

Paris was the first real nighttime race of the International Grand Prix, so the picturesque city lit up into a galaxy. The Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and many other landmarks were now tickled in a shower of golden lights. The remaining 60 cars had their headlights installed, and all of them glowed brightly onto the streets. The starting line was on the Champs-Élysées, the street leading up to the Arc de Triomphe, which stood as a beacon. Outside of Nigel's garage, the European racers stood near the hood of Nigel's GT. He was rewiring the communicator inside of the helmet to connect with each other in addition to his pit crew.

"Alright, that should be good," Nigel said, fiddling with the microphone in the helmet. The fiddling sounds echoed out of the other three racers' helmets. "Now if I need to relay anything to you, you should be able to hear me loud and clear."

"So one of us just has to follow Santiago. If he tries a shortcut, we cut him off?" Jacques asked to confirm.

"Yes, but remember, either you or Felix have to be on him, but not at the same time. We don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves. Got it?"

Jacques and Felix nodded and returned to their own pits. Nigel turned to Gianna, who still had her arms crossed.

"You won't have to do anything. You've performed spectacularly."

"You also know there's a dirt track near the Eiffel Tower, right?" She asked.

"Yeah. And?"

"What happens if you have another Rio incident?"

Nigel looked Gianna dead in her eye. "Obviously, all I have to do is AVOID the dirt track."

Gianna sighed. Nigel put his helmet on and got into the driver's seat.

Meanwhile, Orien was standing outside of his pit. The crowd was full of people cheering his name, waving American flags, and showing their support. The sounds around him were filtered out almost completely. He came crashing down to reality by a loud, high pitched drilling noise.

“Come on, Ryan. I’m trying to wish you luck before you leave.” Parker nagged. She opened her arms up for a hug. Orien hesitantly accepted and they embraced for a couple of seconds. Orien looked back at the cheering crowd.

“Look at all these people cheering for me.”

Parker playfully jabbed Orien’s arm. “Don’t forget who your very first fan was.”

“Sorry.”

Parker pointed at him with her bolt drill. “Remember it.” With that, Orien put on his helmet and readied his car for the parade lap before the race started. Orien swung his car slowly on the road. The pride seeping out of his helmet visor was palpable. All eyes were on him worldwide. Back at home, he knew his crew were looking at their computers. The Ferreiras were probably still watching his race on their barely-functional CRT hanging on the moldy wall. Nigel on the other hand was trailing all the way in the back. His car swayed from side to side, his eyes radiating bitterness and revenge. But it didn’t matter in the end. He told himself the same thing over and over again. *Orien’s racing career dies tonight.*

The lights turned green and the racers flew off into the Paris night streets. Orien, being in the front, kept a steady lead in front of the other racers. He swung around the golden Arc de Triomphe, his car moving with swagger and confidence. He could feel himself getting lighter as he made the turn. It felt so good. He was looking at the map. The next stop was driving northeast to pass Montmartre.

“Alright, you can pass right by Montmartre. You know what to do.” Grant’s voice came through the communicator in Orien’s helmet.

“Leave it to me.” Orien nodded. He had his sights set on the first shortcut he had to take. If he stayed on Boulevard de Courcelles that would’ve taken him past Montmartre, he had to make a bunch of weird and complicated maneuvers on the main circuit. But by cutting through the city by driving on Rue de Londres, it was just a mostly straight road with only one sharp turn onto Boulevard de Magenta back on the main circuit. He readied his hands on the wheel, staring only at the openings between the buildings. Then a foreign sound vibrated through his helmet. It started off quietly, but slowly grew louder and louder. Then something shone in his visor. Bright blue headlights. It was zooming towards him at a brisk speed.

“Jacques, he’s right there,” Nigel said through his comms. “Block him.”

“Oui.” Jacques confirmed. He slammed his foot on the gas, keeping his own car level with Orien. Orien tried to shake him off and aim for his shortcut, but Jacques was still in the way. The opening to Rue de Londres was coming up and Orien was beginning to sweat under his suit and helmet. His heart started beating faster and harder, and his fingers were getting clammy. But by the time he got ready, the opening zipped by. All he did was blink and his window closed. Jacques saw an opening and cut off Orien, forcing him to slam on his brakes. The back of his car swerved from left to right. Other cars passed through the smoke and overtook him. He dropped from 1st place to 3rd place.

“It’s okay! We have the next shortcut by the 8th arrondissement. You’ll get them next time.”

Orien, still mildly frustrated, tapped on his communicator with two fingers to reply. “Got it.”

