

The rain finally decided to commit.

Not a downpour—just steady, patient drops that turned the streets into liquid mirrors and made every neon sign bleed twice as bright. The kind of rain that didn't ruin clothes so much as improve them, gave everything a wet sheen like the city had just remembered it was alive.

Ace pushed through the unmarked door three blocks later.

The place didn't have a name on the outside. Never had. Inside it smelled like old wood, spilled liquor, cigarette ghosts that hadn't been allowed in years, and the sharp clean bite of good sound equipment run hard.

Bass hit like a hand against the chest. Not overwhelming—precise. Someone knew exactly how loud was too loud and stayed one notch under it.

Ace exhaled once, shoulders dropping half an inch.

Daniel followed her in, pausing just inside the threshold to let his eyes adjust.

The room was long and narrow, low ceiling, exposed brick on one wall, dark paneling on the others. Dim red strips ran under the bar. A handful of high tables. A small stage at the far end where three people were already deep into something slow and heavy—upright bass, brushed snare, a woman with a voice like smoke and regret singing about nothing specific and everything that mattered.

No dance floor. No strobe. Just bodies leaning into the music the way plants lean toward light.

Ace found a spot near the end of the bar, back to the wall, sightlines clear without trying too hard.

Daniel slid onto the stool beside her.

"This," he said, "is exactly what I meant by interesting."

Ace flagged the bartender with two fingers.

"Two of whatever's cold and doesn't taste like regret."

The bartender—tattooed forearms, silver at the temples—nodded without looking up and slid two glasses their way a minute later. Dark amber, ice cracked just right.

Ace lifted hers in a small toast.

"To surviving the plaza."

Daniel clinked.

"To not getting lost in it."

They drank.

The music shifted—bass walking a slow circle, voice dropping lower, lyrics thinning until it was mostly feeling.

Ace set her glass down carefully.

"You're quiet now."

Daniel glanced at her.

"Listening."

"Good instinct."

He studied the stage for a moment.

"This isn't your usual spot."

Ace followed his gaze.

"No."

"But you knew it existed."

"Cities talk if you let them."

He smiled faintly.

"And you listen."

"Sometimes."

Another song started. Slower still. The kind that made people close their eyes without meaning to.

Daniel turned back to her.

"Can I ask something stupid?"

Ace raised an eyebrow.

"Try me."

"Why me?"

Ace considered the question like it had weight.

Then she shrugged.

"You didn't flinch."

He waited.

"Most people see someone walking alone at night in this part of town and either cross the street or start performing. You just... matched stride. No agenda. No performance."

She took another sip.

"That's rare."

Daniel looked down at his glass.

"I could say the same."

Ace's mouth curved.

"Flattery."

"Observation."

She laughed—short, genuine.

"Fair."

The set ended. Applause rippled, soft. The trio stepped down. Someone else took the stage—solo guitar, no vocals, just clean lines that cut through the room like intention.

Ace watched for a while.

Then, quieter:

"You're not asking the usual questions."

Daniel tilted his head.

"Which are?"

"Where I'm from. What I do. Why I'm out alone. The checklist."

He shrugged.

"Figured if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me."

Ace studied him under the low red light.

"Smart."

"Or lazy."

"Also possible."

They sat with that for a minute, music filling the space between words.

Daniel finally asked:

"You come here often?"

Ace shook her head once.

"When the night needs it."

He nodded like that made perfect sense.

The rain tapped against the windows now—steady, almost rhythmic.

Ace finished her drink, set the glass down with quiet finality.

Daniel glanced at her.

“Calling it?”

“Not yet.”

She slid off the stool.

“But I’m going to step outside for air.”

He started to stand.

She held up a hand—small gesture, calm.

“Alone. Five minutes.”

Daniel settled back.

“Got it.”

Ace moved through the crowd without touching anyone. Pushed the door open.

Outside the rain had thickened just enough to feel deliberate.

She stepped under the narrow awning, leaned one shoulder against brick, closed her eyes for three slow breaths.

The city kept moving—tires hissing, distant laughter, bass bleeding through the wall behind her.

She stayed there longer than five minutes.

When she came back in, hair damp at the ends, jacket darker across the shoulders, Daniel was exactly where she’d left him.

He looked up.

“Still here.”

Ace slid back onto her stool.

“Still here.”

He studied her face for half a second.

“Everything okay?”

Ace met his eyes.

“Yeah.”

Simple.

True.

The guitarist on stage shifted into something minor-key, slower.

Ace leaned one elbow on the bar.

“Another round?”

Daniel smiled.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

—

High above the grid, rain sliding off invisible surfaces, Mephisto watched the safehouse window stay dark.

No violet sheen returning. No silver hair moving past the glass. No tall shadow leaning in the doorway.

He turned to Konrad.

“She’s not coming back tonight.”

Konrad didn’t answer right away.

Just watched the city breathe below them.

Finally:

“No.”

Mephisto’s smile was slow, satisfied.

“And when she does?”

Konrad’s gaze stayed level.

“She’ll walk in like nothing happened.”

Mephisto laughed—soft, delighted.

“You really believe that.”

“I know it.”

Mephisto tilted his head.

“Because she always does.”

“Because she’s Ace.”

Rain kept falling.

Somewhere below, in a narrow room full of low music and low light, two glasses clinked again.

The night stretched on, unhurried.

And the wager stayed alive between them—quiet, patient, waiting for morning. —

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