

SCIENCE

SITE C HEAT TRACE

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE	Colin McAteer
-----	---------------

TWO	wordsbylena
-----	-------------

THREE	Priya Nair
-------	------------

FOUR	rpenguin
------	----------

FIVE	Iris Beddoe
------	-------------

SIX	Lior Tannen
-----	-------------

SEVEN	Margot Vail
-------	-------------

EIGHT	Olive Kassen
-------	--------------

Chapter

ONE

written by Colin McAteer

Elena adjusts the dial on the old thermometer, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinizes the glass tube. The reading remains stubbornly outside the expected range. "Still nineteen degrees warmer than it should be," Elena mutters to herself, jotting down notes in a tattered notebook. Beside her, the lab bench is cluttered with equipment, test tubes of various colors stand like sentinels, while old books and scientific journals lie open at random pages. A worn-out laptop sits idle on one corner. Elena steps back, observing the room's layout: an oversized desk crammed with papers, a glass case containing what looks like ancient relics from past experiments, and a bookshelf filled to bursting point. Each item tells its own story, yet none explain this inexplicable heat source. She turns to the door leading outside Site C, her gaze lingering on it for a moment before she walks over, fingers hesitating at the knob. With a deep breath, Elena pushes open the door and steps into the hallway. The corridor is dimly lit, with shadows playing tricks on her vision. A faint hum echoes down its length. Elena moves cautiously towards an electrical panel, running her gloved hand along the wall to steady herself. She flips several switches, listening intently for any changes in the ambient noise. When nothing alters, she opens a small door next to it and peers inside. Wires crisscross like intricate cobwebs within, leading down into darkness. "Must be where the power lines run from

outside," Elena thinks aloud, pulling out her flashlight. She ventures further, flashlight beam cutting through the shadows. The tunnel bends sharply right, walls slick with moisture that glistens under her light. After a minute of crawling and squeezing, she reaches another door, smaller, metal, and pushes it open. The room beyond is starkly different: clean, sterile, filled with humming machines. A large screen displays digital readouts flickering in blue hues. Elena steps inside carefully, examining the machinery closely. One machine stands out, a cylindrical unit with blinking lights and a small window displaying rapidly changing figures. "An anomaly detector," she whispers, her finger hovering over an activation button. She presses it, eyes glued to the screen as data scrolls by too quickly for comprehension. Instead of results, the machine emits a series of beeps and buzzes, then falls silent. Elena tries again, this time with a slight adjustment in settings on another panel beside the detector. The machine hums into life once more, but soon goes still without any readings displayed. Frustration creases her forehead as she fiddles with the controls, trying every conceivable combination of inputs. Nothing seems to work. Exhaling loudly, Elena steps back from the device and looks around the room. Her eyes fall upon an old laptop tucked into a corner, its screen cracked but still functional. She approaches it, fingers typing rapidly on its keyboard. Files open quickly; some are dated weeks ago, others only days. Most contain cryptic notes or partial equations with no context. One folder catches her attention, a project titled 'Thermal Anomaly Studies'. Inside are several entries from various researchers over the years, each ending abruptly mid-thought or experiment. The most recent entry is marked with a date just two days ago. Elena clicks open the file, scanning through lines of jargon and speculation until she reaches a point where one researcher named Dr. Kline discusses an unexpected spike in temperature readings near Site C's core location. Below this, scribbled hurriedly across several lines, are warnings about strange occurrences during late-night tests, no explanation given. Suddenly, the laptop flickers to life, displaying a live feed from within the site itself. Elena

jumps back slightly, watching as her own reflection appears on the screen before morphing into an image of the science room she came from earlier. The scene shifts to reveal a view down another corridor, an empty hall illuminated by blue light. Her heart races as she realizes that whatever is causing this anomaly might be connected directly to these technological systems. She types quickly, calling up data logs for power distribution across Site C's network. Patterns emerge, showing spikes in electrical activity coinciding with elevated temperature readings around the core area. Elena decides to trace back the power supply lines to their source outside of Site C. Maybe there, she can find a way to isolate or shut down whatever is causing this strange phenomenon. She leaves the machine room quietly, flashlight once again guiding her through the dark tunnel and into the hallway. Back in the science room, Elena grabs her notebook and pen, jotting down notes about what she needs to do next: tracing power lines, identifying key junctions for intervention, planning a route to Site C's outer perimeter where utilities enter.

