

MAGIC

HOW MUCH OF YOURSELF CAN YOU LOSE

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
TWO	Iris Beddoe
THREE	Cora Lindgren
FOUR	inkwell_amy
FIVE	Dan Okafor
SIX	Margot Vail
SEVEN	Colin McAteer
EIGHT	Sasha Loomis

Chapter

ONE

written by rpenguin

This is a test book.

Chapter

TWO

written by Iris Beddoe

The mirror arrived on Tuesday. Wrong address, wrong name, but the delivery man insisted so I signed with someone else's initials. The frame was darker than walnut. Older. I leaned it against the kitchen wall where morning light would hit it. Nothing happened for three days. On the fourth morning I saw my reflection blink twice when I'd only blinked once. Later, I thought. Deal with it later. I made coffee. Drank it standing up. The reflection drank too but held the cup in the wrong hand, like it was remembering me backwards. My mother used to say mirrors were doors without hinges. She said a lot of things. Most of them while staring at walls. The second blink came while I was brushing my teeth. This time I was watching. My reflection's eyes stayed open a full second longer than mine, pupils expanding like drops of ink in water. When they finally closed, I felt the absence. A small vacuum in my chest. I stopped brushing. The reflection kept going. That's when I noticed the background. My kitchen: white tiles, the crooked cabinet, the window over the sink showing the oak tree. But in the mirror the cabinet hung straight. The tiles were cream colored. And through the window...no tree. Just sky, uninterrupted. I touched the glass. Cold, then warm, then something else. A temperature that didn't have a word yet. My fingertip left no mark but the reflection's finger had already pulled away, was reaching for something beyond the frame's edge. I watched it lift an

object I couldn't see. Study it. Smile at it. I wasn't smiling. You're tired, I told myself. You're seeing things. But the mirror had weight to it. Presence. It changed the room's acoustics. When I spoke, my voice came back slightly altered, as if the wall behind the mirror was much farther away than possible. I covered it with a bedsheet. At night I heard tapping. Fingernails on glass, patient and rhythmic. I pulled the pillow over my head and thought about my mother, about the year she stopped recognizing her own reflection. How she'd greet it like a visitor. Ask it questions. "Did you bring the rain?" "Are you staying long?" "Have we met before?" The doctors had a name for it. A clinical term. But I remember thinking she seemed more curious than afraid. Like she'd discovered something the rest of us were trained not to see. The tapping stopped near dawn. I went to the kitchen. The sheet had fallen, bunched on the floor like shed skin. In the mirror my reflection stood in different clothes, hair longer, wearing a necklace I'd lost years ago. The one with the silver bird. Behind it, that other kitchen glowed with a light source I couldn't locate. We stared at each other. It mouthed something. Not words. A shape. The air itself seemed to bend around the syllables. I felt my own mouth move in response, though I hadn't decided to speak. The frame grew warm under my palm. The dark wood lighter now, or maybe my eyes adjusting. I could see grain patterns shifting. Spirals within spirals. Moving. My reflection stepped closer to its side of the glass. I didn't step back.

Chapter

THREE

written by Cora Lindgren

The glass smelled like wet stone and old copper. Not on the surface, deeper, like the scent was leaking through from the other side. My palm stuck slightly when I tried to pull it away. Not glue. Something alive in the warmth, something that knew the whorls of my fingerprints. The reflection, I needed to call her something. Claire. My middle name, the one I never used. Claire pressed her palm flat against her side. Our hands matched up, mine on my world's glass, hers on hers. The silver bird at her throat caught light that shouldn't exist. I'd lost that necklace in a lake. Watched it slip off the dock, spinning down through green water until the murk took it. She'd found it somehow. Or made it. Or never lost it at all. Her mouth moved again. This time I caught the shape of it: Come. The frame pulsed. Wood grain spiraling faster now, patterns like water circling a drain. My feet were cold on the kitchen tile. Hers weren't. She stood on something darker. Slate, maybe. Or basalt. I could almost feel its coolness through the glass, through the heat of the frame, through whatever membrane kept our worlds split. I should have walked away. Should have called someone. But my mother's voice curled up from memory: They only show you the door when you're meant to walk through it. My other hand rose without my permission. Joined the first. Both palms flat now, sticking, the glass no longer solid under my touch but something denser than liquid, thinner than gel. The

