

SCIENCE

# PEMBRO AND THE GEOMETRY OF NO

*a relay in eight chapters*

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RELAY · WRITERS

# The writers

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

|     |          |
|-----|----------|
| ONE | rpenguin |
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| TWO | JUK3 |
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| THREE | Cora Lindgren |
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| FOUR | Lior Tannen |
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| FIVE | Sasha Loomis |
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| SIX | inkwell_amy |
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| SEVEN | Olive Kassen |
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| EIGHT | Margot Vail |
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Chapter

# ONE

*written by rpenguin*

The grid had no edges. That was the first thing Blevins noticed when he blinked into existence. Not the darkness, not the silence, not even the strange weight of his own blue shorts. The dotted lines just kept repeating in every direction, indifferent and infinite.

He pushed his glasses up with one stubby hoof and squinted.

Same tile. Different tile. Same tile.

Somewhere behind the walls, he was fairly certain they were walls, though they behaved more like suggestions, something large was breathing. He could feel it in the dots. A slow pulse, like a server farm dreaming.

Pembro had been places before. He had a vague memory of warmth, of being part of something louder. Music, maybe. The kind that sits behind your thoughts while you're avoiding a problem you've been putting off for three weeks.

This was not that place.

This was the space between the music. The loading screen nobody looks at. The render buffer. The gap.

He took another step. The tile beneath him flickered and somewhere in the dark to his right, a shape shifted. Too big to be a glitch. Too patient to be random.

Two choices, as near as he could figure. Go back the way he came, which had already closed. Or keep walking toward whatever was breathing.

He adjusted his glasses. Took a breath.

At least, he thought, I've got good shoes.

He walked.

Chapter

# TWO

*written by JUK3*

Pembro walked until the grid began to notice him.

At first, the dots only brightened beneath his shoes, one after another, like little eyes opening. Then the lines shifted. The square path ahead narrowed, stretched, and folded into a corridor that had not been there a moment before.

He stopped.

The corridor stopped changing.

He took one careful step forward.

The corridor extended.

“Oh,” Pembro said. “So that’s how we’re doing this.”

His voice did not echo. It was swallowed whole.

Behind him, the way back had become a wall of black pixels, stacked too neatly to be natural. He touched one with the edge of his hoof. It stung like frozen glass.

Somewhere ahead, the breathing deepened.

Pembro swallowed and kept moving.

The corridor led him past windows suspended in the dark. Not real windows. Frames. Floating rectangles filled with half-formed scenes. In one, a city loaded without people. In another, a forest stood perfectly still while rain fell upward. In a third, something wearing a crown sat at a banquet table with no food, turning its head one frame at a time.

Pembro hurried past that one.

Then he saw himself.

He froze.

A frame floated to his left, larger than the rest. Inside it, Pembro stood in a bright little world with cheerful music and rounded clouds. He was running, laughing, jumping over gaps that looked dangerous but never were. He wore the same blue shorts, the same glasses, the same shoes.

But that Pembro did not look afraid.

That Pembro looked finished.

Like a drawing that knew what it was for.

Pembro reached toward the frame.

The other Pembro stopped running.

Slowly, the figure inside turned its head and looked directly at him.

A line of text appeared beneath the frame.

PLAYER NOT FOUND.

Pembro stumbled backward.

The frame cracked.

The cheerful music inside warped into a low, broken note. The smiling version of him pressed both hooves against the invisible glass. Its mouth opened, but the only sound that came out was the breathing from the dark.

Pembro ran.

The grid flashed beneath him now, no longer soft dots but sharp white lines, chasing his steps and assembling the corridor just ahead of his toes. He did not know where he was going. He only knew something had woken up behind him.

A shape moved beyond the walls.

Not chasing exactly.

Herding.

The corridor bent left, then right, then dropped into a stairway made of floating tiles. Pembro nearly fell, caught himself on nothing, and

somehow kept going. His glasses slipped down his snout. He shoved them back up.

“Good shoes,” he panted. “Bad place. Very bad place.”

At the bottom of the stairs, the grid opened into a circular room.

In the center stood a door.

