

Chapter 33

Riverside — First Contact

The river moved quietly beneath the bridge, dark water sliding smooth and steady like liquid obsidian under the soft glow of streetlamps. Rain had softened into a thin drifting mist that hung in the air like silver breath, barely visible but cool against skin and coats, turning every light into a hazy halo and making the wet wooden promenade glisten underfoot. The space felt private and open at once — almost empty now except for the distant hum of traffic far behind them and the gentle, rhythmic rush of water below. The city lights reflected in long, shimmering streaks across the river's surface, painting the scene in quiet streaks of violet, amber, and silver.

Shammy stood with one hand resting lightly on the railing, tall frame relaxed yet commanding, silver-white hair catching the mist and lamp light in faint ionized gradients that shifted like distant weather. Her coat was damp at the shoulders, but she wore it with effortless grace, electric blue eyes calm on the surface yet carrying a quiet, atmospheric warmth and genuine curiosity as she observed both the river and the man beside her.

Jonas stood close beside her — close enough now that the distance between them was clearly intentional. His shoulder brushed hers, one hand resting lightly on the railing next to hers, their fingers almost touching in the cool mist.

Neither of them rushed the moment.

The rain brushed softly against their coats in a gentle, constant whisper.

Jonas eventually spoke, voice low and warm as he leaned a little closer, his arm brushing hers.

"You're very patient."

Shammy tilted her head slightly, silver-white hair falling softly as she turned toward him, electric blue eyes soft and engaged with quiet affection.

"Yes."

Jonas watched the river for a moment, then glanced back at her, his hand shifting so his fingers brushed lightly against hers on the railing — a gentle, deliberate touch that stayed.

"Most people rush the interesting part."

Shammy said nothing, but she allowed her fingers to rest against his, thumb brushing one slow, warm circle along his skin in quiet response.

Jonas smiled faintly, stepping half a pace closer until their bodies aligned comfortably, shoulder to shoulder, the mist curling softly around them.

"You don't."

Shammy folded her arms loosely over the railing, but kept her body warm against his, her tall frame relaxed in the shared space.

"Observation benefits from timing."

Jonas chuckled quietly, the sound intimate between them as he turned fully toward her, one hand

rising to rest lightly at her waist — warm, steady pressure that made her lean naturally into him.

“That’s a very scientific way to describe tension.”

Shammy did not argue. Instead she let her own hand rest lightly on his forearm, fingers tracing a gentle path along his sleeve as the rain misted softly around them.

The river continued sliding quietly beneath the bridge, its dark surface reflecting the blurred city lights like a slow-moving mirror.

Jonas leaned back against the railing slightly, but kept his arm around her waist, pulling her gently closer.

“So.”

Shammy waited, electric blue eyes warm on his, silver-white hair glowing faintly in the lamplight.

“You’ve moved the experiment through four environments.”

Shammy nodded once, her hand sliding up to rest on his shoulder, fingers curling gently into his coat.

“Yes.”

Jonas counted on his fingers, but kept his other arm securely around her waist, thumb stroking slow circles at her hip.

“Bookstore.”

He raised another finger, pulling her a fraction closer.

“Café.”

Another.

“Street.”

Then he gestured around them, voice low and fond.

“And now the river.”

Shammy allowed a faint nod, leaning comfortably into his hold, her tall frame warm against his.

“Correct.”

Jonas looked at her again, eyes warm and open as he studied her face.

“And each move removed variables.”

Shammy raised an eyebrow slightly, her fingers tracing gentle patterns on his shoulder.

“Explain.”

Jonas gestured toward the empty promenade, his arm never leaving her waist.

“Less noise.”

Then the quiet street behind them.

"Fewer observers."

Then finally toward the dark water, pulling her gently closer until their foreheads nearly brushed.

"More space."

Shammy considered that, silver-white hair brushing his cheek as she stayed warmly in his arms.

"Yes."

Jonas smiled, his hand sliding up to cup the side of her neck gently, thumb stroking along her jaw.

"So the board is clear now."

Shammy watched him carefully, electric blue eyes soft and affectionate.

"Yes."

Jonas stepped half a pace closer, bodies fully aligned now in the misty rain, his arms sliding around her waist in a secure, warm embrace.

"That means the next move matters."

Shammy answered calmly, but her voice carried quiet warmth as she wrapped her own arms around him, holding him close.

"Yes."

Jonas studied her expression, forehead resting gently against hers.

"You expected this."

Shammy did not deny it, her fingers tracing slow patterns on his back through his coat.

"Yes."

Jonas chuckled quietly, the sound warm against her skin as he held her securely.

"Well."

He rested one hand lightly on the railing beside hers, but kept the other arm around her waist.

"Then let's see how good your predictions are."

Shammy tilted her head, silver-white hair brushing his cheek as she stayed comfortably in his embrace.

"You believe I predicted you."

Jonas smiled, thumb stroking gently along her jaw.

"I believe you hoped."

Shammy said nothing, but she leaned into him further, arms tightening warmly around him.

The river continued sliding quietly beneath the bridge, rain misting softly across the water like silver threads.

Jonas looked at her for another moment, voice soft and fond.

"Tell me something."

Shammy waited, electric blue eyes warm on his.

"What made you pick me."

Shammy answered simply, her tall frame relaxed and warm against him.

"You noticed."

Jonas smiled, pulling her gently closer.

"That again."

Shammy's eyes narrowed slightly with quiet amusement, her hand sliding up to rest on the side of his neck.

"Yes."

Jonas leaned slightly closer now, forehead resting fully against hers, arms secure around her.

"And if I hadn't."

Shammy considered the question, her fingers stroking gently along his neck.

"I would have continued observing."

Jonas laughed softly, holding her close in the misty rain.

"Well."

He looked down at the river again, but kept her held warmly.

"I'm glad I noticed."

Shammy studied him for several seconds, silver-white hair glowing softly in the light, then said calmly, voice carrying quiet warmth:

"Why."

Jonas turned back toward her, expression softened with genuine affection.

"Because curiosity works both ways."

Shammy blinked once, electric blue eyes soft.

Jonas smiled faintly, arms still around her.

"You were studying the room."

He gestured lightly between them, forehead still resting gently against hers.

"I'm studying you."

Shammy considered that, her tall frame warm and relaxed in his embrace.

"Acceptable."

Jonas laughed, pulling her gently closer until their bodies pressed warmly together.

"That's the highest approval I'm getting tonight, isn't it."

Shammy tilted her head slightly, silver-white hair brushing his cheek as she stayed comfortably held.

"Possibly."

Jonas shook his head with quiet amusement, arms secure around her.

"Well."

He said softly, voice fond and close,

"Then I suppose the experiment continues."

Shammy met his gaze calmly, her own arms wrapped warmly around him.

"Yes."

And this time, neither of them stepped back.

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Above the City

Mephisto slowly clapped his hands, eyes bright with delight.

"Oh that was a beautiful move."

Konrad watched the two figures standing beside the river quietly.

"Yes."

Mephisto smiled wider.

"She let him make the first real escalation."

Konrad nodded.

"Yes."

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

"And now they're both committed."

Konrad remained calm.

“Yes.”

Mephisto’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

“Well then.”

He looked down toward the river again.

“Let’s see how the quiet one finishes her experiment.”

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