant what I said,” Tetsuko said a little more forcefully this time. She took a couple of steps towards Orien. “You have no skill. You’re naive, too.”

Orien scoffed, “Hey! I’ve been told I’m very talented!”

“Don’t get me wrong, you are talented. Otherwise you would’ve been sent back home in Toronto. But talent is not skill. You need to do more in order to get there.”

Orien stopped walking. He was beginning to think Tetsuko was onto something. He stopped walking. He was beginning to think Tetsuko was onto something. Maybe he could improve, but how? And even if he did improve, could he catch up to all the other racers? Would the other sponsors and media be willing to give him a chance if he does improve?

“What advice do you have for me, then?” He spoke up suddenly, causing Tetsuko to stop as well. She turned to him, and with the same monotone expression, gave him her answer.

“Study the track. Knowing what you’re getting yourself into makes a big difference. Know each type of track and what you should do at them.” She said concisely before walking off into the vast cityscape of Rocinha. Orien returned to the hotel, thinking about what Tetsuko just said to him.

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The next day during his lunch break, Orien went to meet the Ferreiras' four sons. They usually played down the corner from where the market was. They showed him a photo of the whole family so he could identify them. All four of them are brown-skinned. Andre was the tallest while Paulo wore his hair in twisted locks. Fernando was the chubbier twin and had a buzz cut while Lazaro had a full head of wavy hair. Orien let his feet slide down the hill of the streets, casually listening to the sounds of Rocinha. When he spotted the four boys, someone else was with them. It was Jabari, and he had the ball. He was kicking the ball in the air and running around with it, the four boys running behind him and laughing. Andre was the only one who managed to catch up and steal the ball, passing it to his brother Lazaro. He kicked the ball into the goal, which was two sticks with a plastic grocery bag in the middle. The four boys let out a guttural cheer, slapping each other on the backs and high fiving. Jabari gave a half-hearted stomp on the street, feigning defeat. His white-toothed grin gave away his ruse though.

Jabari looked up and saw Orien. He cheerfully waved to him. “Ey, Orien! How are you, my friend?!” The four boys looked to where Jabari was yelling and ran up to him. They were crowding him.

“You’re Orien Santiago! The USA driver, no?!” Lazaro pestered.

“You’re in the Grand Prix! What is it like to meet people from other countries?!”

Fernando added in, shouting over his brothers’ clamoring.

“Your hair is so fluffy! Can I touch it?!” Paulo requested, jumping up. He tried to reach Orien’s hair but he was just a little too short, so his finger could only tickle a strand. Andre shoved their sand and dirt covered soccer ball in Orien’s face..

“Please sign our ball!” Andre requested. Jabari’s signature was already on the ball. He tossed his pen over to Orien and he quickly signed on one of the white portions of the ball.

“Here you go.” Orien cooed, returning the ball to the boys. They all told him collectively. “Obrigado! (Thank you)” and continued their game. He smiled a little, but his expression became more serious. He couldn’t hide the fact that he wasn’t feeling great, but he didn’t want the boys to worry, either. Jabari noticed his expression and approached him.

“You look troubled,” He asked gently, still with a huge grin on his face. “Don’t tell me you’re still sulking about what happened in New York? It’s okay, all our cars fail at some time.”

“It’s not that,” Orien sighed. “I’m beginning to think I’m just not a very good racer.”

“Do you?” Jabari said, his happy smile transforming into a more sly one. He looked over to the four boys, who were engrossed in their soccer game. ““Ey, boys!”

Andre and Paulo looked in his direction almost immediately. Fernando kicked the ball, accidentally hitting Lazaro in the tummy.

“How would you like to see real race car drivers in action?”

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Near the starting positions for the Rio race were the garages where each racer stored their cars. For every city, the IRC had a practice track for the racers practice on the day before the race. In Toronto, it was in the downtown area of the city. In New York, it was in Staten Island. In Rio, the practice track was at a stadium. It was completely vacant while Orien, Jabari and the boys arrived. A few mechanics were there, checking the cars for any potential issues. The four boys were amazed by the different types of vehicles. Some were sleek, others were blocky, but they all shared the same decal: Different paint jobs modeled after every country's flag. Jabari's car was decked out in red, black, green and his hood and roof had the Kenyan emblem on it. The boys were on the first row of the stadium bleachers, shaking the handlebars and jumping up and

down. Jabari was in his car sitting completely still while Orien kept revving his engine loudly, psyching himself up for the race.

“Alright! One quick lap around the stadium! Show me your full skill!” Jabari yelled over Orien’s engine. Orien nodded silently. After three seconds, the two of them launched forward. Orien’s engine was deafeningly loud as the two raced. He had his eyes set on the goal. His tires were screeching against the asphalt, his engine rumbling with each gear. He looked in his rear view mirror. Jabari was quite a distance behind him. Judging by his face in the windshield, Jabari looked carefree as ever.

“Is his head even in the game?” Orien speculated to himself. The first of two turns was coming soon. It was a wide, left-hand turn. Orien was so focused on his goal that he was beginning to veer off into the side. Without realizing, he felt his side be scraped by a railing. He looked to his left window, Jabari coasting along and overtaking him. Andre and Paulo cheer while the twins groan loudly, feeling bad for Orien. Orien growled and pushed his pedal to the floor, trying to catch up to the Kenyan. The next turn was coming soon. This time, Orien tried slamming on brakes to not scrape his door on the railing again. He turned on the inside, hoping to slip past Jabari. But Jabari kept his position, still with a wide grin. The practice race ended quickly, with Orien not finishing until three seconds after Jabari. He got out of his car and leaned against it, greeting Orien as he got out of his.

““Ey dere, slowpoke!” Jabari teased, his voice even more boisterous than usual.

“I don’t get it,” Orien exclaimed, looking at the glove on his hand. “I put my all into speed and somehow I still get overtaken. Why?”

Jabari closed his eyes and hummed an African tune to himself, thinking. After a while, he snapped.

“I think I know what your problem is, my friend,” He said with low confidence. “You are too *aggressive*.”

Orien raised his eyebrow. Jabari walked over to Orien and put an arm around his shoulder.

“Think about it dis way,” He began. His voice had a lot more clarity, like he was educating a young child. “The car is not your slave, it is your friend. The car ‘as its own thoughts, its own desires, its own limitations,” He poked his finger in Orien’s chest. “Just like you.”

“It’s hard not to be aggressive knowing 79 other people want you out of the game. And if I don’t get that ten mil...”

Jabari took the hand resting on Orien’s shoulder and used it to point Orien’s face to look him in the eye. “There are times when you ‘afta take control, and there are times where you have to let the car work on its own. The key is being able to tell which is which, and using the correct timing. If you can do that, you will be unstoppable. Understand, my friend?”

Orien looked up at the now twilight Brazilian sky. He closed his eyes, recalling the two pieces of advice. *Study the map* and *the car is your friend*. He opened his eyes, the newfound resolve in his pupils. Orien looked Jabari dead in the eye. He smirked with a furrowed brow, nodding.