

Chapter 14

The diner smelled like coffee, butter, and the kind of breakfast that didn't pretend to be healthy.

It was the sort of place that had probably been open for thirty years and had never once considered redecorating—faded red vinyl booths with cracked seams, chrome edges dulled by decades of elbows, a long counter lined with mismatched stools and a row of glass pie cases that held yesterday's apple crumble. Morning sunlight spilled through the large front windows in thick golden bars, catching motes of dust and turning the Formica tabletops into warm amber pools. The air hung heavy with the sizzle of bacon from the open kitchen pass-through, the low clatter of plates, and the faint sweet grease of hash browns frying. A single ceiling fan turned lazy circles overhead, stirring the scents without really mixing them.

Mai paused just inside the door, silver hair catching the sunlight in faint runic glints. Jacket open, collar loose, posture relaxed but eyes already mapping every corner—exit routes, sightlines, the quiet rhythm of the few other customers scattered at the counter and in the back booths. She didn't look tense. She looked present, emotionally intelligent in the way her gaze softened fractionally when it landed on Daniel, the sharp analyser edge tempered by something warmer, more curious.

Daniel noticed.

"You're analyzing the room again."

"Yes."

"Danger level?"

"Low."

"That's comforting."

They slid into a booth near the window where the morning sunlight spilled across the table in warm stripes, highlighting the faint scratches on the Formica and the small white flower someone had left beside the sugar shaker. Mai settled with one leg crossed over the other, silver hair falling soft across one shoulder as she leaned back against the vinyl. Daniel took the seat opposite, coat still on, but he leaned forward slightly, elbows on the table, closing the comfortable distance between them.

A waitress appeared almost immediately—mid-fifties, apron stained with coffee rings, hair pinned back with a pencil.

"Coffee?"

Mai answered without hesitation, voice calm and low.

"Yes."

Daniel raised a hand.

"Same."

The waitress poured two thick white mugs and disappeared again with the casual efficiency of someone who had seen every possible version of this morning routine before.

Daniel leaned back slightly, one arm draped along the back of the booth.

“You know what’s funny?”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes on him—sharp but layered now, the usual analyser softened by quiet affection and that occasional teasing glint.

“You’re more relaxed here than you were outside.”

Mai looked around the diner—sunlight catching on the chrome napkin holders, the faint steam rising from their mugs, the way the light warmed the worn red vinyl.

“Controlled environment.”

Daniel laughed quietly—warm, genuine, the sound fitting easily into the diner’s low hum.

“Of course.”

Mai picked up her coffee. Steam curled upward in lazy spirals, brushing her chin. For a moment she simply held the cup between her hands, letting the warmth seep into her palms. Daniel watched her carefully, eyes tracing the soft fall of her silver hair, the way her thumb stroked the side of the mug in a small, absent rhythm.

“You’re still running the experiment.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m still the variable.”

“Yes.”

Daniel nodded thoughtfully, then reached across the table—slow, deliberate—and brushed a stray silver strand from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear with careful fingers. The touch lingered, thumb grazing her jawline gently before he rested his hand on the table between them, palm up.

“I’m starting to think you enjoy this.”

Mai didn’t answer immediately. Instead she set the mug down, then placed her hand in his—palm to palm, fingers threading loosely. The contact was warm and steady; she let her thumb trace slow circles along the back of his hand, emotionally intelligent warmth showing in the way her eyes met his without hesitation.

“It is... interesting.”

Daniel grinned—fond, easy.

“High praise.”

The waitress returned with menus, though neither of them looked at them.

“Kitchen special is eggs, toast, bacon, hash,” she said automatically.

Daniel glanced at Mai, his free hand still laced with hers.

“Data point?”

Mai nodded once, silver hair shifting with the motion.

“Acceptable.”

“Two specials,” Daniel told the waitress, thumb still stroking Mai’s wrist in gentle rhythm.

She scribbled the order and vanished again.