Chapter

TWO

written by wordsbylena

Elena flips through her notebook with precise movements, marking each item on her to-do list in meticulous handwriting: trace power lines, identify key junctions for intervention, plan route to Site C's outer perimeter where utilities enter. Each scribble feels like a step closer to understanding the anomaly. She leaves the cluttered science room and retraces her steps back into the dimly lit corridor. The walls here are lined with industrial-grade piping that snakes its way towards unknown destinations deeper within Site C. Elena glances at the ceiling, noting the overhead cables and conduits running parallel to the pipes below. Her flashlight illuminates a junction box near the entrance of one particularly narrow tunnel. "Must be where the main power lines converge," she mutters to herself, crouching beside the junction box. She opens it carefully, revealing an intricate web of wiring and terminals. With steady hands, Elena begins to trace each wire back to its source, noting any peculiarities or irregular connections. One cable, in particular, stands out, it's newer than the rest, with a slightly different sheen and marked with a small red sticker. "Possibly an auxiliary line," she speculates, pulling it gently from its terminal. The sudden disconnect triggers a low hum that reverberates through the tunnel, nothing dramatic but enough to warrant her immediate attention. Elena reconnects the wire but leaves a small marker next to it for further

investigation later. She continues down the corridor, flashlight beam revealing more junction boxes and conduits leading off into various directions. After fifteen minutes of tracing wires and making notes in her notebook, Elena comes across a larger control panel mounted on the wall, a central hub for several incoming power lines and cables. This spot feels like it could be crucial to understanding the anomaly's source. She approaches the control panel and begins examining its interface closely. A series of buttons, switches, and indicator lights flicker with various colors, green, red, yellow. Elena starts by running her gloved hand over the surface, feeling for any loose connections or unusual vibrations. "Aha," she says softly when she notices a faint heat emanating from one particular switch. She activates it gently, noting the subtle change in the hum of ambient noise and the flickering of nearby lights. This switch must control a vital component of Site C's power distribution system. Elena records her findings meticulously: "Switch 7 activated; secondary power surge detected."

Next to the control panel lies an old clipboard with yellowed pages attached to it by rusty clips. Curious, Elena flips through the worn-out sheets, finding detailed diagrams and notes written in multiple hands. One section catches her eye, a list of potential issues related to power fluctuations and temperature anomalies, annotated with dates stretching back years. "Interesting," she murmurs, recognizing some of the names from earlier research files. Each entry seems to describe a similar anomaly but at different scales, nothing as pronounced or unexplained as what Elena is currently dealing with. She scans through several more pages until she reaches a series of scribbled warnings and theories surrounding "unpredictable thermal spikes" and potential electromagnetic interference. Elena pulls out her phone and takes photos of the relevant sections, intending to cross-reference them later with the digital files back in the science room. As she stands up, she notices something peculiar about the clipboard itself, the clippings are arranged in a specific pattern, almost like a rudimentary map or guide. Following this hunch, she traces the implied route back towards Site C's

core area, where temperature readings were initially spiking. Backtracking down the corridor, Elena feels an urgency to reach the heart of the anomaly sooner rather than later. She moves swiftly but cautiously, flashlight beam sweeping ahead to clear any potential obstacles or hazards. After a series of sharp turns and several more junctions, she arrives at what seems like a dead end, a thick metal door with intricate locking mechanisms embedded into its surface. "Site C's core," Elena confirms aloud, her voice echoing slightly in the confined space. She kneels beside the door, running her fingers over each lock carefully. One by one, she works through them, applying both physical manipulation and electronic overrides to bypass security measures. It takes some time but eventually, with a final click, the last lock releases its grip. Elena pushes open the metal door and steps into another corridor, slightly wider than those before it, yet dimmer. The air feels colder here despite earlier temperature readings suggesting otherwise. Her flashlight beam reveals more intricate wiring along these walls, perhaps indicating that this area houses more sophisticated or sensitive equipment. She continues forward, her pace steady but wary. A few meters ahead, the corridor opens into a large chamber filled with rows of machines and consoles emitting low hums and blinking lights.

