

## HORIZON PROTOCOL

### Chapter 10 — Midnight Meridian

Night did not fall over Horizon.

It assembled itself.

First the desert lost its edges. The mountains became black teeth against a darkening sky. Then the festival lights rose in layers — the gantries, the ramps, the stage towers, the camera drones, the decorative fire-lines that were less there for warmth than for spectacle. By the time the stars should have mattered, Horizon had replaced them with its own sky.

From a distance it looked beautiful.

Up close it looked hungry.

Ace stood with one hand on the Nismo's roof and watched the next course render itself on a giant suspended screen over the festival core. The map flashed white, then red, then settled into a thin glowing line cutting north out of the valley, across an elevated plateau, then east into a labyrinth of black ridges and dry gullies before dropping back toward the festival on a long descending run.

## MIDNIGHT MERIDIAN

The name rolled across the loudspeakers in both Spanish and English, followed by a flood of music and a crowd-response so loud it briefly erased thought.

"Subtle," Ace muttered.

Mai did not look up from her tablet. "That is not one of Horizon's known design priorities."

Shammy stood slightly apart from them, her head tilted toward the northern ridgeline. The wind moved around her strangely tonight — not enough for anyone else to notice, just enough for Mai to. Tiny pauses. Small corrections. Air that behaved like a thing listening at a door.

"It started before the announcement," Shammy said quietly.

Mai glanced at her. "The field?"

"Yes."

Ace pushed off the Nismo and came around to where she could see Mai's screen. The telemetry graph was worse than before. The taper after Event Five had happened, yes, but only partially. The anomaly load had dropped from critical slope to merely severe. And now, with the next race forming on the grid, a faint pre-event rise was already visible.

"Thought it only spiked when the race started," Ace said.

"So did I," Mai replied.

Skulker, leaning against a stack of equipment crates nearby, spoke without looking at them. "It's learning the sequence."

Ace turned her head slightly. "That's a fun sentence."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Dr. Gears arrived exactly then, as though summoned by the phrase. He took one look at the graph on Mai's screen and one look at the course map overhead. His expression did not change, which in his case was usually a sign that the situation had crossed into territory most people would classify as mildly catastrophic.

"Field drift has begun earlier than projected," he said.

"How much earlier?" Mai asked.

"Twenty-one minutes."

Ace let out a slow breath. "And you're saying that like it isn't terrible."

"It is terrible," Gears said. "I see no utility in dramatizing it."

That earned the smallest possible twitch at the corner of Mai's mouth. Shammy did not smile. Her eyes were still on the ridgeline.

"It's stronger toward the plateau," she said. "And thinner near the gullies."

Skulker straightened slightly. That interested him.

"Thinner?" Mai asked.

"Less correction. Less... insistence." Shammy frowned, searching for a word that didn't really exist in the right form. "The festival wants the clean line. The obvious line."

Ace's grin flashed and vanished. "So it has favorites."

Mai was already moving. "Show me."

They crossed the paddock together, slipping through mechanics, drivers, camera crews, and temporary barriers until they reached one of Foundation's portable analysis stations tucked behind a row of apparently ordinary festival cargo trucks. From the outside it looked like a production support unit. Inside it was all hard light, cable trunks, field monitors, and data that no festival staff were supposed to know existed.

Mai dropped Skulker's external array map onto the main display. The red vector lattice of the valley appeared first, then the course overlay for Midnight Meridian. Shammy stepped closer. Ace stayed half a pace back, arms folded, reading faces rather than graphs.

There.

The pattern was clear once the race route was overlaid.

The correction density thickened along the plateau straight and clustered again at the final descent. Between those zones, the route dipped through a section of old cut-road carved into the black ridge country. The grid lines there were weaker. In two narrow patches they nearly vanished.

Skulker tapped one of them with a gloved finger. "Dead pocket."

Mai looked at him. "That's your term?"

"It's accurate."

Gears spoke from behind them. "Probability compensation decreases sharply in those sectors. We have no explanation."

Shammy did not take her eyes off the map. "I do."

That got the room's attention.

She lifted one hand, not touching the display, tracing the route in the air.

