

Chapter 20

The coffee cart stood in the middle of the plaza like an old friend that had seen too many mornings — battered wooden counter worn smooth by years of elbows, steam rising in lazy spirals from the espresso machine, the rich scent of roasted beans mixing with sweet caramel syrup and the faint buttery edge of pastries warming under glass domes. Late morning sunlight poured across the open space in thick golden bars, catching on the leaves of the plane trees and turning every shallow puddle into a bright, shimmering mirror. People moved around them with that easy, unhurried rhythm the city allowed only in these quiet pockets — a mother pushing a stroller, an old man feeding pigeons with deliberate patience, couples strolling arm in arm, all of them wrapped in the kind of calm that hadn't yet turned into afternoon rush.

Mai stood in line beside Daniel, silver hair catching the sunlight in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands look almost alive whenever a breeze moved through the trees. Jacket open, collar loose enough to show the thin silver chain at her throat, she held herself with her usual balanced grace, but there was a new softness in her posture — shoulders relaxed, silver-blue eyes warm and emotionally present as they flicked toward Daniel, reading him openly with genuine curiosity and quiet affection instead of cold calculation.

The tension between them hadn't disappeared.

It had simply settled — like heat under the surface of still water, warm and humming just beneath the skin.

Daniel broke the silence first, voice low and carrying that easy, fond tease as he leaned lightly against the cart's wooden counter.

"You know what's fascinating about this?"

Mai didn't look at him immediately, but the corner of her mouth lifted in a small, knowing curve — emotionally intelligent warmth clear in the subtle tilt of her head.

"What."

Daniel glanced at her, eyes tracing the soft fall of her silver hair and the way sunlight painted highlights across her cheekbones.

"You changed the environment."

Mai answered calmly, but her voice carried a teasing edge softened by genuine affection.

"Incorrect."

Daniel raised an eyebrow, stepping just a little closer so their arms brushed warmly.

"Oh?"

Mai folded her arms loosely, silver hair sliding over one shoulder as she turned toward him, her silver-blue eyes meeting his with clear emotional openness and quiet fondness.

"It is not a reset."

Daniel waited, his hand finding the small of her back — palm resting lightly, thumb stroking one slow, gentle circle through her jacket.

Mai continued, voice low but warm.

“It is observation under new conditions.”

Daniel smiled slowly, the warmth in his expression genuine as he leaned in closer, shoulder pressing comfortably against hers.

“Ah.”

He nodded.

“Of course it is.”

Mai turned slightly toward him, letting her own hand rest lightly on his forearm — fingers tracing a brief, teasing path along his sleeve before settling there.

“You expected retreat.”

Daniel shrugged, but his thumb continued its slow circles at her lower back, the contact warm and steady.

“I expected uncertainty.”

Mai met his gaze directly now, silver-blue eyes soft and emotionally present, the usual sharp edge replaced by teasing affection.

“You misread the data.”

Daniel chuckled softly, the sound warm and intimate between them as he pulled her fractionally closer, bodies aligning comfortably.

“That’s what I like about this experiment.”

Mai raised an eyebrow, but her fingers stayed on his arm, thumb stroking gently in return.

“Explain.”

Daniel gestured loosely between them, his free hand brushing a loose strand of silver hair from her cheek and tucking it behind her ear with careful gentleness.

“The variables keep adapting.”

Mai considered that, leaning slightly into his touch, silver hair catching light as her expression softened further with genuine warmth.

“That is normal.”

Daniel tilted his head, still holding her close, thumb tracing slow patterns at her waist.

“No.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes warm on his.

“That’s rare.”

The barista called the next order.

Mai stepped forward without hesitation.

“Two coffees,” she said calmly, but her hand remained lightly on Daniel’s arm, keeping the contact warm and present.

Daniel blinked, clearly surprised, but his smile widened.

“You’re choosing for me now?”

Mai nodded once, silver hair shifting softly.

“Yes.”

Daniel grinned, stepping up beside her again, his arm sliding around her waist — loose, warm hold that made her lean naturally into him.

“Interesting.”

They stepped aside while the drinks were prepared, bodies staying close — Daniel’s hand resting at her lower back, Mai’s fingers tracing gentle patterns on his sleeve.

Daniel watched her quietly for a moment, then said:

“Observation number nine.”

Mai sighed slightly, but there was clear amusement and affection in the sound as she tilted her head toward him, silver hair brushing his shoulder.

“You did not write it down.”

Daniel tapped his temple, pulling her closer until their foreheads nearly touched.

“I’m keeping a mental copy now.”

Mai studied him, silver-blue eyes sparkling with teasing warmth.

“That is unreliable.”

Daniel smiled, thumb stroking slow circles at her waist.

“It’s faster.”

Mai watched him carefully, her hand sliding up to rest lightly on his chest, feeling the steady warmth beneath his coat.

