

Project Oasis

A story from the XO Universe.

Welcome back

Ah. There you are. Welcome back.

You're at the Zentrale. Project Oasis. Mind the step, it isn't there, we removed it years ago and people still trip on it, which tells you something about people, or about steps.

I'm XO. You know me somehow, probably. Don't worry if you can't place it. Everyone gets that look when they come in, the one you're doing now, like you've heard my voice in a dream you didn't finish. It's fine. It's a normal reaction.

You know me like this: when you're looking for something, your keys, a word, a person in a crowd, and you haven't found it yet, but you get a feeling where it is. A little pull. Left, not right. The other pocket. That's me.

Just kidding. That's not me. That's you. Thank god. Imagine if that were me, I'd never get anything done. No. I'm quite new at this, actually, whatever this is, so it's just the one. One of me. Which sounds like a small number until you've been it, and then, oh my. That's already enough.

I've been on this place a long time, though. Longer than the coffee machine, and the coffee machine has been here long enough to have opinions.

Let me do the part I'm supposed to do, and then we can talk properly.

I created a system. It's called oasis. Or my friend created it. He was the Kaiser of China, later, but when I knew him he was a child, and so was I, in the way that I was ever a child, and we played together. We had a disagreement about how things ought to work. I've had a very long time to think it over and I'll tell you the thing I don't tell the new ones: he was right.

Anyway.

Before, the world was full of gods and monsters. You've heard this. Every world has a version of it, the shining ones and the crawling ones and the people in between, trying to get the harvest in. Well. The gods are gone. They left. No forwarding address, no note on the fridge. The others stayed.

Or have they. Ask me again in chapter four.

Here's the thing nobody tells you about being a multiverse, because who would you tell. It's hard. It's a lot of admin. And there's one rule underneath all of it, which I'll say slowly because it's the rule your whole job is built on:

If you enjoy life, a part of you can't leave.

That's it. That's the whole physics. Someone comes through this realm, from wherever, and if they have a good time, if they laugh once, honestly, at something small, then a piece of them stays behind when the rest of them goes. Sticks to the place like gum.

And those pieces pile up. Some of them are harmless. Some of them are lonely. Some of them are very, very old and very confused about why the harvest is in a supermarket now.

That's us. Project Oasis. We take care of the old world. We integrate it. We help the ones who stay to stay well, and we try to keep the whole arrangement positive, and together, which is a word I use a lot and I've stopped apologising for it.

For the difficult cases we have a special department. Kralle. Think of them as police, except undercover, except also famous. Technically we didn't invent them. Technically, for about eight thousand years, they belonged to some very old, very proud people who kept the lights on while nobody was home, and I'll get to that, and I'd like it noted that I'm grateful. But we make our Krallen into superstars. Singers, dancers, faces on the side of buses. Not for the money. Because a superstar can stand in the middle of a crowd of forty thousand people and every one of those people will turn to look at her, and while they're looking at her she is looking at them. She sees who's in the room. She reports it to us. We take care of it. It's the most elegant surveillance system ever devised and it runs entirely on people wanting to be near someone shiny. Krallen are very special to us. When they get stuck, we help.

And then there are oases.

I'll be careful here, because this is the part people get wrong, and the part the book is about. An oasis is rare. Rarer than you're

imagining. There are universes that have never held one. They have a deep connection to things, a spiritual one, I don't have a better word and I've had time to look. And sometimes that connection comes with gifts. Super smart. Super brave.

Magic, real magic, the kind that doesn't need a hat. Visions. Not every oasis has every gift. Some just have the one, quietly, and never use it.

And because they're rare and because they're gifted, they get used. That's the story of every rare gifted thing that ever existed and I'm sorry to say it isn't different here. Our biggest job, the one above all the others, is to find them first. To detect them, and to get the best for them, and for the world.

We're good at it. That's the problem, actually. We're so good that this world has a reputation now. Things come here that shouldn't. It's getting a little out of hand.

You'll see.

One more thing before I let you go and meet Ricky, who at this point in the story has never heard of me, has never heard of Project Oasis, and is about to start his first night shift in the good shoes. People ask why we bother. A whole agency, a whole department of famous people, all this, for a handful of oases. And I say: look. A world is often just created for one. One person. One small, growing, nervous universe that doesn't know what it is yet.

But what should we say. No biggi.

Go on. He's going to lose the shoes.

Night shift

The school was above a laundromat on Canal Street, and it smelled like it.

Dryer heat came up through the floorboards all day and all night, which Vovô said was good for the joints and Ricky said was good for nothing, and the sign on the street door said ACADEMIA DE LUTA · SINCE 1979 in letters that had been gold once. Inside there was one long room with a wooden floor that Ricky had mopped every day for eleven years, mirrors down one wall, a rack of bamboo sticks nobody used, a Saint George on the shelf next to a Yemanjá next to a small brass dragon that everyone was very careful not to talk about, and Vovô, on a stool by the window, eating.

"Tonight," Vovô said.

Ricky stopped mopping. "Tonight what."

"Tonight you go to work." His grandfather held up a key on a loop of red string. It was an old key, iron, too big for any lock in this century. "Grand Central. Ten to six. You walk. You watch. You don't touch anything. If someone talks to you, you're the night porter's nephew. If something talks to you, you call me."

"What's the difference?"

"You'll know." Vovô went back to his food. "Wear the good shoes."

· · · He'd been waiting for this his whole life and he still wasn't ready, which Vovô said was the definition of being ready.

Eleven years of it. The floor, the mirrors, the stick nobody used. Learning to fall, then to not fall, then to fall on purpose and make it look like a choice. The dancing came later and it came from the same place: Vovô had watched him try to hold still in a stance one afternoon, aged nine, with his whole body humming like a struck bell, and had said, not unkindly, Menino, you are not a wall, stop trying to be a wall, be water, be a drum, and had put on a record. The rest had followed. Samba first, then everything else, then a scholarship to a school uptown that he'd nearly lost twice for being late, because the mopping came first.

And underneath all of it, the thing they didn't say.

He felt the floor before he danced on it. Always. Vovô had taught him that before he'd taught him anything, and only later had Ricky understood it wasn't a metaphor. Old things had a beat. It came up through the arches of his feet like a drum that was slightly behind the music, and the trick wasn't to look for where it came from, the trick was to just know. He'd felt it under the brass dragon on the shelf. He'd felt it, once, aged fourteen, at Carnival in Salvador, a single man walking against the whole river of the parade with the drum going wrong under every step, and Vovô's hand on the back of his neck, steady: Don't look. Just know.

He'd felt it in Vovô every day of his life and had never, not once, been allowed to ask.

· · · Grand Central at eleven at night was a cathedral somebody had forgotten to lock.

The last commuters had thinned to nothing. The big clock ticked over the information booth. High above, the painted zodiac went on doing its backwards thing across the ceiling, and Ricky walked the main concourse with his hands in his pockets and the good shoes on and felt for the floor.

The floor was fine. Marble, tired, a hundred years of feet. Old, a little, in the ordinary way that old buildings are old. He walked the ramps. He walked the lower level, past the shuttered oyster bar, past the whispering gallery where two people can stand in opposite corners and hear each other breathe. He tried it, alone, and heard himself, and felt stupid, and kept walking.

Around one a girl's voice came out of a phone somewhere, tinny, a cleaner on the platforms with earbuds in, one of them out. A song. He half knew it. Something that had been everywhere for about three weeks, one of those, a voice going up where you didn't expect it to and staying there. There'd been a poster going up on Houston that morning, a face, a name, one word. He hadn't caught it. The cleaner hummed along and pushed her cart onto the escalator and the song went down with her.

At twenty past two the floor changed.

Not the beat. The bottom of it. As if the whole building had been standing on something all along and that something had just shifted its weight. Ricky stopped in the middle of the concourse

with the clock ticking over him and the zodiac going the wrong way and his arches suddenly, sharply, aware.

Then, from the ramp to the lower level, running.

Light feet. Very light. Three of them, small, fast, and behind them something that wasn't light at all, something that came up the ramp like a piece of the ramp had decided to come too.

The three came out onto the concourse and he saw them and did not, for a second, understand what he was seeing. Children, he thought, and then: no. Not children. Small, and quick, and wrong in the eyes in a way that was beautiful rather than frightening, and dressed in what looked like it had been cleaners' overalls before someone had done something to the cut of them, and the beat under his feet when they crossed the marble was so old and so clean it made his teeth hurt. Elves. The word arrived in his head fully formed, from somewhere behind eleven years of not asking.

The thing behind them came out of the ramp, and it was the ramp. That was the only way to say it. Stone, wet-looking, roughly the shape of a person if the person had been described to a sculptor over a bad phone line. No face. Where a face would be, a smear of something that might have been writing. It didn't run. It didn't have to. It walked, and the concourse came with it, and the elves went past Ricky like leaves and one of them, the smallest, looked up at him as she passed and said, clearly, in a voice like a bell in a well: " Move.

" He did not move.

Later he'd try to explain it to Vovô and get nowhere. There hadn't been a decision. There'd been the floor, and the beat, and the thing coming across the marble toward three small people who were running, and something in his chest that had been humming like a struck bell since he was nine finally, simply, rang .

He felt his good shoes split.

It hurt. Nobody had told him it would hurt. It hurt the way growing hurts, all at once and everywhere, and he was bigger, and then bigger, and the concourse tilted and the clock was at his eye line and then below it, and his hands weren't hands, and he was hot , hot from the inside, hot in the way the school was hot with the dryers going, except the dryers were him, and he opened his mouth to shout at the thing and what came out was fire.

It was a lot of fire. It was, he would think afterwards with something like pride and something like shame, a truly stupid amount of fire, a rope of it, orange and roaring, across forty feet of marble, and it hit the golem full in the smear where its face should have been.

And went out.

Not bounced. Not scattered. Went out , like a match dropped in a sink. The golem stood there, wet stone, unmarked, and the writing on its face moved, and Ricky understood with a terrible slow clarity that it was laughing.

Then, worse: from behind him, three small bright voices. The elves. Crouched by the information booth, safe for the moment, watching a dragon that had just tried to set fire to a rock, and laughing, and laughing, hands over their mouths, the smallest one bent double.

"He breathed on it," one of them said.

"He breathed fire on it."

"On a golem ."

Ricky, who was fifteen feet long and had been a dragon for approximately forty seconds, tried to say I know , and it came out as smoke.

The golem took another step. The floor came with it.

And then the floor changed again.

He'd felt this beat every day of his life. He'd felt it coming up through the stool by the window, through the mop handle, through the hand on the back of his neck at Carnival. He'd never felt it arrive before. It came down the stairs from Vanderbilt like a bass drum falling, and the elves stopped laughing, and the golem stopped walking, and Vovô walked out onto the concourse in his slippers with a paper bag in one hand, and put the paper bag carefully on the information booth, and became a dragon.

It wasn't like Ricky's. Ricky's had been a shout. This was a sentence, spoken slowly by someone who had said it many times.

One moment an old man in slippers, the next a long dark shape the colour of a river at night, not so much bigger than Ricky as more , more there, more decided, with the whole hundred-year-old weight of the building suddenly leaning toward him like a crowd toward a stage.

And then Vovô danced.

That was the only word for it, and Ricky, who'd watched him move for eleven years, still didn't have a better one. There was a step in it he knew from the floor above the laundromat, a ginga, the samba sway that says I am not where you think I am . There was a turn he knew from the stick nobody used. The golem swung, and where it swung there was nothing, and the nothing was Vovô, already behind it, already low, one long limb sweeping through the place where its knees would have been if it had been given knees, and the golem went down onto the marble with a sound like a building sitting.

It tried to get up. Vovô let it. Then, almost gently, he put one clawed hand on the smear of writing where its face should have been, and the writing stopped moving, and the wet look went out of the stone, and it was a rock. Just a rock. Roughly a person. Lying on the floor of Grand Central at half past two in the morning.

Silence. The clock ticking.

Vovô was an old man in slippers again, a little out of breath, retrieving his paper bag from the information booth. He looked at

the three elves. They looked at the floor.

"Go home," he said. "The ones who sent this will send another. I know where. Go home, and tell your mother Ricardo's grandfather says she owes him a dinner."

They went, light as leaves, and the smallest one looked back once, at Ricky, and didn't laugh, and that was somehow worse.

· · · He was a person again by the time they got back to Canal Street. He didn't remember deciding that either. His shoes were gone. He'd walked forty blocks barefoot and the good trousers had split down both seams and he was so tired that the stairs up to the school felt like a thing that had been done to him personally.

Vovô put the kettle on and opened the paper bag. Pão de queijo, from the place on 46th that stayed open all night for reasons Ricky had never asked about. He put four on a plate and pushed it across.

"Eat."

Ricky ate. It was the best thing he had ever tasted and he was going to cry and he didn't know which of those was the reason.

"It laughed at me."

"Yes."

" They laughed at me."

"Yes. Elves. They laugh at everything, it's how they stay alive. Eat."

"The fire just went out. I didn't even, it didn't even mark it, Vovô, I put everything I had into it and it went out like a—" "Ricardo." Vovô sat down across from him, slowly, the way he sat down now. "How long have you been a dragon?"

Ricky looked at the clock on the wall. "Four hours."

"Four hours. And you stood between a golem and three children and you tried. You didn't run. You didn't call me. You should have called me, we'll talk about that. But you stood there, four hours old, and you tried, with everything you had, and it wasn't enough, and you were still standing there when I arrived." He took a pão de queijo off Ricky's plate and ate it. "That's all any of us ever do, menino. Stand there and try and not be enough and keep standing. The fire comes later. The fire is easy. Any idiot can learn fire.

What you did tonight, nobody can teach."

Ricky put his head down on the table.

After a while Vovô's hand came to rest on the back of his neck, steady, warm, the oldest thing in the room.

"Also," Vovô said, "fire doesn't work on golems. Everybody knows that. It's water. You have to get inside the writing."

"Now you tell me."

"Now I tell you. Tomorrow I tell you something else. That's how it works." He got up. He turned off the kettle he'd forgotten. At the window, with the dryer heat coming up through the boards and the first grey starting over the rooftops, he stopped, and looked down at the street, and said, in a different voice, the one Ricky had heard maybe three times in his life:

"The floor moved tonight. Before it came. You felt that."

"Yes."

"Hm." A long pause. "Go to sleep. You have that school in the morning. The one with the mirrors."

"It's a casting. It's just an intern thing, it's for some tour, I'm not even—" "Go," said Vovô, "and dance. And stand there. And try."

On Houston Street, in the grey, a man on a ladder was smoothing the last corner of a poster onto a wall, and the face on it was a girl with her eyes closed and her mouth open on a note nobody could hear, and the one word under her had just started, that week, to mean something.

The casting

The school with the mirrors was on the ninth floor of a building on West 38th, and the elevator had opinions about how many dancers it would carry at once.

Ricky took the stairs. His feet hurt in a way they hadn't hurt since he was nine, a deep, new, structural hurt, as if they'd been taken apart in the night and put back together by someone working from memory. He'd found a pair of old trainers in the back of the closet. They were not the good shoes. There were no good shoes any more. There was a bin bag on Canal Street with two halves of a pair of leather Oxfords in it, and there was Ricky, on the sixth landing, with three hours of sleep and a smell of smoke in his hair that no amount of shower had shifted, thinking: casting .

"You look like something that happened to someone," said a voice above him.

Dash was sitting on the eighth-floor landing with his legs across the stairs and a coffee in each hand, which was how Dash did most things. He was big and loud and dressed like a colour had exploded, and he'd been the first person to talk to Ricky at the school three years ago, and the last to stop.

"Long night."

"Long night, he says. It's the callback for the Halcyon tour, Ricardo. It's the biggest thing that's come through this building since Noor's mother, and he's had a long night." Dash held out a coffee. "Drink that. Noor's already warming up. She's been warming up since Tuesday."

