

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 7 — Dead Freight

Night returned to the valley like a switch being flipped.

Festival lights roared back to life, brighter than the stars above them. The desert that had been quiet all afternoon now vibrated again with engines, bass, and thousands of voices.

Horizon never really rested.

It simply reloaded.

Ace stood beside the Nismo while a Horizon mechanic pretended to inspect the car.

The man ran a scanner over the chassis, nodded to himself, then looked slightly confused.

“Suspension looks perfect.”

Ace glanced at the dent in the side panel from the Furnace Pass race.

“Yeah.”

“That shouldn’t be perfect.”

Ace shrugged.

“Welcome to Horizon.”

The loudspeakers boomed again.

“Event Four!”

The crowd screamed.

“DEAD FREIGHT!”

Drone cameras lifted into the sky as the course map flashed across massive LED screens around the valley.

A long straight.

A rail yard.

Then a brutal series of tight industrial roads winding through abandoned warehouses.

Ace’s grin returned.

“That looks fun.”

Mai studied the map.

“Dangerous.”

“Same thing.”

When the grid assembled again the air felt different.

More electricity.

More risk.

The drivers had started believing in Horizon now.

They trusted the anomaly.

That was dangerous.

Grouse arrived last.

His car still carried dents from Furnace Pass.

He didn't care.

The man leaned out of the window as his engine idled loudly.

“You ready for round four, Ace?”

Ace rolled the Nismo forward a few centimeters.

“Always.”

Grouse laughed.

“Good.”

His eyes gleamed under the festival lights.

“Let's see what Horizon does tonight.”

The lights ignited.

Red.

Red.

Red.

The engines screamed louder than ever.

Then the lights vanished.

And the pack launched into the darkness.

The opening stretch blasted across a long desert highway.

Cars surged forward again.

But this time nobody held back.

Drivers had learned something from the earlier races.

The festival wouldn't let them die.

So they drove like it.

Ace weaved through traffic immediately.

The Nismo darted between larger machines like a knife slipping between ribs.

Mai's DB11 stayed further back, building speed patiently.

Shammy watched the road ahead.

"...something heavy is moving near the rail yard."

Mai frowned slightly.

"What kind of heavy?"

"...steel."

The course plunged off the highway and into the freight district.

Floodlights illuminated rusting train cars and long rows of industrial warehouses.

Tracks crossed the road at sharp angles.

The asphalt was broken.

Uneven.

Perfect for chaos.

Ace hit the first rail crossing at full speed.

The Nismo launched briefly into the air.

The suspension slammed down again.

The car stayed stable.

Barely.

Behind her several drivers hit the same crossing harder.

One car bounced violently and slammed into a parked freight wagon.

Metal exploded.

The vehicle spun across the road.

Then corrected itself again.

Still racing.

Ace laughed over the radio.

“Yeah.”

“Definitely cheating.”

The road twisted between towering warehouse walls now.

Headlights flashed across rusted steel and shattered windows.

Grouse charged into the industrial maze like a wrecking ball again.

He clipped a stack of shipping crates.

Wood shattered.

Debris flew everywhere.

The car never slowed.

“HORIZON!” he shouted into the night.

Ace closed the gap quickly.

The Nismo slipped through the narrow turns faster than the heavier machines ahead of her.

The road curved sharply between two freight trains parked on parallel tracks.

The gap between them barely fit a single car.

Grouse went through first.

His car clipped the side of one train hard enough to send sparks flying down the entire length of the

wagon.

Ace followed immediately.

The Nismo slid through the gap like a bullet.

Metal screamed against metal.

But the car emerged clean.

Behind them the DB11 approached the same obstacle.

Mai slowed slightly.

Not out of fear.

Calculation.

The Aston Martin threaded between the train cars with centimeters to spare.

Shammy leaned forward again.

"...probability field is fluctuating."

Mai glanced at the telemetry.

The curve spiked again.

Higher than before.

"That's not good."

The industrial maze ended in a wide open freight yard.

Hundreds of train cars sat parked across multiple tracks.

The race route cut directly through them.

The only path forward zigzagged between moving cargo trains slowly crossing the yard.

Ace's grin widened.

"Oh that's just mean."

A freight train rolled across the first crossing.

Grouse didn't slow.

He slammed the accelerator and launched his car over the small ramp built into the crossing barrier.

The vehicle cleared the train by less than a meter.

The crowd watching from drone feeds exploded in cheers.

Ace followed seconds later.

The Nismo jumped cleanly over the moving wagons.

For a moment the car flew above the train.

Then landed hard on the other side.

Still racing.

Mai reached the same crossing just as the next train approached.

Shammy spoke quietly.

"...jump window is three seconds."

Mai accelerated.

The DB11 surged forward.

The ramp rushed toward them.

The Aston Martin lifted into the air.

For a second the car hung above the moving train like a black shadow.

Then gravity reclaimed it.

The car landed perfectly.

Mai didn't even blink.

The finish line appeared beyond the rail yard.

Ace pushed the Nismo harder.

The engine screamed in protest.

Grouse remained just ahead.

The man was driving completely without restraint now.

Too confident.

Too fearless.

The next corner approached fast.

Grouse took it sideways.

The car slammed into a stack of steel containers.

Hard.

The containers shifted.

One toppled.

Ace shot past before the debris finished falling.

In the mirror she saw the impossible again.

The container stopped halfway through the fall.

Just long enough.

Grouse's car slipped free.

Still running.

Still racing.

Ace crossed the finish line first again.

Grouse followed seconds later, laughing like a man who had just cheated death and enjoyed it.

The DB11 rolled across the line moments after that.

Another impossible race.

Another escalation.

Back in the paddock Mai stepped out slowly.

Shammy looked toward the rail yard behind them.

"...the anomaly just corrected multiple collisions simultaneously."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

"That means the probability load is increasing."

Ace leaned against the Nismo again.

"So what happens when it overloads?"

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Across the valley the festival speakers roared again.

“Event Five begins tomorrow!”

Fireworks exploded overhead.

Drivers celebrated.

The crowd screamed with excitement.

And somewhere in the desert darkness beyond the rail yard, Skulker finally reached the outskirts of the Horizon valley again.

He parked his car and watched the distant lights for a long moment.

Then he said quietly to himself:

“...yeah.”

“This is much bigger than a race.”

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