Daniel rested his elbows lightly on the table, leaning closer so their joined hands rested comfortably between them.

“So.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes soft but present, the analyser part of her layered now with genuine curiosity and that teasing emotional depth.

“I have a question about your experiment.”

“Yes.”

“What exactly happens if the variable stops cooperating?”

Mai tilted her head, silver strands catching sunlight.

“You have not.”

“Yet.”

Mai considered that, her fingers tightening once around his in a small, reassuring squeeze.

“That would change the results.”

Daniel smiled, lifting their joined hands slightly to press a brief, warm kiss to her knuckles—gentle, unhurried.

“And?”

Mai studied him again—eyes sharp yet warm, emotionally open in the quiet diner light.

“Then the experiment ends.”

Daniel nodded slowly.

“Fair.”

He lifted the white flower slightly where it rested beside his coffee cup, twirling the stem between fingers.

“You realize this thing is becoming symbolic.”

Mai glanced at it, her free hand reaching over to brush a petal lightly.

“Of what.”

Daniel shrugged, still holding her other hand.

“The morning.”

Mai allowed a small smile—sharp, affectionate, the kind that reached her eyes.

“That is inefficient symbolism.”

Daniel laughed—low and warm, the sound filling their corner of the booth.

“You’re allergic to sentiment, aren’t you.”

“No.”

“Just cautious.”

Mai didn’t deny that. Instead she leaned forward slightly, forehead nearly brushing his across the table, silver hair falling like a soft curtain between them.

The waitress returned with two plates that looked exactly like the breakfast she had described—eggs glistening, toast golden, bacon crisp, hash browns steaming.

Daniel studied the food approvingly, his thumb still tracing slow patterns on Mai’s wrist.

“Okay now this part I understand.”

Mai picked up her fork, but kept her other hand in his a moment longer—squeezing once before releasing with a teasing glint in her silver-blue eyes.

“Good.”

For a moment they ate in quiet comfort—forks clinking softly, sunlight shifting across the table, the low jazz from the speaker mixing with the diner’s gentle clatter. Daniel’s knee brushed hers under the table once; Mai didn’t move away, letting the contact stay warm and steady.

Then Daniel said:

“You know what’s interesting about you.”

Mai waited, taking another bite.

“You’re less predictable than Ace.”

Mai paused slightly, fork hovering.

“That is unlikely.”

“No.”

Daniel shook his head, eyes warm on her.

“Ace is chaos.”

“Yes.”

“You,” he continued, reaching over to brush another strand of silver hair from her face, “are controlled chaos.”

Mai considered that description, her fingers finding his again across the table—light, teasing touch along his knuckles.

“That is inaccurate.”

Daniel grinned.

“It really isn’t.”

—

High above the diner, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto was watching with the sort of delight usually reserved for particularly entertaining theatre.

“Oh this is magnificent.”

Konrad remained silent. Hands in pockets. Gaze fixed on the diner window below where Mai and Daniel sat in the booth, sunlight slowly shifting across the table as the morning advanced.

Mephisto gestured downward.

“She is eating breakfast with him.”

“Yes.”

“She slept two hours.”

“Yes.”

“She has abandoned every routine she normally follows.”

Konrad shook his head slightly.

“No.”

Mephisto turned toward him.

“You’re going to explain how this is still part of her plan.”

Konrad’s gaze stayed on the diner window.

“It is.”

Mephisto sighed dramatically.

“Then tell me.”

Konrad spoke calmly.

“She is measuring the outcome.”

Mephisto blinked.

“...of breakfast?”

Konrad nodded.

“Yes.”

Mephisto stared at him for a moment.

Then he laughed—soft, delighted.

“Oh this is going to get worse, isn’t it.”

Konrad didn’t answer.

But below them, Mai had just looked up from her plate with an expression that suggested the experiment was far from over.

The sunlight kept shifting.

The coffee stayed warm.

And the morning stretched on—quiet, warm, unhurried.—

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