

## Chapter 6 — Misclassification Event

The music is no longer faint.

It fills the room now.

Not loud—

but complete.

---

Every surface carries it.

Every corner resolves around it.

---

Skullker stands at the center of it.

Perfect posture.

Perfect stillness.

---

Badger takes one slow step back.

---

“Okay,” he says.

---

“That’s new.”

---

---

Ace doesn’t move.

Her gaze is locked.

---

“Say something,” she says.

---

Skullker doesn’t hesitate.

---

“What would you like me to say?”

---

The voice is his.

Tone, cadence, weight—  
all intact.

---

And completely wrong.

---

Mai steps forward.

---

“No,” she says.

---

Not to him.

---

To the room.

---

Immediate reaction.

---

The music skips.

---

A fraction of a second—  
but enough.

---

Mai's eyes sharpen.

---

"That's a response layer," she says.

---

---

Shammy shifts slightly.

The air tightens—

not outward—

inward.

---

Like pressure collapsing toward a single point.

---

"Focus," she says quietly.

---

"It's watching how we define him."

---

---

Badger exhales through his nose.

---

"Yeah, no pressure."

---

---

Grouse doesn't speak.

His weapon is lowered—

not out of hesitation—

but uncertainty.

---

Line of sight doesn't mean anything here.

---

---

Jello's device flickers again.

---

"Signal's stabilizing," he mutters.

---

A beat.

---

"Or we are."

---

---

Mai doesn't look at him.

---

"Don't frame it like that," she says.

---

---

The lights flicker.

---

Hard.

---

The music distorts—

then corrects itself.

---

---

Skullker takes one step forward.

---

Smooth.

---

---

Measured.

---

---

Exactly one step.

---

---

Ace’s blade lifts—  
just slightly.

---

---

Not attacking.

---

---

Holding.

---

---

“Stop,” she says.

---

---

He does.

---

---

Immediately.

---

---

The room stills.

---

---

Badger blinks.

---

---

“Okay, so he listens.”

---

---

Mai shakes her head.

---

“No.”

---

A beat.

---

“It aligns.”

---

---

Skullker’s head tilts again.

---

That same angle.

---

Too precise.

---

---

“What is the difference?” he asks.

---

---

Mai answers.

---

“You’re not choosing.”

A pause.

---

---

“Correct,” Skullker says.

---

---

Silence.

---

---

Badger rubs a hand over his face.

---

---

“Fantastic.”

---

---

Shammy steps closer.

---

---

The air around her distorts—  
more visible now.

---

---

The space resists her.

---

---

Actively.

---

---

“You’re not him,” she says.

---

---

Skullker looks at her.

---

---

Directly.

---

---

“I am fulfilling his position,” he replies.

---

---

The music swells slightly.

---

---

Mai inhales slowly.

---

---

“There it is.”

---

---

She turns to the others.

---

---

“This isn’t possession,” she says.

---

---

“It’s structural replacement.”

---

---

Badger laughs once.

Short.

Sharp.

“Yeah, that doesn’t make it better.”

---

---

Mai ignores him.

---

“He crossed a boundary with the wrong assumption,” she continues.

---

“He acted like this was a threat environment.”

---

---

Ace’s voice is low.

---

“It is.”

---

---

Mai meets her eyes.

---

“Not in the way he defined it.”

---

---

The room tightens.

---

Again.

---

---

Jello looks up sharply.

---

“Don’t argue definitions,” he says.

---

---

“Every time we do, it spikes.”

---

---

The music shifts key.

---

Subtle.

---

But wrong.

---

---

Grouse finally speaks.

---

“So what’s the correct one?”

---

---

Silence.

---

---

No one answers.

---

---

Skullker takes another step.

---

Closer now.

“Would you like assistance?” he asks.

---

---

Badger raises his weapon—  
not aiming—  
just ready.

---

---

“Hard pass.”

---

---

Skullker smiles again.

---

---

Same expression.  
Same timing.

---

---

“You are behind schedule,” he says.

---

---

The words land heavier this time.

---

---

Mai’s gaze sharpens instantly.

---

---

“That’s not his line.”

---

---

Shammy exhales.

---

---

“Not his voice either.”

---

---

Ace steps forward.

---

---

Just enough to stand directly in front of him.

---

---

“What schedule?” she asks.

---

---

Skullker doesn't blink.

---

---

“The show must continue,” he says.

---

---

The room reacts.

---

---

Not violently.

---

---

Smoothly.

---

---

The lights brighten.

---

The decay fades.

---

The party room returns—  
overlaid on top of reality.

---

---

Tables restore.

---

Color returns.

---

Children reappear—  
fewer than before.

---

---

Three empty tables.

---

Still waiting.

---

---

Mai's voice drops.

---

"That's the count."

---

---

Badger looks around.

---

“Count of what?”

---

---

No one answers.

---

---

Because they all see it now.

---

---

Three empty chairs.

---

---

And four people standing in the room.

---

---

The music slows.

---

---

Just slightly.

---

---

Like something is—

---

---

deciding.

---

---

Shammy’s voice is almost a whisper.

“It’s choosing who fits.”

—

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