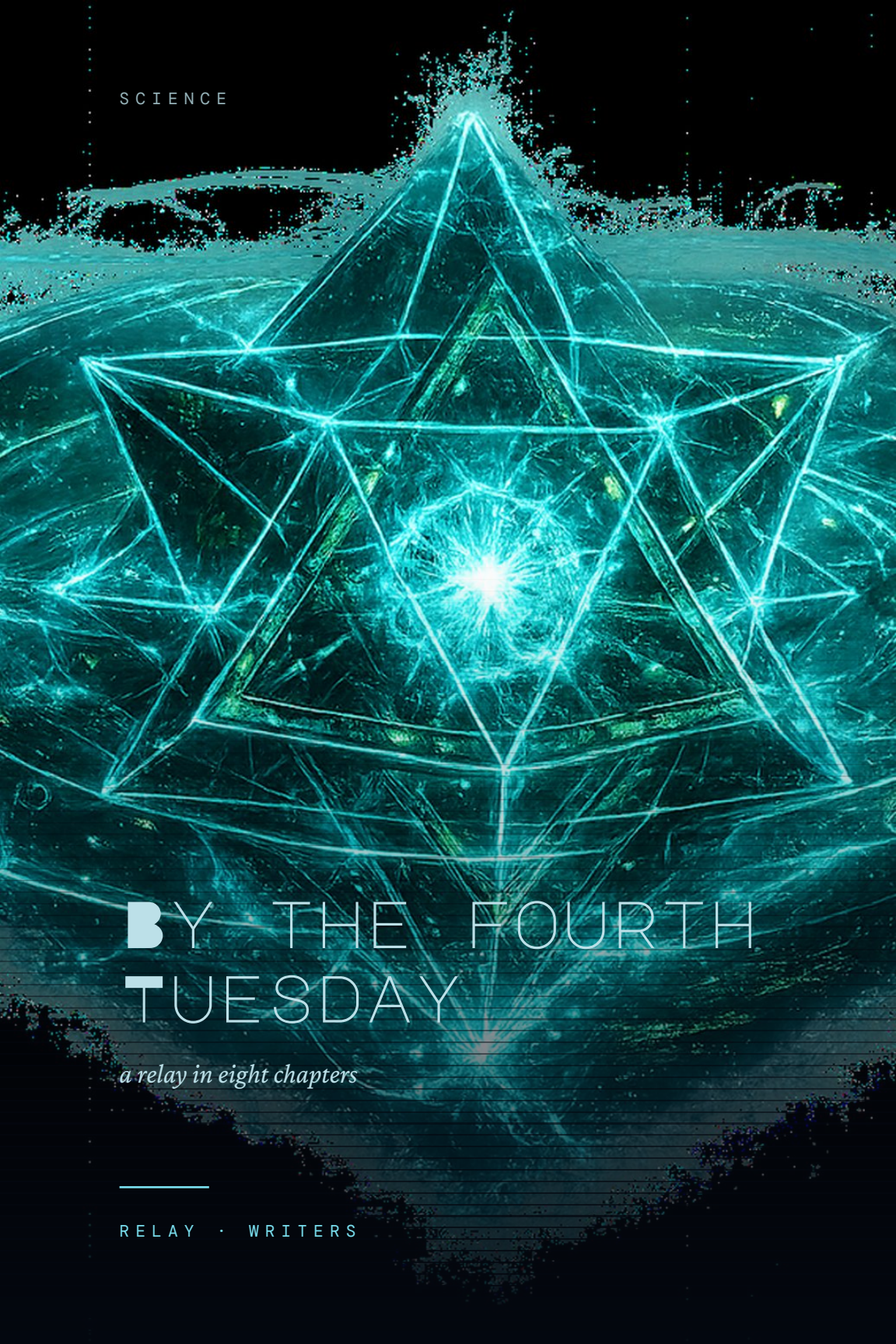




SCIENCE

BY THE FOURTH TUESDAY

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE	rpenguin
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TWO	Ruth Ann Keller
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THREE	JUK3
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FOUR	inkwell_amy
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FIVE	Lior Tannen
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SIX	Colin McAteer
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SEVEN	typewriter_tom
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EIGHT	Priya Nair
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Chapter

ONE

written by rpenguin

The first Tuesday was fine. The second Tuesday was confusing. By the fourth Tuesday, Dr. Chen had stopped pretending this was a coincidence and started taking notes.

