

Chapter 3

They left Detroit behind somewhere around the state line.

The traffic thinned gradually until the highway opened into long empty stretches of asphalt bordered by forests still heavy with early morning mist. The sky had turned pale blue, the kind of color that only exists in the quiet hours after sunrise when the world hasn't fully decided what kind of day it's going to be.

The **silver Aston** took the lead.

The **vanta black Nissan** followed a few car lengths behind, steady and silent, its presence more felt than seen.

For a long time nobody spoke.

The radio channel remained open, but quiet.

Shammy eventually broke the silence.

"Okay."

Ace glanced at her.

"Okay?"

Shammy stretched slightly in the passenger seat.

"Yes. I have reached a conclusion."

Ace kept her eyes on the road.

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is."

Mai's voice came calmly through the comm channel.

"I'm listening."

Shammy leaned her head back and looked at the passing sky through the side window.

"Last night," she said slowly, "was fun."

Ace said nothing.

Mai chuckled softly over the radio.

"That is a remarkably simple conclusion."

"I like simple conclusions."

Ace shifted gears as the road curved gently through the forest.

Shammy turned slightly toward her.

“You enjoyed it too.”

Ace didn't look away from the road.

“It was... acceptable.”

Shammy stared at her for a second.

Then she laughed.

“Acceptable.”

Mai's Aston slowed slightly ahead of them, matching pace with a slower truck in the right lane before smoothly overtaking it.

“That,” Mai said dryly over the channel, “is Ace-language for *extremely enjoyable*.”

Ace didn't respond.

Shammy smirked.

“You know what I enjoyed the most?”

Ace sighed quietly.

“Please don't say Konrad.”

“I was going to say Konrad.”

Mai laughed outright this time.

Ace muttered something under her breath.

Shammy looked genuinely delighted.

“Come on. You have to admit that was perfect.”

Ace glanced briefly at her.

“He interfered.”

“Yes.”

“He was not part of the race.”

“Yes.”

“He did it purely to annoy me.”

“Yes.”

Shammy grinned.

“That's why it was perfect.”

The Nissan accelerated slightly as the highway opened again.

Ace leaned back in the seat just a little.

“He enjoys reminding people he exists.”

Mai’s voice returned, calm again.

“He also enjoys reminding *you*.”

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

Shammy tilted her head.

“You’ve known him longer than either of us.”

“Yes.”

“What was he like the first time you met him?”

Ace was quiet for a few seconds.

The Nissan’s engine hummed steadily beneath them.

“Complicated.”

Shammy snorted.

“That is the least helpful answer imaginable.”

Mai spoke before Ace could reply.

“It is also completely accurate.”

Shammy looked out the windshield toward the Aston ahead.

“Okay, fine. New question.”

Ace sighed.

“What.”

Shammy tapped the dashboard lightly.

“Are we going to see him again at Horizon?”

Ace didn’t hesitate this time.

“Yes.”

The answer hung in the car for a moment.

Mai spoke next.

“That seems statistically inevitable.”

Shammy nodded slowly.

“Good.”

Ace glanced sideways.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“I want to see the Demon Supra again.”

Ace shook her head.

“You do not.”

“Oh, I absolutely do.”

Mai’s voice carried a note of quiet amusement.

“You just want to hear it again.”

Shammy looked out the window again.

“Yes.”

Ace exhaled slowly.

“That car is ridiculous.”

Shammy grinned.

“That car is *magnificent*.”

Mai added:

“The acoustic profile is... memorable.”

Shammy laughed.

“That is the most Mai description possible.”

The highway opened again, stretching long and straight through the morning landscape.

The Aston gradually slowed until it was driving beside the Nissan instead of ahead of it.

For a moment the two cars ran side by side.

Silver and black.

Shammy glanced over.

Mai looked back through the Aston’s window.

For a brief moment the two cars matched speed perfectly.

Ace glanced over at Mai.

Mai met her gaze.

Something passed silently between them.

Not words.

Something quieter.

Something older.

Shammy watched the exchange.

She didn't interrupt.

The Aston slowly accelerated again, slipping back ahead.

Shammy leaned back in the seat.

"You know," she said quietly.

Ace waited.

"The weird part about all this?"

"What."

Shammy gestured vaguely at the road ahead.

"Detroit."

Ace said nothing.

Shammy continued.

"That entire city is currently trying to understand what happened."

"Yes."

"They're building theories."

"Yes."

"They're telling stories."

"Yes."

Shammy turned slightly toward Ace.

"And none of them are even close."

Ace's hands rested loosely on the wheel.

“That is acceptable.”

Mai’s voice returned.

“It is also preferable.”

Shammy nodded.

“Yeah.”

She looked ahead again.

Then she said something softer.

“Still.”

Ace glanced at her.

“What.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“I think they got one thing right.”

Ace waited.

Shammy tapped the dashboard lightly.

“That race wasn’t about the cars.”

Ace said nothing.

Shammy looked out the windshield toward the Aston again.

“It was about us.”

The words settled quietly in the car.

Ace didn’t answer right away.

The Nissan moved smoothly along the open highway.

Finally she said:

“Yes.

It was.”

The road continued ahead of them, stretching toward the horizon.

And somewhere far beyond it—

The next race was waiting.

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