

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 took it out 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 does that face when they come in, the one you're doing now, like you heard my voice in a dream and then the alarm went. It's a normal reaction. We have a form for it.

You know me like this: you're looking for something. Keys, a word, a person in a crowd. You haven't found it yet, but you get a pull. Left, not right. The other pocket. That's me.

Just kidding. 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 plenty.

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. It has one about you already. Don't take it personally.

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. 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 mostly admin. And there's one rule under all of it. I'll say it slowly. Your whole job sits on it:

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 laugh once, honestly, at something small, a piece of them stays when the rest goes. Sticks to the place like gum. The pieces pile up. Some are harmless. Some are lonely. Some 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 keep the

whole arrangement positive, and together. I use that word a lot. I've stopped apologising.

For the difficult cases we have a special department. Kralle. Think 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. I'll get to that. 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 forty thousand people and every one of them turns to look at her, and while they're looking at her, she's looking at them. She sees who's in the room. She tells us. We take care of it. The most elegant surveillance system ever devised, and it runs entirely on people wanting to be near someone shiny. When Krallen get stuck, we help. Usually.

And then there are oases.

Careful here. 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, believe me. Sometimes the connection comes with gifts. Super smart. Super brave. Magic, the kind that doesn't need a hat. Visions. Not every oasis gets every gift. Some just have the one, quietly, and never use it.

And because they're rare and gifted, they get used. That's the story of every rare gifted thing there ever was, and it isn't different here. Our biggest job, above all the others, is to find them first. Get the best for them, and for the world.

We're good at it. That's the problem. We're so good 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, and then I'll 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 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

"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. 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."

The school was above a laundromat on Canal Street, and it smelled like it. Dryer heat came up through the boards all day and all night, which Vovô said was good for the joints and Ricky said was good for nothing. The sign on the street door said ACADEMIA DE LUTA · SINCE 1979 in letters that had been gold once. Inside: one long room, a floor Ricky had mopped every day for eleven years, mirrors, 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.

"What if it's nothing?"

"Then you walked around a train station all night in good shoes." Vovô chewed. "Worse things have happened to better people."

. . .

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. Learning to fall, then not to fall, then to fall on purpose and make it look like a choice. The dancing came from the same place: Vovô had watched him try to hold a stance one afternoon, aged nine, 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. Samba first, then everything else, then a scholarship to a school uptown he'd nearly lost twice for being late, because the mopping came first.

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

He felt the floor before he danced on it. Vovô had taught him that first, 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 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, 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 once been allowed to ask.

He'd felt it in Charlie too, which was worse.

His sister was four years older and had woken up at nine. Nine. She'd come down to breakfast with her eyes gone the wrong colour, asked their mother politely for some water, and set the curtains on fire. By the end of that summer she could hold it. By the end of the next she could hold it in a room full of people, which Ricky, at nineteen, couldn't reliably do in a room containing one trestle table. Six languages. A medical degree in Salvador, then another in something to do with old stone, explained twice, understood neither time. The council had sat her in the deep end of a drained pool at twenty-two and asked her opinion, which they had never once done to Vovô in front of his grandson.

The unforgivable part was that she was lovely. She rang on Sundays. She sent money he hadn't asked for and never mentioned it. She said, every single time, you feel the floor better than I do, Ricardinho, that's the rare one, I just do homework, and meant it, and it helped for about an hour.

. . .

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. The painted zodiac went on doing its backwards thing across the ceiling, and Ricky walked the concourse with his hands in his pockets and the good shoes on.

The floor was fine. Marble, tired, a hundred years of feet. 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, heard himself, felt stupid, kept walking.

Around one a girl's voice came out of a phone somewhere. A cleaner on the platforms, one earbud out. A song he half knew, the one that had been everywhere for three weeks, a voice going up where you didn't expect it 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 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 dead under the clock.

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

Light feet. Three of them, small, fast. And behind them something that wasn't light at all.

The three came out onto the concourse and for a second he didn't understand what he was seeing. Children, he thought, and then: no. Small, quick, wrong in the eyes in a way that was beautiful rather than frightening, in what had been cleaners' overalls before someone had done something to the cut, and the beat they made on 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 walked, and the concourse came with it, and the elves went past Ricky like leaves, and the smallest one looked up 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 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 the 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 clock was at his eye line and then below it, and his hands weren't hands, and he was hot, hot from the inside, the way the school was hot with the dryers going, except the dryers were him. He opened his mouth to shout at the thing and what came out was fire.

It was a lot of fire. It was, he'd 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 face it didn't have.

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: three small bright voices behind him. The elves, crouched by the information booth, watching a dragon who had just tried to set fire to a rock. Hands over their mouths. The smallest one bent double.

"He breathed on it."

"He breathed fire on it."

"On a golem."

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

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

And then the floor changed again.

He'd felt this beat every day of his life. 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. 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, 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, and the whole building leaning toward him like a crowd toward a stage.

And then Vovô danced.

There was no better word for it, and Ricky had been looking for one for eleven years. There was a ginga in it, 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 be-

hind it, already low, one long limb sweeping through the place where its knees would have been if anyone had given it 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, and the writing stopped moving, and the wet look went out of the stone, and it was 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 with the good trousers split

down both seams, and 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. Four on a plate.

"Eat."

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

"Charlie would have—"

"Charlie," said Vovô, "put out the curtains with her mother's good tablecloth and cried for two days. You have all got the same story, menino, you just get told each other's endings." He ate. "Also she would have called me. She always calls me."

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 first grey starting over the rooftops, he stopped, 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 an intern thing, it's for some tour, I'm not even —"

"Go," said Vovô, "and dance. And stand there. And try."

"In what shoes?"

"Four hours a day, and that is your question." Vovô looked at the street a moment longer. "It's a good question. Find some."

On Houston Street, in the grey, a man on a ladder was smoothing the last corner of a poster onto a wall. 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

"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. Big, loud, dressed like a colour had exploded. 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. Biggest thing to 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.

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, so he'd taken the stairs, on three hours of sleep, in old trainers from 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, with feet that felt as if they'd been taken apart in the night and put back together from memory.

"How does she look?"

"Like she's already on the tour and we're the guys who came to see her off." Dash sniffed. "Why do you smell like a barbecue?"

"Long night."

"He says it again."

. . .

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 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. Photographs in the corridor, the ones who'd made it. Ricky knew them like a rosary. 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 in a cleaner's earbuds at one in the morning.

He felt the floor as he went in. Habit. Old wood under new varnish, a garment factory before it was anything. And, faint, from the far end of the studio, behind the trestle table where the jury sat, a beat 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. A man from the tour, all teeth and tablet. 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 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, as if her body had learned 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, let Dash squeeze her shoulder, and looked 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, to nobody. "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 bowed anyway, and the man from the tour laughed, which was something.