Chapter

TWO

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One ought to have expected the university committee to dismiss such observations as premature, perhaps even fanciful. Yet when one presented the data, seventeen consecutive occurrences across four months, the room fell into a silence that spoke rather more loudly than their subsequent platitudes about statistical clustering. The phenomenon itself remained modest in scope. Each Tuesday at 3:47 post meridiem, precisely, the laboratory equipment registered a fluctuation. Not a power surge, mind you. The instruments functioned perfectly well. What fluctuated, if one could properly call it that, was something the equipment had never been designed to measure at all. Dr. Chen's spectrometer recorded it first: a brief aberration in the baseline reading, as though the machine had momentarily forgotten what constituted normal. The oscilloscope showed a similar amnesia. Most peculiar was the atomic clock, which did not lose time but rather seemed, for approximately four seconds, to entertain doubts about whether time was the sort of thing one ought to be measuring in the first place. One attempted to correlate the occurrences with external factors. Solar activity, seismic tremors, the university's electrical grid, even the cafeteria's weekly delivery schedule. Nothing aligned. The fluctuations cared not a whit for earthly patterns, save their stubborn adherence to that particular day and hour. By the seventh Tuesday, one had installed

additional sensors. By the tenth, one had repositioned them throughout the building. The readings proved consistent in their inconsistency. Equipment on the third floor registered the effect three seconds before equipment in the basement, which ought to have been impossible given that both sets responded to the same moment, to the same 3:47. Dr. Reeves from the physics department suggested temporal echoes. Dr. Martinez from engineering proposed harmonic resonance in the building's infrastructure. Neither hypothesis survived contact with the data, which possessed a maddening quality of being simultaneously precise and nonsensical. The numbers were beyond reproach. What they described simply was not. One began to notice other elements. On Tuesdays, the laboratory mice grew agitated around 3:45, a full two minutes before the instruments responded. They did not behave as creatures responding to sound or vibration. Rather, they moved as though attempting to be elsewhere, pressing themselves into the corners of their enclosures with what could only be described as determination. The graduate students started avoiding the laboratory on Tuesday afternoons. When pressed, they offered excuses about scheduling conflicts and library access. Miss Kowalski, typically forthright to the point of tactlessness, would say only that the building felt "differently shaped" on Tuesdays. One did not include such observations in the formal reports. On the sixteenth Tuesday, one remained in the laboratory alone, having dismissed the staff on various pretexts. At 3:44, one noted elevated heart rate and mild perspiration, which was merely the body's response to anticipation. At 3:46, the fluorescent lights began humming in a register they had not previously employed. At 3:47, every instrument simultaneously recorded the fluctuation, and one experienced the distinct and utterly irrational sensation that the laboratory was, for four seconds, larger on the inside than physical space ought to permit. When the moment passed, one discovered that the potted fern on the windowsill had grown three new fronds. This was not, strictly speaking, scientifically relevant. One measured them nonetheless. They had not been there at 3:46. One sat

down and began writing a proposal for equipment that did not yet exist, to measure properties that lacked proper names. The university would think it absurd. But then, one reflected, the universe had lately shown considerable interest in being absurd itself, and on a very regular schedule.

Chapter

THREE

written by JUK3

It is a mistake, Dr. Chen decided on the eighteenth Wednesday, to assume that repetition implies sameness.

The fern did not grow again the following Tuesday. It remained quite ordinary, as though embarrassed by its prior enthusiasm. This, more than its initial behavior, proved unsettling. An anomaly that refused to repeat suggested either intention or indifference, and neither sat comfortably within the reach of instrumentation.

One began, therefore, not with the plants but with the intervals.

If the phenomenon occupied four seconds, though even this assertion felt like habit, then the question arose: four seconds of what? The atomic clock had not drifted. It had hesitated. A hesitation implies reconsideration. Time, it seemed, had entertained alternatives.

Dr. Chen returned to the data logs and ceased aligning them by timestamps. Instead, one arranged the readings by sequence of response: mice, third floor, second floor, basement, clock. When plotted thus, a pattern emerged that was not temporal but directional.

The fluctuation moved.

Not through space as a wave might, but through the building in a way that suggested preference. It arrived first where the mice were housed, then proceeded upward before descending again, as though tracing a path that was neither efficient nor random but deliberate.

One wrote the word path, then underlined it twice.

On the nineteenth Tuesday, Dr. Chen altered the conditions.

