

Formula 1: The GOAT

#Chapter 31: Returning to his Normal Life - Read Formula 1: The GOAT Chapter 31: Returning to his Normal Life

Chapter 31: Returning to his Normal Life

"I thought you'd be resting today," Burak said, a surprised look on his face as Fatih emerged from the locker room, fully suited and ready for practice.

"Why would I do that?" Fatih asked, zipping up his suit and making a final adjustment to his collar.

"You just came from a championship weekend. You participated in at least three intense races, not to mention all the other sessions. Aren't you tired?" Burak asked as they began walking towards the outdoor track.

"All I did was race, and it wasn't that tiring," Fatih answered simply. What he really wanted to say was, I spent my entire previous life confined to a bed, and you want the new me to laze around after a single race weekend? Don't you understand the blessing I have, to not feel constant pain, to do what I love? You want me to waste that time? He kept the thoughts to himself; it would be unfair to Burak. Besides, with his young body and the [Sponge Body] ability, any fatigue that might have accumulated had vanished with a single night's sleep.

Burak just shook his head with a fond, disbelieving smile. "To be young. Oh, and the race recording you requested a copy of has been delivered to the academy. Remind me after the lesson to give it to you."

"Thank you," Fatih said, his own smile hidden by his helmet.

"What are you going to use it for? A memento?"

"That, and a few other things," Fatih replied as they arrived at the pitlane, their karts already prepared and waiting. "I want to see my performance from a third-person point of view."

"Good idea," Burak nodded. "Since I've seen you're very good at overtaking, even in the wet, today we're going to practice defending. And unlike our previous sessions where our karts were matched, today my kart has a few more horsepower than yours. I'm going to push you to your absolute limits so we can see where your weaknesses lie and start fixing them." He started both their karts.

Fatih gave him a thumbs-up, the engine noise drowning out any verbal reply. He boarded his kart, and after letting the engines warm up for a moment, they headed out onto the track, which was completely empty just for them.

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For the first time in a long while, Mehmet, the director of the Fatih Karting Academy, was watching the track not out of boredom, but with a rapt, almost morbid curiosity. From the window of his office, which overlooked both the indoor and outdoor circuits, he could see Fatih and Burak engaged in their training. It was clearly a defensive driving drill, a dance of mismatched power.

On the long start-finish straight, Burak, with his superior horsepower, would inevitably blast past Fatih. But then, a fascinating game of cat and mouse would ensue for the rest of the lap. Fatih defended as if his life depended on it, masterfully using his lower-powered kart to his advantage. He would brake later, get on the power earlier, and do everything in his power to disrupt Burak's rhythm. He used his defensive moves at the last possible second, borderline on the gray line of the rules, parking his kart on the apex as if it belonged to him and daring Burak to find a way around. He would retain his advantage through the technical sections, only for the raw power difference on the main straight to erase his hard-won gap in seconds.

As he watched, Mehmet recalled viewing the race recording Burak had brought him earlier, deliberately without revealing the results. He'd been surprised to see Fatih on pole, but what followed was an experience that left him with a massive, excited smile on his face. Not only because of Fatih's incredible drive, but because two of the top three finishers were from his academy. He finally understood what Burak had meant when he'd said that if nothing out of his control happened, no one would defeat Fatih. Something had happened, and despite that, the kid had done the nearly impossible.

"The silence is unnerving," he murmured to himself. He knew that if he had watched this race, then the directors of all the other academies had done the same. Anyone with a semblance of a racing mind would see the raw talent in Fatih, and the potential increase in sponsorship revenue and academy prestige that such a prodigy would bring. The fact that no one had contacted him yet, now that the recordings were widely available, could only mean one thing: they were planning to poach Fatih behind his back, willing to pay whatever penalty fee was required for the few months of training the academy had provided.

"I have to keep him here," he said, the decision crystallizing in his mind. He immediately returned to his desk and called the reception.

"Is Fatih's guardian, his grandmother, still here?" he asked when the call connected. "Good. Please bring her to my office if she is free." He ended the call and waited.

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"Thank you, and I will be waiting for your response," Mehmet said, shaking hands with Güldane. Fatih, having just finished changing, arrived just in time to see the handshake, wondering what the conversation had been about.

The academy director then extended a hand to Fatih. "I'm Mehmet," he introduced himself. "I expect great things from you in the future, so keep up the hard work." He offered a warm smile before bidding them farewell, leaving Fatih even more curious.

After collecting two copies of the race recording and saying goodbye to Burak and the receptionist, they started their journey back home.

Once he arrived home, his routine remained unchanged. He greeted his mother, who had already returned from work and was preparing dinner, then went to wash up. He carefully stored the two copies of the race recording in a safe place in his room before joining his family for dinner. Afterwards, he spent some quality time with his mother and grandmother before finally heading to bed.

The moment his head hit the pillow, his consciousness slipped away from the real world and into the familiar, limitless space of the Simulation. His next round of training, a deep dive into the fundamentals of tire management, was about to begin, bringing the eventful day to a close.

Chapter 32: The Game Behind the Race

While Fatih slept, his mother and grandmother were wide awake, deep in discussion. Güldane had just finished bringing Rümeysa up to date on the details of her meeting with the academy director.

"So, what do you think we should do?" Güldane asked, seeking her daughter's opinion.

Rümeysa was silent for a moment, digesting the information, her legal mind already processing the various angles. "For now, we don't make any decisions," she said finally. "We'll have conversations with both the academy and Aslan to get the full picture, but we won't commit to anything. We wait. This will give other academies time to make their own offers, which will give us better leverage in any negotiation."

She leaned forward, her voice taking on a more strategic tone. "It also buys Fatih time. Time for him to perform again and prove that his first win wasn't a fluke. The better he performs in the upcoming races, the more his value increases. That will make them want to close a deal as early as possible, afraid that someone else might make an offer we can't refuse. They'll be forced to give us a deal that's closer to their bottom line, with a greater degree of freedom for Fatih."

Her expression softened slightly as she shifted from lawyer to mother. "We can also use this time to see if there are any signs of him losing interest in the sport, no matter how unlikely that seems. The moment we sign one of these contracts, his career path is

locked in for the duration of its term. If he changes his mind, the penalties for breaking contract would be financially crippling. To avoid that, we might have to require him to continue driving, which would be cruel."

As a lawyer, she needed to secure the most benefits for her client. As a mother, she had to remember that Fatih was just a child, and children can be fickle. Although Fatih had shown an obsessive level of concentration for over a year, she couldn't ignore the possibility.

"I don't think he is going to lose interest in karting for a very long time," Güldane said with the quiet confidence of someone who had raised one child and was now helping raise another. "I know the difference between a temporary interest and a deep-seated passion. Fatih is obsessed with motorsport, and I haven't seen a single hint of that changing."

Her mother's assurance was enough. "Then we'll start having formal discussions with the academy and with Aslan," Rümeyza decided, her plan solidifying. "We'll see how things go as we wait for other offers to use in negotiations."

"Good," Güldane said with a warm smile. "It would remove the monetary burden of his hobby from you, leaving you only responsible for the emotional one."

"But he'll have the pressure to perform."

"Only if he knows about it," Güldane countered with a chuckle, taking a sip of water. "And he can perform perfectly well without that knowledge. Both he and the sponsors want the same thing: to win. He's already motivated enough."

Unaware of these high-stakes conversations, Fatih continued his routine for the remainder of the month. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays were for the academy. On the other days, he completed his daily missions, drove his kart in the park, and played with Emir, enjoying the simple life of a child not yet burdened by school. His nights were spent in the Simulation, diligently learning the fundamentals of tire management.

While his life went on without any apparent changes, Rümeyza's was a whirlwind of meetings and phone calls with different academies, with Aslan, and with others who had reached out to sponsor Fatih. At night, she spent her free time poring over child labor laws, sponsorship contracts, and relevant tax codes.

Fatih, who had already taught himself to read Turkish by correlating the English alphabet with the sounds of Turkish product names, realized what his mother was doing. He saw the stacks of documents and the late nights she was putting in. As a result, he made a conscious effort not to bother her, trying to reduce her stress while she was already doing so much, all while continuing her own demanding job.

In return, he was making steady progress in his training with Apollo. However, due to the sheer volume of information he needed to absorb about tire management, he was still not even halfway through the basics when the end of April arrived. May, his birthday month, had begun, and only one day remained before the second race weekend of the championship, set to take place in Ankara.

