

“Fuck, kid. Where did we leave off? I don’t think I’ll ever have it figured out.”

“Auntie Apple?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I think we’ll be alright, yeah?”

“Yeah, kid. Sure. Read that last one back to me again.”

CHAPTER 11: ONION RINGS

“Is that a normal person stare or am I getting special attention ‘cause I’m trans?”

“Sweetie, you’re getting the totally *abnormal* hot lady stare.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Why does it look like the ‘hot lady I want to murder’ stare?”

“Oh, that’s just men, honey.”

Outside the window, the rain continued to fall. Day after day it fell. Without fail. Seemed like some time since the last drought. Yet here was Apple, once again pouring over the data that her old colleague Alice had smuggled out of the weather database over at her corporate archive job. And the numbers didn’t lie.

“Tell me again what this column means.”

“Um,” said Alice, grabbing the printout from Apple’s hand, tearing it a bit at one of its perforated edges before Apple let go of the thin margin of spoke holes that brought back childhood memories of her family computer thinking and printing and printing and thinking, always thinking, printing, thinking, printing. “This one?” asked Alice.

“No,” said Apple, leaning over, pointing and tapping.

“Oh, that’s the citywide average. But those wind speeds though. That’s not, well, tell me again why you wanted this data?”

“Oh,” said Apple. “I just like to be thorough when I’m working a case. Which I’m not. Officially. Working. I’m still not licensed here. And nobody is paying me, that’s for damn sure. You sure you don’t want any onion rings?” Apple asked, wiping her greasy fingers on her monogrammed napkin. The wind outside howled. A personless hat tumbled down the sidewalk, a hatless person chasing behind in its wake, an inverted umbrella in hand, a slight grimace almost visible on their face.

“Honey, that’s alright, you just go ahead and be vague. I always take care of my sisters. Just maybe, you know, let me know if you’re getting me involved in something nefarious or what have you.” Alice’s eyes twinkled. “That way maybe I can enjoy it more.” Apple smiled. The flashback ended.

Apple Hippopotamus yawned and listened to the city noise that enveloped her apartment. It was YAWN. It was well past her bedtime and YAWN. YAWWWWN. Apple licked at her teeth and sucked in the chocolate-y aftertaste of spontaneously-baked midnight brownies. *Goddamn it, thought Apple, it just doesn’t make any sense. None of this makes any sense.* A decadent smile appeared on her face as the thought of sleep

entered her mind. “Mmmmmmm. Sleep.” Apple thought about the distance between her spot on the living room floor and her comfortable bed. “Sigh.” *It doesn’t make any fucking sense*, she thought. End scene.

CHAPTER 12: SOMETIMES THAT'S ALL YOU GET

No, no, we push on. Still. We keep making our plans for the future. Our probably fabulous plans that for some reason at the moment don't really excite us that much. What is it we want? More characters? A bit of character development for specific previously introduced characters? A whole lot more sex and romance? Any sex at all? Gods we're thirsty. For justice. Come on now, powers that be. Give us our justice (and sex).

Do you remember when things? Goodness gracious, right? Sometimes, that's all you get.

CHAPTER 13: GIRL, YOU'LL BE A WOMAN SOON

Alice Year-of-the-Boar sat in her corporate office, sorting papers to file in the corporate filing cabinets.

"Ms. Year-of-the-Boar?"

"Alice. Call me Alice, honey."

"Um, okay," said the baby-faced intern who Alice had used her influence to get hired at the request of her old friend, Apple Hippopotamus. "I finished cross-referencing that data that you asked for."

"Any problems?" asked Ms. Year-of-the-Boar.

"No. I mean," said the intern, "other than getting soaked on the way here this morning. Thanks again for lending me these pants," she said, glancing down at the pants that were three sizes too big. "It seems like this rain is never gonna let up, huh?"

Alice Year-of-the-Boar momentarily drifted off into the past, or maybe the past drifted into Alice Year-of-the-Boar. And here she was, thinking she was living in the future. But no, some things you thought were gone are there, still. Only slightly different this time around. Funny that.

