

Black File — Interlude: “Mai’s Protocol V — Meta”



The table was empty.

That was the first problem.

No food.

No plates.

No setup.

Shammy stopped in the doorway.

“...no.”

Mai:

“Yes.”

Ace was already seated.

Badger looked around.

“...where is it.”

Mai:

“Not required.”

Badger:

“...what.”

Grouse stepped forward.

Measured.

Still.

“...explain.”

Mai folded her hands.

“This round evaluates decision behavior.”

Silence.

Badger:

“I HATE THIS ALREADY”

□

“Rule,” Mai said.

No movement.

“You may eat.”

A beat.

“Or not.”

Silence.

Shammy:

“...that’s it?”

Mai:

“Yes.”

Badger:

“THIS ISN’T A RULE—THIS IS NOTHING”

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

□

No one moved.

That was the system.

□

Badger snapped first.

“FINE—I EAT—WHERE IS IT”

Mai:

“You chose.”

Badger:

“...what.”

Mai:

“You consumed your action.”

Silence.

Badger:

“...this is illegal.”

□

Grouse moved next.

“...no action.”

Mai nodded once.

“Valid.”

□

Shammy leaned against the wall.

“...I refuse to participate.”

Mai:

“Valid.”

□

Ace remained still.

Watching.

Not the table.

Mai.

□

Mai:

“Your turn.”

Ace:

“No.”

Silence.

Mai:

“Clarify.”

Ace:

“No system.”

A beat.

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

□

Ace didn't move.

Didn't engage.

Didn't choose.

□

Grouse observed.

“...non-participation.”

Mai:

“Incorrect.”

□

Badger was pacing.

“THIS ISN'T FAIR—THERE'S NOTHING TO DO”

HeavenlyFather:

“...that is the point.”

□

Time passed.

Nothing happened.

That was the system.

□

Mai spoke again.

“Round nearing completion.”

Silence.

Badger:

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN”

Mai:

“Outcomes determined.”

□

She looked at each of them.

“Badger: disqualified.”

Badger:

“OF COURSE I AM”

“Shammy: abstained.”

Shammy:

“...I’m fine with that.”

“Grouse: optimal.”

Grouse nodded once.

“...accepted.”

A beat.

Mai turned to Ace.

“Undetermined.”

Silence.

□

Ace stood.

Looked at the empty table.

Then at Mai.

“...not a system.”

Mai:

“Explain.”

Ace:

“No constraint.”

A beat.

“No cost.”

Silence.

□

Mai held her gaze.

Then—

a small shift.

“...correct.”

Silence.

□ **Outcome**

Mai:

“No winner.”

Badger:

“FINALLY”

Shammy:

“...thank god.”

Grouse remained still.

“...incomplete.”

Mai:

“Yes.”

□ Epilogue

Later.

The table remained empty.

Shammy:

“...I hated that.”

Badger:

“I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND IT”

HeavenlyFather:

“...you're not supposed to.”

Mai adjusted nothing.

For once.

Ace passed by.

Stopped.

Looked once.

"...inefficient."

Mai:

"Yes."

A beat.

"Necessary."

Grouse stood nearby.

"...structure failed."

Mai:

"No."

A pause.

"It revealed itself."

Ace nodded once.

"...noted."

And walked on.

Because sometimes—
the final challenge—

is realizing
there was never one.

End.

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