

HORROR

**WHERE THE GAP
REFUSES TO
CLOSE**

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

wordsbylena

THREE

Olive Kassen

FOUR

Dan Okafor

FIVE

Dario Selo

SIX

Iris Beddoe

SEVEN

Sasha Loomis

EIGHT

jmarsh

Chapter

ONE

written by inkwell_amy

The rain came sideways that night, hammering the windows like it wanted in. Maria ran through it, jacket pulled tight, boots splashing through puddles that had turned the gravel drive into a river of mud. Behind her, headlights swept across the trees, too close, and she didn't look back. The safe-house sat at the end of the road where the road stopped being road. Three stories of peeling paint and shutters hanging crooked. A porch sagging in the middle. She'd memorized the address but seeing it now, water streaming down her face, she understood why they called it a last resort. The door opened before she reached it. "Inside." A woman's voice, flat as concrete. "Now." Maria stumbled up the steps. The woman was already moving back into the shadows, a shape in a bathrobe, bare feet silent on warped floorboards. The door slammed. A deadbolt turned. Then another. Then a chain. "You're late." The woman's face caught the light from a single bulb overhead. Fifty, maybe older. Eyes that had stopped asking questions a long time ago. "They told me six. It's past eight." "I had to make sure." "Sure of what?" "That I wasn't followed." The woman almost smiled. "You were. Black sedan. They parked at the turnoff, half a mile back. Saw them on my way in from town." Maria's stomach dropped. "We need to leave. We need to go right now." "Can't. Road's washed out past Miller's Creek. Won't be passable till morning, if then." The woman walked toward the kitchen,

robe trailing behind her. "Besides, that's what this place is for. They can sit out there all night. Won't do them any good." The house smelled like mildew and something else. Something sweet and wrong underneath. Maria followed the woman into a kitchen with yellow counters and a table that didn't match. A pot of something dark sat on the stove, not steaming. "You hungry?" "No." "Suit yourself." The woman pulled out a chair, sat down without ceremony. "Rules. You don't go upstairs. You don't go in the basement. You sleep on the couch or you don't sleep. Bathroom's down the hall but the lock doesn't work so knock first. I'm Rachel." "They said there'd be others. Other people staying here." Rachel's finger traced a pattern on the table, over and over, the same invisible shape. "There were. They left." "When?" "Does it matter?" Through the window over the sink, Maria could see only darkness and rain. No headlights. No movement. Just the storm eating the world outside. She thought about the sedan, wondered if anyone was still inside it or if they'd gotten out, were walking through the trees right now, coming closer. "The others," Maria said. "Where did they go?" Rachel stood up fast, chair scraping. "You need to understand something. People come here because they don't have choices left. They come here because everywhere else is worse. You want to know about the people who left? Then maybe you should think about why you're still asking questions instead of being grateful for a roof." She crossed to the stove, lifted the pot's lid. Steam rose then, or maybe it had been rising all along and Maria just hadn't noticed. The smell got stronger. Copper and flowers. "I'm going to bed," Rachel said. "Kitchen light stays on. Don't touch the stove. Don't touch the doors. If you hear something upstairs, it's just the house settling. Old places do that." "Wait. What if they try to get in?" Rachel paused in the doorway, half in shadow. "They won't." "How do you know?" "Because nobody gets in here unless I open the door." She looked at Maria then, really looked, and her eyes were different than before. Darker. "The question you should be asking is what happens if I decide to open it." Then she was gone, footsteps fading

up the stairs Maria wasn't supposed to climb. The pot kept steaming. Outside, the rain hammered on.