"Ms. Year-of-the-Boar? You okay?"

"Call me Alice, honey."

"I'm moving out," said Maggie Brighton Street to her sister, Apple.

"But you just got here," replied Apple.

"I know, but a space just opened up in the commune and..."

"Oh," said Apple, feeling sad but supportive. "That's good. That'll be good."

"Yeah."

The sisters looked into each other's eyes, feeling sisterly feelings.

"I can still help with—"

"No," interrupted Apple. "You do your thing. I'll be fine. Some of the pieces are starting to fall into shape. And it's not like I'm *all* alone here."

"Come on," said Maggie, grabbing Apple's hands. Let's go find Zorba, see if he'll feed us breakfast."

"Okay ladies, two slices of orzo pie."

"Thank you, Zorba," chirped an annoyingly perky Maggie.

Apple rolled her eyes. "What's an orzo pie?" she muttered under her breath.

"Looks *good*," said Maggie, elbowing her sister.

"Everything I've been making is tasting good," Zorba boasted matter-of-factly. "I've really been in tune with the machinery lately."

"Well? How did you like today's special?"

Apple wiped her sloppy mouth with the back of her hand. She took in a deep breath, eyes rolling up towards the heavens. "Sigh."

Zorba, pleased with Apple's visible pleasure, smiled and nodded. "You want to smoke?"

Apple ran her hands down the length of Maggie's purple dress. "Your clothes are just about dry!" she yelled. No response. Apple looked up to the skies, the capricious skies that couldn't quite seem to decide whether to be sunny or gray. She walked inside.

"That was the last load," said Maggie, sitting amidst a semicircle of mostly packed bags. "You sure you'll be alright?"

"Oh, sister," said Apple. "I'm totally an old, mature, adult human being. I'll be *fine*."

"I'm leaving you my extra telephone."

"Sure."

"I'll be seeing you."

"Sure."

VROOM VROOM.

"Oh," said Apple. "The mail truck is here."

"You look cute today." Oh, that was nice of the hostess to say. It was true, though. All day long Apple was feeling those lookin' good vibes. And here she was, on her second costume change of the day, everything pulled out of the dirty laundry pile, getting compliments still. Things had been going pretty much okay lately, which Apple appreciated, though probably not as much as she should have, considering the state she was in not too long ago. But here she was again, back in a bit of a groove, but maybe kind of bored? Her banchan arrived and Apple smiled her best smile.

Well, she certainly knew how to appreciate the finer things in life, that's for sure. Apple was most definitely settling back into her old neighborhood. It was as if she never left or something. Some kind of relationship she had with this place. This beautiful, beautiful place. Which was a city of some kind?

On her way home, Apple had a conversation with one of the library workers who was closing up early it seems, due to some sort of city-wide interlibrary training day. Yet another person Apple had struck up a relationship with that gave Apple those pleasant feelings of being part

of a place-based community. And, feeling neighborly as she was, upon the approach of her dwelling, Apple kept walking right past her own door, and rounded the corner and knocked on her neighbor's. KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. Hello? KNOCK KNOCK. Are you there? Hello?

CHAPTER 14: WITH FEELING NOW

Apple Hippopotamus stabbed at the crevices of her teeth with her ravenous tongue. She had many plans this day, this day in the future in which she existed amid many varied apocalypses. A bird twittered in the distance. It was time to get started.

“Oh my goodness, Apple,” said Apple to herself after finishing her lonely dinner that she whipped up in a jiffy and ate and then washed all the dishes and then sat down on the floor. “That was so goooooood.” Apple sat down on the floor after a long day of being out and about doing stuff, punctuated by a short nap after lunching on some really good leftovers that she found in her food contraption. Have we mentioned that Apple was probably a human that lived in the future? Always a step ahead, Apple consistently grew tired of all the other probably humans that seemed so hopelessly stuck in the present. Catch up, already! is probably a thought that Apple had sometimes maybe. But where were we? Your guess is as good as mine.

CHAPTER 15: CARNIVAL SEASON

“Catch up, will you?”

Apple snapped to her surroundings. *Huh?* she thought, as she looked ahead to the pack of faces that she did not quite recognize as familiar.