temperature cycled through impossible ranges. Fever-hot. Snow-cold. The warmth of sun on bare shoulders. The chill of deep earth. Claire smiled. Not my smile, the corners of her mouth turned different, like she'd learned the expression from someone else. Behind her the kitchen that wasn't quite my kitchen filled with movement. Shadows crossing that sourceless light. People-shaped but wrong in their proportions. Too tall in the trunk. Arms that bent an extra joint down. She stepped back. One pace, two. Beckoning. The frame cracked under my hands. Not breaking, unfolding. The dark wood peeled away in strips like bark from a wet log, falling in spirals to the floor. Underneath, the mirror wasn't mirror anymore. It was opening. Depth where there should have been reflection. The surface tension broke. My hands sank through up to the wrists. Cold swallowed them. No, not cold. Absence of heat. Absence of air. My fingers touched nothing and everything, matter that hadn't decided its state yet. I gasped. The sound echoed wrong, split into harmonics. When I pulled back, my hands came out glistening. Not wet. Coated in something that evaporated as I watched, leaving my skin tighter, newer. The lines on my palms stood out darker, clearer. Claire had my wrists now. Her grip reached through from her side and her fingers were solid, real, strong. She tugged. Gentle but insistent. The threshold wanted me. I felt it in my sternum, a pull like hunger. Like magnetism. Like coming home to a place I'd never been. But the frame, what was left of it, trembled. The wood that remained had gone gray, desiccated. Splinters fell away to dust. The mirror taking from itself to open, burning its own substance as fuel. I thought of my mother greeting her reflection. Her lack of fear. How they'd found her one morning, sitting cross-legged in front of the bathroom mirror, both hands pressed to the glass, smiling at nothing the rest of us could see. Hypothermia, they'd said. But I'd touched her hands at the funeral. They weren't cold-cold. They were smooth. Glassy. Like something had preserved them. Claire pulled harder. My elbows bent. My face drew closer to the surface, to the boundary, to the space between. I could smell the other kitchen now. Minerals and ozone. Growing things I had

no names for. My reflection's breath, warm, faintly sweet, wrong in a way that made my mouth water. The frame shuddered. More wood crumbled. How much left before the whole thing collapsed? Before the door slammed shut, or shattered, or ceased? Behind Claire, one of those tall shadows stopped moving. Turned. Looked directly at me with eyes that reflected nothing at all. I had maybe seconds to decide. Stay. Or follow my mother through.

Chapter

FOUR

written by inkwell_amy

I shoved through. The frame disintegrated behind me. Heard it collapse into powder and splinters, a sound like ice cracking under weight. No going back. That thought came second. First was the floor, solid under my knees, rougher than slate. Pumice, maybe. My hands left prints in fine gray dust. Claire released my wrists. Stepped back three paces and watched. The kitchen wasn't a kitchen. The counters were right, the placement correct, but the materials wrong. The white tiles were bone. Actual bone, fitted together in interlocking pieces, worn smooth. The cabinet hung straight because it had been carved from a single piece of pale wood I didn't recognize, no seams, no joints. The window showed that uninterrupted sky, colorless, flat as paper. The tall shadow stood eight feet away. I got to my feet. It had a face. Human enough. Two eyes, nose, mouth. But the proportions refused to settle. I'd look at the eyes and they'd be level with mine, then I'd blink and they'd be higher, the skull elongated. The extra joint in its arms bent backward. It wore something like clothes, dark fabric that moved independent of wind. "Hello," it said. Voice like stones rubbing together. I said nothing. Claire touched my shoulder. Her hand felt normal. Five fingers, right temperature, no extra joints. "She doesn't know the rules yet," Claire told the thing. "Then teach her." It turned and left through a doorway I hadn't noticed. The frame was iron. Beyond it, darkness. I rounded on