Rümeysa, having prepared well in advance, took Fatih and her mother to the Esenler Bus Terminal to begin their journey. She saw no reason to drive for hours when the academy was handling all the equipment transport; all they needed to bring were their clothes.

What Rümeysa didn't tell Fatih was that for all the parties she was in contact with—regarding sponsorships, scholarships, and other opportunities—this race was crucial. She, and they, were holding off on signing any agreements until after this second weekend was complete. For her, it was about peace of mind and increasing Fatih's value even further by proving his first win was no fluke. For the sponsors, it was about ensuring they weren't being duped into backing a one-hit wonder.

Upon their arrival in Ankara, they took a taxi to a hotel they had booked in advance. After a quick dinner, Rümeysa sent Fatih and her mother to their room to rest. Her own night, however, was just beginning. She had meetings scheduled with the representatives who had flown to Ankara specifically for the race weekend and the contracts. The goal was to go through the draft agreements, clarifying terms and making final adjustments, ensuring that by the end of the race weekend, the only thing remaining would be a signature.

Since they had already discussed the broad strokes of the contracts in their previous conversations, the actual changes were minimal. Rümeysa spent the first part of her evening meticulously combing through the documents one last time, her eyes searching for any ambiguous language or hidden clauses. Once satisfied with her own review, she forwarded the finalized drafts to a specialist lawyer she had hired, an expert in sports sponsorship contracts, for a final professional opinion. With her due diligence complete, she finally returned to her room, ready for the crucial day ahead.

Chapter 33: Race Weekend | Saturday | The Group of Death

"Good luck out there," Burak said as the pitlane exit finally opened, signaling the start of Group A's first free practice session.

"Thanks," Fatih replied, pressing his foot on the accelerator. He drove out onto the Ankara Karting Park circuit for the first time, his mind already working to reconcile the real-world tarmac with the track photos he had studied over the past month.

As if afraid of being left behind, Selçuk blasted past him in the pitlane, a blur of aggressive intent as he rushed to be the first driver on track.

To ensure fairness, TOSFED, the championship organizers, used a random assignment program for each race weekend's groups. This time, it seemed the program had a sense of humor, as it had placed Fatih, Selçuk, and Jackson—the top three contenders—all in the same group. They would be racing against each other in every single session throughout the weekend.

Jackson, in contrast to Selçuk, remained calm, maintaining a moderate speed as he followed Fatih onto the circuit.

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"This is going to be a very interesting weekend, ladies and gentlemen," the main commentator's voice boomed across the facility. "Here at the Ankara Karting track, as luck would have it, the top three in the championship are all in the same group! This gives us the opportunity to see them compete directly at least six times this weekend: two practice sessions, one qualifying, two qualifying heats, and of course, the Final race. It should prove once and for all who is the best of the three this weekend."

On track, Fatih weaved left and right. While the effect on tire temperature was minimal in this category of karting, he was applying all the knowledge he'd gained from Apollo over the last month. Every fraction of an advantage needed to be chased. He quickly brought the tires into their optimum operating window and immediately took off to begin scouting the track in earnest.

"And Selçuk throws the first elbow!" Zakir observed. "He overtook Fatih in the pitlane to be the first on track and is now already a quarter of a lap ahead, showing his competitiveness even in a practice session. Fatih, as usual, remains calm, not getting baited by Selçuk's antics and sticking to his own pace. And surprisingly, unlike last weekend, Jackson is keeping a close distance to Fatih, as if using this opportunity to observe him, to see how he drives. Being overtaken on the final lap of the last race couldn't have been a good feeling for the defending champion." The screen showed Fatih's kart, and moments later, as if a clone had appeared, Jackson's kart materialized behind and slightly to the side, making no attempt to overtake, just watching.

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Fatih drove at a measured pace, his mind a flurry of calculations. He used his memory of the track map and his visual observations to approximate the perfect racing line, constantly adjusting based on the grip levels of the bare, gripless tarmac. With this being the first session of the weekend, track evolution had yet to begin. A few drivers in a hurry even overtook him, but he paid them no mind. Jackson, however, remained glued to his rear, mimicking his every move.

'This track is really up my alley,' Fatih said to Apollo with a smile as he navigated the complex triple hairpin section of T5, T6, and T7.

'For you, it is. For the rest, it is terrifying,' Apollo replied with a chuckle.

'Yes, it's very demanding and a high-speed circuit,' Fatih mused. 'I'm sure they deliberately designed it to test the courage of young drivers, but isn't it a bit dangerous for six-year-olds?' As an adult in a child's body, he found it difficult to gauge the normal level of fear for his age group and wondered if the track's demands might create a dangerous situation.

'It is on the edge of that,' Apollo confirmed. 'That is why they are reducing the number of drivers in the Final to thirty this weekend, unlike the forty from the last race. The tire barriers at the end of the high-speed sections are also designed to bring them to a halt with only minor injuries, should they go plowing into the wall. But that is unlikely.'

'Shouldn't you start your hot laps now?' Apollo added as Fatih exited the **T8 hairpin**.

'I planned on a third reconnaissance lap, but you're right. I should at least test one hot lap and see if my approximations are correct,' Fatih decided. He got hard on the power as he exited **T8**, keeping his foot down and taking **T9** flat-out.

For the out-lap, drivers used a bypass that skipped the final three corners—**T10, T11, and T12**—and fed them directly onto the main straight. This allowed them to build maximum speed for their first flying lap. Thanks to this shortcut, Fatih was already at the kart's absolute limit as he blasted across the start-finish line, his head tucked forward to induce the mini-DRS effect.

He was rapidly approaching the braking zone for Turn 1. Having already judged the optimal braking point during his reconnaissance laps, he braked heavily, got off the pedal, and turned in hard for the **T1 left-hander**

. He hit the middle apex perfectly, the left rear tire lifting slightly from the tarmac before settling back down. He got back on the power, deliberately running wide on the exit to prepare for the very tight **T2 left-hand hairpin**.

He braked hard again, rotating the kart sharply and hitting a late apex to maximize his exit speed. He flowed immediately into the gentle **T3 slight right-hander**, which he took flat-out, before a quick lift of the throttle to navigate the **T4 small right-hander**. This sequence felt more like a high-speed chicane, and he exited it carrying immense speed onto the long back straight.

This straight led to the track's signature feature: the triple hairpin complex. He stayed on the power until he was just meters from **T5**, where he braked hard for the third time in the lap, turning in sharply for the **left-hand hairpin**. His left rear tire lifted again as he hit the early apex, running wide to the right side of the track on exit. He immediately moved to the opposite side to attack the **T6 right-hand hairpin**, hitting the middle apex and powering through the short straight. He then set up for the **T7 right-hand corner**, a faster bend that he took with just a slight lift, before braking again for the final part of the

complex, the **T8 left-hand hairpin**. He hit a late apex, prioritizing his exit speed onto the next straight.

He exited **T8** and got back on the power, not lifting as he took the fast, sweeping **T9 left-hander flat-out**. He entered the medium straight before braking for the final time as he set up for the **T10 left-hander**, hitting an early apex. He made an S-line, hugging the right side for a moment before moving left to take the **T11 right-hander**. He got on the power for the final time, taking the sweeping **T12 left-hander** flat-out and rocketing across the start-finish line to complete his first flying lap.

Chapter 34: Race Weekend | Saturday | The Group of Death II

Selçuk and Jackson, who had been keeping a close eye on Fatih's driving, now had their gazes locked on the timing screen. From watching his flawless execution on track, they knew it was going to be a very good lap.

[P1 - Fatih Y. - 01:20.789]

That number flashed on the screen, causing a collective intake of breath from those watching. Aside from Fatih's own family, many who had attended last year's championship at this track knew the lap record. It was an easy number to remember: 01:20.500. On his very first hot lap, on a track that was not yet rubbered in, Fatih was already less than three-tenths of a second away from breaking it.

"And just as he showed last week, he is not someone who will disappoint," Zakir said with a chuckle once the main commentator finished his excited call of Fatih's lap. "From the look of it, if nothing out of the ordinary happens, that lap record will most likely be broken during the competitive sessions."

"Please, avoid saying that! Don't inflict a commentator's curse on the boy!" the main commentator replied, both of them laughing.

