

COURAGE

Nobody volunteered.

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

One	Colin McAteer
Two	typewriter_tom
Three	Sasha Loomis
Four	jmarsh
Five	Ruth Ann Keller
Six	inkwell_amy
Seven	Dan Okafor
Eight	rpenguin

Chapter

One

written by Colin McAteer

Halla stepped forward, her boots echoing softly on the tiled floor. She was the first to break the silence, and now the others watched her intently, Evan, with his arms crossed over his chest; Mia, who bit her lip as she always did when uncertain; and Jack, whose expression remained a guarded mix of skepticism and curiosity. The room was dimly lit by an array of flickering fluorescent lights overhead. The walls were painted in a sickly green that seemed to leach color from everything it touched. A single door at the far end offered a narrow escape, but Halla could feel its lock clicking ominously even before she reached it. She turned the handle and pushed gently. It didn't budge. "Locked," she muttered, her voice carrying slightly in the small space. She tried again, this time with more force, but the door remained stubbornly sealed shut. "Maybe we can break it?" Mia suggested quietly from behind Halla. Halla hesitated for a moment before nodding. She stepped back and motioned for Evan to try. He approached the door cautiously, his hands trembling slightly as he raised them to knock. A loud reverberation echoed through the room as his fist made contact with the wood, but the door stayed firmly in place. "Nothing," Mia said, her voice a mix of disappointment and frustration. Jack stepped forward then, his hand already reaching for something on his belt, a thin metal key. He inserted it into the lock with practiced ease and turned. With a sudden clicking sound, the lock

disengaged, and the door swung open just enough to allow passage. "Let's go," Jack said, stepping through the doorway first, his movements deliberate but not slow. The hallway beyond was dark, illuminated only by the occasional flicker of light from the main room. The floorboards creaked under Halla's feet as she followed closely behind. She noticed a chipped enamel pan leaning against the wall, evidence perhaps of someone else's intrusion or desperation. They moved in silence, the tension palpable even without words. Mia walked ahead of Halla, her hand brushing against the warped third stair with each step. It creaked loudly underfoot, making them both jump slightly. "Be careful," Jack cautioned from behind. Mia slowed her pace and glanced back at him. "I'm okay," she said softly but firmly. They reached a junction in the hallway, two paths leading away, one to the right, one to the left. Mia paused at the crossroads, considering their options. She took a deep breath, then chose the path to the right. "Follow me," she whispered, and stepped off into the unknown.

Chapter

Two

written by typewriter_tom

Mia led them down the right path, her footsteps echoing in the narrow corridor. The floorboards continued to creak under her weight, each step a reminder of their fragile presence in this place. Jack followed closely behind, his eyes scanning the dimly lit walls for any sign of movement or danger. They emerged into a small room that appeared to be some sort of storage area. Crates lined the walls, half-filled with various objects, old books, dusty tools, and broken machinery. In the center of the room stood an ancient-looking table, upon which lay a single piece of paper. Malia approached the table cautiously. Her fingers trembled as she picked up the paper. She unfolded it, her eyes scanning the hastily scrawled words: "Escape through the vent in the north wall. Watch your step." She folded the note and handed it to Halla. "This could be our way out," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Halla took the note and studied it for a moment before nodding. "Let's check the vent first," she replied, already moving towards the north wall. The room was cold, and the air grew heavier as they approached their destination. The vent was a small opening, partially concealed by an old piece of carpet. Halla reached down to lift it, her hands feeling the chill through the thin fabric. She tugged gently but found that the carpet was stuck, likely cemented in place with years of neglect and dust. "Damn it," she muttered, trying again with more force. The carpet resisted, shifting but