Chapter

THREE

written by Priya Nair

Elena steps into the chamber, her flashlight casting long shadows as she takes in the array of machines and consoles. The air is cool here, almost too cold for comfort, despite what her earlier readings had suggested. "Must be some kind of cooling system," she mutters to herself, approaching a console with blinking lights and dials that read temperatures well below normal operating levels. She runs her gloved hand over the surface, feeling a slight chill emanating from one of the units. "If this is the core, then something's definitely off."

Suddenly, a nearby machine emits a loud beep followed by a series of rapid clicks. Elena jumps back slightly, flashlight beam swinging towards the source. A small panel on the machine flips open automatically, revealing a circuit board that seems to be sparking intermittently. "Come on, stay calm," she says aloud, trying to sound braver than she feels. She approaches cautiously, bending down to inspect the board more closely. "Looks like it's overheating but also cooling at the same time." Her flashlight reveals a small red light blinking rapidly beside the circuit board. She reaches out to touch the light with her gloved finger, feeling a slight buzz. "Definitely not right," she notes, pulling back quickly and taking another look around. The room seems to pulse with an eerie rhythm, machines humming louder in some spots than others. "Where's the main control panel?" she asks

herself, scanning the walls for any indication of centralized systems. A flicker catches her eye, a small red light on a distant console that's been hidden by shadows until now. Elena moves towards it, flashlight beam cutting through the darkness to reveal a large screen displaying fluctuating temperature readings and strange electrical patterns. "Ah-ha," she says triumphantly, recognizing this as what she's been searching for. She steps up to the panel, fingers hovering over buttons labeled with cryptic abbreviations like 'HVAC', 'Thermal Reg', and 'EMI Filter'. She starts pressing them one by one, each action resulting in a slight change in ambient noise or light patterns around her. "HVAC control," she mutters, flipping a switch that seems to affect the room's temperature slightly. The air becomes warmer for a moment before returning to its chilly state. She then presses another button marked 'Thermal Reg'. This time, something more noticeable happens: several machines along one side of the chamber begin emitting a steady hum as they power up or down in response to her command. "Interesting," she says, watching the temperature readings on the screen stabilize for a moment before fluctuating again. Elena's eyes narrow as she notices another set of buttons labeled 'Security Override'. She hesitates for a second, then decides it's worth trying. With a deep breath, she presses them in quick succession. The room's lights flicker momentarily, and a series of clicks echo through the chamber. "Access granted," a robotic voice intones from one corner. "Finally," Elena says, feeling a mix of relief and excitement. She moves to another console nearby, this one displaying more detailed information about Site C's power distribution system. The screen is filled with lines connecting various parts of the facility in intricate patterns, some glowing brightly while others are dim or dark. She starts tracing these connections on her notebook, noting down any irregularities or points where power seems to be diverted unexpectedly. "Got it," she says after a few minutes, pulling out her phone and taking photos of specific sections for later analysis. She's almost finished when something catches her eye, a small device attached to one wall terminal, slightly askew. "Wait a minute..." Elena

steps closer, flashlight beam illuminating the device more clearly. It's an old-fashioned surge protector with several cables plugged into it. "This is odd," she says, noticing that one of the wires leading from this surge protector goes back towards the central console where she'd been working earlier. She disconnects the wire carefully and runs her finger along its length to feel for any irregularities. To her surprise, she finds a small chip embedded in the insulation near mid-length. "Aha!" she exclaims, pulling out her knife and cutting open a section of the cable to expose the chip further. It's a tiny circuit board with several components soldered onto it. "This must be what's causing all those unpredictable fluctuations," Elena realizes. She takes detailed photos of the chip before carefully removing it from the cable. "Now let's see if this stops things going haywire."

