

PROTEGE 216

Chapter 216: I'M NOT DANCING AND THAT'S FINAL!

Coach Sam straightened, his mind still struggling to process the reality of the situation. "The Hidden Valley?" He repeated the words as if testing their weight. "Where is that?"

Ling Li nodded. "This is a sacred place only open for martial art cultivators. It's the only logical place for him to hide and recover."

Coach Sam clenched his jaw, shaking his head. "I knew Solaris had ambition, but this... this is something entirely different."

Fatty exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair, tension clear in his posture. He turned to Ling Li. "We have to keep Lily safe. There's no telling what Solaris will try next."

Ling Li's eyes softened slightly as she looked at Lily. "She will be protected."

Lily, who had remained quiet, swallowed hard, her pulse pounding in her ears. Her fingers trembled at her sides, curling ever so slightly as if grasping onto some invisible thread of resolve. She forced herself to breathe, steadying herself before looking up — her gaze fierce, determined despite the uncertainty that threatened to claw at her.

"I want to help," she said suddenly, her voice firm, yet not without a shadow of fear lurking beneath its surface.

The moment the words left her lips, Fatty's reaction was immediate. His head snapped toward her, brows knitting together in a mixture of frustration and fierce protectiveness.

"No. Absolutely not," he said, his tone flat and final.

Lily frowned, heat rising to her cheeks. "Quan Ye, I'm not weak —"

Fatty's jaw tightened as his eyes flashed with something dark, something immovable. "You are when it comes to this," he interrupted, voice firm but not cruel. There was no room for negotiation in his words, only the unshakable instinct to protect. "This is Solaris we're dealing with. Do you honestly think he'll hesitate to use whatever means necessary? He won't."

The weight of his words fell between them like a heavy stone, and the silence stretched thick. Shi Min observed the exchange but kept his thoughts to himself, watching with measured neutrality.

Ling Li, on the other hand, let out a breath and finally spoke, shifting the conversation forward.

"For now, we focus on a plan," she said, her voice tinged with quiet urgency. "Otako will advise us once I speak with him. I think Solaris plans to make his move on Lily during the day of the competition."

Fatty exhaled sharply but gave a stiff nod, his grip unconsciously tightening around Lily's arm as if his hold alone could keep her safe from what was coming.

Coach Sam, who had been silent until now, closed his eyes briefly, inhaling deeply before opening them again with a newfound determination.

"Whatever we need to do," he said, voice resolute, "I will be ready to help."

Lily's expression hardened, her determination burning stronger than before. "Then, let's set a trap for him on the competition day. I need to compete."

Her words sent a ripple through the group — Ling Li sighed, shaking her head slightly. "But where are we supposed to find a partner for you with only six weeks left until the competition?"

Coach Sam cleared his throat with an exaggerated "Ehem," his eyes twinkling mischievously as he flicked his gaze toward Ling Li.

Ling Li blinked, waiting for him to explain himself. But then, following the direction of his gaze, she noticed something — Coach Sam wasn't looking at her anymore. His eyes had settled on Shi Min.

Shi Min, who had been listening silently, suddenly stiffened under the scrutiny. He felt their gazes land on him, and immediately, his face darkened, eyes narrowing.

“No way!” he exclaimed before anyone could even suggest it.

Coach Sam grinned. “Oh, come on! You were one of my best students; I’m sure you want to give your sister justice!”

Shi Min shook his head vigorously, taking a small step back as if physically rejecting the notion. “No! I’m not dancing in the competition! I’m not dancing and that’s final!” His tone carried finality — absolute and unwavering.

Yet somehow, in some inexplicable turn of events, one hour later—

“One and two and three and turn! Yes, that’s it! Chin up, chest out...”

Shi Min was already dancing with Lily at the practice hall, his movements fluid but begrudging, his expression dark as storm clouds overhead. His face was the very definition of reluctant — it was darker than a pot, his jaw clenched so tightly it looked as though he was holding back a war cry of frustration.

Shi Min “...”

