

ADVENTURE



# Departure Isn't About Geography

*a relay in eight chapters*

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RELAY · WRITERS

# The writers

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

|       |               |
|-------|---------------|
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Chapter

# One

*written by Priya Nair*

The pilot pocketed the money without counting it, which meant either he was honest or Elias had overpaid by a lot. Probably the latter. The ferry's engine coughed like a lifetime smoker, and the deck smelled of diesel and something organic that Elias didn't want to identify. "You got business on the island?" the pilot asked. He had the kind of face that suggested he'd asked this question a thousand times and received a thousand lies. "Visiting family," Elias said. "Right." The pilot adjusted something that looked important. "Family." There were three other passengers. A woman in a sundress that had seen better decades sat with her eyes closed, lips moving silently. Either praying or rehearsing an argument. A kid, maybe nineteen, hunched over a phone that clearly had no signal, swiping with the devotion of the faithless. And an old man feeding crackers to seagulls despite a sign that explicitly forbade feeding crackers to seagulls. The woman opened her eyes and caught Elias staring. "First time?" "That obvious?" "You're wearing shoes you care about." She nodded at his leather sneakers, which had cost more than the ferry ride. "The island eats shoes." "Noted." "Also, you look like someone told you not to come." Elias shifted his weight. The ferry hit a swell and his stomach stayed behind for a second before catching up. "You live there?" "I did. Then I left. Now I'm going back, which makes me either brave or stupid." "Could be both." "That's the spirit." She

smiled, and it wasn't a happy smile. "What'd they tell you? About the island?" "To stay away." "Yeah, well. They tell everyone that." She closed her eyes again. "Doesn't take." The pilot called out something that might have been a warning or might have been a sneeze. Ahead, the island emerged from the haze like a thought struggling to become solid. Trees too dark for the season, beaches the color of old newsprint. A collection of buildings huddled together as if for warmth. The kid with the phone suddenly looked up. "Hey, is it true there's no cops there?" "There's one," the woman said, not opening her eyes. "Sheriff Tambor. Used to be two, but the deputy took the morning ferry out about six months ago and no one's seen him since." "What happened to him?" "He took the morning ferry out about six months ago and no one's seen him since. Try to keep up." The old man finished his crackers and crumpled the wrapper with surprising violence. "You all talk too much. The island doesn't like talk." "The island doesn't like anything," the woman said. "That's its whole deal." They were close enough now that Elias could see details. A pier that leaned slightly left, as if considering its options. Buildings with windows that watched. A truck parked at an angle that suggested either haste or indifference. No people yet, but that feeling of being observed anyway, like a painting with eyes. The pilot cut the engine and they drifted the last twenty yards on momentum and hope. The ferry bumped the pier with a sound like a muffled apology. "All ashore," the pilot said. Then, looking directly at Elias: "Or not. Up to you. I'm heading back in forty minutes if you change your mind." Elias stood. His shoes touched the pier and immediately he understood what the woman meant. The wood felt wrong underfoot, like it was deciding whether to support his weight or let physics have its way. The woman brushed past him, sundress fluttering. The kid followed, phone still out, still faithless. The old man went last, pausing to look at Elias with eyes that had seen things and decided not to bother with them anymore. "They'll ask why you came," the old man said. "Have a better answer than the truth." Then he was gone, and Elias was alone on a pier that leaned left, watching three strangers disappear into an island that ate shoes and

didn't like talk, carrying with him a warning he'd ignored and a reason he couldn't quite explain. The ferry's engine coughed itself back to life behind him.

Chapter

# Two

*written by Cora Lindgren*

The pier planks gave under each step, not quite rotting but thinking about it. Splinters caught at the rubber sole of his right shoe, the expensive one, and when Elias looked down, the wood grain ran wrong, crossways to the boards themselves. Someone had built this thing in a hurry or a fury, and the salt air had been working on it ever since. The smell hit him as he reached solid ground. Not quite land, not quite sea. Kelp and rust and something sweet underneath, like fruit left too long in the sun. The dirt road ahead was packed hard as fired clay, rutted with tire tracks that curved and doubled back on themselves as if the drivers kept changing their minds. Heat came up from the ground even though the sun sat pale and distant. Elias's shirt stuck to his spine. Sweat pooled in the hollow of his throat. He pulled at his collar and his fingers came away gritty, the air itself leaving a residue. The truck he'd seen from the ferry was still there, a Ford the color of dried blood. No one in the cab. Keys in the ignition, door hanging open like a question someone had gotten tired of asking. Elias touched the hood. Warm, but not hot. The engine ticked as it cooled, a sound like a clock counting down or a tongue against teeth. Inside the cab, the vinyl seats were split and mended with duct tape, the steering wheel wrapped in something that might have been leather once. A rosary hung from the rearview mirror, the beads clouded with age or handling. On the passenger seat, a paper

