



# Ragnarök



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# Chapter 1: Kára vs. The Skripsi



Karakazan - Karakalysi Province - Karakalysi

## 1.1 Ragnarök

Kára could feel a bead of sweat roll down the side of her modestly oval, and sun worn face. She squinted through her sand encrusted eyelashes, out across the dune sea.

She stared off past the river in the distance. The mid-day sun pushing the desert air well into the thirty's, and as Kara looked to the brackish river, and towards the long grass, she noted that the rising

air was making it, difficult, to make out anything more than a blur. Kara sighed and pursed her chapped lips, feeling them stick together.

*Ouch* she thought, as her lips ripped apart. She let her fingers feel the damage before continuing to secure the simple ribbons in her hair. She had drawn her golden hair back into two tight buns at the back of her head; two long and thick golden locks framed her face as she forcibly strained to see into the distance.

**Out we go, past the river, and on to the Ravanglass sea we will go...** she began to sing in her head before taking note of the pressure building behind her eyes.

**Wait... Owweeee!** squeaked from her lips.

Kara straightened out momentarily before relaxing again as the pressure subsided.

**I can't say I really understood what Mæster Tolbin said that this would feel like... He kind of mumbled a lot in his later years. By the time we got to him, well...**

**He had this... this hand. A hand on a stick. He used it to gesticulate wildly as he rambled on about current events. Stories of white envelopes with white powder, something about Gøraja preceding Møraja. I don't think I learned so much, and so at the same time.**

**I can Just imagine, the years and years of Citadel Cadets grinding at your sanity. I suppose I might have stories, and a hand too, after a while.**

Kàra shuddered.

**I can tell you this though** Suddenly having someone in your head is weird.... Someone to hear your inner thoughts and nigh a moment of reprieve...

Kàra furrowed her brow, **I am sure there is a way to...**

Kara placed two fingers on her left temple and closed her eyes. There just seems to be some sort of feedback between us. I can feel... it.

"Oww!" She exclaimed and winced.

Kara quickly placed her index finger and thumb across her forehead.

She winced again.

**Interpreter? Are you still there? Did I lose you?**

**Nope... I can still feel you like a Fluvian ear worm.**

Her concentration shifted to the formidably sized and brilliantly polished suit of armor clanking up the sandy red rock path leading to the gates below. Kàra smirked as she heard an audible clank coming from a distance.

**Bófreðr... Where... are...**

Kàra felt a sharp pain radiate from temple to temple.

**Owwwwww...**

Kàra paused, and gently pressed her thumbs against the inner portion of each eye socket. The bridge of her nose squeezed and white orbs fill her vision. Kàra held herself motionless while a dull white glow waxed and waned quickly beneath her thumbs. Feeling relief, she brought her palms up and rubbed her eyes.

**That is much better... I think.**

**Hopefully that will last. Either way we're in the wind five and five!**

Satisfied with the improvement, Kàra turned and burst through the double wood framed glass doors and into a cluttered, but empty study that sat atop a tall tower, above the southwestern gate. A musty smell immediately filled her nose, causing her to contort her face. She began breathing through her mouth and continued to the window adjacent to the, also cluttered, commandant's desk.

Kàra put her right hand on the edge of the splintered wood frame and pushed on the heavy stained-glass window. Once open she leaned halfway out, calling down to the gates below, "Major, I want second company to assist as well. Have them rendezvous with Talik's knights near the mill. See if we can't keep a strong funnel into the knights."

"But..." A gruff voice shot back, Kàra cut him off finishing, "See if you can't again, try to convince Talik to send a few of her knights towards the ruins. Even if she spared a platoon, or two, it could be enough to avert a massacre of these people's cultural heritage..."

Kàra casually pushed herself back into the study without waiting for a response but hearing a gruff, "Aye." was enough confirmation.

**As I was saying**She grabbed a green apple from the worn wooden fruit bowl near the commandant's desk. She began to thumb the surface, gently pressing her thumb into its flesh. After a few moments she found a clean bit of her tunic and wiped the apple.

**I would argue that much of what the Karak's do is for show, but not in the "I will clean up for you kind of way..."**

**No, they do smaller things...Example, this "commanding" officer's desk...**

As Kàra spun the high back of the commanders chair a foul smell crept up and swirled each time she spun the chair.

The apples are no doubt an attempt to curry favor so we might look the other way should the need be. I mean come on. Apples? Really?

**Gah.**She tossed her apple into the air as she paced.

I'm not going to turn down an apple, but if they think a bowl of fruit is going to make me forget about their countries worst kept secret...

Kàra snatched her apple from the air, took a bite, dropped her hand to the desk, uncurled her fingers, and drug them through the parchment. She could feel the apple's juices leave a sticky trail along her hand ending up as blots along the parchment as she searched.

In this greed and lust filled land, there are so many hints of culture, moments of greatness, and they are all hidden...

Hidden behind relics of the past. Never before have we been here, in this moment. And for the Karak's to cling to the sand and the literal hole in the ground lairs of depravity. Well...

She swiped her hand through the parchment knocking a bunch of papers on the floor.

How do apples make up for the roving bands of constables sweeping people off the street, raiding orphanages and the like, all to please their select clientele from far off reaches...

Kàra pulled at a few desk drawers.

Their military is deep in the trade, and they profit just as much as the slavers, if not more for their "procurement" of foreign... product.

Kàra drew in a slow and deliberate breath and started to pace around the Karak's desk. Each path a slight variation on the last

leading from the balcony back to the stained glass window. She liked to spend ample time at the balcony keeping watch, but she knew boredom would creep in if she let it. So she decided to break into the Karak's desk.

**What? Just a little peek won't hurt. Just a little peek here, and there. A little locked drawer there.**

**Hmmm mmm what have we got here?**

Kàra pulled on a knob on one of the lower drawers kicking open a compartment at the bottom of the desk. A quick mechanical whirr and something hit the floor with a thud. Kàra took another bite of her apple and placed it firmly on the desk. She then knelt down so she could take a look.

**Are you... Wow! That got so good.**

She sat back up licking her lips.

**It got so much better! Wow.**

Kàra bent over and reached underneath.

**So, Interpreter are you ready for an adventure?**

**You can hear me, I know you can, I can feel your presence listening in. And as I said earlier, this is not quite what they had described back at the Citadel, but I can tell** Kàra tapped the side of her temple with her free hand and cleared her throat, still attempting to grab the object that fell. Stupid thing is so far back.

**As it was witnessed by her holiness Valfreyja, and as etched upon every Watcher stone in the realm. An account Odinn's judgement, and Mjölfnir's fury...**

Kàra casually pointed towards the east, and towards a massive cloudbank off in the distance.

“Ugh” Kàra said in disgust as she pressed herself to the ground so she could see where her hand was.

**I mean, hey, it is pretty clear you aren't wanted when your planet gives birth to massive islands in the sky.**

Upon finally spying her prize, Kàra reached in snatching it up. She tried not to think about the things on the floor. It is the crunchy ones that get me. She stood up and looked down at her upper body, hastily smacking the dirt from herself.

**But it was the destruction of the Bifrost...**

**Nobody could leave. On the frontier, riding the edge of the universe into the expanse.**

**Valfreyja's account has little detail of our ancestors transgressions, but it goes into great detail of the battle that preceded its destruction, ending with the spectral bridge collapsing at her feet.**

Kàra stood up shaking the little box before tossing it onto the desk.

**She said she could see Heimdallr turn his back as Thor hurled his hammer through the cosmos.**

**Upon striking our world, well, I am glad that Valfreyja was with us that day. Can you imagine if she wasn't? I guarantee our world is not supposed to exist. We were to be struck from the galactic forum, permanently. That is the day the Vanir and Æsir officially went to war.**

Kàra opened the box and furrowed her brow. Strange. She pulled out a small, folded up sketch. Looks to be the works of a child. She folded it back up and placed the lid back on the box.

But it is pretty hard to engage in a war when you have no way of reaching your adversary. So, we, meaning ~~our~~ ancestors, we made do. Refugees of the nine realms. We are destined to fade from history.

Kàra could feel the ground beneath her shift, a few books shifted on their shelves. Nothing fell, nothing to worry about.

Peoples from every realm were now suddenly residents of this new frontier. Without the Bifrost, colonization felt impractical, causing some to turn on each other. Boundaries were drawn immediately, roving bands establishing and fortifying borders. Wars ~~were~~ fought over old wounds and new.

Little is known of, or maybe more appropriately, left from those times though. Valfreyja was relentless in the pursuit of her vision, she was beyond determined to persevere no matter what it took.

I read that she wandered these lands for generations, searching for others who would listen. Relationship after relationship, she connected with the people, and convinced them that her vision was enough.

Kàra made her way to the stained-glass window and began to move it back and forth. She watched as people busily bustled in and out of the gates below.

Eventually people flocked to her, and to what is now Midgard. I tell you though... When Mjölfnir fractured Heim... it didn't just destroy the Bifrost. It broke a lot of people. Trapped in a land they had never intended on settling.

Kàra plopped down in the chair behind the desk. A poof of dust shot up out of the chair. She reached forward and grabbed her apple, letting the chair catch her as she leaned back and stretched out her crossed legs. Kàra closed her eyes and tried to take in the feeling of the warm air whisking through the study.

Kàra took a bite and savored the flavor this time.

