

## HORIZON PROTOCOL

## Chapter 11 — Sunset Gauntlet

Horizon did not wait for night.

That, more than the inserted event itself, made the whole thing feel wrong.

Until now the festival had escalated according to a rhythm that at least pretended to be natural. Day built anticipation. Night delivered spectacle. Even the anomaly had seemed to prefer darkness — bright lights, deeper shadows, engines screaming through spaces where consequence could be mistaken for style.

But **Sunset Gauntlet** began while the sun was still falling.

The valley blazed gold and red, the mountains painted in long strips of fire as the entire festival rearranged itself around an event that had not existed that morning. Crews moved with the speed of an organism responding to injury. New barriers went up. New ramps were assembled. New drone lanes were painted in light across the air.

Nobody announced a reason.

They just acted as though it had always been meant to happen.

That was the part Mai hated most.

Not the anomaly itself. Not the impossible crash survivals. Not even the way the probability field now clearly concentrated itself around what Horizon considered the “correct” finish.

It was the improvisation.

The way the festival rewrote itself in broad daylight and every single person inside it accepted the change as normal.

“That is not event planning,” she said quietly.

Ace stood beside the Nismo, eyes on the rising scaffold of lights near the western ridge.

“No,” she said. “That’s appetite.”

Shammy said nothing. She had been quieter since Midnight Meridian, and not in the peaceful way. The wind around her had changed again. Small shifts. Micro-currents that kept circling back toward the center of the valley as though the entire place were breathing inward.

Skulker arrived from the opposite side of the paddock, hands in his coat pockets, gaze fixed on the newest section of track being assembled. He stopped beside them without greeting.

“They shortened the distance,” he said.

Mai lifted her tablet. He was right.

Sunset Gauntlet was not a long race. It was not even elegant. It was a compressed, aggressive loop beginning at the edge of the main festival grounds, cutting through the western show routes, climbing a half-built ridge road lined with stunt towers, then dropping back into the valley through a sequence of high-speed corners and two elevated jumps that had definitely not existed on any previous map.

“Shorter race,” Ace said.

“Bigger spike,” Skulker replied.

Gears joined them a few seconds later, looking no more pleased by the change than he ever looked by anything.

“The schedule alteration was not approved through any standard channel,” he said.

Ace looked at him.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning Horizon inserted it.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“That shouldn’t be a sentence anyone can say out loud.”

“And yet,” Gears replied.

A blast of music rolled over the valley, followed by the roar of a crowd that had no idea they were cheering for an anomaly escalating its own operating conditions.

High above them, the giant screens flickered to life.

SUNSET GAUNTLET

ONE NIGHT. ONE RUN. NO SECOND TAKES.

“Subtle,” Ace muttered.

“No,” Mai said. “That part is actually very on-brand.”

They spent the next twenty minutes in the mobile analysis unit while the sun dropped lower and the valley outside turned from gold to blood-orange.

The new course was uglier than Midnight Meridian, but in a different way. Meridian had been structurally dangerous — dead pockets, mountain cuts, places where the field thinned and honest gravity returned. Sunset Gauntlet was theatrical. Designed for maximum visual return. Tight enough to force contact. Fast enough to reward bad decisions. Layered with enough cameras and spectacle infrastructure that every mistake would be instantly visible on the giant screens.

“It wants compression,” Mai said.

“Of course it does,” Ace replied.

“No, specifically.” Mai rotated the course model. “Look.”

The route narrowed three separate times. Two of the squeezes were artificial — barriers moved inward to reduce line options. The third came at the first jump approach, where the road fed through a corridor of stage trusses before launching out toward a lit drop into the ridge road.

“Horizon is forcing the pack together,” Skulker said.

"Yes," Mai said. "And if the field is strongest near the finish, then this layout gives it multiple opportunities to spend earlier."

Shammy had her eyes half-closed, listening to the air through the hum of equipment and the throb of far-off bass.

"It's excited," she said.

Nobody answered for a second.

Then Ace did.

"I really wish you wouldn't keep phrasing it like that."

Shammy opened her eyes and looked at her.

"I'm trying to be accurate."

"That's the problem."

On the monitor, the telemetry projections updated.

The field concentration was different this time. Not just a strong finish pull. There were three distinct swells now — one at the first compression, another at the ridge drop, and the largest around the final run into the festival core.