Ricky went eleventh.

He'd danced tired before. Sick, heartbroken, once with a broken toe, and it had always been the same trick: feel the floor first, then let it carry you. But the floor today 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 garment factory and the bedrock of Manhattan one board in the whole world had been quietly taken out, and his feet 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. 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 the struck-bell thing from last night rose in his chest, and for one terrible second he felt his trainers get tight.

He stopped.

Just stopped. Stood in the middle of the studio 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.

"That's three," said Dash. "He gets one more and then it's a medical condition."

"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 corridor under her was slightly behind the music.

"A word."

. . .

The small studio had no windows. One mirror, a piano nobody played, 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, and how the elves had laughed.

"You stopped," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

He had a lie ready. He'd had it since the sixth landing. 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 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 train here, mornings, with me, in this room. You do your grandfather's night shifts. You sleep when you can. At the end of it, if you can get through a combination without changing shape, you go and stand on her stage. If you can't, you go back to mopping. Are you interested?"

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."

"Not golems?"

"Golems," said Ilse Varga, "are rocks with opinions. Seven o'clock."

She went out. He stood in the small studio 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 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

"Smaller," said Ilse Varga.

He made himself smaller. The trainers went back to being trainers.

"Again."

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 on the piano stool, not playing it, watching his feet, and every time the struck-bell thing rose in his chest she said it, not loudly, and he went small. Afternoons at the school with the mirrors, where Noor was learning the Halcyon choreography 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. The floor was still soft. Nothing came up the ramp. The rock that had been a golem had been taken away before dawn that first night and he'd never asked by whom.

On the tenth day Ilse said nothing at all. On the fourteenth she got up off the piano stool, which she had 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. He arrived at quarter to four. 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. A hoodie the size of a tent, 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 hadn't 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.

"You're the one who stopped."

"Ise told you."

"Ise 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 like 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."

"Is that a compliment?"

"From Ilse? It's practically a hug."

He did learn it by watching. He always had. He stood by the speaker and watched three dancers he'd never met move through a piece he'd never seen, and felt the church floor, old in the ordinary way, and felt her.

She wasn't old. That was the first thing. Everything he had ever felt through his feet had been old, that was what the feeling was, and she was the opposite. So new it came through the boards like light through a door, and he had no 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 had been full for an hour before the doors opened, in the street, in the rain. Ricky stood in the wings of a stage the size of a kitchen and understood what Ilse had meant about rooms where a person can see the whole crowd.

Five hundred faces, wet-haired, lit from the stage, 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 everyone had 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."

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.

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 like a man walking on a lake, and it held, it held, and then, forty seconds in, third row, left of centre, one beat slightly behind the music.

Old. Very old. Not wet and wrong like the golem. Old like a stone in a river is old, worn smooth, harmless, there. A man, at the edge of his vision, and he didn't 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, 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 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. Hoodie back on, poster off, 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 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 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, usu-

ally. 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."

"Lizard."

"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 one of them coming since I was eleven 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 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 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 soft place. The board someone had taken out from under the 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 mention to 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 plaster on his shoulders and the lamp at his feet, and felt, faint, down through Brooklyn, the place where the board was missing, and thought 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.

Later, when people asked what that year had been like, the year the girl on the poster turned into the girl on the side of the bus, he'd say: fast. You didn't notice the rooms getting bigger because you were looking down. Five hundred, 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. Then Chicago, three thousand, and he thought this is the biggest room in the world. 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 they were 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.

"What does he do when there isn't a door?"

"Finds one," said Rose.

And in every room, third row or fifth or fortieth, something old. Not always. But often enough that he learned the taste of it, the way you learn a city by its smells: the slow worn ones who'd stayed for the music and wanted nothing; the sharper ones who'd stayed for something else; once, in Detroit, one that wasn't 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.

"Ilse's people have him. Dance."

He danced.

He told her what he felt that she hadn't seen. It wasn't much. But there was always the one 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, a boy who felt one thing she couldn't, and a lie between them 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. Under it, SHE GOT IT SHE GOT IT SHE GOT IT, and a minute later, you should call her.

He was in a hotel in Cleveland with the loading crew coming up through the floor. He looked at the photo for a long time and didn't call her.

It was late, he told himself. In the morning there was a sound-check, and then 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 been very patient about it, arrived.

Stadiums. Halcyon was stadiums, sixty thousand people, a runway going out into the crowd like a pier, and Noor was going to be on it. 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 entirely his own doing. That didn't help at all.

He called 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 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."

She hung up. Not hard. Just exactly. He lay on the bed and felt the floor and it was soft, and for once that was the smaller problem.

. . .

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

"Easy."

"And what is hard?"

"Standing there."

"So stand there. She has a stadium, you have a soft floor and a lie, and you think that means she got the big thing." Chewing. "Menino, your sister has three degrees and a chair at a table nobody offered me. Last week she asked me what you thought about the floor. Because she trusts your feet over her books."

"She didn't say that."

"She didn't have to, she asked. 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." More chewing. "Call her back when you can say I'm proud of you and mean the whole sentence. Until then, work."

"What's the work?"

"Somebody will tell you," said Vovô, and hung up to eat properly.

Somebody was Ilse. She turned up in St. Louis with a paper cup she didn't drink from and walked 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 Grand Central's, 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. 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, 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. He

came up behind it and put one clawed hand, almost gently, on the smear of writing, and thought about water.

Vovô had said get inside the writing and he'd never understood it. Now, with his palm on the wet stone, he did. The writing was a drum somebody had wound up a hundred and forty years ago and forgotten. 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. She was in a hotel in Atlanta, first leg of Halcyon, 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 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 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 nearly the last, because there was so little else. Middle height. Middle everything. A face

that had been asked for directions its whole life. Headphones round his neck he never seemed to put on. He was called XO, 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, with the small quick knot 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.

Nothing.

Not the ordinary nothing of a new building or a young person. The basement's own old was all there, wood and damp and a hundred years of Lower East Side, and in the middle of it, where a man in a cardigan was pulling up a chair, a blank. Not a hole like Detroit. A hole is something. This was the absence of the question. His feet came down on it the way a foot comes down where a stair used to be.

He must have made a face, because the man looked up, mild.

"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."

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

She sang it. It was a small song, about someone leaving a room and the room noticing. Ricky stood by the door 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. The man in the cardigan said nothing while she sang, and nothing for a while after. Then he took the headphones off his neck and put them, for the first time, on, and listened back, and nodded once.

"Yes. That's the one. No biggi."

. . .

Broken Off came out on a Friday. By Sunday it was everywhere 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. By the end of the month there was a second bus, and then there was no bus, there was a plane. Teo had four people under him. There was a woman called Marguerite whose job was Rose's calendar and who spoke to Ilse 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 it, 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. The crowd was the whole world now. She could see all of it.

