

The sun hung low over the dusty town of Axlewood, casting long shadows across the cracked pavement. In this quiet corner of the world, cars weren't just machines—they were legends, each with a name and a story etched into its frame. The townsfolk gathered every Saturday at the old quarry, where the air smelled of gasoline and the ground rumbled with anticipation. This was the Proving Ground, a place where drivers and their vehicles faced off in a test of grit and ingenuity.

At the edge of the crowd stood Mara, her hands stained with grease and her eyes fixed on her car, a patchwork beast she called Rattleback. It wasn't much to look at—its hood was dented, its paint chipped, and its engine coughed like an old man with a cold. But Mara had built Rattleback herself, scavenging parts from junkyards and welding them together under the flickering light of a lantern. To her, it was more than metal; it was a promise of freedom.

Across the quarry, Jace revved the engine of his sleek, black car, Nightfang. It gleamed like a predator, its curves polished to perfection and its exhaust snarling with power. Jace was the reigning champion of the Proving Ground, a cocky grin plastered on his face as he waved to the crowd. Nightfang was fast—faster than anything Axlewood had seen—and Jace knew it. He'd never lost a race, and he didn't plan to start now.

The rules were simple: first car to the far side of the quarry and back won. No fancy tech, no shortcuts—just raw driving skill and a machine you could trust. Mara tightened her gloves and climbed into Rattleback. The engine sputtered to life, shaking the frame as if it might fall apart. She patted the dashboard. "Come on, old friend," she whispered. "Show 'em what we've got."

The horn blared, and the race began. Nightfang shot forward, a blur of black slicing through the dust. Rattleback lurched, its tires spinning before finding grip. Mara gripped the wheel, weaving between boulders and ruts as the crowd cheered. Jace was already halfway across, his lead growing with every second. But Mara knew the quarry—every dip, every loose patch of gravel. She pushed Rattleback hard, coaxing it up a steep incline that Nightfang had avoided.

At the turnaround, Jace smirked as he spun Nightfang in a perfect arc. Mara, though, didn't slow—she yanked the handbrake, letting Rattleback skid sideways before gunning it back toward the start. The shortcut shaved precious seconds, and now the gap was closing. Dust clouded the air as the two cars barreled toward the finish. Nightfang's roar drowned out Rattleback's wheeze, but Mara's hands were steady, her focus unbreakable.

In the final stretch, Rattleback's frame groaned, but it held. Neck and neck, the cars crossed the line. Silence fell, then erupted into cheers as the judge raised Mara's hand. Jace stared, stunned, as she climbed out, patting Rattleback's hood. "Not bad for a junker,"

she said with a grin. In Axlewood, it wasn't the shiniest car that won—it was the one with heart.