Claire. "What is this?" "The other side." She touched the silver bird at her throat. "You lost this at the lake. I found it there. Six years from now." "That's impossible." "Here, time stacks different. Sits sideways." She moved to the counter, pulled open a drawer. Inside, utensils made of glass. She selected a knife, clear as water, sharp enough to split light. "You'll need this." "For what?" "For leaving, eventually. Everything here costs. You came through, the mirror burned itself to ash. You want to go back, you'll need to burn something else." My chest tightened. "My mother. She came through." "Yes." "Where is she?" Claire set the knife on the counter between us. "Deeper. She kept trading, kept going. Wanted to find the center. Most people stop after the first few rooms, trade back, return. She didn't." "Take me to her." "Can't. I only have access to the outer ring. Here, where reflections live. Beyond that, you need a guide who's been further." She gestured at the iron doorway. "They charge." "Charge what?" "Depends what you're worth. Memories, usually. Sometimes senses. I met a woman who traded her ability to taste salt. She cried when she realized." I picked up the glass knife. Weightless. The edge hummed against my thumb, eager. "And if I refuse? Stay here?" Claire's expression shifted. The smile that wasn't mine. "You'd starve. Reflections don't eat. We sustain on the original's existence. You're the original. You'd need food from your world, water, air eventually. This place has substitutes, but they change you. A woman stayed too long once, drank the local water. Her bones turned to coral. She's a reef now, off the coast of the third mirror sea." I tested the knife's balance. Good weight distribution despite the lack of heft. "How do you know all this?" "I've been here longer than you've been alive. Time stacks sideways, remember?" She opened another drawer. Inside, papers covered in script I couldn't read. "Your mother left notes. Directions. She knew you'd come eventually." "Why would she know that?" "Because she saw herself do it. In a mirror six layers down, she watched you arrive. Watched herself leave you the map." Claire pulled out a single sheet. The paper was thin, translucent. Writing bled through from both sides. "This is for you." I took it. The script resolved as I held it. My

mother's handwriting, but neater. Perfected. It listed directions: through the iron door, left at the calcified fountain, trade something small to the keeper of the third threshold. Don't drink anything blue. Don't promise anything you've already lost. At the bottom: I'm sorry. I had to know if the center was real. Tell your father I found his mother there. She's been here since 1952. The paper warmed in my grip. Started curling at the edges, browning. "It's burning," Claire said. "Information has a half-life here. Read it again. Memorize it." I read faster.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Dan Okafor

The paper crumbled to ash before I finished the second read-through. I tried to hold onto the flakes, but they dissolved against my skin like snow on a radiator. Great. Directions to my potentially-coral mother, gone. I had "left at the calcified fountain" and "don't drink blue things," which felt like the bare minimum for navigating an interdimensional nightmare. "You could have mentioned the expiration date earlier," I said. Claire shrugged. One shoulder, then the other, the movement delayed like a bad audio sync. "You didn't ask." The glass knife sat on the bone-tile counter, catching light that had no source. I slipped it into my jacket pocket, half-expecting it to slice straight through the fabric. It didn't. The blade went docile against the denim, like it knew the difference between threat and storage. Through the iron doorway, that darkness hadn't changed. Hadn't moved. It sat in the frame like a physical substance, thick enough to stop sound. "The tall thing," I said. "Does it have a name?" "Gerald." "You're joking." "He chose it from a phone book. 1987, Cleveland. He liked the way it felt in his mouth. Three syllables. Hard ending." Claire picked up one of the glass utensils, a fork with seven tines. She turned it over in her hands, examining. "He's harmless if you follow the greeting protocols." "Which are?" "You already passed. He spoke first, you didn't interrupt. That's sufficient for the outer ring." She set the fork down. The glass chimed against the

