

## Chapter 5 — Theta-24 Enters

The voice doesn't repeat itself.

It doesn't need to.

---

"You're late."

---

The words hang in the air like they belong there.

Not an intrusion.

Not an anomaly.

---

A correction.

---

Ace doesn't respond.

Her blade remains low, angled, ready—but not raised.

---

Mai does.

---

"Define late."

---

The room reacts.

---

Not visually.

Not immediately.

---

But the pressure shifts.

Shammy's eyes narrow.

---

"That mattered," she says.

---

---

The curtain at the side of the stage moves.

---

Not opening.

---

Breathing.

---

---

A figure steps out.

---

Not an animatronic.

---

A child.

---

Small.

Still.

Looking directly at them.

---

Not through them.

---

At them.

Ace's posture tightens instantly.

---

"Hostile?"

---

"No," Mai says.

Too fast.

---

She corrects herself.

---

"Unknown."

---

---

The child tilts their head.

---

"You weren't here when it started," they say.

---

No distortion.

No echo.

---

Perfect clarity.

---

---

Shammy steps forward slightly.

The air bends around her, subtle but undeniable.

---

"What started?" she asks.

---

The child blinks once.

---

“The show.”

---

---

The stage lights flicker.

---

Then stabilize.

---

Freddy, Bonnie, and Chica stand behind the child now.

Closer than before.

---

Not moving.

---

But—

aligned.

---

---

Mai’s voice lowers.

---

“This isn’t playback,” she says.

---

Ace doesn’t take her eyes off the stage.

---

“Then what is it?”

The child smiles.

---

Not wide.

Not wrong.

---

Just—  
expectant.

---

“You’re supposed to know,” they say.

---

A sharp crack splits the air.

---

Not from the stage.

---

From behind them.

---

A door—  
real this time—  
bursts open.

---

Heavy boots.  
Fast movement.  
No hesitation.

---

“Foundation! Hands where we can—”

---

Badger stops mid-sentence.

---

The room hits him all at once.

---

The colors.

The silence.

The child.

The stage.

---

“...what the fu—”

---

---

Theta-24 fans out instantly.

---

Skullker already moving toward the nearest angle of control.

Grouse scanning sightlines.

Jello pulling up a handheld unit, signal sweep active.

HeavenlyFather—

already looking at the child.

---

Assessing.

---

---

Badger exhales slowly.

---

“Okay,” he mutters.

---

“Not a normal day.”

---

---

Mai doesn't turn.

---

“You're early,” she says.

---

Badger snorts.

---

“We got five missing kids and a dead site lighting up like a Christmas tree—yeah, we moved.”

---

He gestures at the room.

---

“This your mess?”

---

Ace answers.

---

“No.”

---

A beat.

---

“It's worse.”

---

Jello's device crackles.

---

"Signal's wrong," he says.

---

He taps it.

Again.

---

"No source. No carrier. It's—"

He frowns.

---

"—it's behaving like it wants to be understood."

---

---

Mai's head turns slightly.

---

"That's accurate."

---

---

Badger points at the stage.

---

"Alright. Walk me through it."

---

Mai doesn't hesitate.

---

"It responds to narrative assumptions," she says.

---

Badger blinks.

---

“...I’m sorry, what?”

---

---

Shammy answers this time.

---

“If you assume the wrong thing, it becomes true.”

---

---

Silence.

---

Then—

---

Badger grins.

---

“Yeah, okay, no, that’s not how reality works.”

---

---

The room reacts instantly.

---

The lights dim.

---

The child on stage—

tilts their head.

Mai closes her eyes briefly.

---

“That was a mistake.”

---

---

Skullker doesn't wait.

---

He moves.

---

Fast.

Direct.

Toward the stage.

---

---

“Contact first, theory later,” he mutters.

---

---

Ace moves at the same time.

---

Not to stop him—

---

to intercept.

---

---

Too late.

---

---

Skullker crosses the invisible threshold—

---

and the room—

---

snaps.

---

Sound cuts.

---

Completely.

---

The colors drain.

---

The stage shifts.

---

Not position—

---

context.

---

The child is gone.

---

Freddy is not.

Standing—

---

directly in front of Skullker.

---

---

Closer than physically possible.

---

---

Skullker freezes.

---

Just for a fraction of a second.

---

---

Enough.

---

---

The lights slam back on.

---

---

Sound returns in a rush.

---

---

Skullker is standing—

---

in the middle of the room.

---

---

Alone.

---

---

No stage.

---

---

No child.

---

---

No animatronics.

---

---

Just tables.

Dust.

Decay.

---

---

Badger looks around.

---

“...where the hell did everything go?”

---

---

Mai doesn't answer.

---

---

Because she's looking at Skullker.

---

---

Something is wrong.

---

---

Subtle.

---

But unmistakable.

---

---

His posture.

---

Too still.

---

Too centered.

---

---

Ace steps closer.

---

Slow.

---

Controlled.

---

---

“Skullker,” she says.

---

No response.

---

---

He turns.

---

---

The movement is perfect.

---

---

Too perfect.

---

---

His head tilts—

---

just slightly.

---

---

Exactly the same angle—

---

Bonnie had.

---

---

Silence.

---

---

Badger's voice drops.

---

"...nope."

---

---

Jello lowers his device.

---

“Yeah,” he says quietly.

---

---

“That’s not him anymore.”

---

---

Skullker smiles.

---

---

Not wide.

---

---

Not wrong.

---

---

Just—

---

---

on cue.

---

---

And from somewhere—

---

---

deep in the building—

---

---

the music starts again.

---

---

This time—

---

---

louder.

---

---

And perfectly—

---

in sync.

---

—  
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