“Are you coming with us?”

Apple’s response mechanism was still running a bit slow. *Um*, she thought.

WILL APPLE DECIDE TO FOLLOW ALONG? OR WILL SHE DECIDE TO DO SOME OTHER THING? TUNE IN AS OUR AUTHOR DECIDES WHERE SHE WANTS THIS STORY TO GO NEXT. NOT THAT SHE HAS TOO MUCH CONTROL OVER SUCH THINGS. THE STORY HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN!!

“You were saying?”

“Um,” said Apple, sitting on a mattress in some musty trailer. “Was I saying something?”

CHAPTER 16: I DON'T BELIEVE WE'VE MET

Hi. I don't believe we've been properly introduced. Also, perhaps you do not properly grasp what it is that is happening to you. You see, you are literally inside of a story. This is not a metaphor, but a historical fact. Your thoughts and actions will literally have an effect upon the observable world, which, make no mistake, is being observed at this very moment.

"Are you talking to me?" asked Apple.

Of course. Obviously I am speaking to the fictional protagonist of this story. Who else would I be talking to?

"Um..."

Anyway, little did you realize that this entire world exists for you. Well, I mean, you kind of evolved along with it, but let's not split hairs. No, we shant be doing *that* again. Um, where were we?

"Achooo!!!"

Oh yes, that which is happening here. This is completely real as far as you're concerned.

Apple continued on her way. Was this all just some imaginary conversation occurring inside of her head as she walked down the street on a sunny day, about to cross the bridge over to the other side of the highway, or was she actually communicating with some other conscious entity?

"Boring," said Zorba in another, totally separate part of the multi-

verse. Apple kept walking.

Apple continued to walk down the street. It was a street straight out of her dreams. It had that, you know, *feel* to it. Any second now, she was due to make contact.

“Slow down. You’re moving too fast. Breathe in the air a bit. Enjoy this lovely weather we’re having.” A child and their guardian crossed Apple’s path. Apple turned the corner and

Completely lost, gods forsaken, Lettuce Bamboo tiptoed through the field of tulips, which smelled like tobacco in the morning. A giant cock scuttled past, noisy and colorful. “Brrurk bigurk. Rurt!” it shouted. Lettuce turned and noticed that she was surrounded by chickens. “Oh!” exclaimed Lettuce. “So fucking good! This life. So. Fucking. Good!!”

Alice Year-of-the-Boar sat at her desk pretending to do work. I mean, she *was* doing work I guess, but, like, she sat there *pretending* it was important or whatever, as if she was this totally professional archivist, competently performing meaningfully important work-type stuff, which, you know, I guess, she was. Type type type, she typed (on her keyboard). Clickity clickity click. *Oh, look how important and competent I am at all of my jobs*, she thought. *I am accomplishing so many things*. I mean, Alice *was* doing a pretty good job at her job today, but, true it was that who-the-fuck-cared? None of this bullshit mattered at all. Obviously. She looked at the time monitor and decided to clock out for an extended lunch break.

“Oh so good!” cried Apple after she bit into a knish that she procured at the local knishery. “I’ve never had a knish before,” she said to somebody. “They are really tasty. I could eat ‘em all up. Your knishes.

I'd eat up all your knishes."

The woman behind the counter squinted sideways at Apple. "Apple Hippopotamus," she said with a slight drawl, "are you hitting on me?"

"Um," mumbled Apple, shyly, mouth full of knish, looking down, shrinking into herself. She shrugged, giving a sheepish grin. "Mrrby," she said, knish filling spilling out of the side of her mouth.

Apple sat on her dirty living room floor, in her somewhat-but-not-too messy apartment, staring out into her darker-than-usual kitchen with its one burnt out light, listening to the contact of the falling rain, feeling like life was spiraling out of control. She just kept moving from scene to scene, never accomplishing anything, always finding herself back on her floor, alone, muddle-headed. She took a sip of bourbon. She yawned. Just then, the phone rang. The clock read 00:12.

