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At the Pinnacle: A Fast Track Story

By

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Young Adult

Sports Romance/Contemporary Romance

Preface

Okay, I know this part of the story (or manuscript, hello beta readers!) will be ignored and you get to see the story of “At the Pinnacle” in some Reddit Discussion or a wiki page. But I really want to tell my story of how I achieved my greatest milestone in my 12-year writing journey, so if you’re here right now, thank you for putting some time into reading this! Here’s the short story of my life and how I got to write this thing.

I daydreamed (or vividly imagined scenes) a lot when I was a kid. It was hard for me to sleep at the time because of that and while I was a smart student at school, I sometimes space out because of those scenes I imagined. It wasn’t until I was about ten or eleven when someone asked me about Wattpad which was all the rage at the time, and my entire writing journey came around when they asked me if I could write.

I wrote my first fanfic (and practically story) in my notebook and my friend loved what I was doing. I kept writing in my notebook and I found that it made me stop vividly imagining scenes so much but still made me enjoy it all the same. So yeah, that’s how I became a writer.

But jump cut to college, and I stopped writing full stories. I did write some short stories that my friends seemed to love but at some point, I literally ran out of ideas to write. I didn’t quite enjoy my course but I can’t tell my parents because my dad wanted me to take up law and talked so highly of the stuff I’m taking at the time. I always wanted to write anything that I find interesting but I’ve got no inspiration or motivation to write. Then I had about a month of sem break and I was getting bored, so I was just surfing on Youtube until the website recommended a song titled *“i think about you not thinking about me”* by far.

I cried. I was moved. But something came to my head. I also became a full Formula One fan and Heated Rivalry was becoming popular where I am, so I was like “Wait, I think I could write sports romance about F1! That stuff’s popular.”

So yeah, here I am, putting together this entire book about an immigrant girl finding a friend with someone who eventually becomes her senior teammate in an F1 season.

I would like to thank *far* for the wonderful song they put out that gave me the inspiration to write this. I also would like to thank Roam, my friend, for at least listening to me yap about my story ideas and progress in this entire process. Lastly, I would like to thank the people who let me talk to them about my ideas and gave out their thoughts about my plans. Adjusting or editing a story is a long, long process, y’all. If you are reading the preface up until this point, thank you for listening to my entire story about this book.

Before I end this preface, let me put a simple reminder/disclaimer in all caps from here:

OTHER THAN FORMULA 1 AND ANY PLACES PORTRAYED IN THIS BOOK,
THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, BUSINESS, AND EVENTS ARE
FICTITIOUS. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PEOPLE AND EVENTS ARE PURELY
COINCIDENTIAL.

There we go. Don’t worry too much about the all caps, because I’m not mad about it but I just want to make sure no one sues me for putting them in a book because I’m really broke. But yeah, enjoy the story! I would love to see any and all discussions or interactions about this story I’ve made because I’m proud of the effort I made throughout this story!

Prologue

Listen, I wasn't born with everything my family could afford in the world. If it weren't for him and his family, I wouldn't even be able to compete in Formula 1. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start the story of how I started to dream.

It was a quiet summer, when I was 6 years old. I just moved in from the Philippines to the U.K. because my mom found herself a job that could hopefully make our lives better after she and dad broke up. Everything was new, people always spoke English with an accent I never could have heard back home, wherever *home* is. It was harder adjusting to school. I'm supposed to be in Year 2 of primary school, but maybe it's because of the differences in the curriculum that I had to start school a year behind. Everything's so new. I wasn't that good in English either, so it was harder to make friends. Except one. And his name was Leon Harrison.

I've never seen someone with blonde hair and blue eyes, like really yellow hair. I guess he has never seen someone who speaks with a strange accent on his part either. So whenever it was break time, he always approached me and asked me what it was like in the Philippines. "Do you always celebrate Christmas for so long like Daddy used to tell me?" "What's *pastillas*?" "Is it really that hot in the Philippines?" It was never a bore talking to him. So suffice it to say that eventually he brought me to his family home, which was way larger than I could remember compared to my home back in the Philippines. Cleaner rooms, different foods, and they served me tea, which up until that moment my mom wouldn't let me drink.

So you can guess that we've become good friends at that point. My mom would eventually meet his family and befriend them too, since I basically begged her to visit Leon one weekend.

But there was one thing that Leon loved since he was a kid. And that was Formula 1. He always brings up his favorite team during breaktime, and even though I eventually started to watch the motorsport myself, I still wonder why he would be into such things. “You always talk about Phoenix.” I say with a yawn, to which Leon responded with a frown. “I always root for Phoenix! They always get the best drivers in the world!” He said, and suddenly, he looked like he just remembered something. “Oh, Daddy told me I can go to Silverstone to watch the race this year! I really want you to go with me so you can see the cars!” He said, his gummy smile showing.

“What? A-are you sure about that?”

“You’re my best friend! Of course I want to!”

“But... Mama would tell me I can’t afford to go there. Everything I want is too expensive for her.”

“I’ll make sure Daddy buys tickets for you and your mommy.”

“Huh? Isn’t that much?”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind at all!”

And so Mr. Harrison, as kind as he is to me and my mom, bought tickets to the Silverstone Race circuit for us to enjoy the summer. And from there, I realized why Leon was into this stuff.

The sound of the cars passing by sounds like roars of a lion, and I can definitely feel the winds whenever they do pass by. The screams and cries of the people (and Leon) were deafening, but all it did was make my heart pump strong and fast. I didn’t know what the term was at the time, but the feeling of adrenaline filled me.

I really want to be one of those drivers.

I never forgot that feeling after I watched the race in person. Almost a year after that event, Leon started telling me about karting. “I’m going to race in karting! Daddy told me that I will become a Formula 1 Driver if I do well in karting!”

I felt a tang of jealousy when he mentioned karting. I want to be part of what he will be in! I want to be the best driver when I grow up! But I know mom wouldn’t be able to help me fulfill that dream. “Hey... What would you feel if I start karting with you?” I ask.

His eyes widened. “You want to race with me?” He said, before something naughty appeared in his smile. “... Then promise me we’ll become the best drivers there are on this planet! And become champions together!”

I only said yes after that on a whim, but who knew this promise would send me to an adventure only I could see through?

ACT 1: The Teammate

Chapter 1

“What a weekend to remember for Leon Harrison! He closes his second year with a flourish and a fourth place here in Abu Dhabi.”

I must say that I'm proud of my improvements this year. My rookie year was rough, the skill level in Formula 1 was super different compared to my experience in the junior leagues. But I came so far, I made my name dominating Formula 2 before I finally got my contract with Horizon GP. They're a new one in the grid, yet to prove much, but as long as I eventually get a seat in Phoenix, that's okay.

I can't believe the season is over again, just like that. It feels like yesterday when I kept stalling in my Formula 4 car and I kept panicking. And now I had to say goodbye to a teammate for the first time in my career in this sport. Marco Abbiati's to retire by the new years, and Horizon's still looking for a new teammate that I could race with.

The Off-season can get boring, so I drive around London whenever I don't have anything to do like interviews or podcasts with people. Today? I just watched the highlights of this year.

To recap, There are 2 rookies this year named Kenneth Lim (The first Korean F1 Driver), and Hans Muller (A prodigy in the junior leagues). I managed to not crash in my first race of the season this time around, and Marco and I put in a decent amount of points for the team in the first half of the season. It was the second half when things started to get interesting and put ourselves in a better position in the near future. Marco landed on the podium in Singapore, while I, as just mentioned, ended up in fourth place in the last race. John Campbell was declared World Drivers Champion the moment he took over second place in the final lap of the season.

As I finished watching through the highlights of the season, I was about to watch some other content that I participated in during the summer break when the sound of a ping rang from my phone. It was my manager.

Hello, Leon. Hoping you had a great holiday.

Here to send you some good news from Horizon

Hope you have a great day, too, maestro

And what's the good news?

They found a good candidate for the second seat, from F2

You're a mentor now, basically

Crazy

You gonna tell me?

Not Yet, Principal says to tell you when they sign it

A new teammate! I can feel the excitement and anxiety well up from my chest. Some of my friends are still racing in F2, seeking a seat in the big leagues or that championship. Traditionally, Formula 2 drivers are banned from racing in that series after winning the championship, encouraging them to race in the bigger leagues like the World Endurance Championship or even Formula 1. While this does keep competition fresh, I believe that the problem with this is that it runs the risk of us losing our license because we couldn't race or no team wants to pick us up. One of these circumstances was that a Formula 2 Driver became unable to race because the F1 team refused to sign him on a contract one time.

Who is this teammate? Now my curiosity has peaked. I list the possible candidates to become my teammate. There is Sasaki, but he's under a different driver academy, I doubt

Horizon has his eyes on him. Ivan? Possibly, he had a good run the last time I raced with him. Might be time for him to move up, anyway. Or maybe it's this year's champion? I'm not able to follow the lineup for Formula 2, but again, I did hear that some of my friends are still racing there.

Another ping rang on my phone hours later, after I finished eating my dinner. I checked to see what it was.

Good evening, Leon. Your new teammate signed

It's going to be Zia Fransisco. A surprise, but she insisted she'll be addressed as Zia from here on out.

Chapter 2

My heart skipped a beat if it didn't drop. I haven't heard from Zia since I shot ahead from karting to Formula 4. My father is the one funding our careers, for sure, but... for Zia to finally catch up? I feel guilty for leaving her behind for her to find her way to the top.

The last time I heard from her, she dressed and acted as a boy, referring to herself as Gio Fransisco. I still wonder how she managed to pull it off, and why she didn't just race as herself, but it's been like 6 years. She deserves to finally come around to Formula 1.

And that's the problem. It's *been* 6 years. It felt weird just saying hi like we're old friends. Not only that, all eyes would be on her this coming season. Not only would she be the first woman to race in the actual F1 league, but she's also the first Filipino racer in F1 history. I bet the team principal felt so many emotions the moment she revealed she's a girl.

I can already tell that my intuition was right the moment F1 announced Zia's signing of the contract. People on social media either enraged that maybe the management pulled a few strings to keep her from F1 Academy, or praised her for being a genius and finding a loophole to climbing the racing ladder, or worried that maybe the league would be way above her capable level. I say I just want to see her perform on track.

Zia's still talk of the town even until I'm called for a team briefing for the upcoming season. Not only will I be introduced to my new teammate, meetings like this are supposed to run us through any new developments to our cars and strategizing on how to deal with the few months leading up to the opening race weekend.

“Nervous?” I heard a voice say behind me. I turned to see that it was my manager, Marlon. I appreciate him a lot for the time he spent handling me since I became a Formula 2 Driver, plus who wouldn’t want a former F1 legend to be his mentor?

“Ish.” I reply, taking my energy drink to sip. “Zia seems to be the biggest surprise of this season and we haven’t even started yet...”

“I heard from your father that you both used to be friends when you were younger.”

“We’re childhood friends, yeah. I just haven’t heard from her when I stepped up to Formula 4 even though Dad funds her career, too.”

“That’s good, you don’t need to feel the anxiety when she walks in later.”

That’s true, I was stammering in my words when I first met Marco a few years back. At least with Zia, she doesn’t feel the need to be nervous around me.

“I... Haven’t seen her in so long, sir. I don’t even know if she’s going to treat me well.”

“Well, she’d be a fool if she’s going to be malicious toward us. The principal let her in on the condition that she follows all of our orders.”

Technically, I’m supposed to follow orders, too. All of us drivers are supposed to if we want to maximize our performance, but him saying that seemed ominous. “Besides,” He says, “I think it’s a great angle if we go for the ‘Childhood friends turned teammates turned rivals’ for this season. She’s going to be the main headline for this season, I’m sure of it.”

Just as I was about to say my thoughts, the main guy, Harry Colton walks in, bringing us to attention that the meeting has begun. “Good morning to you all.” He speaks, and I always try not to make fun of the situation because I find that he always speaks too seriously. “I hope you all are well-rested after last season, because first of all, we have a new driver in our team. A bit

of a surprise to us when she revealed her true identity but we will make the most out of her performance from here on out.” He turned behind him. “Please welcome Zia Fransisco.”

The applause came, but it took a few moments for her to come in. And my heart stopped when I saw her for the first time in a while.

If she didn’t reveal herself and still chose “Gio”, everyone would really have passed her off as a guy. Her face is still soft enough to pass off as feminine, but her black hair is still as short and unkempt. She still looks the same to me, except staring at her for too long makes my heart race faster. Maybe I should say hi or tell everyone that she’s my childhood friend or something.

I couldn’t do it in time, because Sir Principal sat her down and started his speech. “I just want to start with this; congrats on our great second run last year. I know we made some mistakes here and there but we’ve done a lot better than our first year. I’m sure we’re on the right track by this season, because our tests on our new cars are doing wonders.”

“There’s still a lot to do before we work on revealing the cars to the public. We still have to make our own content with Zia and Leon, so we should focus on giving them a photoshoot. Then, I would like Zia to introduce herself to the public.”

I turn to Zia, who seems to listen intently to every word he says. That’s new, because she used to get really bored in times like these and just scribble some pictures to me. “I think Leon would go along with the content. Do you think you can handle a little ice breaker with her?”

“Of course I will, Sir!” I say energetically. After all, she’s technically my junior teammate even though she’s a year older than me.

“Good.” He says, before spending the next hour discussing our strategies for the upcoming test weekend in Bahrain.

Bahrain. Time really flies by, and now that I'm racing with my best friend once more, who knows the things we could do?

"... So if you have no questions, the meeting is adjourned." He declares, with our team filing out the room. I could see the black unkempt fair in the group, and I hurriedly approached her, my excitement uncontrollable. "Zee!" I call out, gently placing a hand on her shoulder-

As if she'd been touched by a ghost, she suddenly yanks her shoulder off me, and I flinch on instinct. Was she surprised about all of that? "... Zee! Long time no see." I greet her.

"Yeah... Yeah, no time no see, Leon." She says, unsure of whether or not to react any further. "Looking forward to racing with you, mate."

"And to you too." I smile brighter. "So we're doing that driver introduction thingy, huh? I think we're going to do just fine. We can tell all our stories for the fans!"

"You could say that."

Just like that? I start to lose whatever it was I wanted to talk about, and the atmosphere is starting to feel tense between us. "I should go ahead and work on my sim racing. See you on our shoot!" I say, hurrying away to try and understand what just happened.

Did something happen these past six years?

Chapter 3

It's been rather quiet between us these past few days. Whenever I go to the gym to train for my driving, I always see Zia being so hard at work in her own world. I guess I can see why the principal chose her out of all the other drivers in the junior leagues. However... I don't know how to reconnect with her, since I really thought bonding with her as a teammate in the series would have been so easy.

Today is the day of the shoot. Staff set up all the recording stuff in the lobby of our headquarters, and we're to meet in the morning in order to get things done by the evening and send out the content on our team's social media accounts. I made sure to go early this time, I was flamed the last time I woke up late on the day I did this exact thing with Marco two years ago.

And sure enough, I was the first one among the two to come around to the set. One of the staff members took notice of me and turned to the rest of his crew. "Harrison's here." The makeup part of the group came up to sit me down and touch up on my face. I once hated the idea of this when I first came into Formula 4, but I was told that they'd do some light makeup on everyone to make them stand out on every set they would shoot, so I had to bear with this for now. I would always wash it off after the set, anyway.

"Where's Zia?" I ask them.

"Oh I saw her earlier, but she hasn't come around here yet." One of the artists tells me as they brush my nose, and I try my best not to sneeze the moment they do.

"What do you think she's doing?"

"I don't know, girl, but I heard about her with her manager. I think a little bit of a meeting with them before she goes here?"

“Maybe. Should we do a light touch with her?”

“She’s not in an awarding ceremony so yeah. Just a light touch up and we’re rolling.”

They finished in five to ten minutes, and I sat down on the lobby couch, before one of the crew members came up to me. Maybe it’s to brief as to what we’re supposed to do. Of course, I can’t spend more than what they hoped for talking about the weather with Zia, anyway. “Okay, I heard that you’re close with Ms. Francisco when you were children, so I just need you to act like yourself, okay? I want you to have her introduce herself to the audience then we’re going to give you a few cards with questions she can answer. Does that sound good?”

I nod. And he goes back to his crew to discuss a little further. I can’t make out what they’re saying.

Fifteen minutes passed by, and finally Zia came around to the lobby. “Oh, good, Francisco’s here!” The same guy who noticed me said, “Come on, we’re about to start!”

I find myself staring at her while she stoically follows whatever the makeup crew does to her. They seem to put more makeup on her than I did, and I really wonder how she’d manage to sit there with such discipline. I always had the itch to get up and wander around whenever they’re not working on me for more than a minute.

After the touchup, Zia sat down beside me on the couch, the crew briefing her on today’s shooting. They still seem to discuss a little more about something, and this is my queue to bond with her yet again. “Nervous?” I ask.

There was that shadow of a smile that perhaps I wished to see, but somehow my mind tells me that I didn’t like to see what she just did. “A little. Are they really aiming for the childhood friends angle?”

“Come on, don’t you think they would love our dynamic when they realize that?”

Zia fidgets a little with her hands, something I knew she'd do whenever she's thinking of something else. "Maybe."

I sigh, caving in to what I thought about Zia the moment I got the news. "Hey, are you nervous because of like... you being the only girl in the grid or you being the first to lots of things?"

Zia, with this in common, shoots a glare, but then looks away. I can tell there is something bothering her with my comment. "I wouldn't--"

"Okay, you two, time for the video!" The cameraguy announces, as one of the crew members hands me prompt cards I would read during the video. I read the first card silently.

HOW DO YOU FEEL BEING THE ONLY GIRL IN THIS YEAR'S GRID?

And to that I think, *'Why are they really trying to sell this angle for her?'* I do know for a fact that female drivers, if shown enough potential from karting, get into F1 Driver Academy. I've met really talented drivers racing in that series, because my team back in Formula 3 and 2 also handled some of them there and I made some content with them to entertain the fans.