"The main field doesn't like uncertainty. It can bend trajectory when motion is legible. It can soften impact when the event still resolves into continuation." She moved her hand over the dead pocket and lowered it. "But here the terrain fractures intention. Too many possible lines. Too many unstable surfaces. Too many outcomes it can't gather into one."

Ace blinked once. "So the field is good at cheating. Bad at improvising."

"Yes," Shammy said.

Skulker's mouth almost moved toward approval. Almost. "That matches what I measured."

Mai expanded the sector. The road imagery resolved into grainy terrain scans. Broken cut-stone. Dry wash channels. Loose scree. Two blind bends, one off-camber hairpin, and a narrow bridge over an empty erosion trench. None of it looked forgiving. Without the anomaly, it would be the kind of section that separated drivers from survivors.

"With seven drivers remaining," Gears said, "a critical incident in that pocket would likely exceed the festival's corrective margin."

Ace looked at him. "You mean it might actually let someone die."

Gears' answer came without cushion. "Yes."

Silence pooled in the container.

Outside, music hammered the festival walls like the pulse of an enormous artificial heart.

Mai broke the silence first. "Then the route is the point."

Gears inclined his head slightly. "That is my assessment."

"They know?" Ace asked.

"No," Gears said. "Not consciously. Horizon behaves as though it is selecting for escalation."

"That sounds uncomfortably close to intent," Mai said.

"Yes."

Ace gave him a look. "You people ever get tired of saying yes to horrifying things?"

"No."

That, at least, sounded honest.

The comm screen on the side bench flickered, then stabilized. Static rolled once through the speakers. Then Bright's voice arrived as though he had been leaning just outside the conversation the whole time.

"So. Midnight race. Dead pockets. Festival trying not to choke on its own miracle. How's morale?"

Ace didn't even turn toward the screen. "You tell me."

"Oh, I'm doing great," Bright said. "You're the ones in Mexico."

Gears regarded the speaker with the same expression he reserved for structural flaws in expensive equipment. "This channel was not opened for commentary."

"Yes it was," Bright replied. "It was opened because you hit the threshold where not telling me would be professionally rude."

Mai cut in before Gears could continue that line. "We've identified two low-correction sectors on the route."

"Only two?" Bright sounded almost impressed. "That's actually better than I expected."

Ace's head turned. "You expected this?"

A brief pause. Not hesitation — sorting.

"I expected Horizon to eventually hit a complexity wall," Bright said. "Everything that keeps a show going breaks the same way. Too much momentum, too much confidence, too many systems relying on the assumption that the next save will happen because all the previous saves did."

"Translation," Ace said.

"Your favorite part of the miracle is about to become conditional."

Shammy's gaze shifted toward the speaker, though not quite focusing on it. "You've seen places like this before."

Another pause.

"Adjacent," Bright said. "Not identical."

Mai caught that word immediately. "Adjacent to what?"

But Bright was already sliding away from the answer.

"Be careful in the dead pockets. And if the road starts feeling like it's making choices for you, that means you waited too long to make your own."

The channel cut.

Ace stared at the speaker for a second. "He does that on purpose."

"Yes," Gears said.

They left the analysis station ten minutes later with the problem made worse by understanding.

That happened more often than it should have.

The walk back to the grid took them through the very center of Horizon's machinery. Announcers blazed across overhead screens. Sponsors rolled in loops. Drivers were being filmed from flattering angles beneath towers of light. The crowd had thickened again, and after Grouse's wreck the energy had changed. It wasn't fear. That would have been rational. It was anticipation sharpened by the first hint of risk.

People were here because for the first time it looked like Horizon might bleed.

That made the cheering louder.

Grouse was near the edge of the paddock, out of the race but very much not out of the experience. He sat on an upturned equipment case with a drink in one hand and his expression recovered to something dangerously close to cheerful. The crash had left a purple bruise along the side of his jaw. He saw Ace and barked a laugh.

"You still alive, little demon?"

"So far."

He pointed at the mountains beyond the lit gantries. "Watch the sixth turn after the bridge. Road falls away harder than it looks."

Mai slowed. "You counted?"

Grouse gave her a look like the question was insulting. "I crashed there. Of course I counted."

His smile thinned a little after that, not disappearing but changing shape.

"Horizon didn't catch me clean this time," he said. "That's new."

Ace stopped. There was no theater in her voice now. "You gonna tell them?"

