

Black File — Interlude: “Cultural Exchange”



The restaurant was quiet.

Too quiet.

Not empty—there were people, low conversation, soft clinking of cutlery—but the kind of quiet that came from expectation. From rules. From knowing how things were supposed to be done.

White tablecloths.

Dim lighting.

Polished glass.

They did not belong there.

Ace sat already.

Still. Neutral. Unmoved by the setting.

Menu unopened.

Mai studied hers.

Not casually.

Precisely.

Shammy looked around once.

"...we are underdressed," she said.

Mai didn't look up.

"Dress code variance is irrelevant to the task."

"That's not what I meant."

The door opened.

Theta-24 arrived.

Badger stopped two steps inside.

"...oh this is worse than I thought."

HeavenlyFather exhaled slowly.

"...we are not doing this."

"We ARE absolutely doing this," Badger said immediately.

Grouse stepped forward.

No hesitation.

No reaction.

Just presence.

He stopped across from Ace.

Looked at her.

A moment.

"Confirmed?" he asked.

Ace didn't look up.

"Confirmed."

That was enough.

They sat.

Not comfortably.

But deliberately.

The waiter approached.

Professional.

Composed.

Unaware.

Mai spoke first.

“We will require multiple servings of escargot.”

The waiter blinked once.

“Of course.”

A pause.

“...how many?”

Mai didn't hesitate.

“As many as your kitchen can prepare within a continuous service window.”

Silence.

Badger leaned forward.

“...she scares me.”

□

The first plate arrived.

Small.

Carefully arranged.

Garlic butter.

Precision.

Shammy leaned away slightly.

“...that’s not food.”

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

A beat.

“It is culturally validated consumption.”

Ace picked one up.

No ceremony.

No hesitation.

Ate it.

Grouse did the same.

Same speed.

Same motion.

Badger made a noise somewhere between laughter and distress.

“THIS IS NOT NORMAL”

□

Second plate.

Mai observed.

Counted.

Tracked.

“Initial reaction suppression successful,” she said.

Shammy turned.

“...that is not a sentence I wanted to hear tonight.”

Ace continued.

No reaction.

Grouse continued.

Minimal reaction.

But—

slower.

Slightly.

Mai noticed.

“Deviation detected.”

Badger slammed the table lightly.

“HE’S BREAKING AGAIN”

Grouse looked at him.

“...noise.”

Badger sat back immediately.

“...okay yeah fair”

□

Third plate.

Shammy:

“I refuse.”

A beat.

“...I absolutely refuse.”

Mai:

“Participation increases data reliability.”

Shammy stared at her.

“...you’re serious.”

“Yes.”

Shammy sighed.

“...I hate all of you.”

She picked one up.

Paused.

“...this is a mistake.”

Ate it.

Immediate regret.

Visible.

Badger pointed.

“YES—YES—THAT’S THE REACTION”

Shammy:

“nope—no—absolutely not—why is it like that”

Mai:

“Texture inconsistency noted.”

□

Fourth plate.

Ace remained unchanged.

Grouse slowed again.

Just enough.

Mai tilted her head.

“Threshold approaching.”

Badger stood.

“THIS IS A MENTAL GAME NOW”

HeavenlyFather:

“...it always was.”

□

Fifth plate.

Mai reached forward.

Everyone stopped.

Badger:

“...oh no.”

Mai picked one up.

Examined it.

Ate it.

No reaction.

Shammy blinked.

“...that’s worse.”

Mai:

“Control is superior to reaction.”

Ace glanced at her.

“Noted.”

Grouse watched.

Adjusted.

Continued.

□

Sixth plate.

Grouse stopped.

Briefly.

That was enough.

Mai:

“Conclusion imminent.”

Badger:

“HE’S DONE”

Grouse exhaled once.

“...accepted.”

Ace finished hers.

Silence.

□ **Aftermath**

Badger:

“WE HAVE A WINNER AGAIN”

Shammy leaned back.

“I am never doing this again.”

Mai:

“Data set complete.”

HeavenlyFather:

“...I need a different job.”

Grouse nodded once.

“...acceptable loss.”

Badger grinned.

“Oh no, this is not loss—this is ADMINISTRATION”

□ Epilogue

Safehouse.

Grouse sat again.

Papers.

Badger's handwriting.

The system.

He stared at the first page.

Longer this time.

"...this is worse."

Shammy:

"I told you."

Mai:

"Pattern recognition failure confirmed."

Ace walked past.

Didn't stop this time.

"Still inefficient."

Grouse looked up.

“...noted.”

And continued.

Because some battles—
are not about winning.

They are about what you agree to carry after.

End.

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