

Chapter 9 — Stage Integrity

The room listens.

Not passively.

Not neutrally.

Attentively.

The difference is immediate.

The pressure doesn't fight them anymore.

It narrows.

Like a lens focusing.

Mai feels it first.

"This is the threshold," she says.

Ace doesn't ask what that means.

She already knows.

Something is about to be decided.

The three children stand at the edge of the light.

Waiting.

Not for instructions.

For completion.

The empty space behind Mai—

widens.

Not visibly—

but functionally.

Ace's voice is low.

“If we get this wrong—”

Mai cuts her off.

“We won't.”

A pause.

“We can’t.”

Shammy exhales slowly.

The air holds—

barely.

“This is where it takes something,” she says.

Badger lets out a quiet breath.

“Yeah,” he mutters.

“Figured.”

Skullker stands motionless at the edge of the stage.

Watching.

Perfectly aligned.

Mai looks at him.

Just for a moment.

“He doesn’t come back for free,” she says.

Ace’s jaw tightens.

“Then we don’t trade.”

The room tightens.

Immediate.

The music distorts.

Sharp.

Shammy reacts instantly.

“Don’t reject the exchange,” she says.

Ace’s voice is flat.

“It took him.”

Mai shakes her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“He *fit*.”

Silence.

Badger laughs once.

“Yeah, no, I don’t like that wording.”

Mai steps forward.

Closer to the edge.

“This isn’t a predator,” she says.

She looks at the empty space.

“It’s incomplete.”

The room stabilizes slightly.

The music softens.

The children don’t move.

But the expectation grows.

Mai’s voice lowers.

“You were supposed to leave.”

The child in front tilts its head.

“...we couldn’t,” it says.

The words land heavy.

Ace’s grip tightens.

“Why?”

The child looks past Mai.

Into the empty space.

“There was no door.”

The stage flickers.

Hard.

The illusion cracks again—

wider this time.

Behind the stage—

nothing.

No hallway.

No exit.

Just—

absence.

Shammy exhales sharply.

“That’s the failure point.”

Mai nods.

“The ending never existed.”

Badger looks between them.

“...so we build one?”

Mai doesn't answer immediately.

Because the room answers first.

The empty space shifts.

Not forming—

inviting.

Three empty chairs.

Three children.

And—

one missing role.

Ace sees it.

“...someone has to open it,” she says.

Shammy doesn't look at her.

“Yes.”

The air tightens again.

Hard.

The cost.

Mai closes her eyes.

Just for a second.

Calculating.

Not numbers.

Structure.

“If we assign it wrong,” she says quietly—

“They stay.”

Ace steps forward.

Immediate.

“I’ll do it.”

The room reacts.

Not violently—

but decisively.

The spotlight shifts.

From Mai—

to Ace.

Wrong.

Shammy's voice cuts in—
sharp.

"No."

The air snaps.

Ace freezes.

"That's not your role," Shammy says.

Ace's eyes flash.

"Then whose?"

Silence.

Mai opens her eyes.

Slow.

“...mine,” she says.

Everything—

stops.

The music drops to a single note.

Held.

Ace turns.

Immediate.

“No.”

Mai doesn't look at her.

"This is structural," she says.

"I define the exit."

The room stabilizes.

Hard.

The choice locks in.

Badger mutters under his breath.

"...yeah, that tracks."

Ace steps forward.

Close now.

"You don't do this alone," she says.

Mai finally looks at her.

“I’m not alone.”

A beat.

“But I am the only one who can do this.”

Shammy exhales.

Slow.

The air doesn’t resist.

It—

accepts.

Mai steps into the empty space.

And the stage—

begins—

to change.

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Permanent link:

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Last update: **03/04/2026 18:41**

