

“Hello.”

The metal casing of the radio was dented and scratched. What remained of the peeling paint was a splotchy yellow, though it might have been white in a better time, and the rest was a patchwork of dull gray and rust. The right-hand back corner was completely caved in, and a thick layer of dust coated the side closest to the wall. The front end didn't look much better. Whatever jargon was engraved on the plastic was hidden by a fine network of scratches, and one of the knobs was missing. Still, the speaker was emitting a faint static, so the girl assumed it was working. Not that she would know.

She had almost convinced herself to walk away when she heard a response.

“Hello?”

The voice was thin and slightly distorted, but definitely feminine. Surprised, the girl took a careful look around her to ensure that she was alone. The derelict apartment was empty, and the moonlit street outside the open door was as still as death. She examined a rusting car on the cracked road, then squinted at the dead forest beyond, where the withered branches hung silently over the sandy earth. She raised the plastic handset to her mouth to speak.

“Who are you?”

Again, the response took a long time coming. *“Huh?”*

“I thought this town was abandoned.”

In fact, she hadn't seen another person in over a week, but that was all right with her. She waited a while, but no response came through the static. She tried a different question.

“Where are you, exactly?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Whaddya mean what am I talking about?” she said, irritation creeping into her voice. “Where are you? Are there others with you?”

“No, it's just me.”

“...You ain't sick, are you?”

“Sick? No. I don't think so.”

“You ain't a cultist?”

“Cultist?” An uncertain laugh came from the radio. *“What is this, some sort of TV show?”*

The girl was at a loss for a response.

“No, well, of course not. That doesn't make sense. This is a radio.”

“Okay, whatever.” The girl really didn't understand what this person was talking about, but she clearly didn't pose a threat.

"The town isn't abandoned," the voice said, suddenly. "The town. Weimar. If you're still wondering. There's a big medical school here."

"Medical school?" This caught the girl's attention.

"Mhm. The Murray School of Medicine. It's right next to the Arby's."

"Arby's?"

"...Yeah. Arby's. The restaurant. I work there."

The girl paused before speaking, the disbelief clear in her voice. "You're telling me there's an actual, working restaurant. With employees. Where you can buy food."

"Uh, yes."

The girl actually burst out laughing. It sounded weird to her, and she quickly stopped. "Right, so you live in a pre-apocalyptic town full of healthy people," she said, "and you work at an Arby's."

The voice didn't respond.

"Ya have a dog, too?"

After a few moments of static, there was a loud crashing noise and an indistinct curse. After that, nothing.

"You there?"

The girl waited by the radio for a little while, hoping for a response. Eventually, she shrugged and flipped the power switch. She'd better get some sleep.

In the darkness my leg caught on something wooden, and with a curse I tumbled to the floor alongside the culpable nightstand. Damn it! That was the third time since I'd moved in. I hobbled to my feet, immediately concerned about the state of the old radio. It had crashed awkwardly into the floor, causing the right-hand back corner to cave in and the volume knob to snap off.

Guiltily, I replaced the table and put the radio right-side up on the floor, making sure it was still making noise. I futilely tried to jam the knob back onto the bent metal bit. Despite how useless my father's old radio was, I felt bad for ruining it. Then again, if the only people who picked up the signal were delusional girls who didn't know what Arby's was, maybe it was for the better.

I checked the time on my phone, confirming what I already knew that it was God-late at night and that I had probably woken up the cranky bald man in the adjacent apartment again. I contemplated the radio for a long time, then hefted it in my arms and carried it with me to the living area. I'd probably step on it if I left it lying around on the bedroom floor.

“Welcome to Arby’s. How may I help you today?”

“Turkey sandwich with extra cheese,” said a middle-aged businesswoman rummaging in her purse.

“Sorry,” I said, with an apologetic smile. “We’re all out of turkey.” I gestured at the hand-written notice I had scribbled and taped onto the menu.

“And a soda and a large curly fries, dear, and make it snappy.”

My well-practiced smile remained plastered on my face. “Sorry, ma’am. There’s no turkey.”

She looked up and squinted at me as if I were some sort of zoo exhibit. “Look.” She glanced at my name tag. “Olivia.”

“Oliwja,” I corrected, my voice strained.

“This is an Arby’s. They have turkey sandwiches.” She gave me a disdainful look that reeked of *useless high school dropout* – or maybe it was just my imagination – then went back to rooting through her bag. I opened my mouth to tell her for the third time that we had run out of turkey, and for a matter of fact she could go shove her large curly fries where the sun don’t shine, but I stopped as I noticed the clock on the far wall. My shift was almost over.

“Of course, ma’am,” I said, deftly entering the order. “Turkey sandwich, extra cheese, soda, aaaand a large curly fries. Will that be all?”

“Yes, thanks, dear,” she said, in a voice that didn’t seem all that grateful to me. I handed her the cup, sent the order through, and abandoned my station. Within five minutes I was waltzing out the back entrance. I was fairly sure I could still hear her yelling at my replacement from outside.

By the time I had finished the grueling walk to my apartment complex, my good cheer had faded. My ten-hour shift was not unlike a merciless vacuum, sucking all the energy from my body. It took all my might to not collapse on the sidewalk, but I gave in to the urge once I traversed the front door and arrived at my couch.

I lay there for a few minutes, debating whether I really needed to change out of my uniform before falling asleep. Idly, I switched on the radio and let the white noise fill the room.

The old device was basically the only thing my father had left behind in America, besides me. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be able to play music or communicate with others or do anything useful at all, unless you wanted it to play static. Turning it on was just a custom at this point; I had never gotten a signal before.

At least, until a strange voice had come out of the static yesterday night.

I reached over to grab the handset. “Hey? Are you there?”

A long time passed, and I worried that I had broken it for real by knocking the table over. Or maybe the girl just wasn’t there. It wasn’t like she would just sit around all day, waiting for a message. Duh. I felt disappointed, though I wasn’t sure why.

I had almost fallen asleep when I heard the voice.

"Hello."

I made a startled, sloth-like noise and dragged myself into a sitting position.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot yesterday. What's your name?"

"Oliwja," I said, rubbing my eyes. "It's Polish."

"What?"

"My name is Polish."

Some time passed, as if this was a revolutionary idea for the girl. *"Oh."*

"How 'bout you?"

"My name's Magnesia."

I blinked. "Magnesia? Like, Milk of Magnesia?"

"What?" she said again, sounding irritated.

"You haven't heard of... you know what, never mind. Not important."

The odd girl fell into silence, and I was worried I had offended her so much she decided to leave. Then again, she was keeping me up, and I had to get up early tomorrow for my shift, so maybe that would have been for the better.

I heard a cough from the other end, confirming her presence.

"So what've you been up to?" I asked.

"Well. There ain't much left in the town. The grocery stores and the pharmacy are all cleared out."

"Uh-huh," I said, brows creased.

"I think I saw that medical place you told me about, but it's pretty far away. So mostly I've been sitting around all day, waiting to hear something on the radio."

I didn't know what to say about that.

"There hasn't been anyone. Sides you," she added.

The voice was slow and thoughtful, with a slight twang that I couldn't place. Based on the high pitch of her voice, she couldn't be much older than I was. I had to wonder how she'd gotten ahold of a two-way radio, or why she had nothing better to do than tell some tall tale to a stranger.

There was a harsh ringing. It took me a moment to realize it wasn't coming from the radio. "Oh, excuse me," I mumbled, searching for my phone in my bag. A heavy stone settled in my gut as I saw the number. "I gotta take this."

I flipped it open. Yes, I have a flip phone.

“Heyyy, boss,” I said. I knew the informal greeting would tick off my manager. The man was infamous at our workplace for yelling at us for every imagined offense, as if he thought he was a drill sergeant rather than a manager at a low-end fast food restaurant. I learned within a week what it was like to be on his bad side – like being trapped in a hurricane of foul-mouthed lectures – but if he wanted us to behave, he should have treated us with a bit more respect.

My self-righteous grin fell as I realized what the irate manager was calling about. “Uh-huh.”

...

“Yeah that was me.”

...

“Okay. To be fair, she was being a total jerkhole.”

My boss didn’t take kindly to that. I listened to his angry tirade without argument, too tired to fight against the storm and knowing it would be futile anyway, but a familiar knot was building up inside of me. The one that said, *you fucked up. Again.* I had a nervous feeling that all this was building up to the two words I dreaded most.

I listened to him yell for at least another two minutes, and frustration started to edge out the apprehension. This was definitely longer than he’d ever gone before. As he made a very mean comparison involving me and a cow, I decided that I should just end the conversation before he could get around to firing me. I broke into his sentence with a hot “Yeah okay whatever,” then snapped the phone shut.

Immediately the rational thinking part of my brain screamed *BAD DECISION*. But, first of all, he totally deserved it. And second of all, I was too tired to care.

The phone rang again, and I picked up. “Hello?”

My manager started to say something indignantly.

“Yeah I don’t care.” I closed the phone again.

I knew I was just digging the hole deeper, but I really fucking hated this man at the moment. In fact, I almost hoped he would call again so I could hang up faster this time. I imagined him angrily throwing pots around the kitchen – probably at my innocent coworkers – which was a somewhat cathartic thought.

When no call was forthcoming, I fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

“*What was that?*”

I grasped at the table for the handset without getting up. “I got fired,” I told Magnesia. The knot in my stomach twisted painfully as I said it out loud.

The response took a few seconds. “*Who were you talking to?*”

“...What?”

"There was a ringing noise. Then you started talking to yourself."

"The, uh, phone. It was a phone."

"Why were you talking to a phone?"

I was a little annoyed that Magnesia had glossed right over my, you know, losing my primary source of income. "It's... a phone," I grumbled. "You use it to talk to people that are far away. With electromagnetic waves or something."

"Like a radio."

"Yes like a radio," I snapped. "You don't have cell phones in the apocalypse, huh?"

"I have a cell phone."

"...Then??"

