

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 7 — The Space Before Entry

The card didn't change.

That was the first thing Ace noticed.

It should have.

Something like that—

something built to be seen wrong—

should have shifted.

Distorted.

Refused to stay the same.

It didn't.

It sat on the table exactly as it had been placed.

Flat.

Still.

Unremarkable—

until you tried to define it.

Ace turned it once between her fingers.

Then again.

Nothing.

"...I don't like it," she said.

Mai didn't look up.

"That's not relevant."

Ace set it back down.

Harder than necessary.

"It should be."

Shammy moved closer.

Not to the card.

To the space around it.

The air didn't react.

That—

was wrong.

"It's stable," she said quietly.

Mai's hands stilled.

Just for a second.

"...explain."

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“Everything else they’ve done,” she said. “It shifts. Adjusts. Rebalances.”

A pause.

“This doesn’t.”

Ace’s gaze snapped back to the card.

“They don’t need it to.”

Mai looked at her now.

“Why.”

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

Because the answer wasn’t structural.

It was instinct.

“Because it’s already correct,” she said.

Silence.

That landed.

Mai leaned back slightly.

Processing.

Reframing.

“It’s not transmitting information,” she said slowly.

A beat.

“It’s aligning us to it.”

Shammy’s expression didn’t change.

But something in the room did.

Just a fraction.

“Yes.”

Ace didn’t touch the card again.

Didn’t need to.

“Then we don’t follow it,” she said.

Mai shook her head once.

“We already are.”

That—

was the problem.

Ace exhaled slowly.

She didn't like this kind of fight.

No direction.

No edge.

No clear moment where action mattered.

Just—

inevitability.

"...I can break it," she said.

Mai didn't even consider it.

"No."

A beat.

"It's not resisting anything."

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"That doesn't make it safe."

"No," Mai agreed.

“It makes it irrelevant to force.”

Shammy stepped back slightly.

Let the room breathe again.

“They’re not testing strength,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“Then what.”

Shammy met her gaze.

“Whether you understand what they are.”

Silence.

That—

was worse.

Ace looked away.

“Fine.”

One word.

Same as before.

Different weight.

Mai reached for the card.

This time—

carefully.

Not cautious.

Precise.

She turned it once.

Light shifted across its surface.

Not reflecting.

Resolving.

For a fraction of a second—

lines appeared.

Not visible.

Not directly.

But there.

Coordinates—

or something like them.

Not fixed.

Conditional.

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"It's location-dependent," she said.

Ace frowned.

"Meaning."

"It doesn't show where to go," Mai said. "It shows when we're in the right place."

A pause.

"That's worse," Ace said.

"Yes."

Shammy's gaze drifted toward the window.

The city beyond it.

Lights.

Movement.

Noise.

All of it—

slightly wrong now.

“They’re not giving you entry,” she said.

Ace didn’t turn.

“I know.”

Shammy’s voice softened.

“They’re letting you find where you already fit.”

Mai stood.

Decision made.

“We move,” she said.

Ace looked at her.

“Now.”

“Yes.”

No hesitation.

No delay.

Waiting would change nothing.

They didn’t take much.

They didn’t need to.

The pendants stayed.

The card came with them.

The city outside hadn’t changed.

But the way it felt—

had.

Ace stepped out first.

Paused.

Just for a second.

Not to check surroundings.

Not to scan for threats.

To feel it.

Direction without direction.

Wrong—

but consistent.

“...this way,” she said.

Mai didn't question it.

Shammy didn't need to.

They moved.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Just—

correct.

Street by street.

Turn by turn.

No clear path.

No visible marker.

But the card—
shifted.

Not visibly.

But enough.

Enough that Mai adjusted.

That Ace corrected.

That Shammy didn't need to.

The city thinned.

Noise faded.

Light changed.

Old buildings.

Older streets.

Places that had never quite left—
but had stopped being noticed.

Ace slowed.

Not intentionally.

Because something ahead—
held.

“There,” she said.

Not pointing.

Didn't need to.

The building didn't stand out.

That was the problem.

It should have.

Given everything else—

it should have been obvious.

It wasn't.

Which made it worse.

Mai stepped beside her.

Looked at it.

Not visually.

Structurally.

"...it's consistent," she said.

Shammy moved to the other side.

The air shifted slightly.

Balanced.

Contained.

“They’re already inside,” she said.

Ace looked at the door.

Closed.

Unremarkable.

Final.

“...this is it,” she said.

Not a question.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Silence settled.

Not hesitation.

Not fear.

Just—
acknowledgment.

Ace reached for the door.

Stopped.

Not because she couldn't.

Because—
for the first time in this entire operation—

this wasn't about getting in.

It was about accepting
that they already had.

She pushed.

The door opened.

Without resistance.

Without sound.

Without question.

And whatever waited beyond it—

was already waiting.

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace28:chapter7>

Last update: **14/04/2026 12:06**