Apple hadn't recognized the voice on the other end of the line. Not at first, anyway. *I've got something you might find interesting*, the voice had said. No introductions. No pleasantries. There was an odd static coming through. Now, here she was, standing amidst these howling winds on this dark and stormy night, in the shadows under the awning of the dental clinic across the street from Grace's Café, watching the lightning dance across the sky, feeling the walls shake with each thunderous boom, waiting. Waiting for her man.

It had been some while since Apple had found herself in the broken heart of the city. She heard some clucking and turned to find herself surrounded by chickens. A cock scampered noisily by. A few hens glanced up at her, as if to say, "Men, honey." Another thunderous boom.

Out of the alleyway across the street emerged a short, slim, trench-coated character wearing one of those old-timey fedoras. Apple watched as they hesitated, suddenly illuminated by the street light, be-

fore they turned towards the café. They were carrying a red briefcase. Apple waited a bit, then, with a look of determination, pulled her scarf tight, nodded to one of the chickens, and crossed the road. She followed the character inside the café.

"Hey hun, happy new year!" The bright lights and colors provided a stark contrast to the outside, Motown love songs replacing the soundtrack of the storm. "Been a while," continued the friendly diner employee, walking past with two plates of cherry pie.

Apple giggled nervously, sticking her umbrella in the umbrella bin, hanging her coat on the coat rack. "Yeah," she shrugged. She scanned the room, gave her coat and umbrella another look, and made her way to the back corner where she had spotted the red of the briefcase peeking out from behind a booth. Apple reached the booth, where trenchcoat sat, unperturbed, their back to the rest of the diner, absorbed in a cup of hot chocolate topped with whipped cream. Apple stood there a second, feeling ignored. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

Trenchcoat made a barely perceptible nod to the empty booth across the table. Apple sat down. She stared at the visage in front of her, and saw before her a handsome, clean cut, youthful looking gent, a somewhat mischievous not-quite grin on his otherwise serious face, which was now nose deep into a pile of fluffy cream.

"Hey sweetie," said another waitress, placing a steaming cup of coffee down in front of Apple and grabbing a sugar dispenser off a nearby table. "You're looking well I like this new look very cosmopolitan so what'll it be, hotcakes?"

Apple turned to the familiar, friendly, fast-talking, bespectacled face, opened her mouth, shut it, and turned back towards trenchcoat. "You order anything?" she asked.

He looked up for the first time and caught Apple's eye, shook his head no.

“Make that two orders,” said Apple. “Extra thin, please.” She smiled her most genuine smile.

“Sure thing, dear.”

“My treat,” said Apple after the waitress walked off. “You’ll like ‘em. They’re the best in the city. Anyway, I don’t like to eat alone.”

Apple looked up as a couple walked up to the bar and greeted their friends. One of them caught sight of Apple, and pointed over in her direction. “Look who it is. Hey kid!” they yelled across the diner, waving. “Haven’t seen you around.”

Apple smiled a polite reserved smile and gave them a wave. A few of the other patrons nodded a greeting in Apple’s direction. Everyone returned to their respective conversations.

“Didn’t realize you were a regular here,” said trenchcoat, wiping his cream-covered upper lip and chocolate-stained mouth with the backside of his hand. Ah, there was that voice that had called her through the phone—tender, mysterious, with a bit of gravel knocking around. That voice that intrigued her just enough to put on some pants and venture out into the city on this queer and eery evening, such as it was. *Do you know Grace’s Café?* the voice had said. *It’s in the District. It’s just off of 9th and—*

I know it, Apple had replied. *I can be there in an hour and a half.*

Back in Grace’s Café: “I’m not,” replied Apple. “I mean. I was. How did you get my number?”

Trenchcoat put down his mug. He reached over towards his hat, which sat on the table to his left, and slid an envelope out from underneath. “I’ve seen you around. I made some inquiries.”

“I’m flattered,” said Apple, who was, truth be told, a little bit flattered. “What’s in the envelope?”

“I want to—”

“Two orders of hotcakes extra thin. Can I get you nice folks anything

else?”

“I think we’re good, Diana. Thank you,” said Apple after Diana re-filled her coffee.