Grouse looked past her, to the crowds, the lights, the race banners lifting in the warm night wind.

"Tell who? Them?" He jerked his chin at the festival. "They don't want to hear it. They're here to see the next idiot nearly become confetti." Then he looked at Mai, then at Shammy, then briefly at Skulker further back in the lane. "You lot though — yeah. Don't trust the soft landings anymore."

Shammy studied him for a quiet second. "You noticed."

Grouse huffed a laugh. "I noticed a mountain tried to bite me and Horizon got there late." He tipped the drink in a little salute. "That counts."

They left him there, sitting in floodlight and noise like a veteran watching the battle continue without him.

The grid for Midnight Meridian was smaller now. Seven cars instead of twelve. The gaps between them were physical and narrative both. Each absence had weight.

Ace rolled the Nismo into position and let the engine idle low. To her left sat a silver hypercar whose driver had survived three impossible recoveries and therefore now looked invulnerable. To her right, Elena Crimson rested in her Ferrari with one hand at twelve o'clock and the look of someone who had

already reduced the entire route to geometry. Two rows back, the DB11 settled into place, black paint catching the floodlights like moving water. Behind them another pair of local Horizon favorites revved too hard for no practical reason. Showmanship by way of denial.

Vega's Jesko sat on the outside line and pulsed with restrained violence.

Marisol's McLaren waited with bright-eyed hunger.

And at the back of the active field, in a slot nobody had expected to see filled again tonight, Skulker's black machine eased into line.

He had re-entered.

That drew looks.

Ace keyed the radio. "You sure?"

"Not remotely," Skulker said.

That was somehow reassuring.

Mai's voice came next, calm and clean. "Dead pockets at sectors six and seven. We do not assume support in either."

"Copy."

Shammy's voice overlaid hers, softer, carrying a texture the radios didn't quite flatten. "The field is already active. It's strongest near the plateau merge and final descent. Weakest over the trench bridge."

Ace adjusted her grip on the wheel. "Got it."

The announcer's voice surged again, somehow louder than physics should have permitted.

"Midnight Meridian!"

The crowd answered like a single animal.

Engines rose. Heat thickened. The gantry lights went red in sequence, one by one, hanging there above the road like the held breath before impact.

Ace let everything outside the first two seconds vanish.

Not the crowd. Not the music. Not the giant artificial sky of Horizon. All of it reduced to the same thing in the end — pressure. Input. Noise to be cut into a line.

Green.

The launch was vicious.

The silver hypercar to Ace's left got the better initial bite and surged half a length ahead. Ace let it. The Nismo hooked, bit, and drove hard. The opening straight of Midnight Meridian was wide enough to invite bad decisions, and the remaining field made them almost immediately. Vega tried to take two positions at once and clipped a rear quarter. Marisol darted outside to avoid the contact and lost

momentum in a spray of dust. Elena took the center with cold efficiency. The DB11 did not lunge; it built speed with the patient brutality of a thing that knew exactly how much road it had.

The first phase of the course crossed the plateau under a sky now fully claimed by festival drones. Their camera beams cut across the desert, bright white blades searching for spectacle. They found it at the first merge. The road narrowed from four fast lanes to two between low rock berms and a broken concrete divider. A local driver misjudged the funnel, bounced off the divider, and slewed broadside into Vega.

The impact should have ended both races.

Instead the Jesko's rear snapped half a degree, the local car's nose skipped, and the two machines separated as though some invisible editor had cut the crash before its consequences arrived.

The crowd went insane.

Ace drove through the wake of it and didn't blink.

"Field just corrected a dual collision," Mai said over the radio.

"Strongly," Shammy added. "Too strongly."

The plateau ended in a left-right crest into black ridge country. The festival lights fell behind them there. Not completely — Horizon always found ways to keep itself seen — but enough that the road ahead stopped feeling like part of the same event. The air changed too. Cooler. Drier. Less performative. Just rock, dust, speed, and the dark.

Ace liked it immediately.

The Nismo came alive on the first technical section, small chassis loading and unloading through linked bends while the heavier cars ahead had to negotiate their mass like a separate passenger. She took the outside of one blind left, cut under the Ferrari on exit, and only just failed to complete the pass because Elena had anticipated the move before Ace had fully committed to it.

