

Chapter 8

The city had fully committed to daylight by the time Mai stepped outside.

No dramatic shift—just the steady grind of morning traffic thickening, horns blaring in short frustrated bursts, pedestrians flowing in tighter packs along the sidewalks. Air still carried the damp aftertaste of rain; exhaust mixed with wet concrete and the faint sweet burn of someone's breakfast cart two blocks down. Sunlight hit at low angles, turning puddles into blinding mirrors and casting long shadows that made every doorway look deeper.

Mai moved through it without hurry.

Jacket zipped halfway, collar turned up against the breeze that carried grit and distant siren whine. Silver hair tucked behind one ear, catching light in faint runic refractions whenever she passed under a streetlamp still burning from the night shift. Stride balanced, precise—never rushed, never slow. Eyes scanning without seeming to: threat geometry mapped instinctively, failure points noted and discarded in the same breath.

She turned left at the third intersection. Narrower street here—older brick facades, fewer windows, graffiti tags faded to ghosts on the lower levels. A delivery van idled at the curb, driver arguing in low tones with a doorman. Mai passed without glance.

Two blocks later she stopped.

Not sudden. Just a natural pause.

A small café occupied the corner—glass front, mismatched chairs on the sidewalk, faded awning flapping once in the wind. Inside, three tables occupied: lone reader with newspaper, couple sharing a croissant, barista wiping the counter with slow circular motions.

Mai pushed the door open.

Bell above it gave a soft, tired chime.

The barista looked up—mid-twenties, tired eyes, apron stained with espresso grounds.

“Morning. Usual?”

Mai nodded once.

The barista moved without further question—espresso machine hissing, milk steaming in short bursts. Mai took a stool at the counter near the window. Back to the wall, sightlines clear. She pulled a small notebook from her jacket pocket—leather-bound, edges worn smooth—and opened it to a blank page. Pen clicked once.

She wrote nothing yet.

Just waited.

The espresso arrived in a small white cup. No saucer. Foam perfect, crema thick and even. Mai lifted it. Inhaled once—bitter, rich—then sipped. Slow. Eyes on the street outside.

A black sedan rolled past—slow, deliberate. Tinted windows. No plates visible from this angle. Mai's pen tapped once against the page—small rhythm—then stilled.

The sedan didn't stop.

Mai exhaled through her nose. Small sound.

She wrote one line:

Sedan. 09:14. Southbound. No visible occupants.

Then closed the notebook. Slid it back into her pocket.

The barista leaned on the counter.

"Rough night?"

Mai met his eyes—silver-blue steady.

"Standard."

He snorted softly. Wiped the counter again—same circular motion.

"Standard's getting longer lately."

Mai took another sip. Set the cup down.

"Observation noted."

The bell chimed again.

A man entered—mid-forties, dark coat, hair cropped short, posture military without trying. He scanned the room once—quick, professional—then moved to the far table. Sat with his back to the wall. Ordered black coffee. No sugar.

Mai didn't turn her head.

She felt the shift in the room anyway: air pressure changing, subtle but unmistakable.

Shammy would have called it atmospheric imbalance.

Mai called it pattern break.

She finished her espresso. Left exact change on the counter—coins clicking softly.

The barista pocketed it without counting.

"See you tomorrow?"

Mai stood.

"Perhaps."

She stepped outside.

The sedan was gone.

Mai walked the opposite direction—toward the river district. Pace unchanged. Shoulders loose. Eyes

forward.

Inside her pocket the notebook sat heavy.

One line added.

Nothing else.

Yet.

—

High above the grid, where rooftops still held morning mist and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto watched with clear satisfaction.

“Well.”

He spread his hands—lazy gesture.

“She moves.”

Konrad remained silent. Hands in pockets. Gaze fixed on Mai’s small dark figure threading through the crowd below.

Mephisto tilted his head.

“You’re going to tell me she’s predictable.”

Konrad answered without inflection.

“No.”

Mephisto’s smile widened—thin, delighted.

“Then what?”

Konrad watched Mai disappear around a corner—silver hair catching one last flash of light before brick swallowed her.

“She’s already decided where she’s going.”

Mephisto laughed—soft, intimate.

“And that,” he said, “is the part I find most entertaining.”

The city kept moving beneath them—cars, people, light, shadow.

Mai walked on.

Notebook in her pocket.

One line heavier than the rest.

The morning stretched ahead—quiet, sharp, waiting for the next pattern to break. —

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