‘I actually ate my words. Who ask me to be so talented?’ He thought helplessly with a snort.

Coach Sam’s voice flew all over the place as he shouted corrections, encouragements, and commands, his enthusiasm contagious despite the lingering tension. Lily, surprisingly, had eased into the dance with an unexpected grace, though nerves still rippled beneath the surface. Shi Min was stiff, resistant — but beneath that, there was something else.

A shift.

A promise.

In the heavy silence of their movements, amidst the synchronized turns and steady footwork, there was an unspoken resolve — an unbreakable, silent vow that Solaris would not win.

Fatty stood near the edge of the practice hall, arms crossed tightly, his expression locked in an unreadable scowl. But deep inside, jealousy gnawed at him like an insistent itch. His eyes followed every precise step Shi Min took, every effortless movement as he led Lily across the floor with a finesse Fatty couldn't deny.

"Why didn't I agree with my mother to take dance lessons when I was young? She was forcing me to the point I ran from home," he thought bitterly, shaking his head. Regret sat heavy in his chest. He clenched his fists, watching how Lily's eyes sparkled with admiration toward her brother, completely entranced by the rhythm they created together. Shi Min moved with a dancer's natural grace, his presence commanding, his movements sharp yet fluid — perfectly measured.

Ling Li sat beside Four Eyes, her gaze carefully observing Shi Min's form, taking in every calculated step. At first, she had watched him with scrutiny, expecting hesitation, expecting struggle. Yet, much to her quiet astonishment, he had settled into the dance as though it was second nature. A slow warmth spread through her chest — pride.

Chapter 217: I HAVE TWO LEFT FEET

'Shi Min is truly remarkable in anything he sets his mind to,' Ling Li mused, an affectionate smile ghosting her lips. Her maternal instincts kicked in, softening her expression as she watched the two before her — her two children. There was something profound in the way they danced, a silent harmony they created despite the tension that still lingered between them.

Four Eyes adjusted his glasses, silently observing Ling Li's expression as he listened to her thoughts. The way her eyes shimmered with unspoken pride stirred something within him — something unexpected. He'd always known she had that maternal presence, that unwavering support, but seeing it so clearly, so openly, made him realize just how deeply she cared.

'I guess I should practice my dance a bit more,' he thought begrudgingly, suppressing the urge to sigh aloud.

Four Eyes hadn't taken dance seriously when he was younger. Back then, it had felt like a chore, something his mother had insisted upon — something he thought he'd never truly need. Unlike Fatty, Four Eyes was very kind and obedient to his mother. But now, watching Shi Min move effortlessly across the floor, seeing how Lily responded to his steps with trust and precision, it struck Four Eyes differently.

For the first time, Four Eyes appreciated the effort his mother had put into sending him to those dance lessons. His mother had seen value in it, even when he had dismissed it as pointless. Maybe, just maybe, he'd been wrong about that.

Four Eyes fingers tapped against his knee absentmindedly, a slight rhythm forming. He stole a glance at Ling Li again, watching the warmth in her gaze. A fleeting thought crossed his mind — perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to step onto the dance floor himself with Ling Li, just once. Maybe not now, maybe not soon, but... eventually.

For now, though, Four Eyes simply leaned back, settling into the moment, watching as Shi Min and Lily continued their silent harmony, the atmosphere thick with purpose and unspoken determination.

Then, one after the other, Ren and Shun entered the hall. They were so excited to come after Butler Peng told them that Shi Min was dancing. They came rushing, their footsteps light, not wanting to disrupt the practice. Not long after, Chatty burst in, Pharsa trailing behind him, her usual composed demeanor momentarily shattered by sheer surprise.

The moment Chatty laid eyes on the dance floor, his mouth fell open, and before anyone could stop him, he bellowed, "Holy Camollie! Is that Shi Min?!"

His voice echoed loudly, bouncing off the walls, making everyone turn.

Shi Min faltered mid-step, barely recovering in time. His face darkened even more, his annoyance visible in the sharp twitch of his jaw. Lily bit her lip, suppressing a laugh, while Coach Sam simply grinned in amusement.

