
CHAPTER 5 — The Skull Reacts (Rewrite)

The room didn't announce itself.

It didn't need to.

It held.

That was enough.

Too much, in fact.

It was smaller than it should have been—
and larger than it allowed itself to appear.

Both were true.

Neither resolved.

The kind of contradiction that didn't break—
because something was forcing it not to.

Ace stepped in first.

No hesitation.

No adjustment.

The space accepted her—
immediately—
but not cleanly.

Like it had already accounted for her presence,
but not fully agreed with it.

Mai stopped at the threshold.

Her gaze moved—
fast—

then slowed—

then stalled for a fraction too long.

"...contained," she said.

Not certain.

"Localized."

A beat.

“Not stable.”

Shammy stepped beside her.

The air reacted—

tightening inward—

compressing—

but not collapsing.

It didn't fail.

It held.

Too well.

“It's all in one place,” she said.

A pause.

“...forced there.”

That was worse.

Ace didn't answer.

She had already seen it.

The skull rested at the center of the room.

Not on a surface.

On the idea of one.

It only existed when you looked directly at it—

perfectly shaped—

perfectly placed—

too precise to belong inside a space that couldn't agree on anything else.

It didn't glow.

Didn't pulse.

Didn't move.

It didn't need to.

Everything around it was already wrong.

Edges softened where they should have been sharp.

Distance refused to settle unless measured directly.

The room didn't distort.

It failed to resolve.

Ace stepped closer.

The space tightened.

Not outward—

inward.

Like everything was being pulled toward a single point

and held there

under pressure that had nowhere else to go.

Mai moved immediately.

Not toward the skull—

to the side.

Positioning.

Accounting for failure.

"If it spreads—"

"It won't," Ace said.

Flat.

Not confidence.

Recognition.

The skull didn't expand.

It condensed.

Shammy shifted her stance.

The air followed—

then resisted—

then folded inward under her control.

"It's pulling everything into itself," she said.

A beat.

“Not taking space.”

“Removing it.”

That locked it.

Mai raised the disruptor.

No warning.

No hesitation.

She fired.

The impact didn't register—

not the way it should have.

There was no flash.

No echo.

No expansion.

For a fraction—

nothing happened.

Then—

everything corrected.

Violently.

Lines snapped into place—

too straight—

too sharp—

overdefined.

Angles resolved beyond what the eye should have trusted.

Distance collapsed—

then stretched—

then locked.

Perfect.

Artificial.

Wrong.

The room didn't stabilize.

It overcorrected.

And in that moment—

the skull reacted.

Not outward.

Inward.

The pull intensified—

briefly—

hard—

as if something inside it tried to continue—

to complete—

to reach—

Then—

it failed.

The motion cut off.

Mid-process.

Like something had been interrupted

before it could finish.

Silence followed.

Not natural.

Enforced.

The distortion was gone.

But the absence of it—

felt heavier.

Mai lowered the disruptor slowly.

"...contained," she said.

Not fully certain.

Shammy exhaled.

The air didn't resist.

Didn't shift.

It held—

too evenly.

"That's not stable," she said.

"...it's locked."

Ace stepped closer.

No distortion now.

No resistance.

That was worse.

She reached for the skull—

and for a fraction—

her hand didn't move.

Not hesitation.

Something else.

Like the space had already accounted for the motion—

and she was arriving slightly behind it.

Then—

contact.

The reaction wasn't visible.

It collapsed inward.

Pressure.

Impossible amounts of space forced into a single point—

contained so tightly it bordered on rupture.

Ace didn't pull back.

But her hand held—

a fraction longer than it should have.

“Still active,” she said.

Flat.

But not perfectly timed.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“Not expressing.”

Latent.

Contained.

Unresolved.

Which made it worse.

Shammy tilted her head.

The air remained still—

but beneath it—

something wasn't.

“It didn't stop,” she said.

A pause.

“It paused.”

Behind them—

movement.

Not sudden.

Not reactive.

Expected.

One of the Serpent's Hand stepped forward.

Measured.

Calm.

Not approaching—

continuing.

“You forced it closed,” they said.

No anger.

No concern.

Just observation.

Mai didn’t turn.

“Yes.”

Flat.

The figure studied the skull.

Then Ace.

Then the room—

now aligned—

now quiet—

now pretending.

“For now,” they said.

A beat.

Not a warning.

Not a threat.

Recognition.

“That was never its purpose.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She didn’t need to.

Because she could feel it.

The skull wasn’t inactive.

It wasn’t neutral.

It was waiting.

The pressure inside it—

contained—

unresolved—

holding something that had been interrupted
before it could finish becoming what it was supposed to be.

And whatever that was—
whatever it had been doing—
hadn't ended.

It had been cut short.

Mid-action.

Mid-function.

Mid-state.

And now—

it remained—

silent—

perfectly still—

perfectly wrong—

waiting

for something

to let it continue.

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