"... We only have one take by the way, so make the most out of this session, you two."

Wonderful.

The crew starts rolling the footage, and I start with the introductions. "What's up, team? Leon Harrison here and it's a wonderful day today because I'd like to introduce our new Horizon driver for this season." I turn to Zia, smiling softly to her to encourage her speaking for herself. To my surprise, Zia suddenly changed her demeanor, acting more like how I remembered her.

She was smiling gracefully, waving to the camera with her two hands as if she was eager to meet the fans. "Hi, I'm Zia Fransisco. I race under the Philippine flag and I'm very excited to work with Horizon."

I think I should go with how Marco dealt with me when we recorded this very thing in my rookie year. “Do you wanna tell us about your junior career?”

Zia shifts a bit while keeping her demeanor so I can't tell if she hated that question or not. “So... Yeah, I raced from F4 to F2 as Gio Fransisco. I know, it might be a shock for you that I'm a girl all along, but I really loved the idea of getting into F1, so I did what I could to get here!”

I looked at the crew, who didn't seem all that fazed with her reply. I can guess that this is the route they both wanted us to go. Just one more question about herself before we get to the queue cards. “That's amazing that you came all the way to get here, though.” I say, cringing at myself because this is such a generic reply to give to a video. “What's your most memorable moment back in the Feeder series?”

I can truly tell that Zia is starting to look uncomfortable, I know what it is whenever she fidgets with her hands. I'm also starting to get uncomfortable with shooting this, but the crew didn't tell us to stop yet. “Well... I remember... when I was in F3, I was so nervous in my first race that I stalled the start.”

I laugh a little, because to be honest? I also stalled my very first race in F4 because the controls were too new to me.

“Oh lord, yeah. I can tell how embarrassing it is. I stalled the start too when I was in F4.”

Zia chuckled a little, her shoulders relaxing as though it wasn't all too bad.

I looked at the queue cards one more time. Adding this question after the last two made me feel like she's going to get mad at me for trying to make this as tense as she wants this to be. And of course, I didn't get these kinds of questions in my first time in Horizon.

Maybe I should let out my inner child.

“... Oh, here’s a good topic to talk about.” I declare, pretending to read the card intently. “Remember when we used to watch Superhero movies? Tell me that you still love Doctor Strange.”

I’m not looking at them at the moment, but I can tell they’re looking at each other in confusion. *Surely no one put that in our cue cards*, I imagine them saying to each other. However, Zia’s eyes light up, her grin becoming more obvious to me that she’s getting comfortable. “Oh, yeah, of course. I love Doctor Strange because like... Who doesn’t love to imagine themselves using magic? You did remember that I used to have a Doctor Strange Pin on a bag, right?”

“Oh, yeah!” I tell her. “Then you wouldn’t stop rambling about your theories for the next movies.”

I managed to carry this on without getting us cut in this shoot. “What’s your favorite color?” “You still watch some shows, right? What’s your favorite one right now?” “Who’s your role model here in F1?” “What’s your goals for this season?” Zia answers them all confidently instead of her shutting up like a clam, because a lot of the questions in these queue cards were mostly about her being a girl, for some reason.

Shooting wraps up, but everyone seems upset. Zia is permitted to go. She looks at me for a moment, standing up after. “... It’s fun talking to you.”

“It’s always been fun talking with you.” I say to her naturally. She immediately looks the other way with that comment and walks away.

“What the hell?” Cue Card guy tells me the moment she’s out of sight. “We spent so much time deciding on those questions we gave you!”

I look up to him, tilting my head. “You told us we only have one take and that I should make the most out of it. So I did.”

“We didn’t get a good scoop on her!”

“I think you did. The fans are going to love her personality when the video releases.”

I stand up. I know I’m going to get in trouble for not following directions here. I get anxious whenever that happens, because I want to keep my seat, but who cares? “All I see in those cards is trying to make her feel unwelcome here. She’s a driver, I think she liked my questions more than whatever I asked her first.”

I then shrug. “Whatever... I think we did a good job.” I say, loud enough for everyone to hear. “I should go do my sim racing in. Pre-test is right around the corner.”

And with that, I leave.

Oh, how I loved catching up with her through those questions.

Chapter 4

Good news and bad news. Which one does someone like me want first? I guess I should go with the bad news.

I got chewed out by Marlon because I didn't follow through with the crew's original plan with Zia's first F1 interview. He told me that I'm going to have problems with the team if I continue pissing them off. It was still worth it, though, getting to talk to Zia about random stuff.

The good news is that the video went to social media anyway, and it's getting good attention so far. I read through comments while the entire video is rolling on YouTube.

@redbullracing

Come to Red Bull, we have cookies 🍪🍪

@lemonmilk

NOT ZIA KNOWING THE JULIAN ROOKIE MEME 😭

@f1_withlarry

Media trying to smear Zia to the ground when it turns out this girl is a sweetie with a talent.

Good luck this season!

I'm glad this risk I took was a win, I would have hated to see the comments if I stuck through the plan, anyway. But I shouldn't keep scrolling down the comment section, it's almost time for Bahrain Pre-testing anyway.

Pre-Testing isn't technically a super duper official race weekend for Formula 1. It's supposed to be a week where each driver goes out the track to practice and also for the team to test their prototypes to see if everything works the way it should. They then tweak anything if they missed a spot or two, and then we can start competing by March when the season officially

kicks off in Australia. Pre-Testing is a good opportunity for the world to see how rookies drive, too, and some fans put in their predictions for the year based on our performance in these sessions. Zia's the only rookie for this year, I bet everyone's eyes were on her like usual.

I sit up on the hospitality couch and double zip up my racing uniform. I believe the team changed our colors starting this season. We used to sport a dominantly black uniform with golden tones added to it, topped with *HORIZON GP* across the chest, but we were allowed to change into a white, blue and yellow uniform so it'd feel cooler inside our suits. I get into the restroom to check my fit. I look snazzy, despite looking like I'm sweating yellow highlighters from my armpits.

Pre-testing starts in an hour. If I'm still nervous about starting the season, I really wonder how Zia's doing. Speaking of her, I heard the door open, and there she was, the top part of the suit still dangling from her waist. "Hey, Zee. Are you excited for the pre-test?" I ask, smiling as usual. She only gave me a side eye in response before she takes a cup then gets some coffee.

"Hey, I thought we're cool after that interview thing. Look, everyone's cheering you on thanks to that!" I said, opening my phone to show her the comments.

"It wasn't about my reputation, Leon." She replied, her hand shaking slightly as she takes some sugar.

"What's it about, then?" I ask, my head starting to feel like it's squeezing.

"None of your business, that's what." Followed by a huff. She moves deeper into the hospitality unit and I follow her.

"Zia, we're teammates now, and I loved that!" I said, facing down to her level when she sits down to sip her coffee. "This ain't you, mate. I thought we were just going through a breezy time the moment you signed that contract and finally race together like we promised as kids."

Zia shot a glare at me, and I hear her knuckles crack. I don't know if I should be worried that she's going to punch me. "Your dad funded you, Your dad funded me, yeah?" She snapped, "But you spent only three years in the junior series."

"Yeah, so?" I say, clearly annoyed at her attitude now. "They chose me for the junior leagues. I only got in earlier than you by luck!"

"Luck?" She asked, placing down her cup and almost slamming it to the point of spilling the coffee earlier. "You came here because your father's rich—"

"Dad let you race with me, Zee—"

"And what did I do?!" She almost screamed. "You see why I raced as Gio?"

I paused for a moment. I genuinely don't know what to say, because I still didn't quite understand why she didn't at least stick to F1 Academy.

She looked down with another huff. "I'm only lucky the FIA didn't kick me out for lying. I'm lucky Horizon's willing to sort my papers to fix this thing up."

Papers? Was she in trouble for that stunt she pulled?

I sigh, looking at her. "... This is just a pre-test, Zia. No need to push today, we just need to get some results for the team." I say, taking my helmet. They proposed I match the colors for the uniform, but I still loved the black and gold, so it stays that way. The top of the helmet adorned my logo, which was a falcon spreading out its wings under my initials. Still beautiful, but I'm not in the mood to admire the work.

"I should go ahead to the garage. Good luck, yeah?" I say, making for the door before turning to her. "Oh, that coffee goes well with the biscuits."

The pit lane is filled with the whirring and chatter between the teams competing this season. I can already see Hans Muller in the next garage, but not much else with the other ones. I

turn to find my new engineer, Nico Lombardi. Technically he's not new, but the team told me I'd be switching engineers after Marco retired and Nico would be a great match for an engineer this season. "Good day, Nico." I greeted the Pit Wall, hoping he was there to notice. And Indeed, he's there to notice me. "Ah, Good morning, Leon!" He said with a warm smile. I can tell why Marco kept telling me how easy it was to talk to him during radio. "I'm your new engineer, *si*? I hope we work well."

"So I hear." I say, shaking his hand.

"Okay, we don't need to push flat out the track today, because we're going to put some flovis on your car and see how it goes."

"Alright, sir."

"Oh, no no, you don't need to call me sir." He said to him. "Just call me Nico. Aaaanyway, Three Days from now, we are going to test how you race with the car, okay? And then we're going to decide how to work together from there."

It wasn't complicated. I spent my first two days doing all the testing I needed for these days, and the car felt better than it was just last year. While I'm at it, I did some good laps in, just a little practice before the season starts. When I looked through telemetry during the testing, I can tell that Zia's taking her time getting used to the actual driving of the car. Her times don't seem too out of the ordinary.

By Day 3, I can finally do some actual practicing. My engineer said it's best to do a few flying laps so he can work with my driving style and practice on his coaching for me during the season. "Okay, Leon, nicely done! You're at 1:30. Glad to know we'll be doing fine this year! Box the car."

Feels very encouraging to have him by his side. As I box and the mechanics drag my car to the garage, I hop out. This is my last test of the week, so I only need to worry about Australia in a few weeks' time. There's some time to kill, so might as well watch the pit wall. The engineers seem to be fixated on one monitor.

"What's up, Nico?" I ask. "How's everyone?"

"No way, are you really telling her not to push flat out?" Team Principal muttered.

"No, really, I told her just to take her time to get used to the car."

"What's this about?" I asked, pushing Nico gently.

"Your friend here... look,"

I looked, and my heart felt like I heard someone scream bloody murder.

It's not because I did end up at the top 5 at the end of the testing weekend, but because Zia ended up at the top of the board.

Horizon didn't hire just my best friend. They might have just hired a monster rookie this year.

Chapter 5

I tried to hold that thought as far away as possible, it was only pre-season testing after all. But I can't help but think about Zia's time in her last lap.

I'm not in danger of losing my seat, I'm far from it. My contract for Horizon would last for a good 2 more years before I have to renew or a team, maybe Phoenix, eyes me as their new driver. But the fact that Zia is already lapping me from the pre-testing means that she's got to surpass me in skill starting in Australia alone. No, I shouldn't really worry too much. Australia might be unfamiliar ground to her, so she still has to learn.

I just can't shake the feeling that there's this many eyes on us this season.

I'm just thankful that Marlon was there to snap me out of the Hospitality trance, so I looked up from the floor. "Damn, Leon, are you praying to win Australia this weekend?"

I think for a moment, until I suddenly remember. I'm in Australia, and it's the first race weekend today. "...Oh, No, Just trying to think of a strategy today."

"I don't take you for a strategist. Did the rookie get competition now?"

Partly, I could say yes. Zia's my best friend, but she's competition, too. Just because I regard her like a flower doesn't mean I'll treat her as such in the races. "... So why are you here?" I say, throwing my sweaty towel at him since I did my track jogging today.

Marlon caught the thing and laughed. "You've got the driver's briefing, remember?" He remarked. "You better freshen up before we go and do some free practice."

Right. He did not need to say it a second time, I freshen up in my own room to prepare for the weekend. For those who're not aware of F1, I'd say that the Driver's Briefing is there for us to get more acquainted with the track if we haven't through track walking already, then the

stewards explain past hazards and accidents in this track and explain if there are new turns to look after. For rookies, this is to orient them about track procedures, especially Safety Cars, which are deployed when there's some hazard that has to be removed from the track.

This used to be televised for fans to see, but I'm kinda glad they didn't anymore because this was our safe place to bring up our concerns that we don't wanna expose to the public, because what if they take it as a scandal?

It didn't take long for me to be in the conference room, and I'm aware that half of us drivers are already there, chatting away about the season and some other things like their off-season activities. Here are some of the drivers that I can list in this room:

1. Kenneth Lim - The Korean Driver I mentioned a while ago.
2. John Campbell - The current defending champion.
3. Hans Muller - John's current teammate.
4. Julian Castillo - The oldest driver in this grid, and a legend in his own right. Won four seasons, with the last one only having a one-point difference with his rival that year.
5. Mateo Flores - I debuted with him two years ago.
6. Pedro Oliveira - His father, Artur, is another racing legend, I bet he's seeking to be a champion, too.
7. David Markovic - He's the first Formula 2 champion. Yeah, F2's history isn't that far off as anyone thinks.
8. Theodore Cromwell - A Phoenix Driver, I wish to be his teammate one day.
9. Zia Fransisco - You know her.
10. Leon Harrison - Yours truly.

I sit beside Zia, teammates are encouraged to be seated beside each other, anyway. “What do you think of the team?” I ask her. Zia seemed to be eyeing Hans out of this lineup. “I don’t know.” She simply replies. “Okay, I guess.”

Okay, I guess was what I didn’t think the first time I sat in this very seat. More drivers filed into the room to take a seat, and the Blitzflamme driver named Jack Sallow sat beside me. “Mornin’, mate.” He greets, leaning forward to check out Zia. “Oh, you must be the rookie everyone’s talking about. Ballsy move, girl, but I’d like to see what you’re made of.”

Zia couldn’t look straight at me or him when he started talking. It didn’t help that it was loud enough that some of the drivers finally turned to look at her with disdain or admiration in their eyes. I can spot Julian looking as though he’s ready to jump at Zia at the next best opportunity. “Okay...” Was all she could muster.

“No, really, I wanna see what you’re made of! Horizon must have picked the best of the F2 litter if you managed to top all of us in Bahrain, even though it was Testing.”

“It’s nothing.” She replied in a genuine nonchalant voice, “I only did the most for the team.”

“Pfft, look at you. People are talking and dying to see what you do to us men.”

The conference started, and nothing interesting was really discussed. Past accidents, Current Hazards, Protocols, the works. It was only during our time to speak when something really happened, and not for the better. “I have a question, Marshall.” Julian spoke, which made my heart sink. He stood up, not really necessary for us drivers, before clasping his hands behind his back. “What’s this woman doing among the ranks of us men?”

Zia shifted at the mention of her, and all eyes are turning to her now. “There’s F1 Academy, and I can tell that she’s going to dominate that series anyway. So what’s she doing

here? Shouldn't she just stay in F1 Academy? Or did she manage to bribe you all so that she gets a comfy seat in Horizon?"

"Julian," Pedro started, "She dominated in F2, she deserves—"

"*That's* the problem, she dominated in F2, dressed as a man and all of a sudden she's a girl all along?" He puts a sharp gaze on Zia, and I look down to see that her knuckles are turning white and she's holding fast on that fist. "Tell me, *Fransisco*, how did you get here with us? Got too scared of Formula 1 Academy? Or do you wanna show the world how much of a fraus you will be when you hop into *real* racing?"

I want to speak up, say that this is all wrong, but I can't say anything because he is right at some point. How did she pretend to be a guy and then suddenly reveal to be a girl without any consequences? It would have been grounds for her to be banned from racing altogether at worst.

"Mr. Castillo, I'm only a steward for this track, but I assure you that the FIA has its reasons to hire Zia as a driver among us." The man said. "Now please, you may resolve this matter at another time."

But Julian doesn't look like he's about to drop this subject. He turned to the steward. "F1 will be ruined if we don't do anything about her. She broke the rules!"

His voice was loud enough to suck up any warmth that I felt in this room. "Mr. Castillo, Please." The steward said, his voice a little shaky, looking at Zia uncertainly.

I was about to open my mouth before someone near me said something first. "I think I should propose something for you, mate."

It was Jack.

"I think we should let her enjoy her first season with us, and then see what's going to happen with all the FIA stuff when they decide on it."

“Let her enjoy the race? Are you insane?! She’s a liar and a frau—”

“I say this because remember, she only came around in pre-testing and then decided to light all of our asses on fire. She might be lucky with the pace and timing, but imagine if she decides to light our asses a second time here in Australia.”

Julian turned red with this memory, before sighing. “I’m not done until something happens. Okay?” He said, before taking his seat. Jack nods to the Steward, though... “I was about to adjourn you all. Thank you for your time. We will try to address your concerns as soon as possible.”

And with that, everyone stands up and starts chattering about the events or strategizing on this race weekend.

“Thank you, Jack...” I whisper, with Jack smiling like a fool to us.

“Nah, don’t mind me, mate. Poor Steward doesn’t know what to do anymore.” He said, turning to Zia. “Don’t mind Julian here. He’s just a grumpy old man but he’ll come around.”

I looked at Zia, who’s still tensed up, but she could muster up a nod. “Thanka for that... I could have punched Julian when he kept mentioning me.”

Jack laughed. “Who doesn’t wanna punch him?” He stood up, stretching his already-stretched-out body. “Enjoy the free practices. And good luck with the FIA stuff he mentioned about.

Both of us walk out the room. I do want to bring up the FIA thing, but I can’t really bring myself to more trouble than it’s already worth. “You good?” I ask.

Zia smiled, but it doesn’t seem to reach her face. “All the more reason to become a champion, right?” She asked me, to my surprise.

“Yeah... Maybe.” I mutter, making our way to our garage.

Zia's such a mystery... I hope she hasn't become a complete lie to me.

Chapter 6

Today's race day. Compared to the Free Practice sessions, many more people should be tuning into Qualifying and Race sessions. Qualifying exists to test our skill and sort out who's the fastest among us to start the race, and the Race exists for us to... Race. Duh.

