

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 2 — Opening Grid

Night settled over the valley like a curtain dropping on a stage.

Festival lights spread across the desert in long glowing lines — neon arches, spotlights, drone cameras circling overhead. Music thundered from speaker towers the size of buildings. Thousands of spectators crowded the temporary grandstands, roofs, hillsides, anywhere with a view of the starting line.

For most of them, Horizon was simple.

Cars.
Speed.
Spectacle.

They didn't see the probability curves bending.

They didn't see physics quietly forgiving mistakes that should have killed people.

But the SCP Foundation had noticed.

And now the Triad had noticed too.

The starting grid stretched across a wide strip of asphalt cut through the desert.

Twelve cars waited beneath the towering Horizon gantry.

Engines idled, some smooth and controlled, others vibrating with barely contained aggression.

Ace rolled the Nismo into position.

The small Nissan looked almost modest compared to some of the machinery around it — a few hypercars, a monstrous American muscle build, something heavily modified that hummed with hybrid systems.

Ace didn't seem bothered.

She rested one elbow against the door and studied the other drivers through the windshield.

Most were focused forward.

A few glanced sideways.

Evaluating.

Sizing each other up.

Typical.

Behind her, the Aston Martin DB11 slid neatly into its starting slot.

Mai adjusted the steering slightly, aligning the car with precise movements that looked almost lazy.

The engine note settled into a low, confident rumble.

Shammy leaned forward slightly in the passenger seat, watching the crowd instead of the track.

"...there are too many people here," she murmured.

Mai smiled faintly.

"That is generally the idea of a festival."

Shammy shook her head.

"That isn't what I mean."

Her eyes drifted upward toward the sky.

Drone cameras circled lazily above the grid, their rotors whispering through the air.

But beneath that sound was something else.

Something subtle.

Something wrong.

Like air currents folding in directions they shouldn't.

A voice roared across the festival speakers.

"Welcome to Horizon!"

The crowd exploded.

Spotlights swept across the lineup of cars.

Engines revved in response.

The announcer continued, his voice overflowing with theatrical excitement.

"Twelve drivers! Ten events! One champion!"

Fireworks burst above the starting gantry.

The sky flashed white.

Ace glanced at the car beside her.

A wide American muscle machine sat there, matte black, engine rumbling like distant artillery.

The driver inside grinned when she looked over.

Big.

Confident.

Too confident.

Ace recognized the type immediately.

Further down the line, another car caught her eye.

Low.

Fast.

The driver inside didn't look toward the crowd.

Didn't wave.

Didn't rev the engine for the cameras.

Just sat there quietly.

Watching the road.

Interesting.

The Aston Martin's radio crackled.

Mai's calm voice came through.

"Wind direction stable. Road temperature high."

Ace tapped the throttle lightly.

"Copy."

Shammy's voice followed a second later.

"...something else is moving."

Ace smirked slightly.

"That's called a race."

Shammy did not respond.

At the far end of the grid, two familiar vehicles waited.

One driver leaned casually against his car instead of sitting inside it.

Grouse.

Even from a distance the man radiated confidence.

The kind built from surviving situations most people wouldn't.

Walking War Crimes had that effect on people.

Across from him, another figure sat in complete silence behind the wheel of a sleek black machine.

Skulker.

His engine wasn't revving.

His headlights weren't flashing.

He simply waited.

Like a predator that had already decided something.

Mai studied the telemetry display.

Every system looked normal.

Too normal.

She had reviewed the accident statistics earlier that day.

They were absurd.

Cars flipped here.

They smashed into canyon walls.

They tumbled through the air.

Drivers walked away.

Every time.

No explanation.

No pattern.

Just...

Horizon.

"Thirty seconds!" the announcer shouted.

The grid lights ignited above the starting line.

Five red lamps.

Engines rose in pitch across the lineup.

Ace's hands settled comfortably on the wheel.

The Nismo vibrated softly beneath her.

Alive.

Behind her, the Aston Martin's engine tone deepened.

Mai leaned forward slightly.

Shammy closed her eyes.

Listening.

Wind pressure.

Air flow.

Movement.

"...something is definitely wrong," Shammy whispered.

Mai's smile returned.

"That's why we're here."

The first red light blinked on.

Then the second.

Then the third.

Engines screamed now.

The desert air trembled with mechanical fury.

Ace's eyes narrowed.

Focus tightened.

Everything outside the track faded away.

Fourth light.

Fifth.

For one brief moment the world held its breath.

And then—

The lights vanished.

Twelve cars launched forward into the Mexican night.

And the Horizon Festival truly began.

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