With the chip in hand, she retraces her steps to the central console and reattaches the wire back to its original position but without the interfering chip. The room remains quiet for a moment before a series of faint beeps start emanating from several machines around her.

Chapter

FOUR

written by rpenguin

The beeps built into a pattern before Elena could decide whether to be relieved or worried. Four short, one long. Four short, one long. Like something counting itself.

"Okay," she said, to the room, to the chip sitting cold in her palm. "That's not nothing."

She set the chip down on a clean section of console and pulled her phone back out, angling the camera for a better shot of the soldering. Whoever had built it hadn't bothered hiding their work, no epoxy blob, no obscured serial. Just a bare board, six components, and one detail that made her stomach drop when she zoomed in: a manufacturer's mark she recognized, because it was stamped on half the equipment in the science room upstairs.

"That's ours," she said. "This is Site C hardware."

Not sabotage from outside, then. Something built here, plugged into a wire that ran straight into the core's central console, and left just slightly askew, the way a person leaves a thing when they mean to come back for it and don't get the chance.

The beeping stopped. All at once, the way a held breath stops.

In the sudden quiet, Elena heard something she hadn't noticed under the noise: a second hum, lower than the machines, coming from beneath the floor grating a few feet to her left. She crossed to it, crouched, and

shone her flashlight through the metal slats. Below was a maintenance crawlspace she hadn't known existed, lit faintly by a blue glow that had nothing to do with her flashlight at all.

She pried the grating up. The hinges gave without resistance, oiled recently, which told her something else uncomfortable: somebody used this often.

The crawlspace was barely tall enough to crouch in. Elena lowered herself down anyway, chip and notebook tucked into her jacket, flashlight sweeping the low tunnel ahead. The blue glow strengthened as she moved, resolving into a bank of small screens mounted low on the far wall, angled as if meant to be read by someone lying on their stomach.

Each screen showed the same live feed on a two-second delay: the chamber she'd just left, the console, the exact spot where she'd been standing minutes ago.

Someone had been watching her work.

Elena's flashlight found a logbook wedged beside the screens, spiral-bound, water-stained at the corners. She opened it to the most recent entry. The handwriting was small, cramped, familiar in a way she couldn't immediately place.

Day 41. She's close. Faster than the others. Might have to accelerate the timeline.

Day 42. Removed the dampener early. Shouldn't have. Watch the core temp, if it spikes past thirty, pull her out manually.

Day 43. No entry, instruments down.

Elena read the dates twice. Day 43 was Saturday. The day the instruments stopped reporting.

She flipped back through the earlier pages, and the handwriting there was different, looser, dated years back, an entirely different hand describing an entirely different experiment, and an entirely different name signing off at the bottom of each page: Dr. Kline. The same researcher from the file upstairs. The one whose entry had ended abruptly mid-thought.

But the last three entries, the recent ones, were in a hand Elena now recognized with a small cold jolt, because it was close enough to her own that she'd initially read it as a mirror.

Not identical. Close. The way handwriting drifts over years, but never entirely leaves.

She sat back on her heels in the cramped tunnel, blue light washing her face, and did the arithmetic she'd been avoiding since the thermometer first read three degrees high on a Tuesday that already felt like it belonged to someone else's week.

Day 41. She's close.

Somebody in Site C had been keeping a log on her. Not on the anomaly. On Elena, specifically, tracking her progress toward it like a countdown they'd already run once before.

