

## Chapter 6

The apartment exhaled slowly back into its familiar late-night hush.

Ace's door closed down the hallway—soft metallic click that carried just far enough to register, then nothing.

Rain kept tapping the kitchen window in patient Morse. Not insistent. Just present. Steady drops sliding down glass, blurring the city's violet-amber bleed into softer ghosts.

Mai stayed leaning against the counter. Reports still open in front of her, but her eyes weren't on the pages anymore. Silver-blue gaze drifted toward the hallway, thoughtful, the tiniest lift at one corner of her mouth that hadn't quite left.

Shammy remained seated at the table. Tall frame folded with effortless economy. Silver-white hair catching faint ionized glints from the overhead light. Electric blue eyes calm, watchful. She lifted her coffee mug—black, no steam left—and took a measured sip.

“Observation.”

Mai didn't look up immediately. Thumb slid along the edge of a page.

“Go on.”

Shammy adjusted the tablet beside her elbow. Small shift, deliberate.

“She deflected fourteen direct conversational probes.”

Mai turned the page with slow precision.

“Only fourteen?”

Shammy inclined her head once.

“Fourteen.”

Mai let the number sit between them for a beat.

“That's actually lower than average.”

Shammy's brow lifted fractionally—genuine curiosity flickering.

“You maintain a baseline?”

Mai shrugged lightly, shoulders rolling under the open shirt.

“Experience.”

Shammy nodded again, accepting.

“Interesting.”

Quiet settled again. Rain kept its rhythm. Somewhere deeper in the building a pipe groaned once, then stilled.

Shammy spoke without hurry.

“So it was not a one-time interaction.”

Mai closed the folder. Neat snap of cardboard.

“Correct.”

Shammy blinked once—slow, deliberate.

“You are certain.”

Mai leaned back a fraction against the counter edge. Arms crossing loose under her chest, shirt gaping just enough to show the sharp line of collarbone.

“She didn’t deny it.”

Shammy tilted her head.

“That is not the same thing.”

Mai’s smile came faint, almost private.

“No.”

She picked up her own mug—coffee gone lukewarm, bitter edge still sharp. Took a sip anyway.

“But with Ace,” she continued, voice low, “it is usually the closest thing to confirmation you’ll get.”

Shammy let the words settle. Considered them for several long seconds, fingers resting motionless on the tablet edge.

“That is consistent with historical patterns.”

Mai nodded once.

“Exactly.”

They sat in comfortable silence. Rain softened further outside—drops spacing out, like the night was finally deciding to breathe easier.

Then Shammy tilted her head again.

“Secondary observation.”

Mai exhaled through her nose—small sound, half amusement, half surrender.

“Yes?”

“Your reaction was... statistically different.”

Mai looked up slowly. Silver-blue eyes meeting electric blue without flinch.

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

Shammy glanced at the tablet, then back to her.

“You appeared amused.”

Mai raised one eyebrow—slow arc.

“Did I.”

“Yes.”

Mai took another sip of coffee. Held her gaze over the rim.

“That may have been imagination.”

Shammy studied her another moment—calm pressure presence, air around him subtly warmer near her.

Then nodded once.

“Possible.”

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Down the hallway Ace collapsed onto the edge of the bed. Boots kicked off in two quick motions—thud, thud—landing haphazard against the wall.

“Interrogation squad,” she muttered under her breath.

She ran both hands through damp black hair, pushing it back from her face. Violet sheen caught the faint city glow leaking through half-closed blinds. She let out a slow breath—long, visible in the cool room air.

For a moment she just sat there. Shoulders loose. Jacket still half-unzipped. The quiet wrapped around her like familiar weight.

Then a soft laugh escaped—low, private, dry humor threading through it.

“Worth it.”

She stood eventually. Flicked off the bedside lamp with one thumb. Darkness rushed in gentle—only the city’s bruised purple filtering through slats, painting faint stripes across the floor.

Ace disappeared into it without another word.

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Far above the sleeping sprawl, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the first pale gray was just beginning to bleed along the eastern horizon, two figures remained motionless.

Mephisto looked thoroughly entertained—coat collar high against the damp, dark eyes gleaming.

“You see?” he said lightly, almost fond. “That was textbook.”

Konrad stayed quiet. Hands deep in pockets. Gaze fixed on the safehouse window below—warm glow still leaking from the kitchen, silhouettes moving slow as the night finally wound itself down.

Mephisto gestured lazily toward it.

“She returned.”

“Yes.”

“She did not deny the implication.”

“No.”

Mephisto’s smile curved wider.

“And therefore.”

Konrad turned his head just enough.

“You misunderstand the variable.”

Mephisto raised an eyebrow—elegant, intrigued.

“Oh?”

Konrad looked back down at the city—rain-slick streets catching the dying neon, puddles reflecting fading lights.

“The question was never whether the evening happened.”

Mephisto folded his hands behind his back.

“Then what was the question?”

Konrad’s voice came flat, certain.

“How much she would allow the others to know.”

Mephisto considered that for a long beat.

Then chuckled—soft, intimate sound against the pre-dawn quiet.

“You’re splitting hairs.”

Konrad shook his head once—small, definite.

“No.”

Below them the kitchen light finally flicked off. Mai set the last report aside. Shammy closed the tablet with a quiet click. The apartment fell properly dark—only the faint violet-amber city bleed remaining.

Mephisto watched the window another moment.

Then smiled faintly.

“Well.”

He glanced sideways at Konrad.

“One perspective complete.”

Konrad nodded once.

“Yes.”

Mephisto’s eyes gleamed—something older flickering behind the amusement.

“Now the interesting part begins.”

Konrad already knew where his gaze would turn next.

Toward the same apartment.

Toward the same quiet window.

Toward the second member of the Triad.

Mephisto spoke her name softly, almost reverent.

“Mai.”

Konrad did not disagree.

The city stretched endlessly beneath them—lights fading one by one as morning crept closer, pale and unhurried.

And somewhere below, entirely unaware of the wager unfolding in the thin space between realities, Mai poured herself another cup of coffee.

The steam rose slow.

The night ended.

The next one waited.—

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