Respectable.

Annoying.

Ahead, the silver hypercar clipped a shoulder stone and got away with it. The correction was there, visible now if you knew what to watch: a trajectory softening that wasn't entirely produced by mechanical grip. The car drifted a line it had no right to hold and returned to it cleanly.

That happened twice more before the dead pocket.

The road warning came not from Mai, not from the terrain, but from Shammy.

"Sector six in eight seconds."

Mai's voice layered immediately over hers. "Bridge after a blind right. Off-camber before the entry."

Ace said, "Yeah."

She could feel it already. Not the bridge itself. The change around it. The same way one can feel a room before stepping through the doorway when an argument has been happening inside.

The right-hander arrived. Ace turned in. The Nismo bit, then went light over the broken camber. She corrected and saw the bridge — narrow, concrete, no barriers worth naming, spanning a dry trench that dropped away into dark stone.

And the field vanished.

Not visually.

Functionally.

The sensation was immediate and absolute. The weird supportive softness that had underlain every near-miss in Horizon so far simply wasn't there. The road felt brutally itself again. Weight mattered. Surface mattered. Mistakes had edges.

Ace smiled without humor.

"There you are."

The silver hypercar ahead of her hit the bridge too fast.

There was no correction.

Its left rear clipped the entry lip, hopped, slewed half a meter, and the driver had to fight the car with both hands and all of whatever talent panic leaves intact. The machine missed the outer edge by centimeters and slammed through the exit wobbling hard enough to lose two positions instantly.

Elena didn't take advantage. She had already anticipated the pocket. Her Ferrari crossed the bridge slower, cleaner, wasting less speed than the hypercar lost in the save.

Ace split the difference. Fast enough to threaten, careful enough to survive, the Nismo compressing over the far lip with a jolt that came all the way through the seat.

Behind her, the DB11 arrived.

Mai had already adjusted. The Aston came onto the bridge in a line so disciplined it looked almost slow — until one understood the road had just stopped helping. Shammy had one hand braced on the dash, eyes unfocused in that way that meant she was no longer reading weather so much as negotiating with it.

"No support," she said.

"I know."

The DB11 crossed anyway, clean and heavy and real.

Someone behind them did not.

Marisol's McLaren hit the bridge entry at the same kind of speed Horizon had been rewarding all night. The car bounced, rotated, clipped the inner wall, and came out with a front-left suspension angle that was catastrophically wrong even before the wheel tore free and cartwheeled into the trench.

The car did not crash.

Marisol was good enough for that.

But her race was over.

The first true mechanical elimination of the festival happened in silence compared to what it should have been, because the crowd was too far away to hear it and the road itself offered no drama, only consequence.

Mai's voice came over the radio after a beat. "Marisol is out."

Ace did not look back. "Copy."

The second dead pocket began less than two kilometers later.

This one was worse.

A descending hairpin carved into loose cut-stone above a wash channel, followed immediately by a broken straight where the road wanted to become gravel and hadn't fully decided not to. The anomaly was not absent here — Shammy could feel remnants of it bunching at the edges like static around a failed screen — but it no longer had the density to carry anyone.

Vega arrived at the hairpin with too much speed and too much faith.

That combination had been carrying him through Horizon beautifully.

It betrayed him now.

His Jesko braked hard, turned, then understeered over the front axle onto the loose shoulder. A better festival correction would have nudged him back. There was none. The car sliced through a shower of pale rock, struck a buried culvert edge, and snapped sideways into the wash. The impact was survivable. Barely. The race wasn't.

The radio filled briefly with a burst of someone swearing in three languages.

Then silence.

"Second elimination," Mai said.

"Yeah," Ace replied.

The field had changed shape now. Not just in number. In belief.

Elena was still ahead. Ace was second. The DB11 was third, Skulker fourth, the damaged silver hypercar somehow clinging to fifth. Beyond them the route climbed out of the dead section and back toward the final descent where the anomaly density would return. Everyone still in the race understood, consciously or not, that they had just crossed a line. Horizon was no longer a guarantee. It was a condition with blind spots.

Skulker came alive in that knowledge.