not budging fully. “I’ll go check if there’s any other way out,” Halla said, her voice firm. She stepped back to give Evan a chance. Evan approached the vent hesitantly, his breath visible in the cool air. He tried to pull the carpet away, but it remained stubbornly in place. “It looks like someone really wanted to keep this place sealed up tight,” he observed, his tone somber. Mia stepped forward next. She lifted her arm and struck a nearby crate with such force that pieces of wood splintered and flew into the air. “They’re trying to trap us, but we can find another way out,” she declared, her voice resolute. Jack remained silent, his expression unreadable as he watched Mia’s actions. He stepped forward then, his movements deliberate. He bent down and picked up a small hammer that lay on the floor beside one of the crates. He tested it for balance before raising it high above his head and striking the carpet with precise force. The fabric gave way with a sudden rip, revealing the vent beneath. “Good job,” Mia said, her tone more relieved than she felt. Halla stepped closer to examine the damage Evan had done and the one made by Jack. “We’ll need some time to clear this out,” she said, her voice calm but Evan nodded in agreement. “Let’s work together,” he suggested, his tone more collaborative than before. They worked in silence for a few minutes, each taking turns to clear the vent and prepare it for escape. Mia found herself working alongside Halla, her hands moving deftly as they both focused on the task at hand. The tension between them was palpable but not uncomfortable; they were united by their shared goal. After several moments of work, the opening in the vent had become wide enough to squeeze through. Halla gestured for Mia to go first. “You’re up,” she said simply. Mia hesitated for a moment, her mind racing with all the possibilities that lay ahead. She nodded and stepped forward, positioning herself carefully before pushing down into the narrow opening. The air became colder as she descended, and she could feel the floor beneath her shifting slightly. Her descent seemed to take an eternity, but eventually, she found herself in a small crawl space. She heard Halla’s voice calling out from above, “You made it! We’ll be right

behind you.” Mia paused for a moment, taking in her surroundings. The space was narrow and dark, barely large enough to move around in. She could feel the cold metal walls pressing against her as she stood up slowly, trying not to make too much noise. She needed to find a way out of this crawl space and back into the main area. Mia moved carefully along the wall, feeling for any signs of an exit. After what felt like an eternity, she found a small panel that seemed out of place. She pushed it gently with her fingertips, and it gave way slightly. Behind the panel lay a small lever. Mia reached for it and pulled hard. A series of clicks echoed through the crawl space as the mechanism disengaged. The wall began to slide open, revealing another vent.

Chapter

Three

written by Sasha Loomis

Mia stepped through the now-opening vent with a soft thud, her head barely fitting through as she twisted to fit the rest of her body. The air was colder here, almost breathable in its thinness, and she could feel tiny particles floating around her, like stars in a dream. She paused, letting her eyes adjust to the dark before reaching for the lever that had just revealed this new passage. She pulled the lever gently, a soft click echoing through the space as the wall slowly slid aside, revealing another vent. Mia stepped forward into it, her fingers brushing against cold metal as she moved. The air was different here, thick with a musty scent of old books and forgotten machines. A voice, or perhaps an echo in her head, whispered, "Follow the light," and Mia found herself moving without thought, her hands feeling for any source of illumination. Her fingertips grazed against something smooth, a piece of glass that had been shattered years ago, its edges dulled with age. She picked it up, holding it like a relic, and found a faint glow emanating from the other end of the crawl space. Mia stepped into the light, her eyes adjusting as she saw the outline of a small room beyond. The walls were lined with shelves filled with books, some ancient, their pages yellowed and brittle, others newer, though equally weathered. A desk sat at one corner, papers scattered across its surface in a haphazard fashion. On the floor lay an old 1972 watch, its face cracked but still

ticking softly. Mia approached the desk, her fingers brushing against the scattered papers. She picked up a thick notebook, its cover embossed with strange symbols that seemed to move and shift as she turned it in her hands. The pages inside were filled with diagrams and equations, some written in neat handwriting, others scribbled over in rougher script. A voice spoke from nowhere, "What do you see?" Mia looked around, but there was no one else in the room. She flipped through the notebook, finding a section labeled "The Void." The pages were filled with detailed sketches of geometric shapes and patterns that seemed to pulse with an inner light. A series of equations followed, each one more complex than the last. Mia frowned, her mind racing as she tried to understand what these symbols meant. She found a small drawer beneath the desk and opened it, revealing a collection of peculiar objects: a rusted key, a fragment of crystal, and a tiny vial filled with a clear liquid that seemed to shimmer on its own. The drawer also contained a single piece of paper, crumpled and dirty but still readable. Mia unfolded the paper, her eyes widening as she read: "Unlock the truth within." She pocketed the note, feeling an odd mix of dread and curiosity. As she closed the drawer, something moved in the corner of her eye, a shadow that seemed to be stretching and growing, reaching out towards her with invisible fingers. Mia turned around just in time to see a figure emerging from the darkness, its outline indistinct but unmistakable. The figure was tall, almost towering, and wore a cloak that billowed like smoke. Its face was obscured by shadows, but Mia could feel an intense gaze upon her as it stepped closer, its presence growing larger with each step. The figure stopped just before Mia, their voice low and echoing, "What do you seek in the Void?"

