

ACE 28 — Hellfire Protocol

Chapter 1 — Foundation Briefing

The room was too clean.

Not sterile — not clinical — just... correct.

Everything sat exactly where it was supposed to. Lines aligned. Surfaces unmarked. The kind of space that didn't invite mistakes because it had already removed the possibility of them.

Ace stood near the back wall.

Not leaning. Not relaxed. Just... positioned.

Mai was seated.

Of course she was.

Shammy didn't choose a place so much as she occupied one — a quiet distortion in the air near the far side of the table, tall enough that the room had to acknowledge her presence even when no one was looking directly at her.

At the head of the table:

Dr. Gears.

Still.

Precise.

Already speaking.

"...the anomaly does not present as a discrete object, entity, or event."

No greeting. No buildup.

Just data.

Ace's gaze shifted slightly.

Not toward him — toward the screen.

Rows of faces.

Different decades.

Same names.

Or close enough to be the same.

"...membership records indicate continuity exceeding statistically viable biological limits," Gears continued. "Observed individuals maintain functional identity over extended timeframes without corresponding physiological degradation."

A slide changed.

Photographs.

Black and white.

Sepia.

Early color.

Digital.

The same man — or something very close to him — standing in each.

Not identical.

But not different enough.

Mai leaned forward a fraction.

"Behavioral drift," she said.

Not a question.

Gears inclined his head.

"Confirmed."

Another slide.

Handwritten notes.

Signatures.

Different hands.

Same name.

Ace spoke.

"They're not the same people."

Flat.

Immediate.

Gears did not look at her.

"Correct."

A beat.

Then:

“They present as continuous identity.”

Shammy’s gaze drifted across the screen.

Not focusing on any single image.

Feeling the pattern instead.

The air in the room shifted — barely.

Like pressure adjusting before a storm decided whether it was worth forming.

“They’re holding something in place,” she said quietly.

Gears paused.

Just long enough to register the input.

“Clarify.”

Shammy didn’t look at him.

“It’s not age,” she said. “It’s tension.”

Silence.

Not empty.

Processing.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“They’re maintaining a structure,” she said. “Not a body.”

Gears nodded once.

“Designation: Hellfire Club.”

The name sat in the room for a moment.

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

But her attention sharpened.

That mattered.

Names always did.

The door opened without ceremony.

Dr. Bright didn’t walk in so much as arrive.

Coffee in hand.

Tie optional.

Energy... inconsistent.

"Well, this looks like a party," he said, glancing at the screen. "Ah. The immortality crowd."

"No confirmed immortality," Gears said immediately.

Bright waved that off with the coffee.

"Sure. 'Functionally persistent identity constructs operating across generational boundaries.' Rolls right off the tongue."

He set the cup down somewhere that had definitely been clean before.

Looked at the images.

Tilted his head.

"...they're cheating," he said.

Ace glanced at him.

Not amused.

Not dismissive.

Just measuring.

"How," she asked.

Bright grinned slightly.

"Wrong question."

He tapped the screen.

"You're asking *what they are*."

A beat.

"You should be asking *what they're doing*."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly.

"They're preserving continuity," she said. "At the cost of identity."

Bright snapped his fingers once.

"See? This is why I like bringing you in."

Gears did not react.

“Foundation interest is not theoretical,” he said. “Hellfire Club exhibits long-term stability, high-resource access, and controlled recruitment patterns.”

Another slide.

Locations.

Private events.

Closed doors.

Old buildings that never quite left the map.

“Invite-only,” Mai said.

“Correct.”

“No financial entry vector,” she continued.

“Correct.”

“No political leverage point.”

“Correct.”

A pause.

Then:

“They’re filtering for something else.”

Gears looked at her.

“Yes.”

Ace pushed off the wall.

Just enough to shift her weight.

“Then we don’t get in.”

Simple.

Direct.

No frustration in it.

Just conclusion.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“They already know who gets in,” she said.