"It don't work like a radio."

"Well what do you use it for?" I demanded

"...It has a game where you shoot birds at pigs."

I pursed my lips. "Angry Birds. Of course."

Magnesia lapsed into silence while I stewed. Some apocalypse, if she had nothing to do but listen to a stranger on the radio and play Angry Birds. Meanwhile, here I was, probably unemployed. And it was all my stupid fault. Why had I hung up on him? Maybe he hadn't been about to fire me. Maybe he would have just had me mop every day for three months straight.

Why did I always ruin everything?

"I'm sorry you got fired," said Magnesia after a while.

I stared at the ceiling for a while, then sighed. "Yeah, whatever."

On the bright side, I could sleep in tomorrow.

"So, tell me about your version of the town."

"It's all right. Pretty broken down. Like I said, scavengers cleared it all out, but it's quiet and I got enough to eat."

"Yeah?" I said, popping a Cheeto into my mouth.

"I saw a possum go down the street this morning."

"Oh, exciting," I said, grabbing another handful.

"Delicious," she agreed.

I stopped chewing for a moment to parse that, then laughed. "Isn't that, you know, dangerous?"

"A possum?" she asked, incredulously. *"No. I killed it from a distance anyway."*

I had been talking about disease, but that brought up more pressing questions. "With what?"

"My gun," she said. *"Duh."*

I pursed my lips. I was willing to play along with the girl's story, but I wasn't quite comfortable with her claiming to have weapons. She was too young to have a gun. On the other hand, she also insisted she was trapped in an apocalyptic pandemic, so maybe I should have taken that with a grain of salt.

"You have a gun, huh?"

"Yeah. It's a .45 ACP. I got a shotgun too, but it's almost out of ammo."

I decided to change the topic. "What do you eat on a daily basis, anyway? Fruit?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Okay. You have to know what fruit is. Or is this some sci-fi future where humanity replaces all the trees with cities?"

"I know what fruit is," she said in a huff. *"But there ain't nothing growing on the trees. They're dead."*

"Why are they dead?"

"'Cus they got sick! Stop playing dumb, Oliwja. It ain't funny."

I crossed my arms. "Okay, you're the one making things up."

"No I ain't."

"Yes you are."

"No I ain't."

"Bet you don't have a gun either."

Magnesia fell silent, and I thought maybe I had upset her. Then, I heard the sound of a gun being cocked, and a series of extremely loud gunshots began to go off.

“Holy shit! Keep that down,” I said, knocking over my bowl of Cheetos as I reached for the volume knob. Then I remembered that it had come off; I had to settle for covering the speaker with my cheese-coated hands. Thankfully, Magnesia stopped shooting.

“Told you so.”

“Okay, first of all, what the hell? Why do you have a gun? Also: you’re going to get me evicted!”

“Evicted?”

“Thrown out! Of my apartment!” I hissed. My neighbor had already filed enough complaints about me and I did not need the landlady to have more reasons to throw me out.

Then the realization hit me. With an annoyed expression, I removed my hands from the speaker. “Oh, yeah, very funny, smart guy. Yeah, I’ve seen that app too. Almost sounds like a real gun.”

“It is a real gun!” she exclaimed crossly. I heard the gun being cocked again.

“No, no, no, no! Okay, okay, it’s a real gun. Just, no more shooting.”

“Hmph.”

“I thought you said you were low on ammo,” I grumbled as I sat down. I felt foolish for having believed her for a moment, and ruined a perfectly good bowl of Cheetos besides.

“I was dry firing, idiot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, whatever.”

We lapsed into silence while I frowned at the mess on the floor. It wasn’t just the Cheetos; my living area was littered with books and other crap that I never had the motivation to clean. I also had a newspaper spread out on the table, joining the radio and at least five dirty coffee mugs. I needed to get back to work.

I was going through the classifieds. They were all the same: not qualified, too far away, too few hours, again and again.

Eventually, Magnesia spoke again.

“There’s some people going through the town. I don’t like it. Are they with you?”

I snorted. “Why don’t you go ask them?”

“They don’t look friendly.”

I let out a small laugh. “Oh, are you afraid they’ll be mean to you?”

“Naw, I’m afraid they’re gonna shoot me.”

“Yeah, okay.” I rolled my eyes.

"I'm serious. They might be raiders."

I shook my head and tried to focus on the classifieds. Interior decorator? I could do that. Maybe covering your living room in Cheetos was in style nowadays. Research assistant? Now it was just taunting me. Having reached the end of the page, I slid it off of the table with possibly more force than necessary.

"They're coming this way," said Magnesia in a hushed voice.

Despite myself, I looked out the window. My apartment complex was on a hill, which gave me a rather expansive view of the outskirts of town and the surrounding forest. I could see cars coming in on the main road, and in the distance the Murray School of Medicine dominated the horizon. I had never liked the view very much; living in the shadow of a big medical school always seemed like a reminder of my own academic failings. There was no one approaching the building, not that I had expected it.

"I gotta go hide," she muttered. Her voice sounded worried for once. *"I'll come back once the people are gone."*

"Sure," I said, unconvinced, but there was no response. I had to hand it to her, she really was dedicated to this apocalypse story.

I abandoned the tiny print of the newspaper and laid back on my couch. What were my other options? I could just keep reading classifieds... but God I had had enough of classifieds. Fuck classifieds. I *did* have one other idea... but I really, really, really didn't want to think about it.

I stared at a painting on the opposite wall as I tried to make up my mind. It was a picture of a sailboat that I had bought at a garage sale for two dollars. At the time I had thought it would make my apartment look more sophisticated, but it just looked out of place.

I grabbed my phone off the end table and pulled up a contact. I didn't have to text him now, I reasoned; I was just considering it. I scrolled aimlessly up through past conversations, familiar ones that I had already read dozens of times. What would he think if I messaged him again *now*? Surely he would be willing to help. Not out of any personal attachment. Just a professional business offer. Yeah.

I started typing, making sure to make my wording as neutral as possible. *"Can we talk? I need your help."*

I stared at that for a while, then erased the second sentence and wrote *"Please."* Then I erased that too.

I cast an eye over my cluttered apartment, my eyes falling on a weathered orange paperback that I had been reading. It was some outdated young adult mystery with a forgettable plot involving a circus performer, or was that a different book? If I could just send this text, I could start reading and forget about all this for a while.

It took another ten minutes and at least five revisions before I was able to send the text, which was *'Hey, can we talk?'* With an unhappy grunt, I tossed the phone onto the couch and grabbed the book instead.

I started to flip through it, trying to figure out where I had stopped. I tended to jump between stories whenever I lost interest, which meant I was always "reading" at least a dozen books at a time. Sometimes they got mixed up in my head. I also liked to read books out loud. Yeah, it's weird, whatever. My primary teachers used to encourage me to read out loud to help me focus, calling me a "late

bloomer” and all sorts of patronizing crap. God, I hate that phrase. Anyway, it became a habit. But not because I’m a goddamned *late bloomer*, just because I like it. It used to bother my mother, who would keep making snide comments about it until I went outside to be alone.

Anyway. The nice thing about having my own apartment was that I could read however I wanted. But I didn’t want Magnesia to hear me talking to myself, and if I turned the radio off I might miss her coming back. So I’d just have to deal.

I was reclining on the couch, my nose buried in the book, muttering the words under my breath, when I heard the sound of stomping around and indistinct conversation on the radio.

“Magnesia?” I asked, absent-mindedly.

“Hello?”

I looked up sharply, because it was definitely not Magnesia. The voice was gruff and unmistakably masculine.

“*What are you doing? Turn that thing off,*” said a second, reedy voice in the background.

The voices sounded hostile, somehow, and I instinctively went quiet.

The first voice spoke again. “*I just heard someone.*”

“*You’re imagining it. Get back to work, dumbass.*”

“*Who you callin’ dumbass? I’m tellin’ you, John, there was a goddamn voice on the goddamn radio.*”

There was an aggrieved sigh. “*Okay, fine.*” Footsteps, and a sound like someone picking up the handset. The voice became much clearer. “*Hello, is anyone there?*”

I put down my book, blinking. Where the hell had Magnesia left the radio? Who was this? Were they dangerous? Then again, there wasn’t much they could do to me through a radio. I had decided to respond with a joke about “goddamn voices” when the man with the reedy voice spoke again.

“*This town is being claimed in the name of the great priestess Serenity. Tell us your location and purpose now and pray that she will let you leave peacefully.*”

My witty comment died on my tongue. I stared at the radio, unsure if it would be prudent to burst out laughing. I remembered my first conversation with Magnesia.

Cultists.

What did *that* mean? Were these people in on the joke?

“*There isn’t anybody there.*” I heard the handset drop and the voices become distant. “*Dumbass.*”

“*Well why the hell would they respond when you threaten them like that?*” said the gruff voice.

“*Just drop it, wouldja? Isn’t there a building you’re supposed to be scavenging?*”

“*Oh, shut up.*”

Then, there was the distant sound of gunfire and shouting, and I heard both men curse and hurry away from the radio. I made a surprised noise against my will and sat up on the couch. As much as I tried to make out the indistinct voices, all I could tell was that there was a *lot* of shooting going on.

Wait, was this going on nearby? Was there a shoot-out going on in Weimar?? Magnesia had made it sound like she was in my town, and the radio's range couldn't be that far. Panicked, as if I expected bullets to start whizzing around my living room, I rushed to the window. However, the view was the same as always: the cars driving in and out, the buildings laid out patchwork among the trees.

The gunfire ceased, yielding the air to the usual static. Uncertainly, I sat back on my couch and gripped my book, as if I really expected to start reading again, and listened tensely for at least five minutes. There wasn't so much as a peep.

What was happening? I had lived in Weimar my entire life and I had *never* heard of gang activity. But there couldn't be any other explanation, right?

Unless cultists. *Haha.*

Maybe it was part of the prank. Maybe Magnesia was playing a movie or something in front of the radio. That was a comforting thought, but the voices had sounded much too realistic. I thought for a moment, then grabbed my phone to Google *serenity priestess*.