But this is when I believe that I've got a shot to be champion as early as now. Because I ended up third place in Qualifying and Zia landed in 11th place. Who can blame her? This is her first weekend in Formula 1 after, where everything is amped up to 11 after the Feeder Series.

We're supposed to go out for our first driver's parade. It's to showcase us for the first time after months of not racing, and where many people decide who to root for the rest of the year. I get out of my hospitality room, looking around for any sign of my best friend. "Zia?" I ask, shuffling down the stairs.

I then hear faint mumbling.

"Too slow on sector 3. I need to fix my racing there." I hear Zia mumble.

I walk completely down, and she's looking down the floor while rocking her leg furiously. "I'm good at the first sector. I just need to watch out for everyone when I start."

"You good?" I ask, and she jumps a little.

"I'm only planning my race strategy." She replies.

"Aren't you supposed to plan with your Engineer?"

"I already told him to feed me data by the minute."

Gosh, my head would explode if I asked Nico to feed me data every minute. I panicked the first time I was radio'ed about my gap and pace. "Don't you treat yourself like a flower?"

She tilted her head, her leg still rocking so furiously. “I did this since F3, Leon. It turns out I perform better with this. If only I did better on Qualifying—”

“Stop pulling that *“If only I did better”* on me, Zee.”

She wouldn’t shut up about it post-qualifying when she went to the media pen to answer their questions, and she seems pretty harsh on judging herself.

“Why? I wouldn’t be here without—”

“Your smarts, yeah.” I said, sitting down beside her. “I’m starting to see how you changed all these years, Zee, and... You overwork yourself. Look at your eyes.”

I can tell those sagging lines from Zia, but she just looks away. “I’ll be okay.” She said, standing up. “I promise.” And with that, she made for the door and left me alone.

I remember when we were children... She always tried to hide her hurt in a facade of being strong and all that. I can tell whenever she’s upset when she grips onto her hands like she’s about to crush them.

“Are you really not upset, Zee?”

“N-No.” And I know she’s lying when tears are falling and her voice is getting softer than usual.

“Tell me, Zee.”

“... Mark stole my book and called me a coward...”

I reported to the teacher about that instance, then, because I’m not really a good fighter, and Mark would have given me a black eye back then.

I sigh, standing up to prepare for the drivers parade. I can still convince Zia to take some time off and then teach her a little bit more about Formula One; She definitely needs the guidance of someone more experienced than her.

The Parade was nice, it was nice seeing the crowd again after months of not being able to race. I remember how emotional I was when I first saw these people as a rookie. *“Don’t cry now, mate.”* I remember Marco saying, *“We’ve got 24 races to do.”*

I look at the other drivers, answering the media who decided to hop on and interview them while the truck was rolling through the tracks. I pass by, waving the air to greet any more fans as I find my way to Zia.

“How does it feel like to be back to racing?” I hear one reporter ask Julian, to which he responded enthusiastically.

“How does it feel to be out of your rookie season?” Another asked Hans. It got too windy for me to overhear what he said, but I get the feeling.

And finally, I spot Zia, plastering that same smile I saw when I first interviewed her a while back. I make my way towards her.

“Is the pressure of being the only woman in this grid too great for you?” Asks the journalist for Formula 1. I was about to answer, but something’s new, because this time Zia answers plainly.

“Oh, not really, I’d say. I’m looking forward to this as a new driver to the table.”

“That’s amazing, Zia. Can you tell us why you raced under the name “Gio” in your feeder Series?”

A long pause came around and Zia leans forward with a smile. “Let’s just say I found my own way to be here and start something new to this league.”

The Reporter seemed to be satisfied, before spotting me. “Oh, hello, Leon.”

“Hey.” I greet back.

“Quickly I must say, congrats on your job last season.”

“Thank you, Miss. I really enjoyed being in Horizon so far.”

“Of course!” She smiles, looking through her phone for a moment. “Now, I think everyone is speculating that you and Zia here are childhood friends?”

“That’s true.” I say, looking at Zia for a moment who looked at me with a squint. Zia-speaks for “*I wanna add something after this.*”

“It’s wonderful that the two of you grew up and achieved your dreams together, but we’re speculating that Horizon’s going to perform the best this season. Does that mean you two are rivals?”

Uh... This is awkward. I did know that Zia’s going to be my rival if it means being able to race at the same time as me, but I don’t want it to sound like I’m being mean to her—

“Yeah.” Zia answered, crossing her arms. “When we were kids, we both promised to be champions together, but only one should be champion for Formula One, so... I’d say we’re going to race to the top first.”

I look at her for a moment, unable to think straight. How can she suddenly sound so confident in her words? And why does my heart race when she mentioned that promise? Maybe it’s because she remembered all this time?

I fixed my throat to add to that. “Yeah, I can agree with her. She’s my best friend, but that doesn’t mean that I’ll let her go easy.”

The woman nodded, smiling at the established rivalry between us too. “Good luck to you both this year.” She ended, before moving away with her cameraman.

I nudge Zia. “So you *can* sound so cool at the cameras.”

For the first time, Zia laughs at my remark. “I know my way to impress people, Leon.” And then she looks out to the crowd and smiles at them.

I try to look back at the audience before they catch me staring at her for too long.

As the parade concluded and we got down from the truck that pulled us through the track, Zia made for the ground first and she stopped in her tracks until I followed her. I turn to look at her, and I can see something in her eyes that looked as though she didn't like what I did. "... What now?" I ask.

"Oh... Nothing." She replied simply. "I just think... It's nothing." And she walked away.

Jack might have spotted us because I felt something heavy on my right shoulder and I turn to see him playfully resting his arm on me while he watches Zia walk away. "Oof, did she beat herself again after that interview?" He asked.

"Nah, I don't know. She kept mumbling about her strategy back at Hospitality. I really need to tell her about that."

"P11 isn't bad for a rookie. I got through worse."

"Right?" I told him. In my first ever race in F1, I crashed my car and had to start from the back of the grid.

"So tell her that. Oh, and maybe you both should stop by Blitzflamme later after everything boils down. My sister came and brought us too many snacks for the team." He said, smiling as he let go. "Good luck turning your Quali into Podium, mate! You deserve it."

Right, I'm P3, I have a chance of at least landing a podium if it isn't winning my first race. As much as I'm excited for that, I couldn't really keep that attitude around her for some reason. "Thanks, Jack. You're a real one."

"Don't mention it. We should head back unless we wanna be late."

Hospitality is filled with our engineers, people who would be looking at telemetry to predict anything that might happen on the track, and Harry the Principal. Zia is already there,

already wearing her undershirt but not her suit, yet. “Morning.” I greeted them, to which they responded accordingly. Pre-race briefing starts, and all we did was basically reiterate what was said during the drivers conference. This time, our engineers will come to us to discuss our plans for the race.

“Okay, Leon,” said Nico, and I find it funny how his Italian accent thickens when he seems excited just now. “I think you know how Australia is at this point, so we’re going for the two-stop strategy today.”

“Soft-hards?” I ask.

“I was going for medium-hards, but if you wanna go for softs, then I’ll let you do that.”

I nod, looking at my phone for today’s grid placement.

1	<i>J. Campbell</i>
2	<i>J. Sallow</i>
3	<i>L. Harrison</i>
4	<i>T. Cromwell</i>
5	<i>D. Markovic</i>
6	<i>P. Oliveira</i>
7	<i>S. Okamoto</i>
8	<i>H. Muller</i>
9	<i>B. Makkinen</i>
10	<i>J. Castillo</i>
11	<i>Z. Fransisco</i>
12	<i>F. Pena</i>
13	<i>C. Martens</i>
14	<i>O. Lund</i>

15	<i>K. Lim</i>
16	<i>T. Heionen</i>
17	<i>M. Flores</i>
18	<i>M. Flaherty</i>
19	<i>G. Nakamura</i>
20	<i>T. Berchard</i>

Knowing what just happened at the Driver's conference, I headed straight to Zia, who was still discussing with her engineer about the entire thing. "Should we try to keep our distance from Castillo?" I ask Zia and her engineer.

Juan, which was his name, cocked his eyebrow up when I interrupted them. "You mean stay behind him the entire time?" He asked me. "It's going to be more trouble for us than what it's worth."

"At least until he pits," Zia mentioned.

"You're going to pit eventually, Francisco," He counter-argued, which was a good point. Unless she manages to keep about 15 seconds of distance or more, Julian's going to catch up to her and she's gotta have to go the extra mile fighting for a higher place for the rest of the race.

"Then when the race starts, you should charge to the front as much as possible." I say to Zia.

"That's risky, Leon!" Exclaimed Juan. "She's going to crash before her race even starts."

"Yeah, I know," I say, my eyebrows furrowing with the possibility. "But if you pull it off, then you've got a chance to score points, at least."

"Why are you helping me?" Zia asked suddenly. My breath hitched for a moment, but I can't suddenly feel so troubled at this moment.

“You’re smart, Zia, I think you love to analyze races.” I mentioned. “Plus I want you to not feel bad about your position. You might pull off miracles here!”

“... We’re going to discuss it again while we do the formation lap.” Juan finally decided, before leaving the two of us be.

Zia sighs, but I can’t let her leave without something this time.

“... You trust me on this as a teammate, right?” I mutter to her.

She looks at me for a moment, searching for something in my eyes before I hear her sigh.

“... Do you think it’s worth it for me to even be here?”

“Of course, Zee.”

“... Then I’ll trust you for this race.”

Chapter 7

This is it. The moments before we hopped into our cars and got our first race. I still admire the black and the gold stuff on my helmet, I wish I could keep this as my signature colors eventually. I head to the garage to get a drink real quick before I hop into the car, because it's going to be a long race and I need the hydration as much as possible.

There I saw her, mumbling again about her strategy by herself.

“So how's your first race day so far?” I say, keeping my nervousness down.

Zia looks up to me, her eyes looking more tired than I saw an hour ago. “... I guess it's okay.” She said, taking her helmet. I notice the eagle plastered on it as though it's giving her a halo when she wears it. “Why's your helmet like that?” I ask curiously.

Her eye twitched for a moment before she looked at the helmet. “... It's a Philippine Eagle. I wanna show my roots when I race.” She commented. There were red, yellow, and blue colors on her helmet, too.

“That's cool.” I smile, walking up to her. “We're going to be okay, yeah?” I ask.

And with that, Zia stared at me blankly and said, “*You're* going to be okay. Good luck, Leon.” Before making her car and leaving my heart into ribbons.

I also headed for my car, which was already parked on the racing grid. I know it's my car as I sport the number “19” on the nose. “There you are, Leon!” Greeted the mechanics, and they helped me get into and fasten myself into the car. They helped me set up my radio as well as installing the steering wheel into place. I pray my body doesn't get stiff or I don't sleep mid-race because I suddenly remember how flat I'm lying within the chassis.

“*Okay, Leon, Mic test, 1-2-3?*” Nico spoke through the radio.

"I hear you loud and clear, boss." I'd reply, hopefully making him hear my voice back. At this point, I can already imagine that cameras are starting to roll and broadcast recapping the Qualifying. The world's about to watch the Pinnacle of Motorsport again.

"Okay Leon, Fransisco and Cromwell took the option of softs, everyone else went for mediums." Engineer language for "Zia's gonna go aggressive and Theo's out here to hunt you as early as now."

"Just remember our plan for today. Mediums and then Hards. Try to conserve your tires as much as possible." Another Engineer Language for "Don't push too hard."

"Thank you for that information, Nico." I say, wondering if they somehow caught my radio for the world to hear.

"Good luck out there, convert your third to a podium." He finally replies, before no more communication comes around. Within a few moments, they're going to take off the blankets of the tires and when the clock before us strikes three, we're to go around the track in formation and get the opportunity to warm up our tires.

All mechanics took the blankets off, and I can see all of them hurrying up to the sides of the track, which meant that the minute hand struck and now we're rolling in formation. It's not that fast yet, I'm supposed to follow Jack before me. I steer left and right, dragging my car around and warming up my tires, occasionally taking a break. I can feel my arms burn doing this because my steering wheel is quite heavy when I steer. I check everything else in my car, I brake just fine and I don't see anything that might make us crash into the barriers. Today is a perfect day. *"Everything works just fine, Have a good day."* I declared to the radio.

I can count that I turned about ten times now, and my heart's starting to race again. The starting line is getting near, and we're already slowing down because we're to get back to our

grid. I line up my car behind John's, and now the waiting begins as the rest behind me are lining up theirs.

"Last car in position, Leon, get ready." Nico Declares, and I hold onto the clutch as we all rev up our engines.

The first red light pops up. Two... Three... Four... Five...

And the lights go out. I let go of my clutch, and the speed of my car shoots me forward. At this point, I have to keep my mind clear and see what's going on. The speed trap's right ahead, and I can see an opening on John's right while Jack's attacking on the left. A great opening for me. I shot right through the gap, breaking at the latest possible time, and I managed to turn without feeling a bump on my left aside from the speed bumps on my right.

I made first place. I try not to hyperventilate as I speed up as much as possible while looking at my mirrors. John's still trying to fend off the Blitzflamme driver, so that gives a good distraction for me to start creating distance from them.

"Mega job, Leon, gap behind Campbell 0.8 seconds, Gap between Campbell and Sallow 0.1 seconds." praised Nico as we made for the sixth corner. Which is probably not good, Either John manages to keep second place then gun for me, or Jack outsmarts him and guns for me by the end of the first lap. Not to mention that this *is the first lap*, so everyone's going to try and claw their way to me and I'll still fall behind for new tires at some point. I try to keep my head in the game.

"How's my teammate?" I asked Nico.

"Fransisco's in 8th place, overtaking three drivers on the first corner."

I try to contain my excitement. Zia taking softs and blazing through on her first race is an amazing feat on its own for a rookie. I can imagine the screams of the audience when they see it on their screens or spotted it on their stadium seats. They might as well get their money's worth.

"DRS Enabled." Nico declared on radio, which meant that we've gone past 5 laps without a change in position, otherwise he might have let me know.

"Who's behind me?" I ask. It wasn't until I hit Lap 6 when Nico replied.

"Sallow just overtook Campbell, he's 1.8 seconds behind you."

Shoot. I never went head to head with Jack that much, but even though he's been friendly to me so far, I never saw him give up without a good fight in our hands.

So I pit soon and he takes over, or he speeds up eventually and we start a dog fight in these streets.

Though the latter didn't come so easy, I happen to be faster than him because Nico's updating me of my gap behind him every few laps. *"0.9 Seconds."* *"1.3 Seconds."* *"1.0 Seconds."* *"1.8 seconds."*

I was starting to get bored. Is this what it feels to be in the lead? Last year, I always try my best to speed up and overtake, but the car didn't really feel as fast as it was now. I realize that maybe... just maybe, Horizon managed to cook up a champion title for us. It's too early to tell though—

"Pit window open, Leon." announces Nico. My interest spiked again, and this is my moment to decide to hold out or pit as early as I can.

"I'm pushing, We should pit at the last possible lap." I decide.

"Copy, understood." Nico replied, probably off to plan this out with the mechanics who will service my car.

I might start to regret that decision, because I struggle to keep my pace and I can already see Jack in the mirrors. It seems like he's planning the same as me.

"Box now, Leon, box box." Nico announces a few laps later, and I comply since I'm starting to worry about my tires blowing up mid-race. To my surprise, Jack followed me to the pits, giving me an opportunity to pass him in the pit lane, still. Mechanics huddled together in position to hold my car and change into my hard tires, and within 2 seconds, my tires were good as new. I was sent out just in time for Jack to change his.

"Good job, Leon, you're currently 5th place." Nico said.

"Who's in front of me?"

"Oliveira, he's 2.5 seconds ahead. In front of Oliveira is Markovic, he's 4 seconds ahead."

Which means I have some work cut out for me if I want to hunt down that first place again.

"Who's behind me?"

"Francisco, she's 7 seconds behind. Sallow's chasing her within 0.6 seconds."

Zia's sixth place? Seven seconds means a lot to Formula One, everyone's gonna notice if I suddenly fall back just to keep Jack away from Zia.

"Just keep your pace, Oliveira and Markovic is yet to pit."

I have two choices. Fall behind so I'm near enough for Zia to DRS right through me and keep Jack away, or keep myself this way so I can reclaim my podium. I think of this while keeping my pace in these streets, my grip tightening to the steering wheel. I'm starting to itch about taking off this helmet, and I can now feel my sweat that I'm producing under my suit.

... I really need that Podium. So I keep my pace.

Nico was right, Pedro and David went to the pits, giving me just enough time to jump from fifth place back into third place. I'm starting to forget some things, but all I care about is to keep going. These hardships are just enough for me to finish the race, I have to hold out.

"Last lap, Leon, last lap." Nico declares, and I can hear his excitement through the radio. I have to keep going. A few more laps and I can cool down with a good ice bath or celebrate with my first champagne. Come on, Come on.

Just as I can see the finish line, a figure pops up on my left.

The same livery as my own.

It's Zia.

Chapter 8

Silence.

I made sure I slowed down until I could manage the speed of the car, but It's almost as though I lost senses on my arms and legs. A couple laps ago, Nico told me that Zia's still a whole seven seconds behind me. She would have been fighting Jack for her position, still. But how did she manage to pull up right next to me?

I have to choose my next words wisely, I'm sure the broadcast would turn their cameras on the ones in my car trying to get my reaction. "... *Nico, who's in third place?*" I ask.

"S-standby, Leon, we're looking at footage and telemetry."

So it's a picture perfect finish. I let Zia pull up ahead of me as we do a cooldown lap on the way to the pits, and by the time we're entering, Nico could tell me which of us are going to park our cars on the 3rd spot.

Halfway through the circuit, I can hear roars getting louder which meant that something was happening. Nico should come with news by now. Is it me? Is it Zia?

"Fransisco's 3rd place mate, She's ahead by 0.068 seconds."

"No way."

I can't believe it. On the other side, Zia would be celebrating her finish.

"She's also Driver of the Day, Leon. Mega job out there, nonetheless."

I tried to kill my adrenaline until I got into the pits. Zia will have to park her car.