Ren, her eyes wide with delight, took a step forward, folding her arms as she watched intently. A slow smirk formed on her lips as she tilted her head. "Ah, my brother still has a kick for dancing," she mused, eyes shining with a mix of nostalgia and pride. "He's as slick as ever."

Shi Min exhaled sharply through his nose. “Shut it,” he muttered under his breath, still maintaining his steps with Lily, though his composure was visibly strained.

Chatty just couldn’t hold back his excitement, his entire body practically vibrating with admiration as he watched Shi Min execute yet another flawless turn. His hands flailed slightly as he leaned closer to Pharsa, voice hushed but still loud enough to carry across the hall.

“Did you see that spin just now? That was professional level!” he whispered in awe, eyes wide as saucers.

Pharsa barely spared him a glance, unimpressed by his theatrics. “Are you really this amazed?” she asked dryly, arching a perfectly sculpted brow.

Chatty, however, was immune to her sarcasm. His jaw hung open, his fingers twitching as if grasping at invisible strings of disbelief. “You don’t get it, Hon! I’m an expert in watching people dance — but when it comes to actually doing it? Ha! I have two left feet. No — worse! I have no feet when it comes to dancing!”

Pharsa sighed, crossing her arms as she observed Shi Min and Lily moving in perfect synchronization. “Well, at least you’re self-aware,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Meanwhile, Ren couldn’t suppress a smirk as she caught Chatty’s exaggerated reaction. “If you’d taken lessons when you were younger, maybe you’d be half as slick as my brother,” she teased, nudging him slightly.

Chatty scoffed, crossing his arms stubbornly. “Oh, please. If talent were contagious, I’d have caught it just by standing near Shi Min.”

At this, Shi Min let out a long, suffering sigh, not stopping his movements but clearly growing more irritable with every loud remark. “If you guys don’t shut up soon, I swear I will—”

Coach Sam clapped his hands loudly, cutting him off. “Focus, Shi Min! No losing tempo! Lily, stay in sync! And Chatty, if you’re not going to dance, at least learn to appreciate it in silence!”

Chatty raised his hands in mock surrender. “Fine, fine! I’ll just be over here admiring greatness quietly. No promises on the quiet part, though.”

Laughter rippled through the group. Even Shi Min couldn’t hold back a small twitch of his lips — though he quickly masked it with another sharp turn.

But as the practice continued, the weight of the moment settled again. Beneath the teasing, beneath the distractions, one thing was clear — Shi Min was in this now, fully committed. The preparation for the competition had begun, and with it, the silent promise that Solaris would soon face a reckoning.

Pharsa, raising a delicate brow, replied dryly, “Knowing Shi Min, I’m more surprised he hasn’t stormed off yet.”

Shi Min snorted.

Ling Li chuckled softly, watching the scene unfold. Her gaze flickered to Shi Min and then back to Lily, a knowing glint in her eyes. The air had shifted. The tension was still there, lingering like a storm waiting to break — but there was also something else now.

A force.

A determination.

A promise.

This wasn’t just about dance anymore.

It was about proving something.

To themselves.

To each other.

And most of all — to Solaris.

Chapter 218: CHAOS ERUPTED

These Chapters are especially dedicated to the Top Three Golden Ticket Contributors: Valentines Go, Ngo_Meline, and Selina Wang50. Thank you.

The atmosphere in the practice hall was electric with energy, Shi Min and Lily moving in synchronized precision, their rhythmic steps a steady drumbeat against the polished wooden floor.

Shun and Ren stood momentarily transfixed, their gazes locked on Shi Min and Lily's movements, admiration flickering in their eyes.

But their time was fleeting. The creak of the doors opening snapped them from their daze, and in strode their respective tutors — Old Tutor Ma and Old Tutor Chen — figures of imposing authority. The mere presence of these seasoned mentors was enough to command swift obedience, and Shun and Ren exchanged a knowing glance before quickly making their exit like two scared bunnies.

