

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 10 — What Doesn't Follow

The door stayed open.

Behind them—
the room continued.

That didn't change.

Ace noticed something else.

It didn't follow.

Most places—
when you leave—
cling.

Noise.
Voices.
Presence.

This one didn't.

The moment they crossed the threshold—
it let go.

Completely.

Ace stopped.

Just outside.

Turned—

not fully.

Just enough to check.

The room was still there.

Of course it was.

But it no longer included them.

“...it dropped us,” she said.

Mai stepped beside her.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“We’re no longer relevant.”

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"That's not how they've been operating."

"No," Mai agreed.

A pause.

"It's how they conclude."

Shammy moved past them.

One step into the open air.

The pressure changed.

Not release.

Not relief.

Just—

difference.

"They don't hold what they can't use," she said.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“Good.”

A beat.

“I wasn’t planning to stay.”

They didn’t move immediately.

That mattered.

Most people—
after something like that—
leave.

Quickly.

Distance equals safety.

Not here.

Not this time.

Mai looked down at her hand.

Empty.

A pause.

“...the card,” she said.

Ace blinked once.

Checked her own.

Nothing.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“It’s gone.”

Of course it was.

Ace huffed once.

“Figures.”

Mai didn’t look surprised.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“It completed its function.”

Ace glanced back at the door again.

Still open.

Still wrong.

Still—

irrelevant now.

“They don’t leave artifacts,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“No.”

Shammy’s gaze drifted.

Not to the building.

Past it.

Into the space the building occupied.

“They don’t need to,” she said.

A car passed.

Normal.

Noise returned.

Movement resumed.

The city reasserted itself.

Ace rolled her shoulder once.

Tension easing.

Not gone.

Just... no longer required.

“They were never going to let us in,” she said.

Mai shook her head slightly.

“No.”

A pause.

“They let us reach the point where we would refuse.”

Ace looked at her.

“That’s the same thing.”

“No,” Mai said.

A beat.

“It’s control.”

Shammy’s voice came in softer.

“They don’t want converts.”

Ace glanced at her.

“Then what.”

Shammy met her gaze.

“They want continuity.”

Of course they did.

Silence settled.

Not heavy.

Just... finished.

Ace took a step forward.

Away from the building.

Didn't look back again.

Didn't need to.

“Foundation’s going to hate this,” she said.

Mai allowed the smallest shift in expression.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“They won’t understand it.”

Ace exhaled once.

“That makes two of us.”

Shammy stepped into motion beside them.

The air around her stabilized fully now.

No residual pressure.

No imbalance.

“They will try to classify it,” she said.

Ace snorted lightly.

“Good luck.”

Mai’s voice stayed even.

“They’ll get close.”

A pause.

“But not enough.”

They walked.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Just... leaving.

Behind them—
the building didn’t change.

Didn't disappear.

Didn't react.

But something—

subtle—

almost imperceptible—

shifted.

Inside—

the room continued.

Always.

A conversation resumed.

"...they didn't align," someone said.

Another voice—

quieter.

"...no."

A beat.

“They held.”

Silence.

Then—

“...rare.”

The empty chair remained.

Not waiting.

Not expecting.

Just—
available.

Outside—
the city carried on.

Unaffected.

Unaware.

Ace didn't slow.

Didn't hesitate.

But for the first time since they had started this—

she didn't feel like something was missing.

Because whatever the Hellfire Club was—

it didn't take anything from them.

And that—

mattered more

than anything they had almost been offered.

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