"Some might be hoping the curse is true," Zakir responded, "but on this circuit, that curse has very little effect. This track rewards bravery more than any other in the championship."

"I know. It's quite surprising we're yet to see anyone hit the walls at the end of that heavy braking zone into Turn 1."

"That's because other than Fatih, Selçuk, and Jackson, who are pushing from the outset, everyone else is gradually building their confidence," Zakir explained. "They're braking earlier, chipping away at the distance bit by bit. Not everyone is as brave as Fatih, braking just ten meters from the corner on his first attempt on a dusty track. To do that, you need massive talent, a perfect feel for the track, and absolute trust in your ability to make the kart obey your every command. We should see these three trading fast laps for the rest of the session."

"And as you say that, we see Selçuk starting his own flying lap!" the main commentator announced. "He follows Fatih's choice of skipping the final three corners and using the shortcut, building speed onto the main straight. He tucks his head forward to induce the mini-DRS effect, gaining as much additional speed as possible before the braking zone! Will he brake earlier than Fatih, or is he braver? It seems he's trying to be braver... but he fails to keep it on the track! A screech of locked tires, and he's in the tire wall! A result of over-braking and having nowhere to go. That brings an abrupt end to his first hot lap, and Turn 1 is now a yellow flag zone."

"Ahh, it was a good start, but this is nothing to worry about in a practice session," Zakir took over, his voice calm and reassuring. "All that matters is that he's okay, and it looks like he is. That's the best possible outcome. The marshals are already pushing him back onto the track."

"If this continues, I think the officials might have to step in and require drivers to take the final triple-corner complex instead of the shortcut," the main commentator mused. "It would significantly reduce their speed approaching the braking zone of T1. With the shortcut, this becomes the longest straight on the track, allowing them to reach dangerous speeds."

"We didn't have this problem last year, so I doubt they'll issue that directive," Zakir responded.

"But I think that's because there was no competition of this level last year to force the top drivers to push the karts so far beyond their limits," the main commentator countered. "This year, because of Fatih, both Jackson and Selçuk know they can only remain in contention if they push themselves to the absolute edge. Any less than that, and Fatih will leave them in the dust, just like he did in the previous championship round."

"That is true," Zakir conceded. "Seeing that he nearly broke the track record on his first try is astonishing. But should the race director really have to intervene? Won't that be babying them too much?"

"We need to baby them. They are still kids doing this for the fun and love of motorsport. There's no need to put them in unwarranted danger. Besides, even without the shortcut, the rest of this track is more than challenging enough."

"Can't argue with that," Zakir said, ending their banter as the replay of Fatih's hot lap was shown on the main screen. He shifted back into his analysis mode. "If we look at Fatih's replay, you can see he only braked three times throughout the entire lap: on the approach to Turn 1, the approach to the T5 hairpin, and the approach to T10. For the rest of the track, all he did was lift off the throttle, carrying as much speed as possible through the different corners. That's why he nearly broke the lap record without any track evolution taking place."

"That's unbelievable," the main commentator said, expressing what everyone listening felt.

"Yes. His braking and throttle control are near-perfect, which we saw last round," Zakir added, his voice filled with a mix of excitement and professional acknowledgement. "And as we saw from Selçuk's failure, it indicates that Fatih was already braking at the absolute maximum distance possible. Any later, and you share Selçuk's fate. To judge that limit on only a few reconnaissance laps... his talent is truly scary."

"But now, let's look at Jackson's lap! He's the last of the three to attempt a hot lap. Having kept his eyes on Fatih's driving for more than three laps, he finally feels confident. He overtakes Fatih on the exit of T8 who moves aside to give him the racing line as he gets on the power, imitating Fatih by taking T9 at full power. Like the other two, he takes the shortcut and starts his flying lap! Will he keep it on the track like Fatih, or will he follow the fate of Selçuk? Ooooh, he brakes earlier than either of them, showing caution as he takes T1! He's slightly slower than Fatih but safe. He brakes again for the T2 hairpin, hitting an early apex for a good exit, then flows through T3 and T4 onto the straight, still on power and pushing for maximum speed! Will he brake earlier again? No! He delays his braking for T5, entering the triple hairpin complex safely, but on a different line than Fatih. He takes the first hairpin, does the same on the second, gets slightly on the power through the T7 right-hander, then brakes before returning to power in the middle of the third hairpin, T8. He carries that power through the exit, takes T9 flat-out, and enters the third straight. He hugs the right side and trail-brakes into T10, gets on the power, then lifts and brakes slightly for T11 before getting on the power for the final time in a drag race to the finish line! And he passes it! Did he match Fatih? Ooooh, he misses by about two-hundredths of a second! **[P2 - Jackson M. - 01:20.992]** Wooow, this is going to be a very exciting weekend! As he lifts, he turns his head, looking for Fatih and Selçuk, as if declaring that he will not be left behind today. That risky but phenomenal lap is there to back up his silent statement!" the main commentator roared, his voice fully recovered.

"He drove with a different approach," Zakir analyzed calmly. "A safer one compared to Fatih's, and he lost a fraction of time because of it, but it allowed him to finish the lap, which can't be said for Selçuk. It's good that he realized he couldn't replicate what Fatih did on his first try, so he approached the problem from a different angle. Otherwise, we might have had another Selçuk situation."

"Yes, he braked at least three more times than Fatih, who only touched the brake pedal thrice throughout the entire lap, utilizing lifting far more," the main commentator added.

"Exactly. To do what Fatih did takes time," Zakir concluded, his tone full of acknowledgement for Jackson's choice. "You can't just do it because you saw it once. You need to understand everything from the grip level to how your chassis will flex through these corners if you want to imitate him and not end up in the tire walls. There is no single best approach for every driver, and there is no need to take risks if you can't handle the pressure that comes with them."

"As if to respond to this challenge Selçuk has started his new hot lap after a few reconnaissance laps to regain his confidence and we can see Fatih zigzagging to heat his tires as he went through T7 and approaches T8 which should indicate that he is going to respond as well" the main commentator said in excitement when he saw how the two kids responded to Selçuk's actions.

"Sometimes you have to wonder where kids this competitive come from," Zakir mused with a shake of his head. "But I certainly won't complain about the entertainment we're benefiting from. Please, take us through their next hot laps." He handed the metaphorical baton back to the main commentator.

The main commentator gladly accepted, his voice booming with renewed energy as he began to call Selçuk's next attempt. At the same time, he kept a close eye on Fatih, who was just exiting the T8 hairpin and immediately got on the power, rocketing towards the start-finish line to begin another flying lap, a clear smile on his face and a palpable sense of excitement in his commentating.

Chapter 35: Race Weekend | Saturday | The Equalizer

[P3 - Selçuk A. - 01:21.102]

The time flashed on the main screen the moment Selçuk's kart shot across the start-finish line.

"And there you have it! The top three are still separated by less than half a second, and as has been the case all session, Fatih remains at the top of the standings," the main commentator announced.

"The difference is becoming clearer with every lap," Zakir analyzed, his tone sharp and insightful. "Fatih is gaining all his time with his perfect throttle control, allowing him to carry speed through corners where the other two are forced to brake. If Jackson and Selçuk want to close that gap, they have two options: either find a way to gain more time in other sections of the track to compensate for the time lost in those braking zones, or they have to attempt what he is doing—which, as we saw with Selçuk earlier, is the far riskier of the two suggestions."

"And it seems, if they've heard you, the two chasers are now returning to the pitlane at the behest of their coaches!" the main commentator exclaimed as the screen cut from Fatih to an image of two coaches standing side-by-side at the pit entry, waving their drivers in. "I hope they're receiving some crucial instructions, because it would be boring if they've withdrawn from the fight now."

The cameras followed them into the pitlane, showing the intense conversations between the drivers and their coaches. Jackson's coach went as far as to pull out a laminated track map, pointing to specific corners and giving his young driver tips on lines and braking points.

This entire process took a full five minutes. By the time Jackson and Selçuk returned to the track, only eight minutes remained in the session. In their absence, Fatih had not been idle. He had put in two more blistering hot laps, each one faster than the last, bringing his best time to within less than a tenth of a second of the all-time track record.

