

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 2 — Signal Construction

The safehouse was quieter than the Foundation room.

Not cleaner.

Not more controlled.

Just... lived in.

Which made the task worse.

Ace stood by the window.

Same posture as before.

Different tension.

City lights reflected faintly in the glass, fractured just enough to make the outside feel less stable than it was.

Mai sat at the table.

Laptop open.

Three screens active.

None of them simple.

Shammy leaned against the far wall, long frame angled just enough that she wasn't fully resting on anything. The air around her held that same subtle imbalance — like pressure waiting for a decision.

On the table:

Three pendants.

Identical.

Except they weren't.

Not really.

Ace hadn't touched hers.

Mai had.

Of course she had.

Shammy... didn't need to.

“You’re staring at it like it’s going to bite you,” Mai said without looking up.

Ace didn’t turn.

“It will.”

“Not physically.”

“That’s not better.”

Mai’s fingers moved across the keyboard.

Controlled.

Efficient.

She wasn’t building something new.

She was shaping something that already existed.

“Identity scaffolding is ready,” she said.

Ace exhaled once.

Short.

“Say that in a way that matters.”

Mai paused.

Considered.

Adjusted.

“We’re not creating a lie,” she said. “We’re selecting what parts of us get seen.”

Ace finally turned.

“That’s still a lie.”

“No,” Mai said calmly. “It’s editing.”

A beat.

“Everyone does it.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to Shammy.

“Do you.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“I don’t need to,” she said.

Not arrogance.

Just fact.

Ace looked back at the table.

At the pendant.

Still didn't move.

Mai rotated one of the screens toward her.

"Exposure one is already chosen," she said. "Public enough to be noticed. Controlled enough to avoid saturation."

Images.

A gallery space.

Glass. Steel. Light designed to feel expensive without announcing it.

"Too many people," Ace said immediately.

"Not for what we need."

"They'll look."

"Yes."

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"That's the problem."

Mai met her gaze now.

"No," she said. "That's the signal."

Silence stretched.

Not empty.

Just... unresolved.

Bright had said:

You're being seen.

Ace didn't like that.

Didn't trust it.

Didn't understand how to operate inside it.

Fighting made sense.

Movement made sense.

Even waiting made sense.

But this—

Standing still while people decided what she was—

That was different.

Shammy pushed off the wall.

Walked closer to the table.

Not fast.

Never fast.

The air shifted with her — just enough that the edges of the room softened slightly.

“They're not looking at you,” she said.

Ace frowned.

“They are.”

Shammy shook her head.

“They're looking for something that fits,” she said. “You're just... where they're projecting it.”

A pause.

Ace considered that.

Didn't like it.

But it tracked.

Mai tapped the screen again.

“Exposure one establishes presence,” she said. “Exposure two establishes competence.”

Another screen.

Different environment.

Darker.

More contained.

A list of items scrolled past.

Descriptions that didn't read like normal objects.

Ace stepped closer.

Just enough to see.

"...auction," she said.

"Marshall, Carter & Dark," Mai confirmed.

Ace's expression didn't change.

But something in her posture sharpened.

"They'll test you."

"Yes."

"They won't care about money."

"No."

A beat.

"Then why you."

Mai's answer came without hesitation.

"Because I'll understand what's being sold."

Ace looked at her.

Longer this time.

Measuring.

Not doubting.

Just... checking.

"...you're sure."

Mai held the look.

"I don't need to win," she said. "I need to be correct."

Shammy's voice slipped in quietly.

"That's what they're listening for."

Ace's gaze dropped to the pendants again.

Three of them.

Waiting.

She reached out.

Finally.

Picked hers up.

It was lighter than it looked.

Colder, too.

Not physically.

Just... wrong in a way that didn't sit in her hand properly.

"What does it feel like," she asked.

Mai didn't answer.

Shammy did.

"Like you're slightly out of place," she said. "Even when you're not."

Ace huffed once.

"Great."

She turned it over.

No markings.

No visible mechanism.

"Put it on," Mai said.

Not a command.

Not quite.

Ace hesitated.

Then—

did it.

Nothing happened.

No flash.

No shift.

No immediate distortion.

Ace frowned.

“That’s it.”

“Wait.”

Mai watched her.

Not visually.

Structurally.

Tracking micro-adjustments.

Shammy’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Again,” she said.

Ace blinked.

Once.

Twice.

“...what.”

Shammy stepped closer.

Looked at her directly.

Then slightly to the side.

Then back.

A faint crease formed between her brows.

“Say something,” she said.

Ace stared at her.

“I’m saying something.”

Shammy tilted her head.

“...no you’re not.”

A beat.

Ace’s expression flattened.

"I just did."

Mai's fingers stilled on the keyboard.

She looked up.

Really looked this time.

There was a flicker—

just for a second—

like her focus didn't quite lock.

"...repeat that," she said.

Ace didn't move.

"Take it off."

Ace did.

Immediately.

The room snapped back into alignment.

Subtle.

But undeniable.

Mai exhaled slowly.

"Good," she said.

Ace stared at the pendant.

Not impressed.

"Define good."

"It works."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," Mai agreed. "It's better."

Silence settled again.

Heavier this time.

More real.

Ace set the pendant back down.

Carefully.

Like it might decide to matter more if she wasn't paying attention.

"I hate this already," she said.

Bright's voice echoed faintly in memory.

Welcome to the part where you have to talk to rich people.

Ace closed her eyes for half a second.

Then opened them again.

Focus returning.

Sharpening.

Different from before.

Not combat.

Not yet.

But something close.

"Fine," she said.

One word.

Enough weight behind it to count.

"When."

Mai checked the schedule.

Cross-referenced something.

Adjusted.

"Tomorrow night," she said.

A pause.

"Gallery opening."

Ace nodded once.

No hesitation now.

Just direction.

Shammy moved back slightly.

Gave the room space again.

The pressure shifted with her.

Balanced.

For now.

“They’ll notice you,” she said quietly.

Ace didn’t look at her.

“I know.”

Shammy’s voice softened just a fraction.

“They won’t know why.”

That—

was the point.

Outside, the city continued exactly as it had before.

Lights.

Movement.

Noise.

Nothing unusual.

Inside the safehouse—

Three pendants rested on the table.

Three slightly different distortions waiting to be worn.

And somewhere, in rooms far more controlled than this one—

People who didn’t recruit

were already beginning to notice

that something new

had entered their pattern.

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