I was searching news sites for any mention of cults or violence in Weimar – there was none – when I heard another sound from the radio.

"Oliwja?"

"Magnesia!" I turned off my phone and grabbed the handset instead. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

"Why is the radio on?" Magnesia asked urgently.

"Uh. A couple of men came in and tried to talk to me."

"What did you tell 'em?"

"Nothing. I didn't say anything to them."

"Good."

"Magnesia, what's going on?"

"Cultists, from what I gather."

"No I mean – like – okay." I took a deep breath. "The apocalypse thing was fun for a while, but if there are people getting *shot* then this is serious. Please tell me that was a recording or something."

"No."

"Then what's going on??"

I clutched the handset, staring intently at the radio as if it would somehow pressure Magnesia into telling the truth.

"I told you. Cultists."

I let out a very quiet scream of frustration. "Magnesia!"

"The New Order guys," she said, sounding indignant. *"I can tell 'cus they all got the sun logo on their clothes. I assume the gunfire was them dealing with so-called 'dissidents.'"*

"Right. New Order. Sun insignias." I rolled my eyes. "That is the most generic cult ever."

"Why don't you know nothing?" said Magnesia angrily. *"Have you heard of Serenity?"*

"One of the men mentioned her."

"See? She's their high priestess or something. She broadcasts her sermons on radio and shit. I don't think it's safe in this town. You should move out."

"You want me to run away from your imaginary friends," I said drily.

"Leave it, Oliwja. Personally, I'm getting out of here as soon as I can." Magnesia's voice was business-like and urgent, unlike her usual languid pace. *"And I was thinking we should meet up. 'Cus you said there ain't nobody with you and if we're both heading the same way..."*

"I'm not leaving my home with some stranger," I said, exasperated. "Especially not a basket case like you."

"Well you're welcome to stay here and get shot!"

"Maybe I will," I said, crossing my arms, which I immediately realized was a totally useless gesture in a radio conversation.

There was a sigh on the other end, as if she was as fed up with me as I was with her. *"Okay. Look, Oliwja. You can pretend all you want that the apocalypse didn't happen. I don't care. And you don't gotta leave this town if you don't wanna. But apparently you don't know jack shit about the wasteland and it ain't safe for you here, so at least let us meet up somewhere and maybe I can get you some supplies or something."*

I paused to think about this. First of all, yeah, it was not a good idea to "meet up" with delusional strangers. Especially when they claimed to have guns. But on the other hand, if Magnesia was actually willing to meet up in a coffee shop or something, I could point out the overwhelming evidence that *there is no apocalypse* and maybe we could be done with the thing. I almost felt a little disappointed at the thought.

Besides, what else was I going to do? Go to work?"

"Sure. Let's meet up tomorrow."

"I ain't sitting around that long." declared Magnesia. *"Why don't we meet now?"*

"'Cus," I said, brashly. "I'm a busy girl."

I really wasn't. If Magnesia left, I would probably just stew here in my Cheeto-strewn living room and worry all day.

"I thought you said your boss just fi--"

"Okay never mind sure we can meet. Where?"

"I don't want you trekking across the town by yourself right now. Tell me where you are and I'll come to you."

"Uh-uh." I shook my head. "Sorry, but if we're going to meet then it's going to be somewhere public. How about the library? It's nearby."

"...Okay. Sure. Where is the library?"

"Well you're in the apocalypse, so how am I supposed to give you directions, huh?" I said. "Do you want compass directions?"

"Just tell me the address," she grumped. "I got a GPS."

I fumed for a moment, then told her the address.

"I'll see you there. Don't get shot."

"I'll try," I said, rolling my eyes.

The library was about as far from an apocalyptic wasteland as possible. It was a modern, two-story affair of brick and glass, populated with smiling librarians and parents with screaming children. Nearby, an orange mesh fence guarded construction machinery that was loudly working on an addition to the building. Magnesia had convinced me to carry the radio with me, worried for my safety, so I was lugging the thing uncomfortably in a duffel bag. This had better be worth it.

I took the familiar path through the door and plonked myself down on an armchair by the reference section, putting the bag down beside me. I undid the zipper, turned on the radio, and grabbed the handset.

"You here yet?" I asked, but there was no response.

I tapped my foot and watched the occasional traffic through the entrance. What would Magnesia look like? I pictured her as solidly built, maybe a redhead, probably with a solemn look perpetually on her face.

"Oliwja?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I'm here too. Where are you?"

"On a couch by the circulation desk. I'm right inside the glass doors."

There was a long silence. *"Oliwja. There's no one here."*

"There's tons of people here," I said, glaring distractedly at the passerby. Was she really going to cop out on me?

"I'm at the entrance. All I see is a ruined library. And a lot of graffiti. You ain't hiding, are you?"

"No." With a grunt I hefted my bag and stuck my head out of the entrance, looking around to make sure Magnesia wasn't ambling about outside. She wasn't showing up, was she? I felt foolish. "You made me walk all the way out here and you're not even going to show your face?!"

"I'm right here!" Magnesia hissed.

I put my hand on my forehead. She just wouldn't give up. "Okay. Fine. Describe this library for me."

"There's a round desk and a buncha shelves knocked over with books all over the place. There's a set of stairs going upstairs. Some newspapers 'round here." I glanced in sequence at the circulation desk and the newspaper kiosk as I heard Magnesia shuffling through papers. Well, to be fair, basically all libraries looked like that. *"They're from year 2098."*

"It's 2016," I deadpanned. "The library is spotless and it's full of patrons."

"So you're from the past, huh?" she challenged.

"And you're from the future," I said in the most unconvinced, skeptical, disbelieving voice I could muster.

"I'm just tryin' to help you, Oliwja!"

"You're wasting my time is what you're doing!"

Magnesia fell into a furious silence – well, it was the same silence as usual, but I could tell from context – and I paced around the lobby. There had to be some way to make her admit that this was impossible. But the sound of growling machinery from outside was making it hard to focus.

I had an idea.

"I have an idea," I said, my face brightening. "You're from the future, huh? So tell me..."

I jogged out the glass doors. The great yellow machinery and the workers in hard hats were hard at work, but they were on the far side of the building. Ahead of me, the only thing guarding a layer of drying cement was the mesh fence. Perfect.

"Tell me what's written in the cement at the front of the building."

I shrugged the duffle bag higher on my shoulder and quickly hopped over the fence, giving a cursory look around to make sure there was no one around to judge me. There was a couple walking down the sidewalk, but they didn't seem to notice.

"In the cement? Where?"

"Just out the front door, and around the corner to the left. It'll be right against the wall." I visualized in my mind what I was going to write. There was no way she could guess. I squatted down against the wall, and, in tiny letters, scratched a message with my fingernail.

"I found it. What are you tryin' to prove?" she said, sounding exasperated.

"Just tell me what it says."

"...I can't read."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, convenient."

Magnesia huffed. *"Fine, I'll just describe it. It's two words, looks like, and the first word's got two letters, and the second word's got three letters."*

I took a while to respond. "Say that again?"

"Well, I'm not so sure about the second word. It's written really small."

I stared at the ground:

HI MAG

Then I whipped my head around. "Are you watching me? Have you been stalking me or something?!" I looked for possible hiding spots around me.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

But that didn't make sense. There was no way she had been close enough to see me write it. Unless there were cameras involved. She probably just guessed. I mean, it was a pretty generic message.

Or maybe she was *stalking me*.

I clutched my head, trying to calm down the swirling winds of anger and confusion. "Okay. Okay. I'm going to draw something else. What is it?"

This time I chose a corner, somewhere where there was *no way* she could see me. I thought for a second, trying to think of something totally random, something that couldn't be guessed. I leaned over and scratched something quickly, but carefully. Then I covered it with a hand.

"At the corner. To the left. What did I draw on the cement?"

The silence lasted longer this time.

"You can't see it this time, huh?" I started to feel a little smug, but my mind was still racing around and leaving me out of breath. "So have you been stalking me? Creep!"

"I'm not a stalker. There's a lot of dirt in the corner... it's pretty hard to see. I'm trying to clear it out."

"There's a lot of dirt my ass! Yeah! Just like how there are guns and cultists! And how you're being pursued through a fucking wasteland!" I was really out of control now, but I was fed up and scared and I had never been *stalked* before so I may have been freaking out a little bit.

"It's a moon."

"What?"

"Looks like a moon. It's kinda hard to see 'cus the drawing is really shallow. And it's got some dots inside of it."

"How many dots?"

"Three."

I paused for a moment, then moved my hand to make sure I remembered what I had drawn correctly.

"So what was the point of this again?"

I sprang to my feet, my eyes like saucers. "There's no way. How did you know?"

"It's right here..."

"There's no way. You can't have seen it. You can't have *guessed*. You're telling me that you are – that you're – you're telling me my radio is picking up frequencies from the, from the apocalypse!?" I started to hyperventilate. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Oliwja, calm down."

"No I will not calm down! Are the cultists real too? Yeah of course the cultists are real. Haha! Hahaha!" I was yelling at this point. I wanted to say something snide, something funny, find the obvious rational explanation here, but people were staring at me now, and I couldn't really process anything in my head. In retrospect, I guess that's what they mean when they say *mindblown*.

"Shut up!" hissed Magnesia. *"Goddamn Orderists are gonna hear you from across town!"*

I latched onto that for some reason. I took a few breaths. "Turn down the volume, then."

"The knob fell off," she said crossly.

That took a few moments to process. "Oh, and is the back right corner caved in?"

"...How did you know that?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Ha! You have my radio! We both have the radio! It's a time travelling radio!"

Magnesia fell silent, and I was suddenly self-conscious about the onlookers. I gave them a haggard smile, trying to convince them I wasn't crazy. Or was I?

"What's the writing mean?"

I breathed in. "It says 'Hi Mag.'"

