

Chapter 12 — Black Finale

ARCHIVE NOTE

Two slightly different narrative records of the Horizon Blacklist Finale exist.

The discrepancy is currently unresolved.

Given the involvement of Konrad, the Foundation has elected not to pursue further clarification.

Detroit had stopped pretending to be a city an hour ago.

It was a machine now.

A screaming one.

The route had burned itself into the night so many times that the streets no longer looked built. They looked carved. Whole blocks of downtown had become corridors of reflected neon and boiling exhaust, the glass faces of old towers shivering under the pressure of engines that had no business still running. Barricades were broken in three places. Two traffic lights hung sideways over an intersection like snapped necks. Somewhere behind the industrial haze, helicopters kept their distance with the prudent caution of men who had figured out that whatever was happening down here was not meant to be interrupted.

The final run of the Blacklist chain had narrowed the field the way a furnace narrows metal.

Twelve had become eight.

Eight had become five.

Now, with the river district behind them and the elevated expressway ahead, it was down to the last cluster of predators, all of them running on obsession, terror, and whatever unnatural mercy still held their drivetrains together.

Ace sat low behind the wheel of the Nismo, gloved fingers steady at ten and two, shoulders compressed, eyes fixed ahead with the violet stillness that always meant she had crossed the line from concentration into something cleaner. The cockpit lights painted the bridge of her nose green and red in fast pulses. Her car vibrated like a loaded spring. The engine note was no longer a sound so much as a pressure against the sternum.

Mai's voice came through the comms without panic, which somehow made it more urgent.

"Three left in effective range," she said. "Viktor is dropping half a lane on exit. Marrow is pushing too hard and will understeer if he survives his own ego. Kessler is still the real problem."

"Good," Ace said.

That was all.

Beside the rear-quarter camera feed, the telemetry ghosted numbers across the inside of the windshield. Speed. Split. Tire temperature. A dancing thread of projected route lines that Shammy had already called “cute” with the kind of polite contempt only she could manage.

Shammy’s voice slid in over the channel a second later, softer than Mai’s, but no less present.

“Crosswind on the upper ramp in twelve seconds,” she said. “The gust pocket is ugly. I can flatten part of it, not all of it.”

“Take the edge off,” Ace said.

“Already am.”

Outside, the air shifted.

No visible miracle. No cinematic burst. Just the subtle correction of reality by a woman who understood pressure the way pianists understood keys. The buffeting that should have rattled the chassis on the approach to the ramp came in blunted, as if the storm over the river had been convinced to wait half a breath longer before baring its teeth.

Ace took the rise flat-out.

The Nismo hit the ramp, suspension compressed, then bit down again on the roadway as sparks flashed from the rear diffuser. Ahead, Kessler’s car—a brutally widened black Mustang with too much motor and not enough sense—wobbled under the same transition. Viktor’s silver Audi clipped a barrier, recovered by spite alone, and kept going.

Marrow didn’t recover.

His Corvette entered the corner too proud, washed wide exactly as Mai had predicted, clipped the angled concrete, and pinwheeled into a nest of construction fencing in a blossom of magnesium sparks and shredded bodywork. The crowd on the overpass above recoiled in one wave, phones up, faces lit white-blue by their own screens.

Ace didn’t look.

One less.

The city opened again. For a handful of impossible seconds the final route gave them a straight that seemed to run all the way through Detroit’s spine, a canyon of sodium lamps and shattered reflections. Old brick. New steel. Graffiti. Chain-link. A mural half-burned off the wall of a condemned music venue. The whole place looked like it had decided to watch.

Kessler moved first.

The Mustang snapped right, trying to box Ace against a narrowing service lane barrier while Viktor lunged up the left with all the grace of a knife fight in an elevator. Too late. Ace dropped half a gear, fed throttle, and let the Nismo slip into the gap that technically should not have fit a bicycle, never mind a live, snarling piece of Japanese vengeance.

Metal kissed concrete.

A scream of sparks.

Then she was through.

Viktor shouted something in Russian over an open band he had forgotten to lock down. It sounded expensive.