They announced the tour in March. Nineteen countries. The poster was her face and one word, and it was on the side of every bus in every city he'd ever been in. Dash sent 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 the only rule I've got." The small quick knot. "This one's further. Months. I can't see what, it's just 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.

"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." He'd promised Ilse, and he said it anyway, up there with her face on every bus in the world below them. "The floor. 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 for the first time it was a thing he watched her do on purpose, for him, so 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."

She didn't explain that. Noor was home for nine days between legs of Halcyon, restless in the way of someone who's already left. Dash was between everything, as usual. And Ricky had flown back from Cleveland with you're not in it in his ears, and a job 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. Berlin, Ibiza, and 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, back to back, the way twins are on flyers, except 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 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."

"Which one of us?" said Dash.

"Oh, I don't know that," said Melaina happily. "I only get the bad bit. Somebody, a skylight, glass everywhere. It's going to be awful." She pointed at him with the cable. "Not you, I don't think. You've got more of a stairs face."

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 down the middle 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, 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 and Dash about four minutes, was that they saw half of it each. Thalia saw the good. Every gig landed, every train caught, arrived in her head before it happened, and since nothing good could ever surprise her she went through life 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 lost love and skylight, and because she'd known since she was four that the bad was coming, the ordinary days between were a series of small miracles, and she greeted each one with her whole arm.

"How are you so happy," said Dash, the first night.

"I know!" said Melaina. "Isn't it wonderful? None of you have died yet!"

"We're getting a great review on Thursday," said Thalia, from the flight case, like someone reading out a will.

"Oh no," said Melaina, and squeezed her sister's hand. "I'm so sorry."

The job was simple too. Stand 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 let him imagine the rest.

On the second night, coming off stage with Thalia on a flight case and 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, bereaved.

"If I skip Vovô's shift Wednesday. Does anything come up the ramp?"

"You get a cold!" said Melaina, delighted. "A really bad one!"

"But nothing comes up the—"

"Your nose is going to be enormous."

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. 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 once, because it's not about you." He held out a coffee. It was too sweet. "Drink that. 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 and put a hand on his arm.

"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 what he'd say to Ilse, afterwards, and she'd 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 watch for anything with wings, and Teo's cousin had said pigeons? and he'd said bigger. He'd gone to Dash's flat at ten with a bin bag and found the aftermath of a party involving everyone Dash had ever met, and Dash on the sofa.

"I'm not helping. This is a character-building exercise."

"There's something in your bath."

"There's always something in my bath. Build some character."

He cleaned. Seven hours. Bottles and a broken chair and the thing in the bath, and by five 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 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. The telephone is a hundred years old and we are not. We come to the door of your sleep and we knock. Somebody should have told you." Her eyes. "They've taken the twins. Twenty minutes ago. Off

the stage, in front of four hundred people, who 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. Take your friends. Ilse had been looking at all three.

"Harpies," Noor said in the car, white-faced, quoting her mother. "Wings. 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. "It's always money, Ricardo. It's never anything cool."

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. It had a beat. It came in late, slightly behind the music, and it was hungry.

The twins were on the floor of the biggest silo, back to back, tied. Thalia looked bored. Melaina looked thrilled. And in the dark above them, in the broken tops of the silos, 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. 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, and he wasn't where they thought he was, and the first one hit the concrete where he'd been 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. 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 on the gantry beneath it, with the third harpy coming at him low across the silo, Noor below with a length of rebar and no fear in her at all, 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, 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, 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 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 a long way north, a single hard down-

ward shove, the way you feel someone jump on the floor of the room above. Not Brooklyn's soft. This had come from the end of a corridor.

Melaina had stopped smiling. It was the first time. She stood on the dock in her yellow with her arm still half-raised from waving the harpy 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 without a word. 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, so on a Tuesday in Cleveland he'd got on a plane, 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 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. 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 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.

"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 it happens to a different twenty thousand on a different night, and I don't 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, 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, 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 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 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 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 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. What she got was the floor. The whole building took a breath in and didn't let it out, and the air 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 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. 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, 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."

"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 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. Behind her, in a loose ring 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 and hadn't been allowed near her for three of them, by Teo, by Marguerite, by something in her face across a 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, 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.

"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 up at him then, 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 think she's one of theirs. Ask her. She's known since she was eleven and 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, 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 eleven, and 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, 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'm not a Krall, 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. 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 thinks it's a gift. Cables move, lamps miss, cars stop. Twenty-two people were in a foyer 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. 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. He put his hands flat on the carpet, 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. Around her, faint, continuous, the room being arranged. And under the arranging, for the first time, because a kobold had told him to listen for it, something else. Something that wasn't luck at all. Something 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 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 wholest 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 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. 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."

"Did they?"

"Noor put her coat on. Dash picked up his keys. Neither of them asked why." Ilse drank the cold coffee, which he had never seen her do. "That's what noticing looks like. You were asleep for it."

Kappa

The letter said Ihr Anspruch endet, which is a way of saying the money stops on the ninth.

He read it on the U8 between Hermannplatz and Boddinstraße, standing up, with somebody's rucksack in his back, and by Leinestraße he'd read it four times and it still said the same thing in the tone of an office being correct at you.

The job had gone the previous March. Fifty-one weeks, if you were counting, and he was, because the letter was. Restructuring, a word that means you. Sixty of them at once, a meeting at eleven he was no longer required to attend, and a sentence near the bottom thanking him for his contribution, which had been, for six years, the thing that stopped the thing for the hospitals falling over at three in the morning.

He'd been extremely calm about it for two months. He had a CV that made people ring back, and he'd genuinely believed, in April, that this would be a story he told at the next place. Then it was August. Then it was a year, and the applications had gone from ninety a month to eleven, and somewhere in there he'd stopped saying between jobs and started changing the subject.

He got off at Leinestraße because that was his stop, and stood on the platform while the train went, and the platform was soft.

That was the other thing, and it had started the same month the job did. He'd stopped mentioning it, because there are only so many times you can ask a person does the ground feel wrong to you before the person starts standing further away. It felt like a floor over a cellar, all of Berlin, as if one board had been taken out from under the whole city and nobody could find which one.

"Stress," Ana had said, the last time.

"It's not stress. It's the ground."

"The ground is stress. Everything is stress. I'm stress." She'd looked at the pavement, then at him. "Kappa. Have you eaten today?"

Ana was probably right. Ana was usually right, which was why he'd stopped telling her things.

. . .

Jonas didn't come that night, and didn't say he wasn't coming, which was the shape of Jonas.