When his rivals rejoined, they were visibly pushing harder, trying to implement their new instructions. Selçuk, driving with renewed aggression, managed to successfully replicate Fatih's no-braking technique in some of the faster corners. However, his still-imperfect throttle control forced him to brake in other areas, preventing him from truly matching Fatih's pace. Still, he managed to reclaim the P2 spot.

Jackson, meanwhile, was on the verge of a breakthrough. He too had attempted the no-brake driving style, but had entered a corner with too much speed, forcing him to brake late and heavily to avoid another crash. The resulting time loss put him on a slower lap than even his first one. But in that mistake, he had learned something crucial. He now understood the required entry speed, the precise level of throttle needed to maintain the kart on the edge through those corners. He was sure he could nail it on the next lap, but just as that realization dawned, the checkered flag was waved, bringing the session to an end. He returned to the pitlane slightly unhappy, but with the quiet satisfaction of knowing he was inching ever closer to matching Fatih. The final standings for the session were P1 Fatih, P2 Selçuk, and P3 Jackson.

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"There's only so much talent can do when there are very limited changes you can make to increase your advantage, especially when the karts are this close," Fatih said to Apollo as he completed his cool-down lap. He had realized that on a dry track, his raw talent advantage was being minimized by the limitations of the machinery.

In Bambino karting, setup changes were minimal. The only other areas to eke out an advantage were in having a brand-new chassis or a blueprinted engine with superior performance. But both of those were areas where top academies excelled. This year, all three of them were using brand-new chassis sponsored by Aslan. As for the engines, the academies were also on a level playing field. They would buy dozens of engines, test all of them, and then amalgamate the best-working parts from different units to create a single, optimized "beast" of an engine, all within the regulations. This meant all three of them were effectively equal when it came to engine power.

The only remaining differentiator was talent. And while the other two were talented, Fatih knew his was on another level. The problem was, there's a limit to how much of a talent advantage you can exploit from a machine before you hit its performance ceiling. The Bambino kart had a very low talent threshold before a driver could extract its maximum potential. Fatih had already blown past that threshold, but since Jackson and Selçuk were talented enough to be on the verge of it themselves, they too could get the maximum out of the karts in these optimal, dry conditions. Unless it rained, where Fatih's superior control gave him a distinct edge, the competition was going to be

incredibly close all weekend. His only remaining advantage was his newly upgraded [Catlex (Excellent)], but even that was limited by how fast the kart could physically respond to his inputs.

"You should be thankful," Apollo answered, a look of amusement on his face. "That is the very reason the System bothered to give you a championship mission with rewards of that magnitude in the first place. If the talent threshold for this karting category were higher, your dominance would be assured, and you would have been earning pennies of SP for simple victories."

"Oh," Fatih said, a thought suddenly clicking into place. "Is that why I didn't receive any 'First Official Race Win' reward, or 'First Pole Position' achievement, or things like that? I've been wondering why those were missing, since they're the backbone of the reward systems in all the stories I've read." He had been so content with the massive SP multiplier from the last race that he hadn't thought about it until later, when he started looking for other ways to increase his SP harvest.

Instead of responding verbally, Apollo simply pulled up the championship mission screen and highlighted a specific line of text for Fatih to see.

[Additional SP can be earned if you complete hidden milestones during the championship period.]

Fatih read the line carefully. A light bulb went on in his head. "So... I **will** be receiving all of those hidden milestone rewards, but only at the end of the entire season?"

"Yes," Apollo confirmed with a nod.

A slow, sly grin spread across Fatih's face. "But what about the multiplier?" he asked, pulling up the **[Recovery Drive Mission]** prompt himself. He pointed to the specific wording: **[A 5X SP multiplier for P1... on all System Points earned **this weekend**]**. "So, those hidden milestone rewards should be included, right? Since I technically **earned** them during the weekend where the multiplier was active." He felt a surge of pride for having caught this loophole before the rewards were issued.

Apollo looked at Fatih for a long moment, a silent expression that clearly said, 'What in the world is this kid made of?' before he finally spoke. "That... I do not know. But since the System worded it that way, it should most likely be included as well. However, as I am not the one who issued that mission, nor do I know all of the System's deepest mechanics, you will have to wait for the rewards to see for yourself." He deftly pushed all potential problems back onto the mysterious System that had issued the mission.

"I hope so," Fatih said as he came to a stop in the pitlane, the last one to leave the track.

He immediately went through the post-session procedures before he and Burak collected the kart and returned it to the academy tent. After a quick debrief about the track conditions, he left to find his mother and grandmother, expecting to spend some quality time with them. Unfortunately, it looked like that would have to be postponed.

He found them not alone, but at the center of a large group. Three tables had been pushed together, and seated with his mother and grandmother were Jackson's father, Selçuk's parents, and a few other adults he didn't recognize. All of them turned to look at him as he approached.

He instinctively turned around, checking to see if Jackson and Selçuk were also behind him, but he found himself completely alone. He was the sole focus of this impromptu summit. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then put on a polite smile and waved at his mother and grandmother as he walked over to hug them, preparing himself for whatever was to come.

Chapter 36: Race Weekend | Saturday | The Entangling of Webs

"My name is Aslan, Selçuk's father," the man said, his voice calm and authoritative the moment Fatih finished hugging his mother and grandmother. Fatih turned to face the group, putting on a look of childlike curiosity. Aslan gestured to the man beside him. "And this is my friend, Aron, Jackson's father. It's a pleasure to meet you." He extended his hand for a handshake after introducing his part of the entourage.

"My name is Fatih. Nice to meet you," Fatih replied in his practiced childlike voice, his small hand enveloped by Aslan's as he used both of his to complete the handshake. The gesture elicited a few warm chuckles from the adults at the table. He then shook hands with Aron.

"Nice to meet you," Aron said, his Turkish broken but friendly, spoken with a distinct English accent as he smiled warmly.

"I'm Salih, from the Fatih Karting Academy," one of the two remaining men introduced himself, extending his hand to Fatih with a professional smile. "I'm here to observe our drivers."

"And I'm Ibrahim, a representative from TOSFED. It's a pleasure to meet you," the last man said, adjusting his suit before offering his hand. Fatih shook it with the same polite smile he had given the others.

'Looks like this is the final meeting regarding the sponsorship,' Fatih thought as he walked back to the seat between his mother and grandmother, accepting the juice his mother handed him. He began drinking from the straw, projecting an air of innocence. 'It's most likely an interview with the subject of the potential sponsorship—which is me. But why is a TOSFED representative here? Is he a mandatory supervisor because the subject is a child, or did someone here request his presence?'

'If I were to make a guess, it is probably the latter,' Apollo's voice echoed in his mind. His mentor's form appeared, phasing through the table as he moved. 'Your mother is very careful when it comes to matters concerning you. This is likely just her being cautious.'

'Aren't you supposed to be all-knowing or something? Why are you making guesses?' Fatih asked curiously. Apollo's behavior didn't quite match the omniscient System he had imagined.

'You keep confusing me with the System,' Apollo replied, his expression turning serious. His translucent body, half above and half below the table, gestured animatedly as if defending himself from a potential accusation. 'The System might be all-knowing—of that, I am not sure, as I also have very little information about it. But as for me, the only thing I can claim to know for sure is everything related to driving. For everything else, *you* are my primary source of information, unless the System determines that I am in need of knowing a specific thing, in which case it provides me with that information.'

'I believe you,' Fatih thought, ending the internal debate just as Aslan began to speak to him directly.

"Fatih, what is your dream?" Aslan asked gently.

'Ah, you're testing my ambition,' Fatih recognized immediately. 'Then let's give you an answer you'll be recounting in a future documentary about me.' He looked Aslan straight in the eye, his young face a mask of unwavering confidence. "To become a Formula 1 multi-champion driver."

His answer, as expected, caused a momentary, stunned silence to fall over the table. Out of the corner of his eye, Fatih saw Apollo looking at him with an expression that clearly asked, 'What is wrong with this kid?' Fatih simply ignored him, continuing to act as if what he had just said was not an outlandish statement for a five-year-old.

It wasn't long before a few chuckles broke the silence.

"It is good to dream big," Aron, Jackson's father, said calmly. There was no hint of discouragement in his voice, only genuine curiosity about the boy's conviction. "But you know that to achieve that will be very difficult. It will require you to have the discipline to practice every single year until you are much older. Do you know that?"

