

Ace liked cities at night.

Not the sanitized versions with postcard skylines and tourist-safe glow. Not the quiet residential blocks where people locked doors and pretended everything balanced.

The real ones. The ones that still bled a little.

Streets where bass leaked from cracked doorways, where arguments spilled onto sidewalks like spilled drinks, where nobody asked your name unless they already knew the answer and didn't like it.

Tonight felt generous.

She pushed out of the narrow bar whose sign had probably started life as electric blue before decades of rain and cigarette smoke had worn it down to a bruised violet pulse. The door settled shut behind her with a soft hydraulic sigh, muting the low-end thump that had been vibrating the glass for the last hour.

Ace rolled her shoulders once. Stretched her arms overhead until vertebrae popped in quiet protest.

"Well," she muttered, mostly to the wet air, "that escalated."

A couple brushed past on the sidewalk, laughing too loud about something small and private. A taxi driver leaned on his horn two blocks down—impatient, habitual. The night smelled like damp asphalt, motor oil, charred meat drifting from a grill cart around the corner, and the faint metallic promise of rain that hadn't committed yet.

Ace glanced at the sky—cloud ceiling low and bruise-colored—then at her wrist. No watch. Just habit.

"Still early."

Which meant the night still had teeth and room to bite.

Inside the bar someone bellowed her name through the half-open door.

Ace turned halfway, one eyebrow already lifting.

"Already?" she called back. "You people get attached fast."

The bartender leaned out just far enough to be seen, shaking his head with the weary affection reserved for regulars who broke things without meaning to.

"Don't start another one in here."

Ace pressed a hand to her chest in mock offense.

"Me?"

He gave her the look. The one that said he'd cleaned up after her kind of interesting before.

Ace's grin tilted sharper.

"Unfair reputation."

He snorted once and vanished back inside.

She laughed under her breath—short, private—and started walking.

The street ahead shimmered under sodium halos, pavement slick enough to catch faint orange ghosts. Music drifted from an upstairs window somewhere: slower tempo, brushed drums, voice like smoke. Different animal from the bar she'd just left.

Ace tilted her head, listening for half a stride.

“Tempting.”

She kept moving.

Then stopped.

Footsteps had synced to hers.

Not aggressive. Not stealthy either. Just... present. Close enough to matter, far enough to pretend otherwise.

Ace didn't turn right away.

She let the rhythm settle—stride length, weight distribution, slight hesitation on the left foot like an old knee complaint. Ten more meters. Twenty.

Finally she glanced back over her shoulder.

Guy. Mid-twenties maybe. Tall enough to notice. Posture loose, hands in pockets, smile already halfway formed like he'd rehearsed it.

He lifted both palms immediately.

“Okay,” he said. “That was subtle for almost thirty seconds.”

Ace planted her feet.

“Forty.”

He blinked.

“...was it?”

“Yes.”

He looked genuinely impressed for half a second.

“Good start then.”

Ace studied him without hurry. Relaxed shoulders. Eyes bright but not manic. The kind of late-night confidence that could tip into charm or disaster depending on the next sentence.

“Are you following me,” she asked, calm, “or just very bad at pretending you're not?”

He spread his hands wider.

“Option three.”

“There’s an option three?”

“I was hoping to ask if you were heading somewhere interesting.”

Ace let the silence sit between them a beat longer than polite.

Then the corner of her mouth curved.

“Bold strategy.”

“Sometimes it works.”

“And when it doesn’t?”

He shrugged, easy.

“Then I learn something.”

Ace leaned in just enough to read his face under the streetlight—pupils normal, no tremor, scent of clean sweat and faint cologne instead of panic or booze.

“You know,” she said, voice low, “that answer just improved your odds dramatically.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She stepped past him, already moving again.

“Well,” she tossed over her shoulder, “keep up then.”

He blinked twice.

“Wait—seriously?”

Ace glanced back, crooked grin flashing.

“You said you wanted interesting.”

He hurried after her, half-laughing.

“Okay now I’m definitely following you.”

“That part was always true.”

They turned the corner together. Streetlights brighter here. Music louder. Crowd thicker. The night folding them in without asking permission.

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Up above the grid, where rooftops blurred into sky and rain refused to fall, Mephisto watched with clear, quiet delight.

“Well,” he murmured, “that was quicker than expected.”

Konrad stayed silent a moment longer than necessary.

He tracked Ace and the stranger until the flow of bodies swallowed them—dark jacket, violet sheen in her hair catching light for one last second before the crowd closed.

Mephisto slid a glance sideways.

“You already know how this ends, don’t you.”

Konrad’s voice came flat, certain.

“I know how you think it ends.”

Mephisto’s smile curved.

“Oh?”

Konrad kept his eyes on the street.

“Yes.”

Mephisto clasped hands behind his back, coat shifting like liquid shadow.

“In that case,” he said pleasantly, “let us begin.”

One lazy gesture toward the sprawl below.

“How long before she returns to the safehouse?”

Konrad didn’t pause.

“Not tonight.”

Mephisto’s smile stretched wider, satisfied.

“Interesting.”

“And when she does?” he pressed.

Konrad considered the question like he was tasting it.

Then answered simply:

“She will say less than you expect.”

Mephisto chuckled—soft, intimate.

“Oh, I disagree.”

Konrad finally met his gaze.

“Of course you do.”

Mephisto tilted his head, amused.

“And what, precisely, do you think she will say?”

Konrad's expression stayed level.

"Very little."

Mephisto looked down at the city again, eyes gleaming with something older than amusement.

"We shall see."

Below, the streets kept breathing—laughter, horns, basslines bleeding into each other. Somewhere in the current Ace was already carving a new path, stranger in tow, night stretching ahead like wet black ribbon.

The wager hung between them, quiet and sharp.

Rain still hadn't fallen.

But it would.—

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