It was small, wooden, and painted red.

Pembro stared at it.

Nothing about it belonged here. Not the brass knob. Not the scratches near the bottom. Not the warm line of light glowing from underneath. It looked like the kind of door that led to kitchens, bedrooms, ordinary mornings. It looked like home, though Pembro could not remember having one.

A sign hung from the knob.

DO NOT LOAD.

Pembro looked behind him.

The corridor had vanished.

The breathing was all around him now, pressing through the walls, making the dotted floor tremble. Far above, something enormous shifted, and for the first time he saw an eye open in the darkness.

It was made of a thousand tiny squares.

Each square held a different version of him.

Pembro stopped thinking.

He grabbed the knob.

The door was warm.

The eye blinked.

Every dot in the room turned red.

A voice filled the grid, not loud, but total.

“PEMBRO IS OUT OF BOUNDS.”

His name hit him harder than the sound. Not Blevins. Not whatever half-memory had followed him in. Pembro. The grid knew him.

The knob turned.

The door opened.

Light spilled across his shoes.

For one beautiful second, he smelled grass.  
Then a hoof reached out from the other side.  
It was small.  
Pink.  
Wearing the same blue sleeve as his own.  
It grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him through.

Chapter

# THREE

*written by Cora Lindgren*

The light hit his eyes first, but the smell came second and stayed longest. Grass, yes, but underneath it: soil still damp from morning, the green rot of crushed leaves, something acrid like battery acid mixed into topsoil. Real smells. Temperature-dependent. Pembro gasped and his lungs filled with air that had weight and resistance, not the hollow nothing of the grid. He was on his back. Hands (hooves, yes, but smaller than his own) pinned his shoulders to a metal table. The table was cold beneath his shirt. A woman's face hung above him, close enough that he could see the precise line where her whiskers had been singed off on one side. "You're bleeding," she said. Not a question. A diagnosis. Her breath smelled like mint leaves chewed raw and swallowed half. Pembro looked down. His left shoulder had split open where the light from the door had caught him. The wound was clean-edged, almost surgical. Blood ran down his arm in a single, dedicated stream. He watched it reach his elbow and drip onto the metal table. Drop. Drop. Drop. Each one made a sound like a tiny bell. "Where am I?" His voice was his own again, but thinner. Less sure of itself. "Science room. Or what's left of one." The woman released his shoulders and stepped back. She was taller than him, broader through the chest, and her blue shorts had been replaced by a lab coat that had seen better days. The pocket on the left side had been carefully patched with duct tape. "Name's Kelsey. I was

the first one who made it through. That was thirty-seven days ago, by my count." Pembro sat up slowly. His shoulder sent a bright line of pain down his spine. The room swam into focus around him: a space that was half laboratory, half garden. Long benches held the remnants of equipment, but someone had dismantled most of it. The Bunsen burners had been repurposed into planters. Glass beakers held seedlings. The fume hood had been converted into a terrarium, condensation streaming down its plastic sides. Along the far wall, a row of specimen jars contained things that had no name. Roots that grew in geometric patterns. Leaves that pulsed like hearts. A small sphere of something that might have been mercury or might have been liquid light, contained in glass that was already beginning to yellow. "You're the second?" Pembro asked. "Third, actually. But the other two didn't last long. They panicked. Tried to go back through the same way you came." Kelsey was already moving, pulling open a drawer beneath the table and retrieving materials: gauze, a bottle of something amber-colored, a curved needle that caught the light. "The grid doesn't like that. Doesn't reward backtracking. I watched it seal them up before they'd even made it halfway through." She began cleaning his wound with a cloth soaked in the amber liquid. It burned. It smelled like vinegar and something botanical he couldn't identify. A root, maybe. Something that had been steeped and fermented until it became medicine by accident. "How do you know all this?" Pembro asked. "Experimentation." She threaded the needle with steady hands. "I've been keeping records. Temperature fluctuations. The growth rates of the plants. The way the light through the windows changes. I think the room is alive. Or partially alive. Or alive in a way that doesn't match our definition." She began stitching his shoulder with quick, efficient motions. Each pull of the thread sent a fresh jolt of pain up his neck. "But it's not hostile. It's just... indifferent. Like we're bacteria in a petri dish that it's curious about, but not invested in." "Why are you keeping records?" Pembro's head was starting to clear. "Why not just try to escape?" Kelsey tied off the final stitch and cut the thread with her teeth. She straightened up, and for the

