

Chapter 9

The river district smelled of wet stone, diesel, and the faint metallic bite of the water itself.

Mai walked the embankment path—narrow concrete strip between rusting railings and the slow-moving current. No rush. Boots quiet on the damp surface. Wind off the river carried cold fingers under her collar; she didn't button up. Silver hair lifted once, then settled again, catching the pale midday light in faint runic glints.

She passed a row of abandoned warehouses—windows boarded or broken, graffiti layered so thick the original brick was only a memory. A single gull circled overhead, crying once, sharp and lonely. Downriver a barge moved slow, low in the water, hull scraping against the concrete quay with a low metallic groan.

Mai stopped at the third pier.

Rusted sign half-hanging: "No Trespassing - Authorized Personnel Only." The chain across the entrance had been cut months ago; links still lay curled on the ground like dead snakes.

She stepped over it.

The pier extended thirty meters into the river—wooden planks warped and splintered, gaps wide enough to show black water below. At the end sat a man on an upturned crate.

Mid-forties. Dark coat. Short-cropped hair. Posture military without effort. Same man from the café. He didn't turn when she approached. Just kept watching the water.

Mai stopped three meters behind him.

Silence stretched. Wind tugged at coat hems. Water slapped pilings below in slow, patient rhythm.

The man spoke first. Voice low. Flat.

"You're early."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She scanned the opposite bank—empty except for a lone fisherman casting lazy arcs. No movement in the warehouses. No glint of lenses. Clean.

Then she stepped forward. Stopped beside him. Looked at the same stretch of river.

"Traffic was light."

He snorted once—small sound, almost amusement.

"Bullshit."

Mai's mouth curved—just enough.

"Observation."

He finally turned his head. Eyes gray. Tired but sharp.

“You always were a terrible liar.”

Mai met his gaze. Steady.

“And you always were terrible at small talk.”

He looked back at the water.

“Fair.”

Another beat of quiet. The gull cried again—farther now.

The man reached into his coat. Pulled a small flash drive—black, unmarked. Held it between two fingers.

“Latest from the archive.”

Mai didn’t reach for it yet.

“What changed?”

He exhaled through his nose.

“They’re moving faster than we thought.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed fractionally.

“How fast?”

“Horizon Protocol acceleration. Three sites compromised in the last forty-eight hours.”

Mai’s expression didn’t shift. Voice stayed level.

“Names.”

He listed them—quiet, precise. Three facility designations. Three cities. Three containment breaches that weren’t supposed to happen.

Mai listened without interruption.

When he finished she took the drive. Slid it into her inner pocket. Fingers brushed the leather notebook already there.

“Anything else?”

He studied her face for a long second.

“You’re calm.”

Mai tilted her head.

“Should I not be?”

He shook his head once.

"Just... unusual. Even for you."

Mai looked back at the river. Water moved slow and dark beneath them.

"Unusual is relative."

He stood. Crate creaked as weight left it.

"Be careful."

Mai didn't answer.

He waited another moment—then turned. Walked back down the pier without looking behind him.

Mai stayed where she was.

Wind tugged harder now. River slapped pilings in steady rhythm. The gull was gone.

She pulled the notebook out. Opened it to the page with the single line from the café.

Added three more:

Archive escalation confirmed. Horizon accel. Three breaches. 48 hrs.

Then closed it. Slid it away.

She stayed on the pier another minute—watching the water move, watching the opposite bank, watching nothing change and everything change at once.

Then she turned.

Walked back the way she came.

Boots quiet on warped wood.

Chain links clicked once under her heel.

The city swallowed her again.

—

High above, where the wind tasted colder and the rooftops stretched like broken teeth, Mephisto watched with quiet delight.

"There."

He gestured downward—sharp, satisfied.

"She took the drive."

Konrad remained motionless. Hands in pockets. Gaze fixed on the small figure moving back toward the embankment path.

Mephisto tilted his head.

“You’re going to say she already knew.”

Konrad answered without turning.

“She did.”

Mephisto laughed—soft, almost fond.

“Of course she did.”

He clasped his hands behind his back again.

“Then the question becomes...”

Konrad finished it for him. Voice flat. Certain.

“What she does with it.”

Mephisto’s smile widened—thin, pleased.

“Precisely.”

Below, Mai disappeared into the street grid—dark jacket blending with the midday crowd.

The river kept moving.

Slow.

Dark.

Unhurried.

The afternoon waited.—

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