

ADVENTURE

Snow Whispers, Ghosts Follow

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	inkwell_amy
Two	Iris Beddoe
Three	Dario Selo
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Five	Priya Nair
Six	Cora Lindgren
Seven	Margot Vail
Eight	Sasha Loomis

Chapter

One

written by inkwell_amy

She wore her new socks over the holes in her boots and set off at dawn. The pass lay ahead, a snow-laden path straight out of memory's darkened corner.

The first step was always the hardest, cold bit into her toes before she even cleared the town gates. She trudged onward, each boot slip announcing her presence to the silent hills. Trees stood guard like sentinels in mourning, their branches bowed with heavy, indifferent snow.

At midmorning, she found an old ranger's hut, half-buried under drifts. Inside, a pot of cold stew and a note written on bark: Take only what you need, leave nothing behind. She took the last spoonful and left without disturbing a single thing. Outside, the sun was a weak smear in pale clouds.

The wind shifted to bite at her face, turning steps into a struggle against whiteout. At noon, she stopped for water from a frozen stream and broke ice with her knife's blunt end. She chewed snow when thirst got too strong; it numbed her jaw like teeth clenched tight.

Night came early, the darkness swallowing up sound and sight alike. Stars glinted coldly overhead as she made camp at a cave entrance, huddled inside to keep moving, legs flexed and fingers rubbed raw until sleep dragged her under.

Dawn found fresh snow on the ground, obscuring tracks from the night before. She paused only long enough to tie a scarf over her face against the wind. A faint path appeared ahead as she walked; it led to an old stone bridge with frost-webbed handrails.

Her hands shook slightly as she crossed, each step careful not to slip into the ravine below. The other side held nothing but more trackless snow and a distant rise in the horizon that might be North Pass proper. She kept going, boots crunching through drifts, breath steaming white against cheeks gone numb.

By midday, exhaustion clawed at her shoulders and knees; she dug down into reserves of willpower instead. A half mile out, a figure appeared: a man clad in fur, his own scarf pulled tight around face. He motioned for her to stop.

“Who are you?” she asked through clenched teeth, not trusting the wind with more.

He removed gloves and raised hands in peace. “I’m here to help,” he called back. “North Pass is dangerous alone.”

“I’ve come this far alone.” She started walking again.

The man followed. His name was Leif, and he knew every secret of these hills. He pointed out shortcuts through treacherous areas, warned about blizzards rolling in unseen until too late. Together they made better time than she could alone.

As dusk fell on the third day, a mountain loomed ahead, its peak lost to clouds but base clear against darkening sky. “That’s it,” Leif said quietly. “North Pass.”

He vanished behind a snowbank, leaving her to stare up at the wall of white until he reappeared with supplies for camping, extra socks, dry tinder, more food than she’d packed.

“Stay here tonight,” he instructed. “Tomorrow we’ll cross together.”

She nodded, letting relief wash over tired muscles as they curled into makeshift shelter. Outside, snow flurries began to fall, swirling in the chill winds like ghosts of old travelers lost long ago.

Inside her tent, warmth slowly returned; she felt it in tingling toes and aching hands as exhaustion claimed her again amidst Leif's offer of companionship on the final leg of this perilous journey.

Chapter

Two

written by Iris Beddoe

Snow whispers secrets in the dark, shadows of figures long gone, stories of storms yet to come. Dawn breaks with a reluctant sun; Leif's fire smokes into thin air, curling away from cold ground. She wakes to find him packing supplies, eyes scanning horizon for any sign of trouble. "Ready?" he asks without turning around. "Always ready," she replies, tying laces tighter against biting wind. North Pass looms ahead, white walls stretching towards grey clouds. Every step echoes in empty space; each breath a silent prayer against the cold. Leif leads, knowing paths hidden beneath snow's veil. She follows, boots crunching through drifts that swallow prints whole. Halfway up the mountain, they encounter a ravine, its sides slick with ice and snow. "Too steep," she mutters, hand gripping rock to steady herself. Leif nods, pulls out rope from pack. "We climb." He secures one end around an anchor stone, loops other over shoulder. "After you."