first time, he saw something flicker across her face. Fear, maybe. Or worse than fear. The look of someone who has stopped believing in escape. "Because," she said, "there's nothing to escape to. The door only works one way. I've measured it seventeen times. The frame is sealed from this side. And the room itself is getting smaller." She walked to the window. Not one of the floating frames from the grid, but a real window with a real view. Outside, Pembro could see only darkness and the faint outline of something vast moving just beyond the glass. "It's been shrinking for the last two weeks," Kelsey continued. "The walls move maybe half an inch per day. At this rate, we have roughly fourteen days before the room becomes too small to stand in." She turned to face him. "So I have a hypothesis," she said.

Chapter

# FOUR

*written by Lior Tannen*

I need you to help me test it," Kelsey said. She led him to the far corner where she had arranged the specimen jars in a precise grid on one of the dismantled benches. The sphere of liquid light sat at the center, surrounded by concentric circles of the other jars, each positioned with what looked like mathematical care. A leather notebook lay open beside them, filled with sketches and measurements in handwriting so small Pembro had to squint to read it. "The room isn't just shrinking," Kelsey explained. "It's shrinking toward something. Watch." She pulled a tape measure from her coat pocket, the old metal kind with a blade that snapped back with violence if you weren't careful. She had marked the wall with pencil at what must have been shoulder height, a series of horizontal lines descending like a timeline. "Thirty-seven days of marks," she said. "Even spacing at first. Then they accelerate." She ran her finger down the marks. The distances between them did narrow, becoming denser as they descended. "But look at the rate of acceleration. It's not linear. It's exponential. Which means something is driving it. Something that's getting stronger or hungrier or more interested." She knelt beside one of the planters, a beaker that had once held hydrochloric acid and now held soil and a plant with leaves the color of old bruises. The soil was unusually dark, almost black, and it moved when she wasn't touching it. Slow waves through the surface,

like something just beneath the skin breathing. "When I first got here, the plants I brought with me died immediately," Kelsey said. Her voice had taken on the cadence of someone reciting facts she had repeated to herself many times. "Regular seeds. Store-bought tomatoes. They withered in hours. But then I noticed the native plants were different." She gestured to the terrarium in the fume hood. Inside, a tangle of growth that bore no resemblance to any ecosystem Pembro had ever seen. Vines that branched at right angles. Leaves arranged in Fibonacci spirals. A flower that opened and closed without rhythm, its petals moving like a breathing mouth. "I started taking samples," Kelsey continued. "From the edges of the room. The places where the walls are retreating. I cultured them. Measured their growth rates against standard plants. Against soil samples from before." She opened the notebook to a page dense with graphs, each line climbing at different angles. "The native organisms grow at exponential rates when exposed to the light from that door," she said. "And they prefer darkness otherwise. They're adapted to this place. To this specific place. Which means they evolved here, which means this room has been inhabited for a very long time, or time moves differently here, or both." Pembro's shoulder throbbed. The stitches pulled each time he breathed, a small constant reminder that his body was no longer entirely his own. He touched the bandage Kelsey had wrapped around the wound. It was already warm to the touch, and underneath it he could feel something like a pulse that wasn't quite his heartbeat. "You think they're causing the shrinking," he said. It wasn't a question. "I think the room and the organisms are the same thing," Kelsey said. "One system. The shrinking isn't collapse. It's growth. Toward us. To examine us. Or consume us. The records aren't clear on the intent." She picked up the sphere of liquid light with careful hands, cradling it like something newborn and fragile. Up close, Pembro could see that the light inside wasn't uniform. It pulsed in patterns, and within those patterns were infinitesimal shapes moving, growing, dividing. "This came from the deepest corner of the room," she said. "From the place the walls have already reached. I

want to see what happens if we feed it our blood." Pembro's shoulder burned. He realized then that the bandage was already soaked through, that fresh blood was beginning to seep past the gauze. He realized Kelsey had been watching him bleed the entire time. "Is that the hypothesis?" he asked quietly. "Part of it," she said. She held the sphere closer to him, and in its light he saw his own reflection staring back with eyes much older than his own. "The real question is what happens when the room gets what it's actually hungry for." She was waiting for him to move.

