

## Chapter 15

The diner wrapped around them like an old, comfortable coat—faded red vinyl booths with seams that had seen too many elbows, chrome edges worn smooth and reflective in the morning sun, the long counter dotted with mismatched salt shakers and napkin dispensers that clinked softly whenever someone reached for one. Sunlight poured through the large front windows in thick golden bars, catching floating dust motes and turning every coffee spill on the Formica into a small, glittering map. The air was thick with the sizzle of bacon from the open kitchen pass-through, the low clatter of plates being stacked, the sweet greasy aroma of hash browns frying in butter, and the steady drip of fresh coffee into the pot behind the counter. A single ceiling fan turned lazy, uneven circles overhead, stirring the scents without quite blending them.

Mai sat across from Daniel in the corner booth near the window, silver hair catching the sunlight in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands look almost alive. Jacket draped neatly over the back of the seat, sleeves of her shirt rolled to elbows, collar open just enough to show the thin silver chain at her throat. She ate with deliberate calm—fork moving in slow, precise motions—but there was a new softness in the way her silver-blue eyes kept flicking up to Daniel, reading him openly, emotionally intelligent warmth threading through the usual sharp focus. She wasn't just analysing; she was present, letting curiosity and that occasional teasing spark show in the small tilt of her head and the faint curve at her mouth.

Daniel leaned back slightly, plate nearly clean, looking satisfied in that uncomplicated way that made the whole booth feel warmer. His coat was still on, collar turned up, but he had one arm draped casually along the back of the seat, fingers occasionally brushing the edge of the table as he watched her.

"You're analyzing breakfast," he said, voice low and fond, the tease gentle.

Mai didn't look up immediately, but the corner of her mouth lifted—just enough to show she'd caught the warmth in his tone.

"Yes."

"That might be the most Mai sentence you've said so far."

Mai set the fork down briefly, silver hair sliding over one shoulder as she tilted her head. She reached across the table—slow, deliberate—and brushed her fingers lightly over the back of his hand, a brief, warm touch that lingered before she pulled back.

"What would you prefer?"

Daniel shrugged, but his eyes stayed on her face, watching how the sunlight painted soft highlights across her cheekbones.

"I don't know."

He gestured vaguely around the diner—the steaming coffee pot, the waitress moving between tables with easy familiarity, the golden light pooling on the table between them.

"Something less like a field report."

Mai considered that, silver-blue eyes softening further as she studied him. Then she took another slow sip of coffee, letting the warmth fill the pause before she spoke again, voice carrying that sharp

affection mixed with teasing emotional intelligence.

“Breakfast was satisfactory.”

Daniel laughed—low, genuine, the sound settling comfortably into the diner’s gentle hum.

“There we go.”

The waitress walked past and refilled their cups without interrupting, the hot stream of coffee sending fresh steam curling upward between them. Mai’s fingers brushed Daniel’s again as she reached for her mug—accidental at first, then deliberate, her thumb tracing one slow circle along his knuckle before she lifted the cup.

Outside the window the city had fully committed to daytime now—people rushing between errands with coats flapping, taxis gliding past the corner in smooth yellow streaks, sunlight reflecting off the still-wet pavement in bright, fractured mirrors.

Daniel glanced at the white flower still resting beside his cup, then reached across the table again—slow, open—and took Mai’s free hand, lacing their fingers loosely. Mai didn’t pull away; instead she leaned forward slightly, letting her thumb stroke the inside of his wrist in quiet rhythm while her silver hair fell forward like a soft curtain.

“You realize,” he said, voice warm and close, “this might be the strangest morning I’ve had in years.”

Mai raised an eyebrow, but her fingers tightened gently around his, the contact steady and warm.

“Why.”

“Well,” Daniel began counting on his fingers while still holding her hand, “I met someone last night who operates entirely on instinct.”

“Yes.”

“This morning I meet her extremely analytical roommate.”

“Yes.”

“And now that roommate is running a social experiment involving breakfast.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair shifting with the motion, her eyes meeting his with that emotionally intelligent depth—sharp curiosity layered with genuine fondness.

“That is an accurate summary.”

Daniel leaned forward slightly, their joined hands resting comfortably between them on the table. He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a brief, warm kiss to her knuckles—gentle, unhurried—before lowering it again.

“So what’s the current conclusion.”

Mai studied him for a moment, silver-blue eyes warm and present, the analyser softened by something softer, more open.

Then she answered honestly, thumb still stroking his wrist.

“Variable remains stable.”

Daniel blinked, but his smile widened, thumb circling back against her skin.

“...stable.”

“Yes.”

“That sounds promising.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver strands catching the sunlight as she leaned closer, forehead nearly brushing his across the small table.

“Possibly.”

Daniel looked out the window again, then back at her, still holding her hand.

“You know something?”

Mai waited, fingers laced with his, the contact warm and steady.

“If this really is an experiment...”

“Yes.”

“...I think you just hit the interesting phase.”

Mai didn't respond immediately. Instead she finished the last of her coffee, set the cup down with quiet care, and let her free hand reach across to brush another stray strand of silver hair from her face while still holding his gaze. Then she stood—smooth, graceful—picking up her jacket in one fluid motion.

Daniel blinked.

“Again with the standing.”

Mai slipped the jacket on, silver hair falling perfectly back into place as she looked at him, eyes glinting with that teasing emotional warmth.

“Movement changes conditions.”

Daniel laughed—low and warm, pushing up from the booth to stand beside her.

“You are unbelievable.”

Mai waited for him, then reached out—fingers brushing his arm lightly before sliding down to lace through his hand again as they walked toward the exit together, bodies close enough their shoulders touched with every step.

Outside the morning air had warmed slightly, sunlight now bright enough to cast sharp shadows across the street and turn the wet pavement into gleaming mirrors. Daniel stepped onto the sidewalk beside her, still holding her hand, thumb stroking slow circles against her palm.

“So,” he said casually, voice close and fond, “where does the experiment go now?”

Mai looked down the street, silver hair lifting in the light breeze, then turned back to him—silver-blue eyes meeting his with playful curiosity finally surfacing clearly.

“We escalate.”

Daniel grinned, squeezing her hand gently.

“That sounds dangerous.”

Mai shrugged lightly, but leaned into him for half a stride—shoulder resting against his chest for a warm moment before straightening again.

“Possibly.”

Daniel slipped the white flower behind his ear with exaggerated seriousness, still holding her hand.

“In that case I’m ready.”

Mai looked at him.

Then she laughed again—soft, real, the sound carrying down the sunlit street.

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High above the diner, where rooftops blurred into low clouds and the wind carried the faint metallic taste of the river, Mephisto watched the two figures step back into the sunlight.

“Well,” he said softly.

“There it is.”

Konrad remained calm.

Below them Mai and Daniel turned down another street together, hands still loosely joined.

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

“She is escalating the experiment.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto smiled.

“I assume this is the part where you claim everything is still perfectly predictable.”

Konrad shook his head slightly.

“No.”

Mephisto looked amused.

“No?”

Konrad watched the pair disappear into the flow of the city.

“This,” he said calmly,

“is the part where it becomes interesting.”—

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