

Chapter 17

The street felt quieter now, the kind of midday hush that settles between the morning rush and the lunch crowd. Older brick buildings lined both sides, their facades softened by years of sun and rain, ivy climbing lazily up some walls and catching the light in gentle green waves. Sunlight slanted across the pavement in warm golden patches, turning every puddle into a bright mirror and making the air feel almost soft despite the lingering damp. A light breeze carried the faint scent of fresh bread from a bakery two doors down and the low hum of distant traffic, but here it was peaceful enough that their footsteps on the sidewalk sounded clear and deliberate.

Daniel turned the notebook over in his hands like someone who had just been handed the steering wheel of a car he didn't quite know how to drive yet.

Blank pages.

Completely untouched.

He looked up at Mai, eyes wide with genuine surprise mixed with growing delight.

"You're serious."

Mai met his gaze steadily, silver hair catching the sunlight in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands look almost luminous. Jacket open, collar loose, she stood with her usual balanced precision, but there was a new, emotionally intelligent warmth in the way her silver-blue eyes held his—sharp curiosity layered with quiet affection and that occasional teasing spark that made her feel more present, more human.

"Yes."

Daniel let out a soft, disbelieving laugh, flipping the notebook open and closed again as if testing its reality.

"And you trust the variable to run the experiment."

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver strands sliding over one shoulder. Her expression softened further, the analyser edge giving way to genuine emotional openness as she studied him—reading the mix of amusement and hesitation in his posture with clear fondness.

"You volunteered."

Daniel laughed again, warmer this time, the sound carrying easily down the quiet street. He stepped closer, shoulder brushing hers deliberately, the contact warm and steady.

"That's not quite the same thing."

Mai didn't pull away. Instead she let her arm rest lightly against his for a moment, her fingers brushing the back of his hand in a brief, teasing touch before she answered, voice low and carrying that sharp affection.

"You accepted the escalation."

Daniel considered her words, eyes tracing the soft fall of her silver hair and the subtle curve of her mouth. He reached out, letting his fingers graze her wrist gently before lacing loosely with hers—warm palm to palm, thumb stroking one slow circle along her skin.

“...fair.”

He flipped the notebook open again, still holding her hand, and looked at her with playful thoughtfulness.

“So the instructions are...?”

Mai waited, her thumb tracing a matching slow circle on the back of his hand, silver-blue eyes warm and engaged, emotionally present in the moment rather than distant.

Daniel pretended to read from an imaginary rulebook, voice full of mock seriousness while still holding her hand.

“I observe your reactions.”

“Yes.”

“I write them down.”

“Yes.”

“And at some point this produces... data.”

“Yes.”

Daniel nodded slowly, squeezing her hand gently, the contact lingering comfortably between them.

“I’m beginning to see the danger in this arrangement.”

Mai allowed the faintest hint of amusement to show—eyes sparkling with that emotionally intelligent tease, her free hand rising to brush lightly along his arm.

“Explain.”

Daniel gestured lightly with the notebook while keeping their fingers laced, pulling her a little closer so their shoulders pressed together warmly.

“Because now I get to ask questions.”

Mai crossed her arms loosely, but kept her hand in his, letting the touch stay warm and steady.

“You already did.”

“Yes,” Daniel said, smiling wider, thumb still stroking her skin, “but now it’s part of the experiment.”

Mai considered that, silver hair shifting as she tilted her head, the warmth in her gaze clear and teasing.

“Acceptable.”

Daniel grinned, leaning in until their foreheads nearly brushed.

“Excellent.”

He flipped to the first page, still holding her hand, and wrote something quickly.

Mai leaned slightly to see, her silver hair falling forward like a soft curtain, body close enough that her shoulder rested against his chest for a moment.

Daniel immediately closed the notebook, pulling her hand gently to keep her from peeking.

“Ah ah.”

Mai raised an eyebrow, silver-blue eyes glinting with playful challenge, but she didn't pull away—instead she let her free hand rest lightly on his chest for a second, feeling the warmth beneath his coat.

“That is inefficient.”

Daniel shook his head, still holding her close, thumb tracing slow circles on her wrist.

“Blind study.”

Mai paused, considering him with clear emotional warmth now showing in her expression.

“...acceptable.”

Daniel smiled, squeezing her hand once more before they started walking again, bodies side by side, shoulders brushing with every step.