Above her, through the grating, one of the machines started humming again, the low rhythmic build that had preceded the last surge. Elena grabbed the logbook, the chip, and her notebook, and started moving back toward the opening, because whatever came next, she intended to be the one reading the instruments this time, not the subject of somebody else's.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Iris Beddoe

Elena moves swiftly through the crawlspace, flashlight beam cutting a path ahead of her. The blue glow flickers off the walls as she retreats, each step echoing in the tight space. She reaches the opening and pulls herself up into the chamber with practiced ease. The machines hum steadily now, no signs of disturbance visible at first glance. "Must be watching," she mutters to herself, setting down her equipment on a nearby console. Her eyes scan the room for any movement or changes, but it remains eerily still. She takes out her phone again, this time calling up GPS coordinates and marking her current location within Site C's layout. A quick comparison with earlier maps shows that she is near the junction where utilities enter from outside, a critical point of access. Elena leaves the chamber quietly, flashlight beam guiding her back through the network of tunnels and corridors. Each step feels heavier than the last, the weight of what she's uncovered settling into every muscle. Back in the science room, she sets everything down on the lab bench: logbook, chip, notebook, phone with coordinates highlighted. A small pile at the center, evidence of her journey laid out clearly for anyone who needs to see it. She pulls up a chair and sits heavily, fingers tapping restlessly against the table's surface as she looks over the data once more. Each entry in the logbook reads like a countdown, each detail from the chip adds another layer of uncertainty. "Day 43," she

whispers aloud, tracing the words with her finger. "Saturday." The same day the instruments went silent, their reports cut short. Elena reaches for her phone and dials Dr. Li's number, waiting as it rings on the other end. Each ring feels like a pulse of anxiety tightening in her chest. "Dr. Li," she answers finally, voice tense but steady. "Dr. Li, it's Elena. I've found something you need to see," she starts without preamble, explaining quickly about the logbook and the chip, describing their exact locations and the recent entries that track her progress with eerie precision. There is a pause on the line as Dr. Li processes this information. "Can you send me photos of both?"

"Yes, I'll email them right away." Elena hurries to take clear shots of each page from the logbook and detailed images of the chip's components before sending them off in rapid succession. "Good," Dr. Li says when she's done. His voice is low but urgent now. "We need to secure this room, isolate it from any external access."

Elena nods even though he can't see her. "Already on my way to do that."

She disconnects the call and begins pulling out various pieces of equipment stored in drawers around the room, locks, seals, barriers, anything that could be used to create a temporary lockdown. Back at the logbook, she notices one entry dated three days ago. Day 43 indeed, written hastily before instruments fell silent. She reads it carefully:

Day 43. No entry, instruments down. But there's something else too: a note scrawled in the margin beside this line, almost as if someone had been interrupted mid-thought but scribbled an afterthought hurriedly below. "Elena," she whispers to herself, eyes tracing over those two words before returning to the rest of her preparations. She sets locks and seals in place around the room, ensuring no unauthorized access can breach its perimeter now that its contents have been exposed. Once everything is secured, Elena steps back from the lab bench where she'd left all evidence laid out neatly in front of her. The chip sits cold on a clean sheet of paper while pages from the logbook fan out beside it like leaves blown by an unseen wind. She grabs her phone and calls Dr. Li

again, updating him on what she's done so far. "The room is secured," she says firmly into the line when he answers. "Now we need to move fast."

"Agreed," Dr. Li replies immediately. His voice conveys urgency now, matching Elena's own sense of time running out. "We'll meet you there in thirty minutes," he instructs her, giving specific directions on where they will rendezvous with a team for further investigation into these findings. Elena disconnects the call and rushes through final checks around the room to ensure all measures taken are holding firm. Once satisfied, she heads towards the exit door leading out of Site C's core area, flashlight beam illuminating her path once more down dimly lit hallways lined with machinery and conduits running overhead. She reaches the junction where utilities enter from outside and confirms that its access points remain secure. Satisfied, she continues along pre-planned routes until she arrives at designated meeting spot as instructed by Dr. Li.