Suddenly the dread of me losing my seat is inching closer. I should be happy for Zia, but why am I so scared of this? Not only did she break records by finishing this way, but I'm sure all the camera's on her today, while I have a feeling people would see me the same way.

I finally get to the garage, and fatigue really washes over me. Surely I lost a couple pounds after two hours of racing, but all I have to do is to find Zia right now and see how she's doing.

I inch my way towards where the mechanics are situated while they're waiting for their 3rd place finisher, taking off my gloves and helmet. In the distance, I saw Zia with her car, and as soon as she hopped out, Horizon practically erupted in their pen. "Zia! Let's go!" "Wooo, Zia!"

I look at her, hunched over and holding onto her knees. I've seen this state anywhere whenever I'm in a race... She's spent. Catching up to me definitely took a toll on her body. But she seemed to recover, because she looked at her people and dashed her way toward up, leaping to our embrace. I still tried to make sense of it all, but Nico turned to me from the crows with an enthusiastic smile. "Oh, Leon!" He said. "Juan's gonna brief her on what's gonna happen after the podium finish. You're needed in the Media Pen, yeah?"

"Y-yeah." I say, and to avoid confrontation from my team at this point, I turned around and made for the media pen. It's a place where either drivers would be interviewed about their race right after the event, especially to those who weren't in the podium. Answering them was a nightmare sometimes, because I don't know how to word my answers without causing a ruckus to my team.

"Leon! Over here!" One of the reporters started as soon as I stepped foot into the pen. I put up a friendly smile to them, fixing my sweat-damped hair as I approach.

"Congratulations on taking fourth in your race, Leon."

"Thank you."

Cameras start pointing at me, and fans who are coming down to watch the podium celebrations look at me. I can feel as though my knees are going to buckle with this many eyes.

“I’m sure it was a surprise to you when Ms. Fransisco appeared on your side in that last lap. Did you expect this?” He asks.

“No, I certainly did not.” I say, trying to make a lighthearted mood with a chuckle. “I thought I had it in the bag.”

“We all thought you did. Do you think this means that Zia Fransisco’s going to be this year’s champion?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe, but we still have 23 races to go.” I will simply mention. “She’s got a long way to go if she wants to be champion.”

I think the reporter’s happy with that answer. “We were all aware that she revealed she wasn’t Gio the moment she signed the contract with your team. Do you think this is a legal move for Horizon? What will be your next steps in case the FIA rules her ineligible to race?”

What? I blink for a moment, before keeping my facade with my token charismatic smile. “Oh, I’m not sure, but look at her results today. Surely her talent’s gonna be enough for her to keep racing in Formula 1.”

It seems that we don’t have much time to continue. “Thank you for your time, Leon.” He says, moving on to whoever else is in the pen. I think for a moment.

Something doesn’t add up. I know at this point of Zia taking up her Gio persona, but I’m not aware that the FIA itself is actually investigating her while she’s racing right now.

Does this mean Horizon and I are actually hiding something from the sport itself?

I walk away with this in mind. Zia might have lied on her papers when she signed her contract.

Chapter 9

0.068 seconds. This is how close Zia is to me.

I look up to the balcony where they will hold the celebrations. Zia's going to have her first taste of Formula One champagne and spectators are dying to see her on the podium. The music blares to the crowd below, and everyone screams as their favorite drivers are about to show up in a minute.

I had to entertain any selfies some fans ask me for when they spot me in the crowd, but once the announcer started to speak, everyone's eyes were glued to that balcony. Zia Francisco's name was called, and everyone gave a deafening cheer as the rookie driver walked out, meekly waving to the crowd. For me, it wasn't that she's seemingly shy about her first podium, it's that for the first time in six years, I can see her gummy smile in its true form.

I remember the first time we won a karting podium together. I landed the winner while Zia was in third place, and both of us watched the ride home as our father brought us to her place to be dropped off. I then remember that this memory was a year before I was sought to compete in F4, too.

"Do you think gold medalists bite their medal because it's made of chocolate?" I ask her.

"What? That's nonsense. Why would medals be made out of chocolate?" She'd reply back.

"Is that not the reason why they bite through it?"

"They bite through it *because* they wanna see how gold is soft."

I could never keep up how serious Zee is sometimes.

Then she looks at me with a smile. "But maybe you can drink Pepsi out of this cup."

And then I can't keep up with Zee's sudden humor. My gold cup and her bronze was large enough to hold like three liters or something, anyway.

"I wish we can get more of these together so we can see how we play with trophies." She stated.

My mind snaps back to the present. Zia's holding her bottle of champagne as *Toreador* starts blaring on the speakers. John Campbell and Theo Cromwell notice her from the side and they invite her to the celebration by showering her with the champagne they just shook open. I can see that Zia laughs and she shakes hers open, accepting the two and retaliating on their actions.

For the first time, I feel like Zia's really slipping from my fingers.

Celebrations are over, and we're allowed to go back to hospitality to debrief as well as to go back to our hotel rooms. I shower up and change back to a black shirt and stretchy pants, and I can feel comfort washing over me. I hear a door click from below my room, and I walk out just to see who it was. It's a champagne-drenched girl.

"How's celebrations?" I ask her, hiding behind a smile.

"Mmm. It's actually more fun than I thought." She puts down her trophy. Harry might pick it up and encase it so it could be safely brought to her house.

We stared just a little too long, and I fiddled with my hands just to break the tension.

"Do you wanna have dinner in a bit? Sun's coming down. I'm craving their burger and fries here."

Zee raised her eyebrow. "Burger? Aren't we supposed to stay healthy?"

"It's not like we'll be chewed out for gaining a little weight after the race." I laughed.

She goes to think about it by looking to the floor, before shrugging. “I don’t see why not.”

My heart skips a beat. Her agreeing... This means I have the chance to really talk and catch up with her.

The rest of the day goes by, just her saying yes made my mind go through debriefing and travelling plans to Saudi for Race 2 like I put the world on fast forward. God, what are we going to do? What am I going to say to Zia without having to get the short end of the stick when I bring up whatever the reporter asked me during the interview segment?

We were finally allowed to leave, but just before I dash out of there like it’s a race start, Nico approached me with his tablet in his arms. “You have a moment, Leon?” He asks.

“Sure.” So I plop back down on my seat. It was at that moment where Nico looked stressed about something. “Was it about today?”

“No, not exactly.” He paused for a few seconds, “Well, Maybe yes, *si*.”

“Then what is it?”

“You and Zia. With your cars in the first race, I think you both could really drive our cars to a championship.”

I’m expecting him to add something based on the way he was dragging on the last sentence. “...But?”

“But if the FIA makes a decision on Zia, I think we’re going to be in big trouble.”

There it was again. “What are you all holding back on me? What’s up with Zia? She drove perfectly today despite being a rookie!”

“That’s the problem, she *drove perfectly*,” He admitted. “But we told her not to push too hard. Her points will be invalidated if the FIA deems her ineligible to race, and... I’m sure that might be a setback on many of us here.

My jaw dropped. It was still vague enough for me to see why this makes sense, but I’m starting to form a theory.

Zia has to tell me to confirm.

“I think...” I mutter. “I think she did fine. I-I think she should celebrate what she did today. I’ll see you soon, Nico.”

And so I stood up without hearing anything additional from the man, before I got out of the hospitality room.

“I heard.” A voice says from behind me.

“Jesus!!” I jump, turning to see... Oh, Zia. my stomach dropped, because she looked tired and defeated by the look in her eyes. “Oh... I was... About to ask you why the FIA is breathing down your neck.”

Zia looked away, lost in thought. “I trust you...”

“I trust you too, Zia. I want to know.”

She uncrosses her arms, now fidgeting them together. “They told me I had a chance at F1 Academy after you shot off to the Feeder Series. Then I remembered that no female driver went as far as Formula 3 after spending most of their career in F1 Academy. I wanted to tell them to put me straight away in Formula 4 instead, but they laughed. Because what can a girl like me do?”

“But I thought that I didn’t need to be a girl all the time. So... I started racing as a guy. I named myself Gio. When I started to grow up... I did my chest bindings. I stopped talking too much. I stopped having friends.”

Her grip on her arm tightened and I started to worry if it’s going to turn purple. “I just thought that entire time... That as long as I get into F1 with you, I’ll act as a boy. Then shock the world as a girl.”

“Zee...” I mutter out, walking carefully through a landmine that is my best friend. “How come the FIA is doing something against you if you’re able to race?”

Zia looked at me, her eyes shaking in panic. “They gave me a temporary license to race. I signed my contract after all.”

Chapter 10

My jaw dropped the moment she laid it out on me. A temporary license? Normally the FIA should have slapped a notice on the team beforehand. “What do you mean by that?” I ask, putting my shoulders on her.

Zia yanked hands away as if she just felt scalding metal on her shoulders. “DON’T TOUCH ME!” She screamed, sending my heart into pieces before she cleared her throat. “S-Sorry...” She muttered, holding onto her shoulders with her own hands.

“Zia...” I mutter out. I wanted to say *what did they do to you*, but...

“It means... That I’ll only race with you until the FIA decides to review my actions for covering up myself as some dude then ban me from racing altogether or something. Leon... I broke the rules just so I could keep up with you.”

I stared into her black eyes which were almost glossy, and I just realized something.

With Zia winning a podium in her first race, the FIA’s going to speed up their process. She wasn’t driving because she’s angry at something or someone. *She’s driving to survive.*

And she’s trying to be better than me right away because she wants to stay by my side.

And now I’m running the risk of losing my friend beside me.

“Zee...” I mutter.

“Yeah... Tell me I don’t belong here.” She said, looking down this time. “Tell me that you agree with Julian that I’m a fraud. Leon... I won Third Place because I want to do my best... But the principal hated me for it. I-”

“Zia.” I said, my voice firm this time. “Please, don’t beat yourself. You deserved to beat me. You drove a perfect race today.”

“No I didn’t. I’m P3.”

“Dude, everyone here would love a P3. You definitely proved Julian wrong because you beat him in positions.”

I pause, gently holding her shoulders again. This time, Zia’s shoulders stiffened for a moment, but she learned to relax them after a while. Something was happening and I don’t know what.

“I’m... You know I’m not good at this, Zee, but if anything, I’m glad that I’m able to race with you.” I admitted, a smile forming with the thought. “Please don’t be scared or hate yourself, because... It breaks me just to see you suffer like this.”

Zee still avoids my eye contact, but I can see that she stopped looking as though she’s about to punch me square in the face. “Leon... What’s gonna happen if they ban me?” She asks, with the tone I definitely remember when we were kids.

I think about it. It’s hard to convince the FIA of anything. The moment they put the final nail on her coffin, the only time I can see her is in the off season. “... If they ban you, I think... I think I’ll round up the drivers who support you and rally.”

She managed a laugh, which made me smile. “What? I think that’s a good idea!” I say softly.

“You’re a bad liar, Leon. You’re such a bad liar.”

I laugh. “No I’m not, I’m cheering you up! See?”

She sighs, gently putting my hands down her shoulders as if to signify that this is enough touching for today. “... Thanks. But... I’ll think about it.” She mutters.

“Over burgers?” I ask, remembering the promised “date”.

“Oh, Sorry... But no.” Zia flatly mentions. “Juan’s asking me to talk to him soon about Saudi, and I think I should also study it anyway. It’s a very hard track.”

Oh. I stopped smiling for a moment, feeling bummed out that it won’t push through today. “I see. I think... I should study, too.” I think Nico would be a gentle mentor about it anyway, and I plan to win a race this season. “Are you gonna be fine on your own?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine on my own.” She answers, dragging out the last word as though it’s a question.

“Okay. Good night, Zia.”

Zia repeats what I just said minus her name, and I walk through the now-empty circuit until my team sees me and escorts me to the service car. (I wanted to just ride a bike to the hotel, I guess they don’t want to risk losing an F1 star like a child in a shopping mall). Everything else was nothing much to talk about. Shower, brush my teeth, dry my blonde hair using the hotel dryer.

I plop down the bed, which was so soft I almost yelped thinking I’m about to just fall through the bed itself. I’m fine, however, so I just allowed myself to sink in and sigh in relief of my muscles finally resting for the rest of the day until I’m to pack and leave for Jeddah. Except, I find myself opening my phone to check the updates, and it turns out that the internet catches on faster than I did throughout this day.

@f1 ZIA FRANCISCO TAKES A SHOCKING FIRST PODIUM IN MELBOURNE!

@ianriley Congrats, queen!!! This is so amazing!

@f1withlarryofficial Amazing job and all, but is this even acceptable knowing she probably faked her documents?

@its_bobby Definitely just a PR move from Horizon. How the hell can a woman do all this?

I can feel my blood starting to boil scrolling further down the comments, which was never something I felt whenever I checked my social media back when I was racing with Marco. Marlon already warned me about replying to these types of comments, not to mention chewed me out when I didn't go through promotion plans, so I just tossed the damn thing to the pillow next to me.

The next few races with her is just a ticking time bomb, for sure.

Chapter 11

If Formula One wasn't killing me in Jeddah, The heat pretty sure would. It's just probably a good thing that the races come around late afternoon and nighttime, so at least we don't just die of some heat stroke in the middle of the race given how hot the car can be for me especially after putting enough laps in. Today was the usual; Marlon briefed me through today's promotions for Horizon, did a track walk with Nico over my ear, and listened to the team briefing for this week's strategies. But it was the Driver's Conference when something happened.

Zia's there early again, and Jack Sallow seemed to save a seat beside him where I could comfortably sit. "Oh, morning, mate!" Jack greeted me, I comfortably sat beside him then turned to Zia. "Are you doing alright?" I ask her.

Zia side-eyed me, visibly tensing up. Seems she hasn't warmed up to Jack, yet. "Yeah, the track's quite hot today."

"Yeah. Damn, seems like the world is getting hotter this year, huh?" Jack replied to her. "But anyway, you did an amazing job in the last race, Zia. Here's to seeing you take first place."

"She got the podium *even though* she's not supposed to, you idiots."

I looked up to see that it was Julian, the eldest in this track. He crossed his arms and looked like he was ready to take out Zia like she's trash.

"Good morning to you, too, mate." I tell him, Jack looking as though he's about to say the same thing. "What did you take for breakfast?"

"I'm not here to talk about food," His voice sounds dark and threatening, his eyes narrowing to the girl. "You're only driving temporarily and you go on to get a podium? I'm telling you, when the FIA bans you for faking your documents, I can't wait to see you leave the

grid and get replaced by a *real* racer. People like you don't deserve to be here! You're just PR stunts that have no real substance!"

"No real substance?" The current champion, John Campbell, finally speaks up once his teammate starts shifting uncomfortably at this confrontation. "Mate, she got a podium on her *first* race. I haven't seen anyone do that in years."

If that wasn't enough, last race's second placer, Theo Cromwell stood up and approached the older man. "And... And she beat Leon fair and square in such a small margin. Didn't you see?"

My heart felt a little lighter when a few more drivers nod in agreement while staring at the only girl in the grid, and I can also feel the impact of her podium win in this room. I have to speak up before the pressure crumbles down on me. "Zia also divebombed in the first lap, too... It takes a lot of courage to do that even if you see a gap. Imagine P11 up a few more places after the first corner!"

Mentioning that, I can see Julian turning red in either embarrassment or anger, definitely recalling the moment when Zia's white and gold car zip through his side.

Jack laughed, kicking his feet back to rest on the one in front of him (Which was reserved for Pedro Oliveira) as though he's about to relax. "See, mate? This is what happens when she shows talent in this place and manages to overtake your dusty bones on the track."

He's definitely seething after Jack's comment. "All of you aren't trying enough!" He lashed out, his hands grabbing Zia's shoulders. But before he spoke, Zia violently pushed him away, with eyes looking like they're about to burst into flames. "Don't touch me!" She calls out, her knuckles turning white. Oh, she's about to punch him if he made the wrong move.

I really need the stewards to come by now, but they wouldn't arrive in another five minutes. "Julian, Please..." I mutter, hoping my message is received that we should stop fighting.

The man scoffs, heading back to his seat. "Few more Races, Francisco. Good luck finding yourself once the FIA kicks you out. I heard NASCAR is a more manageable sport."

I think Zia's gonna find NASCAR boring... Is all I could think.

I looked back at Zia, who was looking down, her eyes trained on her knees. She's rocking her leg doing this, which makes me worry, so I instinctively reached out to hold her hand. "Zee." I whisper. It hasn't stopped, but Zia looked at me for a moment before shaking her head. "They hate me."

"No they don't", I whisper. "I mean, look, more of them start seeing you as one of them. Don't worry, Zia."

"I'm gonna hate this conference..."

"Just hold on to me if you're feeling low, Zia."

She stares at me again, her expression softening but her conflicted look still plastered on her face. She looks back down, her hand relaxing and intertwining on mine, making my chest tight, or maybe that was me forgetting how to breathe.

"Smooth operator, Leon," I hear Jack remark.

"Shut up, Jack," I gently replied.

The heat in the room seemed to simmer down the moment the stewards came in to begin the conference. Again, it's the usual orientation to the track and what to look out for this week, and since Zia's done something, the Stewards also clarified that the FIA are looking into her case and will make a verdict by the time Miami ends. I gulped at the thought, and I could feel Zia

tightening her hand on mine while the rest of the grid narrows their eyes on her. I didn't bother looking across where Julian was sitting, I'd hate to feel angered by his smug look on his face. But thank God that take two of last week's conference didn't happen, because we were dismissed without much debate aside from the track

Jack stretches his long legs before standing up. "So, see you on track soon?" He asks the two of us. "Seems like Jeddah's not gonna be an easy track for the Rookie."

"I think I'll handle myself just fine." She muttered. I can see Jack frowning a little. I can't tell what it is, though.

"Just a piece of advice, mate. It's alright not to push flat out."

Zia looks as though she's offended by that advice as she stands up. It feels jarring to see Zia and Jack's heights side by side now that I think of it. Zia's 5'2 and Jack's 6'2, so Zia looks really tiny next to him. Jack looks amused looking down on her, but he just waves goodbye and heads out the conference room.