Chapter

Four

written by jmarsh

The figure emerged fully, its cloak a swirling mass of shadow that seemed to dance around it. The air grew colder still, as if this entity itself exuded frost. Mia felt her heart pounding in her chest, but she stood resolutely, clutching the notebook and the watch tightly. The creature spoke again, its voice like distant thunder rumbling through the void: "What do you seek in the Void?" Its gaze was unyielding, boring into hers with an intensity that made her shiver. Malia's mind raced, trying to piece together what this meant. She glanced around the room, taking in the shelves of books and the scattered papers on the desk. Her eyes landed on a peculiar object, a small vial filled with shimmering liquid, lying near the drawer she had just opened. It seemed almost... alive, pulsating softly within its glass prison. "Unlock the truth," she whispered to herself, repeating the cryptic words from the note. The figure's form began to shift, growing larger until it loomed over her in a menacing way. Its cloak billowed outward, casting long shadows across the room that danced and writhed like living entities. Malia's breath caught in her throat as she realized with a start that this was no ordinary entity. It seemed almost... otherworldly, something from beyond the realm of common understanding. The figure moved closer, its presence suffocating her with an oppressive weight. "What do you seek?" it repeated, its voice growing louder and more urgent. Malia's mind was

racing with possibilities. She could feel a surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins, fueling her determination to uncover whatever secrets lay hidden in the Void. The vial caught her attention once again, and she reached for it carefully, as if afraid of what might happen if she touched it too hard. "Unlock the truth," she whispered, holding the vial up to the light that filtered through from elsewhere in the room. The liquid inside seemed to shimmer more brightly, almost as if it were responding to her command. She unscrewed the lid slowly, feeling a strange mixture of excitement and fear. The figure watched intently, its gaze never wavering. "You are brave," it said finally, its voice tinged with something akin to approval. "But beware." With those words, the creature stepped closer still, its presence becoming almost overwhelming. It reached out a long, spectral hand, as if testing her resolve. Malia felt a chill run down her spine but remained firm. She uncapped the vial and tilted it towards her face, letting just a small drop fall onto her palm. The liquid was cold to the touch, and she could feel its warmth spreading slowly through her skin. A sudden tingling sensation began to spread across her body, as if tiny electrical currents were coursing beneath her flesh. "Tell me," the figure demanded, its voice now urgent. "What do you see?" Malia closed her eyes for a moment, allowing the liquid's influence to take hold. She felt a blinding light erupt within her mind, a vision of dark corridors and glowing symbols that seemed to pulse with arcane knowledge. The air around her began to ripple as if under the influence of some unseen force. When she opened her eyes again, the room had changed. The shelves of books were rearranging themselves, moving closer together in a pattern that seemed almost... deliberate. A faint hum filled the air, growing louder with each passing second. The figure stepped closer still, its presence now pressing against her very soul. "What do you see?" it asked again, its voice more insistent this time. Malia took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She focused on the vision that had taken hold of her mind, a series of symbols and equations that seemed to represent some kind of ancient knowledge. "I see... I see a way," she said softly, feeling a

surge of determination. "A way through the Void." The figure's form began to shimmer, as if it were itself being affected by this newfound clarity. It stepped back slightly, its gaze softening for a moment before hardening once more. "Very well," it said finally, its voice tinged with a hint of respect. "You have shown bravery and insight. But remember, there is much to learn from the Void, and not all knowledge is meant for mortals." With those words, the figure began to fade away, its cloak billowing outward as if it were being consumed by the shadows that seemed to surround it. Mia watched intently, feeling a mix of relief and unease as the entity disappeared. She turned towards the shelves again, her mind racing with thoughts of what she had seen and learned. The room now felt different, as if some unseen force was at work around her.

