

# ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

## Chapter 6 — Recognition Without Invitation

They didn't receive a message.

No call.

No envelope.

No intermediary pretending not to be one.

---

That was the first sign.

---

Ace noticed it before Mai said anything.

"Nothing," she said.

Not frustration.

Observation.

---

Mai didn't look up from the screen.

"That's the response."

Ace frowned.

"That's not a response."

"Yes," Mai said calmly. "It is."

---

Shammy leaned against the wall.

The safehouse air carried less pressure now.

Not calm.

Just... waiting.

"They don't reach out," she said.

---

Ace crossed her arms.

“Then we missed it.”

---

“No,” Mai said.

A pause.

Then she turned the screen.

---

Images.

Fragments.

Nothing official.

Nothing complete.

---

A photo—

or something trying to be one.

Three figures.

Wrong proportions.

Blurred edges.

Light bending where it shouldn't.

---

Ace stared at it.

“That's us.”

---

Mai nodded once.

“Someone tried to capture us at the gallery.”

---

Another image.

Different angle.

---

Different distortion.

---

Then another.

From the auction.

Even worse.

---

Ace exhaled once.

“They can’t hold us.”

---

Shammy stepped closer.

Not to the screen.

To the space around it.

“They’re trying to,” she said.

---

Mai zoomed in.

Not on the figures.

On the background.

---

People.

Conversations.

Small clusters of movement.

---

Patterns.

---

“They’re mapping reactions,” Mai said quietly.

---

Ace looked at her.

---

“Explain.”

---

Mai didn't rush it.

“They can't record us directly,” she said. “So they're recording everything around us.”

A beat.

“Then reconstructing.”

---

Ace's expression hardened slightly.

“They're building us anyway.”

---

“Yes.”

---

Shammy's gaze shifted.

Not at the images.

Beyond them.

---

“They're not building you,” she said.

---

Ace glanced at her.

---

“They're confirming something they already think you are.”

---

Silence.

---

That—

was worse.

---

Mai closed the screen.

Not needed anymore.

---

“They’ve seen enough,” she said.

---

Ace pushed off the wall.

Moved once across the room.

Then back again.

---

“So what,” she said. “We wait.”

---

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

---

A pause.

---

“We’re already in.”

---

Ace stopped.

Turned.

---

“That’s not how this works.”

---

“It is for them.”

---

Another pause.

Longer.

---

Shammy stepped between them.

Not interrupting.

Balancing.

---

“They don’t open doors,” she said.

---

Ace’s eyes narrowed slightly.

---

“They let you realize you’re already inside.”

---

The room went quiet again.

---

Not empty.

---

Settled.

---

A moment passed.

Then—

a sound.

---

Not loud.

Not sharp.

---

Just—

wrong.

---

Ace's head snapped slightly toward the door.

---

It hadn't opened.

---

But something had changed.

---

Mai noticed it next.

Not visually.

Structurally.

---

"The alignment shifted," she said.

---

Shammy's gaze moved to the doorway.

---

"They're here."

---

Ace didn't reach for anything.

Didn't need to.

---

"Where."

---

The door opened.

---

No force.

No hesitation.

---

Just—

presence.

---

The man from the gallery stepped inside.

---

Alone.

---

Same posture.

Same absence of defining markers.

---

He closed the door behind him.

---

No rush.

---

No tension.

---

Like he had every right to be there.

---

Which—

he probably did.

---

Ace didn't move.

Didn't step forward.

---

Didn't step back.

---

Measured.

---

The man looked at each of them.

Not quickly.

Not slowly.

---

Accurately.

---

"You've been busy," he said.

---

Mai didn't respond immediately.

---

"We've been visible," she said.

---

A faint shift.

Not quite approval.

---

"Close enough."

---

Ace's gaze locked on him.

---

"You followed us."

---

"No," he said.

---

A beat.

“You made yourselves impossible to ignore.”

---

Fair.

---

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air around her adjusted.

Not hostile.

Not welcoming.

---

Balanced.

---

“You’re not here to observe,” she said.

---

The man’s attention moved to her.

Paused.

---

No confusion.

---

Recognition.

---

“No,” he said.

---

Silence.

---

Then:

---

“You’re expected.”

---

Not an invitation.

---

Not a request.

---

A statement.

---

Mai’s posture didn’t change.

---

“By who.”

---

The man held her gaze.

---

“You already know.”

---

A pause.

---

Ace exhaled once.

---

“...Hellfire Club.”

---

The man didn’t confirm it.

Didn’t deny it.

Didn't need to.

---

Another silence.

---

Then—

he reached into his coat.

---

Ace didn't react.

Not outwardly.

---

The man placed something on the table.

---

Not paper.

Not digital.

---

A card.

---

Black.

Unmarked—

at first.

---

Then—

not.

---

As the light shifted, something emerged.

---

Not ink.

Not engraving.

---

Structure.

---

A pattern that only resolved if you didn't look at it directly.

---

Mai studied it.

Carefully.

---

"It's not an address," she said.

---

"No."

---

"Then what."

---

The man's voice stayed level.

---

"An understanding."

---

Ace didn't like that.

---

"What does it mean."

---

The man looked at her.

---

“It means you’ll arrive.”

---

A beat.

---

“Or you won’t.”

---

Shammy stepped closer to the table.

Not touching the card.

---

“It’s already decided,” she said.

---

The man’s gaze shifted to her again.

---

“Yes.”

---

Another silence.

---

Then—

he turned.

---

No dramatic exit.

No final words.

---

Just—

left.

---

The door closed.

---

The room settled.

---

Ace looked at the card.

Didn't touch it.

---

"...that's not a choice," she said.

---

Mai didn't look away from it.

---

"No," she said.

---

A pause.

---

"It's a confirmation."

---

Shammy's voice was softer now.

---

"They're not inviting you in."

---

Ace's eyes narrowed slightly.

---

"Then what."

---

Shammy met her gaze.

---

“They’re acknowledging that you already belong.”

---

Silence.

---

That—

was worse.

---

Much worse.

---

Ace reached out.

Finally.

Picked up the card.

---

For a moment—

it didn’t feel like anything.

---

Then—

just slightly—

wrong.

---

“...when,” she asked.

---

Mai exhaled slowly.

---

“Soon.”

---

A beat.

---

“Not rushed.”

---

Ace nodded once.

---

Good.

---

Because if this was what it felt like  
before they even got inside—

---

then whatever waited beyond that card

---

wasn't going to be simple.

---

And it definitely  
wasn't going to be fast.

---

—

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