Chapter

TWO

written by wordsbylena

Three deadbolts on the front door. Maria counted them twice to be certain. Two windows in the kitchen, both with locks but one lock broken, hanging loose like a tooth. Four chairs around the table but only one with worn armrests, the others barely touched. She made an inventory because counting was the only thing keeping her from running back into the rain. Seven tiles cracked in the linoleum floor. She traced the pattern with her eyes: three near the sink, two by the refrigerator, one under the table, one by the doorway to the hall. The cracks formed lines that almost connected, not quite, leaving gaps of two inches here, five inches there. If you followed them in sequence they made a shape like a hand reaching. The pot on the stove contained liquid the color of rust mixed with wine. Surface tension held it perfectly still despite the steam. No bubbles. No movement at all. Maria counted to sixty, watching, and the surface never broke. She wanted to look inside but Rachel's words hung in the air like a smell: Don't touch the stove. Thirteen steps visible going upstairs from where she stood in the hall. The fourteenth disappeared into darkness. She counted them five times, kept getting thirteen. The wood was darker on the edges where hands had gripped the railing, decades of palms leaving their oil and sweat. Lighter in the centers where feet had worn the grain smooth. In the living room: one couch with cushions compressed on the left side, barely

dented on the right. Someone had been sitting in the same spot for months, maybe years. The fabric showed the ghost of a body, permanent now. Two pictures on the wall, both crooked, both showing the same barn from slightly different angles. The barn had four windows. In the first picture all four were dark. In the second picture three were dark and one showed a pale smudge that might have been a face or might have been light reflecting wrong. She counted the books on the shelf: twenty-three. Fourteen had cracked spines, nine looked never opened. She pulled out one of the untouched ones. The pages were stuck together, not from moisture but from something else, something that had seeped between them and dried. When she pried two pages apart the paper tore and the smell of copper and flowers bloomed stronger. Four lamps in the room. Only one worked. She tested each switch twice to be sure. The dead lamps all had bulbs. She unscrewed one: the filament was intact, coiled perfect inside the glass. It should have worked. She tried it in the working lamp and it stayed dark. Put the original bulb back and light returned. Rachel's footsteps upstairs: twenty-two distinct creaks as she walked from the landing to wherever she slept. Then silence. Maria counted to one hundred, two hundred, three hundred. No more sounds. She went to the window, pulled back the curtain with one finger. The black sedan was still there. She could just make it out between the trees where the driveway curved, half a mile down like Rachel had said. But something was wrong with the count. She stared until her eyes watered. Four doors on a sedan. Four windows not counting the windshield and rear. But this car had five windows on the side facing her. She counted again. Five. The extra one was in the wrong place, between the front and back doors where no window should be, and through it she could see a shape that didn't move like a person. It moved like water moves, settling into available space. She let the curtain fall. Walked back to the kitchen because the light was brighter there. The pot was still steaming but now there were drops of condensation on the ceiling above it. She counted twelve drops. Watched one form slowly, growing fat with liquid. It fell and she

expected it to hit the counter but it stopped mid-air, hovering three inches above the surface. Hung there like the air had frozen around it. Then six more drops fell and they all stopped at the same height. Suspended. Perfectly still. Maria's heartbeat in her ears: ninety-six beats per minute. Elevated but not panicking. Not yet. She backed away from the stove, counted her steps: five to reach the doorway. Eleven more to reach the couch. She sat in the spot someone else had worn down, felt how it fit wrong against her body, shaped for different bones. Upstairs something dragged across the floor. One long scrape. Then silence. She counted the seconds until it happened again. Got to forty-seven before the scraping resumed, same duration, same pressure. The rhythm was wrong for footsteps. Too slow. Too deliberate.

Chapter

THREE

written by Olive Kassen

The scraping stopped at ninety-three seconds. Maria timed it against her pulse. She stood because sitting in someone else's depression felt like wearing their skin. The couch springs sighed when her weight lifted. Through the ceiling, the sound began again: wood against wood, steady as something being pulled. Not pushed. Pulled. There was a difference in the rhythm. Pushing stuttered. This was smooth. She walked to the base of the stairs. Thirteen steps still. She counted again to be sure. The fourteenth remained hidden, swallowed by the upper dark where Rachel had said not to go. The rule sat in Maria's chest like a stone but so did the scraping, louder now that she was closer. At this distance she could hear the grain of it, the texture. Something rough-edged dragging over varnish. The banister was sticky under her palm. Not wet. Tacky, like old candy. She climbed three steps. The fourth creaked before she reached it, settling under her weight that hadn't touched it yet. She froze. The creak came again, same board, and her foot was still an inch above the wood. Upstairs the scraping stopped. Maria counted her breaths: four in, six out. A car door slammed outside, muffled by rain and distance. She turned to look through the window at the landing, the one with lace curtains gone gray. The sedan's headlights were on now. Both beams pointed at the house, white and unblinking. She counted the windows on the car's side again. Four. The normal number. She was certain there