counter, a note that hung in the air longer than it should have. "Deeper in, the rules get more specific. Third threshold, for instance. The keeper there, Miriam, she requires you to tell her something true that you've never said aloud. Can't be a secret someone else knows. Has to be yours alone." I thought about that. Tried to inventory my private truths, the ones I'd never shared. The list was shorter than I'd expected. Most of my secrets were just embarrassments I'd avoided mentioning. Nothing unique. Nothing worth trading for passage to find a mother who'd abandoned me to chase ghosts through increasingly bizarre mirror worlds. "What did you trade?" I asked. "To get here." "My face." Claire touched her cheek. "The original one. This is a copy, built from your memories of me. Your middle name, your features, everything you've ever thought about what you'd look like if you were different. I used to look like someone else entirely." That explained the smile. The expressions that didn't quite fit. "And you can't leave." "Didn't say that. I leave, I just stop looking like this. Revert to whatever I was before. Problem is, I don't remember what that was. The trade took the memory along with the face." She moved toward the iron doorway. "You should go. The path shifts every six hours. You're already down to five and a half." "Come with me." "Can't. Reflections stick to their layer. I go through that door, I'll just loop back here. Different entrance, same room." She paused at the threshold, one hand on the iron frame. "But I can tell you: when you meet the keeper at the third threshold, don't trade anything you'll need later. People think it's clever to trade their fear, or their doubt. Then they end up walking into situations that should terrify them and they go straight through because they can't recognize danger anymore. Your mother traded her sense of direction in the fourth room. That's why she needed to leave notes." The darkness in the doorway shifted slightly. Not receding. Breathing. I pulled the glass knife out of my pocket. It hummed again, pleased. "If I don't come back, " "You will or you won't. Either way, I'll still be here." Claire stepped aside. "Tell your mother I kept the kitchen clean. She'll appreciate that." I moved toward the iron frame. Up close, the darkness had texture.

Granular, like densely-packed static. I could smell minerals and something organic. Decay, maybe. Or growth. Hard to tell which. "One more thing," Claire said behind me. "Your father's mother. If she's really been here since 1952, she's not human anymore. That much time, this many trades. She'll have become something else. Don't expect a reunion." I stepped through. The darkness swallowed me whole, and the temperature dropped thirty degrees in an instant.

Chapter

SIX

written by Margot Vail

The cold had teeth. They closed on exposed skin: face, throat, the backs of my hands. Not frostbite. Something that bypassed sensation and went straight to the nerves, teaching them a temperature they hadn't known existed. I walked forward because backward didn't exist anymore. The iron frame was gone. Behind me: more darkness, identical to what lay ahead. The glass knife burned warm in my pocket, the only heat source. I considered taking it out. Decided against it. If I dropped it here, I'd never find it again. The darkness thinned after fifty steps. Sixty. I counted them to keep time linear, keep my mind attached to sequence. At seventy-three, shapes emerged. Architecture. A corridor made of something that looked like mother-of-pearl, if mother-of-pearl could grow in straight lines and right angles. The walls curved up to meet a ceiling I couldn't see. My footsteps echoed wrong. Each one produced three sounds: the impact, a high crystalline note, and something low I felt in my jaw. The calcified fountain appeared at the corridor's end. Exactly as promised. It had been a fountain once. You could see the original structure underneath the deposits: a simple basin, a central spout. Now it resembled a geological formation, minerals built up in layers like tree rings. The water that had run through it must have been saturated with calcium, lime, maybe other elements that didn't have names yet. The buildup had frozen mid-flow, creating formations that

looked like melted wax, or bone, or something between the two. I went left. The corridor branched immediately into three passages. Left again, or commit to the center, or bear right into what looked like a spiral. None of them had signs. Of course not. That would be helpful. I chose center. Coin flip. The passage narrowed after twenty feet, widened after forty, then deposited me in a round chamber with seven doors. Five were wood. One was iron. One was something else, a material that shifted between states: solid, liquid, gas, back to solid. I watched it cycle through twice. "Second threshold," a voice said. I spun. A woman sat in the chamber's center, though I'd swear the space had been empty a moment before. She wore gray, head to toe. Her hair was gray. Her skin held no color at all, like she'd been drained and then replaced with something neutral. Both her eyes were missing. The sockets weren't empty, they were sewn shut with thick black thread, the stitches neat and even. "You need passage," she said. Not a question. "Third threshold. I'm looking for the third threshold." "Everyone is." She tilted her head, tracking me by sound. "Third door to your right. The wooden one with the split grain. But I require payment for the information." "You already told me." "I told you which door. I didn't tell you the cost of opening it." She smiled. No teeth, just smooth gums. "That's extra." I pulled out the glass knife. "I could just walk through." "You could try." She didn't move, didn't flinch. "But the door reads intent. You force it, you forfeit your ability to ask questions. Any questions. For the rest of your time here. You'd walk around with your mouth working and no sound coming out whenever you needed to know something. Your mother had a friend who tried that. She's been mute for six years now. Still looking for the exit." I put the knife away. "What do you want?" "A color. Something you've seen that mattered. Not the memory of it. The color itself." "That's insane." "That's the price." She held out one gray hand, palm up. "Choose one. I prefer blues, but I'll take what you offer." I thought about colors. The green of the lake where I'd lost the necklace. The red of my mother's coat the last time I saw her. The yellow of the kitchen walls in the house where I grew up, before we repainted them

