

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 3: Echoes of the Void — Chapter 26 - The Form With Two Boxes

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 3.26 **Wordcount:** ~1522 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Unknown **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### Chapter 26: The Form With Two Boxes

The ground rose into a long, uneven slope of black rock, slick with rain. They climbed in silence, breath controlled, boots finding purchase where they could.

Mai kept the scarf around her neck, fingers brushing it now and then like a talisman. Ace stayed close—close enough that if the valley tried to wedge a line between them again, it would have to do it through bone.

The wind shifted.

And with it came that faint, acidic paper smell—subtle, distant.

Mai's shoulders tightened. "We're drifting back toward authored space."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai's voice stayed low. "It will use choice."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It will try."

They crested the slope.

On the other side was a plateau—flat, wide, and wrong in a way that made Mai's skin crawl.

Not perfectly smooth, but too... deliberate. Scattered stones placed like props. A few dead shrubs positioned at intervals that felt like design, not decay.

In the center of the plateau stood two pylons.

Not like the long line they'd seen earlier.

Just two.

Parallel.

Like parentheses.

Mai stopped. Ace stopped.

Mai whispered, "This is a question."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Two options."

Mai nodded, throat tight. “Two boxes.”

They approached slowly.

Between the pylons, on the stone ground, a pale rectangle had formed—like a sheet laid flat, except it wasn’t paper.

It was a surface.

A blank form.

No ink. No symbols.

Just two printed boxes—faint outlines, as if drawn by a careful hand that didn’t want to be seen.

Above the left box, one word appeared, typed cleanly into existence:

ACE

Above the right box:

MAI

Mai’s stomach dropped.

Ace’s jaw clenched so hard it looked like it hurt.

Mai whispered, “No.”

The air tightened, not violently, but insistently—like the plateau wanted them to step forward and fill out the form.

The valley had stopped trying to get identity directly.

Now it was using the bond.

Make them choose. Make them complete a story.

Ace’s voice came low and dangerous. “It’s asking us to pick.”

Mai nodded, eyes hard. “A forced choice form.”

The form waited.

The boxes remained empty, blinking in a way that wasn’t literal but felt like blinking. Two empty squares demanding a mark.

Mai’s mind raced. If they stepped onto the rectangle, if they touched it, if they wrote anything—clean closure. Filed.

But doing nothing felt like waiting for consequences.

The valley loved consequences.

Ace stared at the two names printed above the boxes, violet eyes burning. The sisters hummed under their wrappings, offended that Ace's existence had been reduced to a checkbox.

Mai whispered, "It wants a sacrifice narrative."

Ace's voice was flat. "Not happening."

Mai nodded. "So we refuse the premise."

Ace's gaze flicked to Mai. "How."

Mai stared at the rectangle. Then she looked down at the stones scattered around the plateau.

Stones weren't paper.

Stones were honest.

Mai whispered, "We fill both."

Ace blinked once. "That's still filling."

Mai's mouth tightened. "We fill it wrong."

Ace understood.

Mai picked up a stone—wet, gritty—and tossed it onto the rectangle.

The stone hit the pale surface with a dull clack.

Nothing happened.

Good.

Mai tossed another stone.

Then another.

Soon the rectangle was littered with stones, covering the two printed boxes haphazardly.

Noise.

Obstruction.

Ugly.

The plateau's air tightened slightly, like irritation.

Then the form responded.

The printed names above the boxes began to shift.

The letters flickered, retyping themselves as if the system tried to regain control.

ACE blurred, then reappeared sharper.

MAI did the same.

The boxes beneath them brightened faintly, trying to show through the stones.

Mai's jaw clenched. "It's trying to preserve legibility."

Ace's voice came low. "Then we ruin legibility."

Mai nodded.

She scooped up mud from a shallow puddle near the pylon base and flung it across the rectangle.

Mud splattered, dripping.

The printed outlines of the boxes smeared.

The names above them blurred, as if the system disliked dirt on text.

Ace followed—kicking muddy water across the rectangle with brutal splashes, turning the pale surface into a slick mess.

The plateau convulsed—pressure tightening, like a bureaucrat choking on vandalism.

The names above the boxes flickered again.

Then a new prompt hit their skulls, sharper than before:

SELECT ONE

Mai's teeth clenched. "No."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Not yours."

The prompt repeated, now louder inside the mind, like a system escalating urgency:

SELECT ONE

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard. Anchor.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist back.