"You're telling me you wrote this," she said, skeptically.

I breathed out. "Yeah. And the moon. It's, well, my father had a birthmark on his neck. Kinda looked like that."

"Ain't been no construction work since the Sickness," she said dismissively. *"You're telling me you were born before the apocalypse."*

"I'm from the past," I said, and I actually believed myself.

We fell into silence again.

"Hey! Lady!"

I looked up and I found a construction worker rushing towards me. With a gasp, I grabbed my bag and stumbled back over the fence. "Yes sir?" I said, putting on my most wide-eyed innocent face.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, then searched the cement with a cursory glance. But my writing was flush against the wall, nearly impossible to see in the shadows, and the man didn't notice. "Stay behind the fence, miss."

I nodded energetically and the man stomped away.

I stood quietly in the parking lot. On my shoulder I felt the weight of my bag, in my hand the smooth plastic of the handset. The sound of distant traffic drifted into my ears, the wind cooling my face and blowing my hair back, and in a sudden moment of clarity I saw myself caught between the past and the future in the ceaseless gale of time.

"Why should I pick up these Cheetos," I said listlessly, "If humanity is going to be wiped out in eighty-two years?"

"*Stop that,*" commanded Magnesia. "*And humanity doesn't get wiped out. What are Cheetos?*"

"Cheesy snacks," I said, "so you can fill yourself up with calories before you inevitably die."

"*Stop talking like that,*" Magnesia said again, crossly.

"How do you keep on going?" I respond, totally oblivious to her. "I can't believe this is true. I can't believe this is true."

I was lying on my couch, as usual, but this time my living room seemed gloomier than usual. I'd never felt this way before. This total feeling of pointlessness, like the foundation of the world had suddenly fallen away. I felt like I had no energy, and at the same time I felt like my insides were melting into a nervously vibrating puddle of Oliwja. There was going to be an apocalypse in eighty-two years, and Magnesia was here to prove it.

"There is going to be an apocalypse in eighty-two years," I said.

"*Oh, shut up!*" said Magnesia, finally.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I have a hard time focusing on my thoughts sometimes. So I say them out loud. It's like how I read books out loud. I know it bothers people. But it doesn't matter because they're going to be dead."

I heard a grunt of irritation from Magnesia's end.

"Tell me more about what happened to humanity," I said, thoughtfully.

"*The Sickness,*" she monotoned.

"Yeah. That."

"*I dunno. That was a long time ago.*"

"Are there a lot of survivors?"

"*Oh, plenty. There's lots of little towns popping up nowadays, and there's always been raider bands. Of course, lotta people are afraid of settling down on account of that the Sickness might come back.*"

"Come back?"

"*The first wave of the Sickness was years and years ago,*" Magnesia explained. "*But it's never really gone away. It spread to animals and plants, and every now and then it pops up in human towns.*"

"You're telling me the disease affects humans, animals, *and* plants."

"*Uh-huh.*"

"But how is there oxygen if all the trees are dead?"

"...What?"

I realized that for once I was talking to someone with less education than me.

"Never mind."

"Anyway, I was saying, the people that spread the Sickness, they call 'em 'carriers,' the folks that got the disease but they don't show it."

"So you stay away from humans in case they're carriers," I murmured.

"Mhm."

I closed my eyes and sighed. "So. Not everyone dies, but the people who survive are forever lonely."

"God dammit, Oliwja, are you just gonna lie around and mope all day?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"You need to get off your butt and look for a job."

"Don'ttellingmewhattodo," I muttered.

"I'm serious," said Magnesia, with enough force to make me blink open one eye. *"You can't just give up on life 'cus of something that's gonna happen in the future."*

"I should go to sleep," I decided with a flash of insight.

"Look. What were you doing earlier? Looking for jobs in the newspaper?"

"Yeah, but I didn't find any."

"So what's your next plan?"

I rubbed my eyes. "Why are you being so bossy all of a sudden? I liked you better when you weren't so bossy."

"I'm waiting for an answer, Oliwja."

I sighed. "Well. There's this one guy that I could ask for help. But I really don't want to see his face again." I turned on my phone with one hand. "He's seen the message," I reported grimly. "But no response."

"Go talk to him face to face."

"Well... I guess I could." I looked distastefully at the door, as if going outside would be nothing but the cruelest form of punishment. "Look, Magnesia, I appreciate you trying, but... right now I just feel like... I feel sick and tired and I can't do anything and I hate it. All I wanna do is just go to sleep and forget about it."

"Are you lying down?"

"Yes."

"First things first, you gotta sit up."

I sighed unhappily and stared at the radio. "Do I have to?"

"Yes!"

Suddenly I realized how incredibly ironic this was. I was speaking to a girl living out the apocalypse itself, passing day by day trying to feed herself and defend herself from danger on her lonesome. And here I was in a perfect, beautiful society full of people of all appearances and temperaments that I could talk to any day I pleased. And I couldn't get up from the couch.

I hated that.

"Oliwja?"

I hated that I was such a damn failure. Yes, okay, I said it, whatever, my counselor can go eat a bucket of frogs. I hated that I was legitimately, sincerely incapable of sitting up. I hated that I was watching myself sink into this yawning abyss and doing nothing about it, but I knew that things wouldn't change, because I wasn't just a victim of circumstance; I was like this because *that's who I am*.

"Oliwja."

The world would probably have been a better place if my father had never come to America and conceived me. After all, the world had precious little time left before it expired, and here I was taking up time and space and inconveniencing everyone I've ever interacted with. Even my own father didn't care enough about me to stick around, so maybe it was time to accept that he was never coming back 'cus why would he anyway?

"OLIWJA!" shouted Magnesia, making me jump. *"What is this crap about your father? Stop moping and sit up right now."*

I realized that I had started talking out loud at some point without realizing. "I'm sorry," I said in a small voice.

"Just do this one thing, Oliwja. Please."

The pleading tone in her voice struck something in me. Maybe I could do it if I just didn't think about it. With no ceremony, I pulled myself up and slouched on the backrest. I let out a breath.

"Okay. I'm up."

"If you ain't gonna work, what do you usually do for fun?"

I looked around my living area distantly. "Read books." Of course I liked to read books. I could go to another world and forget that my disappointment of an existence even existed.

There was a bit of a silence. "Oh, I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I forgot you can't..."

"It's all right."

"You've never read a book before, have you?" I said, in wonder.

"...No."

"That's too bad," I said, momentarily distracted from the inevitable death and destruction of all humanity – oops, never mind, I was thinking about it again.

"Why don't you read to me?"

I thought about that.

"It'll take your mind off the apocalypse and maybe it'll cheer you up."

"I don't know," I mumbled. But that did sound... nice. No one had ever actually listened to me read before. It had always just been a nuisance to my peers.

I took a look at the various novels scattered around me. Some of them I had bought second-hand, others I had inherited, and a few, I'm sure, were long overdue at the library. I wasn't a picky reader, so I had all sorts of books: juvenile, adult, fantasy, mystery. Even romance. (I had a phase, okay?)

"What kind of book do you want to hear?"

Magnesia seemed to think about that for a while. *"Are there books about animals?"*

That caught me by surprise. I wouldn't have taken the down-to-earth survivor for an animal lover... but hey, why not?

It took me a little while to find a suitable book. I was on my hands and knees on the rough carpet, shifting through piles of old books in my bedroom closet, when I exclaimed, "Aha!"

"Did you find one?"

I extracted a tattered copy of *The Wind in the Willows*, sending a stack of books all over the floor. I couldn't remember the last time I had read this. "Yeah. But, well, uh, it's a *really* old book."

"All of your books are really old from my point of view."

"Oh, yeah. True." I quickly restacked the books – usually I would just leave the mess, but it felt wrong to leave the books like that – and carried the radio back into the living room. Soon I was set up on the couch, handset placed strategically by my mouth, the book turned to the first chapter. Then, I hesitated.

I wasn't sure why I felt nervous about this. Reading was one of the most natural things in the world to me. I'd never wondered before if I was a *good* reader or not.

"Chapter One," I said, slowly and deliberately. "The River Bank."

I heard some movement on the other end, but she didn't interrupt.

"The mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home..."

I knew this was supposed to be a classic or something, but by the time I had read the first two pages I was intensely bored. Maybe this had entertained children back whenever it was first published, but not me. Conscious of the lack of input from Magnesia, I eventually paused, uncertain if she was interested or dying of boredom or even listening at all. Maybe she had fallen asleep.

"Why'd you stop?"

“Oh,” I stammered, “I, uh, I just, uh... no reason.”

“Keep going.”

“Yeah, okay.” I cleared my throat and started on the next sentence.

“A grave round face, with the same twinkle in its eye that had first attracted his notice. Small neat ears and thick silky hair. It was the Water Rat! Then the two animals stood and regarded each other cautiously.”

I paused again for a moment as I considered the dialogue that followed.

“‘Hullo, Mole!’ said the Water Rat. ‘Hullo, Rat!’ said the –”

I broke off as I heard giggling from the radio. “What?” I asked, peeved. I’d never heard Magnesia laugh before.

“Nothing,” she claimed. *“But, your voice.”*

“What’s wrong with my voice?” I asked, nonplussed, as she kept laughing.

“It sounds like a totally different person.”

I rubbed my neck. “I guess I usually do voices...”

“Yes, keep doing it,” she interjected. *“It’s good.”*

I coughed, self-conscious, and continued.

“‘Hullo, Rat!’ said the Mole. ‘Would you like to come over?’ enquired the Rat presently. ‘Oh it’s all very well to *talk*,’ said the Mole, rather pettishly, he being new to a river and riverside life and its ways...”

The story grew on me as it went on, though it wasn’t going to become my favorite book any time soon. In retrospect, it made sense that Magnesia was entertained; it was the first book she had ever “read.” The light slowly dimmed as I continued, forcing me to turn on my lamp, and I started taking breaks to drink water. That feeling in my gut never went away – believe me, it’s hard to focus when the back of your head won’t stop yelling *HUMANITY IS HEADED TOWARDS EXTINCTION* – but I was glad to have a distraction.