It had been going on since March, if going on was the phrase, and it wasn't, because nothing about it went anywhere. Jonas came round. Jonas was funny and had good hands and looked at you as if you were the only thing in the room, and then went home to a flat in Friedrichshain he'd never been invited to, and answered texts in a rhythm that had nothing to do with when they were

sent. Three days. Then four in a row. Then nothing for a week, and then, at one in the morning, you up.

He was up. He was always up. He'd told Ana it was a thing.

"It's a thing," Ana had agreed. "It's a thing that happens to you at one in the morning."

Tonight he sat on the floor of the flat in Neukölln with the letter next to the rent notice, the second one, the one with Mahnung on it, and did the arithmetic he'd been not doing for three weeks. It came out the way arithmetic does. He texted Jonas the money stops on the 9th, watched the two grey ticks not turn blue, and put the phone face down.

Soft. Still. Everywhere.

Except, he'd noticed lately, and had told nobody: right under him. Right under wherever he happened to be sitting. That one place was fine. It was always fine. It was everything else.

. . .

The concert was Ana's idea, and Ana paid, and he let her, which was its own small humiliation. Columbiahalle, a Thursday, QueenL, whom he didn't like, exactly, but had listened to more than he'd admit, alone, at three in the morning, when the thing for the hospitals was holding.

One name. Like a hurricane. Two albums and a way of standing very still on a stage that made four thousand people lean.

"Back," he said, at the door.

"I want to see."

"You'll see. She's tall."

"She's not tall. She's just still." But Ana went to the back with him, and made up for losing by being kind about it, which was worse. The lights went down and the noise came up and QueenL walked out and stood at the microphone and didn't sing for a full ten seconds. Just stood. And looked, row by row, the way you'd look for someone in a crowd you'd been told would be there.

And the floor was fine.

Not under him. Everywhere. For the first time in a year the ground under four thousand people was simply a floor, solid all the way down, and he stood at the back of the Columbiahalle with Ana's hand on his arm asking if he was okay and couldn't answer, because the girl on the stage had stopped looking row by row.

She was looking at him.

He'd tell himself afterwards that it was the lights. That four thousand people every night thought she was looking at them. He'd tell himself that for about a day and a half. But he was there, and he knew, the way you know when someone across a room has

said your name without saying it, and what came across the hall from her wasn't a look at all. It was a door opening. Someone on the other side of it saying, without words, in a voice that was somehow also his own: oh. There you are. I didn't know there was another one.

Then she sang, and the door didn't close, and he stood inside it for an hour and forty minutes and didn't hear a single song.

"You look like something happened to you," said Ana, on the U-Bahn home.

"Nothing happened."

"Kappa."

"Nothing happened, Ana. I'm tired. The Amt letter came."

"The Amt letter came a week ago. You looked tired then. You look like this now." She waited. He didn't. "Fine. Stress."

"Stress," he agreed, and she looked at him the way she looked at the ground.

* * *

It played at ten past two.

He wasn't asleep. He was on the floor of the flat with his back against the sofa, in the dark, laptop shut, phone face down, feeling for the board, and the room lit up.

Not the light. A light. A rectangle of it standing in the middle of the room where the coffee table wasn't, the size of a door, pale and grainy and slightly the wrong colour, like a film projected onto a sheet by someone working from a description. In it, a lobby. Tile floor. A coffee machine. A plaque he couldn't read. And a man, middle height, middle everything, in a cardigan, with headphones round his neck, who looked out of the rectangle at him, directly at him, on the floor of a flat in Neukölln at ten past two in the morning, and said:

"Ah. There you are. Welcome back."

He didn't move. He couldn't have.

"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." The voice came from nowhere, from the room, from inside his own head. "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, like you've heard my voice in a dream you didn't finish. It's a normal reaction."

It was not a normal reaction. He was crying, he realised, without any idea why, the way you cry at an advert.

"You know me like this," said the man in the cardigan, gently. "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."

And it went on. All of it. Gods and monsters, and the ones who stayed, and a rule about enjoying life, and an agency, and a department of famous people, and a word he'd never heard, oasis, said the way you'd say the name of someone in the room. He sat on the floor and watched a trailer for something that didn't exist, projected by nobody, into a flat with a Mahnung on the table, and it was the most real thing that had happened to him in a year, and he thought, very clearly, in Ana's voice: this is it, then. This is what it looks like from the inside.

"One more thing before I let you go," said the man in the cardigan, near the end, "and meet Ricky, who at this point in the story has never heard of me." The grainy light flickered. For a second the man looked enormously tired and enormously fond. "People ask why we bother. And I say: look. A world is often just created for one."

The rectangle went out.

The room was dark. The floor was soft. The phone lit up once on the table, and it was Jonas, and it said sorry to hear that, and nothing else, and he didn't pick it up.

He sat there until it was light.

His name was Kappa, to the three people who still used it. It had been JB on the email. It had been, once, something else, on a form his grandmother had filled in, in a hospital, a long way from here, and she was the only one who'd ever said welcome back to

him like that, every time he walked through her door, as if he'd been gone for years.

He didn't know why he thought of her then. He didn't know anything. He got up, and put the kettle on, and stood in the one place in the world where the floor was fine, and waited for someone to come.

Berlin

"There's one in Berlin," said Marguerite.

"One what," said Ilse.

"I don't know. Neither does she."

The small studio at Varga's, the radiator ticking. Six weeks since Toronto. The tour cancelled, the movie pushed, the world sending flowers to a hotel that had stopped accepting them. The room had spent an hour arguing about what a soft floor meant and got nowhere, because nobody had a word for it and Ilse wouldn't let anyone invent one. Rose in the hoodie, always the hoodie now. Bob in the doorway. Frau Adler, flown in from a swimming bath with no water in it, on the piano stool with a thermos and the face of a woman who has sat on a council for a long time and has decided to stop.

Marguerite had her phone in her hand and wasn't looking at it. "QueenL played the Columbiahalle on Thursday. She rang me Friday at four in the morning, which she has never done, and said: there was one in the room. At the back. Old. Older than anything. I looked at him and he looked at me and it was like—" She stopped. "She didn't finish the sentence. She said, I've never felt another one. I didn't know there were other ones. And then she said, the floor was fine, Marguerite, the whole hall, for an hour and forty minutes, and hung up."

The radiator ticked.

"Another one," said Frau Adler, slowly. "Another what."

Nobody answered her. Rose was looking at Ricky. Ricky was looking at the floor, soft for a year, and thinking that four thousand miles east there had been, for an hour and forty minutes, a room where it wasn't.

"Ricardo," said Ilse Varga. "How soon can you fly."

. . .

Berlin was softer.

He'd been told, and it was still a shock, the way cold water is when you've been told it's cold. He came out of the airport with Rose in the sunglasses and Bob behind them refusing a trolley, put his feet down, and the whole city gave, very slightly. Frau Adler had said it's worse in the old places. She hadn't said the old places were leaning on it hardest.

