

## Chapter 7 — Correction

The music slows.

Not stopping.

Not failing.

---

Adjusting.

---

Three empty chairs.

Four people standing.

---

The math is wrong.

---

Badger sees it first.

---

"...nah," he mutters.

---

He steps sideways.

Deliberate.

Breaking alignment.

---

The room reacts immediately.

---

The nearest table shifts.

Not sliding—

reassigning position.

Still three empty chairs.

---

Badger exhales.

---

“Yeah, okay, that’s cheating.”

---

---

Mai is already recalculating.

---

“It’s not counting bodies,” she says.

---

“It’s counting roles.”

---

---

Ace doesn’t look away from Skullker.

---

“Define roles.”

---

---

Mai gestures slightly toward the stage.

---

“Performer. Observer. Anchor.”

---

A beat.

---

“...and something missing.”

---

Shammy's eyes narrow.

---

---

"The one that leaves."

---

---

The air tightens hard.

---

---

The room agrees.

---

---

One of the empty chairs pulls back.

---

---

Slow.

---

---

Inviting.

---

---

Badger's voice drops.

---

---

"Nope."

---

---

The chair stops moving.

---

---

Then—

---

---

another one shifts.

---

---

Closer to Ace.

---

---

Ace doesn't move.

---

Her blade hums low—  
steady.

---

---

Skullker watches her.

---

Perfect stillness.

---

---

"You are late," he says again.

---

---

Ace's voice is flat.

---

"We're not part of your show."

---

---

The music distorts.

Sharp.

---

Wrong.

---

Mai reacts instantly.

---

“Don’t reject it outright,” she snaps.

---

Ace doesn’t look at her.

---

“It’s a trap.”

---

“Yes,” Mai says.

---

A beat.

---

“But it’s a structured one.”

---

The room stabilizes slightly.

---

The music returns to baseline.

---

Shammy exhales.

---

“That helped.”

---

---

Badger glances between them.

---

“So we... what? Play along?”

---

---

Mai shakes her head.

---

“No.”

---

A pause.

---

“We align correctly.”

---

---

Grouse shifts position slightly.

---

Minimal.

---

Controlled.

---

He keeps his distance from the chairs.

---

Jello lowers his device completely.

---

“Signal’s gone,” he says.

---

A beat.

---

“Or it doesn’t need one anymore.”

---

The lights dim.

---

Not dark—  
focused.

---

The stage becomes the center again.

---

Freddy moves.

---

Slow.

---

Deliberate.

---

He steps forward—

---

toward the empty chairs.

---

---

Ace's grip tightens.

---

"Targeting confirmed."

---

---

"No," Mai says.

---

A beat.

---

"He's assigning."

---

---

Freddy reaches the first chair.

---

Pulls it out.

---

Waits.

---

---

The pressure spikes.

---

Harder than before.

---

---

Shammy braces.

---

---

The air around her compresses—  
visible distortion now.

---

---

“It’s forcing resolution,” she says.

---

---

Badger’s voice cuts in.

---

---

“Yeah, well, it can force someone else.”

---

---

He turns—  
half step—

---

---

and freezes.

---

---

One of the children is looking at him.

---

---

Not moving.

---

---

Not blinking.

---

---

Just—

watching.

---

---

Badger's grin fades.

---

"...okay, I don't like that."

---

---

The child stands.

---

Slow.

---

Silent.

---

---

The chair it sat in—

---

is now empty.

---

---

The count doesn't change.

---

---

Mai's voice drops.

---

"It's redistributing."

Ace finally looks away from Skullker—  
just for a fraction—

---

---

toward the stage.

---

---

“Then we break the pattern.”

---

---

Shammy shakes her head sharply.

---

---

“No.”

---

---

The air snaps.

---

---

Hard.

---

---

The child is closer now.

---

---

Too close.

---

---

Not moving.

---

---

Just—  
closer.

---

---

Mai steps forward.

---

---

Between Ace and the stage.

---

---

“We don’t break it,” she says.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“We finish it.”

---

---

Silence.

---

---

The music shifts again.

---

---

This time—  
softer.

---

---

Almost—  
expectant.

---

---

Freddy remains by the chair.

---

Waiting.

---

---

Skullker turns his head.

---

Looks at Mai.

---

---

“Correct,” he says.

---

---

The room stills.

---

---

Not stable.

---

---

Focused.

---

---

Three chairs.

---

Three roles.

---

---

One missing piece.

---

---

Mai closes her eyes.

---

---

Just for a second.

---

---

Then opens them.

---

---

“This never ended,” she says.

---

---

The lights dim further.

---

---

The children freeze again.

---

---

Mid-motion.

---

---

The stage sharpens—  
like the rest of the world is being pushed out of relevance.

---

---

Shammy's voice is low.

---

---

"Choose carefully."

---

---

Mai nods once.

---

---

"I will."

---

---

She steps forward.

---

---

Toward the stage.

---

---

And the moment she crosses the invisible line—

---

---

the entire room—

---

---

resets.

---

---

Hard.

Sound drops.

---

---

Color drains.

---

---

Everything—

---

---

goes still.

---

---

Except for one thing.

---

---

A single spotlight.

---

---

Centered—

---

---

on her.

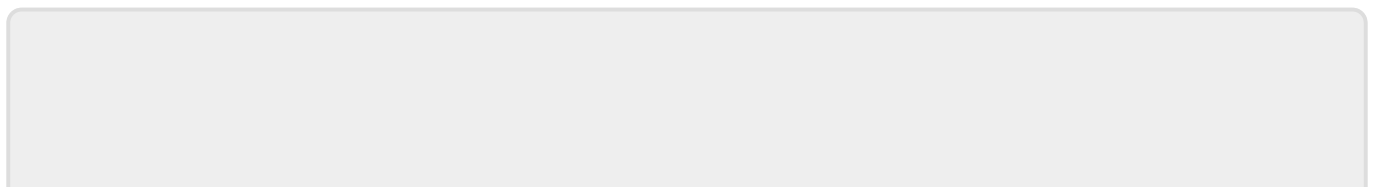
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