By the time I had finished chapter five, my mouth felt as dry as a desert, and I was getting sleepy, besides. It turned out reading for an audience was a bit more exhausting than murmuring a story to myself. I closed the book, yawned, and said, “Do you mind if we stop there? I’m getting tired.”

“Okay,” said Magnesia, though she sounded disappointed. I almost felt bad for stopping, but I’d been reading for way too long. I glanced at my clock, confirming that – holy shit, it was midnight already! I turned my gaze out the window, where night had long since fallen. Then again, I guessed I didn’t have to be up early tomorrow morning.

I set the book to the side and grabbed the handset instead, walking up to the window. I stared pensively at the distant lights shining from the town.

“Magnesia... could you do me a favor?”

"Sure."

"Describe what you see out the window."

"...Why?"

"I wanna know what it looks like," I said, quietly.

She took a while to respond, and for a moment I thought she wasn't going to oblige. Then I heard curtains being drawn.

"It's a big forest," she said, her thoughtful voice starting off slow. "There are hills going up and down, covered in dead trees. And there's a big road going through it, and it's cracked and dusty. Bunch a cars abandoned on it. Where there's a clearing the ground is brownish gray. And there are buildings."

"Describe them," I said.

"Most of 'em are pretty broken down, with busted windows and peeling paint. The big medical place is over in the distance. Looks like there's a big sign that's fallen off and crushed a building nearby. And the moon is real high in the sky, but it's hazy behind the clouds. I can see some water, but it's all brownish and slow-moving, and I guess the dirt near it is caving in 'cus there are trees nearly falling over into it."

"What do the trees look like?"

"Crooked and short," she said. "A couple of 'em have some thin yellow leaves, but most of 'em are just black branches twisting up against each other. And every now and then you can see a bird fly out."

I looked out, trying to picture it all in my head. An oppressive, cloudy sky over broken buildings, the roads in disrepair, all the traffic gone.

"Birds are lucky, y'know. You can wish on 'em."

No sign of life but the occasional, miraculous bird. Still and dusty. Broken and lonely. I felt something that I can only describe as an unadulterated loneliness on behalf of the Earth itself. There was a feeling building up inside me, like... like a quivering bowl of Jell-O. Somewhere in my brain I thought, *Really? That's the best simile you can come up with?* and I let out a breath of laughter.

"I've seen pictures of trees before the apocalypse. Were they really all green and poofy?"

"Yes," I responded. I'd never really looked at the trees, which suddenly felt like a terrible sin. "They're beautiful and green and poofy. There's always a billion birds, too, and the forest is like a sea of different shades of green. And the buildings are clean and shiny, and there's little people walking down the sidewalks going about their lives."

"It sounds nice," said Magnesia.

I nodded vigorously, not that she could see it. "It's beautiful."

I heard the curtains being closed on the other end. *"I don't want anyone to notice I'm here,"* she said gruffly.

That brought me back to reality, and suddenly I felt self-conscious. I would never claim to be an unemotional person. I was well-acquainted with happiness, disappointment, love, maybe a little too much with anger. But this way too sappy for my liking. As if I had turned into goo and was oozing all over everything with every emotion at once. Had I just called a tree beautiful?

I shook my head, not that it helped. This whole apocalypse thing was an emotional rollercoaster.

"I'd better go to sleep," I said, closing my curtains as well.

"Me too," said Magnesia.

"Stay safe," I said.

"...Do you think we could read again sometime?"

I smiled, despite myself. "Sure. It's not like I have anything better to do with my time."

"Thanks."

"No, thank *you*," I said. "I think... I think I'm better now. So thanks."

"Uh-huh," she said, simply, and I heard a click as she turned her radio off.

There were a lot of thoughts rotating through my head as I got ready to sleep. Was the apocalypse for certain the future, or just one of many possible futures? Where the hell did my father get this radio come from? What was I going to read to Magnesia after we finished *The Wind in the Willows*?

But as I flopped into bed, I was thinking about the next morning. I would go talk to Brandon. Surprisingly, I didn't feel anxious about it at all. It would happen, then it would be over, then in eighty-two years there would be an apocalypse so no one would have to worry about unemployment. There was at least *one* bright side to all this: knowing about the apocalypse really put my own problems into context.

As I fell asleep, I had to admit I felt like the Mole, as cheesy as it sounds. The world was full of grassy fields and running rivers, and tomorrow I would get out there and take the bull by the horns or whatever and start getting my life together.

If Magnesia could take on a world full of death and disease and cultists, I could handle an ex-boyfriend.

I hadn't been in this building for at least two years, but its warm wooden panels and shelves full of paperbacks were all too familiar familiar. Round lamps on the ceiling filled the room with dimmed yellow light in an attempt to make it seem homey and comfortable.

Comfortable was about the last emotion I was feeling.

"Hey."

"Hello."

My ex-boyfriend looked skeptically across the counter at me, his elbows resting against the front desk. The cold air between us was as tangible as glue.

"So," I continued.

"Mm."

"What's up?"

"Not much. How about you?"

"I'm fine."

There was a long silence after that.

"Just get on with it, Oliwja. We're both adults."

"Debatable," I muttered under my breath.

That drew a disapproving look. "I know you're not here to buy something. What do you want?"

I had woken up that morning feeling remarkably... normal. Somewhere I still felt a little of the anxiety, the sadness, the quivering Jell-O, but as I went to splash water on my face I tripped over my phone charger, and then it was just like a normal day.

Now that I was actually here, I remembered every reason why I dreaded this meeting.

"Well." I swallowed, having a hard time forcing the words out of my mouth. "I got fired the other day." I paused for a second in case he wanted to express sympathy, but of course not. "And. I was wondering if you needed any help around the store."

"And why are you coming to me for help?"

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, reminding myself to keep calm. "Believe me, Brandon. You are my last resort."

He sighed and walked out from behind the counter, crossing his arms. "I'm sorry, Oliwja, but my store is doing fine. And I have more than enough employees. Do you really want me to hire you out of pity? After what *you* did to me?"

I managed to swallow indignation and respond. "I... I know the store really well. You know that. And I'm good with the customers."

"You smashed three of my snow globes in three months."

"Two," I corrected with a huff. "The third one wasn't *smashed*. Just cracked a little." Why did he have snow globes in a book store in the first place?

"Look," said Brandon. "I'd really love to help." I knew he was lying; the expression on his face said he'd rather be as far away from me as possible. "But you're going to have to look elsewhere, because..."

He trailed off, and I had a fun time imagining the end of the sentence. *Because you're an untrustworthy bitch. Because I vowed I'd never speak to you again. Because I hate you. Because I'm a successful entrepreneur and you're basically a slug.*

I stood up slowly, not looking his smug face in the eye. I wanted to shout at him, I really did. But that was exactly how I'd lost my last job, so I was going to have to show a little restraint.

"Brandon," I forced out from between my teeth. The next word was going to be hard to say. "Please. You know how hard it is for me to... to ask you this. Just... let me work for a month or two. Pay me minimum wage, I don't care. I'll keep looking for other jobs."

He was silent for a while, and I dared to look up at his face.

"Fine," he said.

I breathed out deeply. "Thank you."

"I'll contact you later about the details. I assume you're open any time, since it's not like you have anything else going on right now."

It wasn't a question. "Yes. That will be fine."

"Good. Now get the hell out of my store, Oliwja." He scrunched his nose like he had smelled something bad. "What would your father think?"

That ticked me off, and he knew it. There was no reason for him to bring that up. My heart burned with a hundred things I wanted to spit in his face – both words and actual spit – about what a shitfaced insolent lump he was and that I hoped his stupid shop burned down.

"His little girl's grown up to be an uneducated tramp trying to mooch off of her ex-boyfriend," he continued, with a smug expression. "What a shame."

That's it. Abandoning all restraint, I locked and loaded the most cutting insult I could think of.

"I bet your mother –"

"By the way," Brandon interrupted. "There was a Polish guy in the store. Asked if there was an Oliwja around here."

I felt like I had been just hit in the gut with a bowling ball and I couldn't breathe. The fire disappeared from my head in an instant. "A Polish guy?" I gasped.

"Yes."

"What did he look like?" I couldn't hide the disbelief in my voice.

“Kind of like you,” he said. “Black hair, tall, sharp nose. Had on this thick brown jacket.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him yes.”

I stared at Brandon for a long time, trying to process this information. “Well did you tell him anything about me? Or, did he tell *you* anything? Did you give him my number?”

“You think I still have your number?” he asked.

“Answer the question,” I hissed.

“Although you kept mine, apparently,” he continued as if I hadn’t spoken. He was trying to keep a straight face, but I could see the hints of a satisfied smirk.

“That doesn’t mean anything!” I protested. “I still have your number because – because I didn’t think about you enough to remember to delete it!” Immediately I realized how defensive and obviously fake that sounded. “Whatever, what did you tell the guy?”

“Keep your voice down, would you? We have customers.” He gave an apologetic wave to a blithe old lady near the back of the store.

I clamped my mouth shut to stop from screaming.

“I told him I didn’t know where you lived or how to contact you,” Brandon said. “Which is the truth. But he told me he was staying at the Hampton Inn.”

I was off in a flash.

“You forgot your bag,” called Brandon.

I stomped back into the store, grabbed my purse, and then I was off in a flash.

Apocalypse and unemployment be damned. One thought ran through my mind as I careened through the streets of Weimar, the brick walls and crumbling asphalt suddenly vibrant with a thousand colors of hope and a million dancing shadows of apprehension.

Dad?

“Is there a Dominik Kosmatka here?” I demanded the receptionist behind the desk.

“Sorry,” he said, “We can’t give out information about our guests to –”

“I’m his daughter,” I said. “Dominik Kosmatka?” I gave him an intense look, both hands grasping the counter.