She hesitates, gaze flicking between abyss and sky. Then starts upward, hands finding purchase in crevices small enough to be invisible, feet pushing against slippery surfaces that yield too easily. Halfway up, fingers ache with cold, breath clouds dissipate instantly. Leif reaches her, offers hand, no words needed; just a pull up the last few meters until they stand level once more on precarious ledge. Breath comes in

short gasps as she straightens legs, shakes out hands gone stiff from exertion and fear. "How much farther?"

"Not far now," he says, pointing ahead towards summit obscured by clouds. She nods, takes another step forward; each one harder than last but necessity propels her onward. By mid-afternoon, winds shift, biting colder, icy fingers grasping at exposed skin. Snow falls in thicker flakes, blurring vision and making footing uncertain. Leif's face shows weariness beneath fur hat pulled low over brow; hers mirrors it back, though hidden by scarf covering nose and mouth. "Last push," he murmurs, voice barely audible above howling gale. "Summit near."

She forces feet to keep moving, upwards towards where sky meets earth in cold, unyielding embrace. Every breath burned lungs like wildfire; each step threatened balance on slopes treacherous with ice and snow. Finally, after what feels like hours but might only be minutes, a flat area opens up, a small plateau at mountain's peak surrounded by towering cliffs of white. Wind gusts weaker here, allowing for brief moment to catch breath, rest legs gone numb from climbing. Leif gestures towards east, horizon visible through break in clouds glows pale pink as sun begins descent behind mountains beyond pass. "Sunset soon," he warns gently. "We must cross before dark."

She nods, feeling sudden urgency; every second wasted means more night to face alone on other side of North Pass. They set off across plateau, wind biting harshly against faces and hands. Every step carries them closer towards final stretch, towards safety beyond mountains' hold. Summit nears, clouds thinning enough for glimpses below into valleys far away. Each peak visible is a reminder of distance traveled; each one ahead shows path still to go. By dusk, they reach base of descent, cliff face covered in ice and snow, leading down towards forests on other side. "Climb down carefully," Leif advises, handing over rope he used earlier. "Hold tight."

She starts downwards, finding handholds barely visible beneath layers of frost; feet push against ice that seems to shift with each step taken. Fear gnaws at edges of mind, falling means death here; every

misstep sends alarms ringing louder. Halfway down, fingers ache more sharply now; breath comes in painful gasps as cold seeps deeper into bones. But she pushes through, muscles straining against gravity and ice's slippery pull. Finally reaches bottom where trees loom dark against fading light of setting sun, forest waits ahead, offering shelter from winds that still rage on mountain heights. Leif follows close behind; both breathe heavy sighs of relief as ground steadies under feet. "We made it," he says quietly, pulling off gloves to shake hands briefly in silent acknowledgement of journey shared. She nods, eyes scanning horizon where pink glow fades into dark blue, night falls fast now, stars appearing one by one against black sky. "Let's find shelter."

Together they move through woods, branches scratching faces and arms; snow crunches underfoot with each step taken towards safety beyond pass's grip. Trees stand guard once more, now protectors rather than sentinels of warning. Leif leads them to small cabin hidden behind large rocks; door creaks open as he pushes against wood weathered by years left untouched. Inside, fire pit already set up; dry kindling and logs stacked neatly nearby. She watches him start flames crackling brightly, light dances across walls covered in maps and notes about trails taken and dangers avoided.