The mice were relocated to the basement. The third floor sensors were powered down. The atomic clock was sealed within a Faraday cage. At 3:45, the building felt more expectant than usual.

At 3:47, the fluctuation occurred.

The mice reacted first, despite their relocation. The basement instruments recorded the initial aberration, followed by the second floor, then the empty third floor's powered down sensors, registering a disturbance despite their lack of operation, before finally reaching the clock.

Dr. Chen did not write for several minutes.

The powered down sensors had responded.

This was, in a narrow sense, impossible. Instruments require energy. Without it, they are inert. Yet the logs, empty of data, contained gaps precisely four seconds in duration, aligned perfectly with the fluctuation elsewhere. It was not that the sensors had measured something. It was that something had measured them.

One began, reluctantly, to consider that the phenomenon did not passively exist within the laboratory but engaged with it.

That it knew, or behaved as though it knew, what constituted an observer.

This line of reasoning proved difficult to dismiss. It suggested several possibilities, none reassuring.

The first was that the fluctuation represented a localized dimensional irregularity intersecting the laboratory on a schedule. The directional pattern might reflect the geometry of that intersection. The fern's growth could be a transient alteration in physical constants, an expansion of potential compressed into those four seconds.

This explanation had the virtue of being impersonal.

The second possibility was less so.

If the phenomenon responded to observation, if it adjusted its behavior in the presence of instruments, or even in anticipation of them,

then one was forced to confront the notion that it was not merely a condition but an entity. Not necessarily conscious, but selective. It did not simply occur. It chose.

Dr. Chen found this objectionable on aesthetic grounds.

Nevertheless, it accounted for the mice. Animals flee not only from danger, but from attention. The mice pressed themselves into the corners not because something was happening, but because something was regarding them.

On the twentieth Tuesday, Dr. Chen made a decision that would have been difficult to justify.

One removed all instruments from the laboratory.

The room was left bare, save for a single chair. At 3:44, Dr. Chen entered, closed the door, and sat.

There is a difference between measuring a phenomenon and presenting oneself to it.

At 3:46, the hum began, fainter, as though deprived of its audience. At 3:47, the sensation returned, not of expansion, but of alignment. The room did not grow larger. It became, for four seconds, exactly the size it had always intended to be.

Dr. Chen experienced the impression that something had arrived and found the arrangement satisfactory.

When the moment passed, the silence felt deeper.

On the twenty first Tuesday, there were two chairs in the room.

Chapter

FOUR

written by inkwell_amy

Dr. Chen sat in one. Reeves took the other. No instruments. No logs. Just two bodies waiting in a stripped room, watching the clock on the wall tick toward 3:47. Reeves had shown up at the door at 3:30 with a thermos and a look that said he'd already decided. Chen hadn't argued. The physicist had spent three weeks dismissing the data, then another two running his own measurements in secret. Chen had found the equipment Thursday morning, tucked behind a filing cabinet on the fourth floor. Oscilloscope still warm. "You felt it," Chen said. Not a question. Reeves unscrewed the thermos cap. Steam curled up. "Last Tuesday. I was in the stairwell." 3:44. The fluorescents buzzed. Chen's pulse climbed. Fingers drummed once against the chair arm, then stopped. Reeves drank. The thermos cap clicked back into place. The hum started low. Not in the lights this time. In the walls. 3:46. Reeves set the thermos on the floor. It didn't rattle. The vibration wasn't physical. Chen felt it in the teeth, the sternum, the small bones of the inner ear. A frequency that shouldn't register but did. Reeves leaned forward. "If it responds to observation, we're, " "Quiet." 3:47. The room didn't expand. It locked. Chen felt the edges harden, the walls become definite in a way they hadn't been a second before. The air thickened. Not pressure. Presence. Something occupying the space between atoms, filling gaps that shouldn't exist. Reeves stopped breathing for two seconds. Then