Valfreyja wrote of her experience: "Mjöl­nir revealed to me Odinn's judgement upon our peoples. Ragnarök.

Should Yggdrasil guide you to my hall.

Upon its roots should we shall surrender

By the interpreters will, we shall fight.

We will not go quietly.

Till Ragnarök we meet...

Valfreyja took that personally,

her feelings quite clear:

We shall not yield.

Beyond the reach of Odinn

We shall rebuild.

Beyond the sight of Heimdallr

We shall prosper.

Time will not be kind to those who see only the old ways.

Kàra pushed the chair away from the desk and towards the window behind her. She spun about taking another smaller bite from her apple. She felt slightly sad that she was almost finished with it.

Midgard spring up around what came to be known as the Citadel: a sprawling military academy, which housed the first of Valfreyja's disciples.

Her curation of its archives, er. The hall of letters, propelled the peoples of Midgard into the forefront of Heim's geopolitical problems.

There are countless writings, all from Valfreyja's hand. It is like being able to touch a piece of her when you go there... She was obsessed with unlocking the secrets of our world... Of the cosmos. All so that, we, her peoples, could one day return to the galactic forum.

She opened her eyes and lazily brought her apple up, looked for a good spot and took a bite.

You should be honored.

Honestly, not because you are in my head of all places, but the fact that the Ætherial tendrils of Yggdrasil have reached out across the planes of existence, to connect our two realms. Our two minds. Across space, and time, your realm linked with mine, may just be for the briefest of moments, but it is no less important.

I guess...

Kàra bit the inside of her lower lip.

I guess I am flattered to be one of the chosen. The hall of letters speaks of countless encounters, beings from across existences sharing a moment in time

with ours. It is kind of like a multidimensional root system filling our prismatic void that the Bifrost once did.

We are taught, at the academy that is, that existence is fleeting. An experience, a moment that only exists because we are having it. Always operating within shifting boundaries. Maximizing relative comfort between what is known and unknown. The only thing moving forward is our generational knowledge. It is therefore our duty to be good stewards of society, guiding it, helping it to be better than what it was, to guard her from harm.

Kàra let her legs drop, and she leaned forward.

The Citadel archives seem to be a bit incomplete as to the specifics of each of the chosen's journey though... as many who join the journey, well... Generally they do not finish... But, I mean... stories have passed down through the centuries. So I am sure there must be some exceptions.

Right?

Many of those on the Ætherial Council, have spent their entire careers trying to understand Valfreyja, and Yggdrasil's divine will. The fracturing didn't just strand our peoples here. It also created rifts in the fabric of the cosmos. Rifts that generally liquify people, but those things. The Skripi. They came pouring out.

Kàra pushed herself up to her feet and leisurely walked over to a window adjacent the balcony doors.

My tour in the archives has taught me two things about our situation: This is now a journey shared, i.e., this is a journey that we undertake, 'til Ragnarök do us part. Whether fate is what we make it. Well. I guess Yggdrasil has yet to decide.

Kàra spun about making her skirt spin slightly.

The Ælves, Dwarves, the peoples of Midgard, and various others, recognized the Skrípi, as creatures posing an existential threat to all peoples across Heim. Those that didn't Kàra stuck out her index finger from atop her folded arms, pointing away from her body. Reclaimed by the wild.

The majority though opened their eyes, and minds, to the idea of peace. Or at least uneasy truces. One in which for the first time, established the council.

Kàra began to gesticulate as she recited the moto by heart: "Ten members. Ten different cultures. Ten equals. Do you have what it takes to become a citizen?" Kàra ended it with a campy, but dignified salute.

I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in what the council was doing... So... Yeah Now that we got the run down of me and mine, you have joined me at, what I personally feel is a most interesting time. We are readying for a Skrípi invasion, and they are due any time. But I guess you probably picked up on that.

Kàra yawned.

Oh, I can tell ya the Skrípi are these pretty nasty armored spider like creatures, and I am certain they are not looking for a handout. I mean.

Maybe they are?

I don't know, they are, and honestly the easiest way to explain it is that these creatures have one mission, and that is...

Ya know..

Feed us to their brood. And I can tell ~~you~~ she took a smaller bite from her ripening apple.

If you are drug off alive, your death is excruciatingly slow. The young like to play with their food. I have heard of survivors that lasted three days before their escape. None have ever been the same again. Walking nightmares that follow them wherever ~~they~~ go.

She took another large bite, savoring the juices this time. The white flesh of the apple began to redden significantly. She took a last bite and tossed the apple out the window.

Wow, I can't believe that was so good. Almost a metallic tang to it at the end. I don't know how they do it out here, a touch of sweet, and a touch of sour.

But, wow. Kara grabbed another few apples and slipped them into her pouch where they seemed to simply disappear.

So anyways... My job here is to toss a spanner into the works. I swore an oath to stand for justice for those we love. And in the name of Folkenvangar: I am going to teach them a lesson.

No.

That doesn't work.

I need to get better at these.

## 1.2 Stories of Yesteryear

Kàra felt her demeanor had soured as she paced the empty study[1]. **Seriously, sometimes I don't feel needed; Not needed in a way that matters, I guess. They all do such a fantastic job, everyone is so well disciplined, for the most part.** Kàra could feel the restless energy building up in legs, she spun about to face the massive wooden door.

**Presumably, these doors are so large and cumbersome because Karak the second had a penchant for getting... handsy. Or just general weirdness. Standing over you as you sleep, painting a portrait of you while you sleep. Washing your hands and feet. Braiding your hair. Trimming your ears, nose, shaving you. So many things that you would think someone would wake up for...**

Kàra tugged at the door harder, digging her heels in.

**General oddities really. It wasn't quite clear from the books if any of the behavior was meant to be malicious, or if it just ended up looking that way. I mean there was the one person who was slow cooked, but out of the thousands of other encounters, only a handful are strange and unsettling.**

**Worms... ugh.**

By the time she had pushed the massive wooden door beyond arm's length, she had a roguish smile affixed to her face. The door continued sliding to her left, coming to an abrupt stop with a dull and loud clang. Once into the open Kàra's hand shot up above her eyes shading them while they adjusted.

**I must say, I always feel something special when I see genuine teamwork and camaraderie. I am convinced is a side effect of becoming a citizen. Home and**

community cemented together by duty and honor. We serve each other in order to serve ourselves.

Kàra looked down towards the inner wards where her soldiers were helping with the Karak evacuation.

We have been evacuating people into the mines for hours now. Negotiations took longer than expected with the Elder Karak finally relenting, I mean, gracious hosting his own people, opening his doors, or elevators, whatever.... But honestly it took a lot more to convince him than I would have anticipated.

It wasn't long before her presence along the wall was noted by two runners passing through to various field commanders. Routine reroutes... Two runners, one after the other, approaching with a clang of their armor and a huff of exertion.

Each interaction is generally brief, and efficient. The corps, runner corps that is, knows that I enjoy situation reports from across the ranks, but that I also don't want to eat up their precious time.

Kàra began to read through the reports. Taking the briefest of moments to rub the paper between her thumb and middle finger.

The runners generally collect a few reports at a time and reroute based on importance. The field commanders scratch out on rough paper whatever reports they deem too important to be intercepted by nefarious actors.

These don't have a whole lot to say, some general numbers, oh, here we go, Colonel Alistair reports a drunkard down in the lower ward has been detained pending the Karak authorities arrival.

It says here that Colonel Alistair found a drunkard frantically harassing any and all who might listen about a djinn that was following him. But, nobody, including the Colonel, could see anything following mad man. Upon detaining the

man, and surveying a few of the locals, a little orc servant boy claimed to have seen a floating orb tied up to the man as he flailed through the ward.

The child said it was “funny,” especially when the orb burst out of the man’s trousers and floated into the sky. But unfortunately as the Colonel was speaking to the orc boy, the man had asked to use the ~~trousers~~ and once clear enough, slipped his ~~wrists~~ the tight knots that bound him, in a single blue streak of plasma.

This is noted due to the proximity to the ~~trousers~~, it caused a flare of the spiteful air to catch fire, and it says that as the man entered the single haus, its sides burst off, with blue plasma cutting the ropes easily. He opened the half hanging door, ~~letting~~ the door fall as he opens it. A smile affixed to his face. And he just began casually walking towards the next ward. I don’t blame them for not pursuing.

Kàra looked up to see one of the runners getting impatient. She furrowed her brow slightly and looked back at the reports. Interestingly enough, it says here that Specialist Aton also reported a drunkard flailing about in the wards.

Hmm... Anton states that patrons from a tavern in the middle ward claimed to have witnessed a drunken old man screaming to himself in the corner of the tavern. He repeatedly shouted about the quality of his gin.

Interesting... It says here a blue streak of plasma engulfed the back corner of the room. Not ominous at all. The man lost it, grabbed his bottle from the table, and then as he “tore” through the tavern to get out he caused the following through various ~~clumsy~~ acts, a fight, a fire, three robberies, ~~so~~ muggings, a pantsing after a pissin’...

An... impromptu wedding, an impromptu separation of spouses, possibly related. A piano man hammerin' away at the keys, getting more frantic the more nervous they got. Turns out piano man was the pisser, and the groom was the pissee. Guess he wasn't too fond of that, he broke the piano man's fingers, who was then whisked away by his now ex bride, after she stabbed him in the thigh and left him for dead.