Mai breathed out once through her nose. The sound was almost a laugh.

“You make terrible life choices look very elegant.”

“It fit.”

“It absolutely did not.”

“It fit enough.”

Ahead, the final district loomed: the old freight arteries, the stacked container lanes, the brutal geometry of warehouses and rail spurs where the Blacklist chain had chosen to end because the place looked like it had been designed by someone who hated both pedestrians and mercy. The course map folded in on itself here, all heavy braking zones and murderous exits, the kind of section where raw power stopped mattering and nerve became everything.

Behind them, sirens wailed at a heroic but irrelevant distance.

Kessler came back hard in the braking zone, the Mustang’s front end diving like an animal scenting blood. He tried the inside, late and ugly. Ace let him believe it for half a second, then rotated the Nismo on the threshold of grip and came off the corner with just enough angle to dirty his air and murder his line. The Mustang clipped a stack of temporary barriers and shed one mirror in an explosion of orange plastic.

Viktor threaded through the aftermath, now desperate enough to become creative. That made him dangerous.

“He’s setting up for contact,” Mai warned.

“I know.”

“He really, really wants to die today.”

“Get in line,” Ace muttered.

The next corner was a decreasing-radius left around a dead loading depot, lit by floodlamps that turned the drifting smoke silver. Viktor committed before the corner existed. He shoved the Audi into Ace’s rear quarter and tried to turn a race into an execution.

The Nismo twitched.

For a single cold instant the whole car went light.

Then Shammy spoke, low and almost amused.

“No.”

The air pressure around the tail changed. Not enough to be visible. Enough to matter. Enough to take the worst of the snap away. Ace caught the slide, countered, planted her foot, and the Nismo tore out of the corner with twin ribbons of green-lit vapor curling off the bodywork like something trying to remember how to haunt.

Viktor, deprived of the spin he wanted, paid for his greed instead. His Audi entered the exit too crossed up, clipped the inner bollards, and slammed sideways into a forklift parked behind a mesh fence. The fence folded over the hood in a shrieking metallic veil.

Two less.

Now it was just Kessler.

Of course it was Kessler.

The man had been the cleanest driver in the Blacklist chain when clean mattered, and the filthiest when it didn't. He was not theatrical. That made him worse. No screaming on comms. No grandstanding. No need to prove he was dangerous. His Mustang simply remained there, black and broad-backed, forcing Ace to earn every meter.

The route climbed again, turning back toward the river for the last time. Beyond the rising line of the guardrails, Detroit's lights bled outward in gold and toxic blue. The finish sector waited past the old suspension span and the final industrial straight beyond it. One long run. One last sequence. One chance for someone to make a mistake.

Mai's voice sharpened.

"He's saving engine."

"I know."

"He has one push left."

"I know."

"Ace."

"I know, Mai."

That earned half a second of silence.

Then, very dryly: "Just checking whether we were all enjoying the same apocalypse."

Ace's mouth twitched. Barely. Enough.

The bridge rose ahead of them like a black ribcage over the dark water.

Kessler triggered his push exactly where Mai had predicted, because men like him always mistook optimal timing for originality. The Mustang's rear squatted and surged. Nitrous or something nastier. The car leapt forward, trying to break the draft and make Ace chase dirty air into the final sector.

Ace let him go a fraction.

Not because she had to.

Because she wanted him comfortable.

The Nismo held. Engine hard. Steering alive in her hands. The whole car felt knife-balanced, every vibration telling the truth.

Shammy exhaled over the comms.

“Cross-current is getting weird.”

“Weird how?” Mai asked.

“Weird like the atmosphere can’t decide whether it wants to storm or kneel.”

“That is not a useful metric.”

“It is a perfectly useful metric if you’re me.”

They hit the crown of the bridge.

Wind struck from the right in a hard, invisible shove. Shammy bled part of it away, but not all; the Nismo still edged half a lane before Ace corrected, smooth as breath. Below them, the black water flashed through the rail gaps like strips of torn film. Ahead, the road dropped into the final descent, Kessler’s taillights bobbing like twin wounds in the dark.

