

Chapter 16

The street they turned onto was quieter than the main avenues—narrower, more intimate, lined with smaller shops whose faded awnings fluttered gently in the late-morning breeze. Older brick buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, their facades worn soft by decades of weather, windows reflecting patches of sunlight in warm, uneven rectangles. The kind of place where the city finally slowed just enough for people to breathe between destinations, where footsteps echoed softer on the pavement and conversations carried without having to compete with traffic roar.

Daniel walked beside Mai with the relaxed curiosity of someone who had fully committed to seeing where the day would go. Coat still on, collar turned up against the light breeze, but his posture loose, shoulders easy, a small half-smile playing at his mouth as he glanced at her every few steps.

“So,” he said lightly, voice warm and teasing, “when you say we escalate...”

Mai glanced at the storefronts as they passed—glass reflecting her silver hair in faint runic glints whenever sunlight caught it. She walked with her usual balanced precision, but there was a softer edge to her posture now, a quiet emotional openness in the way her silver-blue eyes kept flicking toward Daniel with genuine curiosity layered beneath the sharpness.

“Yes.”

“...should I prepare for danger, confusion, or paperwork?”

Mai considered the question, tilting her head slightly so her silver hair shifted across her shoulder like liquid frost. A faint, teasing smile touched her lips—emotionally intelligent warmth showing clearly in the way her eyes softened at the corners.

“Possibly confusion.”

Daniel nodded, chuckling low.

“I can work with that.”

They walked another block, shoulders brushing occasionally with each step—warm, deliberate contact that neither pulled away from. Daniel’s hand found the small of her back for a moment as they crossed a cracked section of sidewalk, palm resting lightly, guiding without pulling; Mai leaned into the touch for two full strides, letting her weight settle against him before straightening again with that same soft, knowing curve at her mouth.

The city around them was settling into late morning now. A cyclist passed them ringing a cheerful bell, a delivery driver argued good-naturedly with someone unloading boxes outside a bakery, and somewhere nearby a radio played an upbeat song from an open shop doorway, the melody drifting lazy through the air. Sunlight painted long golden patches across the pavement, turning puddles into bright mirrors and making the brick walls glow a richer red.

Mai slowed slightly as they approached a small art supply store—its window crowded with sketchbooks, tubes of paint, and brushes arranged in inviting rows. The glass reflected both of them side by side, Mai’s silver hair luminous in the light, Daniel’s easy grin visible beside her.

Daniel noticed immediately.

“You’re thinking again.”

“Yes.”

“About escalation.”

“Yes.”

Daniel folded his arms loosely, stepping closer so their shoulders touched again—warm contact that stayed.

“I’m both curious and mildly concerned.”

Mai stopped outside the store window, silver-blue eyes scanning the display with quiet focus, but the usual sharp analyser edge had softened further; there was real affection in the way she glanced sideways at him, reading his expression openly.

Inside, rows of sketchbooks, paints, and brushes lined the shelves in neat, inviting chaos.

Daniel followed her gaze, leaning in until his arm brushed hers.

“...I was expecting something more dramatic.”

Mai turned toward him—silver hair catching sunlight as she met his eyes with that emotionally intelligent glint, teasing warmth clear in her voice.

“Drama is inefficient.”

Daniel laughed—low, genuine, the sound warm between them.

“Fair.”

Mai opened the door. A small bell chimed overhead—soft, welcoming.

Inside, the shop smelled faintly of fresh paper, linseed oil, and the clean sharpness of new paint. Soft music played somewhere behind the counter—gentle acoustic guitar drifting through the space. Dust motes floated in the sunbeams slanting through the windows.

Daniel stepped in behind her, close enough their arms brushed again as they moved down the narrow aisle.

“So the next phase of your experiment involves... art supplies?”

Mai walked slowly past the shelves, fingers trailing lightly along the edge of a display—silver hair falling forward as she examined the options. Daniel stayed right beside her, shoulder to shoulder, his hand occasionally brushing hers as they moved.

“Observation requires new variables.”

Daniel blinked, then leaned closer, his hand resting lightly at her lower back again—warm, steady pressure.

“That sentence raised more questions than it answered.”

Mai stopped in front of a rack of sketchbooks, silver-blue eyes scanning them thoughtfully. She selected one—simple black cover, thick pages—and turned it in her hands.

Daniel leaned in until his chest brushed her shoulder, peering at the notebook with amused curiosity.

"...you're buying a notebook."

"Yes."

"For what."

Mai looked at him calmly, silver hair shifting as she tilted her head, the teasing emotional warmth clear in her gaze.

"To record results."

Daniel stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing—warm, delighted, the sound filling the quiet shop.

"I should have known."

Mai paid for the sketchbook at the counter—quick, precise transaction—while Daniel stood close behind her, one hand resting lightly on her waist, thumb tracing a small, absent circle through her jacket.

They stepped back onto the street together. Sunlight felt brighter now, warming their faces as they walked side by side.

Daniel gestured toward the notebook, his free hand brushing Mai's arm lightly before slipping down to lace their fingers together again.

"So what exactly are you recording?"

Mai opened it briefly, flipping through the blank pages with one hand while still holding his with the other—silver hair catching light as she glanced up at him.

"Reactions."

Daniel pointed at himself, squeezing her hand gently.

"Mine."

"Yes."

Daniel nodded slowly, thumb stroking the back of her hand in warm rhythm.

"That's both flattering and slightly terrifying."

Mai closed the notebook, tucking it under her arm while keeping their fingers laced.

"Acceptable outcome."

They walked another half block—bodies close, shoulders brushing with every step, Daniel's thumb still drawing slow circles on her hand.

Daniel glanced sideways at her, voice fond.

"You know something?"

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes meeting his with open, emotionally intelligent warmth.

“You’re enjoying this.”

Mai didn’t deny it. Instead she leaned into him for a moment—shoulder resting against his chest, letting the contact linger warmly—before straightening again.

“Possibly.”

Daniel grinned, squeezing her hand.

“Definitely.”

He looked ahead, still holding her hand.

“So when does the experiment reach the unpredictable phase?”

Mai slowed again deliberately.

Daniel noticed immediately, stepping closer so their arms pressed together.

“You did that on purpose.”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

Mai turned toward him fully—silver hair framing her face as she met his eyes, then handed him the notebook with a small, teasing smile.

“Because this is the unpredictable phase.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, taking the notebook while still holding her hand.

“Oh?”

Mai met his gaze calmly, silver-blue eyes sparkling with quiet affection and sharp intelligence.

Daniel blinked at the notebook in his hand, then slowly smiled—warm, delighted.

“That,” he said, voice low and fond,

“is an excellent escalation.”

Mai nodded once, her free hand brushing his arm lightly before resting there.

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

“Oh now this is clever.”

Konrad watched quietly.

Below them Daniel was flipping through the notebook with obvious amusement while Mai observed him carefully, their hands still loosely joined.

Mephisto chuckled.

“She has reversed the experiment.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back again.

“You didn’t predict that.”

Konrad didn’t answer immediately.

Finally he said calmly:

“No.”

Mephisto smiled wider.

“Well then.”

He looked down toward the street again.

“Let’s see how the variable handles control of the experiment.”—

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