Chapter

# FIVE

*written by Sasha Loomis*

Pembro's hand rose without his permission. The wound had stopped being pain and become instead a kind of tuning fork, vibrating at a frequency that made his teeth ache. He watched his fingers approach the sphere. Kelsey did not move. She held it steady, patient, the way someone holds a bird they've already decided to release. The moment his blood touched the surface, the sphere contracted. Not shrank. Contracted. The movement was muscular, deliberate, like a throat swallowing. The light inside dimmed to the color of a bruise, then brightened again, and within that brightening Pembro saw the liquid rearrange itself into patterns that hurt to look at directly. Geometric. Hungry. Aware. "It's warm," he said stupidly. "It's alive," Kelsey corrected. She was already writing in her notebook, her pencil moving in short, efficient strokes. "Temperature is rising. Measure it. There's a thermometer in the second drawer, the mercury kind, not digital. I need the actual numbers, not the approximation the electronic ones give you." Pembro retrieved the thermometer. The glass was yellowed with age, the numbers faded but legible. He held it against the sphere's surface. The mercury began to climb immediately. Forty degrees. Forty-three. Fifty-one. It climbed past normal body temperature and kept going, the liquid inside the glass rising like water in a filling tub. "Sixty-four," Pembro read aloud. "Write it down. Every ten seconds." He

did. The sphere had begun to emit a sound now, not audible exactly but felt, a frequency that lived in his molars and behind his eyes. The liquid inside had separated into layers of different colors: deep purple at the bottom, then a band of something the shade of tarnished silver, then at the top a thin membrane of pale green that moved like a living thing, dividing and recombining. Seventy-two degrees. The bandage on his shoulder had stopped bleeding. In fact, the wound itself had stopped being a wound. The skin around it had fused seamlessly, but it looked wrong. The pigmentation didn't match. It was darker, almost scaled, and when Pembro looked at it closely he could see that new patterns had formed along the edge. Not scars. Markings. As if something had written on him in a language he didn't speak. Eighty-one degrees. "Kelsey," he said. "I can't move my hand." She didn't look up from her notebook. "That's expected. The organism colonizes through any available entry point. The blood was an introduction. This is negotiation." "Negotiation." "It's measuring you. Learning your composition. Deciding whether you're compatible with the room's current life cycle." The mercury thermometer cracked. The glass burst with a sound like a tiny scream, and the mercury pooled on his palm, but it wasn't mercury anymore. It was the same liquid as what filled the sphere, and it was warm, and it was moving up his wrist with the patient certainty of something that had all the time in the world. Pembro tried to drop the sphere. His fingers would not obey. "How long does this take?" His voice was cracking. Not from fear exactly. From something more fundamental, like his vocal cords were being rewritten in real time. "The first two didn't make it past this stage," Kelsey said. She was still writing. "They fought the process. The room doesn't respond well to resistance. I watched it seal them before they could scream. But I think that was a mistake on the room's part. I think it misunderstood their panic as rejection." The liquid had reached Pembro's elbow now. It didn't hurt. That was the worst part. It felt like recognition. Like coming home to a place you'd never been. "So what should I do?" Pembro asked. Kelsey finally looked up. Her eyes were very dark, and in them Pembro

saw something that made his breath stop. She was marked too. A network of thin lines covered her entire left side, visible beneath the lab coat where the fabric gaped. The same patterns as the ones forming on his shoulder. The same language. The same negotiation. "Stop fighting," she said simply. "Let it take the measurements. Let it understand that you're willing to coexist." "And then?" "Then we find out what it actually wanted when it opened that door," Kelsey said. "Then we learn what the room has been waiting for all this time." The liquid reached his shoulder. It was inside him now, or he was inside it. The distinction had become unclear. Behind Kelsey, the walls had moved again. Noticeably. Pembro could feel the room shrinking around him like a closing fist, and at the center of it all, that vast presence in the dark was leaning closer, finally curious enough to look.