Bright pointed at her with the coffee.

“Exactly.”

He stepped closer to the table.

“Clubs like this? They don’t recruit.”

A beat.

“They notice.”

Mai leaned back.

Thinking.

Not rushing it.

“They respond to pattern recognition,” she said slowly. “Not application.”

“Bingo.”

Ace’s gaze moved between them.

“Then we give them a pattern,” she said.

Not a suggestion.

A decision forming.

Bright’s grin widened.

“Now we’re talking.”

Gears spoke before it could escalate.

“Operational constraint,” he said. “Subject organization exhibits high sensitivity to surveillance.”

Ace didn’t even look at him.

“We’re not surveilling,” she said.

A small pause.

“We’re being seen.”

That landed.

Harder than it should have.

Because it wasn’t their normal operating mode.

At all.

Mai’s expression shifted.

Just slightly.

Calculation adjusting to a new axis.

“Visibility increases risk,” she said.

“It also creates signal,” Bright countered.

Shammy’s fingers brushed lightly against the edge of the table.

Static, almost imperceptible.

“They’re listening for something specific,” she said.

Ace looked at her.

“What.”

Shammy met her gaze.

“Continuity,” she said.

Another silence.

This one longer.

Gears broke it.

“Recommendation?”

Mai answered.

“We construct an identity vector,” she said. “Not false. Amplified.”

Ace didn’t like that.

It showed in the way she didn’t react.

“Explain.”

Mai turned slightly toward her.

“We don’t pretend to be something else,” she said. “We become a version of ourselves that fits their pattern.”

Ace’s jaw tightened a fraction.

“I don’t do that.”

“No,” Mai said calmly. “You don’t.”

A beat.

“Which is why it will work.”

Bright laughed softly.

“Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Gears ignored him.

“Implementation details required.”

Bright reached into his pocket.

Pulled out something small.

Metal.

Thin.

A chain.

Set it on the table.

It didn't belong there.

Not in that room.

Not in that alignment.

“Start with this,” he said.

Mai looked at it.

Then at him.

“...what is it.”

Bright's grin didn't fade.

“Call it a perception adjustment tool.”

Ace didn't move.

“What does it do.”

Bright shrugged lightly.

“Same thing that happens when someone tries to take a photo of Clef.”

A pause.

Mai blinked once.

“Explain properly.”

Bright sighed.

“Fine. Memetic desync agent. Localized. Wearable.”

He tapped the pendant.

“Cameras don’t get you right. Recordings drift. People remember you... incorrectly.”

Shammy watched it.

Not the object.

The space around it.

“It distorts narrative anchoring,” she said.

Bright pointed again.

“See? Again. Useful.”

Ace’s gaze hardened slightly.

“I don’t like being mis-seen.”

Bright met her eyes.

“For once,” he said, “that’s the point.”

Silence.

Mai reached out.

Picked up the pendant.

Turned it slightly.

Light didn’t quite reflect off it the way it should have.

“...controlled ambiguity,” she said.

Gears nodded.

“Reduces traceability.”

“Increases interpretive variance,” Mai added.

Ace looked at both of them.

Then at the screen again.

The faces.

The almost-same people.

“They’re doing the same thing,” she said.

Not a question.

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“They’re doing it permanently.”

Shammy’s voice was softer now.

“And perfectly.”

Ace looked down at the pendant in Mai’s hand.

Then back up.

Decision settling.

Uncomfortable.

Necessary.

“...fine,” she said.

Not agreement.

Not approval.

Just... acceptance of direction.

Bright picked up his coffee again.

Took a sip.

Grinned.

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

Ace didn’t even blink.

“I won’t.”

Mai didn’t look at her.

“You will.”

Shammy’s lips curved just slightly.

Not quite a smile.

More like recognition of incoming weather.

Outside the room, nothing changed.

Inside it—

Something had already started moving.

Not fast.

Not loud.

But with direction.

And once that kind of movement began—

It didn't stop.

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