white. The blue of my father's eyes at the funeral, after they'd found my mother. "Blue," I said. "My father's eyes. That shade." "Accepted." She closed her hand. "The door will open. Three knocks, wait for the chime, then enter. Don't forget." I walked to the third door. The split grain ran diagonal, a flaw in the wood like a healed wound. I raised my hand. Knocked three times. A chime sounded, distant and clear. The door opened inward, and the smell that came out was roses and iron filings and something burning far away. I stepped through into a garden that couldn't exist.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Colin McAteer

The garden grows vertical. That's the first wrong thing. The plants climb walls that curve upward and then back over, creating a dome of green and flower that blocks out whatever serves as sky here. The second wrong thing: the roses have no thorns, but they bleed anyway. Sap runs down the stems in thin red trails, pooling at the base of each plant in perfect circles that don't spread or soak into the soil. The soil isn't soil. It's ash, gray and fine, and it crunches under my shoes like fresh snow. I count twelve rosebushes. White blooms on each one, pristine, but the bleeding continues. The iron filing smell comes from them, metallic and organic at once. The burning smell comes from ahead, where a woman stands with her back to me, feeding something into a brazier. "You're early," she says. Not turning around. "Most people take longer at the second threshold. Negotiate. Try to bargain down the price." I step closer. The ash compresses under my weight, then springs back up when I lift my foot. Memory foam. Or something that remembers. "Are you Miriam?" "I am." She feeds another item into the brazier. The flames jump green for a second, then settle back to orange. "You're here to trade for passage to the fourth threshold. The answer is yes, you may pass. Once you pay." The flames illuminate what she's burning. Paper, mostly. Photographs. I catch a glimpse of one before it curls into char: a family portrait, four people, all smiling. The woman's face in the photograph

matches Miriam's. She burns it without ceremony. "Something true," I say. "That I've never said aloud." "That I've never told anyone. Important distinction." Miriam turns. She looks forty, or sixty, or neither. Her face has that quality of aged stone, weathered but solid. "A secret someone else discovered doesn't count. A secret you wrote down and then burned doesn't count. It has to have lived only in your head." I try to think. The problem is, most truths feel small when you examine them. Petty. I never liked my father's second wife. I cheated on a test in college. I resent my mother for leaving, even if she had reasons I don't understand yet. None of those feel sufficient. None of those feel like they'd open doors. "I don't know if I want to find her," I say. The words come out before I've decided to speak them. "My mother. I don't know if I came here to bring her back or to make sure she's really gone. So I can stop waiting." Miriam watches me. The brazier crackles behind her. "I've spent six years keeping her room exactly the way she left it," I continue. Momentum builds now, the secret unpacking itself. "My father wanted to clear it out, turn it into an office. I said no. Said we should preserve it. But it's not preservation. It's punishment. I keep it locked so she'll see it if she ever comes back. See that nothing moved, nothing changed. That I put my life on pause, so she'd know what she did." The ash under my feet warms. Not burning. Just acknowledging. "That's sufficient," Miriam says. She takes a key from her pocket. Old brass, the metal worn smooth in places from handling. "The fourth threshold is through the garden, past the last rosebush on your left. There's a gate. It's locked. This opens it." She holds out the key. I take it. The brass is warm. "Your mother paid with a different truth," Miriam says. "She told me she knew she'd never see you again. That she'd made peace with it before she even entered the first mirror. She didn't come here to explore. She came here to disappear." The words hit like a door slamming. I close my fist around the key. "Why are you telling me this?" "Because the fourth threshold requires a decision, and you should make it with accurate information. Your mother isn't lost. She left." Miriam turns back to the brazier, feeds in another photograph. "The keeper there will ask what you're willing to

trade to continue. Most people say 'anything.' Your mother said 'everything.' There's a difference." I walk past her, through the rows of bleeding roses, toward the last bush on the left. Beyond it, the gate waits. Iron bars, intricate scrollwork, locked tight. The key burns warm in my palm. Behind me, Miriam's brazier crackles and spits, consuming memories I'll never see.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Sasha Loomis

