

Chapter 12

The park path curved back toward the main gate in a slow, lazy arc—gravel still crunching softly underfoot, trees dripping occasional fat drops that landed on Mai's silver hair and Daniel's coat collar without apology. The light had shifted; midday sun now higher, filtering through leaves in warmer patches that made the air feel almost soft despite the lingering damp. A light breeze carried the scent of wet earth and distant food carts—grilled chestnuts, coffee, faint char from a vendor's grill. Somewhere ahead a child laughed sharp and sudden, the sound cutting clean through the low hum of the city edge.

Mai walked with that effortless balance—stride never hurried, never dragging. Jacket open now, collar loose enough to show the thin silver chain at her throat catching stray light. Silver hair moved in soft waves with each step, strands clinging slightly where drops had landed. Her silver-blue eyes scanned the path ahead, but the usual sharp analyser edge had softened; there was a quiet, emotionally intelligent warmth in how she glanced sideways at Daniel every few strides, reading him without making it obvious.

Daniel kept pace close—shoulder brushing hers with every other step, deliberate but not insistent. His hand found the small of her back again as they passed under a low-hanging branch; palm flat, warm through fabric, guiding her slightly to the side without pulling. Mai leaned into the touch for two full breaths—letting her weight shift toward him, shoulder resting briefly against his chest—before straightening again with that faint, teasing curve at her mouth.

"You're getting bold," she said, voice low, carrying that sharp affection she rarely let show.

Daniel's thumb traced one slow circle at her lower back—gentle pressure, intimate without demanding.

"You're letting me."

Mai didn't deny it. Instead her own hand rose, brushed his coat sleeve, then slid down to lace her fingers loosely through his for a moment—brief squeeze, warm skin against warm skin—before releasing. The contact lingered in the air between them, quiet and lived-in.

They passed a small fountain—stone basin half-full of rainwater, coins glinting at the bottom like forgotten wishes. Water trickled from a cracked spout in a steady, soft rhythm. Mai slowed without comment. Daniel matched her instantly.

She stopped at the edge of the basin. Leaned one hip against the stone rim. Silver hair shifted as she tilted her head, eyes on the rippling surface—reflecting fractured sky and their blurred silhouettes.

Daniel stepped in behind her—close enough his chest brushed her back. His hands settled lightly at her hips—palms warm, not gripping, just resting. Mai exhaled once—small sound, almost a sigh—and leaned back into him, letting her head tip until it rested against his shoulder. The contact felt natural, unhurried; her body relaxing against his in a way that said she trusted the moment more than she'd admit out loud.

"You're thinking," he murmured near her ear—voice low, fond.

Mai's lips curved—sharp, teasing.

"Always."

Daniel's arms slid around her waist—loose hold, warm embrace that didn't cage. One hand splayed flat against her stomach through the jacket; the other rested on her forearm, thumb stroking slow, absent circles along the inside of her wrist.

Mai let him. Her own hands came up to cover his—fingers threading together over her abdomen—holding him there without words. She turned her head slightly, cheek brushing his jaw.

"You're not asking questions today," she said quietly, emotionally intelligent edge softening the observation.

Daniel's chin rested lightly on her shoulder—breath warm against her neck.

"Figured you'd tell me when you're ready."

Mai's fingers tightened once around his—small, appreciative squeeze.

"Smart man."

They stayed like that for several long breaths—bodies aligned, warmth shared, rain-drops falling from leaves overhead and landing on their shoulders without breaking the quiet. Mai's head tilted further, temple pressing against his cheek. Daniel's arms tightened fractionally—protective without possessiveness.

Finally Mai spoke—voice low, teasing beneath the warmth.

"You're going to kiss me here, aren't you."

Daniel laughed softly—sound rumbling against her back.

"Was thinking about it."

Mai turned in his arms—slow, graceful. Hands sliding up to rest on his chest. Silver-blue eyes met his—sharp, affectionate, emotionally open in a way she rarely allowed.

"Then stop thinking."

Daniel didn't hesitate. He leaned in—slow enough to give her time to pull away if she wanted. She didn't. Their lips met—gentle at first, warm and unhurried. Mai's fingers curled into his coat lapels, pulling him closer. The kiss deepened just enough—tongue brushing tongue once, brief, teasing—before Mai eased back, forehead resting against his.

Daniel exhaled—rough, quiet laugh.

"You taste like coffee and rain."

Mai's mouth curved against his skin.

"You taste like trouble."

She stayed close another moment—nose brushing his, breaths mingling—then stepped back, fingers trailing down his arms before falling away.

"Come on," she said, voice carrying that sharp, affectionate tease. "Gate's this way."

Daniel fell in beside her again—shoulder to shoulder, hand finding the small of her back once more as they continued down the path.

The park gate loomed ahead—ironwork wet and gleaming.

The city waited beyond it.

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

“There.”

He gestured downward—sharp, satisfied.

“She kissed him.”

Konrad remained silent. Hands in pockets. Gaze fixed on the two figures moving toward the gate.

Mephisto tilted his head.

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

Konrad answered flat. Certain.

“She is.”

Mephisto chuckled—soft, intimate.

“Of course she is.”

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

“Then we wait for the next move.”

The path curved on.

The city opened ahead.

And the afternoon stretched—warm, sharp, patient. —

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