"It's distributing load," Mai said.

Gears folded his hands behind his back. "Adaptive behavior."

"That sounds uncomfortably close to agency," Skulker said.

"Yes," Gears replied.

"Again," Ace said, "you say horrifying things way too calmly."

A brief crackle came through the side speaker. Then Bright's voice slid into the room with all the restraint of a crowbar through glass.

"Oh, that's because Gears thinks emotional tone is a civilian luxury."

Gears did not look at the speaker.

"This channel remains improperly accessed."

"Sure," Bright said. "Anyway. You've got a problem."

Mai didn't bother wasting time. "We know."

"You know the shape of the problem," Bright corrected. "Different thing."

Ace leaned one shoulder against the equipment rack. "Then enlighten us."

There was the faint sound of paper moving on Bright's end. Or maybe someone else's keyboard. Or maybe he was just making the sound on purpose.

"The festival's no longer just preserving continuity," he said. "It's curating momentum. That inserted event? That's not random escalation. That's narrative compensation."

Skulker's gaze sharpened.

"You agree with the finish-lane theory."

"I think it's bigger than the finish lane now," Bright said. "It had a stumble in Meridian. People noticed. So now it wants a cleaner spectacle before the finale. Better rhythm. Better confidence. More buy-in."

Mai stared at the graph.

"It's repairing audience expectation."

"Bingo."

Ace rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I hate how much sense that makes."

Bright continued before anyone could build from that.

"The dangerous part is simple: if it starts preserving the event as a story, it'll prioritize sequence over safety. You get a race like Sunset Gauntlet, full of forced compression and highly visible recovery points, and suddenly the field isn't just smoothing impacts. It's trying to preserve dramatic continuity."

"Meaning?" Ace said.

"Meaning if five cars are supposed to survive long enough to make the final straight interesting, it'll spend hard to keep them alive until then."

Mai saw the shape of the implication first.

"And after that?"

Bright let the silence answer for him.

Skulker did it anyway.

"After that, it won't care."

The room went still.

Outside, the crowd roared as one of the practice cars launched from a test ramp and landed in a burst of sparks that was immediately recycled onto the giant screens as if the festival itself were checking its own makeup in a mirror.

Gears looked at the course projection. "Then your operating assumption is as follows."

His tone made it sound like a weapons briefing.

"The event will heavily support continuity until the final third of the route. Once the spectacle objective is satisfied, compensation may become uneven or cease entirely."

"Can it do that?" Ace asked.

“Yes,” Shammy said quietly. “It already did.”

Nobody needed her to specify the mountain.

They went to the grid under a sky that could not decide whether it was evening or stage lighting.

Sunset lived for maybe three minutes at that latitude before Horizon devoured it with artificial light. The western ridge burned red one last time, and then the gantries came alive, the fire-lines ignited, the drone paths brightened, and the valley became its own sunset — hotter, louder, less honest.

The field was down again.

Five drivers now mattered. The rest were still technically present, but the shape of the race had changed. The survivors of Midnight Meridian wore it differently.

Ace in the Nismo, quiet and coiled.

Mai in the DB11, every movement reduced to intention.

Skulker, whose stillness had become its own kind of pressure.

Vega, back from the wash injury only because Horizon’s med teams worked like they’d been told death was a branding problem.

And the silver hypercar driver, pale-faced and brittle, running on the kind of confidence that only persists because stopping would require admitting the pattern.

The crowd wanted this. You could feel it.

They wanted vindication after Meridian’s fracture. They wanted Horizon to prove it was still Horizon.

The festival wanted the same thing.

Ace settled into the Nismo and felt it immediately.

The softness was back before the lights even changed.

Not under the tires yet. Under the moment. A subtle insistence. A shape being prepared around what was about to happen.

“You feel that?” she said into the radio.

“Yes,” Mai replied.

“It’s front-loading,” Shammy added.

Skulker, on the shared channel because nobody had bothered pretending they were still racing as strangers, said: “Then don’t give it the line it wants.”

Ace smiled.

“Now you’re speaking my language.”

The lights went red.

The announcer screamed something incoherent about legends and no second takes.

The crowd counted with him.

Green.

Sunset Gauntlet detonated.

