

## A Matter of Perspective Chapter 1

The city was alive the way only night cities know how to be—raw, restless, breathing through cracked concrete and flickering sodium lamps. Rain had slicked the streets into black mirrors, reflecting the amber bleed of traffic arteries snaking between towers. Distant sirens wailed like half-forgotten arguments. Steam rose from manholes in lazy ghosts. Somewhere a bar door swung open, spilling laughter and bass that thumped against the ribs of anyone close enough to feel it. Ordinary. Perfectly, dangerously ordinary.

Two figures stood where no map bothered to draw lines.

Not quite rooftop. Not quite sky. Just... between. The kind of in-between that smelled faintly of ozone and old leather.

Mephisto leaned against nothing in particular, coat collar turned up, the slow patience of centuries carved into the tilt of his head. His eyes—too dark to be human—tracked the veins of light below without hurry. Konrad stood a half-step away, hands shoved deep in his coat pockets, shoulders set like someone who'd learned long ago that stillness could cut deeper than movement. The faint glow from the streets caught the edge of his jaw, the quiet line of his mouth.

Neither moved for a long beat.

A siren dopplered past beneath them. A cluster of pedestrians staggered across a crosswalk, voices rising in the pointless heat of nothing important.

Mephisto's voice slid into the quiet like smoke. "They've become predictable."

Konrad didn't shift his gaze. "No."

Mephisto's head tilted a fraction, amused. "You didn't even ask who."

"Don't need to."

"Confidence," Mephisto murmured, almost fond. "Or denial."

Konrad exhaled through his nose, the sound low and dry. "Neither."

Down in the older quarter—where brick facades still wore their scars and streetlights wore softer halos—a single window in a nondescript safehouse building glowed warm against the wet dark. The kind of glow that said someone inside had made coffee, left a lamp on, decided the night could wait.

Mephisto followed the line of Konrad's stare.

"Ah," he said softly. "Them."

Konrad gave one short nod.

"The Triad."

Mephisto rolled the word on his tongue like expensive whiskey. "A fascinating little construct."

"People," Konrad corrected, flat.

"Debatable."

Konrad let it slide.

Mephisto leaned forward just enough that the city's reflection ghosted across his eyes. "They've been together long enough now. Patterns settle. Reactions loop. Predictability creeps in like rust."

Konrad finally turned his head. The movement was small, deliberate. "No."

Mephisto's smile was thin, razor-edged. "You sound very sure."

"I am."

"Then maybe," Mephisto offered, voice velvet, "you'd enjoy a small wager."

Konrad's eyebrow lifted a notch. "Sounds like trouble."

"Everything worthwhile does."

Konrad was quiet long enough for another siren to curl through the distance. Below, the safehouse door clicked open. A figure stepped out, collar flipped, shoulders rolling once as if shrugging off the weight of four walls. Jacket dark, stride compact, every line of her reading like a blade already halfway drawn.

Ace.

Heading into the night the way she always did—like the evening owed her answers and she'd collect them with interest.

Mephisto's smile curved deeper. "See? First move already."

Konrad watched her silhouette melt around the corner, violet sheen in her hair catching streetlight for half a second before the rain swallowed it. "No."

Mephisto looked almost delighted. "You still disagree."

"I do."

"And you'd stake something on it?"

Konrad studied the glowing window a moment longer, the faint silhouette of movement inside—someone taller shifting near the counter, silver hair catching lamp glow; another presence leaning against the frame, electric calm radiating even from here.

Then he nodded once. "Yes."

Mephisto's eyes caught a gleam that wasn't from the city. "How delightful."

He gestured toward the sprawl below, lazy. "Very well. A wager."

Konrad faced him square. "On what?"

"Whether their behavior can be predicted," Mephisto said, smooth. "Down to the small rituals. The way they circle each other when one walks back in. The silences that aren't silent."

Konrad thought about it, rain ticking against invisible surfaces around them. "One case isn't enough."

Mephisto's brow lifted, intrigued. "Oh?"

Konrad's gaze drifted back to the safehouse, then to the street Ace had vanished down, then to the quiet figures still moving inside the lit window. "Three."

"Three?"

A short pause. "Ace." Another. "Mai." Last. "And Shammy."

Mephisto's smile widened until it showed teeth. "Three perspectives."

"Yeah."

The quiet stretched, comfortable in its sharpness. The city kept breathing—tires hissing on wet asphalt, a laugh cracking open somewhere blocks away, neon buzzing like tired insects.

Mephisto inclined his head, gracious. "Accepted."

Konrad met his eyes. "Rules."

"Of course." Mephisto spread his hands, palms open. "No interference. No nudges. No helpful little pushes."

Konrad nodded.

"We observe."

"And predict."

Mephisto's chuckle was soft, almost intimate. "And the stakes?"

Konrad considered the drifting clouds, the moon trying to peer through. "A bottle."

"Old?"

"Unpleasantly old."

Mephisto's approval was a low hum. "The unpleasant ones usually are."

Konrad gave one final nod, the kind that sealed things without ceremony.

Below, the city lights flickered as another cloud slid past. Somewhere out there Ace was already carving her own small chaos through perfectly ordinary streets. Inside the safehouse, the other two moved with that easy, wordless choreography that only came after surviving too much together—Mai's silver hair catching light as she set a mug down, Shammy's tall frame leaning in just enough that the air around her stayed still and charged at once.

Mephisto looked down, voice barely above the rain. "Well then."

The first perspective begins.

Konrad followed the gaze, already tasting the night's edges.

Somewhere in the sprawl Ace was moving like intent given bones, and the bet hung in the between-space like smoke that refused to clear.

Mephisto murmured, almost to himself, “Let us see how predictable they really are.”

The city answered with another siren, distant and unconcerned. The rain kept falling. The lights kept burning. And the game—quiet, sharp, already breathing—had started.

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