As Orien remained on Boulevard de Courcelles and passed Montmartre, he came across several tight turns in the Parisian streets. He was still too inexperienced with them to safely keep his speed as he turned, so he had no choice but to slow himself down to turn. Unfortunately, this gave even more cars an opportunity to overtake him, dropping him all the way down to 6th place. He remained in 6th past the Latin Square and along the Seine river. Luckily, the next shortcut that would've taken him right back to Champs-Élysées was coming up. He could make his way back to the lead, but not for long. He had to take the next shortcut as fast as possible. Speeding up on the opposite side of the Seine, he bolted for the road and prepared to take the shortcut. Felix was not too far behind him, but couldn't catch up with Orien in time to block him from his shortcut.

"Idea," Nigel's voice came through. "Make him *think* he can't take the shortcut."

"What are you talking about?" Felix yelled back.

"Get in his head, you fool!" Nigel snapped. Felix got an idea. He drafted behind Orien's car to close the distance between them. Then he went on Orien's left side and drove on the inside. Orien noticed Felix's touring car in his left rear-view mirror. Orien still had enough time to make the shortcut, but with how he was with turns, he couldn't tell if he could've gotten away in time or if Felix's car would've just t-boned him. He decided to speed up to ensure there was enough room. Felix sped up a little, but not a great amount. Orien progressively got faster and faster until the distance was far enough. He smirked, proud of how he was able to shake off Felix. Now all he had to do was take that shortcut.

"Orien!" Grant yelled. "You just missed the shortcut!"

Orien immediately snapped back to his senses. He looked and saw that FDR avenue, his shortcut, was now nothing more than a product in his mirror. How could he have missed the

shortcut again? Whatever. He just had to drive past the Place de la Concorde to return to the starting line. It was a quarter circle of a roundabout followed by a straightaway. No big deal. But as Orien turned, he didn't slow down, causing his car to understeer. His right side passenger door got scraped by the railing. The crowd gasped. The sound of the impact was loud enough to make the audience flinch. Five more cars pass by, dropping him in 11th place. Now he had to regain his speed.

The second lap was no different. Every time he tried to take a planned shortcut, Jacques or Felix just *had* to be there to cut him off. His momentum was killed before a seed of opportunity had the chance to sprout. He kept averaging 11th and 12th place depending on whether he slowed down too much on sharp turns or hit the road partitions. But either way, Orien was making no progress at all throughout the race. Just when he was getting more fame and support, he was letting his people down. Nigel crept his way back to first place and remained in the lead in the first lap and all the way through the second lap. He looked at his dashboard leaderboard and saw Orien's name dancing between 11th and 13th place.

"You had so much promise," He sneered. "Shame to see it end like this."

Grant and Parker were worried while in his pit. Grant was fondling his headset mic, trying to think of a good plan to get Orien out of this meet. Parker was stroking her hair with her gloved hands rapidly.

"The plan's falling apart," Grant told Parker. "As long as Orien can't access his shortcuts, any momentum he gets is dead on arrival."

"Unless he can learn how to make technical turns without losing too much speed, our only hope is access to the shortcuts."

Grant looked back at the garage screen. "That's what worries me."

Parker looked at her bolt drill and clutched it. “Hang in there, Ryan.”

Tetsuko, who averaged at around 3rd place in the race after Orien’s failed shortcuts, was paying close attention to Orien’s performance. Something about how he kept conveniently missing shortcuts struck a chord with her. She didn’t have enough evidence to suspect anything, per se. But she wasn’t going to let this go. She pushed these thoughts to the back of her mind as she focused on the race.

Jabari on the other hand was in the pits, getting his tires changed and had his crew gas up his car. He relaxed his arm on the car door, without a care in the world. He looked up and saw Orien was about to transition into the final lap. Like Tetsuko, he noticed Orien’s subpar performance. He began to worry for the young latino. He looked over to his pit crew, which were handling his last two tires.

“Hurry dis up, men,” He told them. Even though he had his helmet on, they could tell he was smiling. “Our boy Orien needs us.”

Orien was now driving along Boulevard de Courcelles for the third and final time. He didn’t feel the same fire that filled him at the front starting position. It was more of a dying flame that could barely warm his cold body. The crowd, the ones who cheered him on and believed in him, were silent. He passed by them twice. They had eyes filled with worry. Fear. Uncertainty. Even they thought he would fall here. The plan was perfect. It shouldn’t have fallen apart like that.

He was about to pass the Rue de Londres shortcut again. Orien didn’t hear other cars’ engines roaring in his left or right ear. Normally there’d be one hovering near him every time he took a shortcut.