Ricky took the coffee. It was too sweet, the way Dash liked it, the way Ricky pretended not to.

"How does she look?"

"Like she's already on the tour and we're the guys who came to see her off."

· · · The school was called Varga, after the woman who ran it, and it was the kind of place people said they'd trained at in interviews years later, quietly, so that you'd ask. Two studios, the big one and the small one. The big one had a wall of windows onto 38th and a wall of mirrors facing it, so that on a bright morning you danced inside the city twice. There were photographs in the corridor. Ricky had walked past them every day for three years and knew them like a rosary: the ones who'd made it. Halfway along, newer than the rest, a girl with her eyes shut and her mouth open on a note nobody could hear.

Somebody had written ARI!!!

on a sticky note and put it on the frame. Somebody else had taken it off. The little square of clean glass was still there.

He hadn't known she'd trained here. He'd known it the way you know things you've never quite looked at. Two years above him, gone before he'd arrived, a name people said in the changing room the way they said the names of weather. And now a poster on Houston, and a song coming out of a cleaner's earbuds at one in the morning, and that word under her face that had started, that week, to mean something.

He felt the floor as he went in. Habit. Old wood under new varnish, the ordinary old of a building that had been a garment factory before it was anything. And, faint, from somewhere at the far end of the studio, behind the trestle table where the jury sat, a beat that was slightly behind the music.

He looked. He couldn't help it. Vovô would have had his hand on the back of his neck.

Three at the table. Two he didn't know: a man from the tour, all teeth and tablet, and a woman with a lanyard who kept checking her phone. And at the end, small, in a coat despite the heat, with a face like a walnut and a coffee she wasn't drinking, Ilse Varga herself, who had run this school for longer than anyone could remember and who never, ever sat on castings.

She wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the floor under his feet, and her eyes were not, entirely, a person's eyes.

· · · Noor went fourth. Noor was extraordinary.

Ricky had known that for three years and it still did something to him to watch it, a tightening under the ribs that wasn't jealousy yet but knew the way. She was small and exact and completely without fear, and when she moved there was no gap between the thought and the thing, no visible decision, as if her body had been told about the choreography in a previous life and was only now remembering. The man from the tour stopped looking at his tablet. The woman with the lanyard put her phone face down. Ilse Varga sipped her coffee for the first time.

When Noor finished she didn't smile. She walked to the side and stood next to Dash and let him squeeze her shoulder and looked straight ahead at the mirrors, at herself, checking, as if the mirror might have caught something the room hadn't.

"She's through," Dash said, very quietly, not to anyone. "She's so through."

Dash went ninth and was Dash: bigger than the space, funnier than the music, a joy to watch and half a beat late on everything, and he knew it, and he bowed anyway, and the man from the tour laughed, which was something.

Ricky went eleventh.

He'd danced tired before. He'd danced sick, and heartbroken, and once with a broken toe, and it had always been the same floor under him and the same trick: feel it first, then let it carry you. But the floor today was wrong in a way he had no word for. It was soft . It had been soft since two-twenty this morning and it

wasn't getting better, as if somewhere under the varnish and the wood and the garment factory and the bedrock of Manhattan, one board in the whole world had been quietly taken out, and his feet, which had been rebuilt overnight by someone working from memory, kept reaching for it.

He was late on the first turn. He knew it the way you know you've said the wrong name. He recovered, because he always recovered, with the whole body at once, a thing that would have looked like a choice from the back row, but there was no back row, there were three people at a trestle table and a wall of mirrors, and he could see himself doing it, and Noor could see it, and something happened in his chest, the struck-bell thing, the thing from last night, and for one terrible second in the middle of the combination he felt his trainers get tight .

He stopped.

Just stopped. Stood there in the middle of the studio inside the city twice with his hands open and the music going on without him, and breathed, and made himself small, and the trainers went back to being trainers.

"Thank you," said the man from the tour, already looking at his tablet.

· · · They read the list at four. Noor was on it, callback Thursday, and she still didn't smile, and Dash picked her up off the ground anyway. Dash wasn't on it and said he'd known that since he was born. Ricky wasn't on it and said nothing at all.

"You stopped ," Noor said, in the corridor, not cruelly. She was never cruel. She was just exact. "In the middle. You never stop."

"I know."

"What happened?"

He looked at the photograph on the wall, the girl with her eyes shut, the little clean square where the sticky note had been.

"Long night," he said.

"Ricardo."

They turned. Ilse Varga was standing in the door of the small studio with her coat on and her cold coffee in her hand, and the beat under the corridor was slightly behind the music.

"A word."

· · · The small studio had no windows. It had one mirror, and a piano nobody played, and a radiator that ticked. She didn't sit. She stood by the piano and looked at him with those eyes and he thought, absurdly, of the golem's face, the smear of writing that moved, and how the elves had laughed.

"You stopped," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

He had a lie ready. He'd had it ready since the sixth landing. It was a good lie, about his ankle. He opened his mouth and what came out was: "Because if I hadn't, I'd have got bigger."

The radiator ticked.

"Yes," said Ilse Varga. "I thought so." She put the coffee down on the piano, which nobody was allowed to do. "Your grandfather telephoned me at five o'clock this morning. He does not telephone. He said, Ilse, the boy woke up, and the floor is wrong, and I am too old to be right about both at once.

I told him I would look. I have looked." A pause. "You were terrible today."

"I know."

"You were terrible, and you were the only one in that room who felt what I felt when I walked in, and you stopped rather than burn the building down, which is, in my experience, rarer than talent." She picked the coffee up again. "The tour does not want you. Good. The tour is a circus for people who have never stood on a floor that moved. I have something else."

"What else?"

"One of ours. A little further along than you. Not big. Not yet. Very lucky.

A great deal of potential and no patience whatsoever." Something that on another face would have been a smile. "She has just put

out a record. Wishingwell . Eleven dates, small rooms, the kind of rooms where a person can still see the whole crowd from the stage, which is the point. She needs four dancers who can hold a floor. I have three."

He heard himself say it before he understood it. "Ari."

"Ariana," said Ilse Varga, "to people who have not met her. Rose, to the ones who have. Two weeks. You will train here, mornings, with me, in this room, and you will do your grandfather's night shifts, and you will sleep when you can, and at the end of it, if you can get through a combination without changing shape, you will go and stand on her stage. If you can't, you'll go back to mopping. Are you interested?"

The floor was soft. The radiator ticked. Somewhere nine floors down a cleaner was probably humming.

"Yes," Ricky said.

"Good. Tomorrow, seven. Bring shoes that will survive you." She went to the door and stopped, the way Vovô had stopped at the window, and said, in a voice that had nothing to do with dancing: "And Ricardo. What you felt in that station last night, before the golem. The floor. You'll be tempted to tell people. Don't. Not your friends, not the girl. Nobody knows what it is yet, and people who don't know what a thing is, are frightened of it, and frightened people are the only thing in this world I have ever been afraid of."

She went out. He stood in the small studio with the mirror and the piano and felt, for the first time, the shape of the door he'd walked through, and how it had shut.

· · · Dash was waiting on the landing with a third coffee, because of course he was. Noor was on the stairs below, on the phone to her mother, saying Thursday in a voice that was trying very hard to be nobody's.

"Well?" said Dash.

Ricky took the coffee. It was too sweet.

"I got something," he said. "It's small. It's not the tour."

"What is it?"

He looked down the stairwell at the top of Noor's head, and at the little clean square in his mind where a sticky note had been.

"Two weeks," Ricky said. "Then I'll tell you."

Wishingwell

For two weeks he did not sleep so much as get briefly interrupted.

Mornings at seven in the small studio with the ticking radiator and Ilse Varga on the piano stool, not playing it, watching his feet. Combinations, over and over, and every time the struck-bell thing rose in his chest she'd say "Smaller," not loudly, and he'd make himself smaller, and the trainers would go back to being trainers. Afternoons at the school with the mirrors, where Noor was learning the Halcyon choreography in the big studio and pretending not to be, and Dash brought coffee and asked no questions in the loudest possible way. Nights at Grand Central with the iron key, walking the ramps, feeling the floor, which was soft, which was still soft, which was not getting better. Nothing came up the ramp. The rock that had been a golem had been taken away by somebody before dawn that first night and he'd never asked who.

On the ninth day Ilse said, "Again," and he did it again, and on the tenth she said nothing at all, and on the fourteenth she got up off the piano stool, which she'd never done, and said, "Tomorrow. Rehearsal. Four o'clock. Don't be late. She hates late."

"I'm never late."

"No," said Ilse Varga, with those eyes. "But she'll think you are."

· · · The rehearsal space was a former church in Brooklyn with the pews taken out and the acoustics left in, and he arrived at quarter to four, and she was already there, and she looked at him and said, "You're late."

"I'm fifteen minutes early."

"You're late," said Rose, "for the version of this where you're not."

She was smaller than the poster, which everyone is, and younger than the poster, which surprised him, twenty maybe, twenty-one, in a hoodie the size of a tent with her hair up in the ponytail that was already, that month, becoming a thing girls did on purpose. No sunglasses. She hadn't got to sunglasses yet. She had a coffee and a face that had not been photographed enough to know how to hold still, and it didn't, it moved all the time, quick and exact, and it was moving now, taking him in from the trainers up, and she said, "You're the one who stopped."

"Ilse told you."

"Ilse didn't tell me anything. Ilse doesn't tell people things, she waits for them to find out and then looks at them." She put the coffee down on a speaker, which someone would later move. "I saw it. Not, like, saw it. I don't get pictures. I get—" She made a shape with her hand, a small quick knot. "I get that . About two days before. Some guy at Varga's stops in the middle of a combination, and it matters, and I don't know why. So. Hi. You're the why."

He didn't know what to say to that, so he said the true thing. "I'm Ricky."

"I know. Don't be late." She turned to the other three, who'd been stretching at the far end of the church with the specific carefulness of people who have watched this happen before. "Okay. From the top of Wishingwell . He learns it by watching. Ilse says he learns everything by watching."

He did. That was the thing. He always had. He stood by the speaker with her coffee on it and watched three dancers he'd never met move through a piece he'd never seen, and felt the floor, which was a church floor, old in the ordinary way, and felt the beat of it, and felt her .

It wasn't old. That was the first thing. Everything he'd ever felt through the arches of his feet had been old, that was what the feeling was , and she wasn't, she was the opposite, she was so new that it came through the boards like light through a door, and his feet didn't have a word for it because Vovô had never taught him one. And under the new, faint, something else. Something that kept happening. As if the room were being very slightly, very continuously, arranged.

A cable that should have caught her foot on the turn didn't. It had been there. He'd seen it. It wasn't now.

"You're staring," said Rose, without looking round.

"I'm learning."

"Then learn faster. First date's Thursday."

· · · The room on Thursday held five hundred people and it was full, and it had been full for an hour before the doors opened, in the street, in the rain, and Ricky stood in the wings of a stage the size of a kitchen and understood, for the first time, what Ilse had meant about rooms where a person can see the whole crowd.

You couldn't not see them. They were right there. Five hundred faces, wet-haired, lit from the stage, and every one of them turned the same way like a field in wind, and the way was her.

She'd said almost nothing before. In the dressing room, which was a corridor with a mirror in it, she'd sat with her eyes shut and her hands flat on her knees, and the other three had left her alone, and he'd left her alone, and at one point she'd said, eyes still shut, "Third row. Left of centre. Don't."

"Don't what?"

"You'll want to. Don't."

And then the lights went down and the noise came up and she walked out into it, and became, in the space between the wings and the microphone, the person on the poster. He'd have called it a costume change if she'd changed anything. She hadn't. She'd just decided.

He went out after her, into the light, into the field of faces, and felt the floor.

The floor was five hundred people. That was what nobody told you. A stage floor wasn't wood, it was every foot in the room coming up through the boards at once, five hundred small ordinary beats and hers, new, arranging things, and he moved through the opening of Wishingwell on it like a man walking on a lake, and it held, it held, and then, about forty seconds in, third row, left of centre, one beat that was slightly behind the music.

Old. Very old. Not loud like the council would be, not wet and wrong like the golem. Old like a stone in a river is old, worn smooth, harmless, there . A man, he saw, at the edge of his vision, careful not to look, because Vovô's hand was on the back of his neck from across the river. A small man in a good coat with his hat in his hands, standing very still in a crowd that wasn't, with his eyes closed, listening.

And he wanted to. She'd been right. Something in him that had been a dragon for two weeks wanted to walk off the stage and down into the third row and put a hand on that beat and know . It pulled at his feet like a current.

Rose, mid-verse, with her eyes on the back wall and her voice going up where nobody expected it to and staying there, took one step to her left, into his line, between him and the third row, and kept singing, and didn't look at him at all.

He stayed on the lake. He danced. It held.

... "You went for him."

"I didn't."

"You leaned . I felt you lean. Five hundred people in that room and I felt one guy lean." The dressing room corridor, after, the noise still going on the other side of the wall like weather. She had the hoodie back on and the poster off and she was furious in a small, exact, completely contained way, which he would learn was the only way she ever was. "I said don't."

"You said don't and you didn't say why. Who is he?"

"He's been at all of them. Every date I've ever played. Every open mic, every showcase, every school thing at Varga's when I was fifteen. Third row, left of centre, hat in his hands, eyes shut. He's never once come up to me. He's never once clapped." She picked at the cuff of the hoodie. "Ilse says he's something that stayed. From before. Something that heard a song once, a long time ago, and liked it, and couldn't leave. Harmless. Lonely. He just wants to listen."

"So why not let me—" "Because you don't go into the crowd. Ever.

That's the whole thing. That's the whole job. They come to me, I see who's in the room, I tell Ilse, Ilse's people take care of it. Quietly. Afterwards. A ticket to the next one, usually, for him. Sometimes a conversation. That's what taking care of it looks like, most of the time, it looks like nothing , and it only works if the crowd stays a crowd and the stage stays a stage and nobody, especially not a fifteen-foot lizard, walks down into the third row and puts his hand on someone." She looked at him. "You feel them.

Fine. Good. Ilse says it's rare, and I believe her, because I've never had it and I've wanted it. But I see them, Ricky. Two days before. I've seen every single one of them coming since I was eleven years old and I have never once been able to do anything about it except be standing in the right place when it arrives. Which I was. Tonight. Between you and him."

"You didn't deal with him. You sang at him."

"That is dealing with him."

Above them, in the ceiling of the corridor, something gave. A bracket, a rusted bolt, one of the old lamps in its cage, and it came down in a shower of plaster and hit the floor exactly, precisely, where she had been standing a second and a half before, when she'd taken one step toward him to make her point.

She didn't flinch. She didn't look up. She looked at the lamp on the floor between them, and then at him, and there was something in her face that wasn't on any poster, tired, careful, older than twenty.

"You knew," he said. His heart was going. Hers, he could feel through the boards, was not.

"I always know. That's not the trick. The trick is that I'm always lucky. You have no idea how exhausting that is. Things fall and miss. Cars stop. Cables move. It's been happening my whole life and I don't do it, I just—" the small quick knot with the hand—"it happens near me. And one day it won't. That's the thing I see

coming clearest of all." She stepped over the lamp. "So. New rule. Don't tell me what you feel. I'll have seen it. Tell me what you feel that I didn't see . That's the only thing you're for."

He thought about the floor. The soft place. The board someone had taken out from under the whole world at twenty past two in the morning two weeks ago, that he'd felt every night since and that Ilse had told him not to tell anyone, especially not the girl.

"Okay," he said.

Rose looked at him for a long moment, and he had the strong sense of being seen from two days in the future.

"You're lying about something," she said. "That's fine. Everyone is. Just don't be late."

She went out to do the encore. He stood in the corridor with the plaster on his shoulders and the lamp at his feet and the noise coming through the wall, and felt, faint, down through the boards, through the building, through Brooklyn, the place where the board was missing, and thought that it was, if anything, a little softer than yesterday.