Zia turned to me with a frown the moment he left. "What does he mean I shouldn't push flat out? Does he want me to lose?"

Woah, I stand up, still quite taller than her, before she gets any ideas of beating Jack based on her tone. "I-I-I think he means you shouldn't push too far if the track's too hard for you." I clarified. "I think that's what he means. And I think I know he means you the best as a rookie."

Zia crossed her arms. "I heard about him. He has a huge ego off the track. He wants to win for himself to gloat over-"

"Yeah, I know, Zee!" I say, panic starting to rise up my throat. "But he actually has been nice to you, and well- he cares for every rookie."

We head out the conference room before Marlon and her manager decide to drag us out to the garage. “I was scared of Jack when I was a rookie, too. But he’s nice. He actually likes to hang out with those he trusts or likes.

“I... trust your word. But I still don’t think I’ll like him.”

I manage a smile. “You’ll come around to him eventually.”

And so begins our second race of the year.

Chapter 12

I've raced here a couple times now since Formula 2, but I still couldn't shake the feeling of panic whenever the wall grows on me like a looming monster. I'm glad my lap time didn't get deleted when my rear wheel was inches away from kissing the wall on the way to my start line, and for the second time, I managed to land in the top three for this race. Zia, on the other hand, really struggled to keep up with the track but managed to at least get into the third round of qualifying, finishing the session with a good P10 under her belt.

Today is Race Day, though, and I hope I could translate my position into a podium, this time. Zia, however, is doing that mumbling again when I spot her in the garage.

"Is there something on your mind again?" I ask her, sitting down to meet her level.

Zia looks at me, her eyes looking as though they're just dots. "Oh? Uh— yeah. I'm a-okay, Leon."

A quiet pause follows. I can't tell if it's Zia being hard on herself again, or Jeddah's intense turning is starting to put a toll on her. But I already told her everything she needs to know...

I lean back, laughing at a thought that suddenly came to mind. "What's funny about that?" She asks, her voice starting to feel guarded.

"Oh, no. well— do you remember when we were kids?" I said, "Your favorite ball got stuck on our garden tree."

I could tell that one sentence made Zia's teeth appear.

"A-and then," I try not to break down laughing just to deliver the entire thing. "And then I told you I'll get it for you, and remember what I did?"

“You were screaming by the time you’re up that branch,” Zia says between her giggles.

“Dad had to bring up a ladder just so I could come down, I didn’t realize I went so high up.”

We laughed, it was actually something nice I remembered when we were children. I look at her, and I really wonder where the time went and wish we get more moments like these. But... looking at her, should I take it a bit further?

I reach out my hand to her cheek. Zia’s breath hitched before she would realize that it’s me, and I told her what I knew she needed to hear from the moment she became my teammate. “We’re going to be okay, Zia.”

Zia was silent for a moment, her mouth agape as if she wanted to say something, before she smiled slightly and leaned into my touch, her hand gently holding onto my wrist. “Okay, Leon. I trust your word.”

It didn’t take long for us to head out the garage in my black-and-gold and her red-yellow-and-blue helmets, and everyone’s ready to place us in our cockpits. The crowd’s already cheering and chatting away, and I know in a few moments that the cameras are gonna start rolling and the race will be broadcast around the world. “*Radio Check?*” I can hear Nico on my radio.

“Loud and clear, boss.” I could get used to this now.

Since Jeddah is a fast track and any second could put me from the front to the back, I asked Nico to give me soft tires to be replaced by mediums for the next two pit stops. He’s fine with the idea. “*Remember our strat, boy. I believe you can make it to the podium this time.*”

“Yeah, thanks, Nico.” I told him, “Is it fine if you feed me information every other lap? I think I’d like to beat Jack here.”

Jack is on pole this time, and knowing him since I debuted, I learned not to underestimate him unless I want my car on the wall. *“Understood.”*

The clock in front of all of us tells us it’s time for us to go and start soon, so I see everyone pulling the blankets of our tires and Jack moving forward. I could feel my heart starting to pound every second that we’re approaching the starting grid again, and I was hoping my hands wouldn’t sweat into my gloves as soon as I parked.

There’s a reason why I’m nervous of Jack when the lights go off.

I played it safe this time, I can’t risk overtaking Jack in the first lap. My focus was to defend Theo from taking my place. I check my mirrors for him, and he was ready to overtake me, but I managed to flick my car to his side, and when he’s going for the dummy move where he flicks his car to the side opposite me, I built enough speed to flick it in time so he couldn’t overtake me. It was a success.

“DRS enabled, Leon. The gap to Sallow is .7 seconds.” Nico declared, which translates to “Use it wisely.”

I hit the DRS on the next straight and went straight to Jack.

It was a mistake, Jack saw through me.

He flicked his car my way at the last moment, and when I wanted to go for the gap, Jack turned early, making it impossible for me to pass him.

He seems egotistical and I heard he’s had many past relationships in his time in Formula 1, but when it comes to the track... It’s almost like he studies everyone’s driving styles and uses that knowledge against us.

“I see your onboard, Leon,” Nico commented the moment Jack kept a sizable gap, *“Let’s get them on the next straight.”*

“I’m on it!” I replied, almost covering my helmet-covered mouth for accidentally speaking too loudly. I think my mic would clip and if the world heard my radio, they would see through my frustration.

A few more laps come by with me struggling to overtake Jack, and I can already feel my tires starting to fall apart. I have to think of a way to keep up with Jack with fresh tires. “Nico, how long until the pit window?” I ask.

“Your pit window’s going to open in 5 laps,” Nico replied.

“Do you think we can hold out until Jack pits?”

I was thinking that I would be able to catch Jack with fresher tires than his. Though, that might mean my tires give out and I become a hazard on the track, because the yellow on his tires meant that he’s wearing mediums and can hold out longer than I do.

“Negative, Leon. We’re going to pit earlier than him.”

Of course. Jack already outplayed me.

So by the last lap of my pit window, I took on new Mediums, and landed myself into P6. I don’t worry though, I’m sure the ones in front of me are going to pit.

Soon enough, I see Jack’s Blitzflamme car in front of me and we’re back to racing. Jack’s about to pit soon, so I bide my time.

I see Jack’s car swerving to the pit lane, giving me nothing else in sight. I’m in first place. I have to go all out. This is it.

“Yellow flags, Leon. Yellow flags. Slow down, please.”

Many things would have triggered that yellow flag. Either something or someone got into the track somehow and made it dangerous for us to race, or someone crashed and is stalling or

left their car parts on the track. So I slow down. Everyone else should also be slowing down behind me, and Jack must have been stuck in a non-podium position.

But as I pass through the track, I see the reason why the session was yellow-flagged.

There's a white and gold car on the wall.

Zia Francisco crashed the car.

Chapter 13

I wish there was an easier way for me to avoid the media when I went back to the garage. I can hear the sound of the cars passing by while the safety car leads them until my car's extracted from the wall. I hate that Jack's right about me not pushing too hard on Jeddah.

But as I get into the paddock, I can hear the sound of so many cameras clicking and I can see those lenses pointing at me. Zia Francisco, the first Filipino Female F1 driver who had a podium on her debut, crashed into the barriers at Jeddah. Seems like I'm not made of miracles, after all.

"Zia!" One of the reporters begged from the pen. Kate, my manager would have been mad at me if I ignored their requests for a few questions, so might as well hit my quota and leave. I walk up to them, taking my helmet off. What I really hate about this is that this was an opportunity for the broadcast to hear my voice. And there's no Leon to help me through this because he's out there fighting against Jack.

"What happened out there? How did you get a DNF?" They ask. I just state *some* of the facts.

"I think I got a little too ambitious to overtake Julian, and I tried to go for the gap, but I kissed the wall and lost control until I hit the wall."

It's true, I want to wipe Julian's smile off his face so I went to overtake him again. But the problem is that my legs and arms start cramping. Jeddah's smaller than I remembered in F2, too, and the turning is really hurting my body. By the time I crashed, it took me a while to catch my breath.

“What do you feel?” That was the real question. I hate it. I hate that I crashed. I hate that the FIA’s going to breathe down my neck while they’re still looking through my medical tests and data throughout my feeder series. But I can’t afford to say that.

“I think...” I really think about it. “I think it’s just a rookie mistake. I didn’t think through my plans for today and I think I’m able to learn something for the next race.”

I didn’t entertain more questions about me, and I walked back to my garage. Juan turned to me with a frown. “That was a nasty crash, Zia.” He told me. I sigh, ruffling my wet hair. “I tried following your plan, Juan. I’m so sorry for crashing the car.”

“We can fix the car, Francisco.” Juan told me. “But we can’t fix you.”

The very sentence I always heard back in F2.

“Go take a rest.”

I head to the back of the interior garage. I tell the nearby mechanic not to let anyone in while I take an ice bath. I let the cold sink into my body and I sigh, looking up at the ceiling.

I grew to hate the idea of seeing “Gio Francisco” in the mirror everyday. I worked so hard to be here, even my trainers in the past made me want to just quit. I hated the way they touch my shoulders as if I’m the most important person in the room. But once I signed the contract all those months ago, I looked square into my principal’s eyes.

“Zia... Francisco?” He asked, looking at me. “Are you sure you didn’t misspell your name, sir?”

“Yeah. I think it’s time I told everyone that I’m not a guy. I’m *Zia*. Gio’s a pseudonym of mine ever since I got into Formula 3.”

I can’t look directly into him now, because I can tell that he was getting angry. “Did you fake your documents, *Gio*?” He asked, his voice not a yell but I can feel the strain.

“I...” I start fidgeting. “Look, I hate the idea of getting into F1 Academy. I’m sure I’d be 35 by the time I get here. So... I-I begged Mr. Harrison to let me race as a guy.”

“And?”

I gulped. “I... I begged my doctor to put me as a male named *Gio Francisco*.”

He sighs. “... You are aware that the FIA doesn’t tolerate faked documents.”

My heart sank, and my feet got cold. “Yeah.”

“Zia. I’ll report your situation to the FIA. I’ll let you know what happens next.”

I thought I was done before the year even started. I thought I’m going to pack up and leave for the Philippines, hearing everyone say how much of a failure and criminal I am. But the FIA told me that they saw my skill but the disguise thing was still some problem they needed to solve. So they gave me a provisional license. Something that lets me prove I can race before they decide to kick me out.

And judging by today, I think they know I’m still a failure.

Leon won today’s race. Probably because he’s lucky that Jack had a disadvantage because of the Safety Car. I zip up my jacket to meet the rest of the team where they’d meet them once he parked the car. Last week, I was on the other end of that fence where they screamed my name. I was the one in the cooldown room where Theo and John came up and talked to me about my first podium and commented on how beautifully I raced. I was fine just holding the champagne on the podium, but Theo sprayed it first on me and John joined in. I retaliated by joining in, too.

But today, it’s Leon who’s gonna be at the receiving end of this. I looked at him joyfully pumping his fist to the crowd, with them chanting his name and the mechanics welcoming them into their arms. While I’m just beside them, hands in my pockets. We all went to the podium celebrations, where Jack threw his arm around his shoulders, saying something to him that I can’t

really hear from down there before surprising him with a spray. I don't hold any grudge on Leon. I tried to go into my Rookie year distancing him, but every time... Every single time, he knew how to get through my skin.

When he decided to ask about our childhood, it made me feel easier to open up. When I was on the verge of panicking when Julian picked on me, Leon held my hand, and suddenly my chest felt warm. And just before the race... when he held my cheek and I looked at him...

Let's just say I imagined living a life without Formula 1 and us just living out our normal lives.

Because as much as he tried to make it easier for me, he doesn't deserve this. I don't deserve this. That promise of us working our asses off to be champions? I feel like I'd be tearing him apart than us getting all the more closer.

And I think that's fine. It's going to hurt, but if the FIA bans me... I think he's better off achieving that dream on his own.

I listened to the debriefing after the celebrations. I already forgot most of whatever they were talking about, but all I know is that we're moving to Japan. No matter, I can't push too hard but I can't fall behind. All I need is to help Leo-

"Are you alright?" I hear a voice ask.

I look behind the hospitality unit, and I spot that blonde hair and blue eyes. Of course it's Leon. "Yeah, I guess. Congrats on the win, Leon." I told him.

"You're... Not smiling."

"It's the thought that counts."

I see him frown and cross his arms. "Zia, you were working too hard. Look at your eyes."

Oh, here we go again. Making me feel okay around him and then he brings up this? “Leon, you won.” I countered. “You should be celebrating!”

“You looked so done when I saw you in that fence!” He countered. “What’s wrong? I promise I won’t tell!”

I pause. Leon’s been nice to me even when I hid so many things from him all these years, and yet... I can’t afford to make him angry. Not when he’s the first boy who approached me when I first moved in. “... Leon.”

“Zee.”

“I...” I should tell him. Push him away once and for all so that he keeps racing like that without him protecting me all the time. Tell him to live whatever life he wants to live. Because I’m ready to give up. I’m ready to kick the can. I just need the FIA to give me the signal. Then everyone can forget the girl who wanted to live out her dream.

But... who else can I turn to after this?

I sigh, holding onto my wrist a little too tight. I can’t. I really can’t. “I’ll just... go take a rest now.” I mutter.

I didn’t care what Leon told me. I just walked my way out of the paddock. As I make my way through, I see Jack leaning alone on the wall of his hospitality unit. “Hey, Zia. A bit unlucky you DNF’ed this weekend.”

“You wanted me to lose.” I told him. I know that Leon wanted to tell me Jack’s a nice guy, but I can’t afford any more distractions right now. “I’m not in the mood to talk about it.”

Jack stood in my way, I couldn’t tell the expression on his face, because our shoulders bumped as I continued walking.

I’m sorry, Leon. I tried.

Chapter 14

Japan and China aren't really something I'd boast about. I did score at least one point in Japan and seven in China, while Leon's battling with Jack to take first place in the championship points at the moment. If this works well for Leon in Miami, he'd be able to snatch the championship leader title.

Miami can be really hot. It doesn't help that the cockpit is just as hot, I'm at risk of getting a heat stroke right now. Thank god for the drink they installed within my cockpit, though.

Right now, I'm in P2. Gotta give it my all in this race, at least I can go out from this grid with some sort of flourish. Right in front of me is Jack. Behind me is Leon. I've just pitted for mediums, but I can worry once Jack pits for softs then decides to catch me from behind.

Which is what he did. I'm in provisional lead, because by the time Jack sets out to hunt me down, I might have a huge fight in my hands.

"Sallow pitted for Mediums, Francisco." Confirmed Juan. *"Try to keep him behind with Leon."*

That's the problem. Leon. Ever since I stopped bothering to talk to him, I started feeling nervous when he's racing behind me. It's not common for him because he's the faster car, but at any moment I felt as though he's going to take me out of the race. I can imagine him looking "innocent" and claiming it wasn't his fault. I know Leon hasn't treated me that way since we were children, but I can't shake off that fear now that I'm a couple races in.

But I have to see this through. If anything, I should at least show Leon that I tried keeping the promise before I'm banned from racing. Leon seemed to be hungry for the win, however.

I managed to block him from overtaking me. There weren't any team orders about letting Leon pass, but I might as well stay in front. I have enough to last the rest of the race, anyway.

Jack, however, seemed to be a bigger challenge to me. I see him replace Leon after a few laps, and I constantly try to check my mirrors for him.

“Jack has DRS on you, Zia. Keep him behind.”

Shit.

He's getting larger on my right mirror, and I blocked him.

Huge mistake. Turns out he can do a dummy shimmy once the turn comes around, and now I have to chase after him.

7 laps to go. I tried using his tactic against him, but he seemed like he knew I was going to do it.

6 laps. I use the DRS to give myself a boost, to no avail. Jack's smarter than I thought he'd be when I first met him in the Driver's Conference.

4 laps. I decided to bide my time. If I want to win, I have to see through his mistakes. His lapses in his driving.

3 laps. *“0.6 seconds, Zia. Your gap to Jack Sallow.”* But I can see it. Jack's starting to brake earlier and turn weaker. He's cramping. I'm cramping, but I can make the gamble.

2 laps. I made the offense. Jack suddenly goes faster than me when I speed up, but I know he can't keep it for long. By the time the last lap arrives, he's going to struggle. I'm only speeding up his fatigue.

“Last lap, Zia. Give it your all.” Declares my engineer. Oh, I'll give it my all, alright.

I didn't DRS as soon as we entered the first straight. Too soon, Jack can predict my movements. I bide my time. I didn't DRS on the second straight, either. My legs might cramp up by the time I turn and I'd end up lower than I wish.

The third straight. Seconds of pure speed. Here's my chance. I open the DRS, and Jack blocks my path by the time we reach the corner. His mistake. I can tell he's too tired to react or catch up because I turned early and he couldn't catch up with me until I touched the chequered flag first.

"YES, ZIA! THAT'S P1!" I jumped when Juan greeted me, and judging by his background noise, our team mechanics were screaming in delight. I panted for a while, because I needed a moment to think. I beat Jack Sallow. I won a race. For the first time, a woman had formally won a Formula 1 race. My heart can do a million backflips right now, and I couldn't control my squealing. I think I'd be embarrassed to hear that when the broadcast is over and I watch the replay, though. "We got it, guys!" I cheer. "Let's do it!"

I look beside me, and I notice Jack's car. He was looking at me with his visor up. I can't tell if he looks pissed or impressed behind that helmet, but he gave me a thumbs up. Approval.

By the time I get to park in the number 1 spot, I sigh for a moment, letting my limbs rest for a moment. I can hear the deafening cheers of the crowd as well as my mechanics yet again. I take off everything before I'm able to get up the car, and the louder cheers of the people made my heart race if it wasn't already. This... who knew I was on the receiving end of this when I only dreamt of it back when I was a child?

"You know," I hear a voice loud enough for me to isolate. It was Jack. I turn around to see him parked in second place, while Leon ended up in third, still taking his time. "You're a very scary rookie. I didn't realize you planned to tire me out before you went in."

