

## Chapter 26

The next morning arrived quietly.

Rain still lingered over the city — soft, steady, the kind that turned every streetlight into a blurred golden halo outside the safehouse windows and made the pavement below shine like dark glass. The drops fell in gentle, rhythmic taps against the tall glass, creating long vertical streaks that caught the pale morning light and turned the view into a watercolor painting of violet, amber, and silver.

Inside the apartment the atmosphere was calm and comfortably lived-in.

Soft music drifted lazily from the kitchen speaker — low jazz piano with brushed drums, the kind that wrapped around the room like a warm blanket. Someone had made tea; the faint herbal warmth still lingered in the air, mixing with the rich scent of fresh coffee and the clean ozone trace Shammy always carried when she had been sitting still for a while.

Shammy was the first awake.

This was normal.

She stood at the kitchen counter, tall frame moving with effortless grace, silver-white hair catching the soft under-cabinet light in faint ionized gradients. Electric blue eyes calm and thoughtful as she stared at her laptop screen, a half-finished document open but clearly not holding her full attention. One long hand rested on the edge of the counter, fingers tapping slowly, while the other held a steaming mug of tea.

She wasn't really working.

Just... thinking.

Footsteps padded softly down the hallway.

Ace appeared first.

Hair still a little chaotic from sleep, wearing an oversized black shirt that hung loose on her compact frame and carried the unmistakable posture of someone who had slept very well — shoulders relaxed, movements unhurried, violet eyes half-lidded but sharp with morning curiosity.

She stopped in the doorway.

Looked at Shammy.

Then slowly smiled — a small, knowing curve that promised trouble.

“Well.”

Shammy didn't look up from the screen immediately, but her voice was warm and calm.

“Good morning, Ace.”

Ace wandered into the kitchen and leaned against the counter beside her, hip cocked, one hand reaching for the coffee pot without looking. She poured herself a mug, took a long sip, then turned fully toward Shammy, violet eyes studying her with open affection and playful curiosity.

“You’re suspiciously productive.”

Shammy finally glanced at her, electric blue eyes meeting violet with quiet amusement.

“Yes.”

Ace tilted her head, silver-black strands falling across her forehead as she leaned closer, her free hand resting lightly on Shammy’s arm — a casual, warm touch that lingered.

“That’s the energy of someone thinking about something.”

Shammy typed another single line, but her fingers were slower now.

Ace leaned forward slightly, shoulder brushing Shammy’s, voice low and teasing.

“Something interesting.”

Shammy finally closed the laptop with deliberate care, turning fully toward Ace. Her tall frame shifted gracefully as she folded her hands on the counter, the pressure in the room settling warm and balanced.

“Define interesting.”

Ace grinned, wide and delighted, her hand sliding up to rest on Shammy’s shoulder with easy affection.

“Field research.”

Shammy’s fingers paused completely on the keyboard.

Ace’s grin widened, bright and mischievous.

“Oh?”

Shammy closed the laptop slowly, then reached for her own coffee mug, voice calm but carrying a faint, warm undertone.

“You are projecting.”

Ace laughed — bright, genuine — leaning fully against Shammy now, arm draped comfortably around her tall frame.

“Am I?”

Shammy raised an eyebrow, but her free hand came up to rest lightly on Ace’s waist, holding her close in quiet affection.

“Yes.”

Footsteps sounded again from the hallway — softer, more measured.

Mai appeared, tying her silver hair back into a loose knot as she stepped into the kitchen, the strands still carrying faint runic glints from the morning light. She wore a simple soft shirt and loose pants, silver-blue eyes sharp but softened with sleep and quiet warmth.

She stopped when she noticed the look on Ace's face.

"...what did I miss."

Ace pointed immediately toward Shammy, grin turning wicked.

"We're discussing research methodology."

Mai glanced at Shammy, then at Ace, her silver-blue eyes warming with teasing affection as she crossed her arms loosely, leaning against the doorway.

"That sounds dangerous."

Ace nodded enthusiastically, still holding Shammy close with one arm.

"Exactly."

Shammy picked up her coffee, but her other hand stayed lightly on Ace's waist, the touch warm and steady.

Ace continued, leaning across the counter toward Mai with playful energy.

"I was just saying that after yesterday's... successful field study..."

Mai sighed softly, but the sound was warm and amused as she stepped fully into the kitchen, silver hair swaying as she reached for her own mug.

"...Ace."

Ace grinned wider, completely unrepentant.

"...someone else might feel inspired."

Mai leaned against the counter beside them, arms folded, studying Shammy carefully — silver-blue eyes soft, emotionally intelligent, and clearly enjoying the moment as she brushed her fingers lightly along Shammy's arm in a teasing touch.

"Have you chosen a location?"

Ace froze mid-sip.

"...wait, you're just going along with this?"

Mai shrugged slightly, silver hair shifting as she took a slow sip of coffee, her free hand resting lightly on Ace's shoulder with warm affection.

"Observation."

Ace pointed dramatically between Mai and Shammy, eyes wide with delighted disbelief.

"This is unbelievable."

Shammy reached for her coat hanging over the chair, slipping it on with graceful efficiency, but there was clear fondness in the small smile tugging at her lips.

Ace's eyes widened further.

"You're actually leaving."

"Yes."

Ace laughed, bright and full of affection, leaning heavily against the counter.

"This is amazing."

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver hair catching the kitchen light as she looked at Shammy with warm curiosity.

"Environment?"

Shammy slipped the coat on fully, then adjusted her collar with calm precision.

"Bookstore."

Ace blinked.

"...a bookstore."

Shammy nodded once, electric blue eyes warm as she glanced toward both of them.

"Yes."

Ace stared at her for a long moment, then slowly leaned back against the counter, grin spreading.

"Oh this is going to be catastrophic."

Shammy opened the door, rain tapping softly outside, then paused in the doorway.

Considered that.

"...possibly."

Then she stepped out into the rain, tall frame cutting a clean silhouette against the gray morning.

The door closed behind her with a soft click.

Silence settled for a moment.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai looked back, silver-blue eyes sparkling with quiet amusement.

Ace slowly grinned, wide and delighted.

"Oh this is going to be good."

Mai nodded once, taking another sip of coffee, her expression warm and affectionate.

"Yes."

Ace leaned back against the couch, boots back on the coffee table, still smiling.

“Bookstore.”

Mai poured herself more coffee, silver hair falling softly as she turned toward Ace with teasing warmth.

Ace shook her head, laughing quietly.

“The quiet ones are always the most dangerous.”

—

High above the rain-washed city, Mephisto watched with growing amusement.

“Oh now that is interesting.”

Konrad stood beside him, calm as always.

“She chose a bookstore.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto chuckled softly.

“The quiet observer running field experiments.”

Konrad nodded slightly.

“Yes.”

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

“Well then.”

His eyes glimmered with curiosity.

“Let’s see what kind of variable she finds.” —

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