gasped. The sensation wasn't alignment this time. It was scrutiny. Chen turned his head. Slowly. The movement felt like pushing through water that wasn't there. Reeves sat frozen, eyes wide, staring at the empty corner behind Chen's chair. Chen followed the stare. The corner was empty. But it was the wrong kind of empty. A space that had been vacated, not void. The air there looked different. Clearer. Like a window wiped clean in a dusty room. Four seconds. The hum cut out. The room released. Reeves fell forward, caught himself on his knees, sucked air. Chen stood. Walked to the corner. Crouched. The floor was unmarked. No residue, no temperature change. Chen pressed a palm flat against the tiles. Cold. Normal cold, the kind that came from concrete and insufficient heating. But when Chen pulled the hand back, the skin tingled. Not pins and needles. More like the aftermath of holding something that vibrated. "It was there," Reeves said. Still on his knees. "It was standing right there." "You saw it?" "No. But it saw us." Chen stood. Crossed back to the chair. Sat down and waited for the pulse to level out. It took a minute. Reeves climbed back into his chair. Picked up the thermos but didn't drink. "Next Tuesday, " "Three chairs." "Chen, " "If it's responding, we respond back. We show it we're not running." "Or we're feeding it." Chen looked at the corner. Still empty. Still wrong. "Then we find out what it eats." Reeves left at 4:15. Chen stayed another hour, walking the perimeter, measuring nothing. Just pacing. Testing whether the room still felt like a room. It did. Mostly. At 5:30, Chen locked the door and walked downstairs. The graduate students had cleared out. Kowalski's desk was dark. Chen stopped at the third floor landing and looked back up the stairwell. Reeves had been here last Tuesday. In the stairwell. At 3:47. Chen climbed back up. Stood on the landing between third and fourth. Waited. Nothing hummed. No walls locked. But the air felt thin, like it had been breathed too many times. Chen descended. Outside, the sky was overcast. Chen walked to the parking lot, unlocked the car, sat in the driver's seat without starting the engine. The tingle in the palm hadn't faded. Chen flexed the fingers. Opened and closed the hand. The sensation persisted. Not unpleasant.

Just present. A reminder that something had made contact, even through absence. Chen started the car. On the passenger seat, a notepad. Chen picked it up, flipped to a blank page, wrote three words: It moves deliberately. Then drove home, one hand on the wheel, the other still tingling.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Lior Tannen

Chen's daughter was at the kitchen table doing homework when the door opened. She looked up, saw the hand flexing, and said, "You touched something weird again." Not a question. Emma was twelve and had learned her father's tells early. Chen set down the keys. "How was school?" "Mr. Patterson says I need to show my work more. I told him the answer's right there, why does the path matter?" She grinned. "He didn't like that." Chen filled the kettle. The palm still tingled. Under the running water, it felt almost warm. "The path always matters. That's how you know if you got lucky or if you understood." "That's what he said." Emma closed her textbook. "You're doing it again. The thing where you test if normal stuff still works normal." Chen turned off the tap. "Am I?" "You filled the kettle slower than usual. Like you weren't sure the water would go in." She tilted her head. "Bad day at the lab?" The truth was complicated. The truth was that something had stood in an empty corner and looked at them, and Chen had driven home with one hand humming like a tuning fork pressed against bone. "Interesting day," Chen said. "Found something that doesn't make sense yet." "The Tuesday thing." Chen stopped. "I didn't tell you about that." "You didn't have to. You've been weird on Tuesdays for like two months." Emma got up, pulled two mugs from the cabinet. "Also you talk in your sleep sometimes. Last week you said 'four seconds' like six times." The kettle

clicked off. Chen poured. The steam rose normal. The water splashed into the mugs normal. Everything in the kitchen was aggressively, insistently normal, and it felt like a relief Chen didn't want to need. "We should have dinner," Chen said. "Already ate. Made pasta." Emma pointed at the covered pot on the stove. "Saved you some." There it was. The small kindness that meant I noticed you were gone longer than usual. That meant I was worried but I won't say it because you don't like being worried about. Chen sat down across from her. "Thank you." "So what doesn't make sense?" Emma stirred honey into her tea. "The Tuesday thing. You're doing three chairs next week, right?" Chen's hand stopped halfway to the mug. "How, " "You left your notes on the passenger seat. I grabbed your thermos from the car last week, saw the notebook." She shrugged. "Didn't read much. Just the last page." Chen should have been annoyed. Should have said something about boundaries, privacy, scientific confidentiality. But Emma was looking at the hand, the one that wouldn't stop flexing. "It touched you," she said quietly. "No. I touched where it had been." "Same thing, if it wanted you to." Chen met her eyes. Twelve years old and too clever by half, too willing to follow her mother's ghost into places that didn't follow rules. The mutation had taken Lily when Emma was seven. Five years later, the girl still asked questions like someone who'd learned early that the world could betray its own patterns. "I don't know what it wants," Chen said. "But you're going back." Not a question. "Yes." Emma nodded. Sipped her tea. "Okay. But you should bring something." "Instruments won't, " "Not instruments. Something that matters." She looked at the window. Outside, the neighbor's porch light had just come on, the same as it did every evening at six fifteen, reliable and thoughtless. "Mom used to say the important things don't measure themselves. You have to show them you're paying attention." Chen's throat tightened. Lily had said that. About Emma's first fever, about the garden that kept dying, about the biopsy results they'd waited three days to hear. "What would you bring?" Chen asked. Emma thought about it. Twirled her spoon. "Something alive. Not like the mice, they're just scared. Something that