I felt my shoulders stiffen up. I felt bad for overtaking him, but well... I managed to do it.
“... You were getting slower.”

“You definitely made me push too hard.” he jokes, before turning to Leon who was already out of the car. “Oh, speak of the devil, the golden boy’s here, too!”

Leon took off his helmet and balaclava, his eyes shining and his smile reaching his cheeks. “You made it, Zee! You won!”

I won. I looked at him for a moment. I won, sure, but... I think this might be goodbye judging from how I won it. I didn’t care what happened next. My legs took me to where I needed to be. I threw myself into Leon’s arms. *Mi ultimo adios*. “Woah, hey, Zee!” I hear him through his chest.

“I did it, Leon.” I mutter.

The rest of the celebrations went as planned. Jack was poking fun at how I overtook him on the last stretch of the race, and Leon told me he was worried about me when Nico told him Jack overtook me. Then, champagne. Leon was so excited he got to spray real champagne on me now rather than sprite. Jack raised his sprayed bottle as if to give a toast to new beginnings.

But right after the celebrations, Harry called my name. “Zia?” he asks.

I turn to him, the blood draining from my face.

“The FIA wants to have a word with you and me. Come.”

Chapter 15

I could see the seconds go by on the clock that's in the wall of the steward's office, and I have been waiting silently with Harry in the room that's supposed to look like some corporate meeting room where I could get laid off any second now. "Why are they stalling again?" I asked my principal.

"They're just trying to make sure the decision in the paper is final," Replied Harry. Of course. Just so they make sure kicking me out was a mistake.

But I reflected on the six years I drove as "Gio." I've been through so much. I raced until my arms and legs gave out, I watched as the other kids celebrated while I'm on my own. I ate my own slice of pizza in my hotel. I cut my own hair every time I think it's getting too long. I felt... Alone, but maybe the journey was worth it. I think I'll learn how to heal when they let me go.

But... I loved how Leon treated me. Jack's nice. And I always wanted to hug the crowd when they cheered for me. Driving so fast gives me the thrill, too.

"Hey," I told Harry. "You could have just turned me down when I said I'm a girl when I signed the contract."

"I could. I could have found another promising kid." He replied.

"You could have thrown the contract away and act like nothing happened."

"I could."

"Then why didn't you?" I say, fully turning to meet him in the eye. He was giving me this smile that's supposed to make me feel better.

“Because I see you and I see a once-in-a-lifetime talent, Kid.” He reassured. “You make for a high-maintenance driver,” I chuckled and looked down, “But I won’t turn down someone who can write their own story in a place like this.”

I sigh, my hands fidgeting together. “But... what happens if they ban me?” I ask.

Harry’s smile faded. “We’re just going to find another replacement for you.”

A long pause ensues. Of course, they will.

“But there’s people who saw change in you. I’m sure they’ll find a way to continue your work.”

Before I react to that, someone walks into the office. It’s a woman with blonde hair, her face showing age already as she was holding papers. “Good afternoon, Ms. Francisco.” I nod in acknowledgement. “Perhaps you know who I represent?”

“The FIA.” I answer immediately. The full name is Federation Internationale de l’Automobile, but I can’t be bothered to say the full name to save myself the embarrassment.

“So you know why you’re here.”

“I believe so.”

She sits down, looking at the papers, then to me. A long, thick silence. My heart’s bracing for impact.

“We reviewed all of your documents submitted to us and your career records starting from Formula 4.” I just nod, I don’t really know what to say. “And we have finally come to a conclusion. Let me read the ruling.”

“The FIA has concluded their investigation on Driver Number 27, Zia Rico-Francisco. The FIA has discrepancies of her true identity in these documents, claiming to be a male individual named ‘Gio Francisco.’”

I sighed. They know. I'm guilty of it, and they know.

“However, other than the aforementioned discrepancies, the organization has found no other discrepancies in her medical tests and requirements for driving. Additionally, the FIA has recognized that Zia Francisco has displayed exemplary skill in her performance, showcasing no danger to herself and to fellow drivers. The FIA has hereby cleared Driver Number 27 of all charges.”

It took me seconds to sink in what the lady had told me. I look up to her, my jaw dropping, and I realize she had been waiting for me to react.

“In summary, you're allowed to drive permanently.” She said, I can't tell if she's pleased because she kept a straight face before she placed something on my side of the table. “We recognize your efforts, Zia.” She said in a tone that I think she wasn't supposed to say, before turning to her papers again. “So with this in mind, the FIA will be reviewing the rulebook. The organization is now working for a way for aspiring drivers, no matter who they are, to be able to drive in motorsports with equal chances and opportunities.”

“Which means...?” was all I could mutter out.

“Which means it's not soon, but we're gonna start seeing change, Zia.” Harry replies with a smile. “Congratulations.”

I finally look down on my desk. It was a super license. “You may leave, Ms. Francisco. I will have a few more words to your team principal.” Says the lady.

I nod, my hands shakily taking the papers that were handed to me and the license, and head out the office.

But I stay at the door. I looked at the Super License.

SUPER LICENCE CERTIFICATE

Surname: Francisco

First Name: Zia

Six years.

Six years of hiding myself.

Six years of having to bear with the hate of the world. Trying to look into the mirror without loathing that man in front of me.

And they let me race without having to worry about the world anymore.

“Zia, you idiot...” I mutter, my chest pounding and my throat hurting, letting my tears flow uncontrollably.

I don’t remember the walk back, aside from the fact that there are some fans who are still filing out of the circuit. But I found my way to the hospitality room. I don’t know if Harry intended for it to be a secret, but it was Kate who reached out to me first. “I found out about your verdict,” Kate said, her smile proud and glad. “Welcome back to the team.”

My engineer spotted me while he was holding his cup. “Oh, it’s Zia!” He approached me. “Congratulations, mate. You deserve to be here.”

“Have you all been conversing with the FIA before me?” I ask.

“Harry told us about you.”

Of course he did. But right now, I don’t feel like entertaining my entire team right now. “Where’s Leon?” I ask.

“Oh, he’s in his room, right now.”

I didn’t ask anything else. I dragged my feet up until I saw him just sitting in his room. But I think he heard me coming, because he looked my way and stood up, awe in his face.

For the first time, I couldn’t help but smile. No more hiding it. “Leon...”

His breath hitched. “Zee...”

“I can drive with you forever now.”

His smile was brighter than the sun, and he pulls me into a tight hug. “Oh, Zia.”

“Guh, that’s too tight!”

“Sorry!” He didn’t pull out, though. “But I’m so glad... We can both race together now.”

“And win a championship together.”

“Yeah... Yeah, and win a championship together.”

ACT 2: The Dreamers

Chapter 16

If there was one thing to learn about the internet, it's that news either spread like matches in the wind or pure wildfire.

Zia's investigation verdict was posted on F1's social media, announcing that they deemed Zia worthy to continue racing. Rule fanatics and supporters were quick to support her, some people who are believers praised the FIA for being progressive, and others still doubt her driving skills. I say to look at her results these past few races.

Jack was over the moon when the FIA decided to keep her ("I knew they wouldn't doubt you!") and some other drivers are now at least happy to talk to her now that the whole investigation is over. Julian's still guarded about her. "Why would the FIA be soft enough to keep her? This is bullshit!" He said one Driver's conference.

"Hello, Julian," I greet. "It's the rules. Zia's one of us for real."

Kenneth seems to be on my side, because he stood up the moment he knew he's picking on the girl. "Yeah... And look at her." He said, gesturing to where she is. "She doesn't need to worry about racing in Formula 1 anymore. She's free."

"But her stunt's still unacceptable." Michael Flaherty countered.

This went on for a while, but I can't keep adding fuel to the fire. Not when I can tell Zia doesn't seem more distant from me.

"I'm gonna need some food after this," She stated nonchalantly, looking at her phone while the drivers were still arguing.

"Oh, sure! What do you want?"

Zia looked in the distance. “Mmh, the food they give us in hospitality is so bland today.” She muttered. “Oh, I realize I haven’t gone on that burger date you told me since Melbourne.”

I felt my heart flip, and I snapped into attention like some boy scout whose master had just arrived. “Oh... Of course! What would you like to have?”

She opened her maps to check any nearby restaurants around Circuit Gilles Villeneuve. “I dunno... It’s Canada, so....”

I’m still not used to the cadence and calmness that Zia displays ever since she first appeared after that FIA verdict. She seems more relaxed to be around me and Jack at this point, and although I can still hear her muttering and stressing out about her lap times pre-racing, I see her in the mirrors and it doesn’t seem like she’s driving like some unstable guided missile towards me.

I sigh, thinking for a moment. “You know, I think I have an idea after we do today’s Qualifying.” I told her. I was looking forward to this one movie that’s in theaters by now, and now’s probably the chance to watch it.

“And what’s that?”

“Just wear something cozy and meet me at our lobby.”

The day went by in a flash, partly because it was just me being on standby for the first Free Practice session as Alex Summerbell from F2’s subbed in to test my car, and the second free practice was— well— free practice. The moment I stopped looking at my watch every minute of the debriefing, I found myself down the hotel lobby, checking my phone camera as if it was a mirror just in case I still had some engine grease on my face.

I haven't hung out with Zia in years. The last time I did, she seemed to be upset that I was going for F4 ahead of her. But now... I think now's the realest time we could catch up with our lives.

I don't want to get out of the hotel with fans spotting me right away because I'm in my team kit, so I just wrapped myself up in this gray hoodie that still fits like a glove since I got it back in F3, and I covered up my blonde hair with some orange cap that I think would make me look like I'm some homeless person. I wonder how Zia would appear.

I could use this time to study my data for tomorrow's Qualifying, or I could probably try to imagine different scenarios where I could beat John Campbell, but I can't help but take out my phone and check my social media. Since the World Endurance Championship's gonna happen at Le Mans next weekend, a lot of the posts I see were about it. Personally, I would really like to try out a season of driving in WEC, but my priorities are Formula at the moment. Maybe when I get to have my first championship I should shoot to win at the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

"Hello, mate," I hear a male's voice greet, and I look... way up from my phone to spot those brown hair and green eyes. It was Jack Sallow. "You look like you're on witness protection. Is someone suing you?"

I laugh sheepishly, taking my cap off to throw it at him, to which he catches in time with this stupid grin of his. "I'm... going out with someone."

"A date?—"

"No, hah, no." I could feel the heat rise through my cheeks. "Just a friendly hangout. I wanted to catch up with Zia. What are *you* doing here?"

“To answer your question, I’m planning to jog outside.” He said, his smile fading replaced with something unamusing. “Charlotte just broke up with me a few minutes ago. Over text. Can you believe that?”

My eyes narrowed on him. “Charlotte? The model?” I ask. “You both just got into a relationship two months ago.”

Jack gently kicked the ground like he was some school boy kicking a can because he just failed his math test. “Eh, she just got bored of me, I reckon.” He explained in a manner that tells me he’s used to getting girls and getting dumped throughout his career. “Anyway, enough of that. I don’t need any sympathy from a guy who’s about to get his own girl.”

“It’s n-nothing like that!” I stutter. “Zia’s my friend.”

“Judging from all those promotions from Horizon, I can tell you both knew each other since you were kids.” He said, “And I definitely see how she’s warming up to you while you look like you’re about to explode any moment.”

Ugh... Jack knew how to read people when it counts... I lean backward, before thinking about it then chuckling to myself about it.

“You know... I’d say Zia isn’t really the most beautiful girl out there.”

“Liar. Look at the guys fawning over her.” Commented Jack.

“*And* she’s not the smartest person,” I put emphasis on the “and” to stop Jack from interrupting me. “But when I first met her, I was some kid who just kept staring at her when she’s silently sitting in front of me. She also only speaks one word at a time, too. But I see her studying English so hard during break times that she only ate two pieces of *pastillas* her mom made for her.”

“What’s *pastillas*? Some biscuits?” He asks.

“Milk candies.” I answer simply. “That’s how I became her friend. I asked for some of what she’s eating and she gave some. I haven’t stopped talking to her since.”

“Must be nice, having your childhood friend as a teammate.”

“I... haven’t seen her since I shot up to Formula 4. Which is why I want to get to know her again.”

We both heard a *ding* in the distance, and I narrowed my eyes to the elevator as it opened, revealing who was inside.

It was Zia, wearing a black varsity jacket over her white blouse. She looks equally plain as me, but I’m so used to seeing her in our team kit that I forget she can look as awesome in something more casual. I can feel my heart do a backflip.

“Speak of the devil,” Jack mentions, taking the orange cap I threw at him and shooting it just above my head. “Good luck, Leon. Better not break a rookie’s heart.”

I’mma try not to, I thought, as I stood up and took a deep breath, as Jack heads out to do his jogging and Zia walks up to me. “You’re late,” I commented.

“Sorry, I was just trying to find something that doesn’t have the word Horizon on it,” She replied. It’s been months since I first saw her for the first time in years, and I can really notice that her hair’s getting longer, like it was starting to cover up her nape. I don’t know if her hair just grows fast, but I’d like to see if she could keep a ponytail soon.

I laughed, relaxing as soon as Zia made her comment about Horizon. “Nah, we still have like 2 hours, anyway. We have time. Are you ready?”

She nods in response, and we head out in the night to have the moment of our lives.

Chapter 17

I think I shouldn't be allowed to be in a Canadian movie theater at this point. But why did Leon choose *that* movie?

"Why didn't they take a reserve driver in case one couldn't race?" "Come on, it's intriguing, Zee."

"Ugh, stop arguing in the pits! Just drive out with the hards then argue later, you're losing time!" "Shh!"

"Eugh, workplace dating." "I mean I can see the chemistry."

I really had to stop criticizing the movie near the end because the guy behind us was starting to whisper-yell at me to shut up. Does he even know we're *real* F1 drivers? The nerve!

"Remind me not to invite you to a movie next time, Zee..." Leon mentioned, his face red. From embarrassment or anger, I can't tell. "You keep roasting the main character!"

"He's not a legend because he sucks," I tell him.

"Dude, would you be mad if your mechanics drill on a set of hards than mediums?" He asked me.

"At least I can race with them for the rest of the race." I countered. "What about you? Are you gonna lose time by complaining in the pits?"

"I mean... I guess not. You have a good point." He pulls up beside me as we head out the theater, the strange feeling of hope and inspiration sinking into our silence just like every other movie I watched in the theater.

And with that silence, I just... were. I haven't felt so comfortable watching a movie with someone for a long time now, and I surely haven't had a hangout like this for so long. Leon was the only one.

"... Zee?" Leon finally breaks the silence.

"Yeah?" I ask. Silence followed. "Yeah, what is it?" I turn my head sideways to meet a non-existent Leon by my side. He disappeared. Naturally, I turned around to make sure the rapture didn't accidentally happen.

There it is, his blue eyes. His black pupils were larger than I thought they would be, and he was just... Staring. Like there's something on me that I don't know about, because I looked down and I see no stains on my clothes except for my cheese powder-stained hands. I look up to him, my chest suddenly aching. There we were, two famous drivers of the world just meeting eye to eye on a sidewalk illuminated by the streetlight. What does he want to say?

He sighs, digging his hands deeper into the pockets of his gray jacket. "I missed you." He says.

I... don't think I remember him saying that the first time we met. I sigh, fully turning into him. "Yeah, tell me about it."

He lets out a scoff, turning to take a chair that's resting upside down on a table of the already-closed cafe we stopped by. I'm not sure if there's anyone who's gonna spot us and scold up for doing this, but knowing him since I was six, this is his language for needing some time to talk. "I dunno. I've been so focused on the Feeder Series that I forgot what it feels like to sit down and eat pizza with you every time we go karting."

I take the chair across from him and sit down. I try not to feel so tense hearing this from him, because I wasn't prepared to go this deep. We're a few feet away, and I'm not facing him.

We're both facing the world that's turning through the city lights and the cars passing by, maybe on their way to the night shift or going home after a long day. "... Do you want me to be honest or do you want me to comfort you?" I ask, thoughts rushing through my head.

"I want you to be honest. I always want to."

My hands start fidgeting again, no matter how hard I didn't want them to. "I don't hate you, Leon." I can feel his eyes landing on me. "When you left for the Feeders, I didn't go out after winning a race. No kids want to talk to me. Mr. Harrison is a good man, but I didn't feel close after you left."

I looked down, smiling at how cruel life was to me. "I lived alone and it took me so long to get here... While you breezed through the leagues on your own. When I met you again in our first team meeting... I thought you hated me for being too slow. I thought that maybe you're treating me like a disaster because of how much I covered up."

I finally turned to him, his pupils just as large as I remembered seeing them a moment ago. But his face... He looked in awe of something. "That race in Saudi? Where you won? I thought that I was better off leaving you behind. You were so happy while I'm here, just... hating myself."

I let out another chuckle, remembering those moments up until Miami blurred my vision, and I can feel something warm and wet running down my cheek. "But... I just thought that... I can't leave you. I want to be with you every step of the way. Because you're my best friend and I hate the thought of you being gone in my life."

The silence was getting heavier, and with Leon not talking to me for a hot minute, I took the time to wipe away my own tears.

"I'm... So sorry for leaving you behind, Zia." He muttered.

“You don’t have to be.” I replied.

“Yes I do.” I turned to him. He seriously doesn’t need to, we’re just people going through the motions. He didn’t push me back a few years. “I didn’t know how much you suffered without me, Zia. I didn’t cover you from Julian the first time... I didn’t know how to deal with the media targeting you... I wasn’t even with you when you went to the FIA for the whole investigation. I’m a bad friend, Zee. You deserve the world.”

“Well, I don’t need it if they’re only going to bring me down.” I tell him on a whim. “I just want to be me. And... I just want to know that you can stay and keep our promise.”

Our promise of winning a championship together.

His smile beams like the sun rose, before he stood up. “Of course... Though by the looks of it, I might win first.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I laugh, standing up. “John, Theo, and Jack’s your biggest rivals right now. And Leon?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not a bad friend. I’m lucky to be your teammate after all these years.”

