

Chapter 7

Morning arrived quietly.

Not dramatically. Just the slow brightening of the sky beyond the safehouse windows and the gradual return of the city's daytime rhythm.

Traffic began to move again below—tires hissing on streets that still held the night's damp sheen, a delivery truck rattling past with its low diesel growl. Somewhere a bus brake squealed once, then faded. The city exhaled back into motion without fanfare.

Inside the apartment the kitchen light was already on—warm, steady, spilling across the counter and pooling on the floorboards. The tall windows carried faint streaks from last night's rain, catching the pale dawn light in soft vertical lines that made the glass look like old film.

Mai sat at the table with a fresh cup of coffee and a stack of reports spread neatly in front of her. Early light painted a pale stripe across the tabletop, catching the silver in her hair and the sharp edge of her cheekbone. She wore yesterday's shirt—collar open, sleeves rolled—posture straight but relaxed, the kind of calm that came from long habit.

Shammy entered a moment later.

He paused in the doorway when he saw her. Tall frame filling the space without crowding it. Silver-white hair catching the light in faint gradients. Electric blue eyes steady, assessing.

"You have not slept."

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

"Incorrect."

Shammy waited. Air around him shifted subtly—pressure equalizing, calm but present.

Mai took a sip of coffee. Steam curled up slow.

"I slept."

Pause.

"For approximately two hours."

Shammy nodded thoughtfully. Moved to the counter with quiet efficiency—long fingers measuring grounds, pouring water, the soft gurgle of the machine filling the quiet.

"That qualifies technically."

Mai turned a page in the report. Pen scratched once in the margin.

"Yes."

Shammy prepared his own coffee—black, no additions—then sat down across from her. Mug placed with deliberate care. He studied her for a moment without hurry.

Another moment of silence passed. The clock on the wall ticked softly. Outside, a distant siren rose

and fell like a sigh.

Then Shammy said:

“Ace will sleep until noon.”

Mai didn't look up. Continued marking the page.

“That would be optimistic.”

Shammy checked the clock—simple glance.

“Prediction?”

Mai flipped another page. Eyes scanning lines without haste.

“13:30.”

Shammy considered that. Took a measured sip.

“That is consistent with previous data.”

Mai finally glanced toward the hallway where Ace's door remained closed. No light under it. No sound.

“She earned it.”

Shammy nodded once. Small motion.

“Yes.”

Another quiet pause settled over the kitchen. Coffee cooled slowly between them. The light strengthened a fraction—dawn turning toward day.

Finally Shammy said:

“Secondary question.”

Mai sighed faintly—barely audible.

“Yes?”

“When does your evening begin?”

Mai's hand paused over the report. Pen hovered.

Then continued writing a small note in the margin—neat, precise.

“That depends.”

Shammy waited.

Mai closed the folder. Stacked the papers neatly. Edges aligned.

“On whether there is work to do.”

Shammy glanced at the laptop on the table beside him—screen dark but power light blinking steady.

“There is.”

Mai already knew that.

“Of course there is.”

—

Far above the waking city, Mephisto watched the morning scene with growing interest.

The rooftop air was cool and damp. Low clouds still hung close, carrying the scent of rain that hadn't quite left. Below them the streets began to fill—commuters in dark coats, delivery scooters weaving, the first taxis cutting through intersections.

Mephisto leaned against nothing in particular, coat collar high, dark eyes gleaming.

“Oh,” he murmured.

“This will be good.”

Konrad said nothing. Hands deep in pockets. Gaze fixed on the safehouse window below—Mai's silhouette moving calm and deliberate.

Mephisto tilted his head.

“You're going to claim you can predict her as well?”

Konrad answered calmly. Flat. Certain.

“No.”

Mephisto smiled—thin, satisfied.

“Finally some honesty.”

Konrad's gaze remained steady.

“But I know how you will try.”

Mephisto chuckled—soft, intimate sound against the morning quiet.

“Well then.”

He clasped his hands behind his back again.

“Let us formalize the second wager.”

Konrad nodded slightly.

“Go on.”

Mephisto gestured toward the apartment below—lazy sweep of one hand.

“Mai leaves the safehouse this evening.”

Konrad waited.

Mephisto continued.

“She will conduct her business efficiently.”

“Yes.”

“She will maintain operational discipline.”

“Yes.”

“And when she returns...”

Mephisto smiled faintly—eyes glinting.

“She will deny everything.”

Konrad watched Mai finish her coffee below—mug set in the sink with quiet finality.

Then said quietly:

“No.”

Mephisto raised an eyebrow.

“No?”

Konrad shook his head slightly—small, definite.

“She will not deny it.”

Mephisto laughed—low, delighted.

“Oh this should be excellent.”

—

Back in the kitchen, Mai placed her empty mug in the sink. Water ran briefly—rinse, not wash—then shut off.

Shammy watched her carefully.

“You are planning something.”

Mai glanced over her shoulder—silver hair shifting, catching light.

“I always plan something.”

Shammy tilted his head—small motion.

“This appears... different.”

Mai picked up her jacket from the back of a chair. Slung it over one arm.

“How so?”

Shammy searched briefly for the correct wording—eyes narrowing fractionally.

“Less operational.”

Mai smiled faintly—corner of her mouth lifting.

“Imagination.”

Shammy nodded slowly.

“Possible.”

Mai headed toward the door—boots quiet on the floorboards.

Shammy glanced at the clock again—simple digital face.

“It is 08:42.”

“Yes.”

“That is earlier than usual.”

Mai opened the door. Cool hallway air slipped in.

“Cities are big.”

Then she stepped into the hallway.

The door closed behind her—soft click.

—

Above the city Mephisto grinned.

“There.”

He gestured downward—sharp, satisfied.

“Already.”

Konrad watched silently as Mai disappeared into the street below—dark jacket blending into the morning crowd.

Mephisto’s voice carried quiet delight.

“Let the second perspective begin.”—

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