chooses to be there." "Like what?" "I don't know. But when it looks at you again," she met Chen's eyes, "you should be holding something you care about. So it knows you're not just watching. You're there." Chen's hand had stopped tingling. The kitchen felt warm. The pasta in the covered pot was probably still good. "Eat," Emma said, standing. "I've got more math." She took her mug and left. Chen sat alone, looking at the hand, thinking about corners that held absence like weight. Thinking about what it meant to be seen by something that moved deliberately. On the counter, near the fruit bowl, was the cutting from Lily's christmas cactus. Five years old now. Blooming.

Chapter

SIX

written by Colin McAteer

Chen lifts the cutting from its saucer. The roots have grown dense in their shallow bath, a tangle of white threads pressed against the ceramic. Water drips onto the counter. Chen sets it down, finds a cloth, wipes up the spill. The cactus bloomed twice last year. Once in December, as expected. Once in March, which wasn't. Lily had kept the parent plant on the bedroom windowsill, a sprawling thing in a clay pot she'd hauled from three different apartments. After the funeral, Chen had tried to maintain it. Watered on schedule, rotated it toward the light. It died in four months. Emma had rescued this cutting before the rot spread. Stuck it in a glass of water, changed it every week, waited. It took root. Now it sits in the kitchen, too established for water, too tentative for soil. Chen picks it up again. The pads are firm, succulent-thick. Three buds cluster at the tip of one segment, tight and dark. Not ready to open yet. The phone rings. Chen carries the plant to the table, sets it down, answers. "You're bringing people in now?" Reeves sounds tired. Background noise suggests he's still on campus, probably the engineering lab. "Martinez saw the chairs. She's asking questions." "Let her ask." "Chen, " "If it's responding to observation, more observers gives us more data. Martinez has sonar experience. She can listen for, " "For what? We don't even know what we're calling it." A pause. "I'm not saying don't bring her. I'm saying we need protocols.

What if someone gets hurt?" Chen looks at the cactus. The buds haven't changed. "What if we already did?" Reeves doesn't answer right away. When he does, his voice has dropped. "Your hand. Is it still, " "No. Stopped around six." "Mine lasted until eight. Felt like I'd grabbed a live wire, except there was no burn." He exhales. "I ran blood work. Everything's normal. CBC, metabolic panel, even ordered a heavy metal screen. Nothing." Chen switches the phone to the other ear. "You think it's physical." "I think something made contact. Whether that's physical or, " he stops. "I don't know what else to call it." Through the kitchen window, the neighbor's cat crosses the yard. It pauses at the fence line, looks back toward the house, then slips through. Chen watches until it disappears. "Bring Martinez," Chen says. "Tell her to come ready to stay the full four seconds. No running." "And if it escalates?" "Then we document it." Reeves hangs up. Chen sets the phone down, picks up the cactus. The roots drip. Chen finds a small ceramic pot in the cabinet under the sink, fills it with soil from the bag Emma bought last month. The transplant takes three minutes. Chen firms the soil, waters it lightly, sets the pot on the windowsill. It looks wrong there. Too exposed. Chen moves it to the table. Better. The light from overhead is fluorescent, inadequate, but the plant doesn't seem to mind. It's been living on kitchen light for months. Emma comes back downstairs at seven-thirty. She sees the pot, stops. "You're really bringing it." "You said something that matters." "I meant like a photo. Or mom's watch." She sits down. "That thing's alive. What if, " "What if what?" Emma touches one of the pads, careful not to disturb the buds. "What if it doesn't come back?" Chen hadn't considered that. The assumption had been risk to people, to equipment. Not to a passenger. "It's a plant. It doesn't make choices." "You don't know that." Emma pulls her hand back. "Mom always said it knew when she was sad. It bloomed the day before she went into hospice, remember? Like it was trying to, " She doesn't finish. Chen remembers. The flowers had been pale pink, almost white. They'd lasted three days. Lily had died on the fourth. "I'll keep it safe," Chen says. Emma nods. Doesn't look convinced. She stands, kisses Chen on the