Three corners remained.

A right-left transition through the rust corridor.

A short blast under the elevated rail.

Then the final straight.

Kessler defended the first corner with discipline. Good line. Late apex. No opening.

Second corner, same story.

By the time they burst under the rail bridge, the city had narrowed around them into tunnel geometry—steel supports, dripping concrete, echoes layered over echoes, every sound doubled and made hostile. Spectators packed the side ramps and loading docks in dangerous numbers now, held back only by fear and the fact that no sane body wanted to stand too close to the edge of whatever the Blacklist had become tonight.

The final straight opened ahead in a rush of lamps and glare.

Kessler’s Mustang led by less than a car length.

Mai spoke first.

“Final sector. He’ll block once, maybe twice.”

Ace didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Her breathing had gone very slow.

The Nismo’s engine note tightened.

The distance between hunter and prey began to close in millimeters.

Then Mai's voice cracked across the radio with a suddenness sharp enough to cut skin.

"Watch your six, something is closing in, fast!"

Ace's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

At first it was only light distortion in the heat-haze and smoke. Then shape resolved out of the glare—low nose, unmistakable front profile, headlights set with that predatory, almost insolent spacing that once seen was impossible to mistake again. Not some generic silhouette. Not a maybe. Not wishful pattern recognition.

A Supra.

No.

The Supra.

The thing behind them did not sound like an engine coming up through the gears. It sounded like a beast dragging an engine's corpse around inside its chest. The note hit the comms through chassis vibration before the microphones caught it properly: a vast, iron-throated bellow undercut with turbo scream, as though an RB26 had spent one bad night in hell and come back with opinions.

It closed absurdly fast.

Too fast for a car that should have been anywhere near traction.

Too fast for a car that, by every sane metric, had not belonged in the race at all.

Mai's voice came again, this time stripped of analysis and left with the naked certainty underneath.

"Ace," she said. "It's Konrad."

The Supra surged into full view.

White once, perhaps, or silver, maybe even something civilized before the city had worked its chemistry on it. Now it looked like moonlight poured over a knife and then left in a machine shop fire. Broad stance. Too planted. Too calm. The front fascia came up in the mirror like a shark's snout breaking black water. Then it moved.

One lane.

Half a lane.

No hesitation.

It swept out from behind the Nismo and split the centerline with effortless contempt, the sound of it rolling over the straight not like horsepower but demonic judgment.

It passed Ace first.

For half a heartbeat the cars ran side by side close enough that she could see through the side glass.

Konrad sat loose behind the wheel, one hand at the top, profile lit by dashboard ghosts and the pale urban smear outside. Calm, of course. Calm in the way avalanches were calm from a sufficient distance. He turned just enough at the exact wrong moment, as though he had all the time in the world and every intention of proving it, and the shape of the grin on his face was so unmistakably his that Ace felt her soul age two years.

“....for fuck's sake,” she said.

Shammy made a sound over comms that might have been a laugh and might have been pure atmospheric disbelief.

The Supra flew past Kessler next.

Not in a duel. Not in a contest. Just a statement. Kessler blocked once, reflexively, and the Supra simply refused to participate in the logic of obstruction. It shifted left with an impossible little twitch of weight transfer, gripped like it had signed a separate treaty with the road, and blasted by the Mustang as if passing parked traffic.

The whole straight seemed to recoil around it.

Spectators on the side ramps erupted. Some screamed. Some cheered. Some simply stared with the ancient animal expression people get when they realize they are looking at something that has no obligation to explain itself.

Konrad did not stay.

Of course he didn't.

The Supra gained three lengths, four, then continued forward into the dark beyond the finish lighting with the same demonic howl, neither claiming the race nor acknowledging the geometry of it. He had come to intrude, not to compete. To remind the universe that whatever closed system Detroit had tried to build tonight, he could still put his fingers through the bars.

Mai recovered first, because Mai almost always did.

“Did he just—”

“Yes,” Ace said.

“He wasn't even—”

“Yes.”

“He cannot keep doing this.”

