

Fia sighed. She had finally gotten the courage to go up to Char's door after all this time. She wasn't dead, Fia didn't think, but she wasn't answering her anymore. Despite sending many letters to Char and passing by her home on a daily basis, Char wouldn't come outside anymore to say hello. Of course, it wasn't exactly nearby, but it was just routine by now.

"Chartreuse..." Fia murmured to herself, apprehensively stepping forth up to the porch. Her home was a tucked away little cottage in Blissful Mountain, one of the few buildings tucked away with a little pond that seemed to never freeze. (The secret was that it was built on top of a little magma well, so it was always pleasantly warm regardless of season, but that's not important now.) It was a happy, little green cottage that was always free of snow even in the dead of winter. Trees interlocking to block the harsh snows of the mountain from the little home. It was in a little glade off the beaten path that seemed unaffected by the climate nearby. Genuinely just a surreal, beautiful location.

The fireflies and porch light were the main sources of light, illuminating the gently rippling water reflecting flying stars and the flowers of the nearby garden with gentle streaks from its sway. On the porch a little lantern sat lit, a little yellow flame that pirouettes inside the music box like a little mechanical ballerina. The striped cushions of the nearby seating appearing brightest by the contained flame.

The door, though shrouded in darkness had familiar patterning Fia remembered. Little flowers and vines etched into its surface. Char and her made that front door special together with wood chisels and painted it a brilliant burgundy. Over time the color dulled, but it was still distinctly some form of red. The etchings in the surface weren't going anywhere either. The doorknob was made of bronze and resembled that of a daisy. The knocker, made of similar material though slowly weathered green from age (it was passed down to Char from her family), resembled that of a cicada. The type that ate nectar, if Fia recalled correctly.

Tears welled in her eyes, remembering the story her mother told them. The one about the little cicada that helped the flowers bloom even in the coldest of nights. What happened? Fia approached the door finally, the keratin of her fingers creating a hollow sound against the wood as the blind hand found its way to the knocker. The secret knock followed the tune of that story Char's mother told. "Roses rise as night falls, the cicada says until comes dawn."

Then you wait. And wait. The silence of the wind above hopping across the treetops felt deafening. There was no other sound. The creaking of wood from inside, dead and absent just like the last time. Just regular house noises, lacking a sign of life. Fia hummed, lowering her head. "Right..." She gave the best smile she could, deciding to sit against the door in the meantime. Feeling the cool wood against her back, it used to be familiar and comforting. Her face contorted again before finally deciding to say something.

"I had a great day at the festival. Today I went bobbing for apples." She started, a small smile on her face. "It's called Abyss Arcade, it was new this year. You would have loved it." Fia curled inwards, hugging her legs. "Tomorrow is the costume contest, I was hoping you would at least like to see my costume?" Despite knowing better, the pause heavy, she waited for an answer. Something? Anything.

"I get it, maybe next time. That's okay. Did you want to hear more about my apple escapades today?" Another hopeful intermission stood, but only for a brief moment as Fia continued, pretending to pluck the fins on her tail. They sagged just like the lull of woe that rested heavy on her chymogems. "Well, let me recall it... Let's see... Well! This morning... It was a beautiful day out, the sun was shining..."

It was a beautiful day out, the sun was shining, and the wind sang joyfully through the trees of Sullow Grove. You know I live in Sweetbay out west, but bear with me. I decided to take some time away from home, with my new friend Xandre.

He's a silly willow, always talking about the joys of fishing but getting rather festive as the dates drew closer. You would like him, Char. A darkly colored fella who always takes his pup with him. He has a bright green crest that almost looks like chymos, but his chymos is orange. It makes him hard to miss.

Well he invited me to stay with him for the next couple nights at the Sanctum while the festival started. As soon as I arrived he was wearing his costume. In the theming, he was a vampire fish. He says they're deep sea snakefish with an aversion to light, like vampires in the stories. They supposedly come to the surface to drink fisherman's blood... Spooky! Well, there he was all dressed up like one. Down to the pointy white teeth, and crimson vampire cowl. More like a literal interpretation of the name compared to what they actually looked like.

Anyways, Xandre's a sweet guy. He helped me enter the contest tomorrow, and showed off the Abyss Arcade. I didn't think much of it, just a silly little apple picking competition where you get to keep the tasty treats you get! It's quite intense actually... I started with the bobbing part of the arcade.