“Ah, of course,” he said, with only a slightly skeptical nod, and started to click around on his computer. I tapped the marble counter impatiently.

“I don’t see a Dominik,” said the man, “But there is an... Oh-lee-jeer Kosmatka.”

I furrowed my brows as I considered his butchered pronunciation. “You mean Oliwja?”

“Uh –“

“O-L-I-W-J-A,” I spelled out. But why was my name in the system? Maybe my father had used my name to register. Maybe he wanted me to stay with him in the hotel. No wait, that didn’t make sense.

“No,” said the receptionist, snapping me back to reality. “It’s O-L-I-W-J-E-R.”

I paused. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

Had my father forgotten my name? Oh! Maybe Oliwjer was my father’s real name! Maybe he changed it when he moved to America, for some reason. And maybe, maybe, maybe... maybe he had named me after him. The thought triggered a rush of pleasure through my heart. *I’m named after my father.*

Could this really be happening? Was my father right here in Weimar? It was unbelievable.

“Is he in?” I asked, in a rush. “Can I see him?”

“I’m afraid not,” said the receptionist in an apologetic tone. “But would you like me to pass along a message?”

“Yes, please,” I said, eagerly. “Tell him – well – tell him...” I didn’t know how to continue. I felt like there was so much I wanted to tell him, but what do you say to someone that you haven’t seen in fourteen years?

“You know what, I really want to talk to him in person,” I said. “Maybe I could just wait here in the lobby?”

“Of course,” said the man.

I nodded energetically – I had so much energy – and found a seat on a modern-looking beige couch. My leg bounced up and down. I stared at a fake potted plant beside me, then across at some other guests, then the ceiling, which was high above. A fancy chandelier hung down above my head. This was a pricey place; my father must be well-off.

The minutes ticked by agonizingly. I wished I had brought a book, or maybe the radio, so I could talk to Magnesia. The only reading material nearby was an outdated magazine. I could go back home and grab a book, but what if I missed him while I was out?

I put my head in my hands and tried to calm my beating heart. I had waited fourteen years; I could wait another few hours.

Because he had left so early, I had never really known him as a person. My memories were all fuzzy. Still, I knew that my father had cared for me in a way my mother never had. I remembered waiting by the door so he could pick me up off my feet when he came home. His warm, protective presence, and his scent, and the softness of my bed as his soothing voice filling my head with stories. Sometimes I hoped he would return, but it had always been just a childish fantasy.

Until now.

“Oliwja?”

His pronunciation was perfect. But something was wrong.

I spun around. The person standing there was solidly built and handsome, with dark hair and a prominent nose. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of a brown leather jacket – *dad’s* brown leather jacket – and a book bag was strapped to his back. His hazel eyes were lit up with both surprise and pleasure, accompanying a friendly grin.

But he was at least four years younger than me.

“That must be you!” said the imposter. “I’m Oliwjer, your brother.”

"What."

"Oliwja, right?"

I was staring at him in a probably very impolite manner. He looked just like dad. He looked just like *me*. And for some reason I hated him.

"...Yeah."

"I'm your brother," he said, with a smile that I immediately found insufferable. His voice was confident, amenable, and very Polish. "Well, half-brother. I'm in America on a vacation, and I heard about you from our father. I thought I might come see for myself. What a coincidence that we've met here!"

A million thoughts ran through my head. My father married another woman? I had a brother? Did I have more than one?

Eventually, one of the questions bubbled to the top and out of my mouth. "He named you after me?"

"Well," he said, with a chuckle. "Guess he did, yes? He must really like the name."

"But it's *my* name," I said, in a small voice. I knew that was petty and nonsensical but my brain wasn't working correctly at the moment.

He tilted his head at me. "I'm sorry, I think we got off on the wrong foot." He extended one hand. "I'm Oliwjer Kosmatka."

I stood up, mechanically, and shook his hand. "You know my name already."

"*Oliwja* Kosmatka," he said, with another insufferable smile.

I thought for a moment that this might be a prank. Maybe he was lying. But we looked way too alike, and his story was all too realistic.

"It's a beautiful town, isn't it?" he said. "Weimar. I like it here."

"Mhm," I said.

"You have to show me around!" he exclaimed. "Tell me what sights there are to see. Of course, if you don't mind. This is really a momentous occasion! It's not every day you get to meet a long-lost sister."

"Sure," I said, unsteadily, and started heading to the front door, if only so I could stop looking at his face.

I thought I was starting to get a hold of my thoughts now. Okay, I had a brother. What did this mean? And why the hell did I hate him so much?

I took a glance over my shoulder as I saw him follow, his hands stuffed in his coat pockets – my *dad's* coat pockets – with a pleasant little smile on his face. He waved at the receptionist as we passed by.

"Why don't I show you my apartment," I said. I was going back there anyway, now that this wild goose chase was over.

"All right," he said.

On the way back, he kept trying to make conversation. I shot them all down with one-word answers – just grunts, when it was possible – and eventually he got the hint and stopped talking. Thank God.

I unlocked the door, stepped inside, and tossed my keys on a nearby table. In a moment of shock, I suddenly remembered how much of a mess this place was. I turned around, intent on pushing Oliwjer back out, but it was too late. He'd already seen it.

"Quaint little place," he said, which made me want to hiss.

He stepped inside, gingerly walked around the Cheetos (okay, I was going to clean that up the *instant* he went away) and took a seat on my couch. He set his jacket on the couch behind him.

"I see you like to read," he said, with a grin. "Marvelous."

"Yeah," I said, as I closed the door.

I stood in one spot and looked busily around the room, trying to think of something to do while not looking at my brother. What did people usually do when they had company over? Oh, I know.

"Let me get you something to eat," I said, navigating into the kitchen.

I couldn't believe I had gotten my hopes up to see my dad. Some part of me thought I should be glad to meet family who was legitimately happy to see me, but I didn't want to share my father with anyone. Especially not with some smarmy Polish kid who had his life together and went on vacations to other countries. I could hear him humming in the living room, totally oblivious.

I opened my fridge, but found, as usual, that there was not much inside of it. I couldn't serve him old Chinese takeout without embarrassing myself or offending him or both. In the end, I just reached into the pantry and poured some chips into a bowl.

"What's this?" asked Oliwjer as I emerged. "An old radio?"

"Don't touch that!" I cried, and he put his hands up as if he had been caught stealing. I heard the static, and I realized he'd turned it on.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, his voice sincerely repentant.

"*Oliwja?*" I heard Magnesia's voice.

"Someone's on the other side!" he said. "How marvelous."

"OKAY THAT'S ENOUGH," I said, probably more panicked than the situation warranted, and smacked the off switch on the radio. "I, uh, I just don't want you to break it by accident."

Oliwjer gave me a skeptical look, but graciously didn't comment.

"Chips?" I offered, with a pained look.

He took the bowl. "Thank you."

I took a seat in a wooden chair nearby and busily cleared some items off the couch and table. I knew I wasn't being fair to Oliwjer. I took a breath and tried to give him a smile, which he seemed relieved to

see. There were a lot of terrible things about working at Arby's, but at least I had gotten really good at fake smiling.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I... I uh," I laughed nervously. "My apartment isn't in great shape."

"Oh, it's all right," he said. "I suppose I did come unannounced. Do you, ah, live here alone?"

"Yes." He must be disappointed that his sister was such a louse.

"I see. Are you in school?"

"No."

"Then you are a working woman," he said pleasantly. "Marvelous."

I nodded. Yeah, a professional, that's me.

"Where do you work?"

"The book store on Daisy Street," I said.

"Oh, I was there the other day!" he said. "The proprietor was very kind."

"Mhm," I said, in a strained voice.

"I still have a few years of school left before Father will let me go off on my own," he said. "I am thinking about studying business."

"Ah, yes. Business." I said, trying to sound like I knew all about college and business. A moment later I realized what he had just said.

"You live with your father?" I said, eyes wide. "I mean, our father?"

"Uh, that is correct."

Maybe having a half-brother was good for one thing. "Tell me about him," I demanded.

"Oh, he is very caring and smart," said Oliwjer, "but he doesn't have a lot of time for family. Often he is away on business for months at a time."

Good, you don't deserve him, I thought immediately, then felt bad about it.

"What does he do?" I asked.

"I am not sure," said Oliwjer, thoughtfully. "He works for a company called LGA Electronics, but he does not like to talk about his work." He glanced at the radio.

"That's his," I said in a hurry. "Or it was. He left it here, for some reason. I guess he didn't want it anymore."

"No wonder," he said with a laugh. "It looks like it came from a trash bin."

That made me feel a little heated for some reason. "Well it's not *that* bad," I muttered. "I mean, it works fine. It's just scratched up."

I realized I was getting defensive over my shitty apocalypse radio and mentally kicked myself. Thankfully, my phone rang, giving me a reason to look away from Oliwjer's perpetually pleasant face.

"Oh, um, my *employer* wants to talk to me," I said, making sure to stress *employer* so Oliwjer knew I did in fact have a job. "Excuse me." I hurried out the front door, leaving Oliwjer alone with the untouched bowl of potato chips.

Brandon was apparently feeling civil that time of day, because he managed to keep the insults to a minimum as we negotiated my employment. There wasn't much actual negotiation going on, as I didn't dare ask for more hours or higher pay. The sooner I found another job, the better. I was starting in a few days, which gave me plenty of time to keep looking.

"I'll have the contract ready for you on the first day," he said finally. *"You do know how to read, right?"*

I struggled to come up with a comeback for a few minutes, then hung up without a word. There. Look at me, being the mature one.

In the following silence, I became aware of voices coming from inside. First I thought Oliwjer had turned on the old TV, except I didn't have a satellite dish, and I sure as hell wasn't paying for cable.

I burst in. "Hey! I thought I told you not to... touch that..."

I trailed off as I realized the voice coming from the radio sounded like an actual radio broadcast. It was a woman's voice, fading in and out, talking at the measured pace of a public speaker.

