

**BLACK FILE: THE RUNE THAT DOES NOT WAIT (REVISION — RED BEARD)**

The place should have had echoes.

Stone always does.

Even dead structures remember pressure.

But here—

Nothing.

Not silence.

Absence of response.

Mai stopped first.

Not because she sensed danger.

Because she sensed \*failure\*.

Her runes didn't return.

Not distorted. Not blocked.

Just—

Not acknowledged.

"...that's not possible," she said quietly.

Ace glanced sideways.

"That again."

Mai didn't react.

Her eyes were already shifting.

Calculating.

Mapping.

Trying to force a structure where one refused to exist.

—

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air tried to move—

And didn't.

Not resisted.

Not redirected.

Just... not participating.

"...okay," she muttered.

"That's new."

—

Then something clicked.

Not in the environment.

In Mai.

A single instinct.

Wrong.

Not the place.

Her.

—

He was already there.

They hadn't seen him arrive.

Because he hadn't.

He had been present the entire time.

Sitting on a low slab of stone that didn't follow any geometry Mai could resolve.

Short.

Compact.

Grounded in a way that made the rest of reality feel... negotiable.

A dwarf.

And the beard—

**Burnt copper red.**

Not styled.

Not ornamental.

Rough. Functional.

Alive in the same way embers are alive — not loud, but impossible to ignore.

—  
Ace's hand moved slightly toward her katana.

Not drawing.

Measuring.

"Threat."

The dwarf looked at her.

A beat.

Then shook his head once.

"No."

Simple.

Unbothered.

Final.

—

Mai stepped forward.

Carefully.

Every instinct she had was screaming.

Not fear.

Mismatch.

"You are suppressing active runic response."

The dwarf tilted his head.

"...no."

Small pause.

"You're assuming they're yours."

—

That landed.

Hard.

Mai didn't blink.

Didn't move.

But something inside her—

Shifted.

—

She tried again.

Sharper now.

“You’re running without anchor.”

“Yeah.”

“That is not stable.”

The dwarf shrugged.

“Depends who you’re asking.”

—

Shammy took half a step closer.

Air pressure tried to reassert itself—

Failed.

Again.

She frowned.

“...you’re not pushing back.”

“No.”

“Then why isn’t anything reacting?”

The dwarf’s fingers brushed absently through his red beard.

A thinking gesture.

Not nervous.

Not idle.

Just... aligned.

“Because I didn’t tell it to.”

—

Silence.

Real silence this time.

—

Mai moved closer.

Too close.

Her voice dropped.

Focused.

“You’re not casting.”

“No.”

“You’re not channeling.”

“No.”

“You’re not binding.”

“No.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Then finally—

“...what are you doing.”

—

The dwarf looked at her.

Really looked.

And something in his expression shifted.

Recognition.

“...you’re close,” he said.

Not praise.

Not encouragement.

Observation.

“You’re just still asking permission.”

—

That cut.

Clean.

Accurate.

—  
Ace's grip tightened slightly.

Not aggression.

Awareness.

—  
Mai didn't step back.

Didn't break eye contact.

"Then show me."

Direct.

No pride.

No hesitation.

—  
The dwarf exhaled slowly.

Not annoyed.

Just... adjusting.

"Fine."

—  
He didn't move.

Didn't raise a hand.

Didn't speak.

—  
Reality corrected.

A single rune appeared.

Not drawn.

Not formed.

**Accepted.**

And then—

Executed.

—

Mai felt it.

Not energy.

Structure.

Perfect.

No bleed.

No delay.

No failure point.

A rune that existed—

Because it had already decided it did.

—

Her breath hitched.

“...that’s—”

She stopped.

Language failed.

—

The dwarf nodded slightly.

His fingers idly brushing that copper-red beard again.

“Yeah.”

—

Shammy blinked.

“...okay that’s mildly terrifying.”

—

Ace didn’t blink.

“Name.”

—

He looked at her.

Then back at Mai.

Measured.

Decided.

“Mikko.”

Small pause.

“Don’t try to copy that yet.”

—

Mai didn’t answer.

Couldn’t.

—

The rune was gone.

But the damage—

Permanent.

—

Shammy leaned toward Ace.

“...we’re keeping him, right?”

Ace didn’t look away.

“No.”

Beat.

“...but we’re not walking away either.”

—

Mikko stood.

Same height class as Ace.

But heavier.

Not physically.

Structurally.

—

He looked at Mai one more time.

Evaluating trajectory.

"...you'll break something important if you rush."

Beat.

Then, with a faint pull at the corner of his mouth—

"...do it anyway."

—

And then—

He wasn't there.

Not gone.

Just—

Not participating.

—

Mai stood still.

Long after.

Processing.

Failing.

Rebuilding.

—

"...no anchor."

—

Shammy glanced sideways.

"...you good?"

—

Mai exhaled slowly.

"...no."

Small pause.

"...but now I know why."

—

And that—

Changed everything.

Without changing anything.

Yet.

[mai](#), [ace](#), [blackfile](#)

—

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