I wouldn't mind seeing this one, an anxiety fueled burlesque dance broke out. No seriously, it says that the burlesque dancers was forced to continue dancing upon fearing certain death from the Karaks. So, they kept dancing while trying to stamp out the fire bits that hit their stage.

She handed the first runner back their reports and they took off. Kàra drew in a slow breath, "I know you have a lot to do corporal. And I commend your,"

The corporal raised his hand with his head lowered, "No, no ma'am. It isn't like that."

Kàra shifted her stance slightly annoyed. Ugh what do they say... it really bugs me when... Oh! Yeah, I can appreciate the humor, knowing the dancers were fine. It is something that sticks with you, and you remember it years later, and hopefully you can laugh, because you have already shed enough tears.

**Ugh! He is still talking! I haven't even heard a word he has said!**

"...sternly and then turned away. I thought you knew." Tros[2].

"...in the study. Earlier..." Tros. **Did I completely blank on something? Why can't I remember him?** "I knew you would understand commander." The soldier concluded stiffening his pose.

Kàra could see a sincere smile cross his face. "I. Yes. Absolutely, I try." Kàra replied as sincerely as she could muster.

Kàra held out the reports with her left hand and leaned into the parapet, but was just short of grasping the top, and awkwardly landed against it. The corporal saluted and jogged off after taking the report from her.

Kàra straightened herself out, feeling a bit critical of herself. That did not go as expected. She turned to the study.

Oh, and, umm... One of the reports also mentioned that Ætherial Knight Gar found one of those establishments that we spoke of earlier... and while in the process of melting various costumes onto the proprietors of the establishment, they pulled some interesting information out.

A pilgrimage to the Lidless Eye is to take place, and a tribute from each ward within Karakazan is to be represented. Lured there under pretenses of their release from bondage, their freedom. Once there they were Used as forced labor to erect faire about the eye.

This we knew. The official story was that the children were actually set free, with all choosing to retire within the remote communities among the island nations. All choosing, or so we were told, that the kids left the shores of Karakazan. They traveled months by ship, through pirate, and general maritime anarchist, infested waters. They did that year after year just so these kids can be sent to the paradise Islands for their years of service. Tros. Couldn't prove it though. Couldn't even get close to it.

Kàra stared absentmindedly at the large portal leading into the study. The wood grain on the frame is kind of interesting. Worn, with the appearance of rot, but she watched as sand blew onto the tattered, but ornate looking rug that covered the stone floor inside the study. She smirked and walked over to the wood frame, looked it up and down and picked at it a bit, sending chips floating to the ground.

What we didn't know was how long this had been going on. That each year the oldest from each of the wards were to be "selected" for this the two hundredth and thirty second banquet of flesh. Rivers of blood from all forms of malice, to feed the eye and ~~to~~ raise the fortunes of the abusers.[3]

It finally made sense though, both creatures feeding the others insatiable hunger. Thousands upon thousands of victims. I don't get how they have enjoyed this level of secrecy for so long?

Kàra shuddered.

Despite sometimes the horrors involved, I find a sense of security in hearing of the challenges throughout the regiment... I ~~mean~~ need them, but I feel closer... to those under my command. Sometimes... It feels that the higher up I go, the more detached I feel from the lower ranks. Almost needed less...

But maybe that is what the transition to leading people is all about. You are attempting to navigate the larger picture, choosing a team who can accomplish the specific goals you need done. Their eccentricities strengthen the bonds. Throw 'em to the ~~meat~~ grinder and you very well know that the soldier next to you has your back. Who they are is nothing, but a soldier, and a citizen.

A time of war is a time for soldiers, but a time for peace, well... That conflict, can follow you for moments, or years. But should peace be found, that time is for thought and reflection.

The improvement of one's self, and their community is a worthy goal for each and every day. Apart we falter, apart we conspire, but together. Together we are strong.

Kàra picked a few more chunks of wood from the frame and turned to look along the walls, and to the soldiers dutifully working.

**Sometimes I get into my head about things, as you can probably see. I also like to think about the deeper ideas in life. Not that I have the answers, but if I am always afraid of being a misstep away from falling back into the despair, I get paralyzed. If I sink.**

Kàra scuffed the toe of her boot at the sand sending a spray all over.

**I take great care to not to forget that this is a journey that we, in both senses of the idea of we, take together. Where we have been, will inform where we go next, but I will share... The hardest part for me is putting into practice Maester Tolbin's saying: "Know that you know not but find the courage to try."**

**This teaching has served me well, I figure if you can get enough traction to overcome enough of the little hurdles, you are bound to at least go somewhere.**

Kàra could feel her hair getting hot. She brought her hand to her head, felt it, and quickly moved it away. She slipped her hand into her bag and procured a simple white linen shawl. She stretched it out and then wrapped it around her head, leaving her face exposed.[4]

**It really is the little sayings or pictures or I dunno, this weird one comes to mind: Be wary of two pendulums; one riding tuther. But yeah. We have things to do. I can try to explain that one later[5]...**

Kàra could feel energy in her chest building causing her to do a few push-offs the wall. With each push off she enjoyed the rhythmic clapping, allowing her mind to relax[6]. She made sure to give a little extra shove to the sand, sending it all over. She followed a clump of sand as it disintegrated on the stairs that lead to the gate below.

Kara bit the inside of her lip slightly as she stared into nothingness. She stopped, stood straight up, drew in a deep breath, put on a slight

smile and turned and started skipping, Only a little, to the next tower. Along her way she spoke with a variety of soldiers who were readying their positions atop, and below. **Think of it as operational security, and a fast forward button for you. I don't want to bore you, honest. I swear on Valfreyja's spirit, I will not maliciously fast forward on you. Just give me time to open up[7].**

**In terms of those I spoke to: It isn't that I think anyone did anything wrong, it's more like I feel a sense of duty, drawing me into their lives. I don't always know what someone needs, but I at least have the sense to know everyone needs something slightly different to be effective.**

**I know I have to trust them, as they have to trust me. If we don't have that... Well, we might as well hand in our brooches and march into a nest, because in battle with these creatures... we are all equally food.**

Kàra stopped midway to the next tower, turned and stared down into the alleyways below.

**For a desert peoples, they sure do have a lot of stuff. I think down there is considered the middle ward. How these people get so much stuff is beyond me. As you can see, I choose not to let our job end at the physical conflict. I want us to hedge ourselves against future conflicts, show them that what we do matters, and strategically we want to place ourselves within these people's lives. Trust begets trust... Even if they live among... These palm trees...** Kàra twisted about and began walking back to the study.

Along her walk back, she spied a particularly good view of the fields to the south. She strolled along finding what seemed to be the most optimal spot. Kàra let her hand drag across the stone ridges the lined the parapets. She dug her fingers dig into the parapets sandy top, while also lifting her other hand to provide shade for her eyes as she looked toward the river lagoons.

I really like working my fingers down towards the cooler layers. It keeps my mind occupied when I am just... Looking. Those fields are meticulously tended to

Service routes worn into the landscape.

That is some serious hard labor.

Hmmm... and I think those lagoons are cut into the palms too... Somehow they got the water to just slip in and calm itself among the trees.

Do they have an underground aqueduct? That would be pretty interesting to see. Oh! Oh!

I got it!

This isn't our first...

Arachnid Showdown...

No...

That was terrible.

Kàra pushed off and slapped her hands together knocking loose the sand in the process. She brushed the rest on her knee length pleated skirt as she walked back to the study, ignoring the door as she walked in, but did make sure to grab the last apple from the bowl on the desk. As she slipped it into her bag, she scuffed her maroon boots against the sandy rug. She felt eager to get the battle started, if only so that it could end.

Kàra paused a moment, staring down at the little box with the drawing. I always want ed kids.. She peeled the shawl away from her face and let it drape around her neck. She chuckled to herself upon seeing a small sand drift near the, still open, balcony door. She fished in her bag, procuring a few pieces of jerky which she immediately began gnawing on as she walked out onto the balcony.

**I can tell you this, this is probably going to be one of the more difficult jumps I've ever done... Well, sorta.**

Kàra looked up at the sloped roof directly above, partially shaded from the sun, darn thing is blocking a portion of my flight path. She shoved the jerky back in her bag, swapping it instead for another apple to which she immediately took a bite from.

**Different than the last apple in color, but quite the same otherwise. But, I still get amazed at some of the Karak artisans. Some of the more interesting designs. All very... I dunno, it feels sensual. Like the variety of smooth stone creations they can make soft lines everywhere. Blending of nature and culture. The sand softening everything as it whips across its surface.**

**So yeah, I will certainly give them the good artisans award. The mason who set the windows, and roofs... I think they really knew what they were doing. Reinforced and everything.**

Kàra looked down, admiring the distance to the ground, and then shifted her gaze to the path out of the obscured southern gate. From there she traced her eyes to the southeast and to the encampments that her three regiments had erected. Each similar, yet distinct to the commanding officers' taste. Not seeing anything of interest she sighed.

Oh.Kàra gasped, coughed covering her mouth instinctively as she coughed. Finally she felt a small chunk of apple hit her hand. She looked down at to and then wiped her hand against her skirt.

**I knew it!**

**I knew it!**

**I told her back at the academy!**

I said, "if I ever was the one to be chosen... I would forget to even introduce myself to," ...uhh, you, "the interpreter." Ástríðr gave me a fair amount of teasing and agreement with rthoughts.