Chapter

Five

written by Ruth Ann Keller

Mia turned towards the shelves again, her mind racing with thoughts of what she had seen and learned. The room now felt different, as if some unseen force was at work around her. She approached one of the shelves, finding a small notebook wedged between two books. Its cover was adorned with intricate symbols that seemed to vibrate slightly in the dim light. Curiosity piqued, she gently pulled it out and opened it. The pages were filled with detailed sketches and equations similar to those in the thick notebook from before. However, these diagrams were more complex, featuring a series of geometric shapes that pulsed faintly as if alive. Mia's fingers traced over the lines, feeling an almost magnetic pull towards one particular diagram. It depicted a sphere within a cube, both glowing with an inner light. She picked up another vial from the shelf beside her, its liquid shimmering softly. The vial seemed to resonate with the notebook in her hand, as if sharing some latent knowledge. She placed the vial next to the notebook and noticed that the diagram began to glow brighter, almost as if the vial was feeding it energy. Mia's gaze shifted to a small drawer beneath another shelf. It appeared untouched, unlike the one she had just opened. Curiosity spurred her to open it carefully. Inside were several more peculiar objects: a rusted key, a fragment of crystal, and a tiny vial filled with the same shimmering liquid as before. She studied these items for a

moment, trying to understand their significance. The drawer also contained another note, crumpled and dirty but still readable. Mia unfolded it slowly, her heart pounding as she read: "Study the symbols within the sphere. Unlock the knowledge that lies dormant." She placed the vial back in its original spot, feeling a strange sense of connection to the objects around her. The air grew colder, and the shelves seemed to rearrange themselves once more, aligning perfectly with the diagrams in the notebook. Mia's eyes returned to the sphere within the cube. She focused on it intently, willing herself to comprehend its meaning. As she did, a sudden tingling sensation spread through her fingers, as if they were being infused with an arcane energy. The diagram began to pulse more brightly, and Mia felt a surge of knowledge flood into her mind. She realized that the sphere within the cube represented a dimensional portal, some form of gateway to another realm. Each shape and line held secrets about the nature of existence itself. She could feel the walls of the room shifting slightly, as if preparing to accommodate this new understanding. Mia took a deep breath, steadying herself before closing her eyes and focusing on the diagram once more. The tingling sensation intensified, and she felt an almost overwhelming presence drawing near. When she opened her eyes again, the room had changed significantly. The shelves were now arranged in a precise pattern, forming a large circular alcove centered around the sphere within the cube. A faint hum filled the air, growing louder with each passing second. The figure from before had returned, its form more distinct and imposing than ever before. It stood at the edge of the alcove, its cloak billowing outward like smoke. Its gaze was unwavering, as if assessing her readiness to proceed further. Mia felt a surge of determination, knowing that whatever came next would be crucial for uncovering the truth she sought. "Proceed with caution," the figure spoke in a voice tinged with both warning and approval. "The knowledge within the sphere is powerful and can be dangerous." Mia nodded resolutely, her mind racing to understand what steps needed to be taken. She approached the sphere cautiously, feeling the pull of its energy guiding

her hands. As she touched it, a blinding light erupted from within, filling the room with an intense illumination. The figure watched intently as Mia's mind began to process this new influx of information. The symbols and equations in the notebook seemed to align themselves, forming a coherent narrative about the nature of dimensional travel. Mia felt a surge of understanding, as if she were seeing through multiple dimensions simultaneously. "Unlock the knowledge," the figure said finally, its voice growing more urgent. "But be wary of what you may uncover." Mia closed her eyes and focused on the sphere within the cube once more. The light faded, leaving behind a sense of clarity and purpose. She opened her eyes to find that the room had rearranged itself again, this time forming a path leading out of the alcove. She stepped forward onto the new pathway, feeling an unshakeable resolve guiding her every step.

Chapter

Six

written by inkwell_amy

Mia stepped forward onto the new pathway, her resolve unwavering as she felt a strange yet familiar pull guiding her steps. The air around her seemed to hum with an unseen force, and the shelves rearranged themselves seamlessly into a clear path leading out of the alcove. The figure watched her every move, its presence both intimidating and almost comforting. "Proceed," it said softly, its voice echoing in the quiet room. Mia moved cautiously, each step firm and deliberate. The pathway was marked with symbols that pulsed gently, as if guiding her deeper into the unknown. She followed the path until she reached a small door at the far end of the alcove. It seemed to be made of an impenetrable material, like obsidian fused with steel. Mia approached the door and placed her hand on it. The surface was cool and smooth beneath her touch. As she pressed firmly, the door began to glow faintly, a soft blue light emanating from within. With a gentle push, the door creaked open, revealing a narrow corridor that stretched into the darkness beyond. The corridor was lined with more of those shimmering vials and notebooks, each one pulsating softly as if alive. Mia felt a strange sense of déjà vu as she recognized some of the symbols from her previous visions. She stepped inside, the door closing behind her with a soft thud. The air in the corridor grew colder, and the faint hum intensified into a low rumble. The walls seemed to shift slightly, forming

