

## HORIZON PROTOCOL

### Chapter 9 — Triad Protocol

The celebration after Event Five sounded exactly like every other Horizon celebration.

Music.

Fireworks.

Crowds screaming the names of drivers they would forget by next year.

From a distance the festival looked unchanged.

Up close, something had shifted.

Drivers moved a little slower now.

They checked their cars more carefully.

And more than a few of them glanced toward the mountains where Grouse's wreck had happened.

Horizon had blinked.

Just once.

But everyone who had been on that road had seen it.

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Ace sat on the roof of the Nismo, legs dangling over the windshield, watching mechanics swarm around the damaged vehicles returning from the mountain descent.

The recovery crews had already dragged Grouse's car back.

It looked like a crushed soda can.

Grouse himself sat nearby on a folding chair, helmet resting on his knee, talking animatedly with two festival officials.

Still laughing.

Still alive.

But out of the race.

---

Mai stood beside the DB11 with the telemetry tablet in her hands again.

This time the screen was filled with far more data than usual.

Probability curves.

Impact vectors.

Environmental drift.

Foundation instrumentation had quietly been recording everything since the first race.

And now the pattern was finally visible.

"...it's cumulative," she said.

Ace looked down from the roof.

"Meaning?"

Mai rotated the tablet.

Each race formed a spike.

The spikes were growing larger.

"Each event increases the anomaly load."

Ace whistled softly.

"So the festival's basically revving a reality engine."

Mai blinked once.

"...that is not an inaccurate analogy."

---

Shammy stood a short distance away, eyes closed again.

Listening.

The wind across the valley had changed again.

Subtle shifts.

Air pressure bending around invisible structures.

"...the field isn't random," she murmured.

Mai nodded.

"No."

"It's directional."

Ace tilted her head.

"Directional how?"

Shammy opened her eyes and looked toward the festival's main stage.

"...toward the finish line."

Footsteps approached.

Quiet.

Measured.

Ace glanced over her shoulder.

Skulker had returned.

Dust covered his car and the lower half of his coat, but otherwise he looked exactly the same as when he had left the race.

Calm.

Focused.

Observing everything.

Ace hopped down from the Nismo roof.

“You done sightseeing?”

Skulker ignored the joke.

He looked directly at Mai.

“You saw it.”

Mai nodded.

“The probability corrections.”

“Yes.”

Skulker gestured toward the mountains.

“It failed once.”

Shammy spoke softly.

“...overload.”

Skulker nodded.

---

Mai turned the tablet toward him.

“You left the race because you noticed the trajectory adjustments.”

“Yes.”

---

“You confirmed they are intentional.”

“Yes.”

Ace crossed her arms.

“Intentional by who?”

Skulker didn’t answer immediately.

Instead he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small data chip.

He handed it to Mai.

“I ran an external sensor array along the perimeter roads.”

Mai inserted the chip into the tablet.

The screen filled with a new map.

A grid.

Invisible lines stretched across the entire valley.

Ace leaned closer.

“...those look like vector fields.”

“Yes,” Skulker said.

“They’re redirecting probability.”

Shammy studied the pattern carefully.

“...toward the finish line.”

---

Ace blinked.

“Wait.”

“Everything?”

Skulker nodded once.

“Every crash.”

“Every bounce.”

“Every impossible recovery.”

He tapped the screen.

“The system isn’t protecting drivers.”

Mai finished the thought quietly.

"It's protecting the race."

---

Ace looked across the valley toward the brightly lit finish banner.

"...so Horizon isn't trying to stop crashes."

"No," Skulker said.

"It's making sure the race continues."

Shammy added quietly:

"...no matter what."

---

Mai scrolled through the telemetry again.

The spikes from each event formed a clear progression now.

Five races.

Five escalating corrections.

"If the load continues increasing," she said slowly,

"event ten will reach critical mass."

Ace raised an eyebrow.

"Critical as in?"

Skulker answered.

"Reality stops bending."

Ace whistled softly again.

"...and snaps."

---

For a moment none of them spoke.

The festival roared around them.

Music.

Laughter.

---

Engines revving.

From the outside it still looked like the greatest racing party on Earth.

Inside the data, it looked like something building pressure.

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Dr. Gears appeared at the edge of the paddock moments later.

He had clearly already heard most of the conversation.

“That assessment aligns with Foundation projections.”

Ace glanced over.

“You guys knew it might break?”

Gears clasped his hands behind his back.

“We suspected escalation.”

“Not failure.”

Mai looked back toward the mountains.

“Event Five was the first fracture.”

---

Across the paddock the announcer’s voice thundered again.

“Drivers to the grid!”

“Event Six begins in thirty minutes!”

The crowd erupted with excitement.

They had no idea they might be watching a reality engine slowly approaching overload.

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Ace looked at the other racers gathering near the start line.

Seven drivers remained in the championship now.

The field was thinning.

The speeds were increasing.

And the anomaly was working harder every time someone crashed.

She cracked her knuckles once.

“...so what’s the plan?”

Mai answered without hesitation.

“We keep racing.”

Ace grinned.

“Thought so.”

---

Skulker looked toward the start line where the next grid was assembling beneath the Horizon lights.

“...but now we know what we’re looking at.”

Shammy added quietly:

“...and what happens when it breaks.”

---

The festival lights brightened again.

Engines roared.

Another race prepared to begin.

And somewhere deep inside the invisible geometry surrounding the Horizon valley, probability began bending once more to ensure that the show would go on.

For now.

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