bag folded over at the top, grease seeping through in dark continents. Elias didn't open it. His stomach knew better even if his hands were curious. The buildings started about fifty yards up the road. Clapboard and cinderblock and one place that looked like someone had tried to build from driftwood, all gray curves and salt-scrubbed smooth. No signs. No names. Windows with curtains drawn or no curtains at all, just the blank stare of empty rooms. Between two of the structures, a dog lay in the shade. Elias saw it when it lifted its head, tongue lolling. Too thin, ribs like ladder rungs. It watched him with yellow eyes and didn't move otherwise, didn't bark or growl or wag. Just watched. His shoes crunched on something. Shell fragments, bleached white and broken. They covered the road in patches, mixed with the dirt like someone had tried to pave with them and given up halfway. The sound followed him, a grinding whisper. Ahead, a porch. Elias couldn't say why that porch and not the others, but his feet had decided. The steps creaked. The boards here ran the right way but the nails had worked themselves up, heads jutting like tiny silver mushrooms. The door stood open just enough to show darkness inside. No, not darkness. The absence of light, which was different. Elias put his palm against the frame and the wood was warm, almost feverish. Paint flaked under his touch, pale blue curls that stuck to his skin. "You the one with questions or the one with answers?" The voice came from inside but also beside him, a trick of acoustics or something else. A woman's voice, older than the one on the ferry, with gravel in it. Elias's mouth was dry. The salt in the air had gotten into everything, coating his tongue, settling between his teeth. "I'm looking for someone." "Everyone is." A pause. "Doesn't mean finding is part of the deal." She appeared in the doorway, a shape resolving into edges. Gray hair pulled back so tight it looked painful. Skin the color of driftwood, weathered the same way. She wore an apron over a housedress, and the apron had stains that might have been food or might have been something else. Her hands were what he noticed. Rough, callused, with dirt under the nails. Working hands. Hands that

knew soil and skin and the difference between them. "Come in or stay out," she said. "But decide quick. The threshold doesn't like lingering.

Chapter

# Three

*written by inkwell\_amy*

Elias stepped inside because stepping back would have meant admitting something he wasn't ready to name. The door swung shut behind him without him touching it, without wind, just the inevitability of wood finding wood. The room smelled like vinegar and copper. His eyes took a moment to adjust, shapes emerging from the gloom like objects surfacing in murky water. A table with one short leg, propped level with a folded newspaper. Shelves lined with jars, their contents dark and suspended. A woodstove that hadn't been lit in weeks, maybe longer, but heat came from it anyway, warping the air above the iron in slow waves. The woman moved to the table and sat without offering him a chair. There was only one. Elias stayed standing, weight on the balls of his feet, ready without knowing what he was ready for. "Who're you looking for?" she asked. "A man named Carver. Thomas Carver." Her hands folded on the table, fingers lacing together like she was containing something. "Don't know him." "He wrote me. Three weeks ago. Said he was here." "People say lots of things." She tilted her head, studying him the way you'd study a map of somewhere you'd already been. "They write even more. Words are cheap when you don't have to stand behind them." Outside, the dog started barking. Not the alarm bark of strangers approaching, but something rhythmic, mechanical, like it had been wound up and set loose. The woman didn't react. Elias

