

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 5 — Eight Mile Echo

Morning came slowly to the desert.

The Horizon Festival never truly slept, but the hours before sunrise were the closest thing it had to quiet. Music faded to a distant pulse. Mechanics worked beneath portable floodlights. Generators hummed. The smell of hot rubber and gasoline still hung in the air from the previous night's race.

Across the valley the mountains glowed faintly red as the sun crept toward the horizon.

Ace sat on the hood of the Nismo with a cup of coffee that had already gone cold.

She didn't seem to care.

Mai stood nearby reviewing telemetry logs on her tablet while Shammy watched the wind move dust across the paddock in slow spirals.

"...the anomaly remained active after the race," Shammy said.

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

"Probability distortion continued for several minutes."

Ace swung her legs down from the hood.

"Meaning?"

Mai rotated the tablet so she could see the graph.

The curve looked wrong.

Not chaotic.

Stabilized.

"Whatever is causing Horizon doesn't switch off when the race ends," Mai said.

"It tapers."

Ace stared at the data for a moment.

"...like an engine cooling down."

Mai allowed herself a small smile.

"Exactly."

Across the paddock Grouse was already awake.

If he had slept at all.

He stood beside his car surrounded by three other drivers who were listening to him with a mixture of admiration and disbelief.

"...and then she tries to slip inside the guardrail like it's nothing," he was saying loudly.

"That little Nismo nearly clipped the cliff!"

He spotted Ace watching from across the paddock.

His grin widened.

"You're insane, you know that?"

Ace shrugged.

"You moved."

"Yeah!"

Grouse laughed.

"That's racing!"

The Horizon loudspeakers crackled alive again.

A cheerful voice rolled across the valley.

"Good morning, Horizon!"

The crowd that had never quite dispersed answered with a tired but enthusiastic roar.

"Event Two begins in forty minutes!"

Drones lifted into the sky again, cameras already searching for the next spectacle.

Mai studied the course map displayed on her tablet.

"This route is longer."

Ace leaned over her shoulder.

The line cut across several highways before diving into a narrow stretch of mountain road.

"...fast start," Ace said.

"Then technical section."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“The wind patterns there are strange.”

Ace grinned.

“They’re all strange.”

When the cars lined up for the second event the atmosphere felt subtly different.

The drivers were more relaxed now.

They had survived the first race.

They trusted Horizon.

Too much.

Engines roared to life again beneath the rising sun.

Ace settled into the Nismo’s seat, rolling her shoulders once before gripping the wheel.

Across the grid Grouse revved his engine repeatedly, the sound echoing across the valley.

The man looked completely fearless.

Maybe he was.

Or maybe Horizon had convinced him he was.

The lights flashed.

Green.

The second race exploded into motion.

This time the opening stretch was pure speed.

A wide highway cutting across open desert.

Cars surged forward like artillery shells.

The Nismo accelerated hard but the heavier machines gained ground quickly.

Mai’s DB11 thundered past two of them within seconds, the V12’s power finally stretching its legs across the long straight.

Ace laughed when the Aston Martin slid past her.

“Show-off.”

Mai’s calm voice answered through the radio.

“Efficiency.”

Halfway down the highway the course plunged suddenly into a canyon road.

The asphalt narrowed.

Guardrails vanished.

Cliffs replaced them.

Ace dove into the first corner without lifting.

The Nismo’s rear stepped out slightly before gripping again.

She threaded through the twisting canyon like the road had been designed specifically for the car.

Behind her several drivers struggled with the sudden change in terrain.

One car clipped a rock wall.

The impact should have shattered the front axle.

Instead the vehicle bounced once and continued racing.

The driver whooped loudly.

“THIS PLACE IS AMAZING!”

Grouse arrived seconds later.

And he arrived much faster than anyone else.

The man had not slowed down at all.

He threw his car into the canyon road at a speed that made several other drivers instinctively back off.

Dust exploded behind him as the vehicle drifted sideways through the first corner.

The maneuver worked.

Barely.

Ace watched him in the mirror.

“...he’s pushing too hard.”

Mai didn't disagree.

"Yes."

Further back the DB11 flowed through the canyon with smooth precision.

Mai avoided the chaos easily.

Shammy leaned closer to the windshield again.

"...probability field stronger here."

Mai frowned slightly.

"Localized?"

"Yes."

Shammy looked toward the rock walls rising on both sides of the road.

"...the terrain might be amplifying it."

Ahead of them Grouse attempted another impossible move.

Two cars fought for position at the exit of a narrow turn.

Grouse didn't wait.

He forced his way between them.

Metal scraped.

One car bounced against the rock wall.

Another spun halfway across the road.

Neither crashed.

Neither slowed.

The race continued.

Grouse roared with laughter.

"Horizon takes care of its own!"

Ace muttered quietly into the radio.

"That's not a safety system."

Mai finished the thought.

“It’s a containment system.”

The canyon road ended abruptly as the course burst back into open desert.

The finish line waited less than a kilometer away.

Three cars sprinted for it.

Ace was one of them.

She dropped a gear.

The Nismo surged forward.

Grouse thundered beside her, engine screaming at full power.

The DB11 closed rapidly behind them.

For a brief moment the three vehicles ran side by side across the open desert.

Dust clouds trailing behind them like comet tails.

The finish banner rushed closer.

Ace crossed it first by half a car length.

Grouse followed a fraction of a second later.

Mai’s Aston Martin thundered across the line right behind them.

The crowd exploded again.

Another impossible race completed.

Another series of crashes that should have killed someone.

Another demonstration that Horizon refused to allow it.

Miles away from the festival, Skulker watched the race broadcast on a small monitor mounted inside his car.

The signal flickered occasionally as the desert wind shifted.

But the data feed remained stable.

He paused the replay at a specific moment.

A crash in the canyon.

A car striking the wall.

Stopping the frame revealed something interesting.

The vehicle's trajectory had shifted slightly before impact.

Just enough to prevent fatal damage.

Not random.

Corrected.

Skulker leaned back in the seat.

"...yeah."

He glanced toward the distant glow of the Horizon valley.

"They're definitely not going to like this."

He restarted the engine.

And began driving back toward the festival.

Because the next race was coming.

And he had questions that needed answers.

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