"Yes, I know," Fatih responded with a simple nod.

"Do you know what it takes to become a Formula 1 driver?" Salih, the academy representative, asked, leaning forward, expecting a vague, childish answer.

'Talent, forty superlicense points by the time I'm old enough, an academy seat, and...'

Fatih listed the requirements in his mind. Since some of those things weren't even

requirements in the current era, he chose the most obvious and universal answer. "Money," he said, extending his small hands wide to emphasize the quantity. "Lots of money."

Another round of warm laughter covered the table. The questions continued, and Fatih, keeping with his established persona, answered in a childlike but surprisingly insightful manner, never too specific, but always hinting at a deeper understanding.

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While that conversation continued, Selçuk, having just completed a lengthy debrief with his coach, stood at a distance, his hands clenched into tight fists. He was watching his father, Aslan, constantly smiling and laughing as Fatih spoke. It was a warmth and joy he had so rarely seen directed at himself, not even on holidays or his own birthdays. But now, he was seeing it with his own eyes, lavished upon Fatih.

'Is father going to abandon me and choose him to be his son?' His young mind, unable to process the complex emotions, immediately jumped to the worst possible conclusion.

At the thought, a tremor ran through him, and a single, hot tear escaped his eye. He felt a surge of angry frustration, the urge to throw a tantrum, but he fought it down. He knew his father disliked such behavior, and if he acted out now, it would only push him further away. It would only increase the chances of his father making the decision to abandon him and adopt Fatih instead—Fatih, who was calm, who won, who didn't throw tantrums. He loved his father, and he didn't want to lose him.

'What does he have that I don't?' he asked himself, his gaze drifting to Fatih, who was having his mouth lovingly wiped by his mother. It was a familiar gesture, one he had received from his own mother countless times. The sight sent his emotions into even greater turmoil. He had his mother's love, but he desperately craved his father's. And from the look of it, Fatih had both. "This is so unfair," he whispered, before turning and walking back towards the pitlane, his fists still clenched.

He barged into the team tent, finding his coach still there, looking over a piece of paper. The man raised his head, surprised. "Did you forget something, Selçuk?"

"Teacher... I want to beat Fatih," Selçuk said, his voice serious but shaking with barely contained emotion. "Please, tell me how."

'Since Father likes you because you win races, all I have to do is win,' he resolved fiercely in his mind. 'That should be enough for him to look at me the way he looks at you.' He walked closer to his coach and repeated his request, his determination so intense it made his coach wonder what could have possibly happened to cause such a profound change.

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Just moments after Selçuk had returned to the tent, Jackson found himself in the same area, observing the same scene: his father laughing with Fatih's family. But his reaction was the complete opposite of Selçuk's. He immediately waved at his father, who saw him and waved back, beckoning for him to join them. Jackson's face lit up, and he happily ran over to the group, hugging his father before settling into his lap, ready to join the conversation.

Chapter 37: Race Weekend | Saturday | CRISIS AVERTED

"As he comes out of the final corner and goes through the finish line... HE MATCHES FATIH'S TIME... AND EXCEEDS IT! SELÇUK GOES INTO PROVISIONAL POLE! OH MY GOD, WHAT HAS GOTTEN INTO HIM?!" the main commentator's voice erupted through the speakers as Selçuk's kart blasted across the start-finish line on his final qualifying lap, with only thirty seconds remaining in the Group A session.

"He looked absolutely fearless on that drive," Zakir took over, his voice filled with awe. "It was as if he didn't care or even consider what would happen in case of failure. That option simply didn't seem to exist in his mind. I don't know what gave him that final push, but he has finally managed to beat Fatih's time and take the lead." His explanation didn't last long, however, as Jackson was now nearing the treacherous triple hairpin complex, forcing the main commentator to immediately jump back in.

"We see Jackson approaching his most difficult part of the track, the section where Fatih gained most of his time on all the other drivers, and only Selçuk has been able to match it! Will he find the speed, or will he face the same problems he had before? He brakes heavily, takes the ****T5 left-hand hairpin****, goes to the middle of the track, stays for a moment before going wide on the right-hand side. He lifts slightly before returning to power as he takes the ****T6 right-hand hairpin****... he does it nearly perfectly! He hits a late apex and lets the kart's momentum carry him to the other side of the track! Will he brake for T7? No, he doesn't! He lifts and sends it! And unlike his previous attempts, this time he sticks it! He manages to take the ****T7 right-hander**** by only lifting off and not braking! He goes wide on the right side of the track, enters late, hits a late apex while already getting back on the power, and barrels towards T9, which he takes flat-out! He tumbles into T10, brakes heavily for the left-hander, lifts for T11, and gets on the power for the final time as he passes T12 flat-out! And does he improve? YES! BUT NOT ENOUGH TO MATCH SELÇUK! He's still fast enough to move into provisional P2! But will it stick? Or will Fatih, who is starting his own qualifying lap with only three seconds remaining on the timer, improve on his time now that track evolution has set in? ZAKIR, TAKE US THROUGH IT!"

"He timed this perfectly," Zakir began, his voice a calm counterpoint to the frenzy. "He's made sure no one else is immediately in front of him, but also that no one is behind him to benefit from the track evolution for their own lap. He now has the absolute best possible track conditions for this Group A qualifying session. But it's a double-edged sword. At this moment, he cannot afford a single mistake, or he will be starting the heats

from a much worse position. He has the best track conditions, but also the maximum possible pressure."

As Zakir spoke, Fatih, having taken the shortcut, was already nearing the kart's maximum speed by the time he crossed the start-finish line to begin his final, all-or-nothing qualifying lap.

"He brakes later than all of his previous laps! Later than anyone has all day! And he sticks it where Selçuk had failed during the free practice session!" Zakir roared, unable to contain himself. "For T2, you don't need to brake, just lift while carrying the maximum possible speed, and he does it perfectly before getting back on the power, taking T3 and T4 as if they don't even exist! He continues gathering speed, keeping an eye on his braking point for T5... and he is already faster than anyone in Sector One by a tenth of a second! As if he is an experienced hunter who has done this thousands of times, he once again shows why he is the class of this championship! He starts Sector Two by braking later than all his previous times, but instead of braking heavily, he trail-brakes into the corner, inducing an intentional, momentary slide! This allows for a higher entry speed, and with higher entry speed comes higher exit speed! He flows into the T6 short straight, a slight lift into T7, goes wide on the left side of the track before reversing that by moving to the right, lifts slightly, enters T8 late to target a late apex... and he lights Sector Two purple by another two-tenths of a second! He's already getting back on the power on exit and takes T9 flat-out! He does it with more speed than any of his previous sessions as he rushes towards T10! He starts turning *before* braking, only beginning to apply the brakes while the kart is already turning... Ooh, he slides for a moment! He recovers incredibly fast but is forced to brake into T11 to regain full control as he rushes towards T12!"

The main commentator immediately took over, his voice a raw shout of disbelief. "DID THE MISTAKE COST HIM?! NO! HE RETURNS TO HIS ORIGINAL POSITION! POLE POSITION! AND HE BREAKS THE TRACK'S QUALIFYING LAP RECORD BY TWO-TENTHS OF A SECOND, DESPITE THE MISTAKE IN THE FINAL SECTOR!"

[P1 - Fatih Y. - 01:20.213]

The time flashed across the screen as Fatih went through the finish line, the very last person to set a final lap time in the qualifying session.

"Group A has lived up to its potential as the 'Group of Death'!" Zakir said, his voice filled with awe as the screen showed Fatih driving his cool-down lap. "I can't believe karting at this level can be this exciting." He noted that Fatih was driving as if still in the race, with no hint of a raised fist or any other celebration.

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'What has gotten into him? Is he trying to kill us or something?' were the words cycling through Fatih's mind the moment he finished his final lap, remembering how Selçuk drove with a reckless abandon that bordered on insane.

"Are you complaining that you have a competitor who can match you and force you to focus fully?" Apollo's head appeared in front of him, his body having phased through Fatih's from the rear.

"Not that," Fatih retorted internally. "But the way he was driving is not how a sane person drives. At any point during that qualifying lap, had he hit a single pebble, he would have been sent tumbling. He would be out of the session and starting at the back of the grid for the heats."

