

Chapter 11

The park path wound through the morning like a slow exhale—gravel crunching under boots, trees still heavy with leftover rain dripping in fat, irregular drops that landed on shoulders and hair without warning. Sunlight filtered patchy through the canopy, painting shifting gold patches on the ground and turning every puddle into a small, bright mirror of sky and branches. The air smelled of wet earth, damp bark, and the faint sweet burn of coffee from the cart they'd passed two turns back. Traffic noise from the city edge had faded to a distant hum, leaving only wind in the leaves and the steady rhythm of their footsteps.

Mai walked beside Daniel with that balanced precision that never looked forced. Jacket zipped halfway, collar loose enough to show the sharp line of her collarbone. Silver hair loose, strands catching the dappled light in faint runic glints that shifted every time a breeze moved through. Her stride matched his exactly now—not copying, just syncing without effort. Silver-blue eyes scanned the path ahead, but softer than usual, the analyser softened by something warmer, more present.

Daniel kept his hands in his pockets at first, coat collar turned up, but the space between them had narrowed block by block. When the path curved around a small clearing with an old wooden bench, he slowed deliberately.

Mai noticed. She didn't comment. Just let her arm brush his as they stopped—deliberate contact, warm through fabric. She turned toward him, one hip leaning lightly against the bench rail, silver hair sliding over one shoulder as she tilted her head.

"You're quiet now," she said, voice low, emotionally intelligent edge carrying that occasional tease. "That's new."

Daniel exhaled a small laugh, stepping closer until their shoulders touched. He reached out—slow—fingers brushing a stray silver strand from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear with careful gentleness. The touch lingered a second longer than necessary, thumb grazing her jawline.

"You make it hard to fill the silence without sounding stupid."

Mai's mouth curved—sharp, teasing, but the eyes behind it were warm, reading him openly.

"Most people try anyway."

Daniel's hand stayed near her face for a moment, then slid down to rest lightly at the small of her back—palm flat, not pulling, just present. Mai leaned into it slightly, letting her weight shift toward him, the contact warm and steady through layers of fabric. She didn't pull away. Instead her own fingers found his free hand, tracing the back of it once with her thumb—slow, deliberate circle that sent a quiet current between them.

"You're deciding something," he said quietly, voice carrying the fondness he couldn't quite hide.

Mai met his eyes—silver-blue sharp yet soft, emotionally intelligent depth showing clear.

"Yes."

She didn't elaborate right away. Just stayed close, letting the park sounds fill the gap: leaves dripping, distant jogger footsteps on gravel, wind rustling overhead. Her free hand rose, brushed his coat lapel, then rested there—light pressure, intimate without rushing.

Daniel's thumb traced one slow line along her waist through the jacket.

"And you're not going to tell me what it is."

Mai's smile deepened—just enough to tease.

"Not yet."

She stepped even closer, their bodies aligning side-by-side against the bench rail. Her head tilted until it almost rested against his shoulder—brief, testing contact that carried implied warmth. Daniel's arm slid around her waist properly now, holding without gripping, palm warm against her back. Mai allowed it, her own hand slipping up to rest on his chest for a moment, feeling the steady beat beneath fabric before she pulled back just far enough to look at him again—eyes glinting with that emotionally intelligent spark.

"You're handling this better than most would."

Daniel laughed softly—low, genuine.

"Because I like the mystery?"

"Because you don't push."

Mai let her fingers trail down his arm once—light, teasing path—before stepping away from the bench. The separation wasn't abrupt; she kept her hand in his for two full strides, squeezing once before releasing.

"Come on," she said, voice carrying that sharp, affectionate tease. "The path loops back toward the exit. Walk with me a little longer."

Daniel fell in beside her immediately, shoulder brushing hers again as they continued down the gravel trail. The sunlight dappled brighter here, catching Mai's silver hair and turning it almost luminous. They walked close—arms brushing with every other step, occasional deliberate contact from Daniel's hand at her lower back or Mai's fingers grazing his wrist—quiet, wordless affirmations that felt lived-in rather than performed.

The park felt smaller around them, more private, the city hum fading further into background.

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High above the canopy, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto watched with quiet satisfaction.

"There."

He gestured downward—sharp, pleased.

"She's letting him stay."

Konrad remained silent. Hands deep in pockets. Gaze fixed on the two small figures moving together along the path.

Mephisto tilted his head.

“You’re going to say she’s still in control.”

Konrad answered flat. Certain.

“She is.”

Mephisto chuckled—soft, intimate.

“Of course she is.”

He looked down again—Mai and Daniel walking shoulder to shoulder, silver hair catching light, the space between them comfortably closed.

“Then the next part begins.”

The leaves kept dripping.

The path curved on.

And the morning stretched ahead—warm, sharp, unhurried.—

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