

RACE 01 — WOODWARD BAPTISM Detroit Blacklist Underground | Event #1 of 12 Location: Woodward Avenue, Royal Oak to 8 Mile Road Conditions: Late January, 11:47 PM | Dry asphalt, ambient temp -9°C | Light snowfall beginning Winner: Viktor "Ironwall" Drach — ZL1 Camaro, black-on-black

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The cold did not ask permission.

It pressed through every gap in the gathered crowd — through collar seams and clenched fists and the thin foil heat-blankets that three or four spectators had wrapped around their shoulders like they were waiting for someone to pull them back from the edge. The crowd lined both sides of Woodward Avenue in the dark, maybe two hundred people, faces blurred behind breath-cloud and phone-lit anticipation. Nobody used real names here. Nobody asked.

At the far northern end of the drag, a signal flare sat unlit in a kid's hand — couldn't have been older than seventeen, hooded, bouncing heel to toe on the frozen shoulder of the road. His job was simple. When the flag dropped, he lit the flare. When the cars crossed the south line marker — a stripe of orange chalk already half-blurred by a passing tire — he called it. He would be paid in cash and told nothing else.

Seven cars had gathered at the line.

A Dodge Viper in primer grey. A heavily widened Supra in matte blue, sitting low enough to scrape a curb thought about wrong. A modified Mustang GT500 with a cut roof and a cage bolted in somewhere underneath all that muscle. Two cars the crowd had already dismissed — a Civic turbo build and a tuned WRX, both fast, both not fast enough for this field. And then there were two more that the crowd watched the way a crowd watches lightning.

The Nismo 270 sat at the far left lane.

It was smaller than everything around it — a compact, precise machine, body painted the deep matte of a bruise just forming, no branding, no chrome. The hood was unadorned. The exhaust note when it idled was quiet enough to be unsettling, like something choosing not to announce itself. Behind its wheel, visible only as a silhouette through the tinted glass, was Ace — slight, contained, sitting perfectly still while every other driver rolled forward and back, warming tires, performing confidence.

She did not perform anything.

Beside her lane — one gap over — the DB11 settled into its start position with the slow authority of something that did not recognize the concept of rush. Aston Martin's grand tourer reimagined as a weapon: engine singing at low register, bodywork in deep steel-blue that caught the streetlights and held them like captured water. Behind the wheel: Mai, silver-haired, eyes moving across the track geometry with the quiet precision of someone reading a circuit diagram in real time. In the passenger seat — if "passenger" was remotely the right word — Shammy filled the space the way a storm fills a room it doesn't technically fit in. Her head touched the ceiling. Her knees were adjusted forward. She'd have looked absurd in any other context. Here, she looked like the car had been built around her and the builders simply ran out of height.

"Northern wind, three degrees off-axis," Shammy said, barely above a murmur. "It'll pull left past the underpass."

"Already accounting for it," Mai said.

The seventh car pulled up last.

Viktor Drach's ZL1 Camaro did not ease into position — it landed there, 6.2 litres of supercharged American anger dropping into place with a sound that made the crowd step back involuntarily. Black paint, no visible modification to the exterior, though anyone who'd seen it run knew the drivetrain had been taken apart and rebuilt three times over. Viktor himself was never visible behind the glass. He didn't need to be. His reputation arrived well before he did.

He'd won eleven races in the past eight months. He'd been offered a buyout twice. He'd declined both times.

The signal boy raised the unlit flare.

Engines came up. The sound on Woodward shifted — ceased to be ambient and became directional, pressurized, the kind of sound that sits in the chest instead of the ears. The Viper barked. The Supra's turbo whispered its rising charge. The Mustang's V8 opened its throttle once, sharply, like a warning shot.

The Nismo 270 produced almost nothing. Just a low, harmonic pulse — a frequency more felt than heard.

The DB11's engine opened into its baritone, controlled, Mai holding revs at the exact threshold where traction lived.

The flare lit.

The crowd surged back half a step as seven cars launched simultaneously and the combined force of them hit the air on Woodward like a physical event. The Viper overcorrected left immediately, burning rubber that smelled like scorched rubber compounds and something chemical underneath. The Supra got clean traction and surged ahead in the first hundred metres with the efficiency of something tuned past its own caution limits.

Ace moved.

She didn't launch violently. She translated — the Nismo going from static to full motion in a way that seemed to skip the intermediate steps. By the first streetlight, she was inside the top three. By the second, she'd found the pocket between the Supra and the Mustang and was holding it, waiting, reading the road ahead the way she read everything: not as a surface but as a pressure system.

The DB11 was two cars back. Mai hadn't pushed yet. There was something methodical in her restraint — she was watching the field organize itself, waiting for the geometry to tell her something useful.

“Drach hasn't moved,” Shammy said.

“He won't yet,” Mai replied.

He didn't. For six full seconds — a long time at these speeds — the ZL1 ran fourth, sitting behind the chaos of the opening spread, engine barely flexed, Viktor reading the same field that Mai was reading and reaching the same conclusions.

Then he moved.

He didn't pass. He went through. The ZL1 split a gap between the Viper and the WRX that should not

have been a gap at all, the supercharger screaming as he brought the car up to its actual speed, and it was immediately clear that the Camaro had been running at approximately sixty percent of its capability for the first half of the race. The crowd lined south of the underpass heard him before they saw him — a roar that swept ahead of its own source like a pressure wave.

Ace registered it. She did not flinch. She simply made the calculation that Viktor Drach was now running a line she could not intercept with what she had and filed that fact away without sentiment.

The ZL1 crossed the chalk line first by four car lengths.

The crowd erupted and then went quiet again in the way crowds do when something impressive has also been slightly frightening. Flares went up. Phones recorded. The kid with the starter flare called it over a radio nobody else could hear.

Ace brought the Nismo to a controlled stop thirty metres past the line, engine dropping back to its idle murmur. She sat for a moment in the dark cab, watching the Camaro's brake lights in the distance.

First race. First read. The field was real.

She had learned what she needed to learn.

The DB11 pulled up alongside her. Shammy's window was already down, the cold air moving her storm-gradient hair off her shoulder.

"He's fast," Shammy said.

Ace looked across at her. Said nothing.

"She knows," Mai said from the driver's seat, gaze already moving back to her instruments.

They stayed at the line for a moment, the three of them, while the crowd thinned around them and Viktor Drach accepted a paper envelope of cash somewhere north of the chalk and said nothing to anyone.

There were eleven races left.

None of them would be this clean. —

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