

“How do you like the new phone, buddy?” Dirk asked, stuffing his hands confidently into his blazer pockets. Dirk had just bought Orien a new iPhone 3GS. Orien saw commercials of these new smartphones, but holding one into his hands felt unreal. The phone was black, shiny and sleek. He was flipping through the screen, examining the different apps.

“You mean, this isn’t just a phone? It’s a camera, but also a computer? I can play games on it and watch videos as well?” Orien said, his whole body shaking with excitement. He was like a child on Christmas morning.

“Yep, it’s like the future in the palm of your hand. Consider that a congratulation gift. Paid for it myself.”

“Yo, this is sick! Thank you so much, Dirk!”

Dirk waved him off. “Hey, don’t sweat it, kid,” He took Orien’s old phone, examining it closely. The top screen was an inch away from being ripped off completely. “How long have you had this piece of crap, anyway?”

“Oh, that was my first phone I got in high school. I was 14, so... I’ve had it for 8 years?”

Dirk exhaled. “If that ain’t dedication, I don’t know what is.” He shrugged, tossing the old phone aside. Orien’s new phone began ringing, someone from a 719 area code was calling. Orien recognized the number. It was Rio.

“I’ll let you take this call, I’ll go check to see how Parker and the boys’re liking their new gifts.” With that, Dirk walked away. Orien answered the phone.

“Hola, mama?” He asked.

“Orien? You there?” Rio asked, her voice loud from speaking right into the mic.

“I’m here. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Just came back from grocery shopping. Where are you now, Paris?”

“Mhm. Did you hear about London? I—”

“Got first place. I... was watching it on TV. Anyway, I just called to tell you something,”  
She started before stopping. Some bags were rustling in the background. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Telling you to give up after New York. I thought you only put yourself out there because of unrealistic dreams. And the way everyone online and on TV was making fun of you, I just wanted to protect you from that.”

Orien blinked a couple of times. “No, I get it. That was entirely my fault.”

“I didn’t want to watch you again, so I’ve been changing the channel away from racing. Then after Rio, I kept getting your sponsorship money. I’ve never seen so many zeroes before. So I decided to watch your race in London and saw that you won. For a second, you reminded me of him.”

He knew who she was talking about.

His mother spoke slowly. "He would've been proud."

Memories of their go-kart races as a child flooded back to him. He remembered the pride and adrenaline that filled him beating his dad, a professional racer, in a go-kart race as an elementary schooler. He got into racing because of him. And now he was not only making a living off of sponsorships, but people were singing his praises and aspiring to be him.

“Th-thank you.” Orien said, getting choked up a little.

“I have to go now. Just know I’m rooting for you. We both are.”

Orien had to find his voice. “I know. I love you, mom.”

With that, Rio hung up. Orien had the biggest smile on his face. It was nice to hear his mother say those words to him. He kept fixating on the part she said he reminded her of Mateo in

his prime. He was finally getting the recognition he had worked so hard to achieve. He was no longer the underdog, he was now the favorite. He was now on top of the Grand Prix. He was on top of the world.

Dirk swung back into the hotel room. "Hey, Orien. Check this out."

Orien jumped at hearing Dirk's voice suddenly. He quickly wiped the tear that found itself slowly falling down his face. "Yeah?"

"You can come in now, Parker!" Dirk shouted back. The hotel room door burst open and Parker strutted in the hotel. She had a very sassy stance as she walked in. Orien looked down and noticed what she was wearing. She had her own racing suit, decked out in American flag decals. It was different from Orien's suit, but had the same look to it.

"What do you think, Ryan? Cool, right?" Parker said with a smirk. Orien had to admit, Parker looked very cool in that outfit.

"Now Team Santiago has a real pit crew, uniforms and all," Dirk chuckled, proud of what he's done. "Now come on, we have Paris to tour."