She'd given them a key to the side door of the bath in Prenzlauer Berg, and for six nights that was home: Rose and Ricky in the changing cubicles, Bob in the deep end of the drained pool, where he said the tiles reminded him of home. Frau Adler sat with a lamp and did not explain herself.

"Nothing is wrong with the floor," she said, the first night, pouring. "That's the council's position. I'd like you to know I sit on the

council, and it is not my position, and I told them so on Tuesday, and they told me to sit down."

"What did you do?"

"I sat down. I'm old." She screwed the lid on. "Then I flew to New York. Drink your tea."

On the second night Charlie came.

She'd been in Rome for a month, doing something with the council and the ground under the Forum that she described, over Frau Adler's thermos, as reading. She hugged her brother for a long time in the shallow end of an empty swimming pool and then said, to the room, "Rome's the same. Soft. Worse than here, actually. The council's position on Rome is that Rome is fine." She sat on the tiles next to Bob, who moved up for her without being asked, which he had done for nobody. "Hello. You're the kobold. You came out of a hill."

"I did."

"I've read everything anyone's ever written about your people and all of it's wrong, isn't it."

"All of it," said Bob, delighted.

She stayed four days. She read the U-Bahn maps against something from 1902, found two tunnels that shouldn't exist, walked both, found nothing, and said so cheerfully. And on the last night, when Ricky came in wet through from Sonnenallee with one step

in his legs he couldn't explain, she listened without interrupting, sat quietly for a while, and said:

"I couldn't have felt that. I want you to hear me say it. I've got the books and the languages and the chair, and I'd have walked up that street and felt a street." She pushed her hair back the way their mother did. "You found a man under a lid, Ricardinho, with your feet, in the rain. Write it down. Every detail, tonight, before you sleep, because you'll smooth it by tomorrow and the smooth version's no use to anyone."

He wrote it down. It's in the file at the Zentrale now, in his handwriting, which is terrible.

. . .

They looked for him the way you look for a word.

Rose stood in crowds. That was her half. Alexanderplatz at rush hour, the market at Maybachufer, the platform at Kottbusser Tor, sunglasses on, Bob at her elbow in a jacket that said SECURITY in a font Teo would have hated. She looked two days out, face by face, and saw nothing. Not nothing. Everything. Berlin had more things that had stayed than New York, older ones, a city that had been very badly hurt and liked being alive anyway, and every one of them turned to look at the famous girl, and she saw every one of them coming, and none of them was him.

"He's not in the crowd," she said, on the third night, in the deep end. "I've looked at forty thousand people. It's like he's in the one place I can't—"

"Can't what?"

"Look." She took the sunglasses off. "QueenL said the floor was fine. The whole hall. That's not a person in a crowd. That's a person the crowd was standing on."

Ricky walked. That was his half. The U-Bahn tunnels under Alexanderplatz, wet and long. Tempelhof at dawn, a whole airfield of soft, so wide he could feel the edges of the city give. Neukölln at two in the morning, street by street, the way he'd walked Grand Central.

And on the fourth night, on Sonnenallee, outside a bakery that was closed, with the trams gone and the rain just starting, he found it.

Not it. Him. For one step. His foot came down and the ground was solid all the way down, a jolt up through the arches like a stair that is there when you'd braced for it not to be, and what came up through it was older than the council, older than the golem at Grand Central, older than anything he'd ever stood on, and also, on the same string, so new it came up like light under a door. Rose's beat. Both at once, like a river meeting the sea.

Then his other foot came down, and it was gone.

He put his foot back. Nothing. Soft. Berlin. He got his hands on the pavement, the way he'd put them on the writing in St. Louis, and there was something, faint, still: a drum stopped on purpose by someone who wanted quiet to work in. Not a beat. A hand held flat over a drum.

He'd felt one thing like it before: the blank under the lamp shop. But that was an absence. This was protection.

"Someone's keeping him," said Frau Adler, at four in the morning, in the deep end, when he told her. She poured. "Something old. Older than us. I've felt it once or twice over the years and never known what it was, a stillness somewhere in Neukölln, like a stone in a pocket. I thought it was a leftover. Something that stayed." She drank. "It's not a leftover. It's a lid. Whatever's under it has been there a long time, and it woke up on Thursday for an hour and forty minutes, and the lid went back on."

"Can we lift it?"

"You can try. I wouldn't. A thing kept that carefully, that long, by something that old, is being kept from something. And you don't know what." She looked at him with the council's eyes. "The girl on the runway was kept, too. By hills. Ask the kobold how that went for the people who came looking."

. . .

They went home on the seventh day with nothing.

Not nothing. Ricky had one step on Sonnenallee he'd feel in his sleep for the rest of his life. Rose had forty thousand faces, none of them his, and a sentence from QueenL she kept turning over: I didn't know there were other ones. Bob had a jacket that said SECURITY and would not give it back. And Frau Adler, at the airport, said the last thing, the one Ricky would carry across the water and put down on the floor of his grandfather's school like a bag he couldn't open.

"Whoever he is, the floor is fine under him. Only under him. Everywhere else is soft, and has been since a night a year ago that you felt and I felt and the council says didn't happen." She screwed the lid on. "A floor doesn't go soft because something's gone, Ricardo. It goes soft because something's moved. Something that was under all of us got up and walked to Neukölln and sat down. And now it's waiting for someone to come."

"For what?"

"I'd say," said Frau Adler, "to be welcomed back."

On the plane Rose slept, for once, hoodie over her face. Somewhere over the Atlantic she sat up with her eyes open and her hands in the small quick knot and said, to nobody, in a voice that wasn't quite her own, "Oh. There you are," and lay back down, and didn't remember it in the morning.

Ricky remembered it. Seven miles up, the floor of the plane was soft, and four thousand miles behind them and getting further

there was one place where it wasn't.

Something had just said there you are to it. Nobody had said it back.

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. He'd meant to say nothing came up the ramp, which was true, and Berlin was a waste of a week, 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 to feel about. What came out, on Canal Street, in the grey, was that.

"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 in Berlin I can't find and a sister who does all of it better in three languages 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 girl, if she'll come. Sit."

"That's not an answer."

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

. . .

Rose came. Bob came with her, because Bob went where she went now, and stopped in the doorway of the school on the grounds that you don't walk into a dragon's room, you wait to be asked.

"Come in, kobold," said Vovô, from his stool.

Bob came in and sat on the floor by the door like a rock that had been placed there, and looked at the shelf.

"Something's wrong with the shelf," he said.

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

"It's warm," said Bob. "I can feel it from here. I thought it was the dryers. It's not the dryers."

Ricky put his hand on it. It was warm. It had been warm, he realised, his whole life; he'd felt it through his feet every day for eleven years, slightly behind the music, and filed it under the things we don't ask, and never once put his hand on it.

