

CHAPTER 2 — Scene Without Cause

The place still smelled like it had happened.

Not blood.

Not gunpowder.

Timing.

Ace stepped in first.

Didn't slow.

Didn't check corners.

Nothing to react to.

That was the problem.

Mai followed.

Her eyes moved immediately—

not across bodies—

across positions.

Everything—

wrong.

Shammy paused at the entrance.

The air—

uneven.

Not disturbed.

Disconnected.

“There’s no break,” she said.

A beat.

“It didn’t build.”

V glanced around.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...this is not how a fight looks.”

It wasn’t.

Bodies were down—

but not collapsed.

Positions held.

One man stood halfway through turning—

frozen in the moment before movement mattered.

Another had a hand on a weapon—

not drawn.

A third—

mid-step.

All of them—

too early.

Mai crouched.

Measured distance.

Angles.

Timing.

“They didn’t react,” she said.

Ace didn’t look at her.

“They couldn’t.”

That tracked.

Mai stood.

“This isn’t speed,” she said.

A beat.

“They were already too late.”

Shammy moved further in.

The air—

tightened.

Then—

slipped.

“It doesn’t line up,” she said.

A pause.

“It never did.”

That was worse.

V stepped around one of the bodies.

Careful—

but not cautious.

“...Okay,” they said.

“...so he walked in, everyone dies, no one reacts.”

A beat.

“...and nobody hears anything?”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

Flat.

“They heard it.”

A pause.

“After.”

Silence.

That landed.

Ace moved deeper into the room.

Her gaze shifted—

not searching—

tracking.

“There,” she said.

Mai followed the line.

A wall.

Nothing on it.

But—

something was wrong.

Not visible.

Relational.

She stepped closer.

The space—

tightened.

Just slightly.

“He passed through here,” she said.

V frowned.

“...Through?”

Mai didn't answer.

Because “through” wasn't accurate.

Ace reached the spot.

Paused.

Not to think—

to feel the timing.

Something—

had already happened there.

Before this.

Before everything.

Shammy inhaled—

sharp.

The air—

spiked.

“He’s close,” she said.

Not direction.

Not distance.

State.

Mai turned—

fast.

Too late.

A figure stood at the far end of the room.

Not entering.

Already there.

No sound.

No movement.

Just—

present.

V froze.

“...Nope,” they whispered.

“...didn’t see him come in.”

Because he hadn’t.

Ace didn’t move.

Neither did the figure.

For a moment—

everything held.

Then—

he smiled.

Not wide.

Not insane.

Just—

amused.

“You’re behind,” he said.

Calm.

Even.

Mai’s eyes locked onto the implant.

Black.

No reflection.

No structure.

It didn't sit on the skin—

it replaced it.

“That is not acceleration,” she said.

The figure tilted his head.

“Of course not,” he said.

A beat.

“That would be boring.”

Ace stepped forward.

No hesitation.

The figure didn't react.

Didn't prepare.

Didn't adjust.

He was already—

done.

The strike happened.

Before it started.

Ace shifted—

barely—

just enough.

Impact—

missed.

By nothing.

V swore under their breath.

“...What the hell was that.”

Mai didn't answer.

Because she saw it.

Not the movement—

the absence of it.

“He doesn't act fast,” she said.

A beat.

“He acts first.”

The figure laughed softly.

“Finally,” he said.

Someone understood.

Shammy stepped forward.

The air—

collapsed.

Then—

spiked.

Wrong.

Out of order.

“You don’t wait,” she said.

The figure’s smile widened slightly.

“Why would I?”

Another step—

not movement—

arrival.

He was closer now.

Too close.

Ace didn’t retreat.

Didn't adjust.

She watched.

Measured.

The difference.

"You're not faster," she said.

Flat.

The figure tilted his head again.

"No," he said.

A pause.

“I’m just not late.”

That was worse.

Mai stepped slightly to the side.

Breaking alignment.

The figure—

hesitated.

For the first time.

Just a fraction.

That was enough.

Ace moved.

Not reacting—

interrupting.

The strike—

didn't land.

Not cleanly.

Not correctly.

The sequence—

broke.

The figure stepped back—

not retreating—

resetting.

“Better,” he said.

Almost impressed.

Then—

he was gone.

No movement.

No exit.

Just—

absence.

V exhaled sharply.

“...I hate that.”

Mai didn't move.

Her gaze stayed fixed—

on the space he had occupied.

“He didn’t leave,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“He finished.”

That was the difference.

And somewhere—

just outside their reach—

the next action—

had already happened.

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