"Don't worry," said Oliwjer, quickly. "I am very good with electronics. I won't break it."

"What makes you think you're allowed to mess with my stuff?" I demanded.

"Well, we are brother and sister –"

"Half-brother," I fumed.

"Yes. I'm sorry if I have been too familiar. I thought you wouldn't mind." He gave me a mournful expression.

I did mind, but I was more concerned with the woman on the radio.

"...Humanity has suffered in disorder for far too long. Living in the shadow of the pestilence, fearful even to stick our heads out from shelter, the greatness of humankind has been stifled. Good men and women, forced to choose between starvation and stealing their sustenance from others."

"Oliwja?"

"Shut up for a second," I said, walking closer to the radio. The voice was deep, powerful, and elegant. Something made me want to immediately trust her, which in retrospect made me want to distrust her even more.

"This must not go on. Through the power of modern medicine, through a unified and concerted effort, we will create a New Order where our children can live without fear. Where crops can grow. Where animals can roam. Where our home will recover by God's gracious bounty."

“American radio programs are quite strange, aren’t they?” said Oliwjer.

“All we ask for is cooperation. Put your faith in the New Order and the power the Lord has vested in us. Together, we will experience the purging that will erase the Sickness from this Earth. We will all be asked to make sacrifices. But in the name of unity, no sacrifice is too great.”

Some sort of organ music started playing over the radio. This had to be Serenity, the “high priestess” that Magnesia had told me about.

“How did you find this station?” I demanded, squatting by the radio as I tried to figure out what was different.

“Oh, I turned your control-lock off.” Oliwjer showed me a small black button that I had never noticed on the side of the radio. “Then I turned the, ah, what is it called in English? The antenna switch. Then I started tuning.”

He must have noticed the look of disbelief my face, because he quickly explained, “My father works in electronics.”

Of *course* my father had taught my entitled half-brother how to use a ham radio, but not me. I was already furious at Oliwjer for just waltzing into my life like he belonged there and casually fixing my belongings, but now I was furious at myself for not noticing that black button for OVER TEN YEARS.

“Are you okay, Oliwja?”

“YES!” I shouted. “I mean, yes. I’m okay.” I turned off the church music, which was getting on my nerves.

Oliwjer gave me a concerned look. “What did your employer tell you? It wasn’t bad news, was it?”

I took a deep breath, trying to compose my face. I shouldn’t yell at him. “No. Just... negotiations.”

“Look, Oliwja. I know we have not known each other for very long.” He met my gaze with pity in his eyes. “But if you ever need... how do I say this... financial assistance. I would be happy to help.”

My eye twitched. Somehow, that was the last straw. I didn’t want the help of some chipper Polish kid, even if I kind of needed it, and I certainly didn’t need him silently judging my lifestyle and looking at me like some sort of downtrodden stray dog.

“It was very nice to meet you, Oliwjer,” I said in a stilted tone, standing up.

He seemed to take the hint, and stood up as well. “Oh, well, all right. I will be staying at the Hampton Inn for another week, if you want to talk.”

“Uh-huh.” I opened the door for him.

“I’m sorry if I... offended you.”

“It’s okay,” I said, my eye twitching.

Oliwjer pursed his lips, like he was trying to figure out how exactly what he could have done better, which was nothing because it was his very existence that I couldn’t stand. Then he hurried out the door.

I hated the feeling of disappointment that had gotten lodged in my stomach. I felt foolish for thinking my father was here, and childish for wanting it so much. I couldn't even entertain Oliwjer's company without breaking down. I was twenty years old. I should be able to take care of myself.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder what might have been if my father had taken me with him, all those years ago. If I had been raised alongside Oliwjer, a well-meaning little brother, with a proper education, never wanting for money or companionship. An easier life.

I closed the door harder than strictly necessary, then walked to my room. I buried my face in a pillow and screamed, as if trying to excise the confusing emotions from my body.

Ding-dong.

"Ooh, that must be the pizza. Give me a moment."

"Okay."

I put the book face down and hopped over the clutter to the front door, already anticipating the cheesy goodness about to fill my mouth.

"Took ya long eno—"

I froze with my mouth open. It wasn't the pizza.

"Good afternoon, Oliwja."

"Ohh, hey, Ms. Pam. What's up?" I said, plastering the most amenable grin I could manage onto my face. Today? Already? How had I lost track of time?

"I hope you've been well," she said with a smile. "Your rent is due."

I didn't know how my landlady could smile while saying those words.

"Oh, pshh. Right. *Rent*. That thing."

She gave me a dangerous look. "Do you have it this time?"

I spread my stance, as if trying to shield my apartment behind my back. I also didn't want the landlady to know how messy it was, but that wasn't high on my list of concerns.

"...Well, I'll have it in a few weeks." I caught her expression. "One week! Just one. Come on, we're friends, right? Can't you make an exception for an old buddy?"

"I'm sorry, Oliwja. I want to help you out, but you've been causing a lot of trouble around here."

"Like what?" I demanded, putting my hands on my hips. "*Other* than the noise complaints. And the time the bath overflowed. And your cat. Is this about the cat? Look, I'll buy you a new one."

Based on the twitch in her eye, that was still a touchy subject.

"One week?" I asked again, weakly.

"You'd better get your act together soon, young lady," said the landlady.

"Uh-huh."

"I won't be so forgiving next time."

"Understood, ma'am. Have a nice day!"

I thought was about to say something else, but I closed the door before she could change her mind. I sat down on my couch and breathed deeply. Okay. One week. I could do that.

"*What is pizza?*"

"You've never had pizza?" I said, outraged.

"I've seen pictures."

"It's only the most delicious food ever invented by humankind. I can't believe you've never had it."

"I guess that wasn't the pizza, then."

I rolled my eyes. "No, that was Pam, scolding me again."

I did my best impression of the landlady's Midwestern accent. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Oliwja! I really want to help you, but I'm still going to turn you out to the streets because I only care about my ugly cats!"

I paused with a faltering grin, waiting for a reaction that wasn't forthcoming.

"My secret desire is to fill every apartment with ugly cats! The uglier the better!"

"Is that you?"

My smile disappeared entirely. "Yes, it's me," I said in my normal voice. "It's called an impression."

"You sound just like her." Magnesia sounded more astonished than amused.

I made an exasperated noise and flopped onto the couch. Using humor to avoid the rising sensation of despair: unsuccessful. "I guess it comes from doing character voices all day."

I had been reading to Magnesia on my couch when my landlady came knocking. We were almost done with *The Wind in the Willows*, but I didn't exactly feel like reading now. I *knew* my rent had been due a few days ago. Still, the landlady usually let me pay a week or two late if I needed to.

"Why don't you ask your mother for help?"

I snorted and turned onto my back. "My mom hit the road years ago. She thinks it's my fault she's bankrupt and an addict. Like I asked to be born."

A distant gunshot on Magnesia's side made both of us fall silent.

"It's probably nothing," she said after a moment.

"I think she got a new number, anyway," I said, quieter, "'cus the last time I tried calling her I got some accountant's office."

"I bet your brother Oliwjer would help."

"Like I'm asking that snot-nosed idiot for money!" I exclaimed. "You don't get it, Magnesia. My family sucks and I don't want anything to do with them."

"Least you have a family," she muttered.

The plaintive tone in her voice made me pause. I'd never even thought to ask about Magnesia's family, or why she was travelling the wasteland alone. Now I felt guilty.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What happened to your family?"

"Lost 'em."

"Lost as in 'can't find,' or lost as in...."

Magnesia just grunted noncommittally.

"I mean, to be fair, I've basically been complaining to you nonstop the past few days. So if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here."

"Ain't nothing worth talking about."

"Mm, if you say so."

"I think I hear cultists coming," she cut in urgently. *"Be right back."*

"Oh, sure. Cultists. Convenient."

There was no response; she had already left. I sighed.

My job search had continued to be fruitless, even after going out and asking in person, so I had nothing to do but sit around and become one with my furniture, wracking my mind over and over for some sort of plan. Now, the situation was even more dire. Like there was a dark pit in my brain, sucking up each and every one of my accomplishments until I was consumed body and soul.

Maybe I could be a prostitute. I didn't think there was any demand for that in Weimar, but you never know.

"I think they're gone," said Magnesia.

"Welcome back."

"More and more of them are showing up around these parts. I don't like it."

"Wonder why," I said, idly.

"I don't know."

My mind drifted back to the broadcast I had caught yesterday. "Maybe they want something from Murray. The medical school."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A cure."

"The Sickness can't just be cured, Oliwja," she said, indignantly.

"Oh, are you a doctor now?" I yawned. I wasn't exhausted in a "ten hours of sandwich making" sort of way, but sitting around hating myself was surprisingly tiring.

There were more gunshots, and I winced.

"Are you sure it's safe for you to stay here? In Weimar?"

"I have a pretty good hiding spot," she said. *"But I gotta keep moving sometime."*

"How come?" I asked.

"The only reason I stayed here so long anyway is on account of the radio."

She hadn't really answered the question, I realized. "Why don't you just, you know, join the New Order? I mean, I don't trust insane cults any more than the next girl. But that priestess didn't sound particularly evil on the radio."

"You don't listen to a word that woman says," Magnesia ordered. *"You know that 'purging' she's always talking about?"*

"Yeah."

"That's a nice way of saying 'kill anyone who might be a carrier and horde all the supplies for themselves.'"

"...Oh." I stared at the radio. "Okay, now I'm really worried for your safety."

There was a loud bang from the radio and Magnesia gasped. I heard her scrambling to her feet, just moments before a splintering sound not unlike a door being kicked in.

"Freeze in the name of Serenity!"

"See, there was somebody hidin' up here. What did I tell ya."

I sat up in a jolt, eyes round, clutching the handset with a death grip. It was the same two men that had come scavenging earlier.

"Tie her up," said the reedy voice.

"Hey, come on. It's just a girl," responded the gruff one.

"Can't you see she's armed, idiot?"