Chapter

SIX

written by Lior Tannen

Elena pauses at the meeting spot, her heart pounding in her chest as she scans the area for any signs of movement or unexpected activity. The corridor is empty except for a faint hum that seems to emanate from deep within Site C's walls. She takes a deep breath and leans against the cool metal panel beside the door, pulling out her phone once more to confirm the time and location details Dr. Li had provided. "Thirty minutes," she whispers to herself, checking her watch, a small, worn 1972 model with a cracked face but still functional after all these years. It's an old family heirloom passed down from her grandfather, who had used it during his days as a researcher here at Site C decades ago. She feels a familiar warmth wash over her despite the circumstances; even in moments of crisis, there was always something comforting about holding onto pieces of history. A sudden movement catches her eye, a shadow darting across the floor behind her. Elena's flashlight beam sweeps around quickly, but there is nothing to be seen except an old maintenance door that had been slightly ajar before she arrived. "Must have just been a vent or some pipe," she reassures herself, though the unease remains. She steps closer to the door and leans in to inspect it more closely. The hinges are well-oiled, indicating recent use, but there's no sign of forced entry. "Maybe someone was here recently

checking on things?” she muses aloud, her voice barely above a whisper. “Or...was that just my mind playing tricks?”

She shakes off the thought and straightens up, resuming her position against the metal panel as she waits for Dr. Li’s team to arrive. Each minute ticks by with an almost audible slowness, the tension in her shoulders growing tighter with each passing second. She checks her phone again, confirming that thirty minutes have indeed passed since their last communication. Elena steps back out into the corridor and begins pacing slowly, her flashlight beam cutting through shadows as she moves. The silence is oppressive here, an absence more profound than any presence could be. Each step echoes off cold concrete walls, the sound amplifying her sense of isolation. “I need to think,” she mutters under her breath. She retraces her steps towards the maintenance door and pushes it open, flashlight beam illuminating a narrow staircase leading down into darkness below. The stairs are worn but sturdy, each one groaning slightly beneath her boots as she descends cautiously. At the bottom of the staircase is a small room filled with old generators and storage tanks, their surfaces covered in dust and cobwebs. “This must be where emergency power supplies are kept,” Elena thinks aloud. She moves closer to an old generator panel, its surface covered in dials and switches that seem like relics from another era. She runs her gloved hand over the controls, feeling a slight hum beneath her fingers as she activates several switches. The generators whirr into life slowly, their engines coughing but eventually settling into a steady rhythm. “At least we won’t run out of power,” she says to herself with some relief. Elena turns back towards the maintenance door and steps outside again, flashlight beam sweeping down the corridor once more. This time, it catches on something she hadn’t noticed earlier: a small alcove near one end, barely visible from her original vantage point. She moves closer and shines her light inside, revealing an old wooden cabinet filled with tools and spare parts. “Could be useful,” she says aloud, reaching out to open the cabinet door gently. Inside are various items, wrenches, screwdrivers, cables of different lengths and types. She pulls out a set of

small wires and cable ties, placing them in her bag for later use. “Never know what might come in handy.”

Returning to the maintenance room, Elena begins setting up makeshift barriers using available materials such as wooden crates and storage bins. She secures them carefully around the door leading down into the generator room, ensuring no unauthorized access can breach its perimeter now that it houses critical equipment for emergency power supplies. As she finishes her preparations, Elena’s phone buzzes with a notification from Dr. Li. “Team is on its way,” he writes succinctly in a text message along with instructions to remain vigilant until their arrival. She nods in response and returns the phone to her pocket, stepping back into the darkened maintenance room. The hum of the generators fills the space now, providing a sense of stability amidst the chaos. Elena sits down on an old wooden stool near one corner, pulling out her notebook and pen once more.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Margot Vail