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Orien and the gang went out to the streets of Paris, where a racing promo full of fans and sponsors was being held. The venue was massive, as the remaining fifty racers in the International Grand Prix had their own tables. Orien sat with Dirk, Parker, Grant and the Ferreira Boys as the French fans came by. Most of them tried to speak to Orien in English, which he understood enough. For the fans who could only speak French, Dirk translated and spoke to them for him. An army of people were lining up to speak to him, to the point other venue goers had to squeeze themselves through Orien's line.

The venue was packed with all kinds of people. Most of the fans were young, some older and others were the elderly. The crowd was mostly men, though there was a sizable number of women present. Everyone wore the colors of their favorite racer, either wearing shirts or holding signs. The atmosphere was so joyful, the energy of the place was intoxicating. The air was thick with excitement. Everyone was excited to be in the same room with their favorite racers, who were no more than ordinary people like them. Orien did a lot of things, ranging from signing various articles of clothes or accessories or posing for various pictures. Various different fans thanked him, wished him luck, and a few children told him about how they wanted to be a race car driver when they grew up in either broken English or Dirk's dramatic translations. There was one particular moment when an elderly man who could barely stand had a chance to shake his hand. When Orien asked him why he supported him, the man said that he was the hope that everyone could live their dream, no matter their age.

About an hour passed, and Orien stood up from his table. His legs were tingling from sitting down for so long, and he felt the urge to get up and walk around.

"Dirk, can you and the gang hold down the table for me? I need to stretch my legs."

"Sure thing, Ory-ry. Take as long as you need."

Orien left their table and headed over to the concessions stand. As he walked, he observed the rest of the venue. He saw other racers doing similar things as him, signing things and taking photos with their fans. He couldn't help but feel like royalty walking around, people moving out of his way and giving him the most respectful gestures. He couldn't believe he was actually a celebrity, especially after all the times he was mocked on social media and television. This was his time. There was no way he could ever fall from this position.

Then his thoughts got interrupted by bumping into another racer.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was going!” Orien apologized profusely.

“No, it’s quite alright.” A woman’s Italian accent sang to him. It was a very melodic voice to him, as if sheet music constricted his lungs like a boa. When he looked up, he was staring at a very tall Italian woman. She was at least 5 feet 10 inches, but her posture made her look even taller. She had dark brown eyes, and her skin was the color of caramel. Her hair was jet black and went down past her shoulders. Orien’s thoughts immediately melted away, forgetting instantly what he was doing or where he was going.

“Orien Santiago, the American racer, correct?”

Orien jumped, registering that this woman was speaking to him. He had to push past the heart palpitations to find his words. “Yes, that’s me! Um, you’re that formula racer who’s in the Prix, right?”

“That’s right,” She said, extending a gloved hand, which Orien accepted for a shake. “Gianna Romano.”

“Nice to, um, meet you.” Orien squeaked out. He hated how he could feel his mouth moving upwards to form a smile. The way his cheeks were flushing made him feel feverish.

“Now that I actually get to speak to you, I must say, I’m very impressed with your progress. In just three races, you went from the bottom, to tenth place, and now first. You’re practically a legend.”

Orien took his hand and scratched his neck. “Ah, it’s nothing.”

“You came in first in London. That means you were able to beat some of the best racers in the world. And yet, you say it was nothing. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see you're selling yourself short. And with your rookie background? I’m afraid I’ve become a fan of yours too, even though we’re competitors.”

Orien gulped at that. A professional and beautiful racer like her? A fan of his? He must've been dreaming.

"Well, I need to get back to my table, but I would love to talk to you more later," She said, placing a card gently into his hands. It was the address to the Parc Monceau. "Say, Friday at five?"

"Sure, I'd love to."

"Bene," She giggled. She took her hand and caressed Orien's right cheek. He felt the fibers of the leather brush his cheek. "See you there."

Gianna walked off. Orien was frozen for a second. He was still trying to process everything that happened in the last two minutes. He looked at the card in his hand once more.

"Parc Monceau..." He mumbled to himself, his cheeks finally cooling off. His goofy smile remained.