Ling Li, seated at the far end of the hall with Four Eyes, was watching just as intently. Her sharp gaze flickered between Lily's fluid grace and Shi Min's performance — an assessment not just of technical skill but of endurance. Lily's current pace was relentless, yet Shi Min, despite minor hesitations, was keeping up. It was a make-or-break moment for him, a test of his ability to withstand the ever-demanding tempo. Ling Li's lips curved in the slightest smile — there was hope.

She exhaled quietly, shifting her focus to Four Eyes, a decision weighing heavily on her mind. "Hon, I'm going to Otako's place. I've already informed Butler Oda that I will be arriving," she said, her voice calm and controlled. Yet Four Eyes detected something beneath the surface, something unreadable.

The warmth of her hand in his grounded him, but as he listened, a strange sensation coursed through him — nothing. Normally, he could sense her thoughts, faint echoes of emotions that seeped into the pauses between words. But now, as she spoke of Otako, there was an unsettling void. It was as if she

were speaking into an abyss, and he could not reach her. His fingers instinctively tightened around hers, a silent acknowledgment of the eerie disconnection.

'How deep was Otako's identity? Four Eyes wondered.

Still, Four Eyes masked his intrigue behind a composed nod, unwilling to press the matter — for now.

Ling Li noticed his hesitation but chose to let it pass. Instead, she steered the conversation elsewhere, her tone adopting a casual ease. "You can take your time to spend the rest of the morning with your parents. The twins are taking a nap, and they'll have their lessons later. Otherwise, you can hang out with Quan Ye."

She paused, then added with a smirk, "Pharsa will be taking Murphy to the race track. I'm afraid Coach Sam will kick him out of the training room if Pharsa doesn't intervene. You can join them, try driving the race car. What do you think?"

Four Eyes' brows lifted slightly, the faintest glint of intrigue lighting his eyes. "Race track?"

Ling Li chuckled, eyes gleaming with amusement. "Yeah. Bring Quan Ye with you. Look how jealous he is — despite Lily only dancing with Shi Min. Can't he be more serious? Shi Min and Lily are siblings, and yet his face is as dark as a pot."

Her teasing remark was laced with sympathy. Quan Ye's turbulent emotions were obvious — the clenched jaw, the deep-set furrow in his brow, the way his fingers twitched slightly against his knee as he watched Lily move. A storm was brewing inside him, though he remained silent.

Four Eyes let out a rare laugh, shaking his head as his gaze landed on Fatty, who stifled a grin of his own while observing Fatty's predicament. "I'll take him with me to the race track," Four Eyes finally agreed.

Ling Li nodded, satisfied. "Alright, I'll inform Pharsa to make arrangements for the three of you. Hon, Pharsa will teach you how to maneuver the race car. Our race cars are hybrids, are fully customized for extreme racing, and it only takes a second to accelerate to 400 kilometers per hour. So please be careful; safety first. The track is in the middle of the forest near Camp Blaze. The terrain isn't for beginners... though there's also a small circuit— "

Before she could finish, Four Eyes cut in, a smirk playing at the edge of his lips. "Don't be too nervous. I won't risk my life. At most, I'll watch Murphy train."

Something in his tone softened her. He understood — he truly did. His response wasn't careless bravado but rather a reassurance that he valued her concern. He wasn't reckless. He knew she cared, and that alone made him tread carefully.

Ling Li sighed, releasing the tension in her shoulders. "Alright, go sit with Quan Ye first. I'll talk to Pharsa on my way out."

With that, she rose to her feet, moving toward Pharsa. She gave a final set of instructions before disappearing through the doors, but Four Eyes remained still, his thoughts lingering.

'The silence surrounding Otako's name had been deafening. Why?'

Four Eyes moved silently from his seat and took the spot beside Fatty, his eyes flickering with amusement. Fatty, lost in Lily's movements, was utterly oblivious to the new presence beside him. His focus was unwavering, entranced by each calculated step, each precise motion.

Four Eyes reached out, placing a firm hand on Fatty's shoulder.

