

Black File — Interlude: “Mai’s Protocol I — Precision”



The table was wrong.

That was the first sign.

Everything was arranged.

Not casually.

Not approximately.

Exactly.

Plates aligned to millimeter precision.

Cutlery placed at identical angles.

Food portioned into equal segments.

Too equal.

Too controlled.

Shammy stopped at the doorway.

“...no.”

Mai didn’t look up.

“Correct.”

Ace was already seated.

Watching.

Not the food.

The layout.

Theta-24 entered.

Badger saw the table and froze.

“...this is a trap.”

HeavenlyFather exhaled slowly.

“...yes.”

Grouse stepped forward.

Looked once.

Measured.

“...structured.”

Badger pointed.

“THAT IS NOT A GOOD WORD ANYMORE”

Mai finished adjusting the last plate.

Then sat.

“This round requires compliance,” she said.

Flat.

Ace leaned back slightly.

“No.”

Mai:

“Yes.”

Silence.

Shammy:

“...what are the rules.”

Mai didn't hesitate.

“Each segment must be consumed in sequence.”

A beat.

“No deviation.”

Badger blinked.

“...it's food.”

Mai:

“It is now a system.”

□

Round start.

Ace reached for the nearest piece.

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

Ace stopped.

Looked at her.

Mai pointed.

“Third segment. Then first. Then second.”

Silence.

Badger:

“WHY”

Mai:

“Structure.”

Shammy:

“I hate this already.”

□

First sequence.

Ace complied.

No hesitation.

But—

no approval either.

Grouse followed.

Perfectly.

Badger tried.

Grabbed the wrong piece.

Mai:

“Invalid.”

Badger froze.

“...you're serious.”

Mai:

“Yes.”

HeavenlyFather:

“...this is worse than the snails.”

□

Second sequence.

The order changed.

Mai:

“Fifth. Second. Fourth.”

Badger:

“THERE ARE TOO MANY NUMBERS”

Shammy:

“I’m going to get lost.”

Mai:

“Expected.”

□

Deviation.

Badger ate out of order.

Mai didn’t raise her voice.

“Disqualified.”

Silence.

Badger:

“...WHAT”

Mai:

“You deviated.”

Badger:

“IT'S FOOD”

Mai:

“It was a system.”

Badger leaned back.

“...this is oppression.”

HeavenlyFather:

“...this is consequence.”

□

Third sequence.

Ace continued.

Controlled.

But—

slower now.

Not from difficulty.

From restriction.

Grouse adapted.

Faster.

Mai observed.

“Adaptation efficiency confirmed.”

Ace glanced at him.

“Noted.”

□

Shammy lost track.

“...wait—what was the order.”

Mai:

“Repeat.”

Shammy stared.

“...I wasn't listening.”

Mai:

“Disqualified.”

Shammy:

“...I didn't even start properly.”

Mai:

“Correct.”

Shammy walked away from the table.

“...I refuse this reality.”

□

Fourth sequence.

Only three left.

Ace.

Grouse.

Mai.

Badger watching.

Fuming.

Mai:

“Final sequence.”

Silence.

“Second. Sixth. First. Fourth.”

Badger:

“THAT DOESN’T EVEN MAKE SENSE”

Mai:

“It does.”

□

Execution.

Grouse followed.

Flawless.

Mai followed.

Perfect.

Ace reached—

paused—

adjusted—

continued.

A fraction too late.

Mai:

“Deviation.”

Silence.

Ace looked at her.

“...noted.”

And stopped.

□ **Outcome**

Mai:

“Round complete.”

Badger:

“THIS WAS RIGGED”

HeavenlyFather:

“...yes.”

Shammy (from the other side of the room):

“I’M STILL DISQUALIFIED”

Grouse nodded once.

“...acceptable.”

Mai:

“Winner: Grouse.”

Badger pointed at Ace.

“SHE LOST—AGAIN”

Ace didn't react.

“System was flawed,” she said.

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

A beat.

“You were.”

Silence.

Grouse looked at Ace.

“...good constraint.”

Ace nodded once.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Final.

□ **Epilogue**

Later.

Table.

Empty.

Mai adjusted one plate.

Slightly.

Perfect alignment.

Shammy leaned in the doorway.

“...you enjoyed that.”

Mai:

“Yes.”

Badger (still mad):

“I’M NEVER DOING THAT AGAIN”

HeavenlyFather:

“...you will.”

Grouse stood still.

“...structure holds.”

Ace passed by.

Stopped briefly.

“Still inefficient.”

Mai looked at her.

“Correct.”

A beat.

“But effective.”

Ace nodded.

“...noted.”

And kept walking.

Because sometimes—

the problem isn't the challenge.

It's the rules.

End.

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