

Chapter 22

The city streets narrowed as they walked.

The wide boulevards gave way to older, quieter lanes where brick buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, their facades softened by decades of weather and ivy that trailed lazily down the walls. Sunlight slanted lower now, painting long golden bars across the pavement and turning every shallow puddle into a bright, shimmering mirror. Fewer cars passed. Fewer voices carried. The air smelled of damp stone, fresh bread from a hidden bakery, and the faint metallic edge of the river somewhere beyond the rooftops. Footsteps echoed softly here — clear and unhurried — as if the city itself had stepped back to give them room.

Daniel eventually noticed.

“You changed direction.”

Mai did not slow. Her silver hair caught the slanting light in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands glow faintly whenever a breeze moved through. Jacket open, collar loose, she walked with her usual balanced grace, but there was a quiet warmth in her posture now — shoulders relaxed, silver-blue eyes carrying genuine curiosity and affection instead of cold analysis.

“Yes.”

Daniel glanced around, taking in the quieter buildings and the way the street curved gently away from the main flow.

“This isn’t the plaza anymore.”

“No.”

Daniel smiled slightly, the expression warm and fond as he stepped closer, letting their arms brush deliberately.

“New experimental environment?”

Mai answered calmly, but her voice carried a soft, teasing warmth as she glanced sideways at him — silver-blue eyes soft and emotionally present.

“Yes.”

Daniel slipped his hands into his jacket pockets for a moment, then pulled one out again to rest lightly at the small of her back — palm warm, thumb stroking one gentle circle through her jacket.

“You are definitely escalating the variables now.”

Mai glanced sideways again, silver hair sliding over one shoulder as she leaned fractionally into his touch, letting the contact linger.

“Observation noted.”

Daniel chuckled, low and genuine, his hand staying at her lower back as they walked, thumb tracing slow, absent patterns.

“You didn’t deny it.”

Mai said nothing. Instead she let her own hand brush lightly down his arm, fingers grazing his wrist before settling there — warm, steady contact that said more than words.

They turned one more corner.

Now the street was almost empty.

A narrow alley led toward a quieter pedestrian lane behind the main cafés, shaded by overhanging eaves and lined with small potted plants that still glistened with morning rain.

Daniel slowed slightly.

“Oh.”

Mai stopped.

Daniel looked at her, eyes warm and curious as he stepped closer, his hand sliding from her lower back to rest lightly at her waist.

“You picked a quieter location.”

Mai tilted her head, silver hair catching the light as she studied him — silver-blue eyes warm, teasing affection clear in the small curve of her mouth.

“Yes.”

Daniel folded his arms loosely, but the gesture was relaxed, one hand still brushing her waist.

“And that suggests the next part of the experiment requires privacy.”

Mai considered him for a moment, silver hair shifting as she stepped closer — close enough their bodies nearly touched, her hand rising to rest lightly on his chest, fingers curling gently into his coat.

“You are adapting quickly.”

Daniel grinned, warm and genuine, his free hand rising to brush a loose strand of silver hair from her cheek before resting gently at her hip.

“Curiosity.”

Mai stepped even closer now, until the distance between them had disappeared entirely, her body warm against his, forehead nearly brushing his as she looked up at him.

“You said earlier,” Mai continued calmly, voice low and carrying quiet affection, “that escalation interested you.”

Daniel nodded once, his arms sliding loosely around her waist, holding her gently but securely.

“Yes.”

Mai studied him carefully — silver-blue eyes soft and emotionally open, thumb stroking one slow circle on his chest through the fabric.

“And you were not afraid of where it might lead.”

Daniel's voice softened slightly as he pulled her a fraction closer, their foreheads touching gently.

"No."

Mai's eyes narrowed just a fraction — playful challenge mixed with real warmth.

"Good."

Daniel blinked.

"Good?"

Mai answered simply, her hand sliding up to rest lightly on the side of his neck, fingers brushing his jaw with gentle warmth.

"Because the experiment is changing."

Daniel's grin widened, his arms tightening slightly around her in a warm, steady embrace.

"I had a feeling."

Mai took another small step closer, bodies fully aligned now, her silver hair brushing his cheek as she leaned into him.

Daniel's voice lowered instinctively.

"Well."

Mai's tone remained calm but carried a quiet, intimate edge now, her fingers tracing gentle patterns along his neck.

"You have been observing all morning."

Daniel nodded, still holding her close.

"Yes."

Mai met his gaze, silver-blue eyes warm and steady.

"Now you experience."

Daniel laughed softly under his breath, the sound warm against her skin as one hand rose to cup the side of her neck gently.

"That is definitely escalation."

Mai tilted her head, silver hair falling softly as she stayed comfortably in his arms.

"Yes."

Daniel studied her face, thumb stroking lightly along her jaw.

"You're serious."

"Yes."

Daniel exhaled slowly, still holding her close.

“Well.”

He leaned slightly closer, forehead resting gently against hers again.

“I suppose that means the experiment just moved into a different phase.”

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

“Correct.”

Daniel shook his head with quiet amusement, arms still around her.

“You know something?”

Mai waited, body warm and relaxed against him.

“This might actually be the most dangerous experiment I’ve ever participated in.”

Mai answered calmly, but her voice was soft and affectionate as she brushed her thumb along his jaw once more.

“That depends.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, still holding her.

“On what.”

Mai leaned just close enough that her voice didn’t need to carry, forehead still resting gently against his.

“Your curiosity.”

Daniel’s grin returned, warm and fond as he pulled her a little closer.

“Oh that’s still very active.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair brushing his cheek.

“Good.”

For a moment neither of them moved — bodies close, warmth shared, sunlight dappling across them in the quiet street.

Then Mai took his hand — fingers threading through his with gentle firmness.

Daniel blinked.

“Well.”

Mai began walking again — this time toward a narrow stairway leading up to the second-floor entrance of a small, quiet café tucked above the street, her other hand resting lightly on his arm as they moved together.

Daniel followed.

Still smiling.

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High above the quiet street, Mephisto's grin widened dramatically.

"Oh now this is interesting."

Konrad watched the scene below without comment.

Mai and Daniel disappeared up the stairway.

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

"She escalated first."

Konrad nodded slightly.

"Yes."

Mephisto glanced sideways.

"Your analyst is learning."

Konrad remained calm.

"Yes."

Mephisto looked back toward the café door.

"Well then."

His voice carried quiet anticipation.

"Let us see how the experiment concludes."

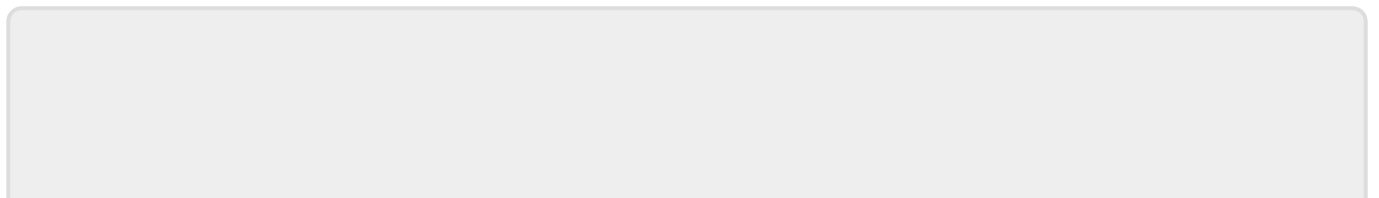
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