"Alright, alright, sheesh." There was the sound of footsteps. *"Come 'ere, missy."*

I was breathing hard, completely frozen, as if I were the one being held at gunpoint. This could not be happening. Magnesia was in danger. And not in the unemployed-and-homeless sort of way. Real, mortal danger.

"Girl or not, the high priestess is bound to give us a promotion if we keep bringing her dissidents."

I heard Magnesia moving, and several sounds came from the radio in succession; a man, grunting in pain; people shouting; earsplitting gunshots. Then, a girl's shriek.

"Magnesia!" I cried, despite myself.

"I got 'er," grunted the gruff man. *"Little troublemaker, aren't ya?"* The commotion on the other side died down, leaving only the sound of Magnesia gasping in pain. She was alive. Oh, thank God.

"Who was that on the radio?" demanded the other one, his voice getting closer.

I froze again, trying to remember all the emergency training I had ever had. Somehow, I didn't think calling 911 would help.

"We have your friend. Tell us who you are and where you are located."

I had exactly one, dumb idea.

Gripping the handset in front of my mouth, I mustered the most deep, powerful, and elegant voice I could manage. "What do you think you are doing?"

"...Who is this?" demanded the reedy voice.

I was shaking. I had only heard Serenity talk once, so I could only pray that I had remembered it correctly. Her low vocal register made me feel like my voice was going to crack at any moment.

"Don't tell me you can't recognize the voice of your own leader," I said.

"...Priestess?" asked the rough voice quietly.

"It's just some sort of trick."

Suddenly my doorbell rang, nearly startling me into dropping the handset. I glanced at the door warily. Maybe they would go away if I ignored them.

"Explain to me exactly why I should give you a promotion for roughhousing my own secret agent," I said, trying to give my voice a dangerous edge.

"It sure sounds like her."

"What do you mean secret agent?" asked the reedy voice.

"My secret plans are none of your business," I said. "Unhand –"

Ding-dong.

"– the girl this instant."

Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

I tossed the handset and leaped as quietly as possible to the door. I whipped it open, revealing a startled pizza guy named Michael. I knew his name was Michael because he delivered pizza to my apartment several times a week. Usually I was happy to see him, because he was cute and brought me food, but I didn't exactly have the time for a friendly conversation right now.

"I'm sorry can you wait just five minutes," I hissed, very rapidly.

"Uh, okay."

I sent the door swinging and raced back to the radio before he even finished the sentence. It didn't close all the way, but that was the least of my problems.

"What was that noise...?"

I took a precious second to compose my voice again. "Never mind that. The girl. Now."

I held my breath, but I heard no movement from the other side. Hadn't I heard this one's name on the radio the other day? Was it Jones? James?

"But why are you communicating over this ancient device?"

Oh no. They weren't buying it. I hadn't gotten the voice right.

"Are you... questioning your high priestess?" I asked, mustering all the conviction and power that I didn't feel. "John?"

There was a tense silence. Then, I heard Magnesia gasp and hit the floor.

"Of course not... your holiness."

I felt like I would faint from relief. "Good. My secret agent, are you all right?"

There came three very loud knocks on my door. Irritated, I tried to see what was happening out of my mostly-shuttered window.

"Yes... Your holiness..." said Magnesia, faintly.

"We're very sorry, high priestess," said the rough voice. *"We didn't know. We just saw this girl hiding alone, and she was armed. I mean, we just assumed..."*

The knocking started again, furiously, and the man on the radio trailed off.

I didn't know what to do. Should I answer the door? Should I ignore it? "The high priestess is busy," I yelled, hoping Michael would take a hint.

"We just assumed she was a dissident," continued the man.

"You assumed wrong," I said coldly.

"We didn't hurt her that much, I swear. She just got shot in the leg. Look, I have some antiseptic on me. I can get her wrapped up in a jiffy."

I heard the door creaking open, and I turned to find a very bald and irate neighbor sticking his head in with a bewildered pizza guy behind him. Oh, for heaven's sake.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" he demanded, very loudly. "I could hear gunshots from all the way in my bedroom."

"Yes, treat her wound," I hissed to the handset, then smacked the mute button and nearly tripped over my table as I addressed my neighbor. "Hey, Mr. Brown!" I said. "What a surprise seeing you again, would you mind stepping outside for just a moment –"

He batted my hands away as I tried to push him through the doorway. "Get your hands off me, young lady! This is not the first time you have interrupted my afternoon nap!"

"I am so sorry about this, Mr. Brown," I said, frantically trying to close the door on him, but only managing to squish his generous stomach.

"Oof," said Mr. Brown.

I shot Michael a look over the man's shoulder, and apparently he caught the desperation in my eyes, as he grabbed my neighbor and gently pulled him out of my apartment, apologizing profusely. I slammed the door shut and returned to the radio, out of breath.

The two men were murmuring something between themselves. Without bothering to listen, I un-muted the microphone and did my impatient priestess impression once more. "Are you finished?"

"Yes, she's as good as new," said the rough voice.

I took a breath. Time to wrap this up. "Then leave, and never speak of this again. My plans must remain a secret. Understood?"

"Yes, your holiness," said the rough voice. The other one answered in kind, if a little skeptically.

"If I catch you bothering my agent again.... There *will* be consequences."

"Yes, your holiness."

I covered the microphone and listened to two pairs of footsteps fade away. Everything was quiet outside my own apartment as well; maybe I had hurt Mr. Brown more than I realized. He deserved it. I waited several minutes more, body tense, in case the cultists were still outside, listening in.

"They're gone," murmured Magnesia.

"Oh thank God," I said, my words spilling out in a rush. I could feel the relief running through my skin. "Are you okay? Does it hurt? I can't believe you tried to attack them!" I paused, hearing her move around. "Mag? You there?"

"I gotta get out of here," she grunted.

"Shouldn't you rest? Or something? Maybe you should wait until your leg heals."

"It's not safe."

"But where are you going?"

"None of your business."

Her voice was even more impassionate than usual. I hesitated, confused and concerned, but I didn't know what else to say.

It sounded like she was gathering her belongings. As the excitement faded, I was left with an uncomfortable sensation of awareness. How could I worry about losing my apartment when Magnesia didn't even know if she would be alive the next morning? Her world was nothing like mine.

I felt a little bit indignant at getting the cold shoulder, too, given that I had just pulled off the greatest ruse of my life and saved her ass from cultist. But I thought I understood why she was acting that way. She was afraid, and she was trying to be prepared for the ever-approaching future that neither of us could predict.

After a minute or so, she spoke up again.

"Thank you, Oliwja. For saving me —"

"You're welcome," I said.

"—But I gotta go." I heard her walking.

“Wait! Aren’t you going to take the radio?” A sudden fear shot through me that I might never talk to Magnesia again.

There was a lengthy pause. *“It would weigh me down.”*

“But...” My mind latched onto one thing. *“The Wind in the Willows. You never got to hear the ending.”*

“Forget about the book, Oliwja,” said Magnesia, anger breaking through her voice. *“The book doesn’t mean jack shit. I never shoulda stopped here in the first place. I need to focus on what’s important.”*

I was at a loss for words.

“I’ll take the radio, though.”

“Good,” I said.

“Turning it off for now.”

There was a click, and then I was alone with the static in my shuttered apartment.

With a deep breath, I turned off my own radio and headed to the front door. I had some very big apologies to make and an extra large pepperoni pizza to eat.

I shot a dirty look at the back of Brandon's head. He called this the storage room, but I was pretty sure it was a repurposed closet, if the cramped quarters were any indication.

I was doing inventory, apparently. Brandon said he wanted to update the electronic catalog, but it might have just been an excuse to give me the most uncomfortable task he could think of. My legs were cramped from sitting in weird positions and my eyes were strained from the lack of light. He probably thought I would vandalize the store if he gave me a normal shift on the counter. As if I would sabotage my own source of income like that.

I dug through a pile of old papers in a dusty box and pulled out a self-help book, then flipped it over and searched for its serial number on Brandon's work laptop. The one good thing about the menial labor was that it distracted me from Magnesia's predicament. I hadn't heard from her since her close encounter two days ago – complete radio silence – and I couldn't exactly bring the galumphing radio to the Weimar Book Nook with me. She was probably just trying to be discreet, I told myself.

I shoved the papers aside and reached into the box to pull out the rest of the copies.

"Ow!" I quickly withdrew my arm. Papercut.

"Oliwja," called Brandon.

"Whaddya want," I snapped, putting my thumb in my mouth. Then I remembered I had been handling second-hand books all day and yanked it back out.

"We have a delivery. Go pick it up."

"A *please* or *thank you* wouldn't hurt," I muttered, disentangling my creaking legs and hobbling out of the closet. Brandon didn't respond.

notes on this chapter

she meets a homeless guy which makes her think

she realizes this job isn't that bad

how would she act in brandon's position?

it seems like she's about to have some positive development as they talk about her..... Past.....

then she just walls herself off and refuses to think about it and it's worse than ever

and it gives her a reason to leeeeeave

.
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.
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"Evicted?!"

"I'm sorry, Oliwja."

"What happened to waiting a week or two?" I demanded hotly.

"Oliwja," my landlady warned.

"I'll have my rent in a few weeks, I swear. Cross my heart."

"Oliwja," she grumbled, louder. "I'm really sorry. I want to help you out, you know that, but there's only so long I can push back the rent."

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The landlady's face contorted in annoyance and pity simultaneously. "You have three days," she said, and shut my own door on my face.

I vocalized a couple of rude metaphors I had learned from my mom and kicked an empty box of cereal.

"What's going on now?"

"I'm being evicted," I muttered.

The familiar knot in my stomach was back again. I couldn't just catch a break, could I? Fired and evicted in less than a week. I looked around at the cluttered apartment. It was creaky, stained, and lacking hot water half of the time, but it was a great deal better than being homeless.

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. I would bet anything that her sudden change in heart was due to complaints from my insufferable neighbor.