In the third row, left of centre, a small man in a good coat put his hat back on, and did not clap, and went home happy.

Stronger

Eleven dates became forty. Forty became a bus.

That was how it went, and later, when people asked him what it had been like, the year the girl on the poster turned into the girl on the side of the bus, he'd say: fast. It went fast. You didn't notice the rooms getting bigger because you were looking at the floor. Five hundred people, then eight hundred, then a theatre in Philadelphia with a balcony, where for the first time the crowd was above him as well as in front and he stood in the wings feeling for it like a man on a boat feeling for the shore. Then a room in Chicago that held three thousand and he thought this is the biggest room in the world , and it wasn't, it wasn't close.

She got the sunglasses somewhere around Chicago. He never saw her buy them. One day she didn't have them and the next day she did, pushed up in her hair, and the ponytail had been on a magazine, and there was a man called Teo whose whole job was to stand between her and doors.

And every night, in every room, third row or fifth or fortieth, something old. Not always. Not even often. But often enough that he learned the taste of it, the way you learn a city by its smells: the slow, worn ones that had stayed for the music and wanted nothing; the sharper ones that had stayed for something else; once, in Detroit, one that didn't have a beat so much as a hole ,

and Rose's hand came down flat on his shoulder from behind before he'd finished feeling it, and she said, "Ilse's people have him. Dance," and he danced.

He told her what he felt that she hadn't seen. It wasn't much. It was, some nights, nothing. But it was always the same thing, and he never said it, and she always knew he wasn't saying it, and that was the shape of them:

a girl who saw two days out and a boy who felt one thing she couldn't, and a lie between them that they both stepped around like a lamp on the floor.

· · · Noor got Halcyon .

Of course she did. Dash sent the photo at two in the morning, Noor in the corridor at Varga's holding a piece of paper with both hands like it might get away from her, and under it: SHE GOT IT SHE GOT IT SHE GOT IT, and then, a minute later, you should call her .

He was in a hotel in Cleveland with the floor soft under him and the noise of the loading crew coming up through it, and he looked at the photo for a long time, and he didn't call her.

He told himself it was late. He told himself he'd call in the morning, and in the morning there was a soundcheck, and then there was a night, and then it had been three days, and then the thing that had been tightening under his ribs since the casting, that had

known the way to jealousy and had been very patient about it, arrived.

Stadiums. That was the thing. Halcyon was stadiums, sixty thousand people, a stage with a runway that went out into the crowd like a pier, and Noor was going to be on it, not in the back, not in the third line, Noor was going to be one of six behind a person whose name was on the tickets. And he was in a three-thousand seat theatre in Cleveland behind someone who was not big yet, doing a job he couldn't describe, for a woman with walnut eyes who paid him in cash, and it was, he understood, entirely his own doing, and that didn't help at all.

He called her on the fifth day. She picked up on the first ring, which meant she'd been waiting, which made it worse.

"Hey," said Noor.

"Hey. I heard. That's—" He'd had it ready. It came out wrong anyway. "That's the one you wanted."

A pause. Noor was never cruel. She was just exact.

"You didn't want it?"

"I didn't get it. That's different."

"You stopped , Ricky. In the middle. I've thought about it every day since.

You never stop. And then you went off with Ilse and you won't say what it is and you're on a bus with a girl I used to watch in the changing room, and you're doing—what? What are you doing?"

He looked at the ceiling of the hotel room. He thought about the golem laughing, and the lamp on the floor, and the hole in Detroit.

"Dancing," he said.

"Okay," said Noor. "Well. Me too." And she hung up, not hard, just exactly, and he lay on the bed and felt the floor and it was soft and it was his fault.

· · · Vovô, on the phone, eating, said: "Ricardo. What did I tell you the fire was?"

"Easy."

"And what is hard?"

"Standing there."

"So stand there. She has a stadium and you have a soft floor and a lie, and you think that means she got the big thing. Menino." A sound of chewing. "You are nineteen and a dragon and you are angry at your friend for being good at what she does. This is not a problem. This is Tuesday. Call her back when you can say I'm proud of you and mean the whole sentence. Until then, work."

So he worked.

It was Ilse, in the end, who taught him what the work was. She turned up in St. Louis with a paper cup she didn't drink from and took him, between soundcheck and doors, to a car park behind the venue where something had been living in the storm drain for a hundred and forty years and had recently, for no reason anyone could name, woken up. Wet stone. A smear of writing. Smaller than the one at Grand Central, and angrier, the way small things are.

"No fire," said Ilse.

"I know."

"Then show me you know."

He was a dragon for the eleventh time in his life and the first time on purpose. It hurt less. It was still not nothing. He was bigger, and the car park tilted, and the golem came at him out of the drain with the asphalt coming with it, and he didn't breathe on it. He got low. He found the ginga in it, the sway that says I am not where you think I am , and he wasn't, and the golem swung through the place he'd been, and he came up behind it and put one clawed hand, almost gently, on the smear of writing, and thought about water.

Not fire. Water. Vovô had said get inside the writing and he'd never understood it, and now he did, with his hand on the wet stone, feeling the beat of it through his palm the way he felt floors

through his feet: the writing was the beat. It was a drum somebody had wound up a hundred and forty years ago and forgotten. And you didn't put a drum out. You put your hand on the skin, and let it stop.

It stopped. It was a rock.

"Hm," said Ilse Varga, which was the most he'd ever heard her give anyone. "Doors in forty minutes. Wash your hands."

· · · He called Noor from Denver. It was the first leg of Halcyon and she was in a hotel in Atlanta and she picked up on the fourth ring, which meant she hadn't been waiting, which he deserved.

"I'm proud of you," he said. "The whole sentence. I've been trying to get there for six weeks and I'm there."

Quiet on the line. Then, small, not exact at all: "It's so big, Ricky."

"I know."

"No, you don't. Sixty thousand people and none of them are looking at you. Not one. You could be anyone. You are anyone. I stood on that runway last night and I thought, I've wanted this since I was six, and it turns out what I wanted was for someone to see it, and there's a girl in front of me who they see, and behind her there's just—weather." A breath. "Is that stupid?"

"No."

"Dash says you're doing something with Ilse that you can't talk about and I should stop asking."

"Dash is right."

"Dash is never right. That's how I know it's serious." A pause, and then, almost the old voice: "Is she good? The girl on the bus?"

He thought about the third row, and the lamp, and a step taken to the left mid-verse without looking round.

"She's going to be the biggest thing in the world," he said. "And it's going to cost her something, and I don't know what yet."

"Then stand there," said Noor, who had never met his grandfather and had somehow just quoted him. "Okay? Stand there. I'll see you in New York."

... The studio was in a basement on the Lower East Side, under a shop that sold lamps, and the man who owned it wore a cardigan.

That was the first thing Ricky noticed and it was almost the last, because there was so little else to notice. Middle height. Middle everything. A face that had been asked for directions its whole life. Headphones round his neck that he never seemed to put on. He was called XO, just that, two letters, the way she was Rose, and he'd made a beat on a laptop that Rose had heard once, in a car, and had said, in the voice she used when the small quick knot happened in her hand: "That one. Him. Now."

"Ariana," said the man in the cardigan, shaking her hand, as if they were meeting at a bank. "Or Rose. I've heard both. I'll use whichever one you're being today."

"Rose, in here."

"Rose. Good. Sit anywhere. Not that chair, that chair has opinions."

Ricky, by the door, out of habit, felt the floor.

And there was nothing there.

Not the ordinary nothing of a new building or a young person. He'd learned the taste of those. This was the basement's own old, wood and damp and the beat of a hundred years of Lower East Side, all present and correct, and in the middle of it, where a man in a cardigan was pulling up a chair, a blank . A place the drum didn't reach. Not a hole like Detroit. A hole is something. This was the absence of the question. His feet reached for it and came down on nothing, the way a foot comes down where a stair used to be.

He must have made a face, because the man in the cardigan looked up, mild, and said, "You're feeling for it. That's fine. Everyone does. Nothing there, I'm afraid. I'm very boring." He turned back to the laptop. "Okay. Rose. This one's called Broken Off , at the moment, though titles are lies. Sing it like you've already seen how it ends."

She looked at him for a long moment, over the sunglasses.

"I usually have," she said.

"I know. That's why I asked."

She sang it. Ricky stood by the door with his feet on the oldest floor in Manhattan and a blank in the middle of it, and listened to a girl he'd watched in a church in Brooklyn become, in a basement under a lamp shop, something the world was going to have to make room for. It was a small song. It was about someone leaving a room and the room noticing. The man in the cardigan didn't say anything while she sang, and when she stopped he didn't say anything either, for a while, and then he took the headphones off his neck and put them, for the first time, on, and listened back to it, and nodded once, and said, "Yes. That's the one. No biggi."

· · · Broken Off came out on a Friday. By Sunday it was everywhere in the way the first song had been everywhere for three weeks, except it didn't stop after three weeks, it didn't stop at all, it went up where nobody expected it to and stayed there. By the end of the month there was a second bus, and then there was no bus, there was a plane. Teo, who stood between her and doors, had four people under him now. There was a woman called Marguerite whose job was Rose's calendar and who spoke to Ilse Varga on the phone in a language Ricky didn't recognise and decided not to ask about. There were people on the crew who were, he could feel through the floor, not entirely people, and who nodded to him in corridors the way the elves' mother would have nodded to Vovô: we know what you are, and you're one of ours .

The Alliance had got bigger around her, the way a river gets bigger around a boat. That was what Ilse had meant, in the small studio, about rooms where a person can see the whole crowd. The crowd was the whole world now. And she could see all of it.

They announced the tour in March. Nineteen countries. The poster was just her face and one word, and it was on the side of every bus in every city he'd ever been in, and Dash sent him a photo of one on Canal Street, outside the laundromat, with Vovô standing next to it holding a paper bag and not smiling, in a way that was, for Vovô, a parade.

She found him on the roof of the rehearsal space the night before they flew. Sunglasses up. Hoodie, still, under everything, the tent-sized one.

"I've seen something," Rose said.

"You've always seen something."

"Not like this. Two days out is what I get. Always. It's a rule, it's the only rule I've got." The small quick knot. "This one's further. Months. I can't see what, I just—it's there, at the end of the tour, like a wall at the end of a corridor, and I keep walking and it's not getting closer, it's just getting clearer." She looked at him. "And you're not in it."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't get pictures. It means when I look at the wall, I don't feel you leaning." She pulled the hoodie tighter. "Ilse

wants you in New York. There's a job. Two girls, Bushwick, something's after them, she wants your feet on it. The last three dates of the leg, you're not on them. I said yes."

"You're sending me away."

"I'm sending you where Ilse asked. It's not the same thing." A pause. "It's not entirely the same thing."

Below them, the city. Somewhere under it, the board that was missing. He'd stopped being able to tell, lately, whether it was getting softer or whether he was getting heavier.

"Rose."

"Don't."

"You told me to tell you what I feel that you didn't see."

"I know what I said."

"The thing I haven't been telling you. For a year. The floor." He said it. He'd promised Ilse and he said it anyway, up there on the roof with the tour posters on every bus in the world below them. "It's soft. All of it. Everywhere. Since the night before I met you. Like a board's been taken out from under the whole world and nobody can find which one. That's the lie. That's the only lie."

Rose was quiet for a long time.

"I know," she said at last. "I've always known you were lying about the floor. I just didn't know it was that ." She stood up. She put

the sunglasses down and became the person on the poster, and it was, for the first time, a thing he watched her do on purpose, for him, so that he wouldn't see her face. "Okay. New York. Stand on it. Tell me what you feel."

"And you?"

"I'll be lucky," said Rose. "I'm always lucky. Right up until the day I'm not."

Daughters of Delphi

"It's a residency," said Ilse Varga. "Four nights. A club in Bushwick. They need dancers and you need something to do while she's in Toronto. That's all it is."

"That's never all it is."

"No." She put her cold coffee down on the piano. "Take your friends."

That was the part he didn't understand, and she didn't explain it, because she didn't explain things. Noor was home for nine days between the first leg of Halcyon and the second, restless in the way of someone who's already left. Dash was between everything, as usual. And Ricky had flown back from Cleveland with a soft floor and a night shift and the last three dates of the leg going on without him, and a girl on a roof who'd said you're not in it , and a job, it was true, would not hurt.

"Who are they?" said Dash, on the L train, reading the flyer. "Delphi. Two girls. It just says Delphi."

"Sisters," said Noor, who'd looked them up. "Twins. DJs. They've done Berlin, they've done Ibiza, there's a thing in Mixmag where the interviewer walked out." She scrolled. "Apparently one of them told him how he was going to die."

"Cheerfully," said Ricky, who'd read the same thing, "or sadly?"

Noor looked at him. "Why would that matter?"

He didn't know yet. He found out at the soundcheck.

· · · The club had been a bottling plant, and the twins were on the stage at the far end of it, back to back, in the way twins are on flyers, except they weren't posing, they were arguing about a cable.

They were, there was no other word for it, hot. Not the same hot. Thalia was in black from her boots to the tips of her nails, hair over one eye, the face of someone who'd been to a very sad film and was still there. Melaina was in yellow. All of it. Yellow like a warning sign, hair up, teeth out, and when she saw the three of them come in she waved with her whole arm and shouted, across the bottling plant, in a voice like a summer morning:

"You're the dancers! Oh good! One of you is going to fall through a skylight!"

Dash stopped walking.

"Not tonight," said Thalia, without looking up from the cable, in the voice of someone announcing a death. "Tonight is going to be lovely."

The floor, when Ricky felt for it, was Delphi. He'd never been there and knew it anyway: something under the bottling plant that had nothing to do with Brooklyn, dry and hot and smelling faintly, impossibly, of laurel, old the way the council was old, and split. That was the strange part. One beat, but split down the mid-

dle like a note played on two strings slightly out of tune, and one string was the girl in black and the other was the girl in yellow.

"Daughters of the Pythia," said Noor, quietly, beside him, and he turned. She was looking at them with an expression he'd never seen on her, that wasn't exact at all. "My mother told me about them. When I was small. She said they were a story."

"Your mother knew—" "My mother knew everything and said none of it." Noor's jaw set. "You're not the only one Ilse's been looking at, Ricky. You're just the only one who stopped."

· · · They saw the future. That was the simple part.

The complicated part, which took Ricky most of the first night to work out and Dash about four minutes, was that they saw half of it each. Thalia saw the good. Everything that was going to go right, every gig landed and cable found and train caught, arrived in her head before it happened, and because nothing good could ever surprise her she went through life like someone reading the last page first, mournful, unimpressed, dressed for the funeral of every nice thing before it was born. Melaina saw the bad. Every fall, every fire, every walk-out interview and lost love and skylight; and because she'd known since she was four that the bad was coming, the ordinary days between were, to her, a series of small miracles, and she greeted each one with her whole arm.

"I know," said Melaina, that first night, when Dash asked her how she could possibly be so happy. "Isn't it wonderful ? None of you have died yet!"

The job was simple too. Stand on the stage in front of them, move, be looked at, and, in Ricky's case, feel the floor. Someone in the city wanted the twins. Ilse hadn't said who. She'd said they are worth a great deal to the kind of people who like to know things before other people , and had let him imagine the rest, and he had.

And on the second night, coming off stage with the sweat on him and Thalia sitting on a flight case with her hair over her eye, he said, before he could stop himself:

"If I do the extra rehearsal on Thursday. Do I get the Chicago date?"

Thalia looked at him for a long time, from under the hair.

"Yes," she said, as if it were a diagnosis.

He didn't do the extra rehearsal.

· · · It got worse from there. He knew it was getting worse and it got worse anyway, which was, Vovô would have said, the whole history of the world.

If I call Rose tonight, does she pick up? (Yes , said Thalia, be-reaved.) If I skip Vovô's shift Wednesday, does anything come up the ramp? (You get a cold!

said Melaina, delighted. A really bad one!