“Yes.”

A beat.

Then Mai, dry as old paper and somehow still focused: “Kessler. Still present. Still trying very hard to ruin our evening.”

Ace's eyes snapped forward.

The finish line was still there.

So was the Mustang.

Kessler had flinched—not much, but enough. Enough to lose the immaculate rhythm he had nursed through the last sector. Enough to leave the door open half an inch.

Half an inch was plenty.

Ace dropped the Nismo down, let the revs leap, and drove straight into the wound Konrad's passing had opened in the man's concentration. The Nismo lunged. Fender to door. Door to quarter. No contact, but close enough that Kessler would feel the heat off the paint.

The Mustang moved to block.

Too late.

Ace was already there.

They thundered toward the finish in a wall of noise and white light, engines hitting the top of their rage together. The Mustang had brute force; the Nismo had timing, balance, and a driver who had long ago stopped asking the road for permission. For twenty meters they were even. For ten, they were less than even, the front corners aligned like matched blades.

Then Ace found the extra fraction.

No miracle. No hidden reserve. Just perfect commitment.

The Nismo crossed first.

By little more than the length of a heartbeat.

The finish gantry flashed overhead in a burst of savage white. Cameras popped. Floodlights strobed the bodywork. Somewhere off to the right, a tower of pyrotechnics that absolutely no one had approved went up in a ragged blossom of silver sparks and smoke. The crowd detonated into noise so loud it became texture instead of sound.

Ace kept her foot in for two seconds more before easing off. The Nismo decelerated in long, angry breaths. Kessler's Mustang dropped back, then veered away down the runoff sector, dignity leaking invisibly from every panel.

Mai exhaled.

Shammy laughed for real this time, bright and astonished and touched around the edges with static.

"Ace."

"What."

"You won."

"I know."

"No," Shammy said, still laughing. "I mean you won despite being professionally harassed by a

metaphysical gremlin in demonic Supra.”

Ace rolled her shoulders once and guided the Nismo toward the designated slowdown corridor, where Blacklist staff, hangers-on, medics, armed idiots, and the merely curious had already begun converging in one glorious and unstable knot.

“I noticed,” she said.

Mai came back on the channel, and now the laugh was in her voice too, hidden under the fatigue.

“I am putting something in the archive after this.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes.”

“What.”

“A formal note,” Mai said. “Subject line: Konrad continues to be Konrad. Operational impact: irritating.”

“Make it stronger.”

“Gladly.”

The winner’s lane was chaos.

People pressed against barriers, shouting, filming, reaching. Blacklist officials with expensive coats and poor survival instincts tried to impose order with gestures that had no chance of meaning anything. Mechanics ran toward the Nismo and then thought better of it when they saw Ace step out and the expression on her face. The car ticked and popped as heat bled out of it, the hood trembling faintly like a predator too alive to be considered parked.

Ace pulled off her gloves finger by finger.

The night air felt cold after the cockpit, though “cold” in Detroit carried layers here—fuel, river damp, hot brake dust, old concrete, ozone. Her pulse was still elevated, but the deep fight-calm had not left her yet. It lingered in the set of her jaw, in the way her eyes continued scanning long after the race was done.

Mai reached her first, moving through the crowd with the clean economy that made even panic give her space. Silver hair loose at the edges now, one cheek marked with a smudge of grease she either hadn’t noticed or had chosen not to care about. She stopped in front of Ace, looked her over with fast professional precision, and only then allowed herself the tiniest nod.

“You’re intact.”

“Mostly.”

“That will do.”

Shammy arrived a second later from the support line, taller than everyone around her by a humiliating margin, the air in her wake carrying that quiet charged stillness that always made nearby people unconsciously lower their voices. She glanced once down the finish straight, toward the

darkness where Konrad had disappeared.

“There’s still residue,” she said.

“From the Supra?” Mai asked.

“From him.” Shammy tilted her head, listening to something none of the engines could drown out. “It’s thinning, though. He’s gone.”

Ace snorted.

“Of course he is.”

For a few seconds none of them said anything.