So they get this big wood tub, right? Fill it with water and apples? Seems pretty normal for apple bobbing... But... There were golden apples intermixed that sank towards the bottom because they're heavier than regular apples. Only the brave supposedly go for gold!

It was actually really easy. Xandre and I pitted against each other! Little does he know I have gills, and that was an easy win. I couldn't see those goldies but they were easy to smell. There were only three there too! A shame honestly. Even if my suspended sight wasn't allowed in the water, I don't think the organizers were impressed that I got all the gold apples though. Pretty sure they caught on quick and I wasn't allowed to do that again. Fufufu!

That's when a tall willow... I think her name was Draven? She was impressed, even though I kind of cheated! She said she liked my style, "do what you're good at" you know? That was my main win of the day though, Xandre totally crushed me at the orchard picking! You have 15 minutes to put as many apples in your team's basket as possible, and girl! He was climbing right up to the tops of those trees, in COSTUME mind you! The best apples were all so much higher than I could reach, and you know I'm a swimmer. Xandre won that one, for sure.

The other arcade battle was essentially a race to get a big "apple" on top of the pine trees without bruising the apple. That one was a group effort, me and like... A whole bunch of strangers spent so much time passing that apple up there. Actually, it was just a pumpkin painted red but if you called it a pumpkin you had to wait until the next round to play. Really silly rule but I get it! I don't think there

are enough apples that size to make it seeable at all. Actually, you would ask if I've ever seen an apple that big... Ah. I'm getting into the silly details too much.

Anyways, that was super fun! I hope Mahi likes the apples, I haven't offered any to them yet but you know how Mahi is... Silly flamake... Fufufu! Xandre said there would be different games tomorrow, and possibly a special mangrove apple tank! That'll be fun, if you came tomorrow you could watch me absolutely smash the competition! And we'd make a new mountain. We'd call it Apple Mountain! And it'd just be you and me, rulers of all applekind!! Haha! Mmh... By Sullow I miss you, Char.

Between the games, there were some shops we went to as night drew closer. We got little Munchkins! They're new little pets, like little furballs, with leafy little tails and big ole smiles. Me and Xandre got so many... Then traded because there's supposedly all these unique morphs they come in! I named mine Squiggles, Wiggles, Giggles, and Clyde. Like those little ghost games we used to play with the tiles, what was it called? Oh! Weasel-Willow, I think. Yeah!

Once it got really dark we played one more round at the arcade... There were spooky noises and eerie figures stalking the orchards by that point. Just for a good scare. It was really funny, remember Draven? Yeah! She scared the heck out of Xandre! That scare got me the win, I think she was looking out for me. Either that or she just really likes being a little prankster. I think its the latter. Regardless he was so spooked he was clutching his gems! Even his puptual got him spooked at some point, that was great. Get this too, his puptual was dressed up as a little sheet ghost! I couldn't get Mahi in a dress even if I tried, Mahi won't even wear her mask how would I get her in a costume? Fufu...

I decided to let Xandre take Mahi home though. I really wanted to visit you before the night ended... That's my story though...

"That's my story though, here we are now." Fia smiled weakly, her head tilting back against the door. "I- I hope you can at least make it to the contest tomorrow, Char..." She put a hand against the door again. "Char I-" Fialova found her throat

closing, as heat welled up towards her eyelids. "I want you to know something. I know mom's passing was hard... If... If you need anything, at all. Please..."

She faltered, trying to detangle the right words from the linguistic spaghetti that was her thoughts. "Please let me know if there's some way I can help. It wasn't your fault, Char. I can't make you come out, and I don't want to come in if you aren't ready for me. Even if it's just you listening to my silly little stories about daily life- I hope I've helped in some way at all." With a shaky breath, it was time to stand up.

She didn't like remembering what happened that night. It all happened so fast, and... Fia knows Char blames herself for that. It has to eat her up, thinking she could have done more. It's not. As many times as Fia had promised Char, she didn't listen. A familiar wetness streaked along her face.

"I- I miss you so much, Chartreuse. I'll... I'll be back tomorrow, okay? I'd just... Really like to know you're still there, girl. I- I'm... I'm struggling too, you don't... You don't have to do this alone." Fia disregarded the serious bleed her eyeliner was facing as she wiped her eyes free of the feeling. "I'll bring you your favorite tomorrow. Apple blueberry pie. You... Have a good night. Be warm. I-" As she turned away her throat strangled the words from her again.

"I love you.... So much."