

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 4 — The Price of Understanding

The room was darker than the gallery.

Not dim.

Controlled.

Light didn't fall freely here — it was directed, contained, allowed to exist only where it served a purpose.

Rows of seating.

Tiered.

Private without being isolated.

Every angle accounted for.

Every line of sight intentional.

Ace noticed the exits first.

Then the people.

Different from the gallery.

Less noise.

Less need to be seen.

These weren't observers.

They were participants.

Or worse—

evaluators.

"...don't assume anything," Mai said quietly.

She didn't look at Ace.

Didn't need to.

"Already not," Ace replied.

Her gaze moved once across the room.

Slow.

Measured.

No wasted motion.

“They’re not watching us,” she added.

Mai’s voice stayed even.

“They are.”

A beat.

“They’re just better at it.”

Shammy stepped into place beside them.

The air shifted slightly.

Not enough to draw attention.

Enough to register, somewhere deeper.

“They’re waiting,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“For what.”

Shammy’s eyes tracked the room.

Not individuals.

The pattern.

“A mistake,” she said.

They took their seats.

Not in the back.

Not at the center.

Offset.

Visible.

But not obvious.

Mai placed her hands lightly on the table in front of her.

Still.

Composed.

Like she belonged there.

Which—

was the point.

The auctioneer stepped into the light.

Unremarkable at first glance.

Which made him dangerous.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, voice smooth, practiced. “We’ll begin shortly.”

A pause.

A faint smile.

“As always, discretion is appreciated. Memory... negotiable.”

Soft laughter.

Controlled.

Ace didn’t react.

But she heard it.

Not the joke.

The tone behind it.

The first item appeared.

Contained.

Encased in glass.

Small.

Unassuming.

“...a minor artifact,” the auctioneer said. “Documented to retain residual emotional imprint from prior ownership.”

Ace's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Memory," she muttered.

Mai didn't respond.

Her attention was fixed on the object.

Not visually.

Structurally.

"Opening bid—"

A number.

High.

But not excessive.

Hands raised.

Voices followed.

Measured increments.

Testing the water.

Mai didn't move.

Not yet.

Ace glanced at her.

"You're not interested."

Mai shook her head once.

"Not enough signal."

The item sold.

Clean.

Predictable.

No disruption.

Second item.

Larger.

More presence.

A fractured mirror.

Surface uneven.

Light bent wrong across it.

“...known to produce inconsistent reflections under certain conditions,” the auctioneer said.
“Observer-dependent variance.”

A few heads tilted.

Interest rising.

Bidding started faster this time.

Higher.

Less hesitation.

Ace leaned slightly toward Mai.

“They want this.”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

Mai’s answer was quiet.

“Because it tells them something about themselves.”

Ace didn’t like that.

Didn’t argue it.

The numbers climbed.

Faster now.

Less controlled.

Someone across the room raised the bid sharply.

Another followed.

Escalation.

Mai moved.

A single motion.

Unhurried.

“Eight hundred thousand.”

The room shifted.

Not visibly.

But the rhythm broke.

Bidding paused.

Just for a second.

Ace watched the reactions.

Eyes.

Posture.

Breathing patterns adjusting.

“They’re recalculating,” she said.

Mai didn’t look at her.

“Yes.”

A voice from the opposite side.

Calm.

Controlled.

“One million.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“One point six.”

Silence.

Not complete.

But heavy.

The kind that presses down on a room and waits.

Ace felt it.

That moment.

Where everything stopped being about money.

And started being about meaning.

No immediate counter.

The auctioneer didn't rush it.

He knew what this was.

Let it breathe.

Someone leaned toward their neighbor.

Whispered.

Eyes flicked toward Mai.

Then away.

Then back again.

Trying to place her.

Failing.

"...one point six million," the auctioneer repeated. "Do we have—"

No answer.

A beat longer.

Then:

"Sold."

The gavel fell.

Soft.

Final.

Ace exhaled once.

“That was high.”

Mai’s response was immediate.

“No.”

A pause.

“It was correct.”

The room didn’t erupt.

Didn’t react.

But something had changed.

The attention was different now.

Sharper.

More focused.

Less casual.

A man approached.

Not immediately.

Not directly.

But inevitably.

Mid-fifties.

Understated.

Expensive in ways that didn’t need to be visible.

“You bid decisively,” he said to Mai.

Not praise.

Observation.

Mai inclined her head slightly.

“It simplifies things.”

A faint smile.

“Or complicates them.”

Mai’s eyes met his.

Briefly.

“Only if the valuation is wrong.”

Ace shifted slightly behind her.

The man’s gaze flicked toward her.

Paused.

“...you’re together,” he said.

Not a question.

Ace answered.

“Yes.”

Nothing more.

The man studied her for a fraction too long.

Something didn’t align.

Height.

Presence.

The way she held herself.

It didn’t match his expectation.

Didn’t match the narrative he was building.

Good.

Shammy stepped into the edge of the conversation.

Not interrupting.

Just... present.

The air shifted again.

Subtle.

Unavoidable.

The man's attention faltered for half a second.

Enough to notice.

Not enough to understand.

"...new collectors?" he asked.

Mai's answer was smooth.

"To you."

The same phrasing.

Different context.

Same effect.

A pause.

Then—

acceptance.

Not full.

Not complete.

But enough.

He inclined his head slightly.

“Enjoy the evening.”

He didn't wait for a reply.

Moved on.

Ace watched him go.

“He knew.”

Mai adjusted her sleeve.

“He suspects.”

“That's worse.”

“Yes.”

The auction continued.

More items.

More bids.

None of it mattered now.

Not really.

The signal had already been sent.

As they stood to leave, no one stopped them.

No one acknowledged them.

But the space they had occupied—
remained.

Like a shape cut out of something larger.

Outside, the night felt less controlled.

More honest.

Ace rolled her shoulder once.

Tension bleeding out in small increments.

“They were testing you,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

“You passed.”

Mai considered that.

Then:

“No.”

Ace looked at her.

Mai met her gaze.

“I gave them something to think about.”

A beat.

“That’s more valuable.”

Shammy stepped beside them.

Quiet.

Steady.

“They’re adjusting,” she said.

Ace glanced back at the building.

“They should.”

Shammy’s expression didn’t change.

“They will.”

Behind them, inside the controlled darkness—

Names were being compared.

Patterns checked.

Histories searched.

Nothing matched.

Which made it worse.

And somewhere, not far from where decisions like this were made—

A conversation shifted.

Slightly.

Quietly.

From:

who are they

to:

why don't they fit

That was enough.

For now.

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Last update: **14/04/2026 12:02**