“What did you observe.”

Daniel answered immediately, voice fond and close.

“You changed tactics.”

Mai said nothing for a beat, but her fingers curled gently into his coat, body leaning warmly into his hold.

Daniel leaned slightly closer.

“You’re not reacting anymore.”

Mai met his gaze directly, silver-blue eyes soft and emotionally open.

“Incorrect.”

Daniel waited, still holding her close.

Mai spoke calmly, but with clear affection threading through her voice.

“I am choosing the next variable.”

Daniel’s grin widened, his arms sliding fully around her waist in a gentle, warm embrace.

“Well then.”

He straightened slightly, still keeping her held close.

“This just became a much more interesting experiment.”

The barista handed them the coffees.

Mai took both, then handed one to Daniel without looking — but her free hand stayed lightly on his chest for a moment longer, thumb stroking once before she released him.

Daniel accepted the cup, eyes warm on her.

“Thank you.”

Mai started walking again toward one of the benches near the edge of the plaza, silver hair glowing in the sunlight.

Daniel followed immediately, falling in beside her, his hand finding the small of her back again as they walked.

They sat on the bench together — bodies close, shoulders touching, sunlight warming their faces.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

People passed.

The city moved gently around them.

Daniel took a sip of his coffee, then looked at her again.

“Good choice.”

Mai nodded, silver hair shifting as she took her own slow sip, her free hand resting lightly on his knee.

“Yes.”

Daniel leaned back slightly, but kept his arm along the back of the bench behind her — fingers brushing her shoulder in gentle, absent strokes.

Then he looked at her again, voice low and fond.

“So.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes warm on his.

“What’s the next variable?”

Mai took another slow sip, then placed the cup down beside her.

She turned toward him fully, silver hair falling softly as she met his eyes with clear emotional warmth and teasing intelligence.

“You.”

Daniel blinked once.

“Oh.”

Mai spoke calmly, but her hand reached over to rest lightly on his thigh — warm, steady contact.

“You have been observing.”

Daniel nodded, his own hand covering hers gently, thumb stroking along her fingers.

“Yes.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver strands catching light.

“Now you answer questions.”

Daniel smiled, squeezing her hand gently.

“That seems fair.”

Mai studied him carefully, her fingers threading through his on his thigh.

“Why did you continue?”

Daniel didn’t hesitate, his free arm sliding around her shoulders to pull her closer — warm embrace that made her lean naturally into his side.

“Because you didn’t stop me.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair brushing his cheek.

“That is partially correct.”

Daniel chuckled, holding her warmly.

“Only partially?”

Mai met his eyes again, silver-blue gaze soft and affectionate.

“Yes.”

Daniel leaned slightly forward, forehead nearly brushing hers.

“Alright.”

“What is the other part.”

Mai answered simply, her hand still resting warmly on his thigh, thumb stroking slow circles.

“You were curious.”

Daniel laughed softly, pulling her closer until their bodies aligned comfortably.

“Guilty.”

Mai watched him for a moment longer, silver-blue eyes warm and open.

Then asked the next question, voice low and teasing.

“Are you still curious.”

Daniel held her gaze, arms around her.

“Yes.”

Mai nodded once, letting her head rest lightly against his shoulder for a moment — warm, trusting contact.

“Good.”

Daniel blinked.

“That sounded ominous.”

Mai’s voice remained calm but carried clear affection, her hand squeezing his gently.

“It is not.”

Daniel leaned forward slightly, forehead resting against hers.

“Oh?”

Mai picked up her coffee again, but stayed close — body warm against his.

Then said quietly, silver hair brushing his cheek:

“Because curiosity produces the best data.”

Daniel stared at her for a second.

Then burst out laughing — warm, delighted, the sound filling their small corner of the plaza.

“You know something?”

Mai waited, silver hair glowing in the sunlight, her body still comfortably leaned against him.

“This might be the strangest date I’ve ever been on.”

Mai considered that, her fingers still laced with his, thumb stroking gently.

“Possibly.”

Daniel grinned, squeezing her hand and pulling her closer.

“No.”

He lifted his coffee cup slightly toward her in a small toast.

“Definitely.”

Mai allowed the faintest hint of a real smile — warm, bright, reaching her eyes.

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High above the plaza, Mephisto laughed aloud.

“Oh she flipped the board.”

Konrad watched silently.

Below them Mai and Daniel sat on the bench, both relaxed now — but the quiet tension between them had not vanished.

It had simply changed form.

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back again.

“She regained control.”

Konrad shook his head slightly.

“No.”

Mephisto glanced sideways.

“No?”

Konrad watched the scene below carefully.

“Now they are both running the experiment.”

Mephisto smiled slowly.

“Well then.”

His eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“That tends to produce... interesting results.” —

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