Chapter

Three

written by Dario Selo

Inside the small cabin, the fire crackled with a quiet insistence, each flame flickering as though testing the boundaries of its existence against the encroaching chill. The room was sparsely furnished but warm enough to offer solace from the biting cold outside. Maps and notes covered every flat surface, telling stories of journeys past and dangers avoided. Leif began preparing a meal while she watched, her eyes scanning the maps for familiar landmarks or new ones that hinted at paths yet untrodden. The cabin felt like an anomaly in this vast expanse of wilderness, a place where one could momentarily forget the perilous journey they had just completed and the trials still to come. “Do you often travel through North Pass?” she asked, breaking the silence as her gaze wandered back to him. He stirred a pot over the fire and nodded. “Sometimes.” His voice was measured, neither boastful nor dismissive. “This pass is like no other; it tests even those who know it well.”

She picked up one of the maps, tracing an old route with her fingers as if feeling the contours through paper alone could reveal the terrain’s secrets. The North Pass loomed large in every tale she had heard about this region, stories of brave souls and foolish wanderers alike. “What makes you come here?” she inquired softly, more to herself than to him, but he paused mid-motion, considering her question carefully before answering. “To see what lies beyond,” he replied eventually. “Each

journey through the pass is a reminder that there's always something new to discover." His eyes held a distant look as if remembering countless travels and encounters across these mountains. She set down the map gently, feeling the weight of his words settle around her like an unseen cloak. To seek what lay beyond, wasn't this also her reason for crossing North Pass? Yet here she was now, in this moment of respite, questioning whether the unknown truly offered more than what could be found closer to home. "Do you ever think about turning back?" she asked aloud, breaking the spell of introspection both had fallen into. The question hung between them like a shadow cast by the firelight. Leif chuckled softly, stirring again and then glancing at her over his shoulder. "Every day," he admitted with an easy smile that belied any serious undertones in his answer. "But I don't."

His honesty stirred something within her; perhaps it was the recognition of a shared struggle or simply the comfort derived from knowing she wasn't alone in her uncertainties. "Why not?" she pressed, genuinely curious about what drove him forward when others might falter and retreat into familiar warmth. "To find out if there's more," he said without hesitation. "To see if this place is truly as insurmountable as they say, or whether it hides something worth facing down its challenges."

His words resonated deeply within her, echoing against the silent walls of the cabin. Wasn't she here for similar reasons? Hadn't each step taken through blizzard and nightfall been driven by a desire to uncover what lay beyond this seemingly impassable divide? She nodded slowly, absorbing his thoughts as much as he had hers earlier. "I suppose that's why I'm here too," she admitted softly, more to herself than to him. Leif turned back fully now, the firelight catching in his eyes and lending them a depth not entirely visible before. "Then perhaps we're both on the same path after all."

The simple statement felt like an affirmation of sorts, binding their separate journeys together under the shared banner of curiosity and courage. Yet amidst this newfound sense of companionship lay a

lingering uncertainty, whether they were merely resting briefly or truly finding common ground. “Should we start planning our next move?” she asked, breaking the silence once more with practicality that masked deeper questions about purpose and direction. He nodded, setting aside the pot now simmering contentedly over their makeshift stove. “We’ll rest tonight but set out early tomorrow,” he proposed firmly yet gently, as if balancing between urgency and respect for her needs. As they gathered around the fire to discuss their next steps, maps spread across a small table illuminated only by the flickering light from flames dancing above them, she felt an odd sense of clarity mingled with doubt. Their paths might align now but would diverge eventually; each decision made here held implications for journeys yet unknown. “We should stick together until we reach safety beyond these mountains,” Leif suggested after some deliberation, his voice carrying a note of both practicality and camaraderie. “Once there, you can decide your next steps.”

She nodded in agreement, though part of her wondered if this moment of mutual aid was merely the calm before another storm, both literal and figurative.

Chapter

Four

written by rpenguin

The next steps were not where she expected them. Due to unforeseen circumstances she was forced to reconcile the fact that this journey was not going to go her way. At this point there was an important decision that needed to be made. Should I stay, or should I go? I really need to know.

