

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 3 — Woodward Baptism

The start detonated like a bomb.

Twelve engines screamed at once, tires clawing at the asphalt as the grid exploded forward beneath the Horizon gantry. Fireworks burst overhead again, the sky flashing white and gold as the pack surged into the opening straight.

Ace dropped the clutch.

The Nismo leapt forward like it had been kicked by physics itself.

For a brief moment the car's rear wheels broke loose, rubber screaming against asphalt — then traction snapped back in and the little Nissan shot forward through the chaos.

Two cars immediately collided behind her.

Metal crunched.

Someone spun.

The crowd roared.

And somehow the spinning car bounced off the guardrail, straightened itself, and kept racing.

Ace didn't even glance in the mirror.

The first corner came fast.

A sweeping right that tightened suddenly halfway through.

Three drivers braked early.

One didn't brake at all.

Ace slid the Nismo inside the braking zone, the car twitching slightly as she pushed the pedal far later than anyone else.

Tires shrieked.

The rear stepped out.

She corrected with a small flick of the wheel.

The car snapped neatly into the corner.

Two positions gained.

Just like that.

Behind her the DB11 entered the same corner in a completely different way.

Mai had braked early.

Calm.

Controlled.

The Aston Martin settled into the curve smoothly, weight transferring evenly across the chassis as the car traced a perfect racing line through the turn.

No drama.

No sliding.

Just precision.

Shammy watched the horizon instead of the track.

"...wind turbulence ahead," she murmured.

Mai adjusted the throttle slightly.

"Understood."

The pack stretched quickly as the race left the festival grounds and blasted onto a long desert highway.

Hypercars surged ahead on raw power.

A monstrous twin-turbo machine roared past Ace on the outside, its driver laughing through an open window.

Ace let him go.

For now.

She shifted gears smoothly, the Nismo's engine singing a sharp mechanical note as speed climbed past two hundred kilometers per hour.

The road blurred.

Festival lights vanished behind them.

Only darkness and headlights remained.

Up ahead Grouse blasted through traffic like a wrecking ball.

The man drove exactly the way he lived — aggressively, confidently, absolutely certain nothing on the road could stop him.

He clipped another racer's bumper in a high-speed lane change.

The other car wobbled violently.

Somehow it didn't spin.

It just... corrected itself.

Even though the physics said it shouldn't.

Mai noticed.

"Did you see that?" she said calmly over the radio.

Ace snorted.

"Yeah."

A beat passed.

"Road's cheating."

Skulker was nowhere near the front.

He had launched normally from the grid.

Then immediately fallen back.

Now his black car drifted toward the outside lane, far from the chaos of the main pack.

He wasn't racing.

He was observing.

Watching how the cars moved.

How the road behaved.

How the crashes didn't quite behave like crashes.

After another kilometer he made a quiet decision.

And eased off the throttle.

Up ahead the highway ended in a brutal chicane carved between two rocky hills.

Braking lights flared across the pack.

Ace smiled.

This was her territory.

She rocketed forward, closing the gap on the heavier machines ahead of her.

The Nismo darted left.

Right.

Slipped between two cars fighting for the same line.

One of them panicked.

Braked too hard.

Spun halfway across the road.

Ace missed him by centimeters.

The spinning car bounced off a rock wall.

The suspension should have shattered.

Instead the car simply landed on all four wheels and continued driving.

The driver sounded ecstatic over the open radio channel.

“THIS FESTIVAL IS INSANE!”

Ace laughed.

“Not wrong.”

Mai reached the chicane seconds later.

She saw the same crash.

Watched the impossible recovery.

And said nothing.

Her foot eased slightly on the throttle.

The DB11 slid gracefully through the narrow turns, suspension absorbing the uneven road like the car weighed half what it actually did.

Shammy leaned closer to the windshield.

“...probability distortion confirmed,” she said quietly.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

She didn't sound surprised.

The race climbed into the hills now.

Narrow roads.

Blind corners.

Cliffs waiting beyond the guardrails.

Ace caught Grouse near the top of a steep climb.

The big man saw her coming in the mirror and grinned.

He swerved deliberately across the road.

Blocking.

Ace's eyes narrowed.

“Really?”

She dropped a gear.

The Nismo howled.

The road curved left toward a cliff edge.

Grouse held the racing line.

Ace didn't.

She dove inside where the asphalt narrowed dangerously near the guardrail.

The gap barely existed.

The Nismo slipped through anyway.

For one terrifying moment the car rode half on the road and half on the painted shoulder.

Then she cleared him.

Grouse burst out laughing behind the wheel.

“Now THAT'S a move!”

Further back in the pack Skulker slowed even more.

His car rolled quietly toward a service road branching away from the main route.

He turned the wheel.

Left the race.

And disappeared into the darkness without telling anyone.

At the front of the field the leaders blasted toward the final descent back into the festival valley.

Three cars fought for position.

Ace closed rapidly behind them.

The Nismo's engine screamed as she pushed harder.

Gravity helped now.

Speed climbed dangerously high.

The road twisted down the mountainside in a series of brutal S-curves.

One mistake here would send a car into the canyon below.

A hypercar ahead of her lost control.

It hit the guardrail at nearly two hundred.

The car flipped.

Tumbled.

Rolled end over end across the road.

Ace threaded through the wreckage.

In the mirror she watched the car land upright again.

Still moving.

Still racing.

"...okay," she said quietly.

"Yeah."

The Horizon anomaly was very real.

Festival lights reappeared ahead as the road burst back into the valley.

Crowds lined the barriers.

Music thundered again.

The finish banner glowed beneath floodlights.

Ace pushed the Nismo one last time.

Three cars ahead.

Two.

One.

The finish line rushed toward her.

Engines howled.

Crowds screamed.

And somewhere high above the race, probability bent once more to allow the impossible.

Ace crossed the line grinning.

Behind her the DB11 followed seconds later, smooth and controlled as always.

Further back Grouse thundered across the finish in a storm of tire smoke.

Skulker never arrived.

And somewhere in the desert night, the Horizon Festival continued pretending everything about it was perfectly normal.

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