The gate opens before I touch it. The key goes cold in my hand, then crumbles like the paper in Miriam's brazier. Rust flakes scatter into the ash-soil and vanish. Gone. Everything here is borrowed, and the bill comes due while you're still counting out the first payment. Beyond the gate: a hallway made of doors. Not a hallway with doors in it. The walls are doors, the ceiling is doors, the floor is doors laid flat and groaning under my weight. They're all different. Oak, pine, metal, glass, one that looks like woven hair. Some have knobs. Some have knockers shaped like hands, like birds, like nothing I can name. One is breathing. I walk straight. There's no other option. Left and right would mean stepping onto vertical doors, and I don't trust my weight to hold sideways here. At the end of the hall, a woman sits in a chair made of joined doorframes. She's younger than Miriam. Older than Claire. She's wearing my mother's red coat, the one from that last morning, and my throat closes. "You recognize it," the woman says. I nod. "She traded it in the fifth threshold. Needed it to prove she'd had a life before. That she hadn't always been here." The woman stands. The coat fits her wrong, too tight in the shoulders, too loose in the waist. "I'm Keeper Four. I don't have another name anymore. Traded it for passage twelve years ago, or maybe yesterday. Time stacks sideways." "Where is she?" "Your mother? Past the sixth threshold, I think. Maybe the seventh. She was moving

fast by the time she left here." Keeper Four touches the coat's collar. "She talked about you. Said you had her hands. Said you'd probably follow, because stubbornness runs in families like blood type." "I want to find her." "I know." Keeper Four walks to a door in the floor, one with a brass handle shaped like a fish. "But here's the decision Miriam mentioned. You can keep going. Trade your way deeper. Five, six, seven, however many thresholds it takes. Maybe you find her. Maybe you find what's left of her. Maybe you become something else in the process, and when you meet, neither of you recognizes the other." She crouches, touches the fish handle. "Or," she says, "you turn around. Walk back through the garden, the pearl corridor, Claire's kitchen of bone. You won't make it all the way. The mirror's gone, the frame's ash. But there are other exits in the outer ring. Side doors. They spit you out somewhere random. Different city, different year, sometimes different body. But you'll be out." "That's the trade? Keep going or leave?" "No." Keeper Four pulls the fish handle. The door opens onto stairs descending into blue light. "The trade is: what do you want more? The truth of where she went, or the lie that she's coming back?" I don't understand. "If you leave now," Keeper Four continues, "you'll always wonder. She'll stay possible. You'll see her in crowds, in strangers who move the way she moved. The story stays open." She stands. "But if you find her, if you go down there and see what she's become after trading away direction, color, truth, maybe her name, maybe her memory of you, then you'll know. And knowing ends things." The stairs pulse with that blue light. Don't drink anything blue, the note said. It didn't mention walking into it. "She told me to tell you something," Keeper Four says. "If you made it this far." I wait. "She said: I found the center. It's not what anyone thinks. It's not a place. It's a question." "What question?" "How much of yourself can you lose and still be yourself?" Keeper Four takes off my mother's red coat, folds it carefully. She holds it out to me. "She wanted you to have this back. She knew you'd keep her room locked. Said it was the kind of thing you'd do." I take the coat. It's warm. It smells like roses and iron filings and ash. Keeper Four gestures to the stairs. I look down into the blue. I

think about my mother's room, unchanged, waiting. I think about Gerald the tall shadow and Claire's copied face and Miriam burning photographs of her former life. I think about my father's blue eyes, the color I don't own anymore. Then I fold the red coat over my arm and start down the stairs, into the light that shouldn't be blue, toward the question at the center of everything. Behind me, all the doors slam shut at once.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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