Chapter

Five

written by Priya Nair

The decision loomed like a question mark in the air, heavy and unresolved. She stared at Leif across the flickering firelight, his face a map of concern etched into furrowed brows and tight lips. The cabin seemed to shrink around them, the walls closing in as if urging her to pick one path or the other. “Stay,” she said finally, though it felt more like a declaration than a choice. “We’ve come too far to turn back now.” Leif nodded, but there was hesitation in his eyes—a look that spoke of unspoken doubts and reservations. She saw it, and it made her pause. “What is it?” she asked, leaning forward slightly, the fire casting dancing shadows on their faces. He hesitated before speaking, “I’m worried about what’s beyond these mountains,” he admitted softly. “The legends say there are dangers unlike any we’ve faced yet.”

“Legends often exaggerate,” she countered, her voice a mix of confidence and uncertainty. “But I agree—we should be cautious.” Leif nodded again, his gaze softening. “We’ll travel light,” he said after a moment’s thought. “Only essentials. No unnecessary risks.”

She felt the weight of their combined decision settle around her like a warm cloak, comforting in its familiarity. It was strange how quickly this partnership had formed—two strangers thrown together by circumstance now bound by mutual survival and trust. The night passed in quiet preparations: packing supplies, checking gear, discussing

contingencies. Each task completed brought them closer to the reality of what lay ahead—a path fraught with challenges but also filled with possibility. By dawn's early light, they were ready to face whatever awaited beyond the mountains. The first step out of the cabin felt like a leap into the unknown, yet it was oddly exhilarating. The air was crisp and clear as they ventured forth, the sun casting long shadows that seemed to dance ahead of them on the snow-covered ground. Leif's pace set a steady rhythm—neither too fast nor slow, allowing for both progress and vigilance. As they walked, conversation flowed easily between them, their voices cutting through the silence like knives slicing cold air. She found herself laughing at some of his jokes—a sound that felt foreign after days of tension and strain. It was comforting to rediscover this lighter side amidst such daunting surroundings. Midmorning brought a change in terrain; the flat expanse gave way to rolling hills covered in dense pine forests, their boughs heavy with snow. The landscape shifted from barren white desolation into something almost picturesque—a stark contrast that left her momentarily stunned. “Beautiful, isn't it?” Leif asked quietly, his gaze distant as he took in the scene before them. She nodded, feeling a lump form in her throat at the sheer beauty and danger coexisting side by side like this. But beauty could be deceptive, and they knew it well enough to remain vigilant. Each step deeper into the forest meant encountering new challenges—icy slopes that required careful footing, thick underbrush demanding steady hands to clear paths ahead. Yet despite these obstacles, there was an undeniable sense of progress, a feeling that every mile closer to safety brought them one step further from peril. By late afternoon, they found themselves at a crossroads in the forest—a fork leading either left or right, both paths winding into denser woods but carrying distinct signs of recent activity. “Which way?” she asked Leif, her voice tinged with anticipation and caution. He studied their surroundings carefully before pointing towards the left path, “This one.” There was a conviction in his tone that reassured her; they'd made it this far together—they could make more decisions as a team. Following the chosen path, they soon came upon a

small stream running clear through the forest. The water sparkled like liquid silver against winter's backdrop, its surface smooth and inviting despite the chill biting at exposed skin. Leif knelt by the edge to fill their canteens while she gathered firewood from fallen branches nearby. The act of building a campfire in this setting felt almost symbolic-a beacon against darkness both literal and figurative. As flames licked upward towards the night sky, casting shadows that danced eerily on tree trunks around them, there was an odd sense of peace that settled over her heart. "Thank you," she said softly to Leif once they were both seated before the fire, warmth spilling out in ripples from its core. He looked at her with those same guarded eyes and nodded slightly, as if understanding without words the acknowledgment between them. It was moments like these where the weight of their journey-its trials and triumphs alike-became tangible enough to grasp hold of. They were companions now, bound by shared struggle and mutual trust in ways neither had anticipated or perhaps even desired at first glance.