Daniel kept the notebook loosely in one hand now, occasionally glancing at Mai as if evaluating something new, his free hand finding the small of her back—warm, steady pressure that made her lean into him naturally.

Mai noticed every glance, her silver hair catching light as she walked, the usual sharp focus softened by genuine curiosity and affection.

“You are exaggerating the observation process.”

Daniel nodded, his hand still resting lightly at her lower back, thumb tracing a small circle.

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because it makes you curious.”

Mai did not deny that. Instead she let her own hand slide down his arm, fingers brushing his in a teasing, warm trail as they crossed another intersection, sunlight warming their faces.

Daniel suddenly stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

Mai took two more steps before noticing, then turned back toward him—silver hair swinging softly, eyes meeting his with that emotionally intelligent spark.

“What.”

Daniel held up the notebook, stepping closer until they stood face to face, his hand finding hers again and lacing their fingers.

“Observation number two.”

Mai waited, letting their joined hands rest warmly between them.

Daniel tilted his head slightly, thumb stroking her palm.

“You’re pretending not to care about the notebook.”

Mai answered immediately, but her voice carried a teasing warmth now, her body leaning slightly toward him.

“I do not care.”

Daniel wrote again, still holding her hand, then closed the notebook with a grin.

Mai watched him, silver-blue eyes soft and engaged, her free hand brushing his coat lapel lightly.

“What did you write.”

Daniel closed the notebook once more, pulling her closer so their arms pressed together.

“Data point.”

Mai exhaled softly, but there was clear amusement and affection in the sound, her fingers tightening gently around his.

“This experiment has degraded.”

Daniel laughed—warm, delighted—and slipped the notebook into his jacket pocket while keeping her hand in his.

“No.”

He leaned in until their foreheads touched briefly, warm breath mingling.

“It has improved.”

Mai considered that statement, silver hair brushing his cheek as she looked up at him, emotionally open and teasing.

“How.”

Daniel gestured toward the street ahead, still holding her hand tightly, thumb stroking slow circles.

“Because now you don’t know what the results are.”

Mai stopped walking again, turning fully toward him—silver-blue eyes meeting his with genuine warmth and curiosity.

Daniel noticed the shift immediately, stepping close until their bodies aligned, one hand resting lightly at her waist.

“Observation number three,” he said quietly, voice fond.

Mai looked at him, silver hair framing her face in the sunlight.

“You are enjoying this.”

Daniel nodded, his hand sliding to the small of her back, pulling her gently closer.

“Very much.”

Mai studied him for several seconds, silver-blue eyes soft and affectionate, then—unexpectedly—she smiled, real and warm, the kind that reached all the way to her eyes.

Daniel blinked, caught off guard by how bright it made her look.

“Well.”

He pulled the notebook back out, still holding her close.

“That definitely deserves documentation.”

Mai shook her head slightly, but her smile stayed, her hand resting lightly on his chest.

“You are manipulating the results.”

Daniel shrugged, leaning in until their noses brushed, thumb stroking her lower back.

“That’s part of experimentation.”

Mai started walking again, but kept her body close to his, shoulder pressed warmly against him, fingers still laced with his.

Daniel followed immediately, matching her stride perfectly.

“You know something?” he said, voice warm and close.

Mai waited, silver hair lifting in the breeze, eyes on him with clear emotional warmth.

“This might be the most interesting day I’ve had in years.”

Mai glanced sideways at him, silver-blue eyes sparkling with teasing affection.

“Possibly.”

Daniel smiled, squeezing her hand gently.

“Definitely.”

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High above the street, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto was nearly vibrating with amusement.

“Oh this is delightful.”

Konrad remained quiet.

Below them Mai and Daniel continued down the street, the notebook now firmly in Daniel’s possession, their bodies walking close together, hands still loosely joined.

Mephisto gestured toward them.

“She handed control of the experiment to the variable.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto turned toward Konrad.

“That is a catastrophic methodological error.”

Konrad shook his head slightly.

“No.”

Mephisto blinked.

“No?”

Konrad watched the pair disappear around the corner, bodies still close, hands linked.

“She did it deliberately.”

Mephisto stared down at the street.

Then slowly smiled.

“Oh.”

He clasped his hands behind his back again.

“Well then.”

His voice carried quiet anticipation.

“Let us see what the variable does with the power.” —

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