The walk back was a different kind of silence. It’s not that feeling after you walk out of the theater, but I’d say it feels more like I just came from some therapy session and that someone lifted the weight off my shoulders. I don’t think Kate would mind me having a teammate over my hotel room for the night, but Leon might have thought the opposite because he saw me off and left me to my own devices.

I head straight for the bed with one huge plop, and I open the phone. I still see people arguing how I might have bribed the FIA to keep my seat, or that it’s still too early for me to prove something on this grid, or that I’m weaker than the entire grid because of who I am. But the odd

one out of this feed is *@therealjacksallow* posting a picture of himself jogging around the same area we were in hours ago. I closed the phone and looked up at the ceiling. I still feel like I want to scream at these people and pull my hair, but right now, I think it wouldn't matter.

Everything I need is right here.

Chapter 18

I made a fatal mistake. I was too ambitious around the last few corners that I locked up and was barred from getting into Q2. Leon, with all his experience in the game, managed to get himself a Pole position that either Jack or John would have to steal from when the race started.

“I locked up,” I mutter to myself, visualizing the past Qualifying session to imagine where I went wrong and visualize how to correct that myself. I could brake early and turn early, but I can get someone pulling a dummy move on me. Kenneth behind me is smart enough to do that. I can also do a divebomb on the first turn tomorrow, but I’m in P16. Everyone would have squeezed me the moment I did that. The back markers are desperate to get into the top 10 for points.

So my only option right now is to bide my time and go all out the moment I get a breather. Especially because the one in front of me in this race is *Julian Castillo*.

I looked up to Julian as a kid. Leon does too, he always says he’s his hero that he strives to be one day. I don’t think I blame him and myself. He’s done miracles in his time, after all. But with his attitude towards me being this “criminal” even after everything cleared up... And with him aggressively preventing me from passing through him whenever I got stuck behind the past few races, plus his comment about NASCAR... (Don’t get me wrong, I bet NASCAR’s just as challenging as F1) I really wonder how this guy got to be in the grid again.

I looked one more time in the mirror. I don’t look like Gio anymore, but I still don’t look like a girl. My hair’s growing longer and it shows, but I still look... miserable.

“... I don’t need you here right now, Gio.” I speak to the mirror. “So don’t come around telling me to give up the race on Julian.”

The man in the mirror didn't reply. I would have been put on some mental health watchlist, otherwise. I wear the sleeves of my racing suit and zip it up before I head out to my car.

The roars of the people once many of us are hopping into our cars are deafening. I got used to this in Formula 2. Some people are getting bored of me winning almost every race last year, but I saw some people begging F1 to put me in a seat because of me winning every time. Guess where I am now.

I catch Julian looking my way, his eyes looking like they're planning a murder. I avoid that. He's so punchable, but I think I can prove who's better in the race.

My mechanics help me get settled into my cockpit, and then install my steering wheel and set up my radio. "*Mic check?*" I ask before Juan does.

"I hear you loud and clear, Francisco. You've got a lot of work to do from P16 today."

"I know," I say, rolling my eyes that my engineer doesn't see. *"Please feed me information every lap."*

"You ask that of every race, but I hear you." Juan then looks at his tablet. *"Okay, everyone's going for mediums today, and I expect us to pit for Hards then go back for mediums throughout this race. Are we clear?"*

I'm not gambling on softs today, there are some tracks that are better off with some sort of durability on the tires. *"I got you."*

"Good luck today, Francisco. We'll guide you."

Radio silence after that. I'm sure that the cameras are rolling already judging by that one cameraman pointing his camera at me. Look professional.

I'm too far to properly see the clock moving, but judging by the sounds of the other cars' engines and my mechanics pulling the blankets of my tires, we're about to roll for the formation lap. I watched Julian pull ahead of me and I started working my way right behind him.

I looked at his rear wing. That's the man to overtake within this race. But there's something else in my mind. I'm here, where it's practically the backmarker's club, but... He's out there, chasing another win in his belt and hopefully making a large enough space for him to keep a championship lead. *"Juan, can you try to update me on Harrison from time to time?"*

"May I ask why?"

Because he's my teammate, dumbass, I could say. *"Just needed to know the gap between him and the second placer."*

As I positioned myself into the grid, Juan came back. *"Alright, Zia. I'll feed you Harrison's data from time to time. Standby, Berchard's going to the pits for position. Get ready."*

He's not retiring from the race, he's only going to the pits because his team decided to change out something in his car before the race started. We all rev our engines the moment red lights start flashing.

Deep breaths, Zia.

The red lights disappeared, and I immediately reacted. Julian did so, too, but I'm not going for his position yet. I'll wait for that. My biggest concern is Kenneth Lim with the yellow and black car behind me, as I know that he's going after *my* position. I managed to block him from passing in the first lap, he'd be stupid to dummy shimmy right through a crowded track at this time, anyway.

"Great start, Zia. Lim behind you 0.2, Castillo ahead 0.4." Paul said once I see the pit lane beside me once more. I'm falling a little behind Julian, but I should still wait for it.

"... Castillo 0.5..."

"... Castillo 0.3..."

A little more to go. Kenneth's already getting smaller in my mirrors, which means he's defending himself from someone behind him or he's starting to struggle with his car.

"And DRS enabled, Zia, DRS enabled. You are within DRS range to Castillo."

Now.

I open my DRS the moment we enter the straight. As expected, Julian wouldn't give up his position without a fight, I learned that much back in Jeddah. So I backed off the moment Julian's about to squeeze me into the wall. No matter, I can try again in the next straight when I'm feeling confident.

I'm already losing track of whatever Juan was saying after a few more laps go by without me being able to overtake. Kenneth behind me is already a few seconds away, but I'm still trying to overtake Julian. *"Ugh, Juan, Julian is so slow!"* I complained. I was starting to get annoyed and judging by how Juan had been telling me about Leon, I'm already about ten or more seconds away from catching him. I need a miracle if I want to get into the points.

"I heard you, but just keep chasing him. Your pit window's going to open soon."

"I choose to stay out." I say. Maybe I can chase down Hans Muller when Julian pits, then I get enough time to do so. Juan had a second opinion, though.

"That's a negative, Zia. We'll take an undercut on Julian." Which means I pit first then I have a chance to stay ahead of Julian with developed tires the moment he pits.

"Fine! Let me know when to box!"

"Okay, Keep your head down."

That's one of those misfortunes I handled today. "*Box, box, Zia, Box, Box.*" Juan announced, and I do so to follow his undercut strategy. I stopped where the mechanics were waiting for me and they lifted my car. The whirring I heard meant that the front wheels were done. Then my right rear wheel is done.

Whirr! Whirr!

"The left wheel won't come off!" Shouted one of those mechanics that's supposed to take the old wheel off. I want to punch the steering wheel, I'm losing so much time. One of the mechanics who was done with his duty of changing the wheel shouted something in what I think is in French before I heard another set of whirring.

I feel my car drop lower and the mechanics scrambling out of my way, which means that I'm allowed to go now. I look at my mirrors in case another car was pitting, and I see the white and gold of Leon, which meant that he was asked to pit for his fight, too. I have no time to complain right here. I move out the pits, ending up on P19. My worst current result so far.

"*What was that, Juan?!*" I exclaimed. I just hope the broadcast won't pick up on it if they've already seen my team stall on the pits. "*I thought this was just a quick stop! Now I'm P19!*"

"*Keep your head down, Francisco.*" Juan said, with a strain that made me think if he got mad about seeing me stall behind him. "*You can still win some points. Julian and the next three cars are yet to pit.*"

But that meant that Julian ended up in front of me again when he pitted and I am back to square one where I have to fight through him. "I've got better tires than you." I mutter to myself, and the DRS I deployed on him made it feel like I got a speed boost this time.

But Julian turned towards me as I pulled up next to him.

I can make it. I have enough speed to pull ahead before he crashes. I can't brake or I lock up the tires. I can-

I felt the back of my car jolt and something pop. Before I knew it, I spun around. "SHIT!" I screamed out of instinct, violently using my steering wheel to try and save myself before I hit the barriers.

Chapter 19

“Are you alright Zia?” I managed to hear from the radio as the smoke rose after I struggled to keep my car alive.

I had to catch my breath. My hip hurts, but I can still move everything after the crash. I’m fine. But I’m also not. Because I found myself in the barriers with Julian Castillo also parked in front of me. *“Yeah... I’m fine. Hope you can hear me.”* I mutter, throwing my steering wheel out before taking a rest for a moment. Hopefully the cameras aren’t showing me inside my cockpit, because I punched my hand on the now-empty cockpit. That was when I saw Julian throw his steering wheel to the side then got out of his cockpit.

His helmet turned towards me, finding me still resting. Oh shit. I scrambled my feet up my seat, holding for dear life onto the Halo so I could squirm my way out while he’s walking his way towards me. But he came to me in a few strides, and I braced for impact.

“What are you doing?” Julian, in his purple racesuit and muffled helmet, says, “Your car’s smoking! It’s gonna catch fire soon. Get out!”

Before I could even protest, he held firmly under my arms and lifted, and before he could say another word, my mind yelled at me to move if Julian was right with my car setting fire soon. I wiggled my foot that was still stuck in the cockpit, and we fell forwards as I finally yanked it out and the heat started rising up behind me, my car starting to set itself on fire.

“... There goes the multi-million dollar car,” I muttered a little too loudly.

“Med car’s gonna come soon. You stayed in there a little too long.”

I look up to realize that Julian really did help me out somehow. The guy who hated my guts for existing in Formula 1 and tried to bully me away... Helped me? What’s up with that?

The marshals behind the barrier hopped out with fire extinguishers and another started waving yellow flags, which meant that our cars are a hazard and everyone has to drive carefully.

I could feel my adrenaline die out, and now I feel so tired with the pain in my hip getting more painful. I took a deep breath, sitting on the grass and taking off my HANS, helmet and balaclava. I need the fresh but smoky air. Marshals noticed me as they scrambled to my side. “Are you alright? Are you feeling dizzy, Miss?” They ask. Totally routine questions whenever someone crashed into the barriers.

“Yeah, I’m good. I guess. My hip just hurts.” I replied. They kept me laying comfortably against the barriers in case they think I’m going to pass out. “The Medical Car’s gonna arrive, they just deployed it.” They repeated. I nod, and they turn their attention to how to remove our cars and fix the barriers.

I turn to Julian, whose helmet is now off. His hair is greying and will probably get grayer after today, but he looks... collected. Like it’s just a job well done. “Why the hell did you help me?” I can’t help but ask. Grumpy old man turned to me like that was an insult to his career. “Are you an idiot? Did they not teach you how to help people in the Feeder series? You being a fraud in this game doesn’t mean I let you burn to a crisp.” He asked. “Kids these days.”

He said the last sentence in a low voice but it’s loud enough for me to hear. The medical car came just in time, and the medics came out to ask us both the same questions the marshals did before they took us to the car to be brought into the paddock clinic. We didn’t sustain enough injuries to warrant an ER visit, anyway.

We haven’t talked since Julian was released to the rest of the paddock earlier than I did. I stayed behind just to relieve that hip pain I got from the crash, and I didn’t wanna see him again

because I believed he crashed into me. I didn't know I could even be able to hate this man so much.

The plus side about being stuck in the clinic is that I get to see the rest of the race. Leon Harrison against Jack Sallow. Those two could decide who's taking over the championship lead at this point, while I'll be held back from the Top 5 again. John Campbell seems to struggle from right behind them, and by the last lap, they're practically a train to the finish line.

Leon took the DRS overtake on John on the last straight. Jack dove in on the other side, sealing John's fate. It was too late for Jack though. Because the turns slow him down, and when he has the chance to chase Leon, he's already at the finish line.

Leon's the new championship leader. The mid-field team became the monster this year.

"Intense fight," Said one of the medics as they breathed a sigh of relief.

"Indeed, sister," Replied the other. "Scary how Horizon's becoming better and better every year."

I decided not to reply to them. I looked at the screen once more, hearing Leon shout over the radio. (As if it's his first time winning a race...)

He deserves this win. I know that much. He deserves to celebrate with the rest of the team while I just let the pain subside and then I can catch up to him. I drift to sleep with that thought in mi-

"Where's Zee?!" I hear a familiar voice boom from the entrance of the clinic. Both of the medics stood up in alarm and even I shot my eyes up just to see the intruder.

"Leon?" I called out.

"Sir, please don't worry, you need to get out--"

"I wanna see Zee!"

Both the medics scramble up to the guy who has the blonde, sopping wet hair, and I sat up immediately.

“No, no it’s fine!” I call out to the medics. “Just let Leon through!”

Both the medics look at us. “Fine. But Leon, you have a podium celebration to attend.”

“I won’t be long,” Leon’s voice came back to that calm tone that I remember whenever he speaks. The both leave us to their devices, and suddenly his face went back to that worry. “Zee! Are you alright? Please don’t tell me—”

“Dude, it’s just some hip pain. I might get bruises tomorrow but I’m not that injured.” I note. “I ain’t dying.”

“But that was a massive crash! When I got to your crash site— your car— It’s on fire—”

“I said I’m fine!” I told him once more, my voice a little louder as panic was also starting to rise up my chest. Leon’s breathing slowed. “Leon... I’m glad you worried about me. But you know... It’s not the end of the world just because my car’s on fire.”

Leon sank down on the chair beside me. “I thought... The thought of you still in the fire... And that I can’t do anything to save you then...” He sighs, looking up at the ceiling. “I was genuinely scared when I saw the crash. I begged Nico to check if you were okay.”

“And?” I realize that I didn’t update Juan on my status since I got out of the car. They might have known through footage and updates from the medics, though. “What’d he say?”

“He says you’re fine,” He answered. “And he told me to keep my head down. I thought about you the entire time I didn’t realize I won until Nico yelled at me.”

I looked at him for a while, my chest somehow tightening. I’ve seen drivers worry about other drivers. I’ve seen moments like Me and Julian, but... I never knew Leon could worry this much.

I laughed at how absurd that was. “What?” Leon asked, his face confused this time.

“You’re worrying over someone who just got saved by Julian like a toddler being put down from a counter?” I asked, giggling.

“What? No— I mean, I thought Julian’s going to yell at you the entire ride back.” He said, smiling in embarrassment.

“Nah, we were just... Quiet the entire time. Uncharacteristic of Julian so far because he never shuts up about my status in racing.”

“I’m glad he’s able to save you,” Is all he could say, before he slips back to that worrying man I saw when he barged in here.

I look at him for a moment. I don’t know why he’s very worried when all I got was a bruising hip at this point, but... that knot in my stomach and burn in my chest just made it all the more tense for me. He needs a reminder.

I remember that warmth when he reached for my cheek. I took his wrist gently, leading his palm on my hand. I tried my best to be serious, but I can feel my cheekbones ache. I can’t help it. He looks at me, his blue eyes wide as something pink starts appearing in his cheeks.

“Leon,” I finally said, “We’ll be okay.”

He just stared at me. I’m starting to worry if I said something wrong, but his mouth stayed open and shivering for a while, his thumb brushing against my cheek. I want him to say something. I want him to let me know how he feels.

“Y-yeah.” He finally says, clearing his throat. “We’ll be okay, Zia.”

I sigh, leaning back. Leon looked stunned when I did so. “Go,” I giggled again. “Or you might get fined because you didn’t take the champagne.”

“Oh, right!” He shot up, fixing his hair as he scrambled for the door. “See you later, Zee.”

I touched my cheek. I already missed his hand and his blue eyes.

The medics let me out right after the celebrations happened. I mentally prepare myself for the clowns that are the media, probably asking if I was too ambitious or if Julian intentionally crashed into me. It's easier accusing him of crashing into me.

The reporters didn't greet me. I just felt a slight tug on my shirt, and I looked down to see that there's a little boy looking up at me. Some parent probably lost their kid who was too curious to venture into this part of the paddock. "Oh, hi, kid," I say, my voice softer towards him than to any of the other drivers. "Are you lost?"

He shook his head. "No..." Then he took out something from his pockets and presented it to me, which was an already melted piece of chocolate. "Mama said everything gets better with chocolate... And I saw your big crash, so here!"

I stared at the chocolate. It's already melted so I can't really eat it right away. I could throw it into the team fridge, though. I smile, getting down to his level to take it. "Thank you, kind sir." I said, showing a gentle smile. The boy already scrambled away, but I realize his family isn't far away.

I noticed his sister at first because he held onto her first, and then... There's Julian and his wife. My enemy's child just gave something to me. I want to tell Julian about the entire crash, but I couldn't help but hear what he was doing.

He was smiling brightly, hugging his family. "Papa, you had a big crash a while ago! Are you okay? Are you angry?" Said the little boy.

I'm sure he is, I thought.

But Julian smiles, ruffling the boy's hair. "No, I'm not angry. And I'm alright, Benjamin." He takes the boy to carry him up, perhaps looking at the track beyond this lane. "I did my best being your hero today."

My heart skipped a beat. Not because I admired him, he sounds like he's lying right now. But it's almost like... He really loves his family.

"See that, Ben?" He says, pointing at the track. "One day, if you want to be like me, I'll do my best to be your hero. Then one day, if you become like me, you do your best to be everyone's hero, okay?"

Everyone's hero...

Julian was a hero when I was a child with Leon. So many of us in this grid might be, too. I've been wondering why. And then in this moment, I remembered why.

Julian's supposed to be just a substitute for a driver who got incapacitated one year. People didn't look up to him at all. And then he used his substitution to win some races and everyone started begging his first team to keep him. He became champion for the first time after two years.

He races because he believes in his own principles.

I put my hands to my pockets, walking back to my team.

"... I'll prove to you that I really belong here, Julian." I mutter to no one in particular. "Then Benjamin can also be my hero."

Chapter 20

Man, it can be really exhausting to be winning races sometimes. I'm really glad for the cap, too, because Jack almost sprayed champagne right into my eyes and I hoped I didn't sting him, too.