Mutual.

Mai spoke low and fierce. "Here."

Ace echoed, "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The plateau's pressure shuddered, as if it hated state-phrases.

The form reacted in a new way.

The pale rectangle began to rise—lifting off the ground like a sheet of stiff paper being pulled up by invisible hands. Stones slid off, mud dripped.

The rectangle floated between the pylons, now vertical like a sign.

And on it, the two boxes expanded, becoming two windows.

Inside the left window: a faint image of Ace—her outline, her violet eyes, her blades on her back. Not a full image, more like a sketch being rendered from memory.

Inside the right window: a faint image of Mai—silver hair, controlled posture, her hand reaching out in that anchor gesture.

The plateau was building a visual choice.

A menu.

Mai's stomach turned. "No."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's trying to make us look at it."

Mai nodded, voice tight. "Recognition trap."

The images sharpened slightly, inviting their gaze.

Mai pulled her scarf up again—not fully blindfolding, just narrowing her view to peripheral.

Ace softened her focus.

Neither of them gave the form a clean stare.

The form's surface shimmered, irritated.

Then the images changed.

The left window—Ace—showed Ace alone in the archive, surrounded by shelves labeled with her name, her body pressed against the plinth, the trisected circle above her like a crown.

The right window—Mai—showed Mai alone in the grotto, the mask hovering inches from her face, the stitched strips wrapping around her wrists.

Mai's breath hitched.

Ace's shadow surged.

The form was applying pressure: choose or we choose for you.

Mai's voice came out low, strained. "It's threatening."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "It's bluffing."

Mai nodded, but her stomach didn't believe it fully. Systems didn't have to bluff. They just had to run procedures until something broke.

The form's prompt returned, now printed on the floating rectangle in clean black letters:

SELECT ONE TO RETAIN

Mai's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace's voice went colder. "Retain implies the other is lost."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace stared at the two windows, then at the printed prompt.

And then she did something simple and brutal.

She stepped forward and slammed her shoulder into the pylon.

Not the form.

The pylon.

Concrete. Rust. Honest material.

The pylon shuddered.

The floating rectangle wavered—its stability linked to the pylons, the frame holding the "form" in place.

Mai understood instantly and followed—kicking the pylon base, driving mud and grit into the cracks.

The pylon's concrete chipped.

The floating rectangle shook harder.

The printed prompt blurred.

Ace shoved again—ugly, physical, no clean strike.

The pylon cracked.

The rectangle flickered, struggling to stay vertical.

Mai grabbed a loose stone and smashed it against the pylon base—again and again—crude impacts.

The pylon trembled.

The rectangle's windows distorted, images of Ace and Mai warping like wet ink.

The system tried to stabilize, and in doing so it made its dependence obvious:

It needed structure.

It needed frames.

It needed two pylons to hold the forced choice.

Ace rammed the pylon one last time.

Concrete fractured.

The pylon tilted.

And as it did, the floating rectangle jerked sideways like a sign ripped off its hooks.

The printed prompt smeared into nonsense.

The two windows collapsed into blankness.

The whole form crumpled—not like paper, like data losing its container.

It folded in on itself and vanished, leaving only rain and broken concrete and mud.

Mai panted, shaking with adrenaline.

Ace stood, shoulders rising and falling, violet eyes burning.

For a moment, the plateau's pressure loosened, as if the system had been stunned by the refusal of its premise.

Mai whispered, "We didn't choose."

Ace's voice was low and absolute. "Never."

Mai nodded, fierce. "We broke the frame."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Always break the frame."

They didn't stay to see what the system would do next.

They left the plateau fast, moving back toward broken terrain, away from anything that looked like a stage.

Behind them, the remaining pylon stood crooked, cracked at the base.

And somewhere in the valley's invisible log, the system recorded a different kind of failure—one it hated most:

**PROCEDURE FAILED — SUBJECTS REJECTED SELECTION**

Not just noncompliance.

Not just vandalism.

A refusal to play.

The valley had wanted a clean story: choose Ace, lose Mai. Choose Mai, lose Ace. A form with two boxes and one tick.

Instead it got mud, broken concrete, and a rule it didn't understand:

No premise is accepted.

So it prepared the only escalation left that didn't require them to agree to anything.

It would remove choice entirely.

And in doing so, it would finally show its true tool:

A mechanism that didn't ask.

A mechanism that stamped. —

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