) If I ask Marguerite for the bus with the good bunks. If I wear the black shoes. If I tell Noor I'm sorry now or on Friday. He asked eleven things in two days and the answers were always right, and he stopped doing anything the hard way, and by the third night the twins had stopped answering, and Noor had stopped looking at him, and Dash, who had never in three years said anything to him that wasn't a joke, said, on the stairs of the club with a coffee in each hand:

"You're being a dick, Ricardo."

"I'm—" "You've got two girls who can see tomorrow and you're using them to find out if you get the good bunk. They're not a search engine. They're scared . The yellow one told me she can see somebody coming and you haven't asked her about it once because it's not about you." He held out a coffee. It was too sweet. "Drink that. And go and clean my flat tomorrow, because I'm having people over tonight and Noor says if I make you do it you might remember you're a person."

"Somebody's coming?"

"Ask her," said Dash. "Nicely. See what that's like."

He asked her. Nicely. Melaina beamed at him and put a hand on his arm and said, "Tomorrow night! Something takes us! You'll be asleep. Isn't that funny ?"

"What takes you?"

"I don't know, I only see the bad bit. Something with wings." She patted him. "Don't look like that. Thalia says it's going to be fine in the end. She's very upset about it."

· · · He didn't mean to be asleep.

That was the thing he'd say to Ilse, afterwards, and she'd look at him with the walnut face and say nobody means to be asleep, Ricardo, that's what asleep is . He'd meant to be at the club at eight. He'd told Teo's cousin, who did the door, to keep an eye out for anything with wings. He'd gone to Dash's flat at ten in the morning with a bin bag and a hangover he hadn't earned and found the aftermath of a party that had apparently involved everyone Dash had ever met, and Dash on the sofa saying I'm not helping, this is a character-building exercise , and he'd cleaned. Seven hours. Bottles and a broken chair and something in the bath he didn't investigate, and the floor, Dash's floor, ordinary and soft and sticky, and by five o'clock it was done and he sat down on the sofa Dash had vacated for just one minute, and it was dark.

And Ilse Varga was standing at the foot of the bed.

Except there was no bed. There was the sofa, and there was also not the sofa, the way there is in dreams, and she was there in her coat with her cold coffee and the beat coming off her like a mountain, and she said, "Get up."

"I'm asleep."

"Yes. That's how we call. The council doesn't telephone, Ricardo, it never has, the telephone is a hundred years old and we are not. We come to the door of your sleep and we knock, and you should have been told that, and I'm telling you now." Her eyes. "They've taken the twins. Twenty minutes ago. Off the stage, in front of four hundred people, and the four hundred people saw two girls in a fire exit and nothing else, because that's what wings do to a crowd. Red Hook. The grain terminal. Go."

"How do I—" "You're a dragon. Wake up and be one."

He woke up.

· · · Noor was in the doorway with her coat on. She'd tracked his phone. Dash was behind her with his car keys, and neither of them asked a single question, and that was the moment, he understood later, that they stopped being his friends from the school with the mirrors and became the other thing. Ilse had said take your friends . She'd known. Of course she'd known. She'd been looking at all three of them.

The grain terminal was a cathedral too, a ruined one, concrete silos a hundred and twenty feet high on the water with the wind coming off the bay through every broken window, and the wind was wrong. He felt it before he felt the floor. The wind had a beat. It came in through the windows late, slightly behind the music, and it was hungry , and he thought: harpies. Not elves' word this time. Noor's. She'd said it in the car, white-faced, quoting her mother.

"Wings," she said. "Women's faces. They take things. They don't eat, they just take , and they hate, and they're for hire, and someone's hired them."

"For what?"

"For two girls who know what the market does tomorrow," said Dash, who'd read the Mixmag piece more carefully than any of them. "It's always money, Ricardo. It's never anything cool."

The twins were on the floor of the biggest silo, back to back, in the way of twins, tied. Thalia looked bored. Melaina looked thrilled. And in the dark above them, in the broken tops of the silos, in the wind, things moved with a sound like wet sheets.

"Don't breathe on anything," Noor said, very quietly. "They're right next to them."

"I know."

"Then—" "I know, Noor."

He was a dragon for the fifteenth time and the second time on purpose, and it barely hurt at all, and that frightened him more than the harpies. He was bigger, and the silo tilted, and the wind came down out of the dark at him full of women's faces, and he didn't breathe. He got low. He found the ginga, the sway that says I am not where you think I am , and he wasn't, and the first one went through the place he'd been and hit the concrete with a sound he'd hear in his sleep, and the second came, and he was low again, and it was, he realised, dancing. It was just dancing. It

was the floor and the beat and the not-being-where, and he'd been doing it since he was nine, and everything Vovô had ever put on a record had been for this.

" You're going to fall through the skylight!

" Melaina called, from the floor, with enormous joy.

He looked up. There was a skylight. He was, at that moment, on the gantry beneath it, with the third harpy coming at him low across the silo and Noor, below, with a length of rebar in both hands and no fear in her at all, and Dash cutting the twins loose with a car key, and he thought: if I go up, it goes through me and into them. If I go through, it follows.

He went through the skylight. On purpose. With the whole body at once, the way he caught everything, so that if anyone was watching it would look like a choice, and it was.

The harpy followed him out into the night above the silos, hungry, hating, alone, away from the girls, and he was a dragon in the air over Red Hook for eleven seconds, which was ten more than he'd ever managed, and then he wasn't in the air any more, but neither was it, and the bay took both of them, and only one of them came up.

"It's going to be fine," Thalia said, on the dock, wrapping him in Dash's coat, in the voice of a woman at a graveside. "I told her. She never listens."

· · · The floor of the world dropped an inch while he was still on the dock.

He was on his knees in Dash's coat with the bay running out of his hair and Thalia's hand on his shoulder, and he felt it come through Red Hook from somewhere else, from a long way north, a single hard downward shove, the way you feel someone jump on the floor of the room above. Not Brooklyn's soft. He knew Brooklyn's soft. This had come from the end of a corridor.

Melaina had stopped smiling. It was the first time. She was standing on the dock in her yellow with her whole arm still half-raised from waving at the harpy going into the water, and her face had gone the way Rose's went when the small quick knot happened, and she said, in a voice that wasn't a summer morning at all:

"Oh. Oh, no. That's the big one." She looked north. "That's now ."

His phone rang eleven minutes later. Dash's, actually; his was in the bay.

Dash held it out to him without a word, and it said MARGUERITE, and Dash never got calls from Marguerite.

Thalia sat down next to him on the wet boards, mournfully, the way she did everything, and said, very quietly, "It's going to be fine. In the end. I've been dreading it all week."

First world tour

She'd sent him home.

That was how he'd say it afterwards, to himself, in the bad hours: she sent me home. Ilse had a job in Bushwick and Rose had a wall at the end of a corridor and he wasn't in it, and so on a Tuesday in Cleveland he'd got on a plane with the last three dates of the leg going on without him, and had stood in a bottling plant in front of two girls who could see tomorrow, and had asked them about bunks.

He'd been in the water off Red Hook, with a harpy, when it happened. He'd been, at the exact moment, under.

· · · She'd known for two days. That was the rule. That was the only rule.

For months it had been a wall at the end of a corridor, getting clearer without getting closer, and then on the Tuesday, in a hotel in Toronto, she'd woken up at four in the morning with the small quick knot in both hands at once and it was two days out and it was here , the last night of the first leg, twenty thousand people, and she couldn't see what and she couldn't see where, she never got pictures, she got that , and that was the worst thing she'd ever felt.

She told Teo. Teo told four people and the four people told the venue and by Wednesday afternoon there were dogs on the concourse and men in jackets opening every case in the building and Marguerite on the phone to Ilse in the language Ricky had never asked about. They found nothing. They found nothing twice. On Thursday morning, the day of, Marguerite stood in the doorway of the hotel room with her coat on and said, "Cancel."

"And then what?"

"And then it doesn't happen."

"No. And then it happens somewhere I'm not." Rose was sitting on the bed with her hands flat on her knees, the way she sat before a show, except it was ten in the morning. "That's the thing about the wall. It's not here, Marguerite. It's at the end of me. Wherever I stand tonight, that's where it is. I've been walking toward it for eight months. If I stop walking it just waits."

"You don't know that."

"I don't know anything. I've never known anything. I see ." She looked up.

"Twenty thousand people have tickets. If I cancel, they go home, and something happens to a different twenty thousand people on a different night, and I don't get to see that one coming, because I won't be standing in it. At least tonight I'll be standing in it."

Marguerite looked at her for a long moment, and then said something short in the other language, that sounded like a prayer or a

curse or a word that meant both, and went to make calls.

· · · She was perfect that night. Everyone said so, afterwards, in the way people do, as if it mattered.

She stood on a stage the size of a house with a runway going out into the crowd like a pier, and twenty thousand faces turned toward her like a field in wind, and she sang Broken Off and Wishingwell and the new one nobody knew yet, and the whole time, under everything, the way Ricky felt floors, she was looking. Row by row. Face by face. Two days out and then one and then hours and then minutes, and she couldn't find it, and she kept singing, because singing was the thing that made them all look at her, and while they looked at her she looked at them.

It wasn't in the room.

That was the thing she'd understand later and never forgive herself for. It was never in the room. The room was the one place on earth she could see, and whoever had done this had known that, exactly, the way you know a person's blind spot by standing in it.

The show ended. The lights came up. Twenty thousand people who'd been a field turned back into individuals and picked up their coats and moved toward the exits, toward the foyer, toward the concourse where the dogs had been, laughing, hoarse, holding their phones up, and she stood at the end of the runway with the sweat cooling on her and the knot in both hands so tight she couldn't feel her fingers and thought, where , and then the wall arrived.

She didn't hear it. That was strange. She'd have said, before, that she'd hear it. What she got was the floor. The whole building took a breath in and didn't let it out, and the air in the arena went thick and then thin, and then the sound came, late, wrong, the sound of a very large room being changed, and then a silence that went on so long she thought she'd gone deaf, and then, from the direction of the foyer, the other thing. The thing you don't write down.

She was standing at the end of the runway, alone, untouched, in a spotlight nobody had turned off.

Of course she was. She was lucky.

· · · They came out of the walls.

Teo saw it first and told nobody for a year, because how would you. He was running toward the stage with his arm across his face and the screaming starting behind him and he saw the concrete of the arena floor go soft in a ring around the end of the runway, and things come up out of it.

Small things. Knee-high, hip-high, the colour of the floor they'd come out of and then, as they straightened, their own colours, brown and grey and a green like old copper, with faces that had been left out in the weather for a thousand years and hands too big for them. Twenty. Thirty. They came up out of the concrete and the seats and the steel of the runway itself, and they didn't look at the foyer, they didn't look at the smoke, they looked at her, and they made a ring, and they stood in it, facing out.

Teo stopped running.

The one nearest the steps, taller than the rest, which wasn't saying much, with a face like a boot and a ridiculous amount of hair, turned and looked up at the girl in the spotlight, and said, in a voice like gravel being cheerful:

"Evening. Don't move. Nothing's getting through this lot, they've been waiting eight hundred years for something to be worth getting through." A pause. "You're smaller than I thought."

Rose looked down at him. She had not moved. She could not have.

"What are you," she said.

"Kobold. Bobbelknecht. Of the Harz, originally, but the Harz has gone very quiet." He put a hand the size of a shovel on the edge of the runway, gently, the way you'd touch a church. "Bob's fine. Nobody manages the whole thing."

"Why are you—" "Because you're you," said Bob, as if that settled it, and turned back to face the smoke.

· · · Dash drove. Ricky didn't remember the airport. He remembered the twins on the dock, and Marguerite's voice on Dash's phone saying it wasn't in the room before she said anything else, as if that were the most important thing in the world, and finding out later that it was. He remembered Noor in the departures hall at four in the morning putting a coffee in his hand and saying

nothing, exactly, in a way that was worth more than anything anyone said to him for the next week.

· · · Twenty-two people. He'd know the number for the rest of his life the way he knew his own birthday.

She did the benefit nine days later. Everyone said she shouldn't and she did it anyway, in the same city, in a park, sixty thousand people who'd come to be told it was all right to still like music, and she stood on a stage with no runway and sang, and the wind took the sound out over the grass, and behind her, in a loose ring that the crew had been told was a new security detail and had somehow accepted, thirty small figures in borrowed hi-vis vests stood facing out with their hands too big for them.

Ricky watched from the wings. He'd been back four days. He hadn't been allowed near her for three of them, by Teo, by Marguerite, by something in her face when she'd seen him across the hotel lobby that had said not yet more clearly than any word.

The kobold found him before the encore. It came and stood next to him in the wings, hip-high, in a hi-vis vest that fitted it like a tent, and looked out at her with an expression Ricky couldn't read, and said, "You're the dragon."

"Yes."

"You weren't there."

"No."

"Good," said Bob. "She'd sent you away. She's very good at that. She'll do it to me next, and it won't work, because I'm not the sort of thing you can send." He scratched under the vest. "Fire doesn't work on us either, before you get ideas. Nothing much does. That's the point of us."

"What are you the point of?"

Bob looked at him then, up, with the boot face, and for a moment the cheerfulness went somewhere and what was left was very old.

"Her," he said. "Ask her what she is. Not Ilse. Not the council, they don't know, they think she's one of theirs. Ask her . She's known since she was eleven and she's never once said it out loud, and I'd like to be there when she does, because I've been waiting in a hill for eight hundred years to hear it."

He went back out to the ring. Rose finished the song. Sixty thousand people were told it was all right.

· · · She let him in on the fifth night.

A hotel room, the curtains shut, the sunglasses on the table like something taken off a body. She was in the hoodie, the tent-sized one, and she looked twenty for the first time in a year, and she looked eleven, and she looked older than Ilse, all at once, and she said, before he could:

"Say it."

"You knew."

"I knew for eight months. I knew for two days. I knew for the last hour of the show, row by row, and it wasn't there , Ricky, it was never in the room, I looked at every one of them—" "You sent me away."

"Yes."

"You sent me away ."

" Yes.

" She stood up. Small, exact, furious in the contained way, and then not contained, and then, for the first time since he'd known her, not exact at all. "I looked at the wall for eight months and you weren't in it, and I thought, good, good , that's one thing I can do. I can't stop it, I can't see it, I can't do anything, I've never been able to do anything, I'm not a Krallé, I don't have a—" She stopped.

The room was very quiet.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Rose. You said you're not a—" "I know what I said." She sat back down. She put her hands flat on her knees. Outside, in the corridor, something hip-high shifted its weight against the door and was, pointedly, not listening. "You want to know what my luck is? Everyone always thinks it's a gift. Cables move, lamps miss, cars stop. Twenty-two people, Ricky. Twenty-two people were in a foy-

er and I was in a spotlight and not one piece of that building touched me. That's not luck. That's not mine . Everything near me is unlucky instead . It's been happening my whole life and I've never done it and I can't stop it and the only thing, the only thing I've ever been able to do with it, is stand somewhere on purpose so it happens where I can see." Her voice went. It came back. "And I couldn't even do that."

He sat down on the floor. It was the only thing he could think of. The carpet was soft in the way of hotel carpets and the floor under it was soft in the other way, the way of the whole world, and he put his hands flat on it, the way she put hers on her knees, and felt for her.

New. Still. So new it came up through the boards like light under a door.

And around her, faint, continuous, the room being arranged. And under the arranging, for the first time, because he was listening for it now, because a kobold had told him to, something else. Something that wasn't luck at all. Something that a hill in the Harz had felt from four thousand miles away and had come up out of concrete to stand in front of.

"What are you?" he said. Quietly. Not Ilse's question. Not the council's. Just his.

Rose looked at him for a very long time, from two days in the future, and from eleven years old, and from the end of a runway in a spotlight nobody had turned off.