Chaos erupted.

Fatty shot up from his seat as if jolted by lightning, his body nearly launching into the air like a startled cat. His yelp sliced through the room, shattering the concentration of those practicing. Shi Min stumbled mid-step, Lily faltered, and the flow of the routine unraveled in an instant. The disruption was complete.

Coach Sam lost it.

"All of you! OUT!" his voice thundered through the hall, sharp and unforgiving. He had tolerated earlier interruptions, had swallowed his frustration from Chatty's antics — but this? This was the final straw.

Coach Sam's fury was palpable, his voice slicing through the tension like a blade. His sharp glare was enough to make the air around them feel suffocating, demanding immediate accountability.

"I let you stay, thinking you'd boost their courage! Not so you could turn this practice into a circus!" The sheer force behind his words was enough to make Fatty shrink ever so slightly, though his pride wouldn't allow him to crumble fully.

Chapter 219: KARMA IS REAL!

If it were Solaris and Lily dancing, this interruption would have been nothing — a mere inconvenience, a fleeting disturbance, a ripple in still water. Their synergy, their precision, was unshakable, unbreakable. But Shi Min? Shi Min was still struggling to regain his footing, still relearning the patterns that had once come naturally to him. Today was his first practice since his return, and his concentration was fragile — easily shattered. And now, thanks to the chaos, the rhythm had slipped from his grasp.

Shi Min clenched his jaw, tension coiling in his muscles. Frustration burned in his eyes — not just at Fatty's blunder but at himself. He had been doing fine, had been holding his own... until this interruption cracked his focus, sending doubt creeping in.

Lily, sensing his turmoil, gave him a reassuring pat on the arm, her expression calm but firm. "Big Brother, ignore the noise. We'll start again." Her voice was steady — grounding, unwavering.

Coach Sam exhaled sharply, his patience depleted. "Get out!!!" The finality of his command left no room for protest.

Fatty, still recovering from his shock, opened his mouth to protest — but there was no room for defense. He knew he had messed up. Instead, he resorted to scratching his nose in frustration, swallowing his grievance. He could feel the eyes boring into him, could feel the heat of Coach Sam's fury.

Fatty, rubbing the back of his head, grumbled under his breath, but he knew there was no talking his way out of this.

But what irritated Fatty even more? The smug amusement on Four Eyes' face.

Fatty shot him a glare that could cut steel.

Fatty barely had time to process his frustration before Shi Min's death glare landed squarely on him from the dance floor. The intensity behind Shi Min's gaze was lethal, unrelenting, sending an icy chill straight down Fatty's spine.

"!!!!"

Fatty blinked. 'Karma is real!' His thoughts raced, and he swallowed hard. 'I just gave Four Eyes a death glare and immediately received one back! To make it worse — it's from my future brother-in-law!'

Fatty's irritation evaporated, replaced by an almost comical sense of doom. 'My future brother-in-law is glaring at me like this! This is not ideal!'

"..."

Four Eyes, noticing Fatty's inner turmoil, smirked knowingly, barely holding back laughter at his predicament.

Fatty, still rooted in place, gave an awkward cough and quickly averted his eyes, suddenly fascinated by literally anything else in the room that wasn't Shi Min.

Shi Min, however, wasn't letting him off easy. His sharp eyes held firm — a clear warning.

Coach Sam huffed in irritation, and his patience for distractions was completely drained. "OUT! NOW!!!" His voice cut through the air like a blade, and Fatty knew better than to push his luck any further.

At the same time, Pharsa called them over, her no-nonsense voice slicing through the tension. Fatty hesitated, his eyes flickering longingly toward Lily. He didn't want to leave her, didn't want to walk away now. But he had no choice — he followed. His expression was carefully controlled, but Four Eyes saw through it.

Without additional hesitation, he bolted for the door, Four Eyes following behind at a leisurely pace — far too entertained by Fatty's unraveling.

As they stepped outside, the weight of Coach Sam's reprimand lingered, but the moment Pharsa greeted them, all thoughts of the practice hall were quickly replaced.