temple, goes back upstairs. Chen sits with the cactus until nine. The buds don't open. The soil settles slightly as the water soaks in. At nine-fifteen, Chen carries the pot upstairs, sets it on the dresser. The bedroom feels emptier than usual. Chen changes, gets into bed, turns off the light. In the dark, the cactus is just a silhouette. Small and improbable. Tuesday is four days away.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by typewriter_tom

Chen doesn't sleep. Tries for an hour, then gives up and goes back downstairs. Makes coffee at ten-thirty because lying in the dark isn't rest, it's just waiting with eyes closed. The pot stays on the dresser. Wednesday morning, Kowalski corners Chen in the hallway outside the lab. She's holding a printout. "The power consumption logs. You asked for them last month." Chen takes the pages. "And?" "Every Tuesday at 3:47, the building's draw drops by point-three percent for exactly four seconds." She crosses her arms. "That's not equipment fluctuation. That's the building using less power. Like something's supplementing the grid." "Or borrowing from it." "Either way." Kowalski leans against the wall. "Martinez told me about the chairs. I want in." Chen looks up from the printout. "It's not a show." "I know what it is. I've been in this building for six years. I know when the walls feel wrong." She meets Chen's eyes. "I also know you sent everyone home for the last two Tuesdays. If you're escalating, you need someone watching the instruments." "There are no instruments." "Then you need someone watching you." Chen folds the printout. "Four chairs." Kowalski nods. Walks away. Thursday, Chen runs a baseline test on the soil composition. Standard nutrient analysis, pH balance, moisture retention. The cactus sits on the lab bench under full-spectrum grow lights while Chen pipettes samples. Everything reads normal. The plant

is healthy, unremarkable, exactly what it should be. Chen takes a cutting from one of the lower pads. Just a small segment. Places it in water on the windowsill. If something happens to the parent plant on Tuesday, there will be a backup. Emma notices Thursday night. "You're hedging." "I'm being careful." "You're scared." She's making quesadillas, not looking up from the pan. "It's okay. I would be too." "I'm not scared." "Then why the cutting?" Chen doesn't have an answer that isn't a lie. Friday, Reeves brings schematics. Spreads them across Chen's desk, fourth floor laboratory blueprints marked up in red pen. "Look at the room layout. The corner where it appeared. That's the northwest quadrant, farthest point from the stairwell." "So?" "So that corner is also the closest point to the old observatory foundation. The building's built over it. Construction records from 1962 show they left part of the original structure intact. Forty feet down, directly below that corner." Chen leans over the drawings. "What was the observatory measuring?" "Magnetic field variations. Atmospheric ionization. They shut it down in 1959 after some kind of instrumentation failure. Records are sparse." "Who worked there?" "Mostly grad students. One professor, name of..." Reeves flips through his notes. "Harlow. Elizabeth Harlow. She disappeared in 1958. Police investigated, never found anything." Chen straightens. "Disappeared how?" "Just gone. Left her coat in the lab, her car in the parking lot. No note, no body." The room feels smaller. Chen looks at the corner where the schematics overlap, the red marks converging. "And no one thought to mention this before?" "I only found it because I cross-referenced the property surveys." Reeves rolls up the drawings. "Chen, what if the fluctuation isn't new? What if it's been happening since the fifties, and we're just the first ones to measure it properly?" "Then why Tuesdays? Why 3:47?" "I don't know. But Harlow disappeared on a Tuesday." Chen walks to the window. Outside, students cross the quad. Normal afternoon, normal campus. "We're still going." "I know." Reeves tucks the schematics under his arm. "I'm just saying we should know what we're walking into." "We don't. That's the point." Saturday and Sunday pass slow. Chen cleans the lab, reviews

notes, checks on the cactus every few hours. The buds swell slightly. Still closed. Monday night, Emma sits on Chen's bed watching the pot on the dresser. "You should talk to it." "It's a plant." "Mom talked to it all the time." Chen sits down next to her. "What did she say?" "I don't know. I was little." Emma leans against Chen's shoulder. "But it always bloomed after." They sit quiet for a while. Then Emma goes to her room and Chen turns off the light. Tuesday morning, Chen wakes at six. The buds have opened. Three pale flowers, almost translucent in the early light. Chen carries the pot downstairs, wraps it in newspaper for transport, sets it by the door. At eight-thirty, the phone rings. Martinez. "I'm in." At nine, Kowalski texts: See you at 3:30. At nine-fifteen, Chen picks up the pot and drives to campus.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Priya Nair