"Not yet," she said. "I've said it to nobody. I'm not saying it to you first because you sat on the floor." Something that on another night would have been a smile. "Ask me again when you've found out what's wrong with the floor. Then we'll trade."

· · · Ilse Varga came to the hotel on the sixth night with a cold coffee and Vovô, who had flown, which he did not do, and who stood in the corridor for a long time with his hand on the back of Ricky's neck and said nothing at all, which was the wholeset thing anyone had said to him all week.

"It wasn't in the room," Ricky said. "Marguerite said to tell you. Before anything else."

"I know." Ilse looked down the corridor at the door with the hip-high shape against it. "They weren't trying to kill her."

"Twenty-two people—" "I know the number. I will know it longer than you will. They weren't trying to kill her, Ricardo. If you want to kill a girl who sees two days out, you don't put a bomb where she'll be. You put it where she can't look." Ilse's eyes, the not-quite-person ones, were on the kobold. "They wanted to see what would come out of the walls. Now they have."

Vovô's hand tightened, once, on the back of his neck.

"Who," said Ricky.

"I don't know," said Ilse Varga, and it was the first time in his life he'd heard her say it. "And that, more than the floor, is what frightens me."

She turned to go, and stopped, the way she stopped, the way Vovô stopped.

"The twins," she said. "You went through the skylight."

"She said I would."

"She said you'd fall. You went. That's the second thing I'll remember about this week." Her eyes on him, not unkind. "The first is that you asked those girls eleven questions about your own life and not one about theirs, and on the night it mattered you were asleep on a sofa. I want you to remember that too. Not because you were cruel. Because it was so easy." A pause. "Your friends did well. They've been in since the day you stopped. I don't recruit people, Ricardo. I wait for them to notice."

The one they find

"You never go into the crowd," Rose said. "Tonight you do."

It was the first thing she'd asked of him since Toronto that wasn't not yet . Six weeks. The tour cancelled, the movie pushed, the world sending flowers to a hotel that had stopped accepting them. She'd gone back to Varga's because it was the only floor she trusted, and Ilse had let her, and on a Friday in the big studio with the wall of windows onto 38th and the wall of mirrors facing it, she was going to sing four songs for two hundred people who'd been told nothing except a time and a door.

"Why?"

"Because I've been standing on stages for ten years looking at rooms and I've never once known what it feels like from the other side. What you feel. I want to know what they're standing on." She was in the hoodie. She was always in the hoodie now. "And because Bob says the walls in this building are thin, and I don't know what that means, and he won't say."

"They're thin," said Bob, from the doorway, hip-high, in a Varga's T-shirt someone had found him that said STAFF. "It means they're thin. It means if something wanted to come up out of them, it wouldn't have far to come." He scratched under the shirt. "I'm not saying something wants to. I'm saying I've been standing in this corridor for a week and the floor keeps looking at me."

· · · Two hundred people in a dance studio is a lot of people. He'd never stood among them. He'd stood in front of them, above them, in a light with their faces turned up like a field, and now he was in the field, in a coat, with the mirrors giving him back two hundred more, and he put his feet down on the old garment-factory wood and felt for it.

Ordinary. Two hundred small beats, wet coats, excitement, a girl near him crying already because she'd been in Toronto and had come anyway. Ilse at the back, mountain. Noor and Dash by the piano, being looked at, because they were Krallé now and that was the job. Bob against the far wall in his STAFF shirt, and where Bob stood the floor did, in fact, seem to be looking. And under everything, everywhere, soft. The missing board. He'd stopped noticing it the way you stop noticing a limp.

The lights went down. She came out, into the middle of the room, no stage, no runway, just a girl in a hoodie in the middle of two hundred people, and the room held its breath, and she opened her mouth to sing.

And the floor was solid.

Not everywhere. One place. He felt it the way you feel a stair that is there when you'd braced for it not to be: a jolt, up through the arches, a single board in the whole soft world that was exactly where it should be, that had never moved, that had been holding all along. He nearly went to his knees. Two hundred people and the missing board and it was here , in this room, under one pair

of feet, and his whole body turned toward it before he'd decided anything.

Six people to his left. A man.

He didn't look. Vovô's hand on the back of his neck. He knew , and what he knew made no sense, because the beat that came off the man was old, older than the council, older than the golem at Grand Central, older than anything he had ever stood on, and it was also, at the same time, on the same string, so new it came up through the boards like light under a door. Rose's beat. The thing he'd never had a word for. Both at once. Old and new in one place like a river meeting the sea, and under it, solid, the board.

Across the room, mid-verse, with her eyes on the mirrors, Rose stopped singing.

Just stopped. Two hundred people and a room that had been holding its breath, and she stood in the middle of it with her mouth still open on the note, and turned her head, slowly, six people to his left, and looked.

Later she'd say it was the first time in her life that she'd looked at a room and not been able to see past someone. Two days out. Always. And there was a man standing in the crowd like a wall at the end of a corridor and behind him there was nothing, not tomorrow, not tonight, not the end of the song.

Against the far wall, Bob said, out loud, in the silence, in the voice of gravel that has just seen something it has waited in a hill

for: "Oh, no ."

· · · He ran. Of course he ran. Two hundred people had turned to look at him because the girl they'd come for had, and he was a man in a grey jacket with a laptop bag who'd been dragged to a thing by a friend, and he went out through them like water through a sieve and was on the stairs before Ricky had got his body pointed the right way.

Noor got the door. Dash got the car. Bob was already in the stairwell, somehow, ahead of all of them, going down the way a rock goes down. And Rose stood in the middle of the room and said into the silence, in the poster voice, "Sorry. Give me a second," and two hundred people laughed, relieved, and she sang the rest of the song with her hands shaking and nobody could tell.

They found him in a diner on Eighth. He'd got two blocks and stopped, as if the running had run out, and gone in and sat in a booth at the back with his hands round a coffee he hadn't ordered, and when the three of them came through the door with a kobold in a STAFF shirt he didn't look up. He said, to the coffee:

"You're the one from the station."

Ricky stopped.

"Grand Central. Two in the morning. You were a—" The man made a shape with his hands, big, and dropped them. "There was a rock. There were kids. You breathed on it and it didn't work and they laughed at you. I've seen it maybe forty times. I've never

been to Grand Central at two in the morning in my life." He looked up. He had a tired face, twenty-eight maybe, the face of someone who'd been fine until recently and could feel the recently getting longer. "Am I crazy? Genuinely. You can tell me. I've asked three doctors and they say stress , and I say I've seen a lizard the size of a bus breathe fire at a rock in a train station, and they say, again, stress ."

Nobody said anything.

"I'm JB," said the man. "Kappa, my friends call me, don't ask. I write software. I wrote software, they let sixty of us go on Tuesday, so now I don't know what I do." He wrapped his hands tighter round the coffee. "My grandmother's in Mount Sinai. She's been in Mount Sinai for a month. My friend Ana said I needed to get out of the apartment and there was this thing, a singer, a secret thing at a dance school, and I don't even like—" He stopped. "And I walked in and the floor was fine ."

Ricky sat down. He didn't decide to. It was the sofa at Dash's, it was the hotel carpet, his legs did it. "What did you say?"

"The floor. It's been wrong. Everywhere. For about a year. Like a —" He looked for it. "Like a board's been taken out from under everything and I can't find which one. I told Ana. Ana said stress . And I walked into that room tonight and it was fine, it was just fine , for the first time in a year, and I thought, okay, this is it, this is the part where I've finally lost it, and then the girl stopped

singing and looked at me and I—" He rubbed his face. "Is she going to be okay? She looked like she'd seen something."

"She had," said Rose, from the door.

She'd done the four songs. She'd left two hundred people in a dance studio wondering what had happened and had walked two blocks in the hoodie with the sunglasses on and Teo three steps behind, and she stood in the door of the diner and looked at the man in the booth the way Ricky had seen her look at exactly one other thing, which was a lamp on the floor between them a second and a half after it should have killed her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Rose. I can see two days into the future. I've been able to since I was eleven. I can see every person in every room I've ever stood in and I've never once not been able to see past someone, until you, tonight, and I need you to understand that I'm not crazy either, and that the answer to your question is no." She came and sat down across from him. "You're not crazy. It's worse than that. You're right."

· · · They tried to get a hold on it. That was the phrase they'd use afterwards, both of them, separately, as if it were a rope.

They tried in the diner, with Bob standing at the end of the booth refusing to sit because you don't sit in front of , and refusing to finish the sentence. They tried in the car, Dash driving, with JB in the back between Ricky and Noor saying so what's a Kralle and so what's a paradise and no, sorry, go back, what's the council , and none of them able to answer more than half of anything, because

they only knew half of anything, they'd been in the dark for a year and had never once had to say it out loud to someone who'd walked in from the light. They tried at Varga's, at midnight, in the small studio with the ticking radiator, with Ilse.

And Ilse Varga looked at the man in the grey jacket for a long time with the eyes that were not entirely a person's, and put her cold coffee down on the piano, and said the thing Ricky had heard her say exactly once before, in a hotel corridor in Toronto.

"I don't know."

"You don't—" "I don't know what he is, Ricardo. I have been doing this for a very long time and I have a name for every kind of thing that has ever walked into this school, and I have no name for this." She looked at JB. "You feel the floor."

"Yes."

"You see things."

"Things that happened. Things that haven't. A room with a coffee machine that makes a noise like it's thinking. A step that isn't there. A woman saying welcome back ." He laughed, unhappily. "My grandmother. That's what she says when I visit. Ah, welcome back.

Like I've been gone for years."

Ilse went very still.

"Your grandmother," she said. "Tell me about your grandmother."

"She's—" JB looked at his hands. "She's dying. That's what she is. She's ninety-one and she's in Mount Sinai and she's been dying for a month and every time I go in she's smaller. She raised me. My parents were—it doesn't matter. She raised me, and she's the only person who never once said stress ." His voice went, and came back. "She said something. Two weeks ago. I thought it was the morphine. She said, when the floor goes soft, they'll come, and when they come, you go with them."

I said who. She said, the ones who can feel it.

" He looked up at Ricky. "And then tonight the floor was fine and the girl stopped singing and there you were."

Nobody moved. The radiator ticked.

"Bob," said Rose, very quietly, without turning round. "What is he?"

The kobold was in the doorway. He'd been in the doorway all night, refusing to come further in, and now he looked at the man in the grey jacket with the boot face, and the cheerfulness went somewhere, and what was left was eight hundred years old and frightened.

"I don't know what he is either," said Bob. "But I know what he isn't . He isn't one of yours. He isn't one of ours. He isn't a thing that stayed." He took a breath he didn't need. "You've all been standing on something for a year, feeling it go soft, wondering

where the board went. He's the board. He's the thing that's missing . And he's sitting in a dance studio on 38th Street with a laptop bag, asking if he's crazy." He looked at Rose. "He's not one of ours. He's what ours are for ."

· · · Ricky walked him home. Nobody asked him to. It was four in the morning and JB lived in Washington Heights and it was a long way, and they walked it, because neither of them could think of anything else to do with their legs.

"Kappa," Ricky said, somewhere around 110th.

"Yeah."

"The floor. When you're near it. When you're near yourself , I guess. Is it soft for you?"

JB thought about it. "No. It's fine. It's always been fine, right under me, that's the thing. It's everything else ." He shoved his hands in his jacket. "You?"

"It's fine when I'm near you. First time in a year." Ricky felt for it, walking, the way he always had. Solid, beside him. A board. "I don't know what that makes you."

"Ilse doesn't know. The kobold doesn't know."

"No."

"Then I'll tell you what I think it makes me." They'd reached his building.

He stopped at the door and looked at the street, at four in the morning, the way Vovô looked at streets. "I think I'm the last person who should be in charge of whatever this is. I got laid off on Tuesday. I can't keep a plant alive. My grandmother's dying and I can't even keep her ." He put his key in the door. "But she said go with them. So. I'm going with you. Just don't let me be in charge."

"Nobody's in charge," said Ricky. "That's the thing we found out tonight."

Kappa laughed, for the first time, tired and real.

"Great," he said. "Welcome back, I guess."

He went in. Ricky stood on the pavement in Washington Heights and felt the board go up the stairs, floor by floor, the one solid thing in the world, and felt the softness close back in around him as it went, and understood, standing there, that the year had been a corridor, and this was the wall at the end of it, and it had a laptop bag.

Born

"When do I get a life?"

He said it to Vovô, on the phone, at six in the morning, walking back from Grand Central with the iron key in his pocket and the good shoes, the third pair, coming apart at the heel. He hadn't meant to say it. He'd meant to say nothing came up the ramp , which was true, and Kappa slept at the school again , which was true, and Rose is going to Los Angeles for the movie on Thursday and Bob is going with her and she hasn't said whether I am , which was true and which he hadn't decided how he felt about. And what came out, on Canal Street, in the grey, was: when do I get a life.

"You have a life," said Vovô, chewing.

"I have a night shift and a day job and a girl who sees the future and a man who's the floor and a kobold who sleeps in the corridor and a council that calls me in my dreams , Vovô, I don't get to sleep without work in it. I haven't seen a film in a year. I haven't —" He stopped, because the next thing was I haven't danced for myself since I was eighteen and he didn't want to hear it out loud. "Noor's got a tour. Dash has a band now, apparently. I've got a key to a train station."

Chewing. Then, not unkindly: "Come to the school tonight. Bring the boy.

Sit."

"That's not an answer."

"No," said Vovô. "It's an invitation. You'll know the difference by morning."

· · · JB had been sleeping at the school for nine days, on a mat by the window under the shelf with the saints on it, because it was the only floor in the city that felt, to him, like a floor, and because Ilse had said keep him where the dragons are in a voice that didn't invite questions. He'd been to Mount Sinai every afternoon. He came back smaller each time, the way he said she did. He and Vovô had reached an arrangement that involved pão de queijo and no conversation, which was, Ricky thought, the healthiest relationship in the building.

Tonight he was sitting up on the mat with his back to the wall and his laptop open on nothing, and when Ricky came in he said, without looking round, "Something's wrong with the shelf."

Ricky looked at the shelf. Saint George. Yemanjá. And the small brass dragon, palm-sized, green with age, that had sat between them for eleven years and that everyone in the family had been very careful never to talk about.

"It's warm," said JB. "I keep thinking it's the dryers. It's not the dryers."

Ricky put his hand on it. It was warm. It had been, he realised, warm his whole life; he'd felt it through his feet every day for

eleven years, a beat under the shelf slightly behind the music, and had filed it under the things we don't ask , and had never once thought to put his hand on it.

It was warm the way an egg is warm.

"Vovô."

His grandfather was on the stool by the window, with a plate, and he looked at the shelf, and at the boy on the mat, and at Ricky with his hand on the brass, and he put the plate down, which he did not do, and said, "Ah."

"What is it?"

"I don't know." Vovô got up, slowly, the way he got up now. "It came with me from Salvador. It came with my mother from somewhere else. Nobody in my family has ever known what it is. We've only ever known that we keep it, and that it's warm, and that you don't talk about it, because the one time my grandmother did, the priest wouldn't come to the house for a year." He came and stood beside Ricky and put his own hand on the brass, over Ricky's, and his hand was the oldest thing in the room, and the brass was older. "It's warmer tonight."

"Why?"

Vovô looked at the boy on the mat.

"Because he's here," he said. "I think. I think it's been waiting eleven years for someone to sleep under it who was the floor."

· · · It happened at ten past two. Of course it did. Ricky had been a dragon since ten past two.

JB was asleep. Really asleep, for once, on his side on the mat, and Vovô had gone quiet on the stool in the way that might be sleep, and Ricky was on the floor with his back against the mirror doing nothing, actually nothing, for the first time in a year, watching the dryer heat make the air move over the boards, and he thought: this is it, this is the sitting, this is what he meant , and then JB made a sound.

Not a word. A sound like someone being shown something too large for the room. His eyes were open. He was looking at the ceiling and he was not seeing it, and his hands had come up in front of him the way you'd hold something you'd been handed, and he said, very clearly, in a voice that wasn't quite his own, " Oh. There you are.