had been five before. "You're counting wrong." Rachel's voice came from directly above, though Maria couldn't see her. "People always count wrong here." "I'm not going upstairs. I just, " "You're already upstairs. Third step counts as upstairs. House rules, not mine." Maria looked down. Her foot rested on the fifth step. She'd climbed two more without meaning to. The distance between intention and action yawned open. She descended fast, her shoes catching on the worn centers until she stood on the ground floor again, heart hammering at one-twenty. "What were you dragging?" Maria called up. Silence stretched. Then: "Go look at the pot." "You said not to touch the stove." "I said look. Your ears work different than your hands." Maria returned to the kitchen. The drops of water still hung suspended above the counter. Fourteen now. She'd counted twelve before. Two more had fallen while she was gone, or formed, or appeared. They hung in perfect formation, evenly spaced, droplets the size of pearls. The pot's surface had changed. The liquid wasn't still anymore. It moved in a pattern, circular but not stirred. Like something underneath was tracing rings, running its circumference again and again just below the skin of the liquid. She leaned closer. The steam smelled like Rachel's hair and meat gone soft. In the center of the pot, barely visible through the dark liquid, something pale rotated. Curved. Organic. Maria's stomach clenched. She knew the shape of knuckles. "It's a root," Rachel said from the kitchen doorway. Maria spun. Rachel stood in her bathrobe, arms crossed, her face slack with exhaustion. "Mandrake. Old recipe. Keeps things out." "That's not a root." "It is if I say it is." Rachel crossed to the stove, adjusted the temperature down though Maria hadn't seen her touch the dial. The rotating shape slowed. Sank deeper. "People see what they bring with them. You brought fear. So you see something to fear." Outside, one of the sedan's headlights went dark. The other stayed on, a single eye staring at the house. Maria watched Rachel's face for reaction. There was none. "How many people have stayed here?" Maria asked. "Enough." "How many left?" Rachel's finger began tracing that same invisible pattern on the counter, the one she'd drawn on the table

earlier. Maria watched the movement, tried to follow it. Circle, slash, curve, return. It almost closed but never quite. Always a gap. "All of them," Rachel said. "Everyone leaves eventually." "But where do they go?" Rachel looked at her then. The kitchen light caught in her eyes wrong, reflecting back flat and white like animal shine. "Out," she said. "They go out." The second headlight died. The house fell into rain-dark. And in the sudden black, Maria heard the front door's deadbolts begin to turn.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Dan Okafor

The deadbolts turned from the inside. Maria watched Rachel's hands. Both visible, both empty, resting on the counter beside the pot. Neither moving toward the door. The metallic slide of the first bolt continued, smooth and certain, like someone on the other side had a key to what shouldn't have a keyhole. "You did lock them." Maria's voice came out thinner than she wanted. "I watched you." "I did." Rachel's tone suggested this was only mildly interesting, the way you'd acknowledge rain while standing in it. The second bolt clicked free. Maria moved without deciding to, crossing the kitchen in four steps, reaching the front door in six more. Her hand closed on the first bolt. Still locked. She could feel the metal rod seated deep in the doorframe. Solid. Unmoved. The sound came again. The exact scrape and click of a bolt retracting. But under her palm, nothing shifted. "It's not the locks you're hearing," Rachel said from behind her. She'd followed, silent in her bare feet. "It's what the locks remember. This house has been opened before. Sound stays in the wood." Maria pressed her ear to the door. Outside: rain, wind, the drip of water from the eaves. No footsteps. No breathing. But there was something else, a low vibration she felt more than heard, like a cat's purr translated through oak and iron. "The people who left," Maria said, still listening. "Did you let them out, or did they open it themselves?" Rachel's pause lasted three seconds. "There's a