“Ryan, look!” Parker’s voice rang out, albeit after some static. He looked in his rear-view mirrors again and saw that Jacques couldn’t speed up because another car was lagging in front of him. It was Jabari’s rally car. He slowed down and was driving at a snail’s pace. If Jacques tried to overtake him, Jabari would just slide right in front of his car. Orien saw Jabari giving him a gloved thumbs up.

“Parker, I thought I told you to stop snatching my headset like that.” Grant scolded.

“Mr. Jabari’s car!” Orien pointed out.

“He gave you your chance. Now take it!”

Orien didn’t hesitate for even a moment. He turned right onto the narrow route of Rue de Londres. He swore he could see his car tearing a hole in the wind, the street lights guiding his path back in the race. He got his momentum back.

“This damn Kenyan,” Jacques swore to himself. His tires screeched, dirtying up the glistening nighttime streets. Right before the Rue de Londres turn, Jabari cut his wheel and hit his brakes, letting the Frenchman zoom right past him. Jabari followed Orien’s car, making sure he could verify his safety.

Nigel just exited the Latin Square and was driving along the Seine River road when he glanced at his leaderboard. He noticed Orien’s name was crawling back up into the top ten. 7th place now.

“What the deuce?” Nigel muttered. “I thought I told those idiots to stay on him. No matter. I’m still in the lead and this race is almost over.”

ZOOM!

Nigel felt his car rattle. Someone just passed him. He looked up and saw the back of none other than Tetsuko Ohama's LMP car only a few feet in front of him. He must've let go of the accelerator without thinking.

"Mate, how'd you let Ohama slip past?" His crew chief nagged.

"Calm down. I'll pass her again in no time." Nigel said with an air of uncertain confidence. They were both nearing Invalides. Nigel just needed to stay on the main circuit. He sped up and became level with Tetsuko Ohama. But he slowly found himself having less and less room on the circuit. Looking over, he noticed Tetsuko's car slowly inching closer to him. It was very subtle, but he felt his car having less and less room to breathe. Tetsuko's piercing gaze stared at him through her helmet. He felt his arms shaking on the wheel until eventually he jolted, turning into Invalides.

"Wait a minute," He muttered to himself. Invalides. He checked the map on his dashboard. He was barreling right towards the Eiffel Tower. "Oh no." He remembered why Invalides stuck in his mind. There was only one road leading up to it. No way out.

He was going straight for the dirt track. As he drove over the dew-coated grass, his tires got muddy and greasy. His seatbelt sliced his chest like a knife as he jerked forward from how abruptly the slowdown. He tried turning his wheel, but he barely turned. He merely squirted mut helplessly as the offroad cars began zooming right past him with ease.

"DAMN YOU, OHAMA!" He screamed.

Orien was nearly done with the race. Third lap, and all he had to do was cross the Seine one last time, take FDR Avenue and reach the finish line again. Jacques and Felix overtook Jabari from both sides in Latin Square. He couldn't protect Orien anymore. They were feet away from Orien, who was slipping right from their fingertips.

“Okay, the race is almost over and we failed badly,” Felix told Jacques through comms.
“We need to slow him down until Nigel can regain ground.”

“But how, we might as well give up now.”

Felix looked up. Place de la Concorde was coming up. And next to it, FDR avenue.
“New plan. We might be able to intercept him if I take FDR and you take Concorde. That way, if I can’t pass him, you might be able to keep some of the momentum.”

“Sounds good.” Jacques agreed. Felix tailed Orien as he slipped through the narrow shortcut while Jacques swung through the plaza. Felix kissed Orien’s bumper before the American left him in the dust and skidded back on Champs-Élysées. Felix was about to rejoin the main circuit street before some familiar blue lights entered his eye.

“Achtung! Look out!” Felix screamed. Jacques looked up and saw he was shooting right for Felix’s car. Felix tried to brake, but his car still drifted right into Jacques’ trajectory. Their cars let out one last frantic squeal.

Then a crash.

Orien finished at around 5th place in that race. Right in the middle of the top ten. It was a cozy little place to land. Orien expected the fans to just stare at him. He remembered seeing them stiff and quiet as a statue a few laps ago. But as he got out of his car, he received a standing ovation from all his fans. Their screams pierced the night sky, chanting his name. How did getting 5th place lift him up even higher? As usual, he got his after-race noogie from Grant and his victory hug from Parker. Jabari’s car pulled up next to his pit and he got out.

“Mr. Jabari! Thank you so much for your help! If I didn’t take those shortcuts, I would’ve—”

Jabari simply placed a hand on Orien's shoulder, giving him a warm smile. "It was nuddin, my friend."

"How can I repay you?"

"Ya don't. I helped ya out 'cuz I wanted to. You're a good kid with a fiery spirit, that's all God asks of ya. I just didn't want ya to fail cuz a little bit of bad luck."