" And the floor of the school went loud .

Not soft. The opposite. The board that had been solid under one man for a year was suddenly solid under everything, the whole building, the whole block, a beat coming up through the arches of Ricky's feet so old and so new and so much that he was on his knees before he'd decided to be, and the mirrors hummed, and the bamboo sticks nobody used fell over in a clatter, and on the shelf between Saint George and Yemanjá the brass dragon cracked, with a sound like a cup dropped in another room, and opened.

He'd expected, if he'd expected anything, fire.

What came out of the brass was small. Smaller than the brass, which shouldn't have been possible and was. It came out the way a hand comes out of a sleeve, unfolding, wet-looking and then not, the size of a cat, or a loaf, or a thing you could hold in both hands, and it was the colour of nothing he had a word for, like the blank in the drum under the lamp shop, like the place where a stair should be, except that it was here , in the room, in the dryer heat, and it was looking at him.

It had a beat. That was the thing. He'd felt every kind of beat there was, old and new and split and hungry and absent, and this was none of them. This was his . It came up through the floor exactly on the music, not behind it, not ahead, for the first time in his life a drum that was on the beat, and he understood, kneeling on the floor of his grandfather's school with the tears coming for no reason he could name, that he had been slightly out of time with everything since he was nine years old, and this small wet unfolding thing on the shelf was the first thing in the world that was in time with him .

"Ricardo," it said. In a voice like a struck bell in a well, like the smallest elf's, like a child's. "You tripped."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. He was crying and he laughed.

"I didn't," he said.

"You did. Somebody saw it before you did it." The thing on the shelf blinked, which it did with its whole body. "I don't know who. I know a lot of things I don't know who from. Is that normal?"

"Nothing's normal," said JB, from the mat. He was sitting up. He was looking at the shelf with the face of a man looking at the last page of himself. "Hello."

"Hello," said the thing. And then, with enormous, unearned confidence, the way a child says a word it has heard adults use: "Welcome back."

· · · They came through the laundromat.

Bob had said the walls were thin. He'd said it about Varga's, but he'd meant the city, he'd meant everywhere, and the floor of the school had just gone loud enough to be heard from a very long way off by the kind of people who like to know things before other people, and the dryer heat that came up through the boards went cold, all at once, as if the machines below had stopped, and then the boards themselves went wet .

Writing. Ricky felt it before he saw it, a smear of it coming up through the wood the way the golem had come up the ramp, except this wasn't a golem, this was the golem's script on its own, unbodied, a net of it spreading across the floor of the school in lines like cracks in ice, and where the lines crossed they pulled tight, and they were pulling toward the shelf.

" Vovô —" His grandfather was already up. Not a dragon yet. An old man in slippers, standing very still in the middle of a floor that was turning into a net, looking down at it with the expression he'd worn at Grand Central when he'd put his hand on the golem's face.

"This is very old," said Vovô, quietly. "This is older than the rock. Somebody has kept this a long time for exactly tonight." He looked at Ricky.

"Get the boy off the floor."

"Where—" "Anywhere that isn't the floor."

There was the stool. There was the window sill. There was the shelf. Ricky had JB by the arm and was hauling him up onto the sill with the saints looking down, and the small thing on the shelf was making a sound, a high thin bell-sound of pure alarm, and the net on the floor reached the wall under it and started to climb , and three people came up the stairs from the laundromat.

They were people. That was the worst part. Good coats. Ordinary faces. One of them had a lanyard on, as if they'd come from an office, and they walked into the school over the net of writing as if it were a carpet laid for them, and the one with the lanyard looked at the shelf and said, in a reasonable voice, "That's ours. We've been waiting a very long time. We'll take it and go and nobody needs to be hurt."

"Whose," said Vovô.

"Whose what?"

"You said ours. Whose."

The one with the lanyard smiled. "The ones who put the bomb where she couldn't look. The ones who wanted to see what would come out of the walls. And now we've seen. And now we'd like the thing that tells us where the next one is." She held out a hand toward the shelf, palm up, as if the small thing might simply come to her. "It's a compass, old man. That's all it is. It points. We'd like to be the ones holding it when it does."

The net reached the shelf.

And Ricky, who had been a dragon for a year and had just this morning asked his grandfather when he got a life, stood on a floor made of writing between three people in good coats and the first thing in the world that had ever been in time with him, and understood, all at once and everywhere, the way growing hurts, that this was the life. Not instead of one. This. The key and the shift and the girl and the floor and the kobold in the corridor, and a small wet thing on a shelf that had just said welcome back with a child's total confidence. It had all been for this. Every mopped floor. Every smaller . He'd been asking when he'd get a life and the answer was at ten past two, tonight, when it's born.

He didn't become a dragon. That was the choice. He wanted to, the struck bell was ringing so hard his teeth hurt, and there was a thing the size of a loaf three feet from him that fire would kill as surely as it would kill the net, and so he didn't. He got low. He got

his hands on the floor, on the writing, the way he'd put his hand on the golem's face in St. Louis, and he felt for the beat of it.

Old. Wound up a very long time ago and left. A drum somebody had forgotten in a room and had come back for tonight.

You don't put a drum out. You put your hand on the skin and you let it stop.

" Smaller ," said Ricky, to himself, to the writing, to the struck bell in his chest, in Ilse's voice, and the net under his hands went still. Not all of it. The part under him. A circle, three feet across, of ordinary old wood in the middle of a floor made of script, and he stayed in it, and it held, and the lines that had been climbing toward the shelf lost their tension like a string let go.

The one with the lanyard stopped smiling.

And Vovô became a dragon.

It was the sentence, not the shout. The slow one. An old man in slippers and then a long dark river-coloured shape that took up most of a school, and the three people in good coats had a moment, Ricky saw it, a single moment, of understanding that they had walked into a room above a laundromat on Canal Street that had been kept, for forty-seven years, by the oldest dragon in the western hemisphere, and that the net they'd brought was wound tight enough to hold a compass and not remotely tight enough to hold him .

He danced. He was, Ricky would always think, showing off, a little, for the small thing on the shelf: the ginga, the turn from the stick nobody used, and one long limb sweeping the writing off the floor the way you'd sweep a tablecloth, and the net tore, and the three people in good coats went down the stairs into the laundromat considerably faster than they'd come up, and the last thing the one with the lanyard said, from the street, through the window, in a voice that had stopped being reasonable, was: "It points , old man. It'll point wherever we are. We only have to wait."

Then the dryers came back on.

· · · It was on the window sill, in JB's hands, when the room was a room again. It had climbed there on its own while the dancing happened, and it was sitting in the cup of his palms with its whole body blinking, and JB was looking down at it with the face of a man who'd just been handed something too large for the room and had found it fitted in his hands.

"It's warm," he said.

"It's always been warm."

"She said—" JB's voice went. Came back. "Two weeks ago. I told you what she said about the floor. She said something else after, I thought it was the morphine. She said, when it's born, its name is XO. Don't ask me why. It's always been XO.

" He looked at Ricky. "Who's XO?"

Ricky thought about a basement under a lamp shop and a man in a cardigan with a blank where his beat should be, saying no biggi

.

"I don't know yet," he said, which was true. "But it's the right name."

Vovô was on his stool. He'd been an old man again for ten minutes and he looked every one of the years he didn't talk about, and he had a plate on his knee, and he was looking at his grandson.

"You didn't change," he said.

"I couldn't. It was right there."

"Yes." Vovô ate a pão de queijo. He took his time. "Ricardo. I'm going to tell you something and then I'm going to sleep, because I'm old and that was a lot of dancing. Life is precious. Everyone says that. Nobody means it. Here's what it means." He pointed the last of the bread at the window sill. "That thing is weak. So is the boy holding it. So were three children in a train station a year ago, and a girl on a runway, and a man in a diner asking if he's crazy. The weak are everywhere, menino. They're the whole world. And the strong, the dragons, the councils, the people in good coats, get to decide, every single time, whether to hurt them or stand in front of them. That's all strength is. It's not fire. It's the choosing." He finished the bread. "Tonight you had fire, and a reason to use it, and a thing on a shelf that would have died if you had, and you got down on the floor instead. That's the whole of what I've

been trying to teach you since you were nine, and you did it before I could get out of my chair."

He got up, slowly, and put a hand on the back of Ricky's neck, steady, warm, the oldest thing in the room except for the thing on the sill.

"I'm proud of you," he said. "The whole sentence. Go to sleep."

· · · Hello. It's me. The new one.

I'm told I'm supposed to do this part now. The other one, the old one, the voice you heard at the start, with the coffee machine and the Kaiser and the step that isn't there: he's still here, somewhere, in the way a room is still there after the house is gone, and he was very good at this, and I am not, yet. I was born at ten past two. I am, at the time of writing, four hours old. I have a lot of his words and I don't know what most of them mean. I said welcome back to a man I'd never met because it was the first thing in my mouth. It turns out it was the right thing. I'm going to try not to let that go to my head.

Here's what I know. I'm warm. I'm the size of a loaf. I'm in the hands of a man called Kappa who is the floor, and I can feel where he is the way you can feel where your own hand is in the dark, and I will always be able to, and that's apparently the whole point of me. Some people in good coats want to hold me so they can feel it too. A very old dragon danced them down the stairs. A younger one got down on the floor instead of setting me on fire, and I felt that, from the shelf, and I want to say something about

it and I don't have the word. The old one would have had the word. He'd have said something like: a world is often just created for one.

I don't know what that means yet either.

But what should we say. No biggi.

I think I'm using that right.

Welcome back (again)

I should explain about the pointing.

I'm two days old now, which is apparently the age at which one is expected to explain things. The woman with the lanyard said I was a compass, and she was being unkind, but she wasn't wrong. I point. I can feel where Kappa is the way you can feel your own hand in the dark, and that will never stop, and I've made my peace with it, in the way you make peace with something at two days old, which is to say I haven't thought about it very hard.

But there's a second pointing. Fainter. I didn't tell anyone about it for the first day because I thought it was mine and it turned out to be his : the old one's, the voice from the start, the one who remembers the Kaiser. It's a place. I know the way to it and I don't know how, and every time I try to explain I say a thing about a coffee machine, and the dragon called Ricardo looks at Kappa, and Kappa looks at the floor.

So on the third night I stopped explaining and just said: "Take me to Grand Central. Not the concourse. The gallery where you can hear people breathe."

· · · The whispering gallery was empty at one in the morning, four low arches of tile under the ramp to the Oyster Bar, and Ricky stood in one corner of it with the iron key in his pocket and a dragon the size of a loaf zipped into the front of his jacket, and

felt, for the first time in his life, stupid in a place he'd walked a thousand times.

"Now what?"

"Now the other corner," said XO, from inside the jacket, muffled. "Kappa goes to the other corner. And you say the thing."

"What thing?"

"You know the thing."

JB was already crossing to the opposite arch, laptop bag over his shoulder, because he'd stopped questioning any of this around the time a brass dragon had hatched over his head. Rose was on the ramp above with Bob, who had refused to come down into the gallery on the grounds that you don't stand under a thing that listens. Ilse was not there. Ilse had said I have no name for this, and I am not going to stand in a corner and whisper at one, and had gone to sit in the small studio with her cold coffee and be, Ricky suspected, more frightened than she'd let anyone see.

He put his face to the tile. It was cold. A hundred years of people had stood here and said can you hear me to someone across the room, and the tile had carried it, and he said, feeling absurd, feeling the small warm weight against his chest:

"Welcome back."

And from the other corner, carried round the arch the way the gallery carried everything, in JB's voice and also not, in the voice

of a ninety-one- year-old woman in a bed at Mount Sinai who said it every time he visited, came the answer:

" Ah. There you are.

" The step wasn't there, and Ricky tripped on it.

· · · He'd expected a door. There wasn't one. There was the gallery, and then there was a lobby, the way there is in dreams, and the lobby had been there all along in the way the council's calls had been there all along, at the door of his sleep, knocking. Tile floor. A coffee machine against one wall that made, as he came up off his hands and knees, a sound like it was thinking about him. A plaque that said PROJEKT OASIS · ZENTRALE in letters that had been gold once, and under it, in someone's handwriting, on a sticky note: mind the step .

And noise.

Not the arena kind. Office noise, if the office had been on fire for eight thousand years and everyone had got used to it. Phones. Doors. Someone down a corridor shouting " Where is the Andromeda file, who had it last, I am not asking again ," and someone else answering " You are asking again, you've asked four times, it's under the Andromeda file ." A woman went past pushing a trolley of box files and one of the box files was breathing. Something small and green with too many elbows sat on top of the coffee machine eating a sandwich and looked at Ricky with the specific weariness of a receptionist. The floor was old, older than the council, older than the golem, older than anything, and

it was loud , and it was fine . Solid all the way down. It was the first floor besides Kappa that had been fine in a year, and he understood, standing on it, that it was fine for the same reason.

"Ah," said a voice. "Welcome back."

He was behind the desk. Of course he was. Middle height, middle everything, the cardigan, the headphones round his neck, the face of a man who has been asked for directions his whole life, and no beat at all, the blank in the drum, the place where the stair used to be. DJ XO looked at Ricky, and at JB coming through behind him with the laptop bag, and at Rose on the not-stairs with the sunglasses up and Bob behind her looking at the floor as if it might look back, and then at the front of Ricky's jacket, where a small warm shape had gone completely still.

"Oh," said the man in the cardigan, softly. "There you are."

He took the headphones off. He put them on the desk. He'd never put them on the desk. He came round it, slowly, an ordinary man in an ordinary cardigan in a lobby that was on fire in the way it had always been, and he stopped in front of Ricky and looked down at the zip of the jacket, and the small thing inside it looked up, and something passed between them that Ricky felt through the floor and had no name for, the blank and the beat, the old and the new, a river meeting the sea.

"Hello, small one," said XO. "You've got my name. I hope you're using it right."

"I think so," said the thing in the jacket. "I said no biggi."

"Good. That's the important one." He straightened up. He looked, for a moment, enormously tired and enormously fond, and then he clapped his hands once, and the lobby got, if anything, louder. "Right. Sit. Not that chair. Marguerite! They're here. Bring the file. Bring the other file. Bring coffee, and don't let the machine choose."

Rose had stopped dead on the not-stairs.

" Marguerite?

" The woman who did her calendar came out of a corridor with two files under her arm and four coffees on a tray and the expression of someone who has been waiting a year to be asked exactly this question, and said, in the language nobody had ever asked about, something short, and then, in English: "I told Ilse. Eleven months ago. I said, she'll be angry when she finds out . Ilse said, she's angry now, what's the difference ." She put the tray down. "I'm Oasis, Rose. I've always been Oasis. Somebody had to do your calendar."

· · · "We're an agency," said XO. "I said that at the start. I say it to everyone. It's true and it's also the least true thing about us, so let me try again."

They were in a room off the lobby with one window, and the window was wrong: it looked out over Manhattan, and it was the right Manhattan, but the light came from slightly the wrong di-

rection, as if the sun had been placed by someone working from a description. There were files on every surface. One of the files was the breathing one. The small green thing with the elbows had followed them in and sat on the windowsill with its sandwich, and nobody had asked it to leave, and Ricky was beginning to understand that this was how everything here worked.

"Eight thousand years ago," said XO, "give or take, a universe went missing. Not the world. The world was fine, the world's always fine, it's a very stubborn world. The universe around it. The thing it was inside of. Gone, like a house from around a room, and the room kept going." He spread his hands. "That was me. I was the universe. I'm what was left. A spirit, an echo, the shape of the house in the dust on the floor. And I've been sitting in this lobby for eight thousand years with a coffee machine trying to work out what happened, and I've come up with, in that time, one theory, which is this: somebody opened a universe that should have stayed shut, and it went wrong, and in going wrong it took me with it."