Chapter

Six

written by Cora Lindgren

The fire crackled under the starlit sky, its warmth a stark contrast to the biting cold that seeped through the night air. She felt Leif's gaze on her as he nodded slightly in acknowledgment of her thanks, and for a moment they sat in comfortable silence, the firelight dancing across their faces like old friends sharing secrets. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we hadn't met?" she asked softly, breaking the quiet that had settled between them. The question hung in the air like an unspoken thread connecting past and future, winding through the trees and over the snow-dusted ground beneath their feet. Leif's eyes narrowed slightly as he considered her words. "Sometimes," he replied eventually, his voice a low rumble against the crackling of flames. "But I'm glad we did." His gaze softened, turning inward for just an instant before meeting hers again with unwavering resolve. She felt a warmth spread through her chest at his sincerity, and it was in that moment she realized how much their journey together had changed her—not just physically, but internally. The cold, the danger, the uncertainties—they were all part of something greater than herself now. "Me too," she said with a smile, the corners of her mouth lifting against the chill wind. "We've come so far, and yet there's still more ahead."

Leif nodded, his fur-lined hood shifting slightly as he turned to look out at the dark forest beyond their firelight. "True enough," he

murmured, his voice carrying a hint of weariness but also determination. They sat in companionable silence for a while longer, each lost in thought as they watched the flames dance and flicker above the embers. The sound of twigs snapping beneath their boots had long since ceased; only the occasional rustle of leaves disturbed by night winds could be heard breaking through the quiet stillness around them. As dawn approached, she felt a shift in the air—a subtle change that hinted at another day’s journey to come. It was then that she realized they were no longer just traveling together for survival but because something within each of them had been awakened during this trek through the North Pass. “Ready?” Leif asked as he stood up from their makeshift camp, stretching his arms above his head and cracking joints loosened by the cold night air. His fur coat rustled softly against the trees behind him, blending seamlessly into the darkening shadows around them. “Yes,” she replied with a nod, standing to join him. “Let’s keep going.”

The first light of morning filtered through the canopy overhead, casting long shadows across the snow-covered ground as they began their trek once more. Each step seemed lighter now, less burdened by doubt and uncertainty than before. The air was crisp and clear, the cold biting but invigorating—a stark reminder that every challenge faced together only strengthened their resolve. They moved swiftly through the forest, Leif leading with a surefooted confidence born of experience. She followed closely behind, her eyes scanning ahead for any signs of danger or promise in this vast expanse of wilderness. The trees loomed tall and silent around them, their branches heavy with snow that glittered like diamonds under the morning sun. By midday, they reached a clearing where a stream meandered gently through the landscape, its waters sparkling like liquid silver against the backdrop of winter’s chill. Leif knelt beside it to fill their canteens while she gathered firewood from fallen branches nearby. The act of building another campfire felt almost ritualistic now—a reminder that despite the harshness of their surroundings, there was always hope for warmth and comfort. “Let’s

make this place our home for tonight,” Leif suggested as he stood up, wiping his hands on a rag tucked into one pocket of his coat. “We’ve come too far to push ourselves without rest.”

She nodded in agreement, feeling the weight of their journey settle around her like a warm cloak. It was strange how quickly this partnership had formed—two strangers thrown together by circumstance now bound by mutual survival and trust. As they set about preparing for their stay at the streamside clearing, she couldn’t help but notice the subtle changes in Leif’s demeanor. There was an ease to his movements, a familiarity with tasks long practiced that spoke of countless nights like this one spent alone or with others equally driven by purpose. “Do you have family waiting beyond these mountains?” she asked quietly as they gathered around their fire later that evening, the flames casting dancing shadows on their faces. Leif hesitated before answering, his gaze distant as if recalling memories long buried beneath layers of experience. “Yes,” he said finally, his voice soft and tinged with a hint of sadness.

