

## Chapter 23

The café upstairs was almost empty.

Late morning had not yet turned into the lunch rush, so the handful of tables near the tall windows were occupied by only a few quiet patrons — one woman slowly turning pages in a worn paperback, another man with headphones typing steadily on a laptop, their movements soft and unhurried. Soft jazz drifted through the room — brushed drums and a gentle upright bass walking slow, lazy circles, the kind of music that invited people to linger rather than rush. Sunlight poured through the windows in thick golden bars, catching on the polished wooden tabletops and the faint haze of steam rising from coffee cups, turning the whole space into a warm, intimate cocoon of light and quiet conversation.

Mai paused near the entrance, silver hair catching the golden light in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands glow whenever she moved. Jacket open, collar loose enough to show the delicate line of her collarbone, she scanned the room with calm awareness — but the usual sharp focus had softened noticeably. Her silver-blue eyes held a quiet emotional intelligence now, warm curiosity and genuine affection threading through her gaze as they settled on Daniel, reading him openly rather than dissecting him from a distance.

Daniel noticed immediately.

“You’re still observing.”

Mai turned toward him, silver hair sliding over one shoulder as she met his eyes with a small, teasing smile — emotionally present, the warmth clear in the soft curve of her mouth.

“Yes.”

Daniel leaned slightly closer, his shoulder brushing hers in a warm, deliberate touch as he spoke.

“Even now?”

Mai glanced at him, silver-blue eyes soft and affectionate, her hand rising to rest lightly on his forearm — fingers tracing a gentle, teasing path along his sleeve.

“Especially now.”

Daniel chuckled softly, the sound low and fond as he slipped his arm around her waist — loose, warm hold that made her lean naturally into him.

“Fair.”

They moved toward a small corner table near the back of the café, partially shielded by a tall bookshelf filled with old paperbacks whose spines were worn soft by years of fingers. The spot was private enough for quiet conversation, but not hidden — sunlight still reached it in soft patches, warming the wooden surface and catching on Mai’s silver hair as she sat down.

Daniel sat first, then immediately leaned forward slightly, his hand finding Mai’s across the table — fingers threading loosely with hers, thumb stroking one slow, gentle circle along her skin.

Mai remained standing for a moment longer, looking down at him with warm curiosity, then sat across from him. The small table between them suddenly felt much smaller, the space intimate and charged

with quiet tension.

Daniel leaned forward again, voice low and warm.

“So.”

Mai waited, her thumb stroking back against his in quiet response, silver-blue eyes soft and engaged.

“Is this where the experiment becomes... practical?”

Mai answered calmly, but her voice carried a quiet, teasing affection as she leaned closer, her free hand resting lightly on his wrist.

“Yes.”

Daniel laughed under his breath, warm and genuine, his fingers tightening gently around hers.

“You’re incredibly direct.”

Mai folded her hands loosely on the table with his still laced in one, silver hair falling softly as she tilted her head — the analyser edge replaced by genuine emotional warmth and playful intelligence.

“Efficiency.”

Daniel studied her face for a moment, eyes tracing the soft fall of her silver hair and the subtle warmth in her expression.

“You’re not joking.”

“No.”

Daniel leaned back slightly, but kept their hands linked, thumb stroking slow circles on her skin.

“Well.”

He tapped the table lightly with their joined hands.

“I suppose I should ask the obvious question.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes warm on his.

“What exactly are we testing now?”

Mai held his gaze steadily, her other hand rising to brush lightly along his forearm in a gentle touch.

“Trust.”

Daniel blinked, clearly caught off guard, but his smile remained warm.

“Oh.”

Mai continued calmly, but her voice was softer now, emotionally open as she leaned across the table, shoulder brushing his.

“You accepted escalation.”

Daniel nodded slowly, squeezing her hand gently.

“Yes.”

Mai tilted her head, silver hair catching the light as she studied him with clear affection.

“You continued pushing the boundary.”

Daniel smiled faintly, his free hand reaching across to tuck a loose strand of silver hair behind her ear — gentle fingers lingering on her cheek for a moment.

“Also true.”

Mai’s voice remained steady, but filled with quiet warmth as she leaned even closer, forehead nearly brushing his.

“So now we test the outcome.”

Daniel leaned forward until their foreheads touched gently — warm contact, breaths mingling.

“And the outcome is?”

Mai met his eyes, silver-blue gaze soft and affectionate.

“Whether curiosity survives proximity.”

Daniel stared at her for a moment, then laughed softly, the sound warm against her skin.

“That might be the most elegant line anyone has used to ask me on a date.”

Mai did not react immediately, but her fingers curled gently into his coat, pulling him a fraction closer.

Daniel grinned.

“Alright.”

Mai waited, her hand resting warmly on his chest.

“I’m still curious.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair brushing his cheek.

“Good.”

Daniel leaned closer across the table, his arm sliding around her shoulders in a loose, warm embrace.

“So am I.”

For a moment the rest of the café faded into the background — the quiet jazz, the distant murmur of conversation, the soft clink of cups — leaving only the warm golden light, the steady warmth of their bodies close together, and the quiet intimacy between them.

Daniel lowered his voice slightly, forehead still resting gently against hers.

“Observation number eleven.”

Mai sighed softly, but the sound was warm and amused as she brushed her thumb along his jaw.

“You abandoned the numbering again.”

Daniel smiled, holding her close.

“Yes.”

“What did you observe.”

Daniel answered quietly, voice fond and intimate.

“You were never losing control.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver hair falling softly as she stayed comfortably in his arms.

“Incorrect.”

Daniel blinked.

“Oh?”

Mai leaned forward just enough that the space between them disappeared again, her hand sliding up to rest lightly on the side of his neck.

“I was sharing it.”

Daniel smiled slowly, arms tightening gently around her in a warm embrace.

“Well.”

He said softly, forehead resting against hers.

“That explains a lot.”

Mai studied him for another long moment, silver-blue eyes soft and affectionate, then she stood smoothly — but her hand remained on his shoulder, fingers brushing his neck in a gentle touch.

Daniel blinked.

“That’s abrupt.”

Mai gestured toward the hallway leading to the restrooms and a small lounge area further inside the café, her other hand slipping down to lace with his.

“Continue.”

Daniel laughed quietly as he stood, immediately stepping close beside her, his arm sliding around her waist again as they moved together.

“You really do treat everything like an experiment.”

Mai answered calmly, but her voice was warm and teasing as she leaned lightly into his side.

“Yes.”

Daniel followed her toward the quiet hallway, still smiling, his hand resting warmly at her lower back.

“Well.”

He said under his breath, pulling her gently closer.

“I suppose we’ll see what the results look like.”

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High above the café, Mephisto’s grin was bordering on delighted disbelief.

“Oh she did it.”

Konrad watched silently.

Below them Mai and Daniel disappeared into the quieter back section of the café.

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back again.

“She escalated first.”

Konrad nodded once.

“Yes.”

Mephisto glanced sideways.

“Your analyst is learning.”

Konrad’s voice remained calm.

“Yes.”

Mephisto looked back toward the café door.

“Well then.”

His voice carried quiet anticipation.

“Let us see how the experiment concludes.”

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