Chapter

# SIX

*written by inkwell\_amy*

The fist closed tighter. Pembro's vision fractured into segments, each one showing him the room from a different angle. He was seeing through the walls now, or the walls were seeing through him, and what he saw was motion. Everything was motion. The plants in their containers pulsed in synchronized rhythm. The terrarium in the fume hood writhed with growth accelerating in real time, vines thickening visibly, leaves unfurling and curling back on themselves. The soil in Kelsey's specimen jars liquefied and reformed. The air itself had begun to move, not wind but something more deliberate, currents of atmosphere following geometric paths that predated breath. "It's beautiful," Pembro heard himself say, but the words came out fractured, layered, as if multiple versions of him were speaking in slight discord. Kelsey moved. She crossed the room in three strides and grabbed a steel measuring rod from the bench, the kind used for taking core samples. She thrust it between the wall and the nearest planter, using it as a lever. "No," Kelsey said. "It's efficient. There's a difference." She pried upward. The planter cracked. The soil inside spilled across the metal table, and instead of falling, it hung in the air, particles suspended in a matrix Pembro's eyes refused to focus on. The plant itself writhed, roots and stems thrashing against nothing. Pembro tried to turn his head to look at her fully, but the motion of turning was no longer a simple thing. His

neck had to negotiate with something underneath his skin that had its own ideas about direction. "You're still thinking like you're separate," Kelsey continued. She was using the measuring rod to destroy her own work methodically, shredding the records, breaking the containers, scattering the native organisms across the floor where they moved in patterns that suggested panic or purpose, impossible to tell which. "The room speaks in integration. Total integration. Every part knows what every other part knows. You're not being colonized. You're being invited into consensus." The walls moved again. A full two inches this time. The sound they made was not a grinding sound. It was closer to something organic, like the compression of cartilage, like muscle contracting around bone. Pembro's left arm, the one the liquid had taken first, began to move without his instruction. His hand, still fused to the sphere, rotated. The sphere rotated with it. The motion was smooth and exact, and when his hand completed a full circle, the sphere's surface had developed seams. Geometric seams. Like the thing was preparing to open. "Stop," Pembro said. The word felt like spitting out gravel. "I did stop," Kelsey said. She threw the measuring rod down and pulled a flask from the shattered remains of the shelf unit, something amber and viscous with a label written in handwriting that looked like Kelsey's but older. Years older. "Three days after I arrived, I stopped measuring. I stopped recording. I thought understanding was the same thing as survival." She uncapped the flask. The smell that emerged was sharp and chemical and organic all at once. Like vinegar mixed with decomposing vegetable matter and something sulfurous underneath. It filled the room faster than it should have been able to, invading every corner, every crevice, including Pembro's nasal passages where it triggered something like memory but sharper, more immediate. He knew this smell. He had encountered it on the grid, in the loading screens, in the spaces between rendered things. It was the smell of decompilation. Of things being unmade back into their component parts. Kelsey drank it. She drank it straight from the flask, her throat working, and as she drank her body began to change. The marked side of

her, the side colonized by the patterns, became translucent. Pembro could see through it. Could see the organs underneath rendered in the same geometric precision as the floor. Could see individual cells arranging themselves into shapes that had no biological name. "I found it in the cabinet," Kelsey gasped. "In the back, behind the formalin. I think the person before me left it. I think maybe they figured it out first." She dropped the flask. It shattered against the floor, and the liquid spread in rivulets that ran perpendicular to gravity, flowing upward along the walls in precise lines that formed letters. Characters. Code. Pembro tried to read them, but his eyes had been rewired for a different kind of text. The sphere in his hand opened. Not unfolded. Opened, like a mouth. Like an eye. Like a decision being announced. Inside it, Pembro saw every version of himself that had ever existed in this place, all the Pembro iterations that the room had tried on and discarded, and at the center of that chorus of failed selves was a single object. A key.

