

The bar smelled like ozone and spilled bourbon, the kind of place where the lights flickered not because of bad wiring but because something older than the building kept testing the circuits. Absolute Ace sat on the edge of the booth like she was balancing on a blade, 120 centimeters of compressed intent wrapped in black tactical weave that had seen better nights. Her violet eyes caught the low light and fractured it into something sharper.

Mai leaned back across from her, silver hair loose for once, the runic disruptor pistol clipped under her jacket like an afterthought. "You're serious," she said, voice low and amused, the way she got when she'd already run the probabilities and liked the chaos coefficient.

"Dead serious." Ace's tone didn't rise. It never did. "First one to close gets bragging rights till the next convergence. No interference. No triad assist. Just us, baseline rules, whoever drags a willing body back here first wins."

Shammy stood at the end of the table, 195 centimeters of storm-carried presence that made the air feel thicker just by existing. Electric blue eyes flicked between them, silver-white hair shifting like it was already tasting the charge in the room. A faint static crackle rode the edge of her laugh. "You're betting on speed, Ace. Not quality. Not endurance. Speed." She let the word stretch, tasting it. "That's almost insulting."

Ace shrugged, compact shoulders rolling once. "Speed's the only variable I control tonight. Everything else is noise."

Mai's smile sharpened. "Terms. Thirty-minute head start for whoever draws first blood—no, first flirt. First successful extraction. Back here with proof. Photos, timestamps, whatever. Losers buy the next round of whatever the Foundation's smuggling in this week."

"Done." Shammy's fingers brushed the table and the overhead lights dimmed for half a second, like the building itself exhaled. "I'll take the tall one at the bar. The one pretending he's not watching us. Looks like he wants to be dismantled."

Ace was already sliding out of the booth. "I'll be faster."

Mai didn't move yet. She just watched them both with that silver-blue gaze that mapped failure points before they happened. "Try not to break anyone permanently. We're not running a recruitment drive."

The night outside was Helsinki in its post-Horizon costume—neon bleeding into rain-slick streets, the faint hum of residual layers pressing against the veil. Ace moved like she always did: before thought, before hesitation. She cut across the square toward a cluster of off-duty MTF types who weren't Theta-24 but carried the same walk-like-you-own-the-corpse vibe. One of them, a woman with a fresh scar across her jaw and eyes that had seen too many containment breaches, caught Ace's stare and didn't look away.

Ten minutes later Ace had her backed against the alley wall two blocks over, katanas left in the booth because tonight wasn't about blades. The woman's hands were already under Ace's jacket, mapping the compact muscle like she was checking for traps. Ace didn't talk much. She never did. She just pressed in, violet eyes half-lidded, and let the kiss turn feral—teeth and tongue and the low hum of emerald frequency that wasn't even a weapon tonight, just background static.

Clothes came off in efficient layers. The woman's breath hitched when Ace dropped to her knees right there in the alley, rain dripping from the fire escape onto bare skin. Ace's mouth was relentless, precise, the same economy of motion she used when ending things. Fingers joined in, curling,

pressing, finding the exact rhythm that made the woman's legs shake. It was quick, brutal, beautiful in its terminality. The woman came with a bitten-off curse, hips jerking against Ace's face, and Ace rose, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and took a timestamped photo on the encrypted burner they all carried.

"Eighteen minutes," she muttered, already walking back. "Beat that."

Mai found her mark inside a converted warehouse club three streets over—some Foundation-adjacent analyst who'd been nursing the same drink for an hour and looking like he needed to forget every equation he'd ever solved. She didn't waste time on subtlety. She bought the next round, let her fingers brush his when she handed it over, and said, low and sharp, "You look like someone who wants to be told exactly what to do for once."

He did. They made it as far as the emergency stairwell. Mai's disruptor stayed holstered; her tongue and hands did the rest. She rode him against the concrete wall, silver hair sticking to sweat-damp skin, calculating every thrust until his control snapped and he came hard enough to see stars. She took the photo while he was still catching his breath, then patted his cheek like she was closing a file.

"Twenty-one minutes," she said on the way back. "Close, but no."

Shammy, though. Shammy didn't hunt. She arrived.

She stepped into the bar's back room where the tall one had followed her like gravity had changed direction. No words at first—just the atmospheric shift, the way the air grew heavy and electric around her impossible frame. She let him press her against the pool table, let him think he was leading, then reversed it with a calm that felt like the eye of a storm. Clothes disappeared. His mouth found her breasts; hers found the pulse in his throat. When he pushed inside her she wrapped those long legs around him and the static in the room peaked—lights flickering, glasses rattling on the shelves. She rode the pressure, equalizing it, drawing it out until he was gasping her name like a prayer and she was laughing low in her throat, electric blue eyes glowing faintly in the dark.

She came first, then let him follow, the release cracking through the atmosphere like distant thunder. The photo was elegant. Almost artistic. Timestamp: twenty-four minutes.

They reconvened at the booth exactly thirty-seven minutes after the bet was placed. Ace was already there, compact and laconic, nursing something that smelled like it could strip paint. Mai slid in next, silver hair slightly mussed, looking satisfied in the way only she could—sharp and quietly smug. Shammy arrived last, storm aura still faintly crackling, hair shifting like it remembered the charge.

Ace set her burner on the table. Photo first. Then Mai's. Then Shammy's.

"Eighteen," Ace said. Flat. Factual. A little dry. "You two can fight over who buys the next round of whatever apocalyptic shit they're serving tonight."

Mai exhaled a laugh that wasn't quite teasing anymore—more like recognition. "You weaponized efficiency. Of course you did."

Shammy leaned back, the booth creaking under her height, and let the static settle. "I enjoyed losing. Slowly." Her eyes flicked between them, pressure equalizing again, the triad snapping back into perfect alignment like nothing had ever been a contest. "Next time we raise the stakes. Quality. Duration. Maybe all three at once, just to watch the math break."

Ace's mouth twitched—the closest she ever got to a smile. "Your move, then."

Outside, the rain kept falling on Helsinki's veiled streets, the Absolute universe ticking along its decisive axis. Inside, the triad sat in the low light, equilibrium restored, the bet already becoming another scar they'd wear like jewelry. No hesitation. No aftermath. Just the next irreversible action, already forming on the horizon.

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