

Chapter 30

Bookstore Café — Controlled Variables

The café corner of the bookstore felt like a small, private world carved out of the larger quiet.

A handful of small wooden tables sat nestled between tall shelves, two worn leather armchairs positioned near the tall window where rain traced slow silver paths down the glass. The lighting here was softer — warm amber from low hanging lamps that pooled across the tabletops and made every coffee cup glow like it held something precious. The soft hiss of the espresso machine behind the counter blended with the distant rustle of pages and the gentle piano music drifting through the space, creating a cocoon of calm where voices stayed low and moments stretched naturally.

Shammy chose a table with a clear view of the room — not out of cold calculation, but with the same atmospheric awareness that always surrounded her. She moved with her usual impossible grace, tall frame settling into the chair with fluid ease, silver-white hair catching the warm light in faint ionized gradients that shifted like distant lightning whenever she tilted her head. Her electric blue eyes were calm, but beneath them there was quiet warmth and genuine curiosity, a subtle pressure regulation that made the small space between her and Jonas feel balanced, safe, and charged all at once.

Jonas noticed immediately.

He pulled the chair opposite her, sitting down close enough that their knees brushed lightly under the table — a deliberate, warm contact that stayed.

“You like sight lines.”

Shammy sat with perfect composure, but her posture was relaxed and open, long fingers resting lightly on the table as she met his gaze with soft, atmospheric warmth.

“Yes.”

Jonas leaned back slightly, but kept one arm extended so his hand rested near hers — close enough that their fingers could touch if either moved.

“That’s tactical.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly, silver-white hair falling in a soft wave as she studied him with clear emotional intelligence and quiet affection.

“Observation benefits from awareness.”

Jonas laughed under his breath — low, genuine, the sound warm between them as he leaned forward, closing the distance until their forearms brushed on the table.

“You’re not even pretending this isn’t a study.”

Shammy allowed the faintest trace of a smile to touch her lips, her hand shifting so her fingers brushed lightly against his — a gentle, intentional touch that lingered.

“No.”

A barista approached — young, smiling, apron dusted with coffee grounds.

Orders were placed quickly and calmly.

Two coffees.

Nothing complicated.

The barista left with a small nod.

Jonas leaned back slightly, but his knee stayed pressed warmly against hers under the table, the contact steady and comfortable.

“So.”

Shammy waited, electric blue eyes soft and engaged as she watched him, her hand still resting near his on the table.

“What exactly are you observing about me.”

Shammy answered calmly, but her voice carried quiet warmth and teasing affection as her fingers traced one slow circle along the back of his hand.

“Adaptability.”

Jonas blinked, clearly surprised, but his smile widened as he turned his hand to lace loosely with hers — palm to palm, warm and steady.

“That’s a big category.”

“Yes.”

Jonas nodded slowly, thumb stroking one gentle circle against her skin while he kept their hands linked.

“And what have you learned so far.”

Shammy folded her free hand loosely on the table, but kept their joined hands exactly where they were, her tall frame leaning slightly forward so their shoulders almost touched.

“You are not threatened by uncertainty.”

Jonas considered that, his thumb continuing its slow, warm strokes.

“...true.”

“You engage with it.”

Jonas smiled, leaning closer until their foreheads nearly brushed across the small table.

“I find it interesting.”

Shammy studied him carefully, electric blue eyes soft and genuinely curious as her fingers tightened gently around his.

“Yes.”

Jonas leaned forward slightly, their joined hands resting warmly between them.

“My turn.”

Shammy waited, her tall frame relaxed and open, the pressure around them balanced and intimate.

“You expected me to notice you.”

Shammy did not answer immediately. Instead she let her thumb stroke slowly back against his, silver-white hair falling forward as she held his gaze with warm, emotional depth.

Jonas watched her closely, the space between them feeling smaller and warmer.

Then Shammy said softly:

“Yes.”

Jonas laughed — warm, delighted — squeezing her hand gently as he kept it held close.

“Well that’s flattering.”

Shammy tilted her head, silver-white hair shifting as she studied him with quiet affection.

“Why.”

Jonas gestured lightly around them, but kept their hands linked, his thumb never stopping its gentle rhythm.