Well. Here we are.

My apologies interpreter... I just get so caught up in my own thoughts sometimes, what with the war and all.

Kidding.

Kara took a few large bites from her apple and tossed the remains off the balcony[8]. She leaned forward, watching as it splashed into the sand below. She then straightened out her posture, and uniform.

Regiment Commander, Kàra Eiryk, serving at the pleasure of her Majesty Valfreyja, High Priestess of Folkenvangar, and Empress to the peoples of Midga

Our battlefield designation: Valkyrja.

We are three thousand plus strong, spread across three battalions. Many cycles of our great moon, Folkenvangar, have come and gone, and triumphantly we press on with limited casualties to this fiend of a creature we call the Skripi.

Bófreðr, with whom you have met, sort of, is my most senior, and executive officer. Field Commander Bófreðr leads the dragoons; Field Command Nevek heads up the Rangers; The Ætherial Priestess: Ástríðr and her company of acolytes tend to the infirm. This my regiment, my Valkyrja.

Accompanying us are Talik, and her Ætherial knights.

The Ætherial knights are... well, formidable to say the least. They were a last minute addition at behest of the Ætherial Council... Normally a welcome presence, but I figured with the sensitive nature of our mission, so I pressed

Councilmember Arturös, but he was quite evasive. I was told, "Under my command, but not under my purview."

What does that even mean? Under my purview. I have level Ætherial access. Nothing should be out of my purview. Unless... Either I don't have as high of access as I thought, or the Council has an off the books operation that they don't want traced back to them.

I can at least say that the knights have proven themselves in battle time and time again. Skilled with a bow, sword, or any blunt object. They can ride just about anything and are devastating wielders of the Ætherial arts. An air of chaos generally follows their wake.

And you, my newest friend are...

She gestured towards out from the balcony.

about to witness...

Well... I don't really want to spoil it. The lot of us have this bet goin', and I am finally about to win! I can feel it!

This, Kara took her hands and showcased her figure, This fine, athletic, and dare I say... work of art... Well...

Technically Astrid and I are the works of art... and it is the art of students... But, that counts right? Say, you have time don't you?

Okay, good. So, a long time ago, ten years ago. I found out Astrid was into painting. Well... being the subject of anyway. And well, I saw a chance. I mean, I thought she was pretty, and cute, and I just couldn't get her out of my head. So, I thought why not these were some of the best painters to ever, well maybe not ever... but at the time I certainly thought they were. They

had a way of making you think that what they were producing was a triumph, a deep insight into the world.

So... Yeah.

Fourth year was wild... Take that for what you will... I do wonder what some of them are doing now. The strange part is that I wonder how they are doing but when I see them in public... Well it is never seems to be in an official capacity, nope, always when I'm groggy, my hair is a mess, I hadn't seen the inside of a bathhouse in months... So no, I don't want to strike up a conversation first thing when I wake up, and so even though we went to the same schools, I can't always find the energy to turn my filter on.

So, Karin, I am sorry I called your kid a fat moose knuckle, and that I told him that I hoped he would choke on a gerbil. So yeah... My original plan had merit, but that was about it. Either way, I am glad things turned out the way they did. It was definitely a defining moment for me and what I would assume was for,

Ástríður...

Kàra winced. **Hold up, what was that?** She brought her hand to her forehead. **Did you...**

**Did you do that?**

**Interpreter?**

Kàra closed her eyes, leaning against the stone railing, until the dull pain subsided.

**That was... definitely strange...**

**Anyways... it took our company of cadets two weeks to get to the lowertown of Fjallstream. The town itself has an interesting story of its**

own, built north of the capital, at the foothills of the Gallarhorn. If I remember correctly, it originally was a sprawling monastery, but has since been converted into a resort town. Catering to weary soldiers, dignitaries, and the well to Owned by the Citadel and operated by the Monks of Ragnaros.

So, yeah, there we were... in front of our classmates, just south of town among the rolling wheat and barley fields, my heart was a flutter. I couldn't believe that I had pulled it off. Ástríðr ducked slightly as she pushed back the flap of her tent. I saw her exit her tent, so carefully. She was so... so, breathtaking. I felt a strange sensation as I stood there in front of her. I felt as if none of it were real. That I was outside of myself, viewing the actions of another. But seeing through my own eyes, I can't explain.

She gave me a look, that gave me an energy in my chest that I could feel spread across me. Kàra bit her lower lip gently.

A gentle breeze had come off the lake. The leaves were rustling, and I finally realized we were in front of the others, but the murmur of the other students washed into the background as we took our places. Our classmates sat around us in a semi-circle; Ástríðr and I at their focal point.

I could feel the dipping sun's warmth against my exposed back. The sky was just beginning to shift colors. The gentle lapping of water against the shore, framed in by the most beautiful flowers.

The instructor flitted about like a butterfly, but I didn't hear a word of what she said. I was transfixed by Ástríðr. When I saw her, and I mean I feel like I really saw her. Sitting with me on that cold, and blunt stone slab...

Oh, I'll never forget how her sweet scent intermingled with these meticulously maintained, lilies and orchids that I had ever seen. Those colors were simply remarkable.

“Mmm” Kàra hummed. There were a variety of flowers all maintained to honor those of us who choose to become citizens. The Monks serve because we serve. All of us knowingly working towards the day in which, Ragnarök is upon us. And upon that day...

Well, the Monks claim that they will be set free, and they will shun the non-believers, and part us for another realm. A gift... A gift is all they chant. I am not sure what that really means, and I am not sure if they even do... but... When you meet them, ~~yeah~~, it is a treat to meet them in person, they are a bit eccentric.

Kàra looked off into the distance, not at anything in particular... she shifted her gaze frequently, looking for changes in the background pattern.

Yeah, so how it all started was that I found out Ástríðr absolutely loves lilies, and other assorted flora. The answer just kind of presented itself; I had remembered a scouting trip where we had mapped out the journey from the Citadel to the Gjallarhorn. Maester Moor would surly scowl if I not also add, it is not only the tallest mountain in all of the land, but is also said to be the real Gjallarhorn.

The records from that time indicate that Valfréyja locked in a battle with Ásgarðr for control over the Bifröst, She was determined to make her final stand, locked in battle with Heimdallr. Heimdallr went to drink from the Gjallarhorn, replenishing his mind and spirit with the knowledge and wisdom of Mimir.

Valfreyja reached out with the Ætherial tendrils of Yggdrasil, across all of time and space, a multidimensional, multi-universe. But I do know it is like all forms of Valfreyja that exist along her Ætherial root of Yggdrasil, converged. A gamma plasma storm erupted in the sky as both Valfreyja and Yggdrasil brought the sacred symbol crashing into our planet. Ending the conflict in a cataclysmic event.

This... as it is noted in her personal letters, outcome was unforeseen by Valfreyja and she was forced to redirect her energy to contain the fallout from the impact, but it still split the planet, and it still sent pieces of it into the sky. She is said to have wept as she watched the Bifrost crumble. She chose us...

...Over Ásgarðr.

So, yeah back to the story, we were marking every location we could find that could provide a strategic advantage, shelter, food, water.

You get the idea.

As good scouts do, we did as we were told, or at least we tried to. I am sure my map looks different than the others, but I distinctly remember marking that place on my map. Fishing, hunting, spectacular flora, berries, plentiful deer, and elk. I marked ~~ed~~ ~~the~~ with a little fish, a little flower etcetera.

Still got that map... Never stopped marking it either. Sooo... bringing it back around again, I made sure to encourage the instructor that it was an absolute must for a painting symposium, filled with these special lilies, and I knew just the place. Not gonna lie, I am still fairly confused how anyone ever listened to me!

I mean. Seriously, who listens to a ~~sixteen~~ <sup>sixteen</sup> old? Yeah... I definitely rolled a perfect twenty on my persuasion skills that day, because it led to two of the most defining moments in my life... one, I found out that some of my classmates did not all share any moral or ethical compass. And two...

Without the trauma of the first, I would not have had as such of an impactful moment with Ástríðr. This girl with whom I had spent so much time thinking about... Thinking of how I could express myself, constantly lost in my own thoughts...

But instead of passionate moments with her, we see each other briefly at dinner, constantly separated by throngs of people. Then again in passing as the dance was to begin, which I ~~learned~~ <sup>learned</sup> she was hoping to dance ~~with~~ <sup>with</sup> away with me. But instead she finds me, bruised, barely conscious, splayed out among the reeds, in the middle of the night, full moons in the sky, I was broken, pretending to be alright.

But yeah, doesn't matter. She showed me her angelic light.

And it...

Was intense...

Ástríðr has become a central figure in my life, and I not sure I would have it any other way. She was there for me when I was at the point in my life when all I wanted to do was finish my story as quickly as possible...

She paused, closed her eyes, a tear welling to the surface. When she opened her eyes, she felt it fall, but she kept staring off into the distance; A blank, and distant expression set across her face. She slapped her face, "Enough!"

Anyways, the sun was dipping into the evening sky, and it was warm like today, but way more humid, and way too many insects. Anyways, we shifted

positions on command, allowing us to sit back. I could feel her warmth pressed up against me. I drew in a quick breath, feeling an energy, coil itself around my spirit. But it was out of sight of the others, that our fingers awkwardly found each other. I turned my head catching her smiling eye. I knew my face was getting red, but I didn't care.