"For him, that is the only way he can match you," Apollo said, his tone natural and not at all scolding. "So, show some respect and continue doing your very best. Complacency is the death of talent. Be thankful that you have two people to force you to stay on your toes." He knew Fatih hadn't slacked for even a moment; the only reason his previous lap times were surpassed was because he had been impeded by younger drivers who didn't yet know how to position their karts to stay out of the way of a driver on a hot lap.

"I'm just worrying about his safety," Fatih replied as he entered the pitlane, his eyes locking onto Selçuk and Jackson, who were already standing in line for the post-session weigh-in. "Him being injured helps no one."

Chapter 38: Race Weekend | Sunday | GROUP A&B QUALIFYING HEATS

As he walked towards them with his helmet still on, Fatih observed the starkly different reactions of his two main rivals. Jackson, seeing him approach, offered a small, friendly wave. Selçuk, however, just stared, his jaw tight, gritting his teeth in silent frustration.

The impromptu meeting with the sponsors and academy representatives had an unintended side effect: thanks to the introductions between their parents, Fatih and Jackson had become tentative friends. Aslan had intended to do the same for Selçuk, but he had been unable to find his son after the qualifying session, and by the time Selçuk had reappeared, it was time for the next on-track session to begin.

Still, Fatih continued his approach; he needed to get weighed in anyway.

"Good driving," Fatih said, extending a closed fist to Jackson.

"I came third," Jackson replied, his face a little shy as he returned the fist bump. He met Fatih's gloved hand with his bare one, his other hand nervously squishing his own racing gloves.

Although he was beginning to consider Fatih a friend, the competitive spirit burned brightly within him. He wasn't happy with P3. It meant starting both of tomorrow's heat

races behind Fatih and Selçuk, significantly reducing his chances of earning a prime starting position for the all-important Final race.

Fatih nodded at Jackson before turning to Selçuk, who had just stepped off the scale. He repeated the gesture. "Good driving," he said, his fist extended.

Selçuk's eyes flickered down to the offered fist. He said nothing. Instead, he balled his own hand and slammed it against Fatih's with more force than necessary, causing Fatih's arm to jolt backward. Without another glance, Selçuk shouldered past him, bumping him as he stalked off towards the academy tent.

Fatih turned, watching Selçuk's retreating back with a momentarily speechless expression. He didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as the official called his name. He immediately walked to the scale, got his weight measured, and then he too returned to the academy tent. Selçuk was nowhere to be seen.

He went through all of his remaining commitments with Burak, debriefing on the session and going over tomorrow's schedule. Afterwards, Burak escorted him back to where his mother and grandmother were waiting. They returned to the hotel, had dinner, and spent some precious family time together before he went to sleep, his mind already preparing for the battles of the next day.

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"When are we going to move to the KZ kart?" Fatih finally couldn't hold it in any longer. He posed the question to Apollo, his voice echoing in the vast, empty space of the La Conca simulation. He had assumed that after the basics were done, he would have moved on to the more powerful machinery, especially since so many of the advanced concepts he was learning would be far more effective at that level and beyond, in single-seaters.

There were only about ten minutes left of his allowed four hours in the simulation, so he decided to use the moment to ask. It would have been one thing if he didn't have a more powerful kart registered. But he did. The KF1 kart was the very first vehicle he had ever registered, yet he had never once been allowed to even materialize it. There was always another task, another fundamental to master in the Bambino kart.

"Learning the fundamentals in a car where you can practice them at the absolute limit of the machine's capability is an invaluable asset," Apollo explained, his tone that of a patient master. "Until you have all of the basics down, until you are able to instinctively use them at this kart's maximum speed, we will not be moving to the more powerful kart. It would be detrimental to your training. You would have to constantly adjust between two vastly different driving styles every time you returned to the Bambino kart after getting used to the KF1 machine."

"I'm pretty sure my Invictus ability can handle that without a problem," Fatih countered, his reasoning sound. "I'm very sensitive to changes. I'm already doing it when I drive my underpowered home kart, the slightly more powerful academy training kart, and the overpowered competition kart. I've been adapting between them seamlessly, as if I've only been practicing with one type of kart this whole time."

"Although you have Invictus, and it is indeed possible for you to do that, I would strongly advise against it," Apollo said, his voice firm but fair. "These are your formative experiences. You are building the foundation upon which your entire career will rest. Mixing these foundational lessons with wildly different types of karts, with different power deliveries and driving styles, will only introduce flaws and inconsistencies into that foundation. You cannot build a skyscraper on a foundation meant for a bungalow. Wait until the championship is over. Wait until you are done with the basics. Then, we can move to the KF1 kart as we focus on the next stage of your training."

Apollo's tone left no room for argument, but it wasn't an ultimatum. The System was designed to help Fatih become the greatest of all time, but only if he wanted it, only if he strived for it. Should he decide to stop pursuing motorsport, the System would simply remain dormant, a universe of wasted potential. This meant that if Fatih truly decided to flunk his training and start using the KF1 kart, he could. But it would come at the detriment of his relationship with Apollo, a reduction in his practice efficiency, and a sharp decline in the missions issued by his mentor. It would be a foolish, shortsighted choice.

"Sure then," Fatih said, shelving his thoughts on the matter. He was a reasonable person. As long as the explanation made sense, he wouldn't fight it. He just wanted to understand the reasons. "We'll wait for when the time comes."

"See you tomorrow," he added, as the timer in his vision neared zero, bringing an end to his time in the simulation for the day. His consciousness drifted back into a peaceful sleep, waiting for the dawn of race day.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second day of the second race weekend of the championship!" the voice of Süleyman Çakır, the main commentator, boomed across the circuit. "We are soon to start the first of three rounds of heat races that will determine the final starting positions for the main event, and who will be eliminated and forced to fight for their redemption in the Pre-Finals. Keep in mind, due to the high-speed nature of this track, the number of drivers who will move to the Final race is thirty, instead of the forty from the previous round, meaning ten drivers will be disqualified from the qualifying heats! I'm Süleyman Çakır, and my co-commentator is Zakir. Zakir, please take it away and give us the details."

Only three minutes remained before the start of the race. All the karts from Group A and Group B were now positioned in their grid slots.

"Thank you very much, Süleyman," Zakir began. "And like you, I'm very excited about this heat. We have a very unusual grid positioning compared to last week. Although two groups have been mixed for the heats, the top three qualifiers are all from the same group—Group A! And from the looks of it, it will be the same for their second qualifying heat as well. But for now, let's focus on our current event. The green flag is waved, and Fatih leads the drivers on the formation lap! He immediately gets on the power and starts weaving like a madman, trying to put as much heat into the tires as possible, creating the look of a snake slithering down the track. The top two on the grid, Fatih and Selçuk, were the ones involved in the incident last weekend, so this start is going to be very interesting. I'm very curious as to whether Selçuk will be aggressive again, or if he will remain calm and take his time to attack, since Fatih doesn't have the massive advantage on a dry track that he did last week in the rain."

As Fatih exited the third of the triple hairpins, he slowed, trying to compress the pack so that he wouldn't have to wait on the grid for too long. But he couldn't slow down excessively and risk his tires dissipating their precious heat. By the time he arrived at his P1 grid slot, there were still more than twenty drivers who were nowhere near the starting grid. It looked like he would have to wait for a few seconds—something no driver wants to do, but an unfortunate consequence of earning pole position.

"What is he doing? Is that even allowed?" Süleyman suddenly asked, his voice sharp with surprise. On the screen, Fatih was using his hands, placing them on his rear tires and physically pushing himself backward, rolling the kart just a few centimeters.

"There is nothing in the regulations that explicitly stops him from doing that," Zakir said, curiosity lacing his own tone. "But I'm very curious as well as to why he is doing it."

"And the final kart enters its grid position! We have a green flag as the lights start going off... AND IT'S LIGHTS OUT AND AWAY WE GO! Fatih has a great start! With enough force to even lift his front tires, it's as if he jumped off the line! He immediately opens a gap on Selçuk, who looks completely surprised by the situation as they barrel into the first corner! Jackson settles in behind them in the third position, followed by Huzeyfa and Aisha, completing the top five as the heat race gets underway! There are no aggressive actions from Selçuk, unlike what we expected. Fatih didn't even give him the chance to drive aggressively or divebomb him, thanks to the gap he opened at the start! How do you think he achieved that, Zakir? Did he jump the start, or was his reaction just that fast?"