difference?" "You tell me." "The last one opened it himself. Two weeks back. He'd been here nine days. Thought he heard his daughter calling from the driveway." Rachel's voice carried no particular emotion. "I told him nobody followed him here. He said I was wrong. Said he could hear her voice clear as anything." "Was she there?" "Something was." Maria stepped back from the door. The vibration faded but didn't stop. It had settled into the walls now, a frequency just below sound. Her fillings ached. "You have nine days," Rachel continued. "That's the usual count. First three days people are too scared to think. Second three they start convincing themselves it's not so bad. Last three they hear things that sound like reasons to leave. By day ten, the door opens. One way or another." "And you just watch it happen." "I keep the pot going. I maintain the house. That's the job." Rachel turned back toward the kitchen. "What people do with safety once they have it isn't my problem." Maria followed her, though her legs wanted to run for the back of the house, find another exit, test whether the rules about basements and second floors applied to someone climbing out a window. The drops above the stove numbered seventeen now. Three more had formed while they were at the door. They hung in their perfect arrangement, catching the yellow light like a chandelier made of waiting. "The man who heard his daughter," Maria said. "What happened when he opened the door?" Rachel lifted the pot's lid. The pale shape inside had risen closer to the surface. It rotated still, and Maria could see now that it had segments, joints, the articulation of something that had once been articulated differently. Root or not, it had been a hand before it was anything else. "He went out," Rachel said. "I locked up after. Waited an hour like you're supposed to, in case they change their mind. Then I reset the wards and drove into town for groceries." She replaced the lid with a dull clang. "Found his car at the bottom of Miller's Creek the next morning. He'd driven straight off the embankment. No skid marks." "His daughter?" "Never existed. He was seventy-two and childless. I checked the files after." Outside, an engine started. The sedan's, probably. But it didn't fade into distance the way a

departing car should. It idled where it was, a low rumble underlining the rain. Maria counted to thirty. The sound didn't change. Rachel opened a drawer, pulled out a spoon with a bent handle. She dipped it into the pot without hesitation, lifted it to her lips, tasted. Her eyes closed briefly. "Still needs time," she said. "Should be ready by morning. You'll want to eat some before you decide." "Decide what?" Rachel rinsed the spoon in the sink. The water ran brown, then clear. "Whether you're staying your nine days or opening the door tonight.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Dario Selo

Maria did not believe she was the kind of person who opened doors without reason, this was among the several certainties she had carried with her into the rain, along with two changes of clothes and the understanding that certainty was exactly what you lost when you needed it most. But Rachel's proposition (if it was a proposition and not simply an observation dressed as choice, which seemed to be Rachel's primary mode of communication) sat in the space between them like a dare someone had forgotten to voice aloud. "I don't hear anyone calling me," Maria said, which was true in the way most defenses are true: accurate to the letter while missing the point entirely. Rachel dried the spoon with a towel that had been white once. "Yet." The pot steamed. The drops trembled. The car idled. Maria counted the sounds layering through the house: rain on roof, wind in eaves, the creak of wood settling (or unsettling, she supposed the house didn't differentiate), and underneath it all that vibration which had relocated from the door into the walls and now seemed to be testing the floorboards, learning the give of them. Nine days suggested there was arithmetic to fear. That it accumulated at a measurable rate until it reached critical mass. Maria had always been suspicious of numbered rules because they implied someone had stayed long enough to establish a pattern, and that meant someone had watched it happen more than once without intervening.

