

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”
Chapter 4 — Divergence Frame

No one stepped back.

That was the mistake the system expected.

And the one it didn't get.

Ace held her position.

Not locked.

Not fixed.

Just—

not yielding.

Mai didn't look at the surface anymore.

Not directly.

She shifted her angle—

deliberately breaking the clean line that had almost formed between her and Ace.

That mattered.

Shammy stayed where she was.

Centered—

but not aligned.

The air around her—

uneven—

finally hers again.

For a moment—

nothing changed.

Then—

everything did.

“...describe it,” Mai said.

Flat.

Controlled.

Ace didn't hesitate.

"...structures," she said.

A beat.

"...tall."

Another.

"...too far to be this close."

Mai processed.

Adjusted.

"...incomplete parallax," she said.

Shammy spoke next.

Slower.

"...I don't see structures."

Silence.

Ace didn't move.

"...what do you see."

Shammy's gaze stayed fixed—

but not on the same point.

"...pressure," she said.

A beat.

"...like something trying to exist."

Mai's eyes narrowed.

That was already divergence.

She stepped sideways again—

increasing the angle difference.

"Now," she said.

"Again."

Ace didn't like it.

Didn't say it.

"...movement," she said.

Flat.

"...not crossing."

A pause.

"...adjusting to me."

Shammy shook her head slightly.

"...no."

A beat.

"...it's adjusting to itself."

Mai didn't respond immediately.

She recalculated.

Discarded the last model.

Built a new one—

faster.

"...it's not shared," she said.

Flat.

"Each of us is resolving a different version."

That landed.

Hard.

Ace's voice dropped.

"...then which one is real."

Mai didn't hesitate.

"None."

Silence.

The surface—

did not change.

But now—

it didn't match between them.

Ace saw depth.

Mai saw inconsistency.

Shammy felt tension.

Three inputs.

No agreement.

And for the first time—
the system faltered.

Light—
shifted.

Not in intensity.

In authority.

Edges softened—
then snapped—
then softened again.

“...it needs convergence,” Mai said.

Ace didn’t blink.

“...not getting it.”

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—
finally—
moved.

Not clean.

Not stable.

But free.

“...it’s pushing for it,” she said.

A beat.

“...trying to align us.”

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Another beat.

“And if it succeeds—”

She didn’t finish.

Didn’t need to.

Ace answered anyway.

“...then it becomes real.”

Silence.

That was the threshold.

Not physical.

Not spatial.

Cognitive.

Perceptual.

Agreement.

Ace stepped forward.

One step.

Nothing crossed.

Nothing changed—

except what she saw.

The structures—

closer now.

Wrong.

Too fast.

Her voice lowered.

“...distance collapsed.”

Mai’s eyes snapped to her.

“Stop measuring it like distance.”

A beat.

"It isn't."

Shammy stepped—

but not in the same direction.

Her path cut across Ace's line—

breaking it.

Immediately—

the depth reduced.

Not gone.

Weakened.

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

"Don't let it build."

Mai moved next.

Sharp.

Deliberate.

She stepped into a position that forced all three of them—

into different angular relationships with the surface.

Three viewpoints.

Three interpretations.

No overlap.

The surface—

hesitated.

Not visibly.

Structurally.

Like it no longer had a single solution.

"...it's failing to resolve," Mai said.

Ace's voice stayed flat.

"...good."

Shammy's gaze flickered.

Just once.

“...not good.”

A beat.

“...it’s not stopping.”

The surface—

shifted again.

Not closer.

Not further.

But—

more detailed.

Each of them—

saw more.

Not the same more.

Different.

Ace saw structure.

Mai saw pattern collapse.

Shammy felt pressure increase.

Three truths.

All valid.

All incompatible.

“...it’s scaling,” Mai said.

“Trying to stabilize through detail.”

Ace adjusted her stance.

Didn’t step back.

Didn’t disengage.

“...then we reduce it.”

Shammy frowned slightly.

“...how.”

Ace's answer came immediately.

"...we stop letting it define what we see."

Silence.

Mai understood first.

Of course she did.

She didn't argue.

Didn't refine.

She acted.

Her gaze shifted—

not away—

but unfocused.

Not committing.

Not resolving.

The effect was immediate.

The surface—

lost clarity.

Edges blurred.

Depth flattened.

Not gone—

but unstable.

"...yes," Mai said.

Flat.

"That's it."

Shammy followed.

Not visually—

perceptually.

She stopped trying to interpret the pressure.

Stopped assigning shape.

Stopped giving it meaning.

The air—

relaxed.

Slightly.

Ace didn't move.

Didn't change her gaze—

but something in it shifted.

Less focus.

Less lock.

Less agreement.

The structures—

flickered.

For a fraction—

they weren't there.

Then—

back.

Then—

not quite.

"...it's slipping," Shammy said.

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Because we are."

That was the key.

Not resisting.

Not correcting.

Destabilizing the observer.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...then we don’t hold anything.”

Mai confirmed.

“Nothing stable.”

Shammy added—

“...nothing shared.”

Silence.

Then—

the surface

did something new.

It didn’t deepen.

Didn’t sharpen.

Didn’t resolve.

It split.

Not visually.

Experientially.

For a fraction of a second—

Ace saw one version.

Mai saw another.

Shammy—

a third.

None of them matched.

And because of that—

the system—

had no single answer.

Mai’s voice cut through.

“...now.”

Ace moved.

Not forward.

Not through.

Across.

Breaking the last clean line between her and the surface.

The effect was immediate.

The depth—

collapsed.

Not completely.

But enough.

Shammy stepped—

harder now—

forcing the air to shift unpredictably.

Mai followed—

not aligning—

not correcting—

just—

adding noise.

The surface—

faltered.

For the first time—

completely.

No depth.

No clarity.

No consistent output.

Just—

a plane.

Flat.

Empty.

Meaningless.

Ace stopped.

Didn't blink.

Didn't look away.

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

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

A beat.

"It only exists if we agree on it."

Shammy exhaled.

The air—

finally—

moved cleanly.

"...then we never do."

Silence settled.

But now—

it held.

Because for the first time—

the thing in front of them

was not a portal

not a surface

not a place

just—

a failed attempt

to become one.

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Last update: **13/04/2026 15:47**