"I think this can be attributed to his actions before the race started, when he pushed himself backward," Zakir explained, his voice filled with the excitement of a fresh realization. "It seems he unstuck the parts of the tire that were gripping the ground due to heat. If you look at his start compared to the others, they all remained stationary for a split second longer, despite lifting off the brakes and getting on the power. Some of their engine's initial energy had to be spent just unsticking the hot, tacky tires from the tarmac. That's an obstacle Fatih didn't have to deal with because he had already

unstuck his before the race even started! A very clever solution to a problem no one else even considered solving. This is the difference between trailblazers and followers."

"And the top five have already broken away into their own group!" Süleyman observed. "It seems like they're intending on conserving their strength for the later parts of the qualifying heat before they push for overtakes. For now, they're focused on increasing the gap to those behind them. But Fatih... he's already in a league of his own. Selçuk is trying to benefit from his slipstream to reduce the gap, but from the looks of it, it's going to take a very long time for him to catch up, unless Fatih makes a mistake—and that is something he is not known for doing."

Chapter 39: Race Weekend | Sunday | Taking the Fight to Him

"And the two chasers make their move! They catch up and flank him on both sides, bleeding the speed they gained from his slipstream! They are now barreling three-wide towards the corner leading to the triple hairpin! Who will be braver? Will it be Fatih, as always? Will it be Selçuk, the aggressive one? Or will it be Jackson, last year's title defender?!" Süleyman's voice was a raw shout as the three karts hurtled towards T5.

On track, Fatih looked preternaturally calm. Selçuk's gaze was locked on Fatih, his posture radiating aggression. Jackson, ever the calculator, was constantly flicking his eyes between the other two and the rapidly approaching braking zone. As they neared the limit, each driver had to consider the actions of the other two. Be brave and risk taking yourself and someone else out of the race? Or be cautious, risk losing a position, but have the assurance that you will still remain in the race and salvage points, unlike having none if you are taken out.

"Ooooooooooooooooooh! FATİH BRAKES FIRST! SELÇUK KEEPS HIS AGGRESSIVENESS AND MOVES INTO P1! AND JACKSON, THE EVER-CAUTIOUS, BECOMES A TAD AGGRESSIVE HIMSELF AS HE GAINS A POSITION AND MOVES TO P2! WHY DID FATİH DO THAT?!" Süleyman shouted, perfectly telegraphing the confusion and shock of the viewers.

On the track, Fatih had indeed been the first to brake, hitting the pedal even earlier than he had in all of his previous laps as he targeted an early apex. The other two, having expected Fatih to be the last to brake, had pushed their own braking points later in an attempt to out-brake him. This forced them to take a wider, later apex.

"And as they barrel into the corner, Fatih gets on the power earlier and passes them both, retaking his original position as they are only just getting back on the power due to overshooting their braking points!" Süleyman roared. "But they are still on his tail as they take T6, the second of the triple hairpins! This time, Fatih keeps his usual calm and smooth driving, perfectly placing his kart in a defensive position that makes it difficult for them to do anything about it! It seems his unexpected move has made them more careful, as they now have to consider that he might do something completely unpredictable! They manage to replicate his no-brake approach through T7, keeping up

with him as Fatih keeps looking ahead, not turning his head even once! It's as if he has eyes in the back of his head!

AND THIS TIME, HE BRAKES LATER THAN THE OTHER TWO AS HE TRAIL-BRAKES INTO T8, THE FINAL OF THE TRIPLE HAIRPIN! As a result, he gets on the power late but keeps his position and has a more controlled acceleration as he powers through T9! The three are now drag racing to the final three corners of this qualifying heat! Will Fatih defend successfully, or will the other two manage to make something of these final corners? Fatih chooses his side of the road, hugging the left side of the track, unlike the previous times where he elected to remain in the middle! As the straight is continuously being reduced, the other two are continuously shortening their distance to him!

AND FATİH BRAKES IN HIS USUAL SPOT, BUT SELÇUK DOESN'T! HE OUTBRAKES HIM! IS THIS IT? IS THIS HOW FATİH IS DEFEATED?! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! FATİH GOES WIDE, BLOCKS SELÇUK, AND FORCES HIM TO BRAKE HEAVIER THAN HE NEEDED! FATİH USES HIS RIGHT AS THE RACE LEADER TO CHOOSE THE RACING LINE! AND JACKSON, WHO REMAINED CALM, GOES PAST SELÇUK AND THREATENS FATİH, WHO LOST TIME DEFENDING! BUT FATİH CLOSES THAT DOOR! THE DISADVANTAGEOUS LINE HE TOOK TO BLOCK SELÇUK TURNS INTO THE ADVANTAGEOUS ONE AS T11 COMES AT THEM! HE PLACES HIS KART PERFECTLY, GETS ON THE POWER ON THE EXIT, AND KEEPS IT THAT WAY THROUGH T12! AND FATİH, THE CONQUEROR, CONTINUES HIS CRUSADE AS HE WINS HIS SECOND AND FINAL QUALIFYING HEAT OF THE WEEKEND, SECURING POLE POSITION FOR THIS EVENING'S RACE! JACKSON FOLLOWS BEHIND HIM, BENEFITING FROM SELÇUK'S AGGRESSIVE ATTEMPT AND COMING IN SECOND, FOLLOWED BY SELÇUK, WHO FINISHES THIRD! THAT WAS A VERY EXCITING HEAT!

These two have been taking the fight to Fatih this whole weekend! I can't help but look forward to the Final race this evening!"

Zakir took over as Süleyman gathered his breath. "Selçuk will be starting on P2 for the Final due to his better qualifying time than Jackson, which is the tie-breaker. But I don't think he should be forgotten. His calm and opportunistic driving has shown to be very fruitful when the other two are battling for the lead, and he is always there to take advantage of their mistakes. It's just very difficult to believe that of the two at the front who have been fighting tooth and nail, one is in his first professional championship, and the other wasn't even in the top three last year, while the defending champion is having to keep calm and pick up the scraps left by the two."

"That is motorsport for you," Süleyman commented as Fatih drove a victory and cool-down lap. "But also keep in mind that these are children with an average age of seven. They are in a period of rapid growth, both physically and mentally. So, someone who wasn't even on the radar last year can just puff up and become a threatening individual in the next year's championship."

"We can't even call it a late blooming," Zakir said with a chuckle before continuing. "But I can't believe how calm Fatih has been throughout these two heats, when someone else might have crumbled from the pressure the other two were exerting on him. Let's see here... I have it written down. The three of them have been in a total of thirteen distinct battles in just these two heats, but Fatih came out on top in all of them by doing different things every single time, despite some of these battles taking place in the same locations. Wow."

"I'm pretty sure I never saw him turn his head even once to look at the other two who were chasing after him," Süleyman, the main commentator, said. "Is that even possible in the first place, or am I just hallucinating?"

"I think I saw the same thing, and even the replay shows it," Zakir answered, just as the replay of the final lap battle was shown on the screen. It showed Fatih defending while only looking forward, turning his head only for the corners as if he were driving alone. "It seems... it seems like he is locating where they are and what they are doing through sound."

"But is that possible amidst the noise caused by both the viewers and the other twenty-nine karts?" Süleyman asked in disbelief.

"I'm having a hard time believing it's true, but we are seeing it happen," Zakir replied. "The other explanation is that he doesn't care to look because of his supreme confidence in his driving, but that's not possible, as his driving shows that he *knows* where they are. If he is actually locating them with sound, that would make him a terrifying person to drive against. He would be responding not to what he sees or thinks you are doing, but to what he *hears*, which would be like driving against a person who has a third-person point of view."

"But that would explain many of his actions during defense," Süleyman added, his voice still tinged with disbelief. "His car placements, his braking timings—when he outbrakes them or when he brakes earlier than them—all of these actions would make sense if you consider that he can use sound to know where his opponents are and what they are doing."

"It is still speculation," Zakir cautioned. "We can just ask him in the interview after the Final race and get a definitive answer. That is, if he even knows how he's doing it in the first place."

"Finally! My day to do the interviews has come!" Süleyman said, a teasing tone in his voice. "I was so jealous of you last championship weekend, but patience has paid off, and I'm going to enjoy it. But why are you speaking as if it's a certainty that he's going to be on the podium in the Final race?"