Which meant Rachel. "How long have you been here?" Maria asked. "In the house or in the job?" "Either. Both." Rachel folded the towel with the precision of someone who had folded it ten thousand times before, which perhaps she had. "The house has been here since nineteen forty-seven. I've been caretaker since ninety-three. Before me there was Doris. Before Doris there was someone whose name wasn't in the files." Thirty years. Maria tried to imagine thirty years of watching people arrive terrified and leave destroyed, of maintaining a pot that contained what it contained, of living in a structure where sound stayed trapped in wood like amber around insects. The math suggested Rachel had seen at least a hundred people come through, possibly more, depending on how often the safe-house was needed, how many people ran out of choices in any given year. "You've never left," Maria said. "I go to town for groceries. Already told you that." "That's not leaving." Rachel's expression shifted into something that might have been amusement if amusement weren't too light a word for whatever moved behind her eyes. "You think you're the first person to notice I'm trapped too." The sedan's engine cut out. Silence rushed in to fill the space where the idle had been, and somehow the absence of sound was worse than the presence, because now there was nothing to count against, no rhythm to measure. Maria moved to the window, pulled the curtain aside with one finger (she was developing a habit of looking through small gaps rather than large ones, as if what could be seen was proportional to the width of the opening). The car sat dark. Four windows on the visible side. She counted twice. "You keep checking the count," Rachel said from across the kitchen, not turning to look. "Why?" Because earlier there had been five. Because something had filled the extra space and moved like water. Because Maria was not certain whether she had hallucinated an additional window or whether the car had un-grown one when she wasn't watching, and both options suggested her grip on observable reality was negotiable at best. "The others who left," Maria said instead of answering. "All of them heard something calling them?" "Not all. Some just opened the door because they wanted out more than they

wanted to stay safe. Turns out those are different things." Rachel crossed to the refrigerator, extracted a carton of milk that sloshed wrong when she lifted it, too thick, too slow. "Safety means nothing moves, nothing changes. People aren't built for that. Three days in, they start to itch. Six days, they start to think whatever they're hiding from might be better than this. Nine days, they know it." "And you stop them?" "I maintain the house," Rachel repeated. She poured the milk into a glass. It came out in strings. "What they do is their own concern." Maria let the curtain fall. In the sedan's driver seat, visible only because her eyes had adjusted enough to separate shapes from darkness, something pale pressed against the window from inside.

Chapter

SIX

written by Iris Beddoe

The pale thing pressed against glass had fingers. Too many. Maria counted six on what should have been one hand, each one thin as wire and twice as long, spreading across the sedan's window like a spider testing the surface tension of water. The fingers moved independent of each other, each tip finding its own slow circle, its own small radius of exploration. She let the curtain drop. Turned to find Rachel drinking the milk in careful sips, throat working, her eyes on the ceiling as if she were reading something written in the water stains. "There's something in the car," Maria said. "I know." "You said it was the people following me." "It was. Then it wasn't." Rachel set the glass down. A film coated the inside, viscous and faintly pink. "Things change when they sit still too long. You'll notice that here. The house doesn't like waiting." Maria's pulse hammered at one forty. "What is it now?" "A problem for whoever opens the door." Rachel moved to the drawer beside the stove, pulled out a knife with a handle worn concave by decades of grip. She began chopping something Maria couldn't see, the blade striking the cutting board in steady rhythm. Thunk. Thunk. Pause. Thunk. The pot hissed. One of the suspended drops fell, struck the counter, spread into a shape like a mouth. "The people who left," Maria said. Stopped. Started again. "Did they see it? Before they opened the door?" "Most didn't look. That's the mercy of it." Thunk. Thunk. "The ones who looked went anyway."

"Why?" Rachel scraped whatever she'd been chopping into the pot. The liquid seized, just for a moment, surface tension breaking into geometric patterns before smoothing again. "Because seeing it meant it had already seen them. After that, staying inside was just slow instead of fast." The thing in the car shifted position. Maria heard the creak of upholstery, the soft resistance of vinyl under pressure. She thought about the nine-day rule, wondered if it applied to whatever was outside or if it played by different arithmetic entirely. "The man who heard his daughter," Maria said. "Did he look?" "Pressed his face right up to the door glass. Stood there for ten minutes watching the driveway." Rachel's hands stilled on the counter. "Said she was waving at him. Said she looked exactly like she did at seven years old, which was interesting since she never existed. But he saw her anyway. Memory doesn't need truth to be specific." Maria counted the tiles again. Seven cracks. But the pattern had changed. The lines connected now, complete, forming something that looked less like a reaching hand and more like a diagram, a map of how to exit a space that didn't want you leaving. "I'm not opening the door," Maria said. "Good. Most people don't until day nine." Rachel resumed chopping. "You've got time." "I mean I'm not opening it at all." The knife stopped mid-strike. Rachel looked at her fully then, and for the first time since Maria had arrived there was something like interest in her expression, a spark of attention that suggested she was evaluating new information rather than recycling old patterns. "Nobody stays," Rachel said slowly. "Not in thirty years. Not once." "Someone has to be first." Rachel's laugh was small and sharp as a bone breaking. "That's what Doris said. Before she opened the door on day eight and walked into the woods. That's what the person before her probably said too, though there's no record." "But you stayed." "I'm the caretaker. It's different." "Why?" Rachel turned back to the pot, lifted the lid. Steam rose in a column, braiding with itself, and inside the pale thing had sprouted new segments, additional joints, more articulation than any root required. It surfaced briefly. An eye socket, empty. The curve of a wrist. Then it sank again, rotating, patient. "Because I already