I felt... the warmth of the heart, the depth of a conversation that didn't need to be had. It was something that I had never felt before, but it also felt as if I did not deserve it. It is funny what darkness can creep into your spirit if you let it get far enough...

But, when she touched me...

I didn't have the words then, but I felt as if an emissary of Valfreyja had come to free me, and to guide me along her path.

Astrid, without a doubt, has given me the greatest gift of all...

Hope...

Kàra's face grew somber.

I can still see her in that dress...

Kara rubbed her right eye gently.

"Gah these creatures can be slow..." Kara mumbled and stretched out. She reached for her pouch and pulled out a small skin filled with water, and began drinking it.

Now, why you?

Why are you here, interpreter?

Why now? What is it that I am to show you? How is my death going to help? What role am I to play?

**Sometimes I just replay things over and over, looking for new details. A trace of some design I have yet to see.**

Kàra walked inside the study, walked back over to the commandant's chair, pulled it closer to the window that looked down upon the gateway. She plopped herself into the chair and leaned her chin on her hands as they rested on the windowsill. She shifted positions until she had a good view of the people coming and going through the inner gate.

With a sigh she let her eyes wander and grabbed the lower portion of the heavy stained-glass window. She began pushing and pulling on it while resting her head on her left arm. A flash of light caught her eye. She scanned the sand caked outer wall, finding what appeared to be an symbol of Ásgarðr.

Kàra pulled the window closer and ran her fingers along it until an ornate crimson M became apparent towards the bottom of the window. She looked back to the sand wall, only the Ásgarðr...ian symbol present on the wall.

**Curious. I haven't seen magick like this except in books.**

Kàra grabbed a piece of parchment from the desk, first held it, quite awkwardly, against the symbol on the glass, then reached into her pouch pulling a piece of, **SketchySketchis its' more humble name** she began by, shadow tracing, and then moving down to ledge here to, **ope, grab a few more colors, and done.**

Kàra held her sketch in her hand, proud of what she had found. She rolled up the parchment and tossed it into her pit of a bag, pushed the window back and resumed her watch. After a few minutes of seeing, no one of interest. She stood up, stretched, and wandered through the study until she was standing in the balcony doorway.

Kàra's eyes fixated on the grassy patches off in the distance among the red rock spires that ate at and melded with the distant hillsides. As Kàra let her eyes draw back across the long red grass, **giving way to the long green grass, and then the white sand, and then the red and white**

sand..... and the river, and the... and the... Mill. A something moving near the mill. She stretched her hands out to touch both sides of the balcony door as she tried to see what was happening near the mill. She felt like she made out what appeared to be Talik's soldiers.

Hmmm...

Kara's eyes snapped back to the horizon. It had been a while, and she knew she was fighting boredom. She had picked at a stone on the wall enough to send a piece clattering to the floor.

Oh, I never told you! Today's category is the "flashiest" kill... but... Kàra strained to make anything out on the horizon. Still nothing. Sorry you will just have to wait to feast your eyes on this... erHer eyes began to wander again, this time they found their way to the path that led to the gate below. A flash of dark brown hair had caught her eye.

Ástríðr.

Kara's face flushed slightly. That ponytail and that crimson bow in her hair. And that white dress. She always gets me with that one.

Whew... Mark my words, by the end of this, two things will happen: That dress will be a different color, it will match much of the sand, and hopefully it will end up outside my shower.

Kara breathed intentionally, to steady herself.

When this thing finally gets going... You just watch. I am going to be like a onetwo punch.

Today is my day.

This is my category.

Oh, and I assure you, mine will be over in a. Flash...

You know...

Kàra jumped backwards, stumbling a bit on the sand on the floor. She could feel, feel, a crackle in her brain as it obscured the offending voice in her head. She drew in a deep breath and could feel her heart racing.

**Interpreter? Is this...**

She fell to her knees, **supposed to happen?**

Her eyes darted back and forth scanning for anything to give a clue as to what was happening.

**THE TASK AT HAND APPEARS THAT IT WILL BE QUITE DIFFICULT IF YOU REFUSE TO PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS YOUNG ONE.**

Kara shook her head feeling lightheaded. **Interpreter?** She found her right hand at the side of her head, the world was spinning, blackness encroached upon her vision and swirls of stars blotted out what remained. Her body slumped below the stone window well near the balcony doors, with a muffled thud.

**What... the.. The fuck!?**

[1] Oh, and I bet you are wondering how exactly did we go from blow by blow of my life, to time jump! Kàra pointed her finger to her temple, a little green glow illuminating just the tip of her finger. Oh, off. I am sworn to keep it on at all times, but that seems a bit much for me. And besides sometimes things get fuzzy, like a poor reception, and I can tell you, that hurts. It is deemed to be the chosen's choice.

[2] This may or may not be the best choice to convey the complexity in use of the expression, sh\*t, but I feel it is close enough.

[3] Another sacrifice, another offering, another year of diminishing prosperity. A massive fortune and luck that shifts as each coin in the treasury departs its master's hand.

[4] 2022.01– Maya licked the side of my screen. What do I have on my screen that is so worthy of your tongue, dog?

[5] As you get a handle on the current storm, you must brace for the next. Exhausting, but still giving it your all. We pray to understand the rhythm just well enough that we may influence our own little ships, little by little. That maybe one day we will find calmer waters through hard work and a whole lot of luck.

[6] How long is she in the air? Is the moment contact is lost, and  $t_1$  is the moment contact is made again, I would assume stiff arm off and on, with a motion that could be thought of as a stiff board, hinged to the ground near her ankles. Does the difference in height from the ground to her ankle make a difference in how long she remains in the air? How does the force required change with the positioning of her arms? Assume right angle ordinary geometry [2], same laws of physics in inertial reference frames [1]. Yggdrasil's tendrils of Æt herial magicks manifest differently in each of our universes, but the mechanics are the same. Each story, each interpreter bringing with them a new perspective.

[7] I am sure that future interpreters may uncover lost archives, possibilities that intertwine themselves, anchoring dimensions to one another. Portals in spacetime, that exist because we can imagine it.

[8] Work out physics problem

<sup>[9]</sup> Get it ?? Paying tribute to my son, Jackson. Who is always coming up with great "dad" jokes.

<sup>[10]</sup> I thought long and hard about this. According to my "extensive" research on wikipedia and <https://www.etymonline.com/word/fuck> I assessed that it was a word traced back to the middle ages, probably Germanic/Dutch origins. To me, it is a word that is flexible. I feel it satisfies my need to express complex ideas that are generally entangled amongst some emotion. Or at least that is what I am thinking.

[AH] You only see small orc children. They cull them when they get too rowdy.

### 1.3 Incoming

Kàra drew in a slow and deliberate breath, then peeled herself from the floor. **Maybe I'm still gettin' used to the connection between us?**

Kàra pulled herself up to the stone window on wobbly legs, and fixed her sight on the distant horizon.

Wouldna be so bad if it didn't knock ya on yer arse at monnente. Didna tell us about ~~that~~ in school.

Kàra grumbled as she leaned against the stone window frame. She clenched a fist with her face tightening as she strained to stand. She sighed and relaxed into the stone, and within moments, slumped her body out the window, bent at the waist.

You know... I have come to realize that I can be a bit dramatic, with my rear end hanging out there, and I just don't care. Magick isn't just for offense. Enchant a cute pair of under garments, and no one dares come near unless invited. And I suppose my ~~might~~ might have something to do with it. I for one think modesty is a tad ~~over~~ veated sometimes, and besides I just gotta... well...

I dunno... let it all hang out, and... I guess, indulge in the nonsensical, even sometimes when I shouldn't. She let her arms drape down, two simple circlets bounced off one another as they met at the palm of her right hand. Sometimes interesting things ~~come~~ come into our lives through unexpected consequences... a clang, a song, a friend, a lover, or a monster. Always a story written, and yet still unfolding, an infinite number of finite possibilities lay ahead.

Kàra focused on the sides of her vision to see her dangling locks. It doesn't have to all make sense; a whimsy is just that. I figure it is the mind's way of trying to add in new experiences into our lives, and... uhh...

I guess into wherever our memories go.

I think it is so our minds can connect the dots just a little bit easier, like checking to see if the thing, idea, or concept still behaves as we would predict, and if not add it to the repository of things that are associated with that concept.

Yep...

Fire is still hot or, nope, this one is new. I have yet to encounter fire that wasn't hot, but my mind doesn't seem to understand that. And so I would argue that this example highlights the gloriousness of our mind: The concept of placing your hand in fire and the resultant natural consequences have bubbled to the surface of your mind, as it has mine, without much effort I might add. Isn't that amazing? It just comes to you, because it has hurt you in the past.

The only differences that I could imagine would be what the nature of the consequences would be; does your concept of fire look the same as mine? I imagine they are inherently different for each of us. Some feel more than others, some feel nothing at all. But I am not sure the specifics matter for our understanding of the concept.

And I would argue that this is a big but, for which I cannot lie I do enjoy from time to time; but, I think this whole thing is our mind's way of reassuring ourselves that we are still here. Like, we still exist right here, right now, what we have come to understand as fire, is still what it is.

I mean think about it, we are just a meat suit carrying around this thing that interprets the world around us, I know for certain that I have had experiences that others have not, and vice versa. Do our realities look the same? Maybe one day the fire will be so hot, maybe the sky will part opening a door to a home denied. There has to be some sort of commonality between our stories, something we can all agree on as a truth.

