

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 5 — What Survives

The gallery was quieter than the first.

Not smaller.

Not less populated.

Just... more selective.

The kind of place where every conversation already assumed context.

No introductions.

No explanations.

If you didn't belong—

you didn't last long enough to notice.

Ace felt it immediately.

Different from before.

The first exposure had been observation.

This—

was filtration.

"They're expecting something," she said quietly.

Mai adjusted her pace half a step ahead.

"Yes."

"What."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because she already knew.

And didn't need to say it out loud.

Shammy moved beside them.

The air didn't shift as much this time.

It didn't need to.

The room was already calibrated.

"They're not looking for confirmation," she said softly.

Ace glanced at her.

"Then what."

Shammy's eyes tracked the space.

"Consistency."

They entered fully.

No hesitation.

No pause at the threshold.

That mattered.

Ace didn't know why.

But she felt it—

like stepping onto something that would react if you stopped.

The pendant rested where it had before.

Still wrong.

Still invisible in all the ways that mattered.

People looked—

then adjusted.

Their attention slipping just enough to make certainty impossible.

The artwork was different here.

Less abstract.

More... intentional.

Portraits.

Landscapes.

Objects with history.

Or at least—

the appearance of it.

Mai stopped in front of a painting.

Large.

Dominant.

The kind of piece that didn't ask for attention.

It assumed it.

Ace followed her gaze.

At first—

a portrait.

A woman.

Seated.

Composed.

Then—

not.

There were layers.

Subtle.

Almost invisible.

The same figure repeated.

Slight shifts.

Posture.

Expression.

Time—

without movement.

“...they didn’t separate the iterations,” Mai said quietly.

Ace frowned.

“They what.”

Mai didn’t look away.

“They kept them in the same frame.”

A pause.

“Most people wouldn’t notice.”

“Most people don’t look,” a voice said.

Not behind them.

Not in front.

Just... present.

Mai turned.

Slowly.

Measured.

The man stood slightly off to the side.

Mid-fifties, perhaps.

Or younger.

Or older.

Difficult to place.

Not because of age—

because of absence of markers.

Nothing about him demanded attention.

Which made him dangerous.

Ace felt it immediately.

This one mattered.

Mai inclined her head slightly.

“Most people see the subject,” she said.

The man’s gaze shifted to the painting.

Then back to her.

“And you?”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“What survives,” she said.

A pause.

Longer than the others had been.

Not awkward.

Evaluative.

The man stepped closer.

Not invading space.

Just reducing distance.

“Survival implies loss,” he said.

Mai’s expression didn’t change.

“Only if you measure the wrong variable.”

Ace watched the exchange.

Didn't interrupt.

Didn't need to.

This wasn't her fight.

Not directly.

The man's attention sharpened.

Subtle.

But real.

“And what would be the correct one,” he asked.

Mai finally looked at him fully.

Not challenging.

Not yielding.

Just... present.

“Continuity,” she said.

Silence.

Not empty.

Not neutral.

Weighted.

Around them, the gallery continued.

Conversations flowed.

Movement persisted.

But something in this space—
narrowed.

The man considered her.
Not her words.
Her structure.
Her consistency.

“...that’s a rare answer,” he said.
Mai allowed the faintest shift in her posture.
Not quite a smile.
“Not particularly.”
A beat.
“We’ve had pieces that were less honest.”

There it was.
Not a statement.
A vector.

The man didn’t react immediately.
Didn’t need to.
The implication was already doing the work.

“...you collect,” he said.
Mai’s answer was precise.
“Yes.”
Nothing more.

Ace felt the shift.

Not in the man—
in the room.

People were listening now.

Not directly.

But awareness had spread.

A woman across the gallery glanced toward them.

Then looked away.

Then back again.

Something didn't match.

Good.

"And this one," the man continued, gesturing lightly toward the painting. "What does it get wrong?"

Mai tilted her head slightly.

Studied it again.

Not for effect.

For accuracy.

"It assumes the subject is stable," she said.

A pause.

"It isn't."

The man's gaze didn't move.

"And yet it appears to be."

Mai's voice stayed calm.

"That's the technique."

Another silence.

This one deeper.

Ace shifted her weight slightly.

Someone beside her took that as an opening.

A man.

Early forties.

Trying to place her.

Trying to understand how she fit into this.

"Do you collect as well?" he asked.

Ace looked at him.

Once.

Measured.

"No."

A beat.

"She does."

The man blinked.

Caught between answers.

Unsure which one mattered.

Behind him, someone whispered something.

He half-turned.

Lost the thread.

Looked back at Ace—

and couldn't quite remember what he'd been asking.

The pendant was working.

Shammy stood near the edge of the conversation.

Watching.

Not participating.

The air around her held steady.

Balanced.

But aware.

"They're aligning," she said softly.

Mai didn't respond.

She didn't need to.

She could feel it too.

The man in front of her shifted slightly.

Decision point.

"You're new," he said.

Not a question.

Mai met his gaze.

“To you.”

The same answer.

Again.

This time—

it landed differently.

A pause.

Then:

“Of course,” he said.

Acceptance.

Partial.

Enough.

He inclined his head slightly.

“Enjoy the exhibition.”

He didn't wait for a response.

Didn't need one.

He stepped back.

Merged into the room.

Or perhaps—

revealed that he had never fully left it.

Ace watched him go.

“He knows,” she said.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“He recognizes,” she corrected.

“That’s worse.”

“Yes.”

Shammy’s voice came in low.

“He’s not deciding,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“Then what.”

Shammy’s eyes tracked the space.

Not the people.

The pattern.

“He’s confirming something he already suspected.”

Silence.

Ace looked back at the painting.

The layered figure.

The repeated self.

“They don’t change,” she said.

Mai shook her head slightly.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“They change exactly enough.”

That—

was the problem.

They didn’t stay long.

Again.

Too much presence becomes distortion.

Too little—

irrelevant.

This was enough.

As they moved toward the exit, the room didn’t react.

Not visibly.

But something had settled.

Not curiosity anymore.

Recognition.

Outside, the air felt different again.

Less curated.

More... uncertain.

Ace rolled her shoulder once.

Let the tension bleed out.

“That was worse,” she said.

Mai didn't disagree.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“But necessary.”

Shammy stepped beside them.

Quiet.

Steady.

“They’ve seen you now,” she said.

Ace looked back once.

At the gallery.

At the light.

At the people who would remember—

incorrectly.

“Good,” she said.

Shammy’s voice softened just a fraction.

“They didn’t see you wrong.”

Ace frowned slightly.

“They saw you the way they needed to.”

A beat.

That—

wasn’t better.

Somewhere behind glass and controlled light—

a conversation ended.

Another began.

Not about money.

Not about art.

About pattern.

And something that had entered it—

without fitting

and without breaking it.

Yet.

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