

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—

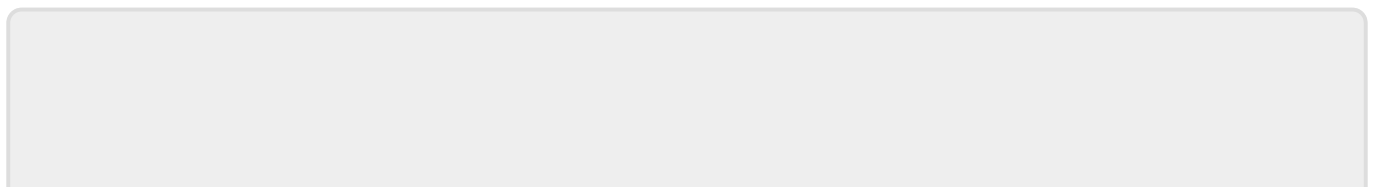
on her.

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