

Speed

The Lancia Delta Internale Evolution's motor whined in protest as Eduardo tried to bring the boxy little red sports car to a speed higher than the blue 1969 Ford Mustang Fastback in front of him. Normally, the little LD could clean the floor with a Mustang any day of the week, but this Mustang had been tuned to its max ability. Eduardo's brown face screwed up with concentration in order to keep his car on the road.

In retrospect, Eduardo thought as his car scraped against the thin metal barrier that prevented the Lancia from tipping off the tree and into the Pacific Ocean and one of the two hovering news chopper recording the entire event, he wasn't ready for the *Tour Rapida Classic Muscle*, the semi-legal race around the perimeter of the island of Rapida. Behind him, bearing down with way too little following distance was the triangular shape of a Lotus Evora. Eduardo took a deep breath. This was not good. One mistake and they'd all be in the drink. Of course, he had to go fast. If he won the Tour Rapida, he could go on to Tanta Island Racing Expo, or TIRE, and finally pay off his debts and support his family.

The three cars whizzed past an arch made out of rock and a sign that said ten miles per hour. They were going at least fifty. *Wow*, Eduardo thought as he saw the hundred-and-eight-degree turn, *they really mean ten*. He quickly made the decision to slow down and let the crazy Lotus pass him. The Lotus's driver, however, misjudged the room he had. He crashed through the flimsy fence and, for a few seconds, drove on the cliff, perpendicular to the road. Then gravity took its hand.

Eduardo and the driver of the Mustang were too busy to notice. Cars should really only go fast on tracks or highways. That's why tracks and highways were invented, and why millions of dollars are pumped into them. Cliff roads, however, are dangerous. Especially dirt ones. The dirt makes the brakes' job much more difficult.

At that moment, Eduardo and his opponent in the Mustang were finding that out to their mutual terror. In a spray of dirt and pebbles, the cars were trying to stop. With the implacable stone of the cliff wall looming up in front of them, they both turned hard. They came to a stop, the Mustang's left wing mirror touching the cliff.

Eduardo saw his opportunity. He shifted into first, and drove forwards, and began to turn. Only too late did he realize that his right front wheel was dangling off the cliff for a fraction of a second. There was a dip and a bump, which was his right front wheel falling for a bit before coming back to grip the dirt. Not realizing what it was, he began turn. For a split second, the rear right wheel hung over the cliff, then safely returned to solid ground. The driver in the Mustang watched this Wily Coyote moment with a look of

utmost horror. Once all four of Eduardo's wheels were back on the ground, the Mustang made a move to catch up.

Back in his Lancia, Eduardo took a look to his right. There were all the other cars, right on the opposite side of the cliff. He only looked to see that all the other cars were there and he was now in the lead. Then the Lotus blew up. Eduardo then came to the decision that he should slow down from thirty to fifteen. The Mustang and all the other cars would have seen the explosion and would be driving with more care as well. Besides, the roads were pretty narrow. He could slow down.

This new caution paid off very quickly. After the turn ahead to the left, there was a roadblock emblazoned in English and Spanish *Tour Rapida Racers turn left!* Any faster, and Eduardo would have plowed through the barricade and become lost. The turn led him off the cliff and onto a small, straight road. Eduardo laughed and gunned his motor. He didn't ease off until his speedometer read 100km/h.

All in all, he felt comfortable with his current speed. After all, he was still a little too close to the edge of a cliff for his liking. And then he saw the entrance ramp. The last leg of the journey, the highway would be a mile-long drag race through traffic, instead of another suicide run along a cliff. He could probably make it...

And then he saw the Mustang slowly gaining on him. He increased his speed and merged, the Lancia's engine screaming in protest. Then, he got his first amateur contestants.

The coordinators of the race did not shut down the highway. They couldn't. It was impossible to shut down half the island's highway. As a result, there were the "amateur contestants" going about their everyday business, such as the two huge semi trucks looming up in front of him. There was a gap in between the two trucks. However, the Mustang could block him by occupying half the center lane.

