

It was around 9:45 A.M. in Toronto. The sky was a cerulean with thin clouds strapping the sky. It wasn't freezing, but it was still chilly enough for your breath to leave frosty puffs. The distant sounds of high-pitched drilling permeated the air, as several other cars were having their tires changed before the race. The pit crews huddled around in their makeshift garages, speaking to their racers in their native tongues.

"Everything looks good," Parker said, standing up after inspecting Orien's car. She slapped the hood with her gloved hand. "I can't wait to see this baby run on the track."

"It's just another car. What's so special about it?" Grant shrugged.

Parker's eyes widened. She walked over to Grant and clutched onto both of his shoulders.

"Just a car?! JUST A CAR?! Are you kidding me?! A race car's engine is powerful and robust, like a bodybuilder's chiseled arms! The tires are soft, but have a firm grip, ready to brave whatever elements the weather throws at us!"

"Okay, okay, I believe you!" Grant frantically spat out. Parker let go of his shoulders.

"With as much TV racing you watch, I'm disappointed in you." She snorted.

"I just watch racing to watch the pretty cars fly on the track, you're the engineering nerd." Grant bit back, shoving his hands in his pocket.

Parker turned around and looked outside of the open garage door. "That reminds me, where *is* the man of the hour?"

"All I know is that he better be here soon."

Orien was strolling through the makeshift garages, where the racers and pit crew were making last minute preparations. On top of the garages, the racers had their last names, numbers and country flags printed on them. 99 others from all corners of the world, whether they be the beaches of Hawaii to the snowy regions of Siberia, competing for \$10 million dollars. While

sizing up the competition and walking back to his appropriate garage, he felt something crunch underneath his racing boot. He twisted his foot out of the way. A small amulet was between the asphalt pebbles. It was an Asian amulet. It was a small red packet with purple string looped through the hole at the top. Orien cupped his hands to take a closer look. In the space of the amulet, “挑戰” was written on it. Orien didn’t know what it said, but was mesmerized by its beauty. Orien lifted his head and saw an Asian girl walking opposite to his direction. She had on a white racing suit with the Japanese flag and neon katakana writing plastered on the suit.

“Excuse me,” Orien called out, stepping forward a little. She stopped, looking Orien in the eye with a somewhat intense glare. She didn’t say a word back to him. Orien pushed his hands forward and presented the amulet nestled into his black gloves. “Did you drop this?”

The Japanese racer stopped. She took a glance at what Orien was holding. She gave one quick nod and took the amulet from his hand. She slipped her right index finger through the amulet string and hung it higher, giving it one quick 360 glance to check it for damage. After seeing no real damage, she pocketed the amulet.

“So, are you excited for the—” Orien began to speak, twiddling his fingers. The Japanese racer already gained a few feet from him, complete silence coming from her mouth. From what Orien could see, on the back of her suit in the shoulder area, “OHAMA” was written on it. Below, the number seven was clearly printed on it. “Are all professionals this weird?”

Orien returned to the garage. Parker and Grant were drinking sodas together waiting for him to come back.

“Good news, Ryan,” Parker said. “Everything looks good for the race. Tires are good, gas tank is full, and the suspension is ready. You’re all set!”

“Awesome,” Orien cheered. He opened the door to the driver’s seat, but didn’t get in yet. He walked over to Parker and Grant. “But are *you* guys ready yet? This is your first time in the big leagues as well.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve watched enough racing on TV. I know the strats. Just leave everything to Grant Kang, professional pit crew chief.” Grant declared boldly. Parker rolled her eyes and sighed at Grant.

“I’m a little nervous. I’ve never been on an official pit crew before. But I think I got the hang of this. I spent all night practicing my tire changes.” She said excitedly, but somewhat breathlessly.

“Did you at least get *some* sleep?” Orien asked.

“I got at least—” Parker began to say before a yawn escaped from her lips. Her eyes watered as she covered her mouth. “An hour.”

“You gotta take better care of yourself, Parker,” Orien said, shaking his head. “It’s okay. This is a huge event. You’ll do great. I promise.”

Orien’s smile and confidence put Parker at ease. “Thank you. And you better win this for us.”

