

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.

Mai paused just inside the door.

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.

A waitress appeared almost immediately.

"Coffee?"

Mai answered without hesitation.

"Yes."

Daniel raised a hand.

"Same."

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

Daniel leaned back slightly.

"You know what's funny?"

Mai waited.

"You're more relaxed here than you were outside."

Mai looked around the diner.

"Controlled environment."

Daniel laughed quietly.

"Of course."

Mai picked up the coffee.

Steam curled upward.

For a moment she simply held the cup between her hands.

Daniel watched her carefully.

“You’re still running the experiment.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m still the variable.”

“Yes.”

Daniel nodded thoughtfully.

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

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

Instead she took a sip of coffee.

Then she said calmly:

“It is... interesting.”

Daniel grinned.

“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.

“Data point?”

Mai nodded once.

“Acceptable.”

“Two specials,” Daniel told the waitress.

She scribbled the order and vanished again.

Daniel rested his elbows lightly on the table.

“So.”

Mai waited.

“I have a question about your experiment.”

“Yes.”

"What exactly happens if the variable stops cooperating?"

Mai tilted her head.

"You have not."

"Yet."

Mai considered that.

"That would change the results."

Daniel smiled.

"And?"

Mai studied him again.

"Then the experiment ends."

Daniel nodded slowly.

"Fair."

He lifted the white flower slightly where it rested beside his coffee cup.

"You realize this thing is becoming symbolic."

Mai glanced at it.

"Of what."

Daniel shrugged.

"The morning."

Mai allowed a small smile.

"That is inefficient symbolism."

Daniel laughed.

"You're allergic to sentiment, aren't you."

"No."

"Just cautious."

Mai didn't deny that.

The waitress returned with two plates that looked exactly like the breakfast she had described.

Daniel studied the food approvingly.

"Okay now this part I understand."

Mai picked up her fork.

“Good.”

For a moment they ate in quiet comfort.

Then Daniel said:

“You know what’s interesting about you.”

Mai waited.

“You’re less predictable than Ace.”

Mai paused slightly.

“That is unlikely.”

“No.”

Daniel shook his head.

“Ace is chaos.”

“Yes.”

“You,” he continued, “are controlled chaos.”

Mai considered that description.

Then she resumed eating.

“That is inaccurate.”

Daniel grinned.

“It really isn’t.”

—

High above the diner, Mephisto was watching with the sort of delight usually reserved for particularly entertaining theatre.

“Oh this is magnificent.”

Konrad remained silent.

Below them 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.

“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. —

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