Ace saw it first in the mirror — the black car that had been lurking at the edge of the race suddenly closing with methodical intent. He wasn't reckless. He wasn't even especially fast in the obvious sense. He was simply done pretending the road would save anyone. Every line he chose from sector seven onward was brutally practical, and in a race full of drivers still half-drunk on Horizon's miracle,

practicality became predatory.

He passed the wounded hypercar before the plateau re-entry.

He nearly passed the DB11 at the merge.

Shammy felt him before Mai saw him.

“Inside pressure. Skulker.”

“I know.”

Mai moved half a line right, enough to protect the entry without sacrificing the car’s setup for the descent. Skulker took the hint, abandoned the move, and fell in behind them. No anger. Just measurement.

The anomaly returned on the final descent like a familiar liar.

Ace felt the softness come back under the tires, the small impossible mercies that widened exits and shortened consequences. The road here was broad by mountain standards and brightly covered by drone beams, each pass beneath them turning the black road silver-white for fractions of a second. The crowd could see this section on giant suspended screens back in the valley. Horizon had brought the spectacle home.

And the spectacle answered.

A local driver — somehow still in contention by sheer refusal to be eliminated — clipped the outer barrier and bounced across the descent in a shower of sparks. The correction hit instantly this time, too eagerly, smoothing the car into a survivable line and letting it continue as though nothing had happened.

The system was compensating again.

Overcompensating.

“It’s overcorrecting for the dead pockets,” Mai said.

Shammy’s response was immediate. “It’s catching up.”

Ace understood that at once. The field hadn’t merely returned. It was trying to recover the race narrative it had almost lost.

Which meant the finish mattered more than ever.

Elena reached the lower descent still in front. Ace could see the Ferrari’s taillights in the artificial night, never panicked, never wandering. It would take a mistake to catch her.

Or a commitment.

Ace chose the second.

The final kilometers of Midnight Meridian ran down a broad switchback into the outer festival roads, then one long high-speed return through a canyon of barriers, screens, and screaming spectators. Elena took the first switchback clean. Ace took it later and harder, the Nismo stepping out on entry

and finding grip on exit in a burst that cut the gap by half.

Mai saw it and said nothing.

Shammy, watching the same pattern from behind, spoke instead. "Ace is going."

"I know."

The DB11 held third with no wasted motion. Skulker remained locked just behind them, not attacking, not falling away, preserving position as though he had decided that seeing the finish mattered more than standing on the podium.

The last straight opened.

Horizon had lined it with fire, floodlights, camera cranes, and enough people to make it feel like a tunnel built from appetite.

Elena stayed center. Defensible. Rational.

Ace didn't.

She went left, where the road ran closer to the outside barriers and the surface looked fractionally worse. It was the wrong line if the road were ordinary. But the anomaly was strongest here, clustered toward the finish, hungry to preserve the event. That made the left edge dangerous in a different way — either the correction would hold and grant her a line no physics should allow, or it would fail and leave her airborne in front of a hundred thousand phones.

The Nismo surged.

For one impossible second the car felt lighter than it was, not floating, not lifting, but being allowed to complete a motion reality should have priced differently. Ace was alongside. Then ahead by a nose. Elena saw it and gave the Ferrari everything that remained.

The finish banner rushed toward them.

The crowd hit a volume beyond human shape.

Ace crossed first by less than half a car.

Elena crossed second immediately after, and the DB11 took third with Skulker almost on its rear quarter.

The giant screens over the valley exploded with replay loops before the cars had even fully passed the line.

To the crowd, it was another legendary Horizon finish.

To the people inside it, it was proof that the festival's miracle had just split cleanly in two.

The run-off area beyond the finish was brighter than daylight. Ace coasted the Nismo down hard, heart still somewhere up in the final straight, and brought the car to a stop among smoke, noise, and the ritual theater of victory. She got out to applause she barely heard.

Elena pulled in a few seconds later. She stepped from the Ferrari, removed one glove finger by finger,

and looked back up the course with a face gone colder than usual.

“That section had no support,” she said.

It wasn't a question.

Mai arrived and shut down the DB11 with measured care. Shammy was already out, looking not at the crowd or the cameras but at the dark cut of mountain road far beyond the finish infrastructure.

Skulker stopped last among the leaders. He remained seated for several seconds, then exited and closed the door quietly behind him.

No one from Horizon's official side had approached yet. The announcers were still busy mythologizing the finish.