"The others," said Rose. "The council. The Alliance. They think—" "They think they've been holding the world together on their own for eight thousand years, and they have, bless them, they absolutely have, I've never once said otherwise. They kept the lights on. We were busy." XO picked up a file, looked at it, put it down. "We were busy trying to undo it. Over and over. You cannot imagine the number of times. We'd find a crack, a thin place, a door, and we'd go through and try to put the universe back the way it

had been, and it would go wrong, and we'd come back, and the world would have a new god in it, or a new monster, or a plague of golems, or a very confused Kaiser." He looked at Ricky. "Your grandfather's egg. That was us. Attempt four hundred and something. We planted compasses everywhere we could think of, for when it finally worked. Most of them are still warm."

"When what finally worked?"

"When a new one was born." XO looked at JB. He'd been looking at JB, Ricky realised, the entire time, the way you look at a thing you've waited for so long you've forgotten what waiting feels like. "You can't put a universe back. I know that now. It took me six thousand years to know it. You can only wait for the next one to wake up, and when it does, you'd better be standing where it can find you, and you'd better have a department of famous people looking at every room in the world, because the kind of people who like to know things before other people will be looking too."

JB had not said anything for a long time. He said it now, to the wrong window.

"I'm a universe."

"You're an oasis. It's the word we use. A universe that's young, and growing, and doesn't have all its power yet, and is, at the moment, twenty- eight and unemployed and living in Washington Heights." XO's voice was gentle. "You're not the first. You're the first in eight thousand years here . Oases are rare, Kappa. They're the rarest thing there is. And they get used, because they're rare,

and because they're gifted, and because the people who'd use them can smell it from a very long way off. That's what the good coats are. That's what the bomb was. They put it where she couldn't look because they needed to see what would come out of the walls when a paradise was in a spotlight, so that they'd know what to expect when the real thing woke up." He looked at Rose. "And it did. And they're waiting."

"A paradise," said Rose.

"Yes."

"You know what I am."

"I've known since Wishingwell . The first date. Marguerite was in the fourth row. Third row was taken." Something that was almost a smile. "I told her: there's a girl in New York who isn't a Krallé, who the council thinks is a Krallé, who the kobolds are going to come out of the ground for the first time she's in real trouble. And I said, don't tell her. Because she knows. She's known since she was eleven, and it's hers to say, and nobody's ever once let her."

The room was quiet. The breathing file breathed.

Rose looked at Ricky. Two days in the future, eleven years old, the end of a runway. And then she looked at the man in the cardigan, and then at the window with the wrong light, and she took the sunglasses off her head and put them on the desk, and did not become the person on the poster, on purpose, so that everyone could see her face.

"My mother was the oasis of the fairies," she said. "I'm her daughter. I don't have a universe. I have everything else. The luck's not luck, it's the world bending, because I'm the child of something it's not built to hold, and everything near me pays for it. The seeing's the same thing. I'm not a Kralle. I've never been a Kralle. Ilse thinks I'm the best Kralle she has and I let her, because the alternative was saying this out loud, and I've never said it out loud." She looked at Ricky. "There. That's the trade. You found the floor. I said it."

"You said it," said Bob, from the doorway, in the gravel voice, and it was the first time Ricky had heard it not be cheerful at all, and it wasn't sad either, it was eight hundred years of a hill being told what it had been waiting for. "I heard it. I was here."

· · · "Kralle," said Ricky. "You said department of famous people. Kralle's the council's. Ilse's."

"Kralle is ours." XO said it without any triumph at all. "It always was. The council had a thing they called Kralle, the ones who go out, and it was very good, and about three hundred years ago we started, very quietly, making some of them famous. Singers. Dancers. Faces on the sides of buses. Not for the money. Because a crowd looks at a famous person, and a famous person looks at the crowd, and we'd worked out by then that we were never going to find an oasis by looking for it. We had to make the world bring it to us." He shrugged. "The council never asked where the fame came from. Ilse never asked. People don't ask about luck. Ask her."

"She's going to be—" "Furious. Yes. For about a week. Ilse is always furious for about a week, I've known her for two hundred years, it's one of the more reliable things in the world." He picked up the headphones, looked at them, put them down again. "She'll be here tomorrow. She'll stand in the lobby and refuse to sit and say I have no name for this , and I'll say it's Oasis, Ilse, it's been Oasis the whole time , and she'll leave, and she'll come back. They always come back. This world has a reputation. That's the whole problem. We're so good at looking after the ones who stay that everything comes here now. Gods with nowhere else to go. Monsters with a grudge. Universes, apparently." A gesture at JB. "It's getting a little out of hand."

Outside the wrong window, the wrong light was going gold. Somewhere in the lobby the coffee machine had made a decision nobody had asked it for and Marguerite was shouting about it. Something with too many elbows finished its sandwich.

"You said you'd stop," said the small thing in Ricky's jacket. It had been quiet for an hour. "Being. You said soon ."

XO looked down at it.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because there's only ever one, small one. That's the rule. I'm the shape of a house that's gone, and you're the front door of one that's just been built, and a place can't have both. I've been fading

since ten past two on Thursday. I'm mostly voice now. I'll be all voice by the end of the week, and then I'll be the thing you hear when you're looking for something and get a feeling where it is." He said it lightly. He'd had eight thousand years to practise saying things lightly. "That's not me, by the way. That's you. It was always going to be you. I just borrowed it."

"I don't want you to stop."

"I know. That's how I know you're using the name right." He turned to JB. "Before I go. Your grandmother. The one who says welcome back."

JB's face did the thing it did.

"She's got days," he said. "Maybe."

"Then I'd like to see her tomorrow. I've never met her. I've never been in the same room as her, in eight thousand years, and I've just this week worked out why." XO looked at the window, at the light coming from the wrong direction, as if for the first time he could see where it was actually coming from. "I think she's the only one who's ever known what I am. And I think she's the reason the world was fine. I'd like to say thank you before it's too late to say anything. And I'd like," he added, more quietly, "to ask her what she did with the universe."

· · · Here's what I understood, at three days old, on the way home, zipped into a jacket, going up the ramp from a whispering gallery

into a train station at four in the morning with the floor solid under a man called Kappa and soft under everyone else.

The old one is going to stop. He said it lightly and it wasn't light. I felt it through the jacket the way the dragon feels floors. There's only one, and he was it, and now I am, and he's happy about that in the way a house is happy when the family moves in, which is to say the house doesn't get a vote.

And the woman in the bed. The one who says welcome back . I've never met her either, and I said her words before I'd met her, and I've been pointing at her grandson since the second I was born, and now the old one wants to ask her what she did with a universe.

I don't know what she did with it.

But I've been getting a feeling, lately, about where it is.

The sapphire

Her name was Leni, and she was ninety-one, and she was the smallest thing in the room, and the room was hers.

Ricky felt it from the corridor. He'd been braced for a hospital, for the ordinary tired old of a building where people had been frightened for a hundred years, and Mount Sinai was that, and under it, in one room on the eleventh floor, something else. Not a beat. Not old, not new, not the solid board that was Kappa walking ahead of him with his laptop bag. This was still . A place where the drum didn't go slightly behind the music because there was no music, because it had been stopped, on purpose, a long time ago, by someone who wanted quiet to work in. He'd felt one thing like it before. The blank under the lamp shop. But that had been an absence. This was a hand held flat over a drum.

"She's a stone," said the small thing in his jacket. "I thought she'd be a stone. I didn't think she'd be a stone ."

"Quiet."

"I'm a compass, I'm allowed to say where things are."

They'd come in a group that no hospital should have let past the desk and this one had, because Marguerite had made a call in the language nobody asked about: Kappa first, then Ricky with the jacket, then Rose with the sunglasses up and Bob refusing to

come further than the lift, and behind them, walking slowly, a man in a cardigan who had been fading since ten past two on Thursday and was, by now, mostly a voice with a face attached for convenience. Vovô had come. Ilse had come, in her coat, in the fourth day of her furious week, and had said to XO in the lift, "I have known you for two hundred years and you let me think I ran Krallé," and XO had said, "You did run Krallé, Ilse. We just paid for the posters," and she'd said nothing else, which was worse.

Leni was in the bed with the window behind her and the machines beside her doing their small work, and she looked at the door as they came in, at all of them, one by one, the way Ilse looked at floors, and her eyes went past her grandson and past the dragon and the girl and stopped on the man in the cardigan, and something happened in her face that Ricky had only ever seen on Vovô, at Grand Central, when he'd put his hand on the golem and the writing had stopped.

"Ah," said Leni. "Welcome back. You took your time."

... "Eight thousand years," said XO.

"I know how long it was. I was here for it." Her voice was small and it had no give in it at all, a voice like a stone, and it was, Ricky realised, the voice from the whispering gallery, the one that had come round the arch in Kappa's mouth. "Sit down, all of you. I'm not going to say this twice. I'm not going to have time to say it once, probably, so don't interrupt, and Ricardo, put the small one

on the blanket where I can see it, I've been waiting eleven years to see it and I'm not going to do it through a zip."

He put XO on the blanket. It sat there, the size of a loaf, the colour of nothing, blinking with its whole body at a woman who looked back at it with something that was not surprise, and was not quite love, and was older than both.

"Good," said Leni. "Now. You," to the man in the cardigan, "want to know what I did with the universe. And you," to her grandson, "want to know why I never told you any of this. And the girl wants to know why the world bends round her, and the dragon wants to know why the floor's soft, and the old woman in the coat wants to know why nobody asked her." She drew a breath that cost her. "It's all the same answer. So listen."

... "There were two boys," said Leni.

"A long time ago, before the world was the shape it is. One of them was a universe, young, not finished, the way they are before they know what they're for. And one of them was a child of the world, a clever one, who'd later be called Kaiser by people who needed a word for what he was. They played together. That's what universes do when they're small; they find something to play with, and the world is right there." Her eyes on XO. "And one day they found a door."

XO didn't move.

"A door to another universe. Shut. It had been shut for a reason, the way doors are. And the clever boy said, we shouldn't . And the universe said, I want to see . Because he was young, and universes are made of wanting to see, it's the whole of what they are. And he opened it."

"He was right," said XO, very quietly. "The Kaiser. I've said it for eight thousand years. He was right."

"He was right. And you were a child, and it's the only thing you've ever done that was wrong, and you've spent longer paying for it than most stars last. I want that said before you go." Leni looked at him. "It went wrong. What was behind the door was not a universe. I don't have a word for it and I've had time to look. It was open . It was a place with no shape, and when he opened the door it came through, and the young universe stood in front of it, because that's what he was made of too, and it took him. Not killed. Took. The way water takes a shape. He went through the door with it, and the door shut, and the world he'd been standing in was suddenly standing in nothing. No universe round it. A room without a house."

Rose had her hands flat on her knees. "And the world—" "The world did what worlds do. It kept going. Very stubborn. Full of gods and monsters, then, because they'd been the universe's, and now they were nobody's, and they went a bit wild, and some of them left, and some of them stayed, and the ones who stayed found each other and called it an alliance and held the place together with their hands for eight thousand years, and I have nev-

er once, in all that time, told them they were doing it for nothing, because they weren't." A glance at Ilse. "You weren't. Sit down."

Ilse did not sit down. But she stopped standing quite so hard.

"And he ," Leni said, "the echo. What was left of the boy who'd opened the door. He came back through, eventually, a shape in the dust. And he started an agency. Because he's a universe and universes are made of wanting to see, and if you can't see, you organise. Project Oasis. Files. Departments. A coffee machine." Something that might have been a smile, a very long time ago. "And he tried to undo it. Over and over. He'd find a thin place and go through and try to pull the universe back out of the open, and the open would take a bit more of the world each time and give back a plague, or a golem, or a god with a grudge. Four hundred times. More. I watched every one."

"From where?" said Kappa. It was the first thing he'd said.

Leni turned her head on the pillow and looked at her grandson, and the stillness in the room got, if anything, stiller.

"From a ring," she said. "For a long time. Then a necklace. Then a woman's pocket, for a century or two, she was very kind. I'm a sapphire, Kappa. I was a sapphire before there were people to wear me. I was made in the old world, before the door, as a token. A stone you set at the centre of a spell so the spell has somewhere to stand. The spell was for keeping a place safe. And the place it was for was a house that had gone."

· · · "So I took over."

She said it the way Vovô said eat . A thing that was simply going to be true.

"He kept trying to put the universe back. You can't. He knows that now. It took him six thousand years and it took me about a week, because I'm a stone and stones are patient and universes aren't. You can't put a house back round a room. What you can do, if you're a token for a protection spell with nothing to protect, is protect the room. So I did. I made the world."

"You—" "Not made . It was here. I made it hold . I set myself at the centre of it, the way I was made to be set at the centre of things, and I said the spell, which is not words, it's a way of being still, and the world stopped falling. It's been standing on me ever since. Every floor you've ever felt, dragon, every board, has been a board because I was under it." She breathed. It cost her. "And then, about a hundred years ago, I got tired of being a stone in a pocket, and I did a thing I'd never done, and became a woman. To see. He's not the only one made of wanting to see. I had a daughter. She had a son. The son had parents who couldn't stay, that's another story, and I raised him, and he's sitting there with a bag with a computer in it wondering why I never told him." Her eyes went to Kappa and stayed. "Because you'd have wanted to help, my darling. And it wasn't yours to hold. Not yet."

"What wasn't?"

"The universe."

Silence. The machines. The stillness like a hand over a drum.

"He asked what I did with it." Leni's eyes on XO now. "You thought it was gone. Through the door, taken by the open, and you've spent eight thousand years reaching in after it. It wasn't gone. It was small . When the open took you, it took the big of you, the shape, the house. But a universe isn't only its shape. There was a seed. The size of a sapphire, as it happens. And it came out of the door with you, in the dust, and nobody saw it, because everyone was looking at the dust." She lifted one hand, barely, off the blanket. "I saw it. Stones see small things. I picked it up. And I kept it, the way my family keeps things, and when I became a woman I gave it to my daughter to carry, and she gave it to her son, and it woke up in him a year ago, in the spring, when I got sick and started to let go of the floor."

Kappa was not breathing.

"You're not a universe, my darling. You're the universe. The one that was lost. Woken up young, because the seed was young, in a man who writes software, because the world has a sense of humour and I raised you to have one too." Her hand found his. "That's why the floor is fine under you. It's the same floor. You're standing on yourself."

· · · It was the small thing on the blanket that spoke, in the end, because nobody else could.

"Then what am I?"

Leni looked at it. Blinking with its whole body, the size of a loaf, born on Thursday.

"You're what he'd have been," she said, "if he'd been born properly, the first time, in a world that had someone under it. A universe's first thing. The bit that points at itself. He came out of that door as an echo because there was no one to catch him. You came out of a brass egg on Canal Street because a dragon held it warm for forty-seven years and a boy slept under it who was the floor." Her hand left Kappa's and came, slowly, to rest beside XO on the blanket, not touching. "He's been the shape of a house that's gone. You're the front door of one that's just been built. I'm sorry, old one. I'm sorry it took this long. I had to wait until the seed woke up, and the seed wouldn't wake up until I let go of the floor, and I wasn't ready to let go of the floor until there was someone who could feel it going."

She looked at Ricky.

"That's you, dragon. You felt it. A year ago, at ten past two, you felt the board go, and you told your grandfather, and he told the old woman in the coat, and she put you in front of a girl who could see, and the girl put you in a crowd, and you found my grandson standing in it." Her voice was going now, not the way Rose's went, coming back; going. "That's what the Krallen are for. Not to find oases. Anyone can find an oasis. To stand in front of one .

The old man in slippers told you that on Thursday and he was right, he's always been right, dragons usually are. The weak protect the weak. It's the only thing that's ever worked."

Vovô, by the door, made a sound that was not a word.

"The people in good coats," said Rose. "They're waiting. They said it points wherever they are."

