

Chapter 8 — The Right Question

The spotlight is absolute.

Not bright.

Not blinding.

Isolating.

Everything outside it—

loses definition.

Mai stands at its center.

Still.

The room is gone.

Not physically—

but functionally.

Only the stage remains.

Ace feels it immediately.

Distance stretches.

Not measurable.

Wrong.

“Ace,” Mai says.

Her voice carries clean.

Unaffected.

“Don’t move.”

Ace freezes.

Not because of the command—

but because she understands it.

Movement would define distance.

Distance would lock position.

And right now—

position is still negotiable.

Shammy exhales slowly.

The air doesn’t spread.

It holds.

Compressed around the edges of the spotlight.

Like she’s containing the rest of the world from collapsing inward.

Badger mutters under his breath.

“Yeah, this is fine. Totally fine.”

Jello doesn't speak.

There's nothing left for his tools to read.

Grouse watches.

Tracking nothing—
and everything.

Skullker stands at the edge of the light.

Perfect.

Waiting.

Freddy is there too.

Behind Mai.

Not moving.

Not needed.

Mai inhales.

Slow.

Controlled.

She doesn't look at anything.

She doesn't need to.

"This isn't about what happened," she says.

The space reacts.

Subtle.

The spotlight tightens.

“Then what is it?” Badger asks.

Mai answers without hesitation.

“It’s about what *should have happened.*”

The air spikes.

Hard.

Shammy braces—
pressure surging against her control.

“That’s a dangerous direction,” she says.

Mai nods.

“I know.”

A beat.

“But it’s the right one.”

The stage shifts.

Not physically—

contextually.

The children appear again.

Not all of them.

Three.

Standing.

Looking at Mai.

No fear.

No confusion.

Waiting.

Ace’s voice is low.

“Those are the missing.”

Mai doesn’t answer.

Because the room answers for her.

The music returns—

soft.

Incomplete.

Like a melody missing its final note.

Shammy’s voice drops.

“That’s it.”

The pressure stabilizes—
just slightly.

“It’s unresolved.”

Mai nods once.

“Yes.”

She finally moves.

One step forward.

Into the deeper center of the stage.

The spotlight follows.

Tight.

Focused.

The children don’t move.

But the air around them—
changes.

Expectation.

Mai’s voice lowers.

Not louder—

but heavier.

“You were not supposed to disappear.”

The room reacts instantly.

The stage flickers—

but doesn’t collapse.

The children remain.

Ace's grip tightens.

"That's not enough," she says.

Mai nods slightly.

"I know."

A beat.

"They were supposed to leave."

The music shifts.

A new note—

almost resolving—

but not quite.

Shammy exhales.

“That’s closer.”

The pressure eases—
just a fraction.

The children blink.

First movement.

Badger goes still.

“...okay.”

Mai steps closer.

Slow.

Deliberate.

“You were supposed to go home,” she says.

The spotlight flares.

Hard.

The stage cracks.

Not physically—

structurally.

The illusion fractures—

and underneath—

something else shows.

Empty space.

Dark.

Unfinished.

Ace feels it.

That edge.

Where something should exist—

but doesn't.

“That’s the gap,” she says.

Mai nods.

“Yes.”

She looks directly at the children now.

For the first time.

“You never got an ending.”

Silence.

Then—

one of the children steps forward.

Not toward Mai.

Toward the empty space behind her.

The stage destabilizes.

Hard.

Shammy's voice snaps.

“Hold it!”

The air compresses violently—

forcing the structure to stay intact.

The spotlight flickers.

The music stutters—

almost breaking.

Mai doesn't move.

Doesn't look away.

"This place tried to continue without one," she says.

The child stops.

Looks at her.

"...we waited," it says.

The voice is different now.

Not scripted.

Not perfect.

Real.

Ace exhales slowly.

“That’s it.”

Mai nods.

“Yes.”

She takes one final step forward.

“We finish it,” she says.

The room holds.

Everything—

waiting.

The spotlight tightens to a point.

And for the first time—

the structure doesn't resist.

It listens.

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