The Mustang realized this, and began to accelerate into position. Eduardo tried to beat him, and the result was the sides of the two cars slamming into each other. Now they were side to side, the Mustang on the right, Eduardo's Lancia on the left. Eduardo looked to his left, and for the first time made eye contact with his opponent.

She was the kind of beautiful you only see in Hollywood movies. Pale skin, wavy brownish-blond hair tied up in a pony-tail, razor sharp cheek bones, and an expensive leather jacket that hugged her shapely figure. However, the most distinguishing feature was the look of intense hatred on her eyes.

Eduardo made a quick calculation. If he got into a shoving match, the Mustang's horsepower would win. No contest, no maybes. The highway, however, had one and a half break down lanes. The one, was blocked by the crazy woman. The half would be a tight fit. It would take all his skill, and maybe the sacrifice of a wing mirror, but he could do it and the Mustang couldn't.

He pulled back, slowing down and letting the Mustang through. He then moved

his car into position and let rip. Soon, he was at his top speed, and gaining on the Mustang. Again, they were neck and neck, Eduardo's car approaching its top speed of 137mph.

There was a honk behind them. A car with lime green paint, blacked-out headlights, a black, raised ridge down the center, and its left blinker going was looming in his headlights. Eduardo quickly recognized it as a 1970 Mercury Cougar Eliminator. Behind the wheel were two old women, one black and one white. Eduardo suddenly realized that somebody's grandmother wanted to get in on the action, and were driving a car souped up far beyond the race's rules.

Then, Eduardo saw the exit. As he was still blocked by the crazy woman in the Mustang, he had to do something. He turned hard into the Mustang. The impact sent his head out of the Lancia's open window. This saved him from the old ladies' opening salvo. Apparently, the two elderly women had some beef with racers and one was shooting a Thompson submachinegun while the other drove. Both Eduardo and his opponent reacted to the sudden threat, dropping under their dashboards and steering blind. Underneath the chatter of the Tommy, shattering glass and .45 bullets hitting metal and concrete and whizzing overhead, Eduardo could hear the sound of the car door scraping against the off-ramp's Jersey barriers. Then the gunfire stopped.

Eduardo mentally crossed himself, then looked up. The Cougar and two thirds of the crazy ladies had gone. The Mustang had come to a stop. Eduardo didn't stop to check on whether the driver was okay. He just sped on down the road. He could see the finish line only a few yards ahead...

And then his car's motor broke. His car skidded to to a stop, about five feet from the finish. At this point, he had only two options: wait there, and lose the race, or he could get out of the car and push, hoping against hope the rules allowed this. He chose the later.

As got out, he heard the rumble of a tuned Mustang V8. He knew he couldn't get across the finish line in time, but he wouldn't just sit like a lump. He would cross that finish line even if it would disqualify him.

He just cleared the first six inches when the Mustang passed him. At least he'd get second place, \$90,000 and a vacation to Italy. He could talk to his girlfriend and his mother, see if they could pawn off the vacation for some extra money to keep the house and the automotive repair garage he owned afloat. Maybe repair the Lancia. Another car sped past him. Third place. \$80,000. Two more feet to go. If he sold the Lancia, he could keep the shop and the house, maybe pay off the loan. The Lancia's repairs would have to wait, though. He just had one more foot to go. Then the third car passed.

Eduardo mentally swore. It was a 1969 Camaro, but Eduardo didn't care. He cared that it had ruined his hopes and dreams. He was now in fourth place. The most he could hope for was \$5,000. He would have to sell the Lancia, and he would have to

consider moving his mom into the garage, or selling the garage to someone else. He had only two more feet to go.

He turned behind him, and saw the Charger hurtling towards him. He jumped out of the way. He watched in horror from the dirt as his beloved Lancia was pushed across the finish line. He stood there in shock and horror as the Charger smashed into his car solidly across the finish line. Judging by how the front wheels of the Charger were where the rear passenger seats of the Lancia should be, it would be cheaper to buy himself a brand new Ferrari.