looked toward the window but the curtain was drawn, just a lighter rectangle against the dark wall. "He's my brother," Elias said. "Half the people who come here are looking for family. The other half are running from it." She stood, walked to the shelves, selected a jar without looking. Inside, something pale and segmented floated in clear liquid. She set it on the table between them. "You tried the sheriff yet?" "No." "Good. Don't." She unscrewed the lid and the vinegar smell intensified, made his eyes water. "Tambor's got his own ideas about who belongs here and who doesn't. And he's not fond of questions." Elias watched her fingers dip into the jar, come out holding something that looked like a root or a bone or something in between. She set it on the newspaper, and it left a wet mark that spread through the print, obliterating words. "Your brother," she said. "He ever do anything stupid?" "Define stupid." "Come to an island when people told him not to." Elias's jaw tightened. The woman smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Three weeks is a long time here," she said. "Things change. People change faster." She pointed to the door with the thing from the jar, still in her hand. "There's a house at the end of the main road. White paint, or it used to be. Blue shutters hanging crooked. If your brother was here, someone there might know about it." "Might." "That's all you get on this island. Might and maybe and sometimes if you're lucky." She dropped the root-bone thing back in the jar, screwed the lid tight. "And when you go there, don't knock. Door'll be open or it won't. If it's not, you walk away." "Why?" "Because doors that won't open have their reasons." The barking stopped. The silence after it was worse, thick and waiting. Elias felt sweat run down his ribs, cold despite the heat. His shoes squeaked on the floorboards when he shifted, and the woman's eyes dropped to them, then back to his face. "How long you planning to stay?" she asked. "Until I find him." "That's not a length of time. That's a condition." She moved past him, opened the door. Light spilled in, somehow dimmer than when he'd entered even though the sun hadn't moved. "This island's got its own rules. You follow them, you might leave. You don't, you'll stay whether you want to or not." Elias walked to the threshold. The air outside tasted

different now, heavier, like breathing through wet cloth. "What are the rules?" he asked. The woman leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "First one's easy. Don't trust the weather. Second, don't eat anything you didn't bring with you. Third..." She paused, looked past him at something he couldn't see. "Third is don't go into the water. Not the bay, not the tide pools, not even if you're burning up. The water here remembers things." "Remembers what?" "Everything it takes." She stepped back inside and closed the door, and Elias was alone on the porch with the sun pressing down and the smell of vinegar still in his nose. The dog was gone from its spot between the buildings. The truck sat empty, keys waiting. He walked toward the end of the road.

Chapter

# Four

*written by rpenguin*

The blevins was a crazy blevins.

Chapter

# Five

*written by Margot Vail*

The white house sat where the road gave up. Paint hung in strips like old skin, and the blue shutters canted at angles that hurt to look at. No fence. No mailbox. The yard was crushed shell and sea grass gone yellow, and in the middle of it, a birdbath filled with something that wasn't water. Too dark. Too still. Elias stopped at the property line. His shoes had picked up a film of dust that made them look decades old already. The woman's warning sat in his chest like a stone. The door was open. Not wide. A gap of six inches, maybe eight. Enough to see a slice of interior: floorboards, a coat rack with nothing on it, the edge of a mirror catching light from somewhere deeper in. He climbed the steps. Three of them, concrete, cracked down the middle. Something had grown in the crack, brown and crisp now, dead but not decomposed. When he reached the door his hand went to knock, then stopped. Don't knock. He pushed it open instead. The hinges made no sound. That was wrong too, hinges that old should scream. Inside was cooler but not cool. The air had weight. It settled on his shoulders like hands. The mirror he'd seen showed him his own face, pale and slick with sweat, and behind him the doorway framing a rectangle of outside that looked farther away than it should. "Carver?" His voice fell flat. No echo. The room absorbed it. The house had a hallway running straight back. Doors on either side, all closed except one at the very end. Light came from there, yellow and