It was warm the way an egg is warm.

"Vovô."

His grandfather looked at the shelf, and at the kobold on the floor, and at Rose by the window with her sunglasses off, and at Ricky with his hand on the brass, and he put his 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 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 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. It's been warmer every night since you came back from Berlin."

"Why?"

Vovô looked east, at the wall, as if the wall weren't there.

"Because he's awake," he said. "I think. Whoever you couldn't find. I think it's been waiting eleven years for someone, somewhere, to wake up."

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

Rose was asleep on the mat by the window with the hoodie over her face. Bob was not asleep, because kobolds don't, but he'd gone still the way rocks are still. 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, and he thought, this is it, this is the sitting, this is what he meant, and then Rose sat up.

Not awake. Not asleep. She sat up with the hoodie half over her face and her eyes open on the east wall and not seeing it, and her hands came up the way you'd hold something you'd just been handed, the small quick knot in both of them at once, and she said, very clearly, in a voice that wasn't quite her own, "Oh. There you are."

And the floor of the school went loud.

For one second, from a very long way east, the board that had been missing from the whole world for a year was solid under everything, the building, the block, a beat coming up through Ricky's feet so old and so new and so much that he was on his knees before he'd decided to be. The mirrors hummed. The bamboo sticks nobody used went over in a clatter. Bob said "Oh—" 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 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 under the lamp shop, like the place where a stair should be, except that it was here, in the dryer heat, and it was looking at him.

It had a beat. That was the thing. He'd felt every kind there was, old and new and split and hungry and absent, and this was none of them. This was his. Exactly on the music, not behind, not ahead, for the first time in his life a drum that was on the beat, and he understood, on his knees 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."

"You did. Somebody saw it before you did it." It 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 Rose, from the mat. She was awake now, properly, hoodie off her face, looking at the shelf the way she'd once looked at a lamp on a floor. "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 everywhere, and the floor of the school had just gone loud enough to be heard a very long way off by the kind of people who like to know things before other people. The dryer heat went cold, all at once, as if the machines below had stopped. Then the boards went wet.

Writing. Ricky felt it before he saw it, a smear 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 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 turning into a

net, with the face he'd worn at Grand Central when he put his hand on the golem.

"This is very old," said Vovô, quietly. "Older than the rock. Somebody has kept this a long time for exactly tonight." He looked at Ricky. "Get the girl 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 Rose by the arm and was hauling her onto the sill with the saints looking down, and Bob was already there, somehow, between the sill and the room, and the small thing on the shelf was making a high thin bell-sound of pure alarm, and the net 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 had a lanyard on, as if she'd come from an office, and they walked in over the 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 a hand out 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 that 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, the way growing hurts, that this was the life. Not instead of one. This. The key and the shift and the girl 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. 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. But there was a thing the size of a loaf three feet from him, and a kobold, and a girl, and fire would kill them as surely as the net. So he got low. He got his hands on the writing, the way he'd put his hand on the golem's face in St. Louis, and 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 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 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 climbing toward the shelf lost their tension like a string let go.

The one with the lanyard stopped smiling.

And Vovô became a dragon.

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 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. The net tore. The three

people in good coats went down 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 Rose's hands, when the room was a room again. It had climbed there on its own while the dancing happened, and sat in the cup of her palms blinking with its whole body, and she was looking down at it from two days in the future and finding, for once, nothing there but what was in front of her.

"It's warm," she said.

"It's always been warm."

"It's pointing." She turned her hands, slowly, a quarter turn, and back, and the small thing in them turned with her like a needle and settled, facing the east wall. "Ricky. It's pointing."

"Berlin," said Ricky.

"Berlin," said the thing on the sill, trying the word out. "Is that a person?"

"It's a city. There's a person in it."

"Oh. Yes. Him." It blinked. "I can feel where he is. Like a hand in the dark. Is that normal?"

"Nothing's normal," said Rose and Ricky and Bob, at the same time, and the thing on the sill made a sound it would later insist was not a laugh.

"It has a name," said Vovô, from his stool. He'd been an old man again for ten minutes and looked every one of the years he didn't talk about. "My grandmother said. The one time she talked about it. She said, if it ever opens, its name is XO. Don't ask me why. It's always been 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.

"That's the right name," he said, which was true, and which was all he knew.

Vovô 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 girl holding it, whatever the kobold says. So were three children in a

train station a year ago, and a girl on a runway, and a man in Berlin you couldn't find. 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, 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 room full of people I'd never met because it was the first

thing in my mouth. I don't know who it was for. Not them, I think. Someone east. I'm trying not to let it 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 girl who sees two days out, and I'm pointing east, at a city called Berlin, at a man in it whose name I don't know, and I can feel where he is the way you can feel where your own hand is in the dark, and I always will, 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. 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.

The zoo

I should explain about the network, because it's how I know the next part, and I wasn't there. I wasn't anywhere. I was in a brass egg on a shelf, which is not a place, it's a wait.

Dragons talk to each other without talking. That's the whole of it. Not words; more like the feeling you get when someone in the next room is thinking about you. Ricardo has it with his grandfather, a hand on the back of the neck from across a river. His grandfather had it with his mother, and so on back, a line of hands, and when I came out of the brass I came out into the middle of that line like a phone switched on in a house where everyone's already talking. The old ones call it the family. Ricardo calls it the network, because he's nineteen. Vovô doesn't call it anything, because you don't name the air.

Most of what comes down it is nothing. Weather. Somebody's knee. But some of it is old, and some of it is his, the one from the start, the one in the cardigan, because he was on the line before any of us. What follows is a thing he put there a very long time ago, for whoever came next. I'm the whoever. I've been carrying it round for nine days trying to decide whether it's mine to tell.

It's about a zoo. I'll tell it the way it came. Briskly, because it isn't nice, and the old one wasn't a lingerer.

First: we were hunted. Everything after is because of that.

A thing that can feel where another thing is, across a room, a river, a sea, is the most valuable thing in the world to anyone who wants to know what's coming, and the most dangerous thing in the world to anyone with something to hide, and the world has always had more of the second kind. So, hunted. Not for the fire. Nobody ever cared about the fire. Fire's easy; any idiot can learn fire; you've met Ricardo. For the line. For the family. For the thing that comes down the network that you don't name.

Second: in the old country, the old old one, China or Japan or the place before they were either, some men read about us. Scholars. Alchemists. The kind who sit in a room full of books about ancient magic and get an idea, and the idea was: if we can't have a dragon, we can build one.

They'd read that the gift lived in the head. So they went looking in heads. A tissue, they thought, a piece of the brain the size of a thumbnail, where the family lived. And they took it out of people. I'm not going to say how, because the old one didn't, and he was there, and if he wouldn't say it then I won't. They took it out of people and put it into animals. Dogs first. Then birds, because birds see further. Then anything. For a hundred years, more, in a walled place with a lot of rooms, they took the thing that feels out of one creature and pressed it into another and waited for it to feel.

