

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”  
Chapter 5 — Forced Alignment

The surface didn't disappear.

That would have been simple.

It remained—

flat,

empty,

meaningless—

as long as they refused to agree on it.

That was the state.

Unresolved.

Unclaimed.

Safe.

For a moment—

nothing pushed back.

No distortion.

No pressure.

No attempt to become something more.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—

steady.

“...it stopped,” she said.

Mai shook her head immediately.

“No.”

Flat.

“It's waiting.”

Ace didn't move.

Didn't blink.

"...for what."

Mai's answer came without delay.

"Consensus."

That tracked too cleanly.

Silence held—

but not comfortably.

Because the absence of reaction—

was reaction.

And then—

it happened.

Not in front of them.

Inside.

Mai felt it first.

Not as thought—

as correction.

A subtle pull—

not on her body—

on her interpretation.

"...no," she said immediately.

Sharp.

Ace's gaze didn't shift.

"...what."

Mai's voice tightened.

"...it's trying to simplify."

A beat.

"...reduce variance."

Shammy's breath hitched—

just slightly.

"...I felt that."

The air—

tightened.

Not around them.

Between them.

The space connecting their perspectives—

compressing.

Ace's voice dropped.

"...don't let it."

Mai didn't answer.

She was already fighting it.

Her gaze shifted—

not outward—

inward.

Breaking her own pattern.

But it was harder now.

Because the system wasn't presenting something to reject—

It was removing the need to.

"...it's not forcing an image," she said.

Flat.

Controlled.

"...it's removing alternatives."

That was worse.

Shammy stepped—

half a pace—

without meaning to.

Her stance—

aligned—

just slightly closer to Ace's.

The air followed.

Too cleanly.

"...I didn't—" she started.

Mai cut her off.

"You did."

A beat.

"And it counted."

The surface—

flickered.

Not visibly—

but—

there.

Something.

A suggestion.

A shape.

Ace saw it first.

Of course she did.

Her voice stayed flat—

but lower.

"...it's back."

Mai didn't look.

"...don't define it."

Ace didn't answer.

Too late.

Because now—

there was something to see.

Not clear.

Not stable.

But—

consistent enough—

to exist.

Shammy's voice dropped.

"...I see it too."

That was the failure point.

Mai moved—

fast.

Not forward—

not back—

sideways.

Hard deviation.

Breaking the alignment.

"Stop confirming!" she snapped.

The air—

fractured again.

Pressure—

uneven.

Unstable.

Shammy forced her stance wider.

Breathing broke.

"...it's pulling us together," she said.

Mai corrected instantly.

"No."

A beat.

"It's removing distance between our interpretations."

Ace stepped—

but this time—

she didn't commit.

Half movement.

Then stopped.

The shape—

flickered—

uncertain again.

"...don't finish actions," she said.

Flat.

"Leave them incomplete."

Mai locked onto that.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Partial states."

Shammy adjusted—

deliberately this time.

She began a breath—

and stopped midway.

Held it—

not stable—

not broken—

just—

unresolved.

The air reacted immediately.

Pressure—

inconsistent.

Alive again.

The shape—

collapsed.

Not gone—

but—

unusable.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“...good.”

Ace’s voice stayed low.

“...it needs closure.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Another beat.

“Completion equals agreement.”

Shammy let her breath out—

but not fully.

Just enough.

“...then we don’t complete anything.”

The system pushed harder.

This time—

direct.

Not subtle.

Not quiet.

A pull—

on all of them.

Not toward the surface—

toward each other.

Angles narrowing.

Perspectives aligning.

Three viewpoints—

drifting—

toward one.

Ace felt it.

Didn't resist—

directly.

She broke it.

She stepped—

back.

Not fully.

Just enough—

to desync the geometry.

Mai mirrored—

but not exactly.

Offset.

Shammy stayed—

center—

but changed her breathing again.

Three frames—

separating—

just before they touched.

The surface—

failed.

The shape—

collapsed.

Again.

Harder this time.

Like something had been interrupted mid-definition.

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

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“Because it almost had us.”

Ace didn't blink.

“...won't.”

Silence.

Then—

the system changed strategy.

The pull stopped.

Instantly.

No transition.

No fade.

Gone.

And for a fraction—

everything was perfectly still.

Too still.

Mai's voice dropped.

“...no.”

Ace didn't move.

“...what.”

Mai's eyes narrowed.

“...it's not pulling anymore.”

A beat.

“...it's locking.”

The realization hit—

all at once.

Shammy's voice came first.

"...it picked one."

Ace's grip tightened—

just slightly.

"...whose."

Silence.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because she was checking.

Comparing.

Reconstructing.

Then—

"...not mine," she said.

Flat.

Shammy shook her head.

"...not mine either."

That left—

Ace.

Ace didn't react.

Didn't deny it.

Didn't confirm.

She just—

looked.

And for the first time—

the surface—

was stable.

Not flickering.

Not collapsing.

Not unresolved.

A shape—

clear—

consistent—

real.

Her voice dropped.

“...I see it.”

Mai moved instantly.

“No.”

Sharp.

“Don’t hold it.”

But Ace didn’t release it.

Didn’t deepen it either.

She stayed—

on the edge.

“...it’s clean,” she said.

Flat.

That was the danger.

Shammy stepped forward—

breaking the triangle completely.

The air—

spiked—

hard—

violent—

unstable.

The shape—

cracked.

Not gone—

but fractured.

Mai forced movement—

crossing both of their lines—

destroying any remaining shared frame.

“Break it!” she snapped.

Ace didn’t hesitate.

She shifted—

not away—

not forward—

sideways—

out of her own line.

The shape—

shattered.

Gone.

Nothing left.

Just—

surface.

Flat.

Empty.

Dead again.

Silence—

hard—

real—

held.

Shammy exhaled sharply.

The air—

wild—

then—

settling.

“...it chose you,” she said.

Ace didn't respond.

Mai did.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Because she almost accepted it."

Ace's voice stayed flat.

"...didn't."

Mai nodded.

"No."

Another beat.

"But it only needs once."

Silence.

Ace looked at the surface—

but now—

there was nothing there.

Nothing to see.

Nothing to resolve.

"...then we don't give it once," she said.

Flat.

Final.

And for the first time—

the system

didn't try again immediately.

Which was worse.

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