“Because that means I passed your first filter.”

Shammy nodded once, her free hand rising to rest lightly on his forearm, fingers tracing slow, warm patterns.

“You did.”

Jonas rested his elbows on the table, leaning in until their faces were close, the contact warm and charged.

“So what’s the next filter.”

Shammy answered calmly, but her voice carried soft, atmospheric warmth as she leaned into him, shoulder pressing lightly against his.

“Persistence.”

Jonas smiled, his hand tightening gently around hers.

“Oh that’s easy.”

Shammy waited, electric blue eyes warm on his.

Jonas gestured around them, still holding her hand close.

“I’m still here.”

Shammy allowed the faintest hint of a real smile to touch her lips — calm, warm, and teasing.

“Yes.”

Their coffees arrived — two steaming cups placed gently between them.

Jonas picked up his with his free hand, took a sip, then watched Shammy again over the rim, their joined hands still resting warmly on the table.

“You’re different from the usual people who run social experiments.”

Shammy raised an eyebrow, her thumb still stroking slow circles against his skin.

“You have experience with them.”

Jonas shrugged, but kept her hand securely in his, leaning closer.

“University life.”

Shammy nodded slowly, her tall frame relaxed and comfortable against the contact.

Jonas continued, voice low and fond.

“They normally try to guide the conversation.”

Shammy waited, fingers gently squeezing his.

“You let silence do the work.”

Shammy took a slow sip of her coffee, still holding his hand, electric blue eyes soft and engaged.

“Yes.”

Jonas grinned, pulling her hand a little closer across the table.

“That’s very effective.”

Shammy studied him carefully, her free hand rising to brush lightly along his arm.

“You are comfortable with silence.”

Jonas shrugged, but his smile stayed warm as he kept their hands linked.

“Most people aren’t.”

Shammy nodded, silver-white hair glowing softly in the light.

“Yes.”

Jonas leaned forward again, forehead nearly brushing hers, voice intimate.

“So what happens if I start running the experiment too.”

Shammy did not look surprised. Instead she leaned in until their foreheads touched gently — warm, trusting contact.

"That was inevitable."

Jonas laughed quietly, the sound warm against her skin as he kept her close.

"You knew."

"Yes."

Jonas tilted his head, thumb stroking gently along her hand.

"So now we're both observing."

Shammy nodded once, electric blue eyes soft and affectionate.

"Yes."

Jonas raised his coffee slightly with their joined hands still linked.

"To mutual curiosity."

Shammy lifted hers as well, the cups clinking softly together.

"Acceptable."

They drank.

Outside the rain continued to fall in gentle silver threads.

Inside the bookstore the quiet rhythm of pages turning and footsteps between shelves continued.

Jonas set his cup down, but kept her hand in his, thumb stroking slow, warm circles.

"You know something."

Shammy waited, her tall frame relaxed and warm against the contact.

"This is a very unusual way to meet someone."

Shammy considered that, her fingers gently squeezing his.

"Yes."

Jonas smiled, leaning closer until their foreheads touched again.

"But it works."

Shammy studied him for a moment, electric blue eyes warm and open, then nodded once.

"Yes."

Jonas leaned back slightly, but kept their hands linked and bodies close.

"Well."

He said quietly, voice fond.

“Now I’m curious about the next variable.”

Shammy’s eyes narrowed slightly with playful warmth.

“Good.”

Jonas smiled, thumb still stroking her skin.

“Dangerous word.”

Shammy answered calmly, but her voice was soft and teasing as she stayed close.

“Yes.”

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Above the City

Mephisto watched with growing amusement, leaning forward with clear delight.

“Oh this one is elegant.”

Konrad stood beside him, calm as ever.

“Yes.”

Below them Shammy and Jonas continued their conversation in the quiet café corner, bodies close, hands linked, the tension between them warm and balanced.

Mephisto gestured toward the scene.

“They’re not escalating the way the others did.”

Konrad nodded.

“No.”

Mephisto’s grin widened.

“This is a chess match.”

Konrad allowed the faintest smile.

“Yes.”

Mephisto clasped his hands behind his back.

“Well then.”

His eyes gleamed.

“Let’s see who makes the first real move.”

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