So, I posit that the question is valid and makes sense. Is the fire hot? I could trust your experience, or I could run my hand across it, I mean, how do I know I have not been recently imprisoned by a Djinn? Or am I witness to the Ethereal and the Aetherial converging upon Yggdrasil?

How do I know I am still real? What is real anyways? Maybe my current boredom and lack of someone to talk to has taken my mind and simply run away.

I don't know the answer. I am not sure there is one. But, and this may sound weird, or simple, but I would think that we don't all have to do dumb things to answer our own questions. Sometimes we can use the experiences others have had to fit into our idea of how our existence works. We can still have the strange questions but answering them shouldn't always have to be painful.

Unless...

Kàra bit at the inside of her lower lip, sinking into the thought as she closed her eyes. She gave herself a moment before releasing her lips with a soft breath.

I mean... it shouldn't hurt unless you want it to, and even then, within reason.

Kàra straightened herself, stretching her back and arms before leaning out the window again. She looked down at the bustle still taking place at the gate, as people, cargo, and standard trade moved in and out.

They seem to keep on like if it were any other regular day, as if there were not a scourge barreling down upon their society... mmhmm... My dad used to have all these kinds of sayings for situations like this.

He just seemed to collect these things in his head, and they tended to fit whatever situation... What was it? [2]

Kàra stuck her hand out and began counting on her fingers: There was...

“Slicker than snot on a glæðorknob.”

No... That is for something slippery...

“Shiverin’ like a dog passin’ razor blades.”

No... That one is for being really cold.

“As useful as tros in a box.” I think this one is kinda like: Are we making compost? If not, I am not sure the purpose.

“Runin’ ‘round like a kitten in a mitten.”

That last one is code for you don’t have the slightest clue what you are doin’, but you sure are doin’ it. I would argue this last one is our case with our calm, “it is normal that soldiers came to town,” populace.

A surface level calm... but... it feels coerced somehow. I mean we are quite the ways from any settlement. We are literally on the fringes of society. Beyond this, to the south... Nothing but death awaits.

So, yeah, I think that one fits the best. Kàra chuckled out loud breaking the silence, drawing her attention to how alone she was.

Yeah, so my pops certainly was a collector of information. Seemed to have the right know-how for just about any situation, that gut feeling sort of thing. But yeah wasn't always the kind of information I wanted to know about, but I could usually understand motive. And you know some stuff was just down right funny.

I can tell you that I enjoy a good hunt because of him, and fishing still calms me down. Those were the times when you would hear the strangest things, but the most pertinent to keeping yourself awake and entertained while you simply waited. Spice of life of thing, and you only get fleeting moments of it.

Time is certainly precious...

I guess because of him I did a lot of things maybe outside my comfort at first, but you know you learn to just jump right in because you are eager to be noticed, to be seen by this person who was down at the docks, tending to the loading and unloading of the ships, before I even woke up.

My mother on the other hand was a healer and had to work strange hours for the sake of her role caring for soldiers. She was just usually sleeping during the day. I mean when we got older, she was able to transition to daytime healin', but...

Kàra chuckled out loud, this time stifling the noise with her hand.

She had this sayin' there is always a saying I mean it was the thing we heard every morning. "Don't wake me unless there is blood." Well, it

was a hot midsummer day, and I wanted to cool off in the below ground hideaway, and simply enjoy my pitcher of Feldehan's bread and lemon

I was pretty singularly focused in those days, as I figure an eleven year old would be, and so I decided let's take that pitcher down stairs so we can enjoy it in dugout of our modest home... Oh but I should probably bring more lemons too incase I need to punch it up a bit... But we don't need to take the gate at the top of the stairs down, just step over it... Weeeeeee... splat.

Oh... there was blood. I flew down the stairs landing face first on the not so soft ground. I bet it had to have been a good five meter drop to the ground. I ended up losing a big triangle in my two front teeth while learning about gravity and awkward legs.

Awkward might be an understatement.

I know that my outward appearance is from an inherited lottery, and they say, the only thing others cannot imprison, is your mind... Well try to get people to take your mind seriously, your thoughts and ideas... When you've got this golden brown hair, and ~~skin~~ that were distracting the girls, and the boys alike... Your body changing and becoming more awkward by the day... We guess you tend to imprison yourself.

Kàra sighed out loud. The universe is weird...

So I understand if this next part is just that for you.

But... I want you to go ahead and grant yourself a moment of whimsy. is something I used to do to free my mind of the locks I used to put on it. Kind of like reminding myself that my mind is in control of this meat suit, and not the outside world.

Now, stick out your tongue.

No seriously, try it.

Free your mind...

Kàra stuck out her tongue. But could feel the familiar twinge of embarrassment.

Nope, that is just silly... but not very full of whimsy.

Uhhh... what was that thing Helga said to do? Oh yeah!

Okay. Okay! Now I know that this one works! For this you will need paper hats, two bears, a hunter, and a bee's nest, just oozing with honey. But it's really just a pressure device that explodes its contents all over the place, be it bees, lemons, or the really fine confetti that just sticks with you, and lives with you for weeks on end.

Shower? Nope that doesn't rid you of it, found some in my armpit. But anyways, as you dance around to the natural consequences as they unfold the bees, bears, and hunter. It is so whimsical! So freeing!

Who will walk away? Who will eat whom? A nail biter to be sure! Will the bees ever get justice for their hard work being blown up? Of course they will! We aren't monsters.

Feldahan's brand bee bombs come with a new, roomier hive in which the queen sits and awaits her brood to complete their task. She sits on a throne, if you would believe it, just waiting for her brood to be released from their exploding home. It was all worked out in some sort of contract Feldahan's had secured with the QueenQueen bee. She is a hoot, but I really wouldn't make her mad.

But, see, after all that don't you feel just a bit more in tune with yourself? Don't you just love them little pollinators? Don'tcha feel just a bit

freer than you were before? But what I wonder is whether you could ever do that again?[3]

What is weirder to me is that even if you didn't stick your tongue out... Or play with a Feldahan's bee bomb in reality, whatever that looks like for you... You did in your mind... Woah.[4]

But... and, I am quite certain about this, you pictured something. You understood the idea. The ideas were weighed and judged by a massively complex interconnected belief system in your mind.

Do it, or don't. An interesting system always weighing do it or don't do it, believe what you experience or don't.

Kàra forced herself upright, pushing off playfully. She crossed her arms as they stretched out above her head, and she spun.

Kara made two twirls, to ensure her skirt would spin, and as she let her arms fall they found the sides of her worn but still snug, mythrill lined leather tunic, to which she adjusted it. Her hands then migrated to her, luxuriously soft leather skirt.

Feeling the soft texture, she lost track of her surrounding and she slipped and hit her head against the chair.

"Ow!" She exclaimed as a hand nursed her sore spot.

H... Ow... What... is going on?

Did my inner voice just change? Some knock on the noggin I should probably see someone about that...

Sooo... Anyways...

The skirt is mythril lined; I had that done on a separate trip to the region, Fjallheim that is. We as a society have not figured out matter transporters. Quicker travel maybe?

Quick Travel sort of, but instant, Nope.

A journey is apparently still meant to impart wisdom, and wisdom only comes from an understanding over time. A suffering of change.

Well, okay..

Maybe I wasn't quite accurate..

We do have portals it's just that anything that goes in living, comes back out as some ~~Cronenberg~~ monstrosity.. Was that akin to my voice cracking?

Anyways, each pleat of the skirt has this beautiful golden embroidery around its border, I guess it was a gift from my mother, but I don't ever remember mom giving it to me.. **The ornate, and decorative skirt stretched most of the way to her knees, but** anyways.. can you blame a girl for wanting to look good as she goes into battle? Me..ow..

Did I just say.. meow?

Am I having a full-on **breakdown** from the boredom?

Now, you may wonder to yourself, or maybe not, but I do.. What have we gotten ourselves into?

Are the lizard people going to show up?

Well, I hope not

Seriously, those things kinda scare me..

Nice enough people, but they just kinda creep me out..

The lizard people were not coming

Yet

Now as I was saying..

Wait, what?

So..

As I am sure you are aware by now, there are some strange things afoot, and I know the real burning question on your mind..

Kàra wandered about, eventually finding herself at the edge of the balcony where she could feel the wind pick up, bringing with it a sand that bit at her face. She pulled at her shawl slightly, freeing up a piece so she could pull it across her face.

You want to know how in the world something lined with mythrill could be comfortable, or breathable, or you know, bendy? I mean the flex on this thing, Kàra pulled a pleat up, running a hand along its worn but soft leather exterior enjoying the feel; letting her fingers drag along the embroidery. She pulled the pleat upwards exposing the gentle arc that the pleat made, while exposing part of her thigh. (Even when others aren't around I still notice...)

She began bending it in every way she could think of. "See?" She said aloud which instantly made her feel embarrassed.

**WELL, I WILL TELL YOU...** What just happened? Am I dying?

**Underneath the scarf Kara pursed her chapped lips, and then bit at another bit of dry skin.**

The Dwarves of Nixavellir... They know their way around a mythril chainmail. You use that as a backing, or midpiece such as mine, soft on both sides, doesn't get wet, pretty great really. It is a hidden advantage concealed by a stylish, and less irritating armor. Now in many colors. Guaranteed to clean up easily.