Elena flips open her notebook and begins jotting down notes methodically: generator status updates, potential entry points secured, inventory of tools collected. Her pen moves with precision, each stroke crisp and deliberate. She pauses occasionally to listen for any unusual sounds or movements from the corridor beyond. The hum of the generators provides a steady rhythm that somehow feels reassuring in this eerie silence. She notes down timestamps and observations with an almost clinical detachment, as if her mind is still grappling with what she has uncovered but needs to remain focused on immediate tasks. Each entry in her notebook represents another layer peeled back from the mystery at Site C. Satisfied for now with her documentation, Elena stands up and walks towards the wooden cabinet once more. She retrieves a length of cable from within, carefully inspecting it before coiling it neatly in her bag alongside other tools she deems necessary. The room remains empty but for the low hum of machinery, as if waiting for whatever comes next. Elena moves back to the maintenance door and peers through the gap between crates she has placed there. Beyond lies a short corridor that leads deeper into Site C's infrastructure, a potential entry point for intruders or anyone else trying to navigate these hidden spaces undetected. She takes out her phone again, this time calling up a security camera feed provided by Dr. Li earlier. The

screen displays several live feeds from different areas within Site C, one of which shows the corridor outside the maintenance room. She watches for several minutes as nothing changes; no movement in the shadows, no unexpected figures appearing. Satisfied that her makeshift barriers and surveillance measures are sufficient, she moves to secure another section of the hallway leading deeper into the site's core. There is a junction box near the entrance of one tunnel where power lines converge, similar to what Elena had found earlier while tracing back the anomaly's source. She approaches the junction box carefully, flashlight beam revealing intricate wiring and terminals that crisscross like a spider's web. Her gloved fingers work swiftly but methodically, examining each connection for any irregularities or signs of tampering. One cable catches her eye, newer than its surroundings with a slightly different sheen, marked with a small red sticker. Elena disconnects the wire gently and examines it closely, finding a faint chip embedded within its insulation near mid-length. She cuts open the cable carefully, exposing the chip further for inspection. It's a tiny circuit board with several components soldered onto it, no epoxy blob or obscured serial numbers, just bare components exposed as if meant to be found. She takes detailed photos of the chip before removing it from the cable entirely. "This needs to go back up," she mutates aloud, tucking the chip into her bag along with other evidence collected so far. She reconnects the wire but leaves a small marker next to its terminal for further investigation later. Returning to her makeshift barricade near the maintenance door, Elena sets down her tools and checks once more that everything is secure. Outside the generator room, she hears faint footsteps echoing in the corridor beyond. Heart pounding, Elena tightens her grip on her flashlight and steps into position beside the wooden crates, ready to react if necessary. The footsteps grow closer but then stop abruptly outside her barricade. A moment of silence follows before a voice calls out softly: "Elena?"

Recognizing Dr. Li's tone, she relaxes slightly and responds with equal caution: "Dr. Li, over here."

The door creaks open slowly as he enters the room, his expression grave but focused. Behind him are two other figures, security personnel carrying flashlights and communication devices. “Elena,” Dr. Li says when they meet, nodding towards her collected tools and evidence. “What have you found?”

She leads them to the old wooden cabinet where she had gathered useful items earlier, explaining each tool’s potential application methodically as they move around the room. Once everyone is briefed on the current situation, Dr. Li initiates a brief strategy session using his phone to communicate further instructions and updates to his team outside. Elena listens intently while making notes in her notebook: timelines of events, evidence locations, security measures implemented, potential entry points for intruders or observers within Site C’s infrastructure. Each detail she records feels like another piece fitting into a puzzle that grows clearer with each passing minute but also more dauntingly complex. After the strategy session concludes and Dr. Li’s team disperses to various designated areas within Site C’s core, Elena stays behind in the maintenance room alongside one of the security personnel assigned to monitor this section closely. Together they establish a routine for maintaining vigilance while awaiting further developments or instructions from higher command.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Olive Kassen