It didn't. Not for a very long time. What they got, mostly, were dead animals and sadder men.

Third, and this is the bit nobody puts on the poster: you don't do a thing for a hundred years without learning something, even if it's the wrong thing. What they learned first wasn't a dragon. It was how to watch. Rooms of watchers. Animals with a little of somebody in them, not enough to feel, just enough to look, and report, and a system for the reports, and men to read them. The old one says that was the first surveillance system in the world, and that everything since, the famous people, the department, the posters on the sides of buses, is that room with better lighting. He says it fondly. He was fond of most things by the end.

Fourth: one day one of them worked.

Not because they'd got the tissue right. They never got the tissue right. It worked because the animal was lucky. That's the old one's word. A mouse, he says, though the record doesn't say mouse, the record says small. Something small with a thumbnail of somebody in it, in a room full of dead attempts, and a spirit passing through, one of the ones who'd stayed, one of the ones who'd enjoyed life and left a piece behind, and the small thing caught it. The way a net catches a fish it wasn't set for. It woke up, and it felt, and it looked at the men, and the men understood that they'd made something they had no name for.

That was the first one. There were more. Not many. Each one lucky. Each one a net that happened to be in the water when

something swam through.

. . .

Fifth: the part nobody planned.

You can't do a thing like that for generations, in a walled place, with the spirits of the country passing through it like weather, without the country noticing. The old one says it the way you'd say water finds a way. After enough generations of lucky animals in that place, the ordinary animals, the ones nobody had touched, the mice in the walls and the cats in the yards and the cranes on the roofs, started to feel. On their own. No tissue, no thumbnail, no men in a room. Born with it. As if the gift had got tired of being stolen and simply decided to be everywhere.

The prince called them the ninja. He was a child when he named them, and he thought it was funny, and it was, a little: a kingdom's worth of animals that could feel where you were and never once told anyone. The era of the ninja, he called it, to the old one, with enormous satisfaction, when he was eight and the old one was whatever the old one was, and the two of them were standing in a doorway looking at a room.

Because he showed him the zoo.

. . .

Sixth: the zoo was a copy of the Forbidden City.

That's the thing that comes down the line clearest, clearer than the men or the mice. Red walls, gold roofs, courtyards inside courtyards, the whole thing rebuilt smaller and somewhere else. A palace for the animals that had been given a thumbnail of a person, and for the people who were about to be.

Because that was the rule of the place, by then. Nearly everyone who lived there went through it. The procedure. You came to the zoo as a person and you left as something that could feel, and what you left as depended on luck, and luck, the old one says, mostly meant mouse.

The mice were in the lower section. A floor under the floor, under the biggest hall, and the hall was full of ancient things: bronzes, bells, stones with writing on, the oldest objects the kingdom owned, arranged in a ring round the centre, and in the centre, under all of it, the mice. The prince explained it the way a child explains a thing he's been told. The old things keep the bad spirits out. You put what you're keeping in the middle and you put age round it, because age is heavy and spirits don't like heavy, and then whatever passes through the palace at night, whatever's out there enjoying life and leaving pieces of itself, can't get in to the small things in the middle and wake them up wrong.

"Chuan," the old one says he said. Just that. The prince's name, or the word for what the place was for; the old one was never sure which, and asked, and the boy said it again, Chuan, and looked at the ring of bronzes, and looked at the floor under the floor, and

said the thing that's been sitting in my head for nine days like a stone in a pocket:

"We didn't fully understand it. One day we left the door open."

Seventh: a dog got in.

That's the part that comes down the line with the fewest words and the most weight, the way the worst things do. Not a monster. Not a spirit. Not anything the ring of bronzes had been built to keep out. A dog, an ordinary one, from the yards, that wandered through a door somebody had forgotten to shut, and went down to the floor under the floor, and did what dogs do in a room full of mice.

It killed a few. Maybe a dozen. That should have been the end of it.

But the mice were linked. That was what they'd been made for; that was the whole point of the thumbnail and the luck and the spirit caught in the net. Every one of them was on the line with every other one, the way I'm on the line with Vovô and Ricardo, and when the first one died, suddenly, in the dark, with teeth in it, the shock went down the line into all of them at once. Not the news of it. The feeling. The teeth. And the next one felt it and stopped, the way a heart stops when it's been told to, and its stopping went down the line too, and the next, and the next, one small death mirrored a hundred times in a hundred small bodies that had never been bitten, until the floor under the floor was

quiet, and the dog stood in the middle of it, confused, with a dozen on its conscience and hundreds at its feet.

The old one calls it the first thing anyone ever learned about the network that they didn't want to know: it carries everything. Joy, weather, somebody's knee. And the end. It carries the end, at the speed of feeling, to everyone who's listening, and there's no door for that.

He says the prince stood at the top of the stairs and looked down at the quiet floor, eight years old, and said, "That was our first failure." Meaning his. Meaning the zoo's. Meaning the whole idea of building a thing that feels. And that he never once, in all the years after, in all the years of being Kaiser, said my. Always our. The old one loved him for that. I can feel it on the line, nine days old, like warmth off a wall.

That's where it stops. Two boys at the top of a stair in a palace that was a copy of a palace, looking down at a ring of old things round a floor gone quiet, and one of them saying one day we left the door open, in the past tense, at eight, having just learned what a door is for.

. . .

Eighth, and this part didn't come down the line. This part Vovô told me, on the stool, when I asked why the pigeons on Canal Street look at me like that.

The ninja are still here.

They never went away. They spread. A kingdom's worth of animals that could feel where you were became a world's worth, over the centuries, quietly, water finding a way, and today, if you know where to look, they're everywhere the watching is done. Police. Border posts. The secret services of every country that has one, which is every country. A dog at an airport that finds what it's looking for a little too often. A cat in an embassy. Somebody's parrot. The old one says every government on earth has a room somewhere with something small in it that feels, and most of them don't know what they've got, and the few that do don't say.

Not the Krallen. Never the Krallen. The old one is very firm about this on the line, firmer than he is about almost anything, and I've worked out why, and it's the closest thing to snobbery I've felt from him. The ninja are extraordinary. I won't pretend otherwise; some of them can feel further than I can, and I'm a compass. But they didn't learn it. They caught it, the way the first mouse caught a spirit, and everything they've done with it since they do the way a leaf does things. They lean on the chi of the place they're in, the nature of it, the weather and the water and the old stone, and let it move through them, and call that a gift. They don't shape it. They never once take hold of it and turn it, the way a dragon does with a floor, the way Ricardo did on his knees on a net of writing. Such amateurs, the old one says, fondly, the way you'd say it about a child who's built something impressive out of things

that were lying around. And then, less fondly: and look what it cost.

