

*But it is all so tenuous.*

Yes? So? Did ya ever think maybe I designed it to be tenuous? Maybe this is not the life you are supposed to be living.

*Oh fuck. You blew my mind or whatever.*

Yawn. Anyway, did ya ever think that maybe you could totally trust me here, maybe?

*What are you saying? Magic exists or something?*

## CHAPTER 17: I'M TALKING SHIT BEHIND MY FRIENDS' BACKS AND IT'S MAKING ME LOOK REAL GOOD

“Cinnamon. Johnny Cinnamon.”

“That your real name?”

The record scratched and Cinnamon gave Cathexis one of his patented tough guy looks.

Cathexis averted his gaze, reached down and grabbed another muffin. “I only ask because we were just discussing that very spice before you walked in. Cinnamon, right? Like the spice?”

Cinnamon glanced at Hippopotamus, who had a don't-look-at-me-this-is-totally-awkward grimace on her face. He glared back at Cathexis, who was now munching away, looking him in the eye. Johnny Cinnamon melted his tough guy face back into his more default, somewhat bemused not-quite-smile and took his own bite of muffin. “Not bad,” he said. “What is that, ginger?”

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*Just an old fashioned love song, one I surely wrote for you and me. You and me. You and me. You and me. You and me. You and me. You and me...*

“I think the record is skipping again.”

“Nah. Fuck that guy.”

“We all make our mistakes.”

“Would you put that down? You’re not *really* expected to transcribe *everything*. Have a little fun, will you? It’s not like this archive is going to last anyway.”

“Okay, gang, once more from the top.”

## CHAPTER 18: ONCE AGAIN, FROM THE TOP

“Oh no,” said Johnny’s eyes.

“What is it?” asked Apple.

“My pills. I think I forgot to take them this morning.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll have to go back. Meet up with you later?”

Apple froze a bit with an inappropriate stab of panic.

“At Grace’s? Apple?”

It was now so many time units into the future, relatively speaking, since the last time we checked in with our protagonist, Apple Hippopotamus, and her associate, Johnny Cinnamon, a.k.a. Johnny Pickles, a.k.a. Johnny Dust, who maybe would also turn out to be a protagonist, depending on probably reader feedback or something. It had *been* a while, however, since we had received any *proper* feedback.

“Oh! Fuuck! Ohhhhhh!”

“Somebody’s having a good morning,” said Johnny, grinning awkwardly, nodding over to the alleyway that none of our characters had probably ever been down. Before today, that is. Apple probably responded with some words as our spotlight shifted into the blah blah metaphor blah blah blah where Lettuce Bamboo stood, hand over heart, feeling the buh-bump buh-bump of her primary organs. “Thank you,” she whispered into the shadows, before walking out into the clearing. “Excuse me,” she said to the first couple that she saw. “Do you know

what day it is?”

## CHAPTER 19: A PAIN IN MY HEART

“Right there. Can you feel it?”

“Sweetie, that’s not your heart. Your heart is on the other side.”

“Whoah there, look who got their degree in probably human anatomy. Oh godsdammit. Those motherfuckers got some nerve.”

Alice turned to see what had all of a sudden clouded Apple’s mood. Oy. Fucking military. “Goddamn fascists,” Alice spat, shaking her head. “They’re a bit out of their depths, yeah?”

Apple was still giving the two interlopers her stinkiest stink eye.

“Maybe they’re deserters,” Alice proffered.

Apple grabbed another ring and swallowed a burp. Her demeanor shifted. She whistled a little tune. “Maybe.”

“Geez Apple, what have you got me into?”

“Come on,” said Apple, shoveling the papers into her satchel. “I’ve lost my appetite. Let’s blow this joint.”

Alice looked down to the near spotless plates with the handful of bones that Apple had picked clean. “Okay, sweetie,” she said. “You say so.”

“The fire is still warm. We must have just missed them.”

“Are you sure it was her?”

Apple reached into the embers and pulled out a still smoldering scrap of paper. "Yeah, this is her handwriting. It's the Historian alright."

"It's a little concerting that you know her handwriting," replied Zorba, taking a sip from his canteen.

"Ha! Caught me. I was just being dramatic." Apple punched Zorba in the arm and grabbed the canteen. "But I *have* seen it. Her handwriting? She used to leave all these notes attached to the documents in the Scholarly Archive. Drove the archivist wild." That was before the flood, obviously. Archives were never known for being the most publicly accessible of institutions, but it had been some time since a human body had set foot or wheelchair inside *that* particular physical space. "I've actually got transcribed copies of a bunch of those notes, but I never tried to, you know, recreate her handwriting or whatever. But it's her. You can bet your fancy bag of treasures on *that*." Apple liked to tease Zorba about his fancy bag of treasures that he was carrying around. She still hadn't seen what was inside. It had been four days since they had left the city on this little digression of theirs and

"Groan. Is this going anywhere?"

"What?" asked Apple, wiping her mouth and tossing Zorba the canteen. "You mean, are we heading towards some specific plot of some sort? Ha! Doubtful. But let me check my calendar."

"Wow!" said Zorba. "Look at that sky."

"I'll have a bowl of the fish head stew, thanks," said Zorba, sidling up to the bar. They had reached the little village earlier that night, and the locals were starting to gather around the scattered fires for the evening entertainment. They had run into one of Zorba's cousins on the outskirts of the forest, which was an odd bit of welcomed coincidence, and she had given them directions and a recommendation to try the town's famous fish head stew.

"Could I get a glass of your local grog, maybe?" said Apple with a friendly, understanding smile to the young lass that was standing amidst the various pots and cauldrons. The lass looked over towards one of the older villagers, who shrugged and went back to tending their grill.

"It's pretty strong," said the girl to Apple, biting her lip.

"That's alright, kid," said Apple, taking a seat next to Zorba, throwing her bag on the ground, and stretching out. She glance back at the girl. "Thank you," she added, sweetly. "I appreciate it."

The lass ladled out some spirits into a mug and handed it to Apple. She turned to Zorba. "I'll get you some stew."

"Starting off strong, eh Apple? Don't want to fill your belly first?"

Apple shivered after a sip of grog. "Maybe I'll have some of what he's cooking later," she said, wiping at the corner of her mouth, nodding towards the open flames of the grill. "Oh," she said, "I loooove accordion music."

The lass brought over a steaming bowl full of greens and chopped tubers and grains and broth and spices and such, along with a smaller, empty bowl. "For the bones," she said, as Zorba eyed it and then her with questioning eyes. Zorba looked back down to the bowl of stew, which also happened to contain the head of one red fish. He looked back up, grinning large. "Wow, this looks awesome. Thanks," he said, winking a cheesy-type wink.

The girl kind of stared at Zorba, wiping her hands on her apron. "You folks from the city?" she asked.

"Oh," teased Apple, "do we look that glamorous to you?"

The girl laughed. "Well, kind of. I mean. Just that you don't look like the folks that usually pass through."

"Nah," said Zorba, "we are totally normal run-of-the-mill statistically not-at-all aberrant human-type normy normal persons of no par-

ticular interest. Wow,” he said, sucking and sliding a bone out of his mouth, depositing it in the little glass dish. “I think this is the best stew that I’ve ever ate.”

“Here,” said the girl, pulling a dish towel from behind the bar.