The crowd screamed around them. Music pounded from speakers that had already been blown once and were heading for a second heroic death. Someone in the distance tried to start a chant with Ace’s name and got the syllables wrong. Overhead, the clouds shifted, lit from below by the city until they looked like the inside of a bruise.

Mai folded her arms.

“So,” she said at last. “Official recap. We survived the Blacklist final. Kessler lost. Viktor ruined his own evening. Marrow discovered the concrete economy. And Konrad appeared in a demonic Supra for no reason except personal malice.”

Ace leaned against the still-hot fender of the Nismo.

“Not no reason.”

Shammy smiled faintly. “No. Not no reason.”

Mai looked between them. “All right. Go on.”

Ace stared down the straight where the Supra had been, expression flattening into that dangerous thoughtfulness she wore when pieces began to align in her head.

“He didn’t come to interfere,” she said. “Not really.”

“He absolutely interfered,” Mai replied.

“He came to remind us he could.”

That stilled things a little.

Shammy’s eyes narrowed with interest rather than alarm. “Yes,” she said softly. “That sounds more like him.”

Mai let the idea settle, visibly disliked it, and then accepted it anyway because she respected accuracy more than comfort.

“A message, then,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“Yeah.”

The music kept pounding. A flood of people on the outer barrier began cheering again as the giant screens replayed the finish—Kessler lunging, Ace taking the inside, the Nismo crossing first by a margin too small to look fair and too clean to argue with. There was no broadcast angle of the Supra yet. That would come later, if the cameras had been brave enough. If the footage survived whatever physics Konrad had bent merely by passing through.

Shammy looked at Ace sidelong.

“You’re annoyed.”

“Yes.”

“Only annoyed?”

Ace considered that.

“Annoyed,” she said, “is the polite word.”

Mai’s mouth betrayed her with the briefest smile.

“There she is.”

A race marshal, or someone playing one tonight, began approaching with the cautious posture of a man who had drawn the shortest possible straw and knew it. He had a headset, a black jacket with the Blacklist insignia stitched across it, and the expression of someone trying very hard not to remember the part where an unidentified Supra had just torn through the end of his event like a mythological insult.

He stopped a safe distance away.

“Winner’s enclosure,” he said, raising his voice over the crowd and failing. “We need—”

“No,” Mai said.

The man blinked.

Mai did not raise her voice. She did not need to.

“Ace will be there in a minute,” she said. “After you fix your perimeter, clear your medics a path to sector four, and tell anyone asking about the extra car that if they value their insurance premiums, they saw nothing.”

The marshal stared at her for two bewildered seconds, then nodded like a condemned man accepting a priest and vanished back into the noise.

Shammy watched him go.

“I do enjoy when you do that.”

Mai looked mildly offended. “Do what.”

“That.”

“That is not a useful description.”

“It is if you’re me.”

Ace barked one short laugh before she could stop herself.

The three of them stood there a moment longer, framed by floodlight glare and steam and the afterimage of velocity. Triad-shaped now, fully and unmistakably, in the mess that came after victory rather than before it. Not because the night had been neat. Quite the opposite. Because it had been ugly, loud, dangerous, and just unstable enough to prove the point.

Binary had survived for a long time.

Tonight had belonged to something else.

Mai looked toward the winner’s enclosure and then back to Ace.

“Ready?”

Ace pushed off the car.

“Yeah.”

Shammy tipped her chin toward the dark beyond the straight one last time.

“You know,” she said, “he was grinning.”

“Of course he was,” Ace muttered.

“No, I mean really grinning. He enjoyed that.”

Ace gave her a flat look.

“Shammy.”

“What.”

“I know.”

This time all three of them laughed, brief and tired and real.

Then they turned toward the floodlights, the cameras, the chaos, and whatever came after the finish line. Behind them, far out in the dark industrial web beyond the official course, there rose for one fading instant the distant, impossible howl of an engine that sounded less like combustion than a demon clearing its throat.

Konrad, somewhere out there, was still being Konrad.

Ace did not bother looking back.

She had already won.

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