In stunned grief and acceptance, he walked over to the awards ceremony. It passed him by in a daze, however, he did notice the girl who had beaten him was enjoying the attention winning gave her. She struck cartoonish modeling poses while holding the trophy and feigning modesty. She was the only one to have a victory speech. It took ten minutes.

Eduardo's mind finally started working when he got his victory check. Comparing the mortgage payments he had (crippling) to the money he had (not much.) It was going to be close.

Just as he was contemplating going into debt to pay off his debts, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and there two men, one with a sculpted, squarish face, slightly tanned skin and brown hair, the other with a more circular face, black skin and no hair. Both had a cool, cocky attitude. Both wore expensive suits and shades.

"Sorry about what happened to that car," the white one said. "I'm Tony Berreta and this is Jules King. You're Eduardo Cruz, right?"

Eduardo nodded cautiously. Berreta nodded. "Shame about the car. Looks like it was totaled." He looked genuinely sad about how damaged the car was.

"I could fix it," Eduardo said, still cautious. "If I had the time away from my shop, I could repair the rear. It's not like the engine was damaged." The two men laughed. King, still chuckling, said, "I bet you would, wouldn't you? I can see the results: that little car looking like it had just rolled out of the assembly line an' all. Can't you see it, see it, Tony?"

"Oh-ho yeah. Good as new in a week."

King shook his head, and became serious. "No, it'd take longer than that. It may be two weeks, maybe two years. There'd be problems, enough to make any other man sell the thing for scrap. But you know what?"

"What?"

"He'd perservere. Go beyond the point any other person would quit. Does that sound like the kind of guy we want?" As he finished, King turned to stare pointedly at Berreta. Berreta didn't hesitate. "All we need is for him to want to race again."

Eduardo broke in. "I'd love to race, really guys. I just am in a bit of a bind..." King cut him off. "We know about your situation. Arrangements have been made." King and

Berreta whipped out envelopes. "In this envelope," Berreta said, "is a check. The value is equal to the monetary value of what you should have won. A hundred and twenty large. Either way, you're taking it. You deserve it more than that bitch."

Then King cut in. "In this envelope is our business card and the form for a racer from Warrior to enter the Tanta Island Racing Exposition as the driver for Warrior. If you want to sign on with us, call the number on the business card."

Eduardo considered his options. The only way out of debt right now was to sign but... well, he needed to ask a few questions. "What is Warrior?" He asked. Berreta laughed a laugh that slowly trailed off into a cry, but King answered. "It's this American car company that wants to play with the big boys like old Enzo himself. I admit, I had no clue it existed either, but they got me away from the people at Chrysler's SRT. Good thing, too, as we'd had just about had enough of each other."

Eduardo looked at Berreta, who was stopping his sobbing. "What's his problem?" Berreta looked up, tears in his eyes. "I'm head of Warrior's marketing and PR."

"So," Eduardo asked, "final two questions. Answer them right and I sign right now. Why haven't I heard of you and what do you want with me?" Berreta looked up. "I'll answer the first question, and Jules can answer the second. You haven't heard of us because I was just brought on a year ago. The powers-that-be at Warrior hadn't even *started* a marketing campaign. Their plan was to build suspense by having them be a mystery manufacturer at TIRE, the world's least-known racing event. They agreed to do it as long as we helped advertise them. So now, I'm running *two* add campaigns at once!"

King chimed in. "As for your second question, we need a dark horse to show how bad ass our cars are and to add drama for the competition part of TIRE. We're pretty sure that they're technically superior to all the other cars. But that doesn't mean crap if there isn't a driver behind the wheel who can handle them. You, even though you lost, look like you can attract the attention we need. You also will take a fifty-fifty split of the winnings and a hundred grand per expo drive without whining like a spoiled brat. Think on that."

Eduardo, however, had already made up his mind. "Just get me a flat surface to write on," he said. "You have your driver."