

Chapter 27

The safehouse grew quiet again after the door closed.

Rain whispered gently against the tall windows, turning the city lights outside into soft, blurred halos of violet and amber that glowed through the streaked glass. The apartment felt warm and lived-in, the low lamp light casting long golden pools across the hardwood floor and the worn leather of the couch. Soft jazz still played from the kitchen speaker, piano notes drifting lazily through the space like a comfortable sigh.

Ace flopped onto the couch like someone settling in for a show, sprawling across the cushions with one arm draped over the backrest and her legs stretched out. She wore the same oversized shirt from earlier, hair still messy, violet eyes bright with mischief and affection.

Mai leaned against the kitchen counter, coffee mug cradled between both hands, silver hair loose and catching the warm light in faint runic glints. She looked relaxed — shoulders soft, posture open, silver-blue eyes warm and emotionally present as she watched Ace, the usual sharp edge replaced by quiet fondness and teasing intelligence.

For about ten seconds neither of them spoke.

Ace finally said, grinning:

“Bookstore.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair shifting softly as she took a slow sip of coffee, her free hand reaching over to brush a stray strand of Ace’s hair from her forehead with gentle fingers.

“Yes.”

Ace stared at the ceiling for a moment, then sat up, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, violet eyes sparkling.

“I need to understand the plan.”

Mai sipped her coffee again, then set the mug down and stepped closer to the couch, sitting on the armrest beside Ace so their shoulders brushed warmly.

Ace looked up at her, grinning.

“No no no.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes soft and teasing as she reached down to tuck another messy strand of Ace’s hair behind her ear, thumb lingering gently on her temple.

Ace pointed toward the door Shammy had just walked through.

“That woman just walked into the rain to run a social experiment in a bookstore.”

Mai considered that, her hand sliding down to rest lightly on Ace’s shoulder, fingers tracing a slow, affectionate circle.

“Yes.”

Ace narrowed her eyes, but there was clear delight and warmth in her expression as she leaned into Mai's touch.

"That's terrifying."

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver hair falling forward as she looked down at Ace with genuine emotional warmth and teasing affection.

"Explain."

Ace leaned forward, resting her head against Mai's side, one arm wrapping loosely around her waist in a comfortable hug.

"Because she's not doing what we did."

Mai said nothing at first, simply wrapping her own arm around Ace's shoulders and holding her close, silver-blue eyes soft as she brushed her fingers through Ace's hair.

Ace gestured between them with her free hand, voice playful.

"We escalate directly."

Mai nodded once, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to the top of Ace's head, her voice warm and affectionate.

"Yes."

Ace pointed toward the door again, still nestled comfortably against Mai.

"Shammy studies the entire board first."

Mai's eyes softened further with understanding and fondness as she held Ace closer, fingers stroking slowly through her hair.

"Yes."

Ace leaned back slightly but kept her arm around Mai's waist, grinning up at her.

"Oh this poor, unsuspecting bookstore patron."

Mai raised an eyebrow, but the expression was playful as she brushed her thumb gently along Ace's cheek.

"You assume she will select one."

Ace blinked.

"...oh no."

Mai said nothing, but her smile was warm and teasing as she pulled Ace into a full side hug, resting her chin lightly on top of Ace's head.

Ace slowly grinned, wrapping both arms around Mai's waist now.

"Oh that's worse."

Mai sipped her coffee again, still holding Ace close, her free hand stroking slow, soothing circles on Ace's back.

Ace leaned forward conspiratorially, voice full of delighted affection.

"She's going to find someone interesting."

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes sparkling with quiet amusement as she kept Ace held warmly against her.

Ace continued:

"And then she's going to take their brain apart like a puzzle box."

Mai tilted her head, pressing another soft kiss to Ace's temple.

"Possibly."

Ace laughed, bright and warm, burying her face against Mai's shoulder for a moment.

"Oh I would pay money to watch that."

Mai looked toward the rain-streaked windows, still holding Ace close, her voice soft and affectionate.

"You will hear about it later."

Ace smiled wickedly, squeezing Mai tighter in the hug.

"Oh I'm absolutely conducting a full debrief."

Mai did not argue. Instead she simply rested her cheek against Ace's hair, fingers continuing their gentle strokes down her back.

Ace folded her arms loosely around Mai's waist, still grinning.

"But first..."

Mai waited, silver hair falling softly as she looked down at her with warm fondness.

Ace pointed toward the ceiling.

"...our two invisible spectators are probably having a field day."

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Interlude — Observers

High above the rain-washed city skyline, Mephisto was already laughing — low, delighted, the sound carrying easily in the thin space between realities.

"Oh this one will be fun."

Konrad stood beside him, arms loosely folded, watching the streets below with calm focus.

"Yes."

Mephisto tilted his head, eyes gleaming.

“The quiet one.”

Konrad nodded.

“Yes.”

Mephisto smiled slowly, gesturing lightly toward the safehouse far below.

“You know what makes her dangerous.”

Konrad said nothing.

Mephisto continued, voice rich with anticipation.

“She doesn’t rush.”

Konrad nodded again.

“Yes.”

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back, looking down toward the bookstore several blocks away.

“Ace burns bright.”

He gestured lightly.

“Mai calculates.”

Then he looked toward the quiet figure walking through the rain.

“But Shammy...”

His grin widened.

“...dissects.”

Konrad allowed the faintest hint of a smile.

“Yes.”

Mephisto chuckled, eyes bright with curiosity.

“This might be the most interesting variable yet.”

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