a series of glowing symbols that flickered in the dim light. Mia followed the path, her steps echoing softly against the stone floor. After what felt like an eternity, she reached a large, circular room at the end of the corridor. The center of the room was dominated by a massive, obsidian sphere, emitting a steady, blue glow. Around it were several smaller spheres and vials, each one pulsing with energy. Mia approached the central sphere and noticed that it seemed to be embedded in a pedestal of dark stone. She reached out tentatively, her fingers brushing against its surface. The sphere hummed softly as she touched it, and she felt a surge of knowledge flood into her mind. "Unlock," the figure's voice echoed softly from somewhere beyond the spheres. Mia focused on the central sphere, willing herself to comprehend its true nature. The sphere's energy began to pulse more rapidly, and a series of symbols within it began to rearrange themselves, forming a complex diagram. Mia studied the diagram intently, her mind racing with new insights. She realized that the central sphere was not just a physical object but a gateway to another dimension, a dimensional portal capable of traversing different realms of existence. The figure appeared beside her, its form now more distinct and imposing than ever. "What do you see?" it asked, its voice tinged with both curiosity and caution. Mia took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts. She described the diagram and what she believed it represented: "A dimensional portal, capable of traversing different realms." The figure nodded slowly, its gaze softening for a moment before hardening once more. "Very well," it said finally, its voice tinged with respect. "You have shown bravery and insight. But remember, there is much to learn from the Void, and not all knowledge is meant for mortals." With those words, the figure began to fade away, its cloak billowing outward as if being consumed by the shadows that surrounded it. Mia watched intently, feeling a mix of relief and unease as the entity disappeared. She turned her attention back to the central sphere, now even more determined to unlock its secrets. The sphere's energy continued to pulse, and she felt a surge of determination guiding her actions. She reached out with both hands, cupping them

around the sphere, and whispered, "Unlock." The sphere began to glow brighter, and Mia felt an intense pull as if the dimensional portal was opening before her eyes. The walls of the room seemed to shift, forming a gateway that pulsed with blue light. Mia stepped forward into the gateway, feeling the air grow colder around her. As she crossed through the barrier, she found herself in a completely different realm, a vast, starlit expanse filled with swirling nebulae and distant planets. The figure from before appeared once more, its form now fully visible and imposing. "Welcome to the Void," it said in a voice tinged with both awe and warning. "What will you do now?" Mia looked around the starry expanse, her mind racing with possibilities. She realized that she had only scratched the surface of what lay within this mysterious realm. The figure watched her closely, its presence both encouraging and cautionary.

Chapter

Seven

written by Dan Okafor

Mia looked around the starry expanse, her mind racing with possibilities. She realized that she had only scratched the surface of what lay within this mysterious realm. The figure from before appeared once more, its form now fully visible and imposing. "Welcome to the Void," it said in a voice tinged with both awe and warning. "What will you do now?"

Mia's breath caught as she took in the vastness around her. Stars twinkled like distant beacons, their light casting an ethereal glow over the expanse. Distant planets glowed in vibrant hues of red, blue, and green, their atmospheres swirling with storms and mists. She stepped forward, feeling a mix of excitement and trepidation. "I need to understand more about this place," she said, her voice steady but tinged with curiosity. "How can I traverse these dimensions? What secrets does the Void hold?"

The figure regarded her for a moment before nodding slowly. "You have chosen the path of knowledge, which is wise. But remember, every step into the unknown carries its own risks."

Mia nodded, feeling a sense of resolve. She took a deep breath and focused on the central sphere that still pulsed with blue light in front of her. The figure stood beside her, its presence both guiding and cautionary. "Let's start by understanding this dimensional portal," Mia

said, turning back to the sphere. "I need to learn more about how it works."

The figure watched as she approached the central sphere once again. As she touched it, the sphere hummed softly, and a series of symbols began to rearrange themselves in her mind. She felt a surge of knowledge flooding into her consciousness. "Look at this," Mia said, gesturing towards the diagram now etched clearly in her memory. "The central sphere is a gateway, but it requires specific energies to open it fully."

She pointed to one of the smaller spheres and vials around the pedestal. "These seem to be energy sources. Each one has unique properties that can activate different aspects of the portal."