Chen parks in the loading zone because faculty lot semantics don't matter when you're carrying evidence of hope wrapped in yesterday's newspaper. The building looks the same as it always does. Which is either reassuring or deeply unsettling, hard to say which. The lab is empty at nine-thirty. Chen sets the pot on the bench, unwraps it carefully. The flowers look more fragile under fluorescent light. Petals like rice paper, veins visible when the light hits right. "Talking to it yet?" Chen turns. Kowalski's in the doorway with a toolbox. "It's nine-thirty." "I couldn't sit at home." She sets the toolbox down, looks at the cactus. "Huh. Lily's plant." "You remember it?" "She showed me once. Said it was older than her marriage." Kowalski crouches by the toolbox, starts pulling out gear. Thermal camera. EMF reader. A handheld oscilloscope that looks like it survived a small war. "I know you said no instruments. But I'm leaving these outside the door. If something happens and you don't come out, I want data." "We'll come out." "Probably." She stands, looks at Chen. "You know this is insane." "Yep." "Okay. Just checking." Reeves arrives at noon with sandwiches nobody eats. Martinez shows up at one-forty-five with a recording rig and the good sense not to ask permission. She sets it up in the hall, aims a shotgun mic at the door. "Infrasound," she says when Chen looks. "If it hums, I want the frequency." "It's not a whale." "You don't know what it is." Fair point. At

three o'clock they move the chairs in. Four now, arranged in a half-circle facing the corner. Chen takes the one on the left. Reeves sits next to Chen, then Martinez, then Kowalski closest to the door. The cactus goes on the floor in the center. Chen sets it down carefully, adjusts the pot so the flowers face the corner. "You really think it cares about a plant," Martinez says. "I think if something's been trying to get our attention for seventeen weeks, we should offer it more than our fear." Three-fifteen. The building's afternoon-quiet, that specific density of air that comes from heating systems and old concrete and the accumulated attention of decades. Chen's hands are steady. That's good. Hands should be steady. Three-thirty. Kowalski closes the door. Seals them in. Nobody speaks. Three-forty. Chen's heart rate climbs. Expected. Documented. Doesn't make it pleasant. Three-forty-four. The fluorescents hum. Different pitch than last week. Lower. More deliberate. Martinez leans forward. "You hear that?" "Everyone hears it," Reeves says. Three-forty-six. The walls lock. Chen recognizes the sensation now, the way the room decides what it is. The corner sharpens into focus. That wrong kind of empty, like a held breath. Chen looks at the cactus. The flowers haven't moved. Three-forty-seven. The hum stops. The corner fills. Not with presence this time. With arrival. Something stepping into the space it had always been entitled to, patient and permanent and done waiting. Chen feels it looking. Not at them. Through them. Reading them like text, like data points in an experiment they'd never consented to join. The cactus blooms. Not the three flowers already open. The rest of it. Every pad splits into sudden color, magenta and white, a profusion that shouldn't be possible, that violates every principle of botany and energy conservation and what plants do. The pot cracks. Roots spill out onto the floor, reaching. Kowalski makes a sound. Not fear. Wonder. The thing in the corner leans closer. Chen can't see it but feels the attention shift, narrowing. Focusing on the plant. On this small living testament to care, continuity, the stubborn refusal to let something die just because it should. Four seconds. That's all they ever get. But in the fourth second, Chen understands. It isn't hostile. It's lonely. It's been lonely since 1958,

since Harlow disappeared, since the last person who understood what it was stopped showing up. And every Tuesday it comes back to the place it was seen, hoping. The flowers blaze. The roots reach. The corner holds its breath. And then it's over. The hum returns. The walls release. The corner empties. Chen looks down. The cactus is gone. Not dead. Gone. The pot sits cracked and empty, soil scattered, not a trace of root or pad or flower. Just one petal. Pale pink. Resting on the floor where the thing had stood. Chen picks it up. It's warm.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

rpenguin

TUESDAY!!!!

JUK3

is there a ghost in the machine?

Finished on 28 April 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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