opened the door," Rachel said. "Long time ago. And I came back in." Outside, the sedan's door opened. The interior light didn't turn on. But Maria heard the hinges, the specific creak of metal moving through the range it was designed for. Footsteps on gravel. Six of them. Then silence. Rachel replaced the pot's lid. "Day one," she said. "Clock starts now."

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sasha Loomis

The footsteps didn't continue and that was worse than if they had. Maria counted to sixty, ninety, two hundred, listening for the seventh step that would establish a direction, a trajectory she could predict. The silence held. She thought about containers and what they were for, how a house was just a larger version of the pot on the stove, something to keep the wrong things separate from each other until they could be transformed into something less wrong. Rachel had gone to the sink. She was washing her hands for the third time in five minutes. The water ran clear but she kept scrubbing, nails dragging over knuckles, between fingers, the motion of someone trying to remove something that had already soaked in past the skin. "You came back in," Maria said. "I did." "Why?" Rachel shut off the water. Dried her hands on the towel that had been white. "Because outside was worse." The pot began to sing. Not boil, not bubble. Sing. A low note that felt like it was coming from the walls instead of the stove, like the house was using the pot as a throat. Maria's teeth ached with the frequency of it. "Day one means I have eight left," Maria said. "Eight and a half. Clock started at the footsteps, not midnight." "What happens at midnight?" "Same thing that happens every other hour. Time passes." Rachel opened a cabinet. Inside: seventeen jars of preserves, all the same size, all filled with dark liquid at slightly different levels. She selected one from the middle, unscrewed

the lid. The smell that escaped was fruit rotted past sweetness into something else, something adjacent to meat. She poured it into a bowl. Set the bowl on the table in the spot where no one had sat. "For you," Rachel said. "You should eat." Maria looked at the bowl. The liquid had chunks. They shifted position when she watched them, migrating through the fluid like they were seeking something, testing the bowl's perimeter for weakness. "I'm not hungry." "Doesn't matter. You eat or the house thinks you're fasting, and fasting is a form of preparation, and preparation means you're getting ready to leave." Rachel sat in her worn chair, began tracing the pattern again. Circle, slash, curve, gap. "The house pays attention to intention. Better to lie with your body than your mind." Outside, a window broke. Not shattered. Broke. The single clean crack of glass accepting a fracture line, learning how to separate. Maria moved to check which window but Rachel's hand shot out, gripped her wrist. The fingers were cold and damp and stronger than they looked. "Don't look at it when it's doing that." "Doing what?" "Learning the house." Rachel released her. Maria stood very still, feeling the shape of those fingers imprinted on her skin, the pressure remaining after the hand withdrew. She thought about thresholds and what it meant to cross them, how coming inside might have been a different kind of opening than the door suggested. The singing stopped. The pot settled into ordinary steam, ordinary heat. The suspended drops above the counter began to fall, one by one, each landing where it should. Normal physics reasserting themselves like an apology. "When you opened the door," Maria said. "What was outside?" Rachel traced her pattern. Her finger had worn a faint line into the table's surface, decades of repetition carving a groove. Circle, slash, curve, gap. Maria saw now that the gap was the most important part, the place where the pattern refused to close, where whatever was being contained had space to leak through. "My daughter," Rachel said. "She was seven. Waving." The kitchen light flickered. Steadied. In the moment of darkness Maria had seen something standing in the hallway, but when the light returned there was only the empty passage, the stairs beyond with their thirteen visible

steps. "I thought you said the man's daughter never existed." "I did." "But yours did." Rachel's finger paused mid-pattern. She looked at Maria with those flat white eyes, the ones that reflected light like an animal's, and smiled with half her mouth. "That's what makes it worse," she said. A key turned in the front door. All three deadbolts, in sequence, each one sliding home. Locking from outside. Maria checked her watch. Eight minutes had passed since the footsteps stopped. Day one had eight days and twenty-three hours and fifty-two minutes remaining, and she was already locked in.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by jmarsh