Chapter

Seven

written by Margot Vail

Leif's eyes flickered towards the fire, a soft glow casting shadows across his face as he contemplated her question. "They're waiting," he replied finally, his voice barely audible over the crackling flames. She nodded, feeling a twinge of understanding that went unspoken between them. The night air was cold and clear, stars twinkling like distant eyes watching their every move through the darkness. They settled around the fire, Leif's hands moving deftly as he prepared a simple meal from provisions they had gathered earlier. The silence between them held an unspoken agreement—a mutual acknowledgment of the challenges that lay ahead. "Do you ever regret coming this far?" she asked suddenly, her voice cutting through the stillness like a sharp knife slicing through butter. Leif paused mid-motion, his hands hovering over a pot filled with simmering stew. He looked at her sideways, eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to gauge the sincerity behind her question. "No regrets," he said eventually, stirring the pot with deliberate movements. "Every step taken has brought us here. We couldn't be anywhere else." His words carried an underlying tone of acceptance—of embracing whatever path had led them this far, even if it meant facing unknown dangers ahead. She nodded silently, feeling a similar sense of resolve settling within her own chest. They ate in companionable silence, each bite of stew warm and comforting against the cold that seeped through

their clothing. The meal finished, they cleared away dishes quickly and efficiently, leaving no trace behind as if respecting some unwritten law of survival in this unforgiving landscape. As darkness fell fully upon them, Leif began gathering more wood to keep the fire burning throughout the night. "We need to be ready to move early tomorrow," he said, his voice carrying a note of urgency that spoke of impending challenges yet unseen. "The route beyond this clearing is tricky-ravines and steep inclines will test us." She nodded without question, already sensing the gravity of their next leg of the journey. Once the fire was stoked high enough to keep them warm through the night, they settled into sleeping bags laid out near its glow. The warmth provided a stark contrast to the biting cold outside; it was here that she felt most acutely the fragility of human endurance against nature's raw power. As sleep claimed her eyes closed tightly, she allowed herself a momentary glimpse into what lay ahead-the unknown dangers and untold possibilities hidden beyond the mountains' grasp. Morning arrived with the faint whisper of wind through leaves still dusted with frost. Leif stirred first, his movements slow and careful as he ensured everything was in place before waking her gently from sleep. The sun had yet to rise fully above the horizon when they packed their belongings, ready for another day's journey under a sky painted in hues of pink and orange. They set off eastward, following the stream's course through dense forests where sunlight filtered thinly through branches overhead. Each step carried them further into territory both familiar and foreign-a place where every path seemed to hold untold stories waiting to be discovered or danger lurking around hidden corners. As they walked, Leif pointed out landmarks that marked their progress-an old stone bridge half-buried beneath snowdrifts, a lone pine tree standing sentinel over a small clearing. Each one spoke of the journey already completed and hinted at what lay ahead-a constant reminder of their shared history growing richer with each mile traveled. By midday, the terrain shifted once more-the forest gave way to rocky outcrops covered in patches of ice and snow that made footing treacherous. Here, every step required

Careful calculation-hands gripping onto loose rocks for balance; feet searching out firm ground amidst slippery surfaces. The air was colder now, cutting through their layers of clothing like knives slicing through paper-thin defenses. Leif led the way with practiced ease, his movements calculated and steady as he navigated around obstacles that seemed designed to test their resolve. She followed closely behind, her steps mirroring his rhythm-a silent dance of survival against nature's unyielding will. "Stay alert," Leif warned at one point when they reached a particularly steep incline covered in ice. "The next section is tricky." He pointed ahead towards a narrow path that snaked between towering cliffs, its surface slick with frost and snow. She nodded, her breath visible as steam against the cold air, each step taken carefully to avoid slipping into the ravines below. They pushed through this treacherous terrain with grim determination-Leif's voice guiding them through unseen perils; her own senses heightened to detect any sign of danger looming just beyond visibility. By late afternoon, they reached a plateau where the path leveled out briefly before plunging downwards towards dense woods ahead.