“That’s the plan.” He said confidently. He swung the car door open and got inside the driver’s seat. He turned on the engine, which roared to life like a lion. He coasted the car over to his starting position on the main road. There were 100 white markers on the road, making up a zipper-like formation. For the starting race, Orien had to drive up to the upper-middle point since his racing designation was #31. To his left were the makeshift stands. There were hundreds of fans sitting there, eagerly waiting for the race to begin. Most were cheering on their respective racers. They waved banners with their racers’ numbers on it. Others held up signs in support of

their home country. None of them were cheering for Orien. It made sense, Orien was a complete newcomer to an event of this caliber. In terms of odds, the fans were most likely going to support the big names who had won multiple times in previous events. Orien took a deep breath. The crowd didn't matter. What mattered was qualifying. If there were a hundred racers, and the last ten got disqualified, that means he'd be okay if he cleared the top ninety. However, Dirk told him that if racers made the top ten, they'd get exclusive events and sponsorships. Those would help him get more money and recognition.

He pushed those thoughts to the side when looking up to the traffic lights in front of an overpass. There were 12 lights total on each, six red ones on the top and six green on the bottom. He bore his eyes on the lights, blocking out everything else. He wanted to see the moment the light switched to green. A horn blared, the six red lights burned out and the green lights illuminated a soft green glow. His ears were assaulted by the panoramic sounds of engines roaring and tires squealing. The streets of Toronto became masked in thin smoke. Like an instinct, Orien slammed his foot on the gas pedal. Lurching forward, his engine shot forward, blending into the traffic of the race. The International Grand Prix's debut race had officially begun.

The Toronto track was pretty simple to navigate. Mostly straight with a few turns. They would've passed three landmark buildings throughout the race. The first one would be the Toronto sign outside Nathan Phillips Square, which was about the first quarter of the track. The second one was about halfway with the Rogers Centre. Then the final building was the CN Tower, which was near the end of the race.

Orien, despite starting off relatively high, had several cars pass him. He could feel it happen, the cars flying by cradled his car. Orien gritted his teeth. He looked at the leaderboard on

the jumbotron. Nigel Thorne, the British racer, was currently in the lead. The same jerk who slapped him at the welcome party. Second place, Tetsuko Ohama, a female racer from Japan. She was also the one he gave the amulet back to. His eyes searched up and down, trying to find his position. Finally, he found his name. Orien Santiago was now in the low 50s. He thought about how he managed to lose about 15 places in the span of two minutes. He took a deep breath.

Focus on the road. Don't let the others throw you off. Just focus. All he had to make sure of was that he remained at 89th or higher. That was the only thing he had to be concerned about. But how did they manage to pass him that quickly? It was like trying to catch water in your fingers, they somehow managed to slip past no matter how defensively he tried to play it. But he seemed to be comfortably cushioned in 60th place, so he tried not to push. He continued to stay on the main road, making turns as needed, avoiding the bumpers of other racers and watching out for obstacles. The track was a little bit more difficult than it looked on paper. It was a little tight for 100 racers to fit through.

The first lap passed by without much incident. Orien kept his place. Near the end of the second lap, Orien passed by the CN Tower again. Orien took two fingers to the side of his helmet, pressing a button.

“Grant,” Orien said over his radio.

“This is he.”

“Tell Parker to get ready. I’m coming in for a pit stop, I need to replace some tires.”

“Copy that,” Grant nodded as Orien cut the transmission. He turned to Parker, who was sitting on a cooler, trying to keep her eyes open. “Parker, grab some tires. Orien needs us.”

“Now?” Parker gulped. Grant silently nodded back. She felt the sweat collect on her forehead. Under the gloves, her fingers got numb and tingly. She felt her lung capacity shrink as

she could only take shallow breaths. She spent seven hours last night practicing for this moment, but it's always scarier when it's the real deal. Not to mention most pit crews had a team of five people, and she and Grant were the only ones on the job. She tried to put her nerves at bay, but she still felt the shakiness in her fingers. She raced to pick up a stack of four tires, which were so heavy, she could feel her back breaking.

"When Ryan gets here, jack up his car. I'll change the tires." She strained, dropping the tires. Orien got into the pit lane and coasted down to the 31st garage, coming to a halt once he reached his destination. Grant jacked up his car while Parker began loosening his bolts. As fast as she could but still trembling slightly, she got the four bolts and tossed the old tire. She grabbed the new tire with both hands, positioned the tire, and then bolted it. She sprinted to the rear right tire and did the same. Orien looked over at the track. He watched the multicolored cars fly by, looking like smears in the air. Their engines roar by, then fade away. Looking at his leaderboard, he was beginning to lose positions. His name descended lower and lower, and with it, so did a feeling of dread.