Pharsa wasted no time. "I'm taking Murphy to the race track. He hasn't practiced in a long time. Madam said I should take both of you as well. You can choose — drive or watch Murphy train."

Murphy, upon hearing his name, halted. "Wait — what? Why wasn't I informed? I'm not prepared!" His tone edged into panic, his confidence momentarily shaken.

Pharsa didn't hesitate — she smacked the back of his head with an audible thud. "Are you a child who needs preparation for everything?" Her tone was sharp, laced with impatience. "By the end of this year, Madam expects you to participate in multiple races to test your skills. So? Are you practicing, or do you plan on disappointing her?"

Chatty straightened instantly, puffing out his chest as though building an invisible wall of confidence around himself. "Of course, I'm going to practice! I won't let myself disappoint Madam's expectations or trust. I need to prove that she didn't invest in the wrong person." His voice was smug and assured, the words dripping with self-importance.

Pharsa loudly snorted, shaking her head in pure exasperation. "Madam doesn't need your words. She wants results."

With that, she turned on her heel and strode away, her pace brisk, her patience worn thin. She refused to subject herself to another one of Chatty's grandiose speeches.

The four of them drove to the race track along with several bodyguards that Ling Li arranged for them; Goldie was invited by Pharsa to tag along with them. The Race Track is called Blaze Mountain which is a combination of natural terrain and man-made. This mountain is at the far end of Camp Blaze which has its own entrance.

Each of Ling Li's camps have race tracks, they build it for practice and also to hold local and international competitions. Putting them by their camp is also for their further security.

When they arrived, Four Eyes and Fatty were both astonished that their jaws almost dropped. What they are looking at is beyond from their imagination.

The Blaze Mountain Race Track is known for the breathtaking mountain race track carved into the rugged terrain, winding through sharp turns and exhilarating elevation changes. The setting is nothing short of cinematic — mist rolling over peaks in the morning, golden sunlight streaking across the valley at dusk. By night, the entire circuit glows with embedded LED track markings, lighting the way for high-speed races beneath the stars.

The track itself is a marvel of engineering, blending the natural curves of the mountain with precision-designed straights for maximum speed. Each corner offers a new challenge, from tight hairpins clinging to the cliffside to wide, sweeping bends with dramatic elevation shifts.

Chapter 220: BLAZE MOUNTAIN RACE TRACK

An underground tunnel section plunges racers into a neon-lit abyss, creating a thrilling high-speed challenge where only the glow of the track guides them forward. Then comes the ultimate test — a suspended sky bridge, stretched over a deep canyon, where drivers experience the sensation of flying at breakneck speeds which would definitely make the spectators gasp at the daring spectacle.

High-tech safety barriers and runoff zones ensure racers can push the limits while staying protected, but unpredictability lurks within the environment itself. Dynamic weather technology introduces sudden rain showers, misty fog, or shifting wind patterns to amplify the challenge, forcing drivers to adapt to ever-changing conditions.

Now, visualize the spectator experience with massive grandstands positioned at the most thrilling sections, where fans can feel the ground tremble as cars roar past. The VIP viewing area is perched at the highest vantage point, offering panoramic views of the entire track. Luxurious lounges with glass walls bring guests up close to the action while keeping them in ultimate comfort.

Above it all, a towering LED screen displays real-time footage, tracking every heart-pounding moment from multiple angles, complete with live commentary and data overlays.

The heart of the operation? The racers' pit and garage. This high-tech hub sits at the base of the mountain, designed for seamless workflow. State-of-the-art garages house teams working tirelessly on precision tuning, while the pit lane is an orchestrated ballet of lightning-fast tire changes and refueling.

The Blaze Mountain Race Track isn't just a race track — it's a masterpiece, a fusion of speed, technology, and raw adrenaline carved into the mountain itself. This is the ultimate racing dream.

