

HORIZON PROTOCOL

Chapter 8 — Meridian Break

The fifth race began under a black sky.

The desert had cooled slightly, but the festival itself was hotter than ever. Floodlights carved the valley into sharp white shapes while thousands of spectators pressed closer to the barriers than they had in any previous event.

Word had spread.

These races were getting insane.

Drivers were pushing harder.

And Horizon kept letting them survive.

Ace rested her chin briefly on the steering wheel inside the Nismo as the grid assembled.

Five races down.

Five to go.

Her grin never quite left.

“This one feels different.”

Mai’s voice came through the radio from the DB11.

“The route is longer.”

Shammy added quietly:

“...and the anomaly spike hasn’t dropped since the last race.”

Ace blinked.

“Wait.”

“It didn’t reset?”

“No,” Mai said.

“That’s the problem.”

The course map flashed across the giant screens above the starting line.

MERIDIAN BREAK

A massive loop across the desert plateau.

Long straightaways.

Then a brutal mountain descent near the end.

Ace studied the final section.

“...that drop is nasty.”

Mai’s voice remained calm.

“Yes.”

Shammy spoke softly.

“...probability field is strongest there.”

Across the grid Grouse slammed his door shut and revved his engine hard enough that the entire car vibrated.

He leaned halfway out of the window again.

“You ready to lose tonight, Ace?”

Ace smirked.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

Grouse laughed.

“Oh I will.”

He slammed the wheel once in excitement.

“This place loves me.”

The lights ignited.

Red.

Red.

Red.

The desert fell silent.

Then—

Green.

The grid exploded forward again.

The opening kilometers were pure speed.

Cars rocketed across the plateau like missiles.

The Nismo launched hard, but the bigger machines surged ahead again on raw horsepower.

Mai's DB11 sliced through the pack smoothly, passing two cars before the first major bend.

Ace tucked into a slipstream and waited.

Patience.

Then she darted sideways and surged past.

The Nismo slipped between two cars that nearly collided trying to block her.

Both vehicles corrected themselves unnaturally.

Ace laughed.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Festival magic."

Halfway through the race the road began to climb.

Higher.

Steeper.

The air grew thinner.

Wind slammed across the plateau in violent gusts.

Shammy leaned closer to the windshield.

"...this is wrong."

Mai frowned.

"What is?"

"The probability field isn't correcting crashes."

"It's guiding them."

Mai's hands tightened slightly on the steering wheel.

"That's worse."

Up ahead Grouse blasted through the mountain road like a man who had decided physics was optional.

He clipped barriers.

Bounced off rocks.

Slid sideways through turns that should have thrown him off the mountain entirely.

Each time the car corrected itself.

Each time Grouse laughed louder.

“HORIZON!”

Ace caught him near the top of the climb.

The Nismo surged forward through a narrow hairpin and closed the distance quickly.

Grouse saw her coming.

His grin widened.

“Again?”

Ace dropped a gear.

“Again.”

The summit appeared.

Beyond it the road vanished.

Not literally.

But the drop was so steep the far side of the road disappeared completely from view.

The mountain descent.

The most dangerous section yet.

Shammy’s voice came over the radio.

“...probability spike confirmed.”

Mai said quietly:

“Ace.”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

Ace grinned.

“Never.”

Grouse reached the summit first.

He didn't slow.

He launched over the crest at full throttle.

The road dropped like a rollercoaster track.

Ace followed seconds later.

The Nismo screamed down the slope as gravity joined the engine again.

Speeds climbed dangerously fast.

Too fast.

The first corner approached.

Grouse took it sideways.

Too fast.

For the first time since the festival began, Horizon didn't fully correct the mistake.

His car slammed into the guardrail.

Hard.

The barrier ripped loose.

The vehicle bounced violently.

And this time the correction came late.

Too late.

The car flipped.

Once.

Twice.

Then slid upside down across the asphalt before finally grinding to a halt against a rock wall.

Dust filled the air.

Ace blasted past the wreck seconds later.

In the mirror she saw the difference immediately.

The car had stopped.

The engine was dead.

No miraculous correction.

No impossible recovery.

Just silence.

Mai reached the crash moments later.

The DB11 slowed slightly as it passed the wreckage.

Shammy stared at the telemetry display.

“...probability overload.”

Mai understood instantly.

“The system failed to compensate.”

The race continued.

But the tone had changed.

Ace crossed the finish line first again minutes later.

The crowd roared as always.

Fireworks exploded.

Music thundered.

But somewhere behind the celebration a single driver was climbing slowly out of a wrecked car for the first time in Horizon history.

Grouse sat on the asphalt beside the overturned vehicle, helmet still on his head.

He wasn't injured.

Not seriously.

But the car was done.

Race over.

Festival over.

He watched the recovery crews approach.

Then he started laughing.

Not the wild laugh from before.

Something quieter.

“...okay.”

He looked back toward the mountain road.

“You win this round.”

Back in the paddock Mai shut down the DB11 and stepped out slowly.

Shammy spoke quietly beside her.

“...the anomaly just failed.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace leaned against the Nismo again, watching the mountain ridge in the distance.

“So what happens now?”

Mai looked at the telemetry curve again.

The spike had dropped.

But not completely.

“Now,” she said calmly,

“we find out what Horizon does when it starts losing control.”

And somewhere at the edge of the festival lights, Skulker finally stepped back into the valley.

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