

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 6 — Furnace Line

By the time the third event was announced, the desert had fully awakened.

Sunlight hammered the valley now, turning the festival grounds into a shimmering sea of metal, glass, and color. Mechanics rushed between cars. Vendors shouted. Drone cameras dipped low over the paddock searching for dramatic close-ups of drivers preparing for the next run.

Horizon never paused for long.

Not when the crowd wanted speed.

Ace tightened the harness inside the Nismo and flexed her fingers once against the steering wheel.

The car felt good.

Better than good.

The engine had that slightly aggressive vibration she liked — the mechanical equivalent of a blade that had just been sharpened.

Mai leaned against the DB11 nearby while reviewing the course layout.

“This one is shorter,” she said calmly.

“But more technical.”

Ace glanced over.

The route map looked ugly.

Sharp elevation changes.

Several blind turns.

One section marked simply **FURNACE PASS**.

“...that name doesn’t sound friendly.”

Mai shrugged lightly.

“Horizon rarely chooses names for safety.”

Shammy stood several meters away again, studying the wind patterns rolling through the valley.

Dust moved differently today.

Not random.

Not natural.

"...the probability distortion increased after the second race," she said quietly.

Ace raised an eyebrow.

"So the festival's warming up."

Mai considered that phrasing.

"...yes."

Across the paddock Grouse was doing exactly what Grouse always did.

Showing off.

He revved his engine loudly for the cameras, laughing with the crowd while several other drivers gathered around his car.

One of them shook his head.

"You almost wiped out half the grid in that canyon."

Grouse grinned.

"But I didn't."

"That's the point."

The Horizon announcer's voice thundered across the valley again.

"Event Three!"

The crowd screamed in response.

"FURNACE LINE!"

Fire cannons burst along the starting gantry.

Flames roared skyward as the next grid assembled.

Ace rolled the Nismo into position.

The desert heat shimmered above the asphalt now.

Engines idled around her — some nervous, some aggressive, some completely confident.

Grouse's car sat two positions ahead.

Still vibrating with barely controlled energy.

Mai guided the DB11 into its slot further back.

Shammy leaned slightly toward the windshield.

"...air pressure is unstable again."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

"That might make the downhill section dangerous."

Ace's voice cut in over the radio.

"Good."

The lights ignited.

Red.

Red.

Red.

The desert seemed to pause again.

Then the lights vanished.

And twelve engines detonated.

The opening stretch was chaos.

The road climbed steeply out of the valley before plunging into a tight sequence of switchbacks carved directly into the mountainside.

Ace attacked the climb immediately.

The Nismo's lighter frame paid off here.

She shot past two heavier machines before the first corner even arrived.

One driver tried to block her.

Ace braked impossibly late.

The Nismo snapped inside the turn like a knife cutting fabric.

Position gained.

Behind her the DB11 moved differently.

Mai waited.

Observed.

Then accelerated through a gap created by two drivers fighting each other.

Precision instead of aggression.

Shammy watched the mountains.

“...there’s turbulence ahead.”

Mai adjusted the steering slightly.

“Understood.”

The race plunged into Furnace Pass.

The name was accurate.

The road twisted between narrow rock walls that trapped heat like an oven.

Air shimmered.

Engines screamed louder in the confined space.

Ace flew through the first series of turns with barely controlled slides.

The Nismo danced across the asphalt, rear tires clawing for grip.

Up ahead Grouse blasted through the same corners like a demolition charge.

He clipped a barrier.

Hard.

The impact should have destroyed his suspension.

Instead the car bounced once and continued.

Grouse roared with laughter.

“HORIZON!”

Ace caught him three turns later.

"Still lucky," she muttered.

Grouse saw her in the mirror and immediately moved to block.

Ace expected that.

She dropped a gear and pushed the Nismo toward the inside line.

The gap barely existed.

The road narrowed to almost nothing against the rock wall.

Ace went anyway.

For half a second the Nismo skimmed the stone barrier so closely sparks danced from the side mirror.

Then she cleared him.

Grouse barked out another laugh.

"Crazy little demon!"

Further back the DB11 approached the same section.

Mai braked earlier than the others.

The Aston Martin slid smoothly through the turn.

Shammy's voice was quiet but urgent.

"...the probability field just spiked."

Mai's eyes flicked to the telemetry display.

The graph jumped sharply upward.

"That's new."

Ahead of them the road dropped suddenly into a steep downhill section.

Ace hit the descent first.

The Nismo accelerated violently as gravity joined the engine.

Speeds climbed past two hundred.

Then two-twenty.

Then higher.

The next corner arrived far faster than expected.

Ace slammed the brakes.

The Nismo twitched dangerously.

For a moment the rear end started to swing wide.

Then something subtle happened.

The car corrected itself.

Not fully.

Just enough.

Ace felt it instantly.

"...okay," she murmured.

"That's cheating."

Behind her Grouse attempted the same descent at an even higher speed.

This time luck almost ran out.

His car hit the next corner sideways.

Completely out of control.

The vehicle slammed into the guardrail.

Hard enough that the metal barrier folded inward.

The car spun.

Flipped once.

Twice.

Dust exploded across the road.

Ace shot past the wreckage.

In the mirror she watched the impossible again.

The car landed upright.

Still running.

Grouse's laughter echoed across the radio channel.

"SEE?!"

The race blasted out of Furnace Pass and back toward open desert.

Only a few hundred meters remained.

Ace pushed the Nismo harder.

The finish line appeared ahead between two towering festival banners.

The engine screamed at full throttle.

Behind her the DB11 closed steadily.

Mai's precision was relentless.

The Aston Martin surged closer with every second.

But the distance wasn't enough.

Ace crossed the line first.

Again.

The crowd exploded.

Fire cannons erupted beside the finish.

Music thundered across the valley.

Grouse arrived thirty seconds later.

His car rolled across the line sideways, body panels dented but engine still roaring.

He climbed out laughing hysterically.

"BEST. FESTIVAL. EVER."

Mai parked the DB11 beside the Nismo in the paddock minutes later.

Shammy stepped out slowly.

"...the anomaly is accelerating," she said quietly.

Ace leaned against the hood again.

"Meaning?"

Mai held up the telemetry display.

The probability curve had risen sharply.

Each race was increasing it.

“Meaning Horizon is building toward something.”

Ace glanced toward the starting line where the next event preparations were already beginning.

Her grin returned.

“Good.”

Across the valley the festival speakers roared again.

“Event Four begins tonight!”

The crowd screamed with delight.

And somewhere beyond the mountains, Skulker’s car was finally returning to the valley.

Because he had discovered something Horizon probably didn’t want anyone to understand.

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