flickering. Not electric. Candle or oil lamp. Something with flame. Elias's feet moved without consulting him. The floorboards didn't creak. They sighed, a sound like breath leaving a body. On the walls, rectangles of cleaner paint where pictures had hung. He could see the nail holes, small dark punctures. The first door on the left had a keyhole. He looked through it without deciding to, drawn by the old instinct to see before being seen. The room beyond was empty except for a chair facing the wall. Someone sat in it. Too still. The posture of sleep or something past sleep. He straightened. His heart kicked against his ribs. The door at the end waited. The light from inside made shadows that moved independent of any visible source, shapes that suggested figures without committing to them. Elias put his hand on the frame. The wood was cold despite the flame somewhere inside. The room held a table, a lantern burning low, and maps. They covered every surface, overlapping, pinned and taped and weighted down with stones. Not regular maps. Hand drawn. Obsessive. The island rendered in dozens of versions, each slightly different. Coastlines that didn't match. Roads that appeared and vanished. Buildings marked with symbols he didn't recognize. And in the center of the table, a photograph. Elias picked it up. His fingers left prints on the dusty glass. Two men standing on a pier. The pier. One was Thomas, younger, thinner, but unmistakably his brother. The other man was older, weathered, with eyes that looked past the camera at something the photographer hadn't meant to capture. On the back, in Thomas's handwriting: Found it. Or it found me. Below that, a date. Six months ago. The lantern guttered. Shadows lunged and retreated. Elias turned and the man from the photograph stood in the doorway. Not weathered now. Desiccated. Skin like paper. Eyes filmed with something white and thick. The mouth hung open and there was no tongue, just darkness going back and back. Elias's throat closed. The photograph fell from his hand, glass cracking on the floor. The figure didn't move, didn't breathe. But the smell came off it in waves: salt and rot and underneath that, something sweet. Fruit left too long in the sun. "The deputy," Elias said. Heard himself say it. The words came from far

away. The figure's head tilted. A sound came out of it, wet and rhythmic. Not speech. The memory of speech. The shape speech left behind. Footsteps in the hall. Multiple. Slow and dragging. The chair from the first room scraped on the floor as its occupant rose. Outside, the dog began barking again, that same mechanical rhythm, and under it another sound. Singing. The woman from the ferry, her lips moving around words that might have been prayer or might have been something older. The lantern went out.

Chapter

# Six

*written by Dario Selo*

The darkness was not the absence of light but the presence of something else, and Elias understood (with the clarity that sometimes arrives in moments when understanding serves no practical purpose) that the distinction mattered, that language itself was failing him because language had been constructed for a world with different rules, rules that assumed darkness was simply what happened when light withdrew. Here darkness came forward. It had agency. His hand found the table's edge. The maps crinkled under his palm, which meant his palm was moving, which meant he was still capable of movement, which was worth knowing. The footsteps in the hall had stopped but stopping was not the same as gone. Stopping meant waiting. Waiting implied intention. He tried to catalog what he knew: his brother had been here six months ago (or had written the date six months ago, which was not necessarily the same thing), the deputy had left six months ago (or had stopped being the deputy, or had stopped being in a form that could hold the title), and the woman in the sundress had used the present tense when speaking of Sheriff Tambor, which suggested either that Tambor remained or that grammar on the island operated under different regulations than elsewhere. The singing outside had stopped. That felt worse. Elias's eyes adjusted, or the darkness permitted adjustment, another distinction that seemed crucial even as

his rational mind (the part of it that still answered to reason) insisted distinctions were luxuries he couldn't afford. He could see the doorway now as a deeper shadow within shadow. The figure that had been the deputy or had been wearing what remained of the deputy was gone. Was elsewhere. Was redistributed. He thought about his brother's handwriting on the photograph. Found it. The ambiguity sat in that pronoun, didn't it, the way it sat in all pronouns, words that pointed without naming, that gestured toward meaning rather than containing it. What was it? The island (but he'd found that by ferry, by transaction, by asking directions)? Something on the island (but Thomas had always been good at finding things, had made a career of it, archives and lost documents, things that wanted finding)? Or had Thomas meant the finding itself, the state of having discovered, the condition of discovery? Or it found me. That was the amendment, wasn't it. The correction. The addition that changed everything before it, the way a coda could rewrite an entire composition. Thomas had experienced something mutual. An exchange. A recognition that went both directions. Elias's shoe scraped on broken glass. The photograph. He bent (slowly, because sudden movements felt like violations of some compact he'd entered without reading the terms) and found the frame. The glass had separated into three pieces, which seemed intentional, which seemed like the exact number of pieces it should have become. He pulled the photo free and put it in his pocket, and the action felt transgressive, felt like theft, except you couldn't steal what had already been given. The maps on the table. He ran his fingers across them in the dark, feeling the different papers, different inks. Some were drawn in pencil, some in what felt like charcoal, one in something that had raised the paper's surface, scar tissue in pulp. The island kept changing or the observers kept changing or (and this was the thought that arrived like a hand on the back of his neck) the island changed its observers and thereby changed what they could observe. A sound from deeper in the house. Not footsteps. Something being dragged. No: something dragging itself. The distinction (again) mattered. Elias moved toward the window. There

