

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 4 — Aftermath Vectors

The finish line chaos lasted longer than the race.

Cars poured into the festival paddock beneath towers of light and camera drones that dipped low to capture every smoking brake disc and glowing exhaust pipe. Music hammered through the night while announcers shouted race statistics no one in the crowd was actually listening to.

Drivers climbed out of their cars grinning, shouting, arguing.

Some inspected dents and scratches that should have been catastrophic.

None of them were.

Ace rolled the Nismo into the staging lane and cut the engine.

The sudden silence inside the cockpit felt almost strange after the race.

She sat there for a second longer than necessary, hands still resting lightly on the steering wheel.

Then she stepped out.

Heat rolled off the car.

The brakes ticked quietly as metal cooled.

A festival mechanic jogged over with a tablet and a flashlight, already talking too fast.

“Unbelievable run out there! That inside move in the hills? The crowd loved it—”

Ace walked past him without breaking stride.

“Car’s fine.”

The mechanic blinked.

“Uh... yeah. It usually is.”

The DB11 arrived a moment later.

Mai parked beside the Nismo with her usual quiet precision and shut down the engine.

Shammy stepped out first.

She looked toward the mountains.

Then toward the sky.

Then toward the track they had just driven.

Her expression didn't change.

"...it corrected the accident," she said softly.

Mai leaned against the Aston Martin's door.

"Yes."

"That isn't normal."

"No."

Across the paddock Grouse slammed his car door hard enough to rattle the hinges.

He looked absolutely delighted.

"That was insane!" he shouted to no one in particular.

A few other drivers nodded in agreement.

One man laughed as he pointed at the crushed front corner of his car.

"That guardrail should've killed my suspension!"

Another driver slapped the roof of his vehicle.

"Best racing festival on Earth!"

The crowd cheered again somewhere nearby.

To them it was entertainment.

To the Foundation it was data.

Mai's tablet lit up with telemetry reports.

She scrolled through them quickly.

Brake loads.

Cornering forces.

Impact vectors.

Numbers that should have ended the race for multiple vehicles.

Instead every system read within survivable limits.

Even when physics said otherwise.

She turned the screen toward Ace.

“The rollover.”

Ace glanced at the replay.

The hypercar had flipped three times.

The telemetry insisted the impact forces never exceeded structural tolerance.

Ace snorted.

“Yeah.”

“That’s not how gravity works.”

“No,” Mai said calmly.

“It isn’t.”

Shammy had wandered several meters away now.

She stood near the edge of the paddock where the asphalt gave way to open desert.

Wind brushed softly across the valley.

Festival lights reflected in her silver hair.

“...it’s not protecting the drivers,” she said quietly.

Mai looked up.

“What do you mean?”

Shammy pointed toward the racecourse.

“It’s protecting the event.”

Ace raised an eyebrow.

“...difference?”

Shammy’s eyes followed a drone circling above the festival.

“If a driver dies, the race stops.”

Mai thought about that for a moment.

Then nodded slowly.

“That would explain the statistical pattern.”

Footsteps approached.

Dr. Gears arrived exactly as he always did — without hurry and without visible emotion.

“You appear to have completed the first event successfully.”

Ace leaned against the Nismo.

“Road’s cheating.”

Gears did not react.

“Yes.”

Mai tilted her head slightly.

“That was quicker than most analysts reached the same conclusion.”

Ace shrugged.

“Hard to miss.”

Gears glanced at the telemetry tablet.

His eyes moved quickly across the data.

“Impact mitigation outside expected parameters,” he said.

“Corrective probability shifts during critical failure moments.”

Mai watched him.

“You already knew.”

“Yes.”

“Why send us?”

Gears looked toward the brightly lit Horizon starting line in the distance.

“Because knowing something exists is not the same as understanding how it works.”

Behind them another car rolled into the paddock.

It was not one of the racers.

It was a black Foundation transport vehicle.

The door opened.

A technician stepped out carrying a portable antenna array and several data drives.

He began setting equipment near the edge of the paddock without speaking to anyone.

The festival crowd paid him no attention.

To them he was just another part of the event infrastructure.

Ace glanced around.

“Where’s Skulker?”

Grouse overheard that.

The big man laughed loudly.

“Guy bailed halfway through the race!”

“Left the road and vanished.”

Ace frowned slightly.

“That’s not like him.”

“Nope.”

Grouse grinned.

“Which means he probably saw something the rest of us didn’t.”

Shammy returned slowly from the desert edge.

“The wind changed again,” she said quietly.

Mai looked toward the hills.

“What direction?”

Shammy pointed toward a distant highway cutting across the desert.

“South.”

Ace followed her gaze.

Headlights moved there.

A single car driving away from the festival.

Skulker.

Far outside the Horizon valley, Skulker pulled his car onto an abandoned service road and shut off the engine.

Silence filled the desert.

He stepped out and walked several meters away from the vehicle.

Then he looked back toward the distant glow of festival lights.

His expression was thoughtful.

Not fearful.

Just... curious.

"...yeah," he murmured to himself.

"They're not going to like this."

Back at Horizon, fireworks exploded again above the valley.

The announcer's voice boomed across the festival grounds.

"Event one complete!"

The crowd roared.

"Nine races remain!"

Music surged louder.

Drivers prepared their cars again.

And somewhere beneath the noise and lights and celebration, the anomaly continued quietly rewriting the rules of reality.

The Horizon Festival had only just begun.

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