

# CHAPTER 3 — Talking Too Late

He didn't re-enter.

---

He was there.

---

---

The hallway outside the room—

---

empty.

---

---

Then—

---

occupied.

---

---

Ace didn't turn.

---

---

She moved.

---

---

Because turning—

---

was already too late.

---

---

The strike came—

---

---

before the intent.

---

---

She shifted—

---

---

not reacting—

---

---

intercepting.

---

---

Contact—

---

---

glanced.

---

---

Not clean.

---

---

Not enough.

---

---

The figure stood behind her now.

---

---

Not moved.

Repositioned.

---

---

“Still behind,” he said.

---

---

Calm.

---

---

Almost conversational.

---

---

Mai stepped into the space between them.

---

---

Not blocking—

---

breaking sequence.

---

---

“You are not operating in time,” she said.

---

---

Flat.

---

---

The figure looked at her—

---

interested.

---

---

“Time’s fine,” he said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“You’re just using it wrong.”

---

---

Shammy inhaled—

---

---

slow.

---

---

The air—

---

---

didn’t follow.

---

---

Lagged.

---

---

Then—

---

---

surged.

---

---

“He’s out of rhythm,” she said.

---

---

The figure laughed—

---

---

quiet.

---

---

“Rhythm implies waiting,” he said.

---

---

“I don’t.”

---

---

V stayed near the wall—

---

---

eyes tracking—

---

---

failing.

---

---

“...Okay,” they muttered.

---

---

“...so how do you fight something that already happened?”

---

---

---

---

Ace didn't answer.

---

---

She stepped forward again.

---

---

Deliberate.

---

---

No hesitation.

---

---

The figure watched—

---

---

not reacting—

---

---

already finished.

---

---

He spoke—

---

---

and the movement cut through it.

---

---

"You're—"

The strike landed—

---

before the word ended.

---

---

Ace absorbed it—

---

shifted—

---

recovered—

---

but not cleanly.

---

---

Not fast enough.

---

---

Mai moved—

---

too precise.

---

---

Too correct.

---

---

The figure wasn't there anymore.

---

---

Not gone.

---

---

Elsewhere.

---

---

“You think in lines,” he said from behind them.

---

---

“You wait for things to happen.”

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“That’s adorable.”

---

---

Shammy stepped sideways—

---

not toward him—

---

away from alignment.

---

---

The air—

---

spiked.

---

---

Then fractured.

---

---

The figure paused—

---

---

again—

---

---

just a fraction.

---

---

Ace saw it.

---

---

“Again,” she said.

---

---

Mai adjusted—

---

---

less precise this time.

---

---

Less optimal.

---

---

The space—

shifted.

---

---

Uncertain.

---

---

The figure moved—

---

but not cleanly.

---

---

Not perfectly.

---

---

His hand—

---

missed—

---

by nothing.

---

---

He frowned.

---

---

Slightly.

---

---

“Messy,” he said.

Not annoyed.

---

---

Interested.

---

---

Mai’s voice didn’t change.

---

---

“You require sequence.”

---

---

The figure smiled again.

---

---

“No,” he said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“I remove it.”

---

---

Ace stepped in—

---

closer than before.

---

---

---

No distance.

---

---

No delay.

---

---

The figure didn't strike.

---

---

Didn't move.

---

---

For a moment—

---

---

nothing happened.

---

---

That was new.

---

---

Then—

---

---

he leaned slightly.

---

---

Not back.

---

---

Sideways.

---

---

And the next action—

---

---

failed.

---

---

Not cleanly.

---

---

Not completely.

---

---

But enough.

---

---

Shammy pushed—

---

---

not force—

---

---

pressure.

---

---

The air—

collapsed inward—

---

---

then expanded wrong.

---

---

Timing broke.

---

---

Not for him—

---

for everything.

---

---

V blinked.

---

---

“...Okay,” they said.

---

“...that’s doing something.”

---

---

Mai stepped again—

---

less precise—

---

more variable.

---

---

The system—

---

no longer linear.

---

---

The figure tilted his head.

---

---

Curious now.

---

---

“Interesting,” he said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“You’re getting worse.”

---

---

Mai didn’t respond.

---

---

Because worse—

---

was the point.

---

---

Ace moved again—

not faster—

---

not earlier—

---

just—

---

unpredictable.

---

---

The strike—

---

didn't align.

---

---

Didn't connect.

---

---

The figure stepped back—

---

not retreat—

---

re-evaluation.

---

---

“You can't keep that up,” he said.

---

---

Calm.

---

---

Certain.

---

---

“Neither can you,” Ace said.

---

---

Flat.

---

---

That was the first real answer.

---

---

Silence—

---

brief—

---

held.

---

---

Then—

---

he laughed.

---

---

Not loud.

---

---

Not broken.

---

---

Just—

---

genuine.

---

---

“Maybe,” he said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“But I don’t have to.”

---

---

And then—

---

he wasn’t there.

---

---

Not movement.

---

---

Completion.

---

---

---

Gone—

---

before absence registered.

---

The space—

---

settled.

---

Wrong.

---

Incomplete.

---

Shammy exhaled slowly.

---

The air—

---

stabilized.

---

Barely.

Mai didn't move.

---

---

Her gaze fixed—

---

on nothing.

---

---

“He is not leaving,” she said.

---

---

Ace nodded once.

---

---

“No.”

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“He's waiting.”

---

---

V swallowed.

---

---

“...For what.”

---

---

Ace didn't answer.

---

---

Because the answer—

---

had already happened.

---

---

And they were still—

---

trying to catch up.

---

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