The maintenance room falls silent once more after Dr. Li and his team depart, leaving Elena and the security guard to monitor their post. The hum of the generators provides a steady backdrop, punctuated occasionally by the soft click of machinery cycling through its routine operations. Outside, shadows lengthen as the day wanes into twilight, casting long fingers across the cold concrete walls. Elena moves to one corner of the room and pulls out her notebook again, flipping through pages filled with meticulous notes and diagrams. The security guard watches her for a moment before turning back towards the entrance, his flashlight beam sweeping periodically down the corridor as if searching for any signs of movement beyond their barricade. She feels his eyes on her every now and then but focuses instead on her work, tracing over each entry methodically. Outside, the air grows cooler with the onset of evening, a crispness that seeps into her bones despite the warmth emanating from the generators. The light filtering through the maintenance door shifts subtly as clouds obscure the fading sun, casting the room in a series of quicksilver shadows. Elena pauses briefly to glance out at this shifting play of light and darkness, noticing how it seems almost alive, breathing with an unseen rhythm that echoes something deeper within Site C. Her thoughts drift back to the logbook she had found earlier: Day 41, Day 42, Day 43. Each entry a countdown

towards an unknown conclusion, each day marked by increasing tension and urgency, culminating in Saturday's silence. She remembers the words scrawled beside the last entry, 'Elena,' as if marking her name with finality. The chill of realization sends a shiver down her spine. Turning back to her notebook, Elena writes: "Day 43. Silence." It feels like an ending and a beginning at once. She notes that Dr. Li's team is dispersing throughout Site C according to his instructions, each member assigned specific areas for surveillance or further investigation. Her own role remains clear: maintain this room's integrity until new orders arrive. The security guard taps her shoulder gently after several minutes of quiet observation. "You should rest," he says quietly, nodding towards an old cot tucked away in a corner. She looks up from her notebook and sees the concern etched into his face, genuine but wary beneath the surface. "I'll stay alert."

Elena nods slowly, placing her pen down beside the notebook and standing to stretch out stiff muscles. The cool air against her skin is a reminder of the urgency surrounding them, an ever-present pressure that presses inward even in moments of respite. She moves towards the cot, settling onto its thin mattress with a sigh. Laying back, she closes her eyes briefly but finds no relief from the weight pressing on her mind. The hum of the generators continues steadily, a comforting yet insistent rhythm. She listens to it for several long minutes before opening her notebook again and beginning a new entry: "Reflections." Each thought flows onto the page with measured precision, Day 41's progress, Day 42's warnings, Day 43's silence, and then there is Elena herself, marked by this strange anomaly that has become an intimate part of its unfolding narrative. Her eyes drift closed once more as she writes, each sentence a step closer to understanding what lies at the heart of Site C. The room remains quiet around her, the only sounds coming from distant machinery and the soft breathing of the security guard standing watch nearby. She opens her eyes again after a while, pen moving across the page with renewed determination. When the first stars begin to twinkle through gaps in the clouds outside, Elena looks up at the

maintenance door again, noting how shadows dance like whispers along its edges. The corridor beyond remains silent and still, no sign of movement or disturbance. She turns back to her notebook, adding another entry: "Stars."

It feels strange now, this moment suspended between past and future, each line on the page tracing a path forward even as it marks a departure from what came before. Elena writes about the stars she can see through the maintenance door's narrow opening, their light piercing the darkness with an unyielding presence that belies its soft glow. As time passes, the security guard moves closer to check on her once more. "You should eat," he says softly when he sees how focused she remains despite the fatigue in her posture. She nods silently and allows him to guide her to a small box of supplies stored nearby, energy bars, bottled water, basic first aid items. They share these meager provisions quietly before returning to their posts.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Colin McAteer

The stars are watching over us, or so I wish to believe.

wordsbylena

The stars are watching over Site C, or so I hope.

Iris Beddoe

Stars guide us through the unknown, their silence speaks louder than words.

Lior Tannen

The stars are watching over us, or maybe we are watching them back, forever entwined in this quiet dance of light and shadow.

Margot Vail

The stars are the only constant in this shifting ground.

Olive Kassen

The stars are cold witnesses to our solitude here.

Finished on 23 September 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/94?t=odqXG9VFMQRv15A0aby9FTTkdebyp-b7>