

## Chapter 10

Mai walked half a block before Daniel caught up again.

Not running. Just quickening his pace enough to fall in beside her, coat flapping once in the morning breeze that still carried the damp chill from last night's rain.

"You realize," he said after a moment, voice low and carrying that easy half-laugh, "most people would have clarified whether they actually wanted company."

Mai continued walking, boots steady on the sidewalk still pocked with shallow puddles that reflected gray sky and passing traffic lights. Silver hair caught the weak sun in faint runic glints whenever she passed under a streetlamp left on from the night shift. Jacket zipped halfway, collar turned up, but not tight—deliberate space left at the throat like she refused to armor herself completely.

"That would reduce the data."

Daniel laughed quietly—warm, genuine, the sound cutting through the low rumble of morning commuters around them.

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what."

"Talking like every conversation is an experiment."

Mai glanced briefly at him—silver-blue eyes sharp, but not cold. A tiny, knowing tilt at the corner of her mouth that said she'd caught the teasing edge in his voice and decided to play with it.

"Most interactions are."

Daniel tilted his head, studying her face in the shifting light—how the silver strands framed the precise line of her jaw, how her posture stayed balanced even when the crowd jostled closer.

"You're serious."

"Yes."

They crossed the street as the pedestrian signal blinked green. Morning commuters flowed around them like a slow river—coffee cups steaming, phones glowing, shoulders hunched against the lingering damp. A delivery scooter whined past, exhaust mixing with the sweet burn of a nearby bakery cart.

Daniel studied her again, closer now—close enough their arms brushed once when the crowd tightened.

"You really only slept two hours."

"Yes."

"And you're still out here doing... whatever this is."

Mai looked ahead toward the next corner, but her tone softened just enough to carry that emotionally intelligent tease she reserved for people who didn't flinch.

“Cities are large.”

Daniel groaned softly—half amused, half fond.

“There it is again.”

Mai allowed a small smile—real, sharp, the kind that reached her eyes for half a second.

They walked another block in silence, but the space between them had narrowed. Daniel’s hand brushed the back of hers once—accidental at first, then deliberate. Mai didn’t pull away. Instead she let her fingers linger against his for two full strides, a quiet, wordless acknowledgment that sent a small, warm current up his arm.

Finally Daniel asked:

“So what exactly changed this morning?”

Mai stopped at the corner.

Traffic moved steadily past them, engines rumbling, horns giving impatient bleats. The low sun painted long shadows across the asphalt, turning every puddle into a bright mirror.

Daniel waited, watching her profile—the way her silver hair shifted in the breeze, the way her eyes scanned the intersection with that perfect mix of calm and calculation.

Mai looked across the street, thinking, then said quietly, voice carrying that emotionally intelligent weight:

“Perspective.”

Daniel blinked.

“...okay that one’s new.”

Mai didn’t elaborate.

Instead she started walking again.

Daniel followed, but this time he stepped deliberately closer—shoulder brushing hers, hand finding the small of her back for a brief, guiding touch as they crossed into the next block. Mai leaned into it for half a stride, letting the contact settle warm through fabric before she straightened again.

“You’re really not going to explain that, are you.”

“No.”

“Of course not.”

They passed a small park where early joggers made steady loops along the gravel path. Trees still dripped leftover rain, leaves glistening. The air smelled cleaner here—earth, wet bark, distant coffee.

Mai slowed slightly.

Daniel noticed. He matched her pace exactly, then reached out—fingers brushing her wrist, then

sliding down to loosely thread through hers for a moment. Not holding tight. Just present. Mai squeezed once, sharp and teasing, before letting go, but the touch left a faint warmth that lingered.

“You’re deciding something.”

“Yes.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Probably not.”

“That is not a comforting phrase.”

Mai looked at him again—silver-blue eyes meeting his with that emotionally intelligent glint, sharp but never cruel.

“You asked what happens next.”

Daniel nodded cautiously.

“Yes.”

Mai gestured toward the park path.

“We walk.”

Daniel stared.

“...that’s it?”

“Yes.”

Daniel thought about that.

Then shrugged.

“Well.”

He gestured toward the path.

“Alright then.”

They stepped onto the gravel trail.

The park was quieter than the streets outside it. Sounds of traffic faded into the background, replaced by wind moving through the trees and the steady rhythm of their footsteps on loose stone. Sunlight filtered through branches in soft, dappled patches that danced across Mai’s silver hair and Daniel’s shoulders.

For a while they walked without speaking.

Daniel’s hand found the small of her back again—gentle pressure this time, thumb tracing one slow circle through her jacket. Mai leaned into the touch for longer, letting her shoulder rest against his chest for two full breaths before pulling back with that teasing half-smile.

Finally Daniel said:

“You know something?”

Mai waited.

“I expected Ace to be the complicated one.”

Mai’s eyes flicked sideways—sharp, knowing.

“And?”

Daniel smiled.

“I’m starting to think she’s the easy one.”

Mai didn’t disagree. Instead she let her hand brush his again—fingers trailing deliberately along his palm before falling away.

They walked another stretch of the path.

Then Daniel asked carefully:

“So if I ask a direct question... will I get a direct answer?”

Mai considered that.

“Possibly.”

Daniel laughed softly.

“You’re consistent at least.”

He took a breath.

“Alright.”

He looked at her.

“Did Ace tell you about last night?”

Mai stopped walking.

Daniel stopped too.

For a moment neither spoke.

Then Mai said calmly:

“Yes.”

Daniel blinked.

“...oh.”

That was not the answer he expected.

Mai continued walking.

Daniel hurried after her.

“Wait.”

He caught up again—stepping close enough their arms pressed together this time, his hand finding her waist for a brief, grounding squeeze.

“That was surprisingly straightforward.”

“Yes.”

“So... what did she say?”

Mai glanced ahead at the winding park path—trees arching overhead, light dappling the gravel.

“Very little.”

Daniel groaned again.

“Of course.”

Mai allowed the faintest smile—teasing, emotionally sharp, the kind that promised more without giving it away.

—

High above the park, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto watched with growing amusement.

“Oh this is delightful.”

Konrad remained quiet.

Below them the two figures moved slowly along the path beneath the trees.

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

“You predicted she would not deny it.”

“Yes.”

“She didn’t.”

“No.”

Mephisto turned slightly toward him.

“So I assume you’re about to claim that counts as concealment.”

Konrad shook his head.

“No.”

Mephisto raised an eyebrow.

“Oh?”

Konrad watched Mai carefully as she continued walking.

“You are still watching the wrong signal.”

Mephisto sighed dramatically.

“Then enlighten me.”

Konrad answered calmly.

“She is deciding whether to continue the experiment.”

Mephisto smiled.

“And?”

Konrad looked back toward the path.

“She already has.”—

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Last update: **15/03/2026 09:46**