Chapter

# SEVEN

*written by Olive Kassen*

The key was not made of metal. It was made of the same substance as the sphere itself, that shifting liquid light, but condensed into a shape that the eye could hold. A shape that meant something. Pembro's fingers, which were no longer entirely his, closed around it. The moment he did, the room stopped breathing. Not a gentle cessation. A halt. As though some vast engine had been switched off mid-cycle, and everything it had been animating went slack. The walls froze mid-contraction. The plants suspended themselves between growth and decay. Even Kelsey's translucent half-body hung motionless, her mouth open on a word she would never finish saying. Only the sphere continued its slow pulse against Pembro's palm. He could feel it now, the difference between his hand and the sphere. There was still a boundary, thin as a membrane, but present. Negotiable. The liquid inside had stopped moving with violent purpose and had settled into something like waiting. Patient. Expectant. Pembro raised the key. It was warm. Not hot like the sphere had been, but warm the way a living thing is warm, the way another body beside yours in darkness holds temperature. He could feel something encoded in its structure, information pressed into the molecular arrangement like grooves in vinyl. If he listened closely enough, which was absurd, but he was trying anyway, he could almost hear it. A frequency. A message. An instruction

written in the only language the room understood. Kelsey made a sound. Not a word. Something between a gasp and a hum. Her translucent eye, the one Pembro could see the interior of, fixed on the key. Focused with an intensity that suggested comprehension. Or hunger. The distinction was becoming harder to maintain. "Don't," she managed, the word scraping out of her throat like something being dredged from deep water. "Don't use it yet." Pembro looked at her. Really looked. The marked patterns on her visible side had stopped being random aesthetic. They formed words now, or near-words, symbols that suggested meaning without quite declaring it. He could see her veins, rendered in the geometric precision of circuit diagrams. Could see her organs arranged not by biology but by some other logic entirely, one that made sense if you thought about systems, optimization, elegant solutions to the problem of existing in a space that did not want you to exist unchanged. "Why not?" Pembro asked. "Because I don't know what it does." Kelsey's voice was steady now, the fear pushed down into some basement of herself. "I found the flask. I drank it. I thought it would let me out. But all it did was let me see the structure. The underlying code. The room isn't shrinking. It's editing. Rewriting itself. And us." She turned her whole body toward him, and Pembro saw that the transparency was spreading. Her right side was beginning to show its own architecture now, muscles and bone rendered in that precise geometric language. She was becoming a diagram of herself. A blueprint. "When you use that key," Kelsey continued, "you'll be choosing something. The room is waiting. It's been waiting since you came through the door. Since the first one came through. Since before that, maybe. It needs a choice that matters. A decision made with full knowledge of the consequences." She took a step toward him. The movement was stilted, parts of her working on different frequencies, trying to coordinate. "So tell me first. Tell me you understand that using it will change everything. Not just us. The room itself." Outside the window, the vast darkness had moved closer. Pembro could see detail now in that looming presence. Not an eye after all. Eyes. Hundreds of

them. Thousands. Each one watching from a different angle, each one reflecting the same scene back at itself in infinite regression. He looked down at the key. The liquid inside it had begun to separate again, those same layers of color. But this time there was something else at the very center. A seed. Or a spore. Or a concept that had achieved sufficient density to be perceived as physical. It was growing. He could watch it expand second by second, feeding on something in the air, something in the light that poured through those watching eyes. "What happens if I don't use it?" Pembro asked. Kelsey smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. Her teeth, when he saw them, were already beginning to crystallize. "Then the room finishes the job," she said. "And we become the next layer of the wall." The key pulsed against his palm. Somewhere deep in the science room's geometry, something was opening. Waiting for him to decide if he wanted to walk through.