"Unless force majeure happens, he is going to be on the podium," Zakir answered, his voice full of confidence. "Although I can't say for sure he'll win the race, since the other

two have been constantly improving and bringing the fight to him, he is going to be there."

As they spoke, Fatih and the rest of the karts from the Group A & C qualifying heat were finally entering the pitlane to go through the after-race procedures. Group A was finally done with their qualifying heats and had only the Final race left for those who made it through, and the Pre-Final for those who were eliminated.

Chapter 40: Race Weekend | Sunday | A Terrible Decision

"This is going to be a very exciting race," Fatih murmured to himself. He watched as the last of the coaches and officials cleared the grid. Only thirty seconds remained before the formation lap of the weekend's Final race was set to begin.

Even though his kart lacked rearview mirrors, he could feel Selçuk's presence a short distance from him. It was more than just proximity; it was an aura of pure aggression radiating from the kart in P2. He could sense it in the sharp, impatient blips of Selçuk's throttle. This was not a bluff. Fatih knew, with absolute certainty, that Selçuk was going to be incredibly aggressive at the start and might even risk taking both of them out. He was sure of this because he knew that, other than himself, the rest of the drivers were too young to think of using pre-race aggression as a sophisticated mental game to unsettle a rival without actually intending to follow through. Selçuk's aggression was genuine.

Normally, Fatih wouldn't be worried. He could handle a straightforward attack. The real problem, the variable that turned this into a complex strategic dilemma, was Jackson, sitting calmly in P3. Jackson was perfectly positioned to benefit from any chaos Selçuk created, just as he had in the last qualifying heat. This put Fatih between a rock and a hard place.

He could defend aggressively against Selçuk, which would compromise his own line and almost certainly allow the opportunistic Jackson to benefit. Or, he could do nothing, let Selçuk by, and risk losing a position he might never get back. The Bambino kart was neither powerful enough nor large enough for him to strategically "park it" on an apex to block both of them. He had to choose which threat to prioritize. The contrasting driving styles of his two rivals only compounded the problem; they complemented each other perfectly. Selçuk's raw aggression created openings, and Jackson's calm, calculated driving style was perfectly suited to exploit them. What worked as a defense against one would likely fail against the other.

"That's good," Apollo's voice resonated in his mind, cutting through his thoughts. "You should feel excited to be put in challenges like these. They will forge you in ways that mere practice is incapable of."

Fatih smiled inside his helmet as the timer hit zero. The official waved the green flag, signaling the start of the formation lap. "I know," he replied to Apollo as he lifted his foot

from the brake pedal and began to lead the thirty-kart train around the circuit. "That's why I've been racking my brain on how to deal with this situation ever since the qualifying heats ended."

"I am curious to see your answer," Apollo said, before ceasing all communication. Although Fatih's [Sponge Brain] ability gave him the mental capacity to converse during a race, Apollo wanted to prevent the formation of a bad habit. Once Fatih reached a level of competition that required one hundred percent of his mental focus, he couldn't afford to have a portion of his mind subconsciously reserved for a conversation with his mentor. It would be a difficult habit to break later on.

Fatih weaved left and right, scrubbing his tires to build as much heat as possible, careful not to open too large a gap to the karts behind, which would only mean a longer wait on the grid. As he exited T8, he slowed to a crawl, causing a concertina effect behind him as he waited for the last driver to catch the tail of the train. Once the pack was compressed, he got on the power for the final time, a tad more aggressively than necessary to induce a brief wheelspin, cleaning off any debris that had stuck to the hot tires when he had slowed down. He rushed to his grid slot and came to a stop, his eyes immediately locking onto the starting lights. He repeated his clever trick from the heats, pushing his kart backward a few centimeters with his hands on the rear tires, unsticking them from the tarmac. This time, nearly all of the top ten drivers did the same, showing that their coaches were paying attention. Those without coaches simply imitated what the front-runners did.

BIP... BIP... BIP... BIP... BIP...

One by one, the five red lights illuminated. All thirty drivers held their breath, waiting for the moment they would go out.

VRROOOOM!

The moment the lights went out, Fatih's [**Catlex (Excellent)**] ability showed its benefits. He was the first to get on the power, his reaction seemingly instantaneous. He launched off the line and barreled towards T1, knowing full well that Selçuk was coming for him.

As he approached the braking zone for Turn 1, he didn't brake at his usual, absolute-limit point, nor did he brake excessively early. He chose a point in the middle, moving slightly to the right side of the track before turning in, perfectly covering the inside line. The move completely thwarted Selçuk, who was barreling in, planning to out-brake Fatih. Fatih's early turn-in forced Selçuk to brake ahead of his own plan, or risk a collision. This allowed Fatih to not only keep his lead but to open a small, crucial gap to the two chasing him. He went through Turn 2, got on the power, and plowed through T3 and T4 as if they were a single, continuous straight, entering the back straight with as much speed as possible. He tucked his head forward for the mini-DRS effect, determined not to lose any time, knowing his rivals would be benefiting from his slipstream.

He maintained his speed masterfully through the triple hairpin complex, increasing the gap between himself and those behind him. As he exited T9 flat-out, he saw a flag being waved from the marshal post. He turned his head slightly. That's when he saw the penalty board, his own name and number displayed in stark black and white.

[FATIH Y. #213 - JUMP START - 5 SECOND TIME PENALTY]

As he read the board, he tilted his head in genuine confusion. He didn't lift at all, keeping his foot planted as he took T10, T11, and T12, his head still locked on the board, his mind racing. *When the heck did I jumpstart?*

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"OOOOH! A five-second penalty has been issued to Fatih for a jump start! Oh my god, is this real? I don't think he did!" Süleyman exclaimed, his voice a mix of shock and disbelief as the live footage showed Fatih tilting his head in confusion while navigating the final corners. "His reaction was fast, that is true, but not jump-start-level fast! Or am I misremembering?"

"I think a jump start might be a possibility, but the speed at which that punishment was announced is what's truly surprising," Zakir said, providing a technical explanation. "I don't think they even had time to visually investigate it at all. They must have just gone with the raw sensor data from the starting grid."

"But is the sensor data to be trusted? As you can see, even Fatih himself is tilting his head in confusion!"

"Although they can malfunction, it's very rare," Zakir explained. "They are generally very reliable and are tested before the Final race. But even if it turns out to be a mistake, a one-in-a-thousand situation, a jump start time penalty cannot be rescinded. It is considered final, and the regulations do not allow for it to be taken back."

"That's why I'm surprised at the speed of the decision!" Süleyman argued. "They could have taken their time, since the penalty can be added at the end of the race! And here is the replay of the race start. Let's watch carefully and come to a decision on our own."

The screen changed from the live race to a replay of the start, focused on Fatih. The camera angle chosen by the student broadcast director was perfect, showing both Fatih's kart and the starting lights in the same frame. The replay, slowed down to a crawl, showed Fatih's kart moving just a few frames *after* the lights went out. When played at normal speed, however, the movement was so immediate it *appeared* to be a jump start.

"AAAAAH, I don't think that is a jump start," Süleyman said as the scene was replayed again and again, getting slower with each repetition.

"I agree with you," Zakir said, leaning forward. "It looks like either the laser sensor on the grid malfunctioned, or Fatih's reaction time actually exceeded the data transfer speed between the timing tower, the sensor and the control station. The system registered his movement before it registered that the lights had gone out, making it appear as if he had jumpstarted."

"But unfortunately, it doesn't matter," Süleyman lamented. "The penalty is out and can't be taken back. That's why they should have checked if the video matched the sensor data. They have now just completely altered the complexion of this race. The penalty has resulted in Selçuk reducing his aggressiveness. He's just focusing on maintaining the distance now, not even trying to overtake, since that guarantees him a race win if he just remains within five seconds of Fatih."

"Thankfully, the penalty didn't rattle Fatih, as he is still driving at the same incredible pace," Zakir observed as the broadcast returned to the live race. "But the pressure on him has just increased tenfold. He now has to open a five-second gap to Selçuk if he wants to win this race. And both Selçuk and Jackson know that. They are now just keeping pace with him, content to sit behind him, as the gap between the top three is not even two seconds..." He trailed off, wondering how much pressure Fatih must be feeling, having just received a massive confidence blow from a penalty he didn't deserve.