The first compression point came less than twenty seconds in — a funnel through scaffold barriers that forced six wide down to two and pretended this was a sane thing to build for motorsport. Horizon compensated instantly. Cars touched. Mirrors broke. A rear corner climbed halfway onto another hood and slid back off with impossible gentleness. The pack came through intact.

Ace used the field's generosity against itself, pushing the Nismo into a gap that shouldn't have existed and trusting that if Horizon wanted a clean first act, it would let the move happen.

It did.

She came out second behind Vega.

"Confirmed," Mai said over the radio. "It's spending early."

The ridge climb was worse. A pair of camera arches framed a sequence of linked corners so tightly that the only way through at speed required the exact kind of faith Horizon had been teaching everyone to adopt. Vega drove it like a believer. The silver hypercar followed. Ace did not. She drove it like a skeptic exploiting a liar's habits, taking the less photogenic line because the field had clearly favored the obvious one in the previous sector.

That worked too.

By the first jump she was alongside the hypercar and nearly on Vega's rear.

The jump itself was obscene. Not technically impossible — Horizon never did impossible in the clean sense, only in the curated one — but designed to stretch the suspension and the audience at the same time. The launch corridor compressed between truss towers, opened to the night, then dropped onto a ridge road lit from below by concealed flood panels that made the landing zone look like a stage built for gods with sponsorships.

Vega launched first.

The Jesko sailed.

For one moment the car hung too cleanly against the firelit dusk.

Then Ace launched after him and felt the field take hold mid-air — the smallest weird easing, not enough to remove danger, enough to profile it into beauty.

She hated it.

And used it anyway.

The Nismo landed harder than the Jesko but straighter, suspension compressing with a violence that translated through her spine and into the wheel. She corrected once, twice, and was still there.

Behind her the DB11 took the jump with less flash and more authority. Mai let the car's weight do what weight did best when respected, and Shammy gave her the one sentence that mattered.

"Two meters left on landing."

Mai adjusted in the air.

The DB11 hit clean.

The crowd's reaction reached them half a second late through the valley speakers.

Second compression.

This one happened at the ridge drop and was exactly as ugly as predicted. Five cars entered. The road narrowed against a cut wall, the outside edge unguarded, then broke left over a blind crest into a descending switchback. Horizon spent brutally here. You could feel it in the road. In the way impacts dissolved into saved trajectories. In the way bad choices remained expensive but not terminal.

The silver hypercar clipped the wall and should have lost its rear suspension.

It didn't.

Vega got crossed up over the crest and should have gone wide into empty air.

He didn't.

Skulker went three-wide for a heartbeat that should have ended in steel, glass, and historical footage.

It didn't.

The anomaly carried them all through the sequence like an editor cutting the worst second from every possible version.

And then the final third began.

Ace felt it vanish.

Not all at once.

One meter there. Half a line here. The softness was simply no longer willing to pay the same price.

"Drop," Shammy said sharply.

Mai had already seen it in the graph. "Confirmed. The field is thinning fast."

The final run into the festival core was a long descending S-line between barriers, camera towers, and densely packed spectator zones. It looked safer than the mountain. That made it more dangerous. Drivers would trust it longer.

Vega did.

He entered the first right too hot, expecting the same gentle correction that had carried him through the ridge. It arrived weakly, late, insufficient. The Jesko drifted wide, clipped the barrier, overcorrected, and snapped across the road in front of the silver hypercar.

This time Horizon didn't save the second car cleanly.

The hypercar hit Vega's rear quarter hard enough to launch itself half-sideways into a camera stanchion. Carbon fiber exploded. The impact turned the car in the air once, almost elegantly, before it crashed nose-first into the run-off trench and stayed there.

The crowd screamed.

Not cheered.

Screamed.

Vega somehow kept moving, one taillight gone, bodywork torn open down the side.

Ace shot between the dying stanchion and Vega's crippled line by instinct more than thought.

Real debris now. Real chance. No soft landing.

Behind her, Mai saw the opening close and chose survival over position. The DB11 went left, heavy and decisive, clipping shattered camera housing with a shriek of composite against paint but keeping all four wheels down.

Skulker took the center, because of course he did, and came out of the wreckage still in the race by what looked suspiciously like contempt alone.

The final straight opened in front of them.

Only three cars were truly in it now.

Ace. Vega. Skulker.

Mai half a breath behind.

And the field — what remained of it — surged toward the finish in concentrated desperation because Horizon's favorite ending was still available if it could just hold together for fifteen more seconds.