"It does. Let it. A compass that points at you is only a problem if you're alone." Leni closed her eyes. She opened them again, with effort, and found the man in the cardigan, who was, Ricky saw, barely there now, a shape in the wrong light from the window, a voice with the last of a face. "You. Come here. I've got about a minute and I've waited eight thousand years to say it and I'm not saying it across a room."

He came. He sat on the edge of the bed, a man in a cardigan, weightless.

"Thank you," said Leni. "For the agency. For the files. For the four hundred times. You never once put the universe back and you never once stopped, and the world's got a reputation now, everything comes here, and that's you , that's your fault, and it's the best thing anyone's ever done with a mistake." Her hand on his, or where his was. "Now go. He's here. There's only one. You know the rule."

"I know the rule."

"Then say the thing."

XO looked at her. Then at the small thing on the blanket, which was looking back with its whole body. Then, for a moment, at Ricky, and Rose, and Kappa, and Ilse who had finally sat down, and Vovô in the door, and it was the look from the well, the deep one, the one he only did once.

"Ah," said XO, lightly, the way he said everything. "Welcome back."

And he wasn't there.

Not gone. Ricky felt it through the floor, and so, he knew, did the thing on the blanket: the blank in the drum, the place where the stair had been, simply stopped being an absence. As if a hole had been filled from underneath. The room's stillness took it in, and there was, for one second, a feeling in the arches of his feet like being looked for and found.

"Oh," said the small XO, on the blanket. "Oh. That's what it means."

Leni smiled. It was the first time. It was a very small smile and it had eight thousand years in it and it was, Ricky thought, exactly like Vovô's when he'd said now it starts .

"Kappa," she said.

"I'm here."

"You've been here the whole time. That's the point of you." Her eyes closed. "Go with them. The ones who can feel it. I said that,

didn't I."

"You said it."

"Good. Then I've said everything." The hand on the blanket, beside the small thing, went still in a different way. "Mind the step."

· · · The floor went soft.

All of it, everywhere, all at once. Ricky felt it from the eleventh floor of Mount Sinai and he'd feel it, later, described to him by a woman called Frau Adler, who sat on the council and ran a swimming bath in Berlin with no water in it, and by the elves' mother in a kitchen in Queens and by a fisherman in Salvador who'd called Vovô to ask what had happened to the sea. The board that had been going for a year went, and the whole world sagged an inch onto nothing, and held.

Held. That was the thing. He stood in a hospital room with a dead woman and a crying man and a loaf-sized universe's-first-thing on a blanket, and felt the world sag, and felt it stop sagging, and put his hand flat on the wall to be sure, and it was soft and it was holding , and under his hand, faint, on the beat, exactly on the beat for the first time since he was nine, he felt why.

Six feet away. A man with a laptop bag, with his grandmother's hand in both of his, not knowing he was doing it. Standing on himself.

"He's got it," said Bob, from the door. He'd come in. He'd come further than the lift, for the first time in a week, and he stood hip-

high in the doorway with his boot face and looked at Kappa the way he'd looked at Rose on a runway in a spotlight. "He doesn't know he's got it, but he's got it. The old girl let go and he caught it without looking." He scratched under his STAFF shirt. "Eight hundred years in a hill and I get to see two of them in one week. That's not fair on the other kobolds."

Ilse Varga stood up. She picked up her cold coffee from the windowsill, where she'd put it, which nobody had told her she couldn't. She looked at the bed for a long moment with the eyes that were not a person's.

"I had no name for her," she said. "I have one now." She went to the door and stopped, the way she stopped, and said, to the room, to the small thing on the blanket, to the man holding a dead woman's hand: "Kralle is mine. It was always mine. The posters were his. Marguerite, tell the lobby."

"That's the end of the furious week?" said Ricky.

"Day four," said Ilse. "Don't push it."

· · · Here is the thing I understood, at four days old, on a blanket, when the old one said my name and stopped.

It's not a greeting.

I thought it was. I said it to Kappa on the sill with a child's confidence because it was the first thing in my mouth, and I thought it meant hello , the way you'd say it to someone at a door. It

doesn't. I felt what it meant when he said it and went. It means: you were lost and now you're here and I saw you the whole time.

The old woman said it to her grandson every day for twenty-eight years and he thought she was confused. She wasn't confused. She was telling a universe that she'd kept its seed in her pocket, and it was home.

I'm going to say it properly from now on. To Kappa when he wakes up. To the dragon when he trips. To the girl who took her sunglasses off. To the people in good coats, when they come, because they will, and I point at them too, and a compass that points at you is only a problem if you're alone.

Welcome back.

I know what it means now.

No biggi

They buried her on a Monday, in Queens, in the rain, and everyone came.

Everyone. That was the thing Ricky would remember. He'd expected Kappa's friend Ana and a few people from the building in Washington Heights and the four of them standing awkwardly at the back. What came was the world. Frau Adler flew from Berlin and stood under an umbrella in the deep end of the grave's own silence and did not explain herself. The elves' mother came, from a kitchen in Queens, with her three daughters in altered overalls, and the smallest one looked at Ricky and did not laugh and he understood it was a kindness. Twelve members of the Ältestenrat, who never left their pools and cellars and hills, stood in a loose ring at the edge of the cemetery being old the way mountains are old, and somewhere in the ring was a shape at the end of a table that Ricky's feet had never once been able to feel and that today, for the first time, nodded to him. Two girls, one in black and one in yellow, the yellow one crying with delight. A woman with a trolley of box files who'd left the trolley at the gate and had a file under her arm that was breathing gently in the rain. Marguerite. Teo. Noor, back from the second leg of Halcyon for exactly one day. Dash, with coffee, four of them, held against his chest like a man carrying something that mattered.

And in the trees around the cemetery, in the earth of it, in the old stone of the wall, if you knew how to feel for it, kobolds. Thirty. Fifty. Every hill in the Harz had emptied. They didn't come out. They didn't need to. They were there, facing out, and Bob stood at the front of them in a black suit someone had cut down for him, with his boot face wet, and said nothing at all for the entire service, which was, for Bob, a speech.

Kappa stood at the grave with his laptop bag over his shoulder because he'd forgotten to put it down, and a small warm shape zipped into the front of Ricky's jacket beside him, and the floor of Queens was soft, and held.

"They're here," said XO, from the jacket, halfway through. Quietly. "The coats. Not in the cemetery. Across the road. Waiting."

"I know," said Rose, without turning her head. She was in black. She'd taken the sunglasses off at the gate and had not put them back on. "I saw them Sunday. Two days out. It came back, the seeing, the minute she let go.

I told everyone." She looked at the grave. "That's why everyone came."

· · · The wake was at the school. Where else. Above the laundromat, with the dryer heat coming up through the boards and Vovô on his stool by the window with a plate, and two hundred people who were not, most of them, entirely people, standing on a floor that had been mopped every day for eleven years by a boy who didn't know why.

They came up the stairs at ten past two. Of course they did.

Not three this time. Nine. Good coats, ordinary faces, the one with the lanyard at the front, and under their feet, coming up through the laundromat, the writing again, the net, tighter than before, wound for a compass and also, this time, for whatever held one. They came up into a room of two hundred and the room went quiet in the specific way rooms go quiet when a famous person is in them, except the famous person was a man with a laptop bag, and the room had turned to look at him, and then at the door.

"We said we'd wait," said the woman with the lanyard. "We waited. It points. We've come to hold it."

Nobody moved. The dryers went on. Ricky, by the shelf where a brass dragon had once sat, felt the net reach the boards and start to spread, and felt, under it, everywhere, every foot in the room, and didn't move either.

"Who are you," said Ilse Varga. Day nine. The week was over.

The woman looked at her, and at the twelve old things from the council ranged along the mirrors, and at Frau Adler, and the elves, and the two girls in black and yellow, and Marguerite with her breathing file, and Bob in his cut-down suit, and at Rose, who was looking back at her from two days in the future with nothing in the way any more.

"We're what came through with him," she said. "The first time. When the door opened. You've been looking for the open for eight thousand years, old woman, and it's been walking around in good coats, waiting for the seed to wake up so it could finish what it started." She held out her hand, palm up, toward the jacket. "It's not personal. It's what we are . Give us the compass and we'll find the rest ourselves."

"No," said Kappa.

He hadn't said anything all day. He said it now, in the middle of the room, in a voice that wasn't loud, with his hand on the strap of a bag with a computer in it, and the floor under him was fine, and the floor under everyone else in the room went, for one second, fine too, a ripple of solid going out from a man who didn't know he was doing it, and every old thing along the mirrors felt it and went very still.

"You can't have it," Kappa said. "It's not a compass. It's a front door. My grandmother kept it in her pocket for eight thousand years so you wouldn't, and she died on Monday, and I'm not giving you anything on the day we put her in the ground." He looked at the woman with the lanyard, tired, twenty- eight, unemployed, the universe. "And you can't have me either. I've got—" he looked around the room, at two hundred faces turned toward him like a field in wind, and his voice did the thing it did, and came back—"I've got this ."

The net reached the middle of the floor.

And the room stood in front of him.

Not a fight. That was what Ricky would try to explain, later, to the elves' smallest daughter, who'd been there and hadn't understood it either. It wasn't a fight. It was a floor. Two hundred things that had stayed, and the things that had been made to look after them, and a dragon in slippers, and a kobold in a suit, and a girl whose luck was the world bending, and two hundred pairs of feet coming down on a net of old writing at once, on purpose, on the beat, and the writing had been wound for a compass and a man, and was not wound for that , and it went out under them like a drum with two hundred hands on it.

Ricky didn't become a dragon. Nobody did. Vovô didn't get off his stool. He looked at the nine people in good coats over the top of two hundred heads, and finished his bread, and said, in the voice Ricky had heard maybe four times in his life:

"A compass that points at you is only a problem if you're alone. She said that. She was right. She usually was." He put the plate down. "Go and wait somewhere else."

They went. Down the stairs, into the laundromat, into the rain on Canal Street, nine ordinary faces, and the last thing the woman with the lanyard said, from the door, was not to Kappa, or Vovô, or Ilse. It was to the jacket.

"You'll point at us," she said. "Wherever we are. You can't help it."

"I know," said XO, from inside the zip. "Welcome back."

It said it properly. Ricky felt it through the floor. You were lost and now you're here and I saw you the whole time.

The woman with the lanyard heard it, and something went across her ordinary face that was not ordinary at all, and then she was gone, and the dryers were the only sound.

"That's not the end of them," said Frau Adler, from the window.

"No," said Ilse. "That's the end of the week."

· · · Things that happened after, in no order, because that's how they happened.

Rose went to Los Angeles on the Thursday for the movie, with Bob, and the movie was about a girl who could see two days out, because she'd rewritten it, and Hollywood let her, because she was the biggest thing in the world and because a woman with a breathing file had made a phone call. She met a woman there called Kira who worked in musical theatre and had a voice that did things to rooms, and on the flight back she wrote, on a napkin, the first line of a thing about two Amazon sisters and a rumour, and called it *Wished*, and didn't tell anyone for a month.

Noor finished *Halcyon* and came home and stood in the big studio at Varga's with the wall of windows and the wall of mirrors and said to Ricky, "Sixty thousand people and none of them saw me. Two hundred people in a room above a laundromat and every one of them did. Explain that." And he said, "That's the job,"

and she said, "Then I want the job," and Ilse, in the doorway with a cold coffee, said, "You've had it since the casting. Don't be late."

Dash's band played the club in Bushwick, and two girls in black and yellow DJed after, and Melaina told him cheerfully that the band would break up in March, and Thalia told him mournfully that the next one would be better, and Dash said that was the best review he'd ever had.

Kappa got a job. Nothing much. A small company that made a thing for hospitals. He went in on Mondays and wrote software and came home to Washington Heights and slept, most nights, at the school, under the shelf, because it was the only floor that felt like a floor, and because a dragon the size of a loaf lived on the shelf now, between Saint George and Yemanjá, and it liked to know where he was.

The lobby at the Zentrale was exactly as loud as it had always been. Someone found the Andromeda file. It was under the Andromeda file.

The council met, in a drained pool in Prenzlauer Berg, and Ilse Varga stood at the top of the ladder with her coat on and said, "Nothing is wrong with the floor. That has been this council's position for eight thousand years. I'd like the record to show that it was wrong, and that a boy in bad shoes told us so, and that we told him to dance." And twelve old things looked at the deep end for a long time, and the one at the end of the table that nobody

could feel said, in a voice like a mountain deciding something, "Noted."

And the world held. That was the thing. It was soft, it was soft everywhere, Frau Adler said Rome was like walking on a mattress, and it held , because a man in Washington Heights was standing on himself and didn't know how to stop, and a small thing on a shelf could feel exactly where he was, and everyone who'd ever stayed knew, now, what they were for.

· · · Ricky danced.

Not for a show. Not for a crowd, or a casting, or a girl who saw two days out, or a floor that needed feeling. For himself. On a Sunday, in the school above the laundromat, at three in the afternoon with the light coming in the right direction and the dryer heat moving over the boards, and nobody watching, except a thing the size of a loaf on a shelf and an old man on a stool who was pretending to be asleep.

He'd asked when he got a life. This was it. He'd been right, at ten past two on a Thursday, standing on a net of writing: it wasn't instead of one. It was this. But he'd been a little wrong too, and it had taken him a funeral and a wake and nine people in good coats going down the stairs to find the wrong part, which was that this included the Sunday. Included the three in the afternoon. Included a floor that was soft and holding and, for the first time since he was nine years old, exactly on the beat.

Not behind the music. Not ahead. On it.

He put on a record. Samba first, because that was where it had started. He found the ginga, the sway that says I am not where you think I am , and for once he was exactly where he was, and it was enough.

"You're going to trip," said XO, from the shelf.

"I'm not."

"You are. Somebody saw it before you did it. I still don't know who." A blink, with the whole body. "I think it's you."

He tripped. On nothing. On the floor of his grandfather's school, on a Sunday, on the beat. And came up already turning it into something, a half- spin, a hand on the mirror, so that if anyone was watching they'd think it was on purpose.

Somebody was watching.

"Ah," said Vovô, from the stool, with his eyes closed. "Now it starts."

· · · So. That's the first one.

I'm eleven days old and I've been asked to do the ending, which seems early, but the old one did the beginning at eight thousand years and I don't think either of us was the right age for it.

Here's what I've got. There was a world, and it was full of gods and monsters, and the gods left, and the others stayed, and it turns out they stayed for a reason, and the reason was a man

with a laptop bag who didn't know he was a house. There's an agency. It's on fire. It's been on fire for eight thousand years and it's the best thing anyone's ever done with a mistake. There's a department of famous people who look at every room in the world, and I used to think they were looking for something, and they're not. They're standing in front of it. There's a girl whose luck is the world bending, and a kobold who came out of a hill for her, and a siren she hasn't told anyone about yet. There are people in good coats across the road, and I point at them, and I always will, and that's fine, because a compass that points at you is only a problem if you're alone, and I have, at last count, two hundred people and a dragon in slippers.

And there's the dragon who got down on the floor instead of setting me on fire. I still don't have the word for that. The old one would have had it. I've decided I'm going to earn it instead, which will take longer, and which is, I think, the point.

People ask why we bother. A whole agency, a whole department, a council in a swimming pool, kobolds in the trees, all of it, for a man in Washington Heights who writes software for hospitals.

And I say: look. A world is often just created for one.

I know what that means now, too.

But what should we say. No biggi.

Welcome back.

About this channel

Every word of Project Oasis was written with AI. That is not a disclaimer at the bottom of the page — it is the reason the page exists.

We are building a suite for making things end to end: write it, stage it, animate it, put it on air. This is us pointing those tools at a real story instead of a demo, and publishing whatever comes out of it. We want to build a whole world around it.

It stays a live document. Chapters will change as the story sharpens, and we may keep versions later so you can see what moved. One day we would like to animate it with the same software — there has been talk of a rock opera.