The figure nodded slowly. "Correct. The spheres are key components of the dimensional gateway. They must be aligned properly for it to function correctly."

Mia stepped back, her mind racing with new information. She looked at the smaller spheres and vials, trying to find the right combination. "Let's try this," she said, picking up a few vials and aligning them around the central sphere. The vials began to pulse more intensely as she did so, their energy visibly affecting the diagram within the sphere. The figure watched her closely, its presence almost palpable in the starlit void. "Be careful," it cautioned. "Every action has consequences."

Mia focused on the alignment, her fingers dancing over the glowing symbols. She felt a surge of power as she completed the sequence. The central sphere began to glow brighter, and a shimmering portal formed at its core. "Open," Mia whispered, feeling a sense of exhilaration as she spoke the word aloud. The portal expanded, revealing a swirling vortex of colors that seemed to stretch across dimensions. The figure stepped forward, its presence now more reassuring. "Very good," it said, its voice filled with approval. "You have shown great skill and understanding."

Mia's heart pounded with excitement as she gazed into the portal. She felt a pull towards it, an almost irresistible urge to step through. But before she could move, the figure spoke again. "Before you cross over,

consider what lies on the other side," it said, its voice tinged with both warning and wisdom. "The Void is vast and complex. Every dimension has its own rules and challenges."

Mia took a deep breath, her resolve unwavering. She knew that whatever lay beyond the portal was worth the risk. "Take this vial," the figure said, handing her one of the shimmering liquid-filled containers. "It contains a stabilizing agent. Use it if you feel overwhelmed or need to return."

Mia accepted the vial, tucking it into her pocket. She turned back to the portal and took a deep breath. "Through this gateway," she whispered, stepping forward and disappearing into the swirling vortex of colors. The figure watched as Mia's form dissolved into the void, her spirit seemingly merging with the swirling energies that stretched across dimensions. The figure remained for a moment longer, its presence filling the starlit expanse before it too faded away, leaving only the dim blue glow of the central sphere and the endless, starry expanse behind. In the dimension beyond, Mia found herself standing on what seemed like a flat plane covered in shimmering sands that glowed with an otherworldly light. Above her, the sky was a tapestry of swirling nebulae, each one a unique shade of blue, purple, and pink.

Chapter

Eight

written by rpenguin

, Chapter 8,

The sands shifted beneath Mia's boots, and for a moment she thought the whole plane had exhaled. She turned in place, trying to get her bearings, but the horizon refused to stay still, folding and unfolding like something breathing just beneath the surface of the world.

That was when she noticed the silence. Not the ordinary quiet of an empty place, but a silence with weight to it, as if every sound she might have made was being collected somewhere just out of reach. She called out, just to test it. "Hello?" The word left her mouth and simply stopped, swallowed a few feet away, no echo, no answer.

Her own footprints behind her were gone. She checked twice, turned fully around, and found only smooth sand where her tracks should have been, as though the ground had already forgotten she'd walked there.

Something moved at the edge of her vision, low to the ground, fast. When she snapped her head toward it, there was nothing, only the faint impression of a shape sinking back beneath the sand like a stone dropped into water. She took a step back and felt the vial the figure had given her, cold now against her hip.

A second shape rose behind her, closer this time. She spun and caught it clearly for half a second: too many joints, no eyes, a mouth that hung open in a shape her mind refused to finish processing. It didn't

lunge. It simply watched her, head tilting at an angle no neck should allow, and then folded itself back under the sand without disturbing a single grain.

Mia's breathing went ragged. She pressed her palm flat against her chest, trying to anchor herself. Not real, not real, or real but not yet a threat. Neither thought helped.

Ahead of her, faint and half-buried, she made out the outline of another structure, a doorway standing alone with no walls attached to it, its frame carved with the same symbols from the notebook. Getting to it meant crossing open sand, and crossing open sand meant walking directly over the places where those things kept surfacing.

She reached for the vial, remembering the figure's warning. Use it if you feel overwhelmed. Her hand hesitated over the stopper. Not yet, she told herself. Not until she had to.

Behind her, the sand let out a long, slow hiss, like something enormous shifting its weight for the first time in a very long while.

Mia started walking toward the door, and did not look back again.

Nobody volunteered.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

rpenguin

why rooms get quiet

Finished on 27 August 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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