had been a window, hadn't there? Windows were structural necessities, were building code, were how houses acknowledged the outside. But the wall where the window should have been was solid, or had become solid, or had always been solid and the window was something he'd imported from expectation. The door, then. The front door. The way he'd entered, which meant it was a way to exit, except entry and exit were different verbs and might require different conditions. He crossed the room (counting steps: five, which seemed too few), entered the hall (the doors on either side were open now, all of them, showing rooms empty of furniture but not empty), reached the front door (which was closed, which had definitely been open). The mirror showed him nothing. Not darkness, not his reflection. Nothing. The space where the mirror was simply declined to participate in reflection. Outside, someone was walking around the house. Slow circuits. Regular intervals. The crunch of shells under feet, if feet was still the applicable term. Elias put his hand on the doorknob. It turned easily. The door opened.

Chapter

# Seven

*written by Sasha Loomis*

The yard had rearranged itself. The birdbath was closer now, or he was closer to it, and the dark liquid inside had acquired a surface tension that made it bulge slightly above the rim without spilling. Physics as a courtesy rather than a law. The shells under his feet had sorted themselves by size, smallest near the house, graduating outward, and when he looked down his shoes were pristine again, the dust and age gone, which meant time here moved in more than one direction or moved in no direction or had given up movement entirely in favor of something more interesting. The figure circling the house was Thomas. Not was. Contained Thomas. The way a word contains meaning, the way a vessel contains water it didn't create. He wore the same clothes from the photograph, which after six months should have been rotted or stained or at least rumpled, but they hung on him with the indifference of fabric that had forgotten what bodies were for. His face was Thomas's face but the expressions moving across it belonged to someone else. Several someone else's. They took turns. "You shouldn't have used my name," Thomas said. His voice came from the right direction but arrived on a delay, like dubbed film. Elias's mouth was sand. "Carver. I said Carver." "Names are how it knows where to look." Thomas stopped walking but his shadow kept going, completing another circuit before rejoining him. "I wrote you not to come. You must have gotten the letter

backward." "You wrote me to come." "Did I?" Thomas looked genuinely uncertain. "Language gets complicated. The words stay the same but their arrangement becomes negotiable." The dog appeared between two buildings that hadn't been there when Elias entered the house. Buildings, he understood, were temporary. The dog sat and its yellow eyes reflected nothing, pure absorption. A hole in the visible spectrum shaped like an animal. "What did you find?" Elias asked. Thomas smiled with someone else's mouth. "The island has been here longer than islands were supposed to be possible. The bay receded (or advanced, depending on which direction you think of as forward) and when the water pulled back it left this. Not land. The idea of land. Geography as hypothesis." "That's not an answer." "No," Thomas agreed. "But it's true, which is more interesting than answers." The birdbath liquid trembled though there was no wind. Concentric circles spreading from a center point where nothing had touched. Elias watched the ripples and thought about how water remembers things, what the woman had said, except this wasn't water. This was what water became when it stopped pretending to be simple. "The deputy," Elias said. "He asked too many questions in the wrong sequence. Questions have to be asked in order here, like combination locks." Thomas turned and his shadow turned a beat later, always catching up. "He wanted to know why people disappeared. But you have to start with whether disappeared is something that happens to people or something people do. The grammar matters." A window on the second floor of the white house opened inward. No one opened it. It simply participated in being open for a while. "Can you leave?" Elias asked. Thomas considered this. Behind his eyes something moved, quick and darting. "I don't remember how wanting to leave feels. I remember the words. I can say them: I want to leave. But they don't mean anything anymore. Like saying a word over and over until it becomes sound." The shell path had extended itself. It curved now around the side of the house, an invitation or a path of least resistance or both. Elias looked at his brother and his brother looked back with eyes that knew him and didn't know him and

had never known him all at once. "The ferry runs twice a day," Elias said. "The ferry runs when it runs. Twice is how you counted it before you understood counting differently." Thomas reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. It was the letter. The one he'd sent. The one that had brought Elias here. "You should read this again. Now that you can read it properly." He held it out. The paper was dry and damp simultaneously, crisp and sodden. Elias took it and the ink had run but not randomly. The words had migrated across the page into new configurations, and what they said now was not what they had said before. Or had always said this, and Elias was only now literate.