Vega tried to defend center line with a damaged car and the arrogance of someone who had spent too long being saved. Ace knew better now. She went right, where the surface looked marginally worse and the lighting was less flattering. Horizon would have favored center. Reality favored traction.

The Nismo found just enough.

Skulker stayed left, not trying to win, trying to survive the lane the others weren't reading.

Mai stayed behind both lines, waiting to inherit the mistake.

Vega's rear finally gave up halfway down the straight.

Not dramatically. Just enough. A twitch becoming a slide, a slide becoming loss, and no anomaly left willing to turn it into a perfect near-miss. The Jesko spun broadside, shedding sparks and expensive body panels in a long violent arc toward the barriers.

Ace passed him.

Skulker passed the far side.

The DB11 missed the spinning debris by centimeters that belonged to skill, not miracle.

Ace crossed first.

Skulker crossed second.

Mai took third less than a second later.

The finish lights detonated around them. Fire columns. Music. Announcers losing their minds in two languages. The giant screens instantly replaying the exact parts that still looked heroic from a distance.

But the crowd was different now.

You could hear it in them.

They had seen the hypercar go into the trench. They had seen Vega's damage. They had seen, maybe for the first time, a Horizon finish that looked less like invulnerability and more like a deal expiring in public.

Ace brought the Nismo down hard beyond the line and sat one breath longer than usual before getting out.

Her hands were steady.

That was how she knew it had been close.

Skulker stopped not far from her and exited with the same measured calm he brought to everything, but there was dust on his coat and a fresh scrape down one side of the car that had not been there at the start. Mai pulled the DB11 into the winner's lane seconds later. Shammy was out almost before the engine died, eyes already on the valley itself rather than the race.

"It's unstable," she said.

No one asked what.

Mai held up the graph.

They didn't need to.

The telemetry had gone ugly in a new way. No longer a clean rise with localized troughs. Now it looked serrated. Overcorrection, drop, overcorrection, failure, rebound. A system trying to preserve its own function while burning through the margins that made that function survivable.

Gears joined them with the timing of inevitability.

"Status?"

Mai turned the screen toward him. "It's oscillating."

"Yes."

Ace looked at him. "You say yes to everything like it isn't getting worse."

"It is getting worse," Gears said.

"That is why I am here."

For once, nobody even tried to make a joke out of that.

Behind them, festival staff swarmed the wreck sites. The crowd noise surged and dipped unpredictably now — half celebration, half the collective aftertaste of having seen something go wrong that had not been allowed to go wrong before.

Skulker looked toward the giant replay screens. They had already started editing around the ugliest angles.

"It's doing damage control," he said.

Mai followed his gaze. "The festival?"

"Yes."

Ace frowned. "You say that like it's alive."

Skulker met her eyes for the first time since Meridian.

"I'm saying it reacts like something that wants to continue being itself."

That sat heavily in the floodlit air between them.

Shammy, still watching the wind move wrong around the main stage towers, spoke into the silence.

"It isn't one thing."

Mai looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

Shammy took a moment. Not for drama. For accuracy.

"The field. The roads. The cameras. The crowd. The expectation. They aren't separate anymore." Her gaze drifted to the finish banner, to the giant screens, to the ramp crews already moving with suspicious speed in the center of the valley. "Horizon is what happens when all of them start pulling in the same direction."

No one had a better sentence than that.

A notification hit Mai's tablet.

Then another.

Then three at once.

She looked down.

And swore softly in Finnish.

Ace blinked. "That bad?"

Mai turned the screen.

The festival schedule had changed again.

The finale had been moved forward.

Not by a day.

By hours.

BLACK FINALE  
TONIGHT  
FULL VALLEY CIRCUIT

Gears read it over her shoulder and went very still.

Skulker's expression somehow flattened even further.

Ace stared at the screen, then up at the center of the valley where crews had already begun reconfiguring barriers, lights, and ramp elements at a speed that was no longer remotely plausible.

"It's not waiting," she said.

"No," Mai replied.

Shammy looked toward the heart of Horizon where the wind had begun spiraling inward hard enough now that even Ace could see dust move against the expected flow.

"It can't," she said.

And for the first time since they had arrived in Mexico, the festival did not feel like a party with an anomaly inside it.

It felt like an anomaly wearing a party as camouflage.

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