Four Eyes and Fatty's eyes widened in unison, their breath hitching as they took in the sprawling mountain race track before them. It was unlike anything they had imagined—raw, untamed, and terrifyingly beautiful. The twisting roads carved into the rugged terrain snaked perilously along sheer cliffs, daring drivers to defy gravity with each turn. The steep inclines clawed at the sky, their peaks shrouded in mist. In contrast, the suspended sky bridge — a monstrous steel construct — loomed over a deep canyon, daring racers to fling themselves across its abyss with nothing but speed and precision. It kept them from plunging into the void, which gave a chill on their spine.

Fatty let out a low whistle, shaking his head in disbelief. His fingers curled tightly around the railing of the VIP lounge, where Pharsa had taken them to observe. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the cold metal, a subconscious sign of his own nerves creeping in.

"Murphy," he murmured, voice edged with awe, his eyes never leaving the treacherous expanse below. "Does the race track where you practice in Germany also look like this?"

Murphy, standing beside him, remained composed, but the sharp flicker in his gaze betrayed the storm of calculations already brewing in his mind. He had seen incredible tracks before—NASCAR ovals with unforgiving speedways, Formula 1 circuits with their deadly sharp turns—but this? This was different.

He inhaled slowly, absorbing every detail, every elevation change, every turn that whispered of danger. A thick fog clung to the cliffs, curling like ghostly fingers through the cracks, creating an eerie illusion that the track was alive, watching, waiting for its next challenger.

"I practiced on NASCAR tracks and F1 circuits," Murphy said, his voice controlled, even. Yet, his eyes traced the intricate layout with a hunger, analyzing every risk, every challenge. "They are as grand as this... but this —" He hesitated, his fingers grazing the edge of his helmet, the hard surface grounding him. Something about this track was different. More ruthless. More unpredictable.

His pulse quickened.

“This is my first time seeing a mountain race track,” Murphy admitted, his voice quieter, as if speaking too loudly might disturb the beast lurking below.

Chatty, standing with his arms crossed, cast a sideways glance at Fatty, the corner of his mouth quivering into an amused smirk. Unlike Fatty, he wasn’t shocked. He had expected the spectacle — the flashing LED walls broadcasting live feeds of the racers, the pit crew working with machine-like precision below, and the roar of engines that echoed across the rocky cliffs like an ominous drumbeat. But Murphy’s reaction? That was something else entirely.

It meant something.

“Looks like even you’re impressed, Murphy,” Fatty teased, tilting his head slightly, a sly grin creeping onto his face. “So... what do you think? Would you ever race on it?”

Murphy’s jaw tensed. He wouldn’t admit it—not yet—but his mind was already running simulations. Every curve, every braking zone, every possible overtaking point flickered through his head like a relentless stream of data. He could see himself behind the wheel, could feel the steering resist under the immense G-force as he took each turn at breakneck speeds, could sense the split-second decisions that would mean victory or disaster.

His heart pounded.

“Only one way to find out,” he finally said, voice low, firm.

Pharsa scoffed, folding her arms as she leaned back slightly. “Heh, do you think you can drive on this mountain? In your dreams,” she snorted. “Not for another five years or more. Hmph.”

Murphy barely reacted, the fire in his eyes burning too brightly now. He didn’t need five years. He needed one opportunity.

Pharsa jerked her chin toward the back of the facility. "There's a NASCAR Oval behind this mountain; let's go," she said.

But Murphy didn't move. His gaze remained locked onto the track, his fingers tightening around his helmet.

Because now, he wasn't just looking at the track.

He was seeing himself conquer it.

Pharsa exhaled sharply, shaking her head as she observed Chatty's stubborn expression. He was always like this — unwavering, unyielding, a smirk permanently plastered on his face as if nothing ever truly fazed him.

Goldie, leaning against the railing, watched the exchange with amused eyes. He was always the spectator in moments like this — enjoying the subtle clashes between personalities, the push and pull of dominance between racers who carried unshakable confidence. He chuckled, crossing his arms.

"Why don't you show them the real deal?" Goldie suggested, his tone edged with mischief. "Let them see what driving on this track is really like so they won't have their imagination running wild."