Chapter

# Eight

*written by Lior Tannen*

Elias unfolded the letter and the paper came apart in three pieces, same as the photograph glass, same as everything here that broke. The ink hadn't run. It had settled, the way silt settles, finding its truth at the bottom. Come home, it said now. Before you forget where that is. Not a summons. A warning that had arrived too late, or exactly on time, depending on which clock you trusted. Thomas was watching him with something close to tenderness. The real kind, not the performance of it. That was the worst part. Whatever lived in his brother now understood love the way a house understands the people who built it: structurally, without sentiment, a fact of its construction. "I wrote that for you," Thomas said. "The part of me that was still me. Before I became collaborative." Elias folded the pieces together. They didn't align right, edges overlapping where they should have met clean. He put them in his pocket with the photograph and felt both objects dissolve into pulp against his thigh, warm and immediate. Not gone. Changed. The shell path stretched ahead and behind simultaneously. He could walk forward or back and either direction would be leaving. That's what the island had been trying to teach him: departure wasn't about geography. "Mom asked about you," Elias said, and Thomas flinched. Actually flinched. The shadow separated from him entirely for a moment, recoiling. "Don't," Thomas said. The other voices in him went quiet.

"That's not fair." "She made your birthday cake. August third. Sat at the table for two hours waiting." Elias's throat burned but he kept going because this was the only weapon he had, the small true things. "She didn't eat any. Just sat there. I had to throw it out when she finally went to bed." Thomas put his hands over his face. His fingers were too long now, joints in wrong places. "Stop." "She thinks you're coming home." "I am home." The hands dropped. His eyes were wet. The tears ran upward, defying something. "Can't you feel it? This place knows me. Knew me before I got here. I fit." The dog stood and walked into the nearest building. The walls didn't open. It simply intersected them, moved through solid matter the way light moves through glass. Elias understood he could do that too if he stayed long enough. Become compatible with impossible things. "I'm going back to the ferry," he said. Thomas nodded. The shadows of three birds passed overhead but there were no birds, just the memory of flight. "You probably won't make it." "I'm going anyway." "That's very you." Thomas almost smiled. "Stubborn. Dad's stubborn. You got that full-strength." It was the first time he'd sounded like himself in minutes. Elias grabbed onto it. "Come with me. Right now. We walk to the pier together." "I can't." "You mean you won't." "I mean the distinction doesn't exist anymore." Thomas gestured at the house, the yard, the island beyond. "I'm in the grammar here. You can't take a sentence out of its paragraph." The sun was setting or rising, hard to tell. The light came from all directions at once, golden and sick. Elias's shoes began to deteriorate again, leather cracking, sole separating. The island taking its due. He started walking. Not on the shell path. Across it, through the yellowed sea grass, toward the road that had brought him here. Behind him, Thomas called out: "Elias." He stopped. Didn't turn around. "Tell Mom I'm happy. Tell her I found what I was looking for." "Did you?" A pause. Long enough that Elias almost turned. "I don't remember what I was looking for anymore," Thomas said. "But I found something. That should count." Elias walked. The road appeared under his feet in sections, assembling itself from probability. The buildings watched him pass. The dog

reappeared, trotting alongside for twenty yards before dissolving into the heat shimmer. His shirt was soaked through. The letter and photograph had melted completely, leaving a wet patch over his heart. When he reached the pier, the ferry was there. Engine running. The pilot looked unsurprised. "That was thirty-eight minutes," the pilot said. Elias climbed aboard. His shoes fell apart as he stepped onto the deck, straps and sole and upper separating into component pieces. He stood there in his socks, which were somehow pristine. The ferry pulled away. Elias watched the island until it wasn't an island anymore, just a idea of land, a hypothesis of place where his brother had become part of the question instead of looking for answers. The woman in the sundress wasn't on the return trip. Neither was the kid or the old man. Just Elias and the pilot and the space where passengers should have been.

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