“Sure thing, sweetie.”

Apple grabbed the sugar dispenser and tilted it towards her coffee mug, watching with a child-like glee as it sweetened her cup. “You gonna try your pancakes or what?”

Halfway into his stack, trenchcoat paused, a bite of pancake stabbed on his fork, syrup dripping onto the plate, and pointed said fork in Apple’s direction. “These are pretty good.”

Apple smiled. She swallowed what was in her mouth and followed it up with a gulp of coffee. “Wait until you try the pie.”

Trenchcoat rolled his eyes, reached over, and threw the envelope towards Apple’s side of the table. She put down her utensils and looked inside.

Zorba Cathexis was on his knees in front of the toilet. In front of his shit-clogged toilet, to be more specific. Whatever, one minute your contraptions are all covered in shit and the next they’re not. No big deal. Sooner or later the future will come and all your concerns about “Oh no everything is covered in shit and how will I ever get out of here without getting shit all over everybody how embarrassing” will be revealed to be but a dream, a horrible horrible dream. “Would you shut up?” croaked an exasperated Zorba. “I’m trying to figure out how to unclog this shit-clogged toilet. I could do without all your half-baked philosophizing.” Sure, sure, somebody has got to operate the machinery. Right, folks?

Zorba flushed the toilet for the umpteenth time and stared at a bowl that was now probably as clean as he had ever seen it. Everything was

more or less back to normal. Yes. Everything was totally and completely normal.

“Oh!” gasped Apple.

“Did I tell you to put your ass down? Lift it back up.”

“Sorry.”

“What’s that?”

“Sorry, sir,” said Apple.

SMACK.

Apple moaned.

“Get up on the bed,” whispered a hot, raspy, tender voice into her ear.

“I really need to vacuum my floor,” mused a thoughtful Apple.

“*Later*. Geez. I’m busy giving you sexual pleasures here.” His hands ran up the length of her back and up her out-stretched arms. She writhed underneath his weight.

“Oh. My. God!” Was she dreaming again?

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” exhaled Apple, breathing deep after a rather large spasm.

“It’s, um, *been* a while is all.”

“I’ll be gentle.”

Apple closed her eyes, leaned back, and melted into the universe.

RING RING. RING RING.

“Should you answer that? What is it even connected to?”

“Oh,” said Apple, running her hands over her new associate’s chest.

“The machine’ll get it. My friend Zorba hooked it up. It’s hooked into

like three of the networks. It's secure. Apparently. So," Apple reached up and pulled his chin around towards her. "That was fun. You're quite talented."

He momentarily got lost in her eyes.

"Anyway," continued Apple, "I guess I'll take your case. But you should know, I never mix business and pleasure, so obviously, what just happened will have to be a one time thing."

"First of all, my little tease," he said, grabbing her hand and moving it down to his butt, leaning in towards her ear, "I cannot imagine. you are one to voluntarily. divorce. pleasure. from anything you do. On the other hand, my sweet lady," he went on, pausing periodically to kiss her neck and nibble her earlobe, "you are quite right. inasmuch as. that was certainly. a singular. once in a lifetime. experience."

"Oh, you are sooo cocky." She squeezed his butt and they like, kissed or something. It was terribly cute or romantic or whatever.

KNOCK KNOCK. KNOCK KNOCK.

"Should you answer that?"

"Um..."

"Apple! You there? I brought muffins! Put on some clothes and come eat some muffins!"

"Oh, hey Zorba."

"Late night? New trenchcoat?"

Apple looked down at the trenchcoat that was neatly folded over the kitchen chair. "Um...you could say that."

Zorba looked towards the bedroom. "Oh, here's your spare key. I feel like there was something important I came over here to tell you. Oh. Have a muffin."

Apple bit into a muffin. "Mmmm. What is that? Cinnamon?" she

asked, crumbs tumbling onto the floor.

“Hi.”

“Oh,” said Apple.

“Hi there,” said Zorba, offering a muffin to the uncannily familiar yet mysterious man that had just walked into the kitchen. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

TO BE CONTINUED...?