

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 3 — First Exposure

The gallery was built to be seen.

Not just the art.

The people.

Glass walls, angled just enough to reflect without fully revealing. Light placed with intent — warm where conversation should gather, cold where distance was expected. Everything curated to look effortless.

It wasn't.

Ace noticed that immediately.

"Too clean," she said quietly.

Mai didn't look at her.

"It's meant to be."

"That's the problem."

A faint pause.

Then, softer:

"That's the point."

They entered without announcement.

No one stopped them.

No one greeted them.

Which meant they had already been accepted—

or were about to be tested.

Ace didn't like not knowing which.

The pendant rested against her collarbone.

It didn't feel like anything.

Which was worse.

Every instinct she had told her something was off—

but nothing gave her a target.

No edge.

No vector.

Just... a constant, low-level misalignment.

People looked.

Of course they did.

But not consistently.

Some glanced past her like she wasn't there.

Others lingered a fraction too long—

as if trying to confirm something that didn't quite resolve.

Ace felt it.

That moment where someone's attention slipped.

Like a grip that didn't hold.

"...they're losing track," she muttered.

Mai's voice came back calm, steady.

"Good."

Shammy moved beside them, unhurried.

The air shifted almost imperceptibly as she passed.

A couple near the entrance faltered mid-conversation.

One of them glanced up.

Frowned.

Then shook it off.

Didn't look again.

Shammy didn't react.

She never did.

The first room was sculpture.

Metal, mostly.

Abstract forms that tried very hard to suggest meaning without committing to it.

Ace scanned them once.

Dismissed them.

“None of this matters,” she said.

Mai tilted her head slightly.

“It matters to the people who think it does.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No,” Mai said. “But it’s what we’re working with.”

They moved deeper.

Not together.

Not separated.

Just... offset.

A formation that wasn’t obvious until you tried to define it.

Ace drifted along the outer edge of the room.

Never still.

Never idle.

People noticed that.

Or thought they did.

“Excuse me.”

Ace didn’t turn immediately.

The voice came from her right.

Measured.

Polite.

Expectant.

She looked.

A man in his forties.

Well-dressed.

Too aware of himself to be comfortable.

Trying anyway.

“You’re new,” he said.

Not a question.

Ace held his gaze.

“Yes.”

Silence.

He waited.

For elaboration.

For context.

For something to anchor her to.

Ace didn’t give it.

“...enjoying the exhibition?” he tried.

Ace glanced at the nearest piece.

A twisted structure of polished steel that reflected the room in broken fragments.

“No.”

The man blinked.

Caught off balance.

“...no?”

Ace looked back at him.

“It’s trying too hard.”

A beat.

Then she turned away.

Conversation over.

Behind her, the man hesitated.

Half a step forward.

Then stopped.

Uncertain.

Not dismissed—

just... unanchored.

He watched her go.

Like he'd lost track of something important without realizing when.

Across the room, Mai was already in conversation.

Of course she was.

Two people.

A curator, judging by posture.

And someone else.

Older.

Less obvious.

More dangerous for it.

They were standing in front of a painting.

Large.

Layered.

At first glance, a portrait.

At second—

something else.

The same figure repeated.

Not identically.

Subtle shifts in posture.

Expression.

Age.

All contained within the same frame.

"...most viewers fixate on the surface repetition," the curator was saying.

Mai's gaze remained on the painting.

"They would," she said. "It's the easiest entry point."

The second man spoke.

Voice low.

Controlled.

"And you?"

Mai didn't look at him.

"Continuity," she said.

A pause.

"I'm more interested in what remains consistent."

The man's attention sharpened.

Not visibly.

But the room around them seemed to quiet just a fraction.

"And what would that be," he asked.

Mai tilted her head slightly.

"The structure," she said. "Not the subject."

The curator smiled politely.

Didn't understand.

The other man did.

"...that's an expensive interpretation," he said.

Mai allowed the smallest hint of a smile.

"Not particularly."

A beat.

"We've had pieces that were less honest."

The curator blinked.

"We?"

Mai turned to him now.

Briefly.

Just enough.

"Collection," she said.

Nothing more.

Across the space, Ace caught that.

Didn't hear the words.

Didn't need to.

The shift in attention was enough.

People were starting to connect things.

Or think they were.

Shammy stood near the far wall.

Watching everything.

Not focusing on individuals.

Feeling the room as a whole.

The air had changed.

Subtly.

Pressure building.

Interest condensing.

“They’re starting to align,” she said softly.

No one responded.

They didn’t need to.

A woman near the center of the room glanced toward Ace.

Then toward Mai.

Then back again.

Something didn’t match.

Height.

Presence.

Movement.

Her expression flickered.

Confusion.

Interest.

A need to resolve it.

She stepped closer to someone beside her.

Whispered something.

That someone looked over.

Frowned.

Looked again.

Longer this time.

Ace shifted position.

Not away.

Not toward.

Just enough to break the line.

The woman blinked.

Lost it.

Shook her head.

“...I thought—”

“Thought what?” her companion asked.

She hesitated.

Didn't answer.

Didn't remember clearly enough to try.

Mai's conversation wound down naturally.

No abrupt ending.

No forced exit.

Just... completion.

The man inclined his head slightly.

“You're new,” he said.

Same phrasing.

Different weight.

Mai met his gaze.

“To you.”

A pause.

Measured.

Accepted.

They didn't stay long.

That would have been wrong.

Too much presence becomes noise.

Too little—

irrelevant.

This was enough.

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

Not overtly.

No heads turned in unison.

No conversations stopped.

But something lingered.

An afterimage.

A question that didn't quite resolve.

Outside, the air felt... simpler.

Less structured.

Ace exhaled.

Didn't realize she'd been holding it.

"That was pointless," she said.

Mai adjusted her sleeve slightly.

"No," she said. "That was introduction."

Ace glanced back at the building.

Glass.

Light.

People who would remember them—

incorrectly.

"...they don't know anything," she said.

Shammy stepped beside her.

"They don't need to," she said.

A beat.

"They just need to notice that they should."

Behind them, inside the gallery—

Conversations shifted.

Subtle.

Fragmented.

Incomplete.

“...did you see—”

“I think so—”

“No, they were—”

“Who were they?”

No one had the same answer.

Which meant—

it was working.

Somewhere deeper in the city,

in a room far quieter than the gallery—

a name was spoken.

Not loudly.

Not urgently.

Just... added to a list that didn't get many additions.

Not new.

Not yet.

But no longer invisible.

And that was enough.

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Last update: **14/04/2026 12:01**

