

Chapter 19

The sidewalk widened into a quiet plaza lined with old plane trees whose leaves still dripped occasional silver drops from the morning rain. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in shifting golden patches that danced across the paving stones and turned every bench into a warm invitation. The air smelled of damp earth, fresh-cut grass from a nearby park border, and the faint sweet smoke of someone's cigarette drifting from a café terrace across the square. People moved slowly here—couples strolling, an old man feeding pigeons, a woman pushing a stroller with one hand while talking on her phone—giving the place that rare midday calm the city rarely allowed.

Daniel walked with the notebook tucked openly under his arm like a trophy he had no intention of surrendering. His coat was open now, one hand still laced loosely with Mai's, thumb stroking slow, steady circles against the back of her hand as they moved. The contact felt natural, warm, and unhurried.

Mai kept pace beside him, silver hair catching the dappled light in soft runic glints that made the strands shimmer whenever a breeze moved through the trees. Jacket open, collar loose, she walked with her usual balanced grace, but the sharp analyser edge had melted further into something softer, more emotionally present. Her silver-blue eyes flicked between Daniel and the notebook, not with cold calculation but with genuine curiosity and quiet affection, the teasing warmth clear in the small tilt of her head and the way her fingers gently squeezed his every few steps.

Daniel glanced sideways at her, voice low and fond.

"Observation number six."

Mai raised one eyebrow, silver hair sliding over her shoulder as she turned toward him, letting her free hand rest lightly on his forearm while they walked.

"Already."

Daniel nodded, still holding her hand, pulling her just a fraction closer so their shoulders brushed warmly with every step.

"You're smiling more than usual."

Mai's mouth curved—sharp, teasing, but the warmth in her eyes was real and unguarded.

"Data bias."

Daniel laughed softly, the sound warm between them, and lifted their joined hands to press a gentle kiss to her knuckles—brief, tender, lingering just long enough for Mai to feel it.

Mai didn't pull away. Instead she leaned into him for a full stride, letting her temple rest lightly against his shoulder, silver hair brushing his cheek before she straightened again with that same quiet, affectionate glint in her gaze.

Daniel stopped under a particularly large plane tree whose leaves created a private canopy of shifting gold light. He turned to face her fully, still holding her hand, the notebook now in his other hand.

"New rule," he said, voice playful but close.

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes soft and engaged as she looked up at him, her free hand rising to rest

lightly on his chest, fingers tracing a slow, absent pattern along his coat.

Daniel flipped the notebook open with one hand and wrote something quickly, then held it so she could see the page.

Mai leaned in closer, her body pressing lightly against his, silver hair falling forward like a curtain as she read.

Daniel's free arm slid around her waist—warm, steady hold, palm resting at her lower back without pulling.

Mai's fingers curled slightly into his coat, thumb stroking along his collarbone through fabric while she read.

Then she looked up at him, silver-blue eyes sparkling with teasing warmth and clear emotional intelligence.

"That is not an observation. That is a suggestion."

Daniel grinned, keeping her close, thumb still stroking slow circles at her lower back.

"Exactly."

Mai studied his face for a long moment—reading the amusement, the affection, the challenge—then allowed a small, real smile to break across her face, the kind that reached her eyes and softened every line.

Daniel's breath caught visibly.

"Observation number seven," he murmured, voice lower now, forehead nearly brushing hers.

Mai waited, her hand still resting on his chest, body warm and relaxed against him.

Daniel wrote again, the pen moving slowly while he kept her held close.

Mai's fingers slid up to the side of his neck, brushing lightly along his jaw in a gentle, teasing touch.

Daniel closed the notebook and slipped it back into his jacket pocket, both arms now loosely around her waist, holding her in the quiet golden light under the tree.

"You're not stopping me," he said quietly, voice fond and close.

Mai's silver hair brushed his cheek as she tilted her head, silver-blue eyes warm and open.

"No."

Daniel's hands splayed gently at her lower back, thumbs stroking slow, comforting circles.

"Why not?"

Mai leaned her forehead against his for a moment—warm contact, breaths mingling—then pulled back just enough to meet his eyes.

"Because the experiment is working."

Daniel exhaled a soft laugh, pulling her closer until their bodies aligned comfortably, one hand rising to tuck a loose strand of silver hair behind her ear.

“That is the most terrifying thing you’ve said today.”

Mai smiled again—real, warm, emotionally present—her fingers tracing gentle patterns on the back of his neck.

“Accurate.”

They stayed like that under the tree for several long breaths—bodies close, arms around each other, sunlight dappling across Mai’s silver hair and Daniel’s shoulders, the quiet plaza moving gently around them.

Finally Mai stepped back just enough to start walking again, but she kept one arm looped loosely through his, fingers still laced with his, shoulder pressed warmly against his side.

Daniel fell in beside her immediately, the notebook safe in his pocket, his free hand resting lightly at her waist as they continued down the sunlit street.

Mai glanced sideways at him, silver-blue eyes sparkling with teasing affection.

“Observation number eight?”

Daniel grinned, squeezing her hand gently.

“You’re letting me win this round.”

Mai tilted her head, silver hair catching light, her voice soft and warm.

“Possibly.”

Daniel laughed quietly, pulling her closer as they walked.

“I’ll take it.”

The plaza opened ahead into another quiet street lined with more trees and small shops, sunlight following them like a gentle spotlight.

Mai and Daniel walked on—bodies close, hands linked, the notebook now firmly in Daniel’s possession, the experiment quietly, warmly, deliciously out of Mai’s hands.

And for the first time in a long time, Mai didn’t seem to mind at all.

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High above the plaza, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto watched with open delight.

“Oh this is beautiful.”

Konrad remained quiet.

Below them Mai and Daniel moved through the sunlight, arms linked, bodies walking comfortably

close, silver hair glowing as Mai leaned slightly into Daniel's side.

Mephisto gestured downward.

"She handed him the notebook. She handed him the rules. And she is still smiling."

"Yes."

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back, eyes gleaming.

"And she is not taking it back."

"No."

Mephisto smiled wider, almost reverent.

"Then we are no longer watching an experiment."

He looked down at the street again, voice soft with anticipation.

"We are watching something much more interesting." —

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