Sorry, it's catchy.

**What?!** <sup>[5]</sup> **Kàra paused lingering on her thought, staring into the distance.**

They pay the bards in Midgard to sing the praises of Mythril Brand - Dwarven Products.

And, hey Bards can sometimes throw down a catchy tune.

**She surveyed the battlefield.**

**She could feel an excitement build within her chest. Soon it will be time. Out of habit she brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, her plan of action running through her mind: Destroy bug things. Gonna destroy big bug things and little bug things, and not become food. oh, and win this contest.**

In all seriousness though... I can't wait to come off the front for a while. It has certainly been a push, and I know everyone is getting a bit run down. I heard Cook has even resorted to two nights of venison backstrap stew. We definitely cannot sustain that rate of resource use.

I can tell everyone needs to blow off some steam, and Field Marshal Arturos has assured us of rest and relief as soon as the Sentinels[AH] arrive.

So until then, we wait, we hold, and we press on. But you want to know what I would really like to do? Like, not a tros field version, either.

Give you a hint we left port about five cycles ago, and before that it was another three at sea.

uh... oh, um...

**So... uh a cycle is, uhm, is how long it takes for our moon, Fólkvangr, to orbit our world. About a quarter of a season is a good measure. It is locked in our rotation, with only the slightest variance in its orbital speed relative to us ants down here...**

A timepiece just slowly movin' through the sky. Takes just near two months, give or take a few days here or there.

**Kàra gestured to two horizons opposite one another. Two mont hs between here and t here, and t hen gone for t wo more.[6]**

Anyways, the other moon, Valhalla, has a much shorter period traveling with the rotation of the planet. Setting every day as our star rises, or I suppose sets, depending on where you are in the world. All I know is that the light that comes from that place. It.. It just feels different somehow...[7]

But anyways. I want to bathe... and I mean I want to take a real bath. Not a simple in and out of a portable tub, no. Conjuring up "perfect" water, sure. The environment? No. Hard no. Tell me how I am supposed to relax out here?

Now, what I'm imagining is a visit to the gardens of the Citadel. Slip into those thermal pools, and just melt. A constant haze of both smoke from Feldehan's brand products, and the mixture of mountain air and the warm pools, creating this...

Fog, that just takes a moment to get used to, or lost in. It can take your breath away. Similar to Jim's sauna back home, get that thing crankin' and you come in from the cold, and she'll take yer breath away.

Yeah, so, one of those baths where the world's problems just melt away. I can just imagine the warm water caressing my skin, taking my dry and cracked skin, nourishing it with exotic soaps from far off lands, leaving my skin feeling so smooth. I could spend hours under the stars, first alone, and then...

With Astrid by my side. **Kàra reveled in the thought for a moment until she spotted a change in the background.**

Aww... Tros.

**Why couldn't they wait ten more minutes?**

**A black streak on the horizon had caught her eye, and a sour look took hold on her face momentarily before being replaced with one of resolve. She reached into her bag pulling out a wooden tripod and a**

long spyglass which she then affixed to it. She looked at the side which was marked with, angles.

As she set up the tripod in the shade of the balcony, she could see the massive outline of darkness began to expand as she tinkered with the spyglass.

Almost got a fix on 'em. She tinkered with a few dials, and checked her readings on the side, she then took a moment to watch through the spyglass as the darkness spread across the distant mountainous horizon.

Almost got a rough calculation.[8]

Breathe...

She pulled out a clutch of paper, and a piece of sharpened coal from her bag and began scratching down a few numbers.

Today we are not just soldiers, Today we are family. Today we step into Fenrir's mighty jaw, Today we pray to you.

Valfreyja, protect us with your divine light.

Today we pray to you and your Valkyrja.

Hmmm...

They seem to be moving faster than normal...

Kàra looked up at the balcony's roof, a much appreciated roof for seeing and not frying, but for signaling, not so good. Kàra's eyes began to dart around.

Need to get into the open.

Kàra ran out of the study and to the other side of the rampart threw up her hands sending bursts of color shooting high into the air for all to see.

Adjust - Speed - two hundred thousand paces, mark.[9]

She drew in a deep breath and attempted to steady her mind.

“Ohhhh yeah! We, are, on!” Kàra shouted, and quickly descended the ladder, just off from the stairs. Her feet landed awkwardly on the sandy cobblestone with a thud. As she went to get up, she fumbled her step slightly, sending her tumbling, but she quickly recovered and took off.

Stupid ankle. Kàra dusted herself off and set off towards the middle ward.

I found everyone except for Talik, with whom I cannot seem to reach Yeah, I did that time skip thing, didn't figure you needed to hear about operations stuff. And you know... for those who might be listening in... She flagged down a runner and set them off to establish contact with Talik.

Plus...

I haven't really told anyone about you yet. So rather than put everyone on edge, I have chosen to keep you my secret for the time being. But anyways, I just wanted to hear status reports, and make sure everyone had what they needed.

I like to remind myself that everyone has an important job, and everyone deserves to know it, even if it doesn't feel like an important job it might just free up worry for another person, and every action ripples outward, impacting the course of someone else's path. So, if I can positively nudge here and there, like checking in with everyone I can, even if they can be difficult to reach, I try.

upon concluding her business with the runner Kàra returned to the southern rampart, and to her, home away from home. My smelly armpit of despair. A true taint Skeggja<sup>sr</sup>[10].

Kàra thrust her head out the window adjacent the balcony doors; the Skrípi had reached the edge of their territory.

Let's see...[11]

Tros. They are almost in range! Kàra ran into the open again and sent up an even more grandiose signal.

Adjust - Speed - twenty-five thousand paces, mark.

They are going to reach the river much sooner than expected, and planned for! Kàra sighed; she really hated these things.

Kara held her breath and bit her lip. She could hear the dull roar of a stampede slowly building in distance. She eyed the brackish river water, **it seems to be at its seasonal peak, and it is churning along swiftly.**

We followed that river all the way from the North Week after week of combat with these creatures. From one sea to another if we keep up this little dance of ours.

The horde was closing in, the sand churning beneath their limbs, generating a massive cloud in their wake. They have crested the dunes south of the river...

Kàra drew in a deep breath.

Hopefully the river will slow them down...nope.

Owww. She had bit down hard on her lip.

The battle had begun in earnest with fireteam after fireteam unleashing strong concentrated fire along the riverbanks, from dug in positions within the palms, and along, and into the lagoons. The horde was significantly stymied, as burst after burst of explosions could be heard. Ætherial magick is a real riot in close quarters.

Kàra watched as the mutilated bodies of the Skripi were swept downstream by the strong currents. With so many different Magicks lighting up the battlefield, it reminds me of the parades along the river back home when I was a young girl.

Except, here, with each new explosion all that remains is death and a pockmarked patch of earth **A massive flash lit up the landscape, blinding Kàra for a moment.**

Okay, so this may sound weird, but despite my hatred for these things, they are kind of fascinating creatures. No, hear me out here. As they approach their long tails are the first thing you see and what is probably what makes them so formidable. Their tail is so agile, as is their bodies. But it is the razor sharp spike at the end that is what is frightening.

You should never take your eye off of it.

Their official designation, which only the highest of councils could have ordained mind you...

The Skrípi. It literally means the horror...

The Horror...

Now imagine this... In the tens of thousands.

Granted this is just a rough sketch, best I can do with my mental canvas, but I think you get the idea. Anyways, their hunger, or drive, whatever, is so strong that they will literally be

running a top of one another, desperately trying to reach their prey.

The creepiest part, or at least I think so, is that the hairs that line their bodies will bristle against one another. A little static crackle heard only when they are on top of you. The hushed stampede still sends a tingle down my spine.

Let that sink in for a moment.

A rumble felt in the ground... beginning as a simple movement quickly evolving, and becoming more and more violent as it approaches.

A fast moving blight is what it is.

It isn't long before you have a full on stampede. The ever shifting sand covering any trace of you after they reach you.

Those eight watchful eyes secured their target hundreds of paces prior.

I can tell you this... That tail precedes its sound. With that distinctive crack, that tail reaches out as if a living harpoon. The armored black spear sinking into your chest, crushing, and eviscerating everything in its way. Snapping your spine as it exits.

But if you are unlucky enough to survive, your wound closed off by a thick mucousy layer... The rot'll get ya in hours. Eats right

through you. The horrors one must witness, if you could stay awake that is.

"Hmmm..." Kāra hummed.

Might be something interesting to study. Not that I want anyone to suffer that fate, but the reality is, this is war.

Anyways. I think that alone justifies my hatred of these creatures. These eight eyed armored hairy spider scorpions deserve to be wiped out.

**Kara felt her energy surge, manifesting as a faint golden glow that shimmered across her skin before fading away.**

The moments before complete engagement seem to smash time into two categories: the incredibly long wait, and the intense, and fleeting rush of engagement.

These feelings of the moment, prior, and of waiting, feel as if it were nothing but a lingering fantasy.

Taunting you with an illusion.

A time just... before.

Before you compromised, just that little bit of who you thought you were, and you never got it back.

But hopefully you don't have to. You just hope this time isn't the last, and that this mission doesn't destroy who you are. We have

been quite fortunate, I think. The soldiers are hardy. We are the best after all.