But... Zia. How my heart went a thousand miles an hour when she took my hand and rested it on her cheek just to tell me that we'll be okay. I *won't* be okay after that. But that's something I can live with. I'm supposed to be packing up right now as we're to fly to another race weekend. Hopefully the summer creak starts after that, and I can spend time with...

Oh god.

I hear a knock on my door. I snap out of my thoughts as another round of knocking comes. "Coming! One moment." I call out, scrambling out of my bed to open the door. Perhaps it's Marlon about to discuss social media promotions or Nico asking me about telemetry.

It was Zia in her oversized hoodie and pajamas. "Zia?" I call out, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeing you," She flatly responds.

"Seeing me? We're in a hotel, Zee."

She raised an eyebrow. "I thought you told me you'll see me later? So here I am. Now you saw me."

I groan, looking at her for a moment. "Zee, what if our managers see us here?"

"So what?" She crosses her arms. "Leon, we literally used to share a hotel room together when we started karting. Remember? We made a bet to count all the stars we see but we gave up because there were too many to count and we lost track."

“I can remember that.” I say, holding the door open. “Alright, Zee... You can come in.”

So she walked inside, and I didn’t know what would happen next in these coming hours with her in my room.

“Nice room,” She commented, her hands still in her pockets as she looked out the window.

I stare at her, my shoulders tensing as I sit down at the foot of the bed. “Yeah.” I mutter. I don’t know what to say, I didn’t even expect to have a visitor tonight. But she turned to me, nonchalantly walking up to sit close to me.

“I... I think I saw Julian’s son today.” She takes her hands out of her pockets, now fidgeting with them. “He gave me some chocolate.”

“Oh?” I say, looking down next to her. I can feel her heat radiating beside me, and my hand was twitching. I want to wrap it around her shoulders.

She pauses for a moment, laughing a little. “Man, imagine me having children.”

That thought came from nowhere, and my heart’s starting to do backflips again. “I think you’re old enough to find someone and have a family with, Zee.” I say, but when it came out of my mouth, I felt... wrong. Like I shouldn’t have said that.

Zee looks up to me, and I suddenly realize how close her face and lips are to me. “I’m only a year older than you, Leon. I’m 24. I don’t think I wanna have kids yet. Look at us, we’re racing so hard. I ain’t abandoning kids.”

I don’t know much about her the past six years, but I do remember her being so fond of taking care of the caterpillars that suddenly appeared in our school garden. Kept yelling at our classmates not to touch the caterpillars until they became butterflies. Even I get scared whenever

I see her glaring as I make my way to the garden. “Well, why were you thinking of children?” I mutter.

She just shrugs. “I... I just thought that I want to become their hero when I keep driving here.”

She pauses, searching for something in my eyes yet again. “... Leon?” She asked.

“Yeah?”

“What did you want to say when you held me in the clinic?”

I froze.

I wanted to ask if I could kiss her. It was right there. My heart was pounding.

This time, I can formally ask that. But... It was just too painful to think that one of us goes and the other has to live with the pain.

I looked away. “No, Zia... I just didn’t think you’d remember what I’d say to you.”

My breath hitched when I felt Zia’s hand on my chin, tilting my head to meet her black eyes again. “Can I... Can I just be impulsive this once?” She asked.

Impulsive for what?

My words came first. “... Go ahead.”

Then my thoughts came second. My gap to Zia closed in, and I felt something warm and soft press against my lips.

Zia Francisco is kissing me.

It only lasted for about five seconds, her face turning pink as she broke the kiss and looked at me.

I'm here, just sitting at the foot of the bed and Zia is still dangerously close to me, but spiritually, I'm on my knees, banging my fist against the floor. Zia actually kissed me. My best friend, the one I wanted to reconnect with— was kissing me.

“W-what was that for?” I ask, my self-control failing me. My voice sounds like a seal clapping its hands after a cool performance at the Zoo.

Zee's ears turned red, before leaping deeper into the bed. “That's for worrying about me today. Goodnight—”

“Huh, Wait!”

I turn to her, her eyes still open and looking at me. “What?”

I froze for a moment, before shifting so that I'd see her better and lay beside her. “... How long were you thinking about me like that?”

Zee's eyes widened, before she scoffed. “I don't know what you mean—”

“You know what I mean—”

“*But* I just... ever since you keep looking after me this year?” Her hands curled up to her own body. “I just... I thought we'd be different. Like... I thought this year will be just... Us against the world.”

I stared at her. Her dark eyes that looked as glossy as the marbles we used to play with. Her dark hair that just fell to cover her face.

“And how do you think it went so far?” Was all I could mutter out.

Her eye twitched, looking at the pillow she just planted her head into. “... I... You *are* staying by my side. Even though my rookie year was a mess and everyone thinks you're on the way to the championship.”

I could see her lips shiver and her breath hitch.

“I didn’t know our promise was one hell of a mess.”

I sigh, reaching for her hair to tuck it behind her ear.

“Zee, do you wanna know what I think?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“I think that I’m glad I get to finally share a seat with you.”

She stared at me, before she broke into a laugh. “That’s it?” She asks.

“That’s what?”

“I just told you what I feel and you only get to say you’re glad I’m your teammate?” She laughs even more, playfully pushing my chest. “You’re so cheesy!”

“What else should I say?” I start laughing too.

“I don’t know! I thought you’re gonna go on with some grand speech, too!”

“I don’t have a grand speech!”

“Then stop asking me if you want me to know what you think, fool!”

She took the pillow under her head and then smothered it on my face. I felt so giggly that I laughed into the pillow, and I can feel her shift even though she’s still laughing.

“Fine, just rest well, Zee. Good night.” I finally mutter next to her, shifting my body away from her as I drift off to sleep with her kiss still fresh from my mind.

Chapter 21

I like the Red Bull Ring, I've had a great time driving through the tracks this weekend and I even got to the top 5 in this week's Qualifying while Leon's got his pole again. Everything would be a perfect race for Horizon. The only problem was the weather.

We sort of expected the rain after Juan and Nico informed us of the upcoming weather this morning, but we didn't really think it'd be this strong when the sky fell during our race. The race is red flagged, which means we have to come safely into the pits then hang out with the rest of the grid in the pits like one awkward subway station.

I'm seated next to Jack while Leon's talking to Kenneth and Hans. I've known these two because they were the fiercest rivals I've witnessed in my first year of Formula 2, with Hans winning out by only five points. But I've seen them from time to time, and I really feel like they've got something going on based on the way they look, talk to, and hold each other whenever I pass by, but I can't prove it yet.

"Slow day, isn't it?" I heard Jack Sallow's voice. I catch my leg rocking again, and I stop it once I get to notice what's happening.

"We should have cancelled this race," I commented, taking my towel from my lap to ruffle my hair dry.

"Eh, chin up, maybe the sky gods smile again and decide to let us race in twenty minutes." I see him kick back his legs. I don't need to look to know that he also has his hands behind his head like it's a day out at the beach.

I stare at Leon one more time. I watched him as he laughed when Hans said something I couldn't make out. Perhaps I looked a little too long, because I can feel Jack lean forward or something.

"Mate, is there something on Leon's cheek?" He asked.

I snap out of it, giving him a side eye. "What do you mean? He looks fine to me."

He looked amused at my reaction. "Yeah, right. I've been seeing the way you stare at him."

"Is it rude to stare?" I snap.

"Hey, calm down." He raises his hands as if he's admitting guilt. "No, it's not rude to stare, but seriously, who looks at their teammate like they're pining at them to come back already?"

I froze. He didn't stop there. "Canada Qualifying? I saw you looking at Leon's telemetry on the broadcast. You looked like you're seeing an angel for the first time. Catalunya Race? You can't stop smiling when Leon was just talking about pancakes and pasta. Silverstone? You didn't pull back when Leon grabbed your hand and started running in our track walk."

"I didn't know you keep tabs on me now." I started fidgeting.

"Well? Am I seeing what I'm seeing?" Jack says, a mischievous smile reaching his eyes. "Leon's a looker and it's finally time for him to get a girl."

"Shut the hell up." I look away. Not because I hated Jack at this point; He's been the one who points out things where I couldn't see. No, it's because I hated that he's kinda right. Jack looks as calm as he can be in this situation.

"So you're not saying no," He notes. "Summer break's coming up soon. Huge opportunity for you to spend the month with him."

“He’s my friend. Of course I’ll spare some time for him.”

“Do you want my advice, rookie?”

I turned to him. I despised the way that he just... Looks so relaxed with this. “I don’t need your advice. Not from a guy who manages to break girls’ hearts in a span of two months or less.”

“The very reason why I’m giving you advice.” He now looks unamused at my comment. Good for him. “So, Summer Break. Both of you have one month.”

He leans forward, his green eyes piercing my soul. I can’t look at them for too long. It’s like he’s shooting out lasers that might burn through me. I hate it.

“So?”

“You have enough time to process. And you have enough time to see where it goes with you and Leon.”

I groaned. “What the hell’s gonna happen if Horizon finds out about us?”

Before I think about what I just said in the first place, Jack shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows? You both might break your PR teams. Who knew what my PR did after they found out yet another girl broke up with me.”

“Red Flag procedure is ending,” Announced the crappy PA system that they seem to never bother fixing for a decade or two, *“All drivers standby. We are performing a rolling restart in twenty minutes.”*

Great. We’re to do a warmup lap before we start racing our hearts out again, even though the Red Bull Ring is still a drying river outside. Jack, with his long limbs, stood up and stretched, hearing his body pop along with a sigh of relief. “Finally, something the fans could smile about. That trophy’s going to be mine.” He smiles, and all I could do was roll my eyes.

Everyone starts filing out to their respective cars, and I spot Leon looking back at me with a smile, mouthing out something I can't quite make out. Is he saying I got luck?

“Seriously, though, Rookie,” Jack said as it was his turn to follow. “I don't control the world, so everyone's gotta say something about you and Leon, but just follow what you wanna do, yeah?” He puts his pockets before turning away from me.

I stare at him as he shrinks toward the grey but busy pit lane, and I could feel something bubbling up from my stomach. I could tell Jack knows what he's saying, but I hate the feeling that he's helping me. It makes me feel like I owe him something big.

But I can't shake this feeling around Leon. If anything, I should consider taking the leap like he said.

Chapter 22

The one way I can tell when Summer Break's right around the corner is when F1's PR team gathers all of us to do some fun challenges in a room and decide who's champion in these challenges. It's called Grill the Grid, and the one thing that I realized in my time in Formula 1 is that I seem to completely forget things.

I've heard about this year's challenges from Hans Muller and Kenneth Lim.

"Dude, we have to find out who's who through our baby pictures! I look so weird as a child!" Said Hans, who looked like he just saw his favorite artist of all time.

"It was easy," Noted Kenneth, his face as stoic as ever. *"Hans was so cute and I saw his mole under the eye. That's how I knew it was him."*

I noticed Hans's face turn red. *"That's not fair because you knew me since Formula 2! And don't spoil it! Leon might have a faster time than me and I wanna win this year's Grill the Grid!"*

So they laughed and walked away. I notice them reach for each other's hands as they head out to the paddock. They're in different teams... Hans in his blue-green shirt from Jackson and Reeds and Kenneth in his silver and orange from Cobra Sterling. I wonder what's up with them being so happy today.

Anyway, it's my turn to be in that room now, so I gathered myself before stepping into a room that's black and decorated with red lights that look like they're about to fly towards me. "Oh, it's Leon!" Said one of the crew members taking care of the set. "Come on in, we just need to wrap up Kenneth's video."

I look at the chair and a canvas next to it, with black posters written with “Grill the Grid” right in the middle of it. Looks like I’m gonna name a lot of people this year.

“Did Zia already do this?” I ask them.

“Not yet, She’ll go after you.” Another told me. Which means I hope Zia doesn’t make fun of me when I’m not looking. “Are you ready?”

I take my microphone so they pick up whatever I was saying throughout the filming process. “Yep– Yeah. Ready to guess.” I say, my heart racing to see whoever I could guess right.

The cue girl greeted me and the fans who would be watching the Grill the Grid season, and then she explained this challenge’s mechanics. I’m supposed to flip the canvas to see a picture of a child, and I’m supposed to guess who it is in just under 2 minutes. One point for every driver I got right.

“Timer starts... Now,"declared the crew, and I shakily flipped the first canvas.

The first picture was a photo of a boy with brown, curly hair and green eyes that are covered with a cap that says “*Arthur Sallow #1!*” The name in the cap is a giveaway. “That’s Jack Sallow.” The people give a thumbs up which means I’m right and I’m onto the next person.

I see a young boy with a back bowl cut and a mullet in the back. He looks ridiculous, and I knew who else had strange fashion in this grid. “Beni Makkinen,” I declare, onto the next person.

This time it’s a disgruntled Asian boy who’s standing next to his sister, who’s smiling from eye to eye. I’ve seen this before. “Kenneth Lim,” I noted, because his sister is now a famous K-Pop Girl Group Member and she had definitely shown this photo before.

I breeze through with some, but It took me a couple more seconds to guess the others.

Hans Muller. Julian Castillo. Sasaki Okamoto. Pedro Oliveira.

My heart stopped for a moment when I saw a photo of a girl, who had some face paint of a blue butterfly on her cheek. It's cropped close so I could only see her face. It might have been really easy for everyone because she's the only woman in the current grid, but for me? I've never seen this kind of photo of her back then. I'm starting to think that this was her when she was back in the Philippines.

I realize I've been staring for too long. "I think you'll answer it right away if you know what to look for," One of the crew gave out a hint.

"Y-yeah," I laugh awkwardly. It's too late, I'm sure the world will see me staring at her. What would they think about it? What would my team say? What would Marlon say? "That's Zia Francisco. I definitely know that face from everywhere."

Then I flip the page to see the empty canvas. I answered everything right.

I sighed in relief as everyone else shifted. "Oh, you answered them all, Leon! How do you feel and what did you learn?"

They usually ask this just for reflection and all, but my stomach is churning just getting reminded of Zia from six years ago.

I'm a month away from moving out of my father's home to stay with my uncle. I already signed a contract for a team in Formula 4, and I can't really stay behind in Ripon unless I want to wake up at 3 am so I can get to the race tracks. I'm excited for the journey. What I'm not happy with is that for the entire month, Zia seems distant or moody when I want to reach out to her.

I had to see her in my final week before I moved away to stay at my uncle's place. I need to promise her that I'll at least visit her over Christmas until she gets to Formula 4 as well. I remember that it's a cold day, that I can see my own breath while the trees around the town are barren.

“Aren’t you about to leave?” I heard a very familiar voice behind me. I don’t need to guess who it was the moment I turned to the origin of the voice.

“I have until a few days from now, Zee.” I greet back. I’ve known her for years, but that long, straight, black hair still leaves me breathless. That day, Zia had it in one long braid.

She wasn’t looking directly at me, though. She was looking at the ground, her foot fidgeting on the ground. I need to say it.

“Zee, you don’t worry about me, okay?” I finally say, walking up closer to her. “I’ll do my best to visit over the holidays.”

Zia frowned. “You’re leaving me behind. That’s the basics of it.”

“No I don’t!–”

“I wanted to go with you! But they didn’t want me to go to F4!” She snapped. Her hands shifted under her gray hoodie. “They want me to be stuck in F1 Academy.”

“Maybe you can be in F1 Academy then catch up in F3?” I ask, my head tilting.

Her eyes twitched, as though she was considering my choice, before putting her hand on my chest. It was warm, so I can definitely feel my hair stand. “I’d rather be stuck here than see you again, Leon.” She said in a dark tone that I never heard her say. “Go. Be the best you can.”

“Zee, wait!”

“You’re leaving me!” She snapped again, her eyes glossy. “I’m losing this time with my best friend, and he’s leaving me! I’d rather see you leave than spend so much time in my room crying. So goodbye!”

She didn’t let me speak again because she pushed my chest and turned away as she stormed off. That was... That was the reason why we didn’t speak for 6 years.

“Leon?”

The voice of the F1 crew brought me back to the present. “Oh, ahem,” I stumble. I hope I didn’t space off too long so that they’d think I was just wondering about what to say. “Well, all of us look different as kids, apparently.” I smiled as I practiced since F3.

“Perfect. Do you wanna know where you are on the standings right now?” She asked.

“Yeah.”

“So, since you have a perfect score so far, you are tied with Jack and Kenneth. Hans and Sasaki are currently below you.”

“Ah, that’s gonna be a tough battle,” I joked.

“... End scene!” The camera man says, and everyone moves to see the replay of the entire video. “Can I go?” I asked them.

“Of course, Leon, you can go.” Said the woman.

I walk out the room, and I see Zia waiting with her hands clasped together, she turns to see who left the room. “Hi, Leon.” She greets. “Should I worry about the Grill the Grid?”

Wow... We’ve changed a lot since we were children.

“Nah,” I say with a dry laugh. “Just guess who you think looks like who.”

“Gotcha.” She stands up and gives me a side hug, which seals the deal of my heart going a million miles an hour before she heads in.

I love her.

Chapter 23

Leon finishing with a win and me following with a nice P2 at Spa signifies the beginning of the summer break. Leon made a good gap between himself and John Campbell at this point, and I'm already fighting against Jack Sallow for a solid 3rd. We only need this team debriefing before we can finally do what we want in our lives.

"Psst, where are you going in the summer break?" Leon whispered, while Harry was talking about our next steps in Zandvoort once everything is over.

"Mm, I dunno. Going back to Ripon, I guess." I said, staring straight to Harry as he starts talking about what the team should do during the summer break.

"Visiting your mom?" He asks. I freeze.

I realize he really hasn't heard of me since he stopped talking to me. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. Aren't you missing your father, too?"

"Yeah... I haven't seen him in a while." He fidgets, and we pause to listen to Harry go on a tangent about Leon's championship points.

"So you're going to Ripon with me?" I finally ask.

"Yeah. I should go with you."

"This meeting is adjourned, please have a great summer break."

Everyone started collecting their stuff and filed out the hospitality unit, and Harry turned to look at us for a moment. "You two." He started.

"Yep, what's up, sir?" Leon asked with that smile he trained for in years.