"Parker, could you hurry this up a bit?" Orien said, impatiently tapping his fingers against the car door.

"I'm trying my best!" Parker yelled back. She changed the tire in about the same amount of time. She moved to the rear left tire on the other side and changed it. Two more cars passed by.

"Hurry up, Parker." Orien said again, a little louder this time.

"Hold on!" She yelled back, finishing the third tire. She ran to the front left tire, the final one. As she was loosening the bolts, another car passed by.

"Parker..."

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" Parker yelled back. Her voice quivered a little and her vision began to waver. She grabbed the new tire and quickly secured the bolts. She gave a thumbs up over the hood to Grant, who moved the car jack from under Orien's car, causing it to drop to the ground. Before the tires could even kiss the ground, Orien floored the gas and zoomed out of the pits, getting back into the race. He checked the leaderboard again. He dropped from 60th to 70th. He was still above the qualification threshold, but he still had time to gain some more ground.

He managed to crawl back up to 68th place by the time he passed by the Rogers Centre for the third and final time. He was turning, but noticed some of the racers trying to crawl past him. Orien was matching their turns, making sure they couldn't gain any more ground on him. Grant saw from the garage screen that he needed to make a call to make sure that Orien could secure his position. Grant has seen this happen a couple of times on TV. He has to make either one or two calls. He can tell Orien to maintain his inside turn, or he can tell Orien to go outside. By going inside, it meant Orien could maintain his current position and continue to keep the inside track, making his turns faster. By going outside, it would mean he'd give up the inside lane, but he could speed around the racer. Outside was objectively a better call to make, and had they had more time, it would've been the better choice. But the race was about to finish, so they needed to secure the best possible place they could get. He went over to the radio.

"Orien, listen," Grant said, his finger hovering over the talk button. All he had to do was make the call. The right call. He's already decided. All he needs to do is say the word.

"Yes?"

"Take the outside." Grant blurted out without thinking. Orien shrugged. He didn't really see the point, but decided since he was already 68th place, he would have a decent cushion. It wasn't the greatest of strategies, but he's been doing okay for himself.

"Alright," Orien answered, letting go of the talk button. He began to go to the outside of the track. Grant realized his mistake. He meant to tell Orien to keep the inside line. If Orien goes outside, he just opened up the possibility for anyone behind him to take his place. He quickly picked up the radio.

"Wait, no, go insi—"

Orien didn't hear what Grant said because a car came behind him, went inside and stole his spot. Orien saw it happen in slow motion, but he couldn't react quick enough to prevent it. He gritted his teeth. His blood boiled. Three more cars did the same before he could cut off the fourth car. He could feel the heat build in his face. His eyes were focused ahead. He cleared the finish line, slamming on his brakes. His tires screeched, piercing his ears even through the helmet. He drove his car back into the pits. He took off his helmet, letting his sweat drip down his forehead. His face was red, his eyes were wide, his lips were curled into a snarl. His jaw clenched and unclenched. He didn't say a word. He glanced up at the jumbotron for the final results. Orien scanned through them.

#1 - Nigel Thorne (GBR)

#2 - Tetsuko Ohama (JPN)

#3 - Felix Schroeder (GER)

...

#72 Orien Santiago (USA)

He made 72nd. It wasn't a bad position, he still made it in the top 90. But he couldn't help but feel something was empty. Like, he shouldn't have been as low in the race as he ended up. He probably could've finished in 60th and slowly improved from there. But Parker let him slip to 68th place and Grant's wrong call is what finally dropped him down to 72nd. He

qualified. That's all that mattered. So why did every time he recollect back to what happened, he fixated on Parker's tire fumble or Grant's misspeaking? The taste in his mouth got bitter as he thought more about it. It was probably just the cold Toronto air and the car exhaust.

Parker and Grant ran up to him. Parker jumped from behind and gave him a bear hug. Grant took his fat pudgy arms and put Orien in a headlock, taking one fist and giving his hair a noogie.

"Ryan, you did it! First race down!" Parker giggled. She was still shaking Orien.

"And here you had us worried we'd fall at the first hurdle." Grant chuckled, with a deep horse laugh. Orien's eyes were still vacant, fixating on each individual asphalt pebble on the road.

"Yeah..." Orien muttered. "I did it."