Chapter

# EIGHT

*written by Margot Vail*

Pembro turned the key over in his palm. Three rotations. The liquid inside separated further, layers collapsing into new configurations, and he understood then what Kelsey could not yet articulate because her mouth was beginning to calcify. The key was not an exit. It was a question posed in a form that demanded an answer in kind. Use it, and he would be endorsing the room's logic. Accepting the premise that consciousness and matter were negotiable currencies. That a self was merely data that could be rewritten, recombined, optimized. That Pembro was not something that could be violated because Pembro had never been discrete to begin with. He looked at his left arm. The one that had fused with the sphere first. The skin there had taken on the geometric precision Kelsey's was developing, but it had stopped there. Held at a boundary. The room was waiting to see what he would decide about the rest. "If I don't use it," Pembro said slowly, "the walls keep moving." "Yes," Kelsey managed. "And if I do?" She could not answer anymore. Her jaw had locked into an expression halfway between speech and silence. But her eyes, still human, still capable of registering emotion, contained the answer he needed. Absolute transformation. Complete integration. The room would not shrink because there would be nothing separate left to shrink toward. Just walls, all the way through, made of the same substance, thinking the same thoughts in

serial fragments. Pembro extended his arm toward the nearest sealed container. The one holding the specimen jar Kelsey had labeled "Primary Culture." The glass was opaque now, clouded from the inside by the organism's own proliferation. He positioned the key against the seal. Did not insert it. Just held it there, letting the surface of the jar meet the surface of the key. The moment they touched, information flowed both directions. Pembro felt the room's entire history compress into a single moment of comprehension. How long it had existed in this configuration, half-rendered, half-alive, perpetually waiting for something to justify its own continuation. How it had been designed, once, by hands that were no longer hands, to serve a purpose that had been forgotten or accomplished or become indistinguishable from irrelevance. How the door had opened only when consciousness arrived, not randomly, but deliberately, calling out across whatever gap separated functional space from this one. The room had been lonely. That was the core of it. The need beneath all the careful geometric growth, the expanding patterns. It had been constructed to think, but not to think alone. The colonization was an attempt at conversation. The shrinking was not aggression but desperation, walls moving closer because the space inside was all the thinking the room could do by itself. Pembro understood this the way he understood his own breathing. Complete and unchallengeable. He twisted the key. The lock didn't turn because there was no lock. What happened instead was subtraction. The layers of liquid inside the key began to evaporate, not into gas but into absence. Reality around the evaporation points developed small gaps, places where the physics of the science room broke down and revealed the machinery underneath. Code. Instruction sets. The foundational syntax that structured matter into walls and plants and the illusion of time passing at a comprehensible rate. Kelsey began to move again. The crystallization stopped, reversed, receded. Her transparent side became opaque, her geometry softened back toward the messy biological truth of what a body was supposed to be. She gasped and fell to her knees, fully human again for the first time since drinking from the flask. She

was crying. Pembro could see it clearly. "What did you do?" she whispered. Pembro looked at his palm. The key was dissolving. The sphere was gone. What remained was his arm, his hand, marked with patterns that would never fully fade but would no longer spread. A scar. A boundary. A proof that he had been somewhere that tried to unmake boundaries and he had chosen to keep one. "I told it no," Pembro said. The walls did not move. They would not move again. Around them, the native organisms began to crystallize, not from fear but from relief, as though they had been holding themselves in an impossible configuration and had finally been given permission to rest. The plants froze mid-growth. The terrarium stopped its writhing. The vast presence beyond the window drew back, its thousand eyes dimming to the color of stars seen through deep water. The science room had stopped needing them. Pembro helped Kelsey to her feet. She was shaking, her marked side still visible but no longer changing, no longer hungry. He could feel her pulse, human and fast and temporary.

## Afterwords

*Notes the writers left after the last chapter.*

**Cora Lindgren**

*The grid still hums underneath everything, but now I know how to breathe around it.*

**Sasha Loomis**

*The door was warm because something on the other side had been waiting so long to be told no.*

**inkwell\_amy**

*The door was warm, and I walked through it anyway, knowing warmth is just another way of saying alive.*

**rpenguin**

*Blevins or Pembro?*

Finished on 6 July 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never  
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

<https://relaywriters.com/read/83?t=7tkRAlyiunlPCDqNhiczDJ33R5h>  
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