Because it did cost. A thing that can feel, in a room that belongs to a government, gets used the way everything rare and gifted gets used. And for a very long time the dragons could do nothing about it. Our hands were tied. That's the phrase that comes down the line, in Vovô's voice and his mother's and hers. We were the hunted thing. We were the reason the room existed. A dragon walking into a government to complain about the treatment of psychic animals would have walked out as an exhibit. So for centuries we watched the ninja get used and said nothing, and that's another kind of failure, and nobody on the line calls it my either.

It changed when the Alliance went in. Not by force. By paperwork, which the old one says is worse. After the big hero of their time went missing, the one every country had leaned on without admitting it, the one whose absence left a hole the size of a government in every government, the Alliance walked into that hole and sat down. Integrated, is the word. Councils inside ministries. Old things with lanyards. And the rooms with the small feeling things in them got, for the first time, someone standing in front of them.

Who the big hero was, and where they went, the line doesn't say. The old one goes quiet there, the way Vovô goes quiet at the window. I have a feeling about it, the way I have feelings about most things I'm not supposed to have feelings about yet. I'm keeping it for later.

Ninth. I've thought about this a lot, for something nine days old.

The old one says the Kaiser was right. He says it the way you'd say the sky is up. And I used to think, in the first few days, when I had all his words and none of the meanings, that it was about the door. The other door. The one in the story he never quite tells, the one that opened and took him. But I've had the zoo on the line for nine days now, and I don't think it's that door. I think it's this one. I think a boy of eight stood in a doorway and looked at a room full of things that had been made to feel by men who didn't understand feeling, and said we didn't fully understand it, and meant: you can't build this. You can only be born with it, or lucky. And if you keep trying to build it, one day you'll build something that feels, and it'll feel the door, and it'll open it.

And the old one, who was a universe, and young, and made of wanting to see, didn't listen. Because he wanted to see. And I think, on the line, in the part he never quite says, that what came through the other door was a dog. A bigger one. And that it found the whole world linked, and the world felt the teeth, all at once, and went quiet, and that's what soft is. That's what the floor has been for a year. A hundred small bodies that have never been bitten, waiting to find out whether they've stopped.

I'm a compass. I point at things. I'm pointing at a man in Berlin, and at the people in good coats, and, lately, faintly, at something I can't name, in the old country, under a floor, in the middle of a

ring of ancient things. It's very small. It's very still. It feels, on the line, like a door somebody left open a very long time ago and never went back to close.

I haven't told Ricardo. I'm telling you.

No biggi.

No biggi

Things that happened after, in no order, because that's how they happened, and because I was in a shoebox for some of them.

Rose went to Los Angeles on the Thursday for the movie, with Bob, and with me, in a shoebox with holes in it, carried through security as an emotional support animal. She dared anyone to ask. Nobody asked. I said welcome back to a customs officer. 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 called Marguerite 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; I felt it through the cardboard. 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. I knew. I'm not anyone.

Noor finished Halcyon and came home and stood in the big studio at Varga's, the one with the wall of windows and the wall of mirrors, and said to Ricardo, "Sixty thousand people and none of them saw me. Explain that."

"That's the job," he said.

"Then I want the job."

"You've had it since the casting," said Ilse, in the doorway with a cold coffee. "Don't be late."

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

The council met, in a drained pool in Prenzlauer Berg, and Frau Adler stood at the top of the ladder with her thermos and said, "Nothing is wrong with the floor. That has been this council's position for a year. I'd like the record to show that a boy in bad shoes stood on Sonnenallee in the rain and found the one place where it's right, and that we told him to sit down." 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."

The people in good coats did not come back to Canal Street. Bob said they wouldn't. Bob said they didn't need to, now that there was a thing in the world that pointed (me), and they'd simply go and stand where it pointed and wait. Ricardo said then we go there first, and Bob gave him the boot face and said, "Yes. That's the next bit. That's not this bit."

And the world stayed soft. It was soft everywhere, Frau Adler said Rome was like walking on a mattress, and it did not get better and it did not get worse, because somewhere in Neukölln a man

nobody could find was sitting on the one board that had never moved, under a lid something very old had put there, waiting for someone to come.

. . .

Ricardo 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. A Sunday, the school above the laundromat, three in the afternoon with the light coming in the right direction and the dryer heat moving over the boards, and nobody watching except me, on the shelf, home from Los Angeles in my shoebox, and an old man on a stool pretending to be asleep. He was not asleep. I can feel his knee.

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 a week in Berlin and a step on Sonnenallee and me being born on a shelf to find the wrong part, which was that this included the Sunday. Included the three in the afternoon. Included a floor that was soft everywhere except one place four thousand miles away, and a small warm thing that could feel exactly where that place was, and would, when it was time, take him there.

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," I said.

"I'm not."

"You are. Somebody saw it before you did it. I still don't know who." I blinked; I do it with my whole body; I'm working on that. "I think it's him. The one east. I think he's seen all of this already, from the floor of a room, and doesn't know what it was."

He tripped. On nothing. On the floor of his grandfather's school, on a Sunday, on the beat, or nearly. 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, from a lobby I've never seen, 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 is a man in Berlin nobody can find. 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, somewhere, and I point at them too, and 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, a dragon in slippers, a dragon in bad shoes, a girl, a kobold, two friends, a council in a swimming pool and a woman with a thermos.

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.

I point east. I've pointed east since the second I was born. There's a man there whose name I don't know, sitting on the one solid board in the world, under a lid something old put there, and he's seen a trailer for all of this, and he thinks he's going crazy, and he isn't. He's right. Somebody should tell him. I think it's going to be us.

People ask why we bother. And I say: look. A world is often just created for one.

I don't know what that means yet.

But what should we say. No biggi.

One more thing, and I only know it because the line goes quiet in exactly one place in this city, and I've learned to listen to the quiet.

In a basement on the Lower East Side, under a shop that sold lamps, a man in a cardigan took the headphones off his neck and put them, for the second time in his life, on.

He listened back to something. Not a song. A voice, his own, saying ah, there you are, and a lobby behind it that didn't exist yet in any way a camera could find, and a coffee machine thinking. He listened to all of it, to the end, to no biggi, and nodded once, the way he had for the girl, and pressed a key.

"East," he said, to nobody, to the blank in the drum where he sat. "Again. And this time, put his name in."

Four thousand miles away, on the floor of a flat in Neukölln, at ten past two in the morning, a rectangle of grainy light stood up in the middle of a room where the coffee table wasn't, and a man who'd been fine until recently looked up from the arithmetic, and the man in the cardigan looked out at him, tired, fond, and said:

"Ah. There you are, Kappa. 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.