That left the truth to the people who had survived it.

Mai brought up the live graph on her tablet again. The telemetry lines were uglier now — not merely higher, but split. A deep trough where sectors six and seven had drained the correction density, followed by a savage rebound toward the finish.

“It redistributed,” she said.

Gears appeared at her shoulder as though called by the sentence. He looked at the graph, then toward the giant screens, where Ace's overtake was already being replayed from six different angles. In one of them, taken from a drone above the final straight, the Nismo seemed to occupy two slightly different positions across a single stutter of frames before resolving into one.

Mai saw it.

So did Skulker.

Neither commented immediately.

Shammy spoke first.

“It's straining.”

“Yes,” Gears said.

Ace tilted her head. “How many more times can it do that?”

Gears gave the only honest answer available. “Unknown.”

Skulker finally looked away from the replay and toward the mountains.

“It's not just protecting the race anymore.”

Mai's eyes moved from the graph to him. “Explain.”

He nodded toward the finish infrastructure, the lights, the cameras, the screaming crowd, the giant screens replaying impossibility as entertainment.

“It's protecting the narrative.”

That landed harder than the telemetry had.

Ace looked back at the replay. The overtake. The crowd reaction. The instant packaging of danger into triumph.

“Meaning what?”

Skulker’s expression did not change. “Meaning Horizon isn’t merely preserving continuation. It’s preserving the version of the event people came here to see.”

Shammy’s gaze remained fixed on the dark ridgeline beyond the lights. “It likes the ending.”

Mai exhaled slowly. “That would explain the finish concentration.”

Gears said nothing for several seconds, which in him meant he had reached a threshold he disliked. “If that interpretation is correct, then the final events are at greater risk than projected.”

“Because it’ll spend more to keep the show intact,” Mai said.

“Yes.”

Ace looked from the graph to the lights to the replay of herself winning by half a car. “That’s not ominous at all.”

A laugh broke in from the side.

Grouse, bruised and visibly furious at being reduced to spectator status, had made his way into the winner’s lane. He looked at the replay, then at the mountain in the distance, then at Ace.

“You know the really funny part?” he said.

Nobody answered.

He jerked his chin at the giant screens. “Everyone out there thinks that was the cleanest race of the night.”

No one corrected him.

Because from the audience’s point of view, it had been.

After a while the festival people finally arrived — assistants, camera teams, too-bright hosts, a medic who only existed because insurance still demanded the shape of concern even in places where concern had become optional. Questions were shouted. Sponsors wanted reactions. Someone tried to hand Ace a laurel draped in LED strips. She took exactly one photo before stepping away from the cameras on the grounds that the Nismo needed checking.

It didn’t.

But the excuse worked.

Back in the quieter dark at the edge of the run-off, with the crowd noise reduced to a distant wall, the core group closed ranks without meaning to make it visible. Ace by the Nismo. Mai with the tablet. Shammy reading the air. Skulker slightly off-angle. Gears just behind them like a vertical punctuation mark.

“Two events before the finale,” Mai said.

“Three,” Gears corrected.

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “No. This was event six.”

“Yes,” Gears said. “And Horizon has inserted an unscheduled exhibition heat tomorrow afternoon.”

Ace stared at him. “It did what?”

Gears handed her a slate. The festival schedule had changed. A new event sat between Meridian and the planned next night race. Not officially part of the championship. Not removable either, if the banners already rising over the valley meant anything.

## SUNSET GAUNTLET

### Special Invitational

Skulker took one look and said, “It wants another spike.”

No one argued.

Shammy turned her face toward the center of the valley, where crews were already assembling new lighting rigs for an event that had not existed this morning.

“It’s accelerating itself,” she said.

Mai nodded once. “Then we don’t have ten clean chapters of this.”

Ace’s grin returned, but this time there was edge under it.

“Good,” she said. “I hate slow problems.”

High above them, one of the drone cameras drifted, corrected its line, and held steady over the winner’s lane as though it had chosen exactly the right place to watch from.

Maybe it had.

The festival lights burned hotter. The giant screens reset. Somewhere out in the dark beyond the applause and music, the dead pockets waited in the mountains like the memory of honest gravity.

And Horizon, having nearly lost its grip on the script, rewrote the next page in real time.

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