

Chapter 28

The bookstore smelled like old paper, fresh ink, and the faint clean scent of rain still clinging to coats and hair.

Soft, warm lighting spilled from brass fixtures overhead, casting gentle pools of gold across the dark wooden floors and the tall, crowded shelves that reached almost to the ceiling. The air felt thick and comforting — the quiet rustle of pages turning, the low murmur of distant conversations, and soft instrumental music drifting from hidden speakers near the ceiling, piano and strings weaving slow, contemplative notes that invited people to linger. Rain tapped gently against the large front windows, turning the street outside into a blurred watercolor of lights and umbrellas.

Shammy stepped inside.

Her coat was damp from the rain, droplets still sliding down the dark fabric in slow rivulets, but her tall frame moved with the same impossible grace as always — storm-carried presence wrapped in calm. Silver-white hair shifted in faint ionized gradients under the warm lights, electric blue eyes steady and observant as she paused just inside the doorway. The bell above the door chimed softly behind her, a gentle note that faded into the quiet hum of the store.

She paused.

Observed.

People moved slowly between the shelves like fish in a calm current — a young student sitting cross-legged on the floor near the philosophy section, completely absorbed in a thick volume; an older couple quietly browsing travel books together, fingers occasionally brushing as they pointed at pages; a man standing near the science shelf, flipping through a hardcover with quiet, focused intensity.

Shammy watched for several seconds.

Patterns emerged quickly.

Body language. Attention spans. Small distractions.

The man at the science shelf did not look up when she entered.

Interesting.

Shammy walked deeper into the store, her tall frame moving with quiet pressure regulation — the air around her subtly shifting, making the space feel calmer, more balanced simply by her presence. She selected a thick psychology book from the nearest shelf. Not because she needed it. Because observation worked better when you appeared occupied.

She opened the book.

Pretended to read.

Actually watched the reflection in the glass of the nearby display case — a perfect, slightly distorted mirror of the room behind her.

The man was still there.

Still reading.

Still unaware.

Or pretending to be.

Shammy closed the book with careful fingers.

Walked toward the science section.

Stopped beside him.

Pulled another book from the shelf — heavy, glossy cover — and opened it at a random page.

He spoke without looking up, voice low and calm, carrying a hint of dry amusement.

“You’re not actually reading that.”

Shammy blinked once — slow, deliberate.

Interesting.

She turned slightly toward him, silver-white hair catching the warm light as she regarded him with her usual atmospheric calm, electric blue eyes steady but carrying a faint, subtle warmth beneath the surface.

“Observation.”

The man finally looked up.

Mid-thirties. Calm gray eyes. Mildly amused expression that suggested he had been waiting for this moment.

He gestured toward the book in her hands with a small tilt of his head.

“That’s the third time you’ve turned the same page.”

Shammy considered that for a quiet beat, the pressure in the small space between them equalizing gently around her presence.

“You noticed.”

“Yes.”

He closed his own book with a soft snap and leaned lightly against the shelf, studying her with open curiosity.

“Which raises the question.”

Shammy waited, book still open in her long fingers, tall frame perfectly still but radiating that impossible grace-to-mass balance.

“Are you studying the book...”

He tilted his head slightly, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“...or the room.”

Shammy allowed the faintest trace of a smile to touch her lips — calm, measured, but carrying a quiet, atmospheric warmth that made the air around them feel lighter.

“Both.”

The man leaned a little more comfortably against the shelf, eyes meeting her electric blue ones with clear interest.

“Well.”

Shammy waited, the book still held loosely in her hands, her presence subtly regulating the small pocket of quiet they had created between the tall shelves.

“This just became a much more interesting bookstore visit.”

Shammy nodded once, silver-white hair shifting faintly.

“Yes.”

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Far above the city, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the rain fell in soft silver threads, Mephisto burst out laughing — delighted, low, and thoroughly entertained.

“Oh I love this already.”

Konrad watched the bookstore quietly, arms loosely folded.

“Yes.”

Mephisto pointed downward with clear satisfaction.

“She picked the one person who noticed her first.”

Konrad nodded.

“Yes.”

Mephisto’s grin widened, eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“Oh this experiment...”

He clasped his hands behind his back again.

“...is going to escalate beautifully.”

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