Orien nodded with gratitude. With his friends, he felt invincible. Absolutely nothing could bring him down now.

Tetsuko walked up to him. With the usual stoic face. He had her hands in her racing jacket pocket.

"Tetsuko, good job coming in first! Must've felt great rubbing your victory in that British punk's face!"

"No, I—" Tetsuko began to sulk before her gaze was met with Jabari's. He didn't say anything, but gave her a prompt look and smile. Tetsuko blushed, taking a hand out of her pocket to rub against her arm.

"Thank you." She mumbled. After her skin returned to its normal complexion, she looked at Orien. "Orien, did something feel... off to you in this race?"

"Well, the only thing was not taking my shortcuts, but once Mr. Jabari came by, it was all okay."

Tetsuko stroked her chin. She needed a different approach. "Did you hang around Nigel Thorne? Or were you close to him at any point?"

"Nope!" Orien beamed. "I hate his guts. Why?"

"Just checking." She dismissed, before turning around and going back to her own pit.

“So who’s buying victory lunch this time?” Orien asked, immediately changing the mood of the room.

“Not it!” Parker shouted, touching the tip of her nose. Orien and Jabari quickly followed. Grant hesitated for a moment, then realized his mistake.

“Fine,” Grant pulled out his wallet reluctantly. “What do you want?”

“The finest cuisine Paris has to offer!” Parker demanded in a fake calm voice.

“If Orien’s racing career dies, I’m getting a job because of you, Parker.” Grant joked.

“Hey, don’t jinx it!” Orien squealed. The crew burst into laughter as they went to go eat.

Nigel and Gianna were back in his pit after everyone had cleared out. Not even his pit crew was still here.

“Nice plan.” Gianna said sarcastically. She was leaning on the wall of his garage with her hands in her pockets. Nigel sat in his crew chief’s chair and was watching a news spot following Orien and friends being jumped by the French media while they entered a restaurant. Look at all those people giving attention to Orien. Every two eyes that focused on him was another brain that dumped Nigel from its memory.

“I don’t get it. If anything, we just made Santiago more popular than he was previously.”

“Did you forget how he got famous in the first place? He’s basically known as the racer who can come back from anything.”

“It’s not fair!” He screamed, slamming the armrest. “For years, I had to climb my way up to earn Britain’s respect as the nation’s champion! I earned my fame and recognition! But the dirty street racer who only won one race is the star of the whole show! It’s like I don’t even EXIST anymore!”

Two IRC tow trucks cruised past Nigel's garage, towing Jacques and Felix's touring cars. They looked like accordions. The whole front was smashed, windows so shattered you can't even see through them anymore and the wilted tires. And in front of them were an angry Jacques and Felix.

"We just heard from the IRC. Our cars are damaged beyond repair! We're being disqualified" Jacques complained.

"Ja, they're sending us back home." Felix cried.

Nigel sighed, arms crossed. He had a very unfeeling look on his face. "Well, perhaps had you not let Santiago slip past you, your cars would still be intact."

"That kid is not just a street racer! No way it's the same guy from New York!" Felix bit back.

"Yeah, he's improved a lot. It even took us all we had just to block him from the streets."

"That means less to me when you got beaten by a rally car on an asphalt track, so..."

Jacques and Felix shot each other glares. THIS was the man they agreed to work with? The same "friend" that just sat on his ass and drove while they did all the work blocking Orién Santiago.

Felix simply shook his head then looked at Gianna. "You're still working with this fool?"

Gianna simply shrugged with a smile.

"Then your career will be just as dead as ours." Jacques finished before the two stormed off. Nigel sighed and began to tap his foot.

"We need a better plan to take out Santiago for good in Italy next week. But how?"

Gianna stopped leaning on the wall and walked up to him. "I have an idea. But I have one favor to ask of you."

“And that is?”

“Since your plan obviously backfired, leave everything to me. All you have to do is sit in your hotel room and sleep like a baby.”

“I don’t quite appreciate your verbiage.” Nigel pouted.

“So is it a deal?” Gianna offered her hand. Nigel looked down at her glove.

“What is the plan?” He asked hesitantly.

“Can’t tell you. If I do, you’ll try to change it and we’ll fail again.”

“But I can’t even know what it is?”

“It’s better left as a surprise,” She pushed her hand closer to him. “So?”

Nigel took one last quick glance at Gianna’s hand. Then back at her face. She had an amiable smile. Nigel looked at her hand once more.

“Alright,” He conceded, shaking her hand. “I hope your plan will be better.”

“Oh trust me,” She sneered. “Italy will be the last sight Orien Santiago sees.”