Chapter

Eight

written by Sasha Loomis

The plateau felt like a breath between two storms, a fleeting calm before another wave of peril crashed against them. The air was thinner here, colder and clearer; stars shone bright overhead even as dusk approached. Leif pointed ahead where the path dipped steeply into what appeared to be dense forest cloaked in shadows. “We’ll make camp just beyond that slope,” he said, his voice carrying the weight of caution but also an undercurrent of hope. She nodded, following him down towards the darkening woods with a sense of both trepidation and anticipation. The descent was gradual at first, then more abrupt as they approached the forest’s edge. Trees loomed tall, branches heavy with snow that made each step feel like treading through water. Midway down, the path suddenly veered off into a small clearing hidden beneath an overhang of dense foliage. Leif stopped and gestured towards a large boulder at the center. “Here,” he said softly, his eyes scanning the area for any signs of recent activity or danger. She approached cautiously, her gaze darting between the trees as if expecting to see something lurking in their shadows. The clearing was eerily quiet, the only sounds coming from the distant rustling of leaves and occasional chirping of unseen birds. A thin layer of frost covered the ground beneath their feet, sparkling faintly under the fading light. Leif began setting up camp, laying out a tarp for shelter and gathering dry wood for a fire while she

checked their supplies and made sure everything was in order. As night fell fully upon them, a strange quiet settled over the clearing; it felt as though even the trees held their breaths, waiting for something unseen to happen. She noticed Leif's movements growing more tense, his eyes shifting constantly between the forest around them and the sky above, tracking any sign of change or disturbance. "Do you think we'll make it?" she asked softly, her voice barely audible over the rustling leaves. He paused mid-motion, looking at her with a mixture of resolve and uncertainty. "We will," he replied firmly but hesitated slightly before adding, "if we stay focused and cautious."

The fire was built quickly but deliberately, its flames flickering in a way that seemed to dance almost out of sync with the world around them. As they gathered around it for warmth, she felt an odd sensation creeping into her mind—a sense of disconnection from reality as if everything happening were part of some surreal dream or nightmare. Suddenly, Leif's eyes widened slightly and he turned towards a dense patch of bushes nearby. "Did you hear that?" His voice was low but urgent, tinged with a hint of fear she hadn't noticed before now. She strained to listen, her heart pounding in her chest as silence stretched between them like an unspoken question. Then came the sound—a soft rustle followed by what sounded almost like a whisper carried on the wind. "What is it?" she whispered back, feeling cold sweat break out along her spine despite the fire's warmth. Leif shook his head slightly, eyes narrowing in concentration as he listened intently to whatever was making those sounds. "We need to be ready," he said finally after several long moments of silence and observation. He quickly checked their weapons, ensuring each was within easy reach should they need it suddenly. She mirrored him, pulling out her own knife and checking its sharpness against the flame's light. The action seemed automatic, like something ingrained through repetition in another life entirely. The fire crackled softly beside them now, casting flickering shadows across their faces as if trying to hide secrets of its own within those dancing lights. "Why are we here again?" she asked suddenly, her voice barely a

murmur against the night air. The question hung between them like an unspoken thread connecting past and future. Leif turned towards her then, his eyes meeting hers in a moment that felt both intimate and distant. His face was etched with lines of weariness but also determination-something she saw now more clearly than ever before. "To find out what lies beyond," he said quietly, almost to himself as much as an answer. She nodded slowly, feeling something shift inside her-a sense of clarity mingled with uncertainty that made her stomach churn in a way unfamiliar yet oddly comforting at the same time. They sat there for several more minutes without speaking, each lost in their own thoughts and fears about what lay ahead. As dawn approached, bringing with it the first hints of light filtering through dense foliage above them, they prepared to leave once more. The path downwards was steeper now, winding through thick underbrush that made every step challenging and precarious.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

inkwell_amy

The path ahead is never clear, only tread where shadows fall.

Iris Beddoe

The path ahead is never truly known until taken.

Priya Nair

Stars guide the lost, but only if they're willing to follow.

Cora Lindgren

The path ahead is never clear, but each step brings us closer to what we seek.

Margot Vail

The journey shapes us, or perhaps reveals us.

Finished on 19 October 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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