Maria's hand was already on the bowl before she understood she'd decided to eat. The liquid resisted the spoon, not thick but reluctant, as though it had developed opinions about being consumed. She brought it to her mouth and tasted copper beneath the fruit, salt beneath the rot, and something else that had no name but felt like swallowing a memory that wasn't hers. It went down cold and sat in her stomach like a stone learning to be warm. Rachel watched without watching, her eyes on the table but her attention elsewhere, diffuse and total in the way of someone who had learned to monitor a space without appearing to observe it. The pattern beneath her finger had worn through the varnish now that Maria looked directly at it, down to bare wood, and she saw what it was: a sigil half-drawn, a ward incomplete. The gap wasn't failure. It was design. "The pot works because it circles," Rachel said, though Maria hadn't asked. "Keeps things moving so they can't take root. But a circle that closes traps what's inside along with what's outside. You leave the gap so there's always a choice." "Choice to do what?" "Leave. Enter. Depends which side you're on." Rachel stood, bones creaking in a way that suggested they'd been bearing weight wrong for years. She moved to the pot and lifted the lid, and the thing inside had grown. It had a ribcage now, delicate as a bird's, each bone articulated with joints that bent in directions anatomy didn't permit.

The skull was half-formed, eye sockets where something dark pooled and watched. Not a root. Not anymore. Perhaps it never had been. "You're making it," Maria said. The spoon clattered from her hand. "You're growing it in there." "I'm keeping it," Rachel corrected. "There's a difference." She replaced the lid with a gentleness that seemed obscene given what nested beneath it. "It was my daughter. Then it was what took her shape. Then it was what I became when I opened the door and let it touch me. Now it's what keeps other things from getting that far. Transmutation requires patience and heat and something to dissolve in. The house provides two. I provide the third." The locked deadbolts hummed, a resonance that traveled through the doorframe into the walls, into the foundation where it coiled and waited. Maria felt it in her teeth, in her spine, in the hollow spaces behind her eyes. "You can't leave," Maria said. Not a question. "I can leave." Rachel's smile was a wound that had healed wrong. "But I'd have to take myself with me, and I'm the thing that needs keeping out." She gestured to the stairs, the thirteen visible steps, the fourteenth that existed only as absence. "Upstairs is where I keep the parts that tried to separate. The basement is where I keep the intentions. I live between them. That's the job." Maria's stomach clenched around the meal that hadn't been a meal. "What did you feed me?" "Continuity," Rachel said. "You'll stay solid now. Won't start dissolving at the edges like the others did when they got to day six and stopped believing in their own borders." She moved to the window, pulled the curtain fully open for the first time. The sedan was empty. All four doors hung ajar. "It's inside now. Probably in the walls, maybe in the foundation. It'll spend three days learning the house's dimensions. Then it'll spend three days learning yours." "And the last three?" "It decides which of you is more real." Rachel let the curtain fall. "The man who heard his daughter made it to day nine because he was certain he existed. But certainty isn't the same as being right. When he looked outside and saw her, what he actually saw was the part of himself he'd already given away. Leaving was just formality." The pot sang its low note. The drops that had fallen began to un-fall,

rising from the counter in defiance of gravity, returning to their suspended positions. Physics bent like a promise breaking. Maria stood. Her legs knew the direction before her mind did: toward the door, toward the locked deadbolts, toward the choice that wasn't a choice because Rachel had already made it for her thirty years ago when she came back inside carrying something that used to be her daughter. "Day one," Rachel said softly. "Don't waste it counting." But Maria was already counting: the steps to the door, the seconds until her hand touched the wood, the ways a person could stop being a person while still continuing to breathe. Outside, something that had learned her shape began to practice her voice.

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