

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 8 — The Room That Continues

The door didn't close behind them.

Ace noticed that immediately.

Not because of sound.

Because of absence.

Most places—

even controlled ones—

complete themselves.

Doors close. Systems reset. Spaces define themselves again.

This one didn't.

She didn't turn back.

Didn't need to.

"It's still open," she said.

Mai stepped forward.

One step.

Then another.

"It doesn't need to close," she replied.

Shammy crossed the threshold last.

The air changed.

Not heavier.

Not thinner.

More... consistent.

Like everything inside the room had already agreed on what it was.

And wasn't going to adjust for them.

The space wasn't large.

That was the first contradiction.

From outside—

it should have been.

From everything leading up to it—

it had to be.

Inside—

it wasn't.

A single room.

Tables.

Seating.

Low light.

No stage.

No focal point.

Nothing to indicate hierarchy.

Which meant—

it existed anyway.

People were already there.

Of course they were.

Not many.

Not few.

The exact number needed to feel complete.

No one looked at them.

Not immediately.

Conversations continued.

Unbroken.

Which meant—

they had been expected.

Ace stepped fully into the room.

Nothing reacted.

That—

was wrong.

She scanned once.

Quick.

Efficient.

Every person present—

felt placed.

Not positioned.

Placed.

Like they had settled into a pattern that resisted disruption.

“...they’re stable,” she said.

Mai didn’t respond immediately.

She was already mapping.

“They’re consistent,” she corrected.

A beat.

“Stability would imply no variance.”

Ace didn’t like that answer.

Shammy moved slightly ahead.

Not leading.

Equalizing.

The air shifted just enough to test the edges of the room.

Nothing pushed back.

Nothing yielded.

That—

was new.

“They don’t need adjustment,” she said quietly.

Ace glanced at her.

“Everything needs adjustment.”

Shammy didn’t argue.

“They’ve removed the need for it.”

That—

was worse.

A voice carried across the room.

Not loud.

Not directed.

“New arrivals.”

Not a question.

Just—
acknowledgment.

Ace’s gaze snapped toward the source.

The man from before.

Gallery.

Auction.

Safehouse.

Consistent.

Of course.

He didn’t stand.

Didn’t gesture.

Just—
included them.

Mai stepped forward.

Not toward him.

Toward the space between.

Measured.

“We were expected,” she said.

The man inclined his head slightly.

“You arrived.”

A pause.

Not approval.

Not surprise.

Just—

completion.

Ace didn't move closer.

Didn't retreat.

Held position.

“Is that enough,” she asked.

The man’s gaze shifted to her.

“No.”

A beat.

“But it’s required.”

Shammy’s eyes moved across the room.

People weren’t watching.

But they were aware.

Every conversation adjusted—

just slightly—

to include them.

Not overtly.

Structurally.

“They’re integrating us,” she said.

Mai’s expression didn’t change.

“Yes.”

Ace’s voice was flat.

“Into what.”

The man answered.

“Continuity.”

Silence.

That word again.

It didn’t get easier.

Mai’s gaze moved across the room.

Now—
she could see it.

Not visually.

Pattern.

Each person—
not identical.

But aligned.

Differences contained.

Variations allowed—
but bounded.

“They’re not preserving individuals,” she said.

The man didn’t respond.

Which meant she was right.

Ace stepped forward once.

Just enough.

“And the ones who don’t fit.”

The man’s gaze stayed on her.

“They don’t remain.”

No threat.

No weight.

Just—

fact.

Shammy’s voice softened.

“They don’t fail.”

A beat.

“They’re replaced.”

That shifted something.

Not in the room.

In the understanding of it.

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"That's not survival."

The man considered her.

"No," he said.

A pause.

"It's continuity."

Of course it was.

A chair sat empty.

Not prominently.

Not hidden.

Just—
there.

Ace noticed it.

Didn't point.

Didn't need to.

Mai saw it next.

Of course she did.

Her gaze lingered for half a second.

Then moved on.

Not ignored.

Not acknowledged.

Logged.

Shammy felt it.

Before she saw it.

The air around that space—
slightly different.

Not unstable.

Waiting.

“They’re missing one,” she said quietly.

The man’s attention shifted.

Not surprised.

Not defensive.

“We are always missing one,” he said.

That—
was worse.

Ace looked at the chair.

Then back at him.

“And you think that’s us.”

The man didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

A conversation nearby shifted.

Not louder.

Just—

closer.

“...they’re early,” someone murmured.

“...or late,” another replied.

Mai’s expression didn’t change.

“They’re not deciding,” she said quietly.

Ace glanced at her.

“Then what.”

Mai met her gaze.

“They’re verifying.”

Shammy stepped slightly forward.

Not toward the chair.

Toward the room.

“They already know the outcome,” she said.

The man’s gaze rested on her.

For a fraction longer than before.

Recognition.

Of something deeper than pattern.

“Yes,” he said.

Silence.

The room didn’t wait.

It continued.

Always continuing.

Ace exhaled slowly.

She didn’t like this.

Didn’t like any of it.

But she understood it now.

Enough.

“They don’t want us to join,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“No.”

A beat.

“They want us to replace.”

That—
was the line.

The chair didn’t move.

Didn’t call attention to itself.

Didn’t need to.

It was already part of the pattern.

Waiting.

Not for someone new.

For someone—
that already fit.

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Last update: **14/04/2026 12:07**