Kàra could see the advanced fireteams falling back towards the ridge, and Kara turned her head to look out through the door, and at the heavily armored Major who was waiting in the doorway, and she shouted, "Now! Bófreðr! LOOSE!"[16]

Within moments she saw her planning come together as she stuck her head out the window and watched volley after volley of, Ætherial armor piercing arrows, streak across the sky. Kàra was feeling giddy. The Skrípi's multi-jointed legs were churning up the sand as they raced towards the outer village, obscuring visibility.

Every few moments arrows from along the wall would fire, and then the Ætherial knights will morph them into whatever they please.

Usually high yields.

Kara tried to enjoy the brief moment, and even cracked a smile as volley after volley burst into flashes of different colors every few moments. The bursts spawned smaller bursts that glowed brilliantly and created a deafening shockwave as they pockmarked the desert.

It is an amazing thing to watch such coordination between soldiers. The grit it takes to do some of these jobs... Right now it is literally raining bombs in front of them, and they are holding the line.

Not only are they holding the line, but they are slowly working them back towards the ridge to maximize kill time.

I mean... I can feel the heat... And... The shockwaves, one after another adjusting our breathing to the rythmn of war. It gives me such. **Kara bit the inside of her lip.**

Those soldiers there. Their grit, and dedication to their art, which, to me it is our opportunity...

These moments are our opportunity to mourn peace. A victory or a defeat can feel like an eternity, until it is over; but it is now, and now is the only thing standing between you and an uncertain, but generally directed outcome. Not divinely, unless you mean as in pressing start on some sort of weird experiment...

But yeah... Life is full of outcomes that are unexpected. Knowing how to live with yourself if you should win or lose... That is what ends up making you, you...

**Kàra watched as the wall of creatures slowed, but the sustained barrage after some time could not completely halt the arachnid advance. Instead a dam began to form against the bridge, and had begun backing up the river and into the lagoon. A strange wall of corpses is forming a very weird bridge.**

**Kara stared towards the lagoons where crippled creatures were washing ashore, pawing at the sand, and thrashing their tails.**

Fascinating<sup>[6]</sup>.

They just... kinda piled up there.

I certainly give the Knights points for creativity...

But...

As a horde wants, it will press on. Now they are using their dead as a road of sorts. The more that die, the more they seem

to just pack in there... It is definitely one of the more queer things I have seen them do.

The horde has been difficult to contain across the board, breaking through the fire line in various pockets along the front.

As the platoons fell back one after another, each holding out as long as they could, they collectively made their way towards the hard ridge, and to Bófreðr's waiting command.

Kara looked out across the battlefield one last time, climbed into the window frame drawing in one last calming deep breath, and upon exhale a vibrant golden shimmer swept across her body and she leapt from the window.

The leap left a cracked footprint in the stone window casing, and carved a body sized channel in the eve. The Skrípi were closing in fast, and Kàra was reaching her apex high above the battlefield, and well above the village.

Highest I have jumped from, not the highest I have been. [?where was the ref]

Kara clenched her fists tight. Reached towards her side, and to her sword.

I am going to kill so many... So.. So many.

There was fire in Kàra's heart as she freed her slender rapier from its hilt. You and me, we have Skrípi to kill

A shadow cast an eerie contrast onto the horde of dark creatures. Time began to slow, Kàra closed her eyes, and when she opened them, a burst of blue energy shot from her body, solidifying her control over the battlefield, and slowing everything it touched.

Now, it is important to note that candle wax, when in its liquid form, is generally hot.

Ch.

I'm sorry... I uh... need to focus. Sooo...

Weird stories help me to...um, focus my energy a bit.

I heard this neat saying once, "What's a person without imperfections?" Or something similar to that. The point is I heard it when I needed to hear it.

I found a way to bridge the gap so to speak. Kinda like you didn't quite know something one moment, and then just "Ah-ha!" Or something like that.

So, one thing kind of led to another and this is something that I came up with that helped me to...let go. It...distracts me from the million other things running around in my head..and it helps me to find the person behind the imperfections.

To find the strength to fight today.

In the corner of her eye she could see the arrows overhead come to a crawl. Kara liked to think that, in battle, time has to get by me.

Anyways, so yeah, it was a concept that I apparently, failed to learn. The wax that is. *Everything is about perspective, and when you hear glowing reviews of this new way to sculpt...*

*Well, let me clue you in; Helga, first told Nevek about it, who then told Talik, who then told Bófreðr, who then confided in Astrid. To which of course she just had to tell me all about it. Well the way she described it, it would be some sort of work of art when all things were said done...*

*Well, to be honest, by that point I thought I was going to be learning how to create something out of clay.*

*Sol had on this cute frock, and... I walked in to this small wooden hut. Maybe hut is generous. The air was acrid; the smell of wax was overwhelming.*

*The smoke made it hard to see, and by the time I was seated I knew something was amiss.*

*No...*

*We don't have that kind of relationship yet.* Boundaries are important. You, may be the interpreter, but you get the gist of it... and that is all you will get... For now.

Maybe later... Let's try something else... I got these cute new boots... They are a cute red and brown lace up. I was going to surprise Astrid, but, uh...

**HEL... ELLOO... H... QU... QUARA...** A deep static filled voice cut across Kàra's mind.

Look here bust er, quarantine provided an opportunity. An opportunity to learn how to communicate again.

**OOO RECPT...** Hello?

It seems like something, the Astrid thing... Uh... you wouldn't forget, but I guess when you are stuck in the same routine day in day.

Ahh!

Kàra winced, doubling over as a pain sank to her stomach.

**K... KÀRA CAN YOU READ ME?**

Kàra's hand darted into her bag quickly procuring a scrap of leather, and just as quickly it was between her teeth.

Feeling a stinging sensation creep along her skull, she struggled to continue her inner monologue: in some of the Aetherial aid missions we were on right after graduating... Where... we received our first commands. I went off to ~~nvdlir~~ while Astrid went to further training through the realm. For a while her missions were more secretive than my own!

In... Kàra bit harder into the leather. In...fact some still are.

K...

I GET IT! Kàra screamed out loud, "I GET IT!"

The pain began to subside.

Funny how it all works out

Kàra straightened out, stretching her arms out above her head, and raising herself on her toes.

The point is getting that different perspective after helping to open my mind, but if I expected others to have the same conclusions about things as I do isn't it to their disadvantage if I use my understanding against them?

**THAT WAS RICH. I MEAN SERIOUSLY, IT WAS FUN TO LISTEN TO.**

**AM I** just baiting people into arguments?

Kàra burst out laughing, but could feel a sole tear soaking into her dry skin.

[1] Etherial – Define AEtherial

[2] From the book of Ed. An obscure text that I have never actually seen, but I certainly have heard of.

[3] If your answer is anything but, no, I would ask if your scenario a sketch, a painting, or reality? How much of your reality are you capturing in your scenario, how much of it is made up? Is it okay to be surface deep, knowledge wise, an ocean wide but no more than a few centimeters deep? Can you rewind the event with perfect clarity?

Our limitations on what we know, and how it all connects to one another, limits our own resources to understand a given scenario. I have realized that if you can at least recognize you don't know something, that there is a limit to what I know, (so far). Once I know the depth of my own understanding I can choose to expand my understanding, or not. The hardest part for me is remembering set a sign post indicating shallow water, (shallow understanding). Lest you dive in head first, and make a fool of yourself, or worse.

[4] Keanu! You heartthrob. Swoon. Phill and Fred's Excellent Adventure was simply a masterpiece. I mean going back in time? How all the timelines don't just fracture? It is crazy. (Frowned upon thing in our society. Time travel that is.) Always saying don't regret your past, but don't run away from it either.

[5] Paying tribute to my Henny Penny. He who liked to spout off some seemingly random factoid, and immediately say after he finished, "What?! I (heard, saw, read, did... etc.) in some (show, book, experience)." Always brought a smile to my face. Ya know, when the gag is novel, and not... Annoying.

Also, they, (the boys), just seem say the same things over... and over... and over... One day one kid was in the bathroom, and the other was in their bedroom. I hear one kid shout, "I say ass, you say..." The other without missing a beat, "Holeeeeeeee." - "Ass" goes one "Hole" goes the other. And so on and so forth. Kids are silly.

[6] It is clear to the casual observer that this would be different depending on where you are on the planet.

[7] When Fólkvangr is out of sight, and it is just Valhalla, it feels like things just get a bit more, erie.

[8] Suppose our arc of Skripsi shows at an angle of 2 degrees on the horizon. If I know my planet's radius, can I find out the distance to target If I translate the two arc lengths on top of one another, and swing the triangles through so it looks like an ice cream cone, one stuck in the other, but since the angles of the similar triangles are so small relative to the distances we are thinking about... I posit that they can be treated as similar triangles, sharing the distance of spread on the horizon with that of a longer, angle that its triangle would make at the center of the planet. So we have an angle, which when projected backwards would make a super small angle to the planets center of gravity. I know the radius of the planet, being the long leg of the perpendicular triangle... Which would be my distance to target, and to one half the arc these things are making. So, 2 degrees on the horizon, my glass is scaled to each tick of separation being 1000 meters, so what 15,000 meters on the horizon? So relate that back to our planet at about 15,000,000 meters in diameter, so about

7,500,000 meters long leg, at about 15,000 short leg. ---- NEED TO FINISH @mile uo 150km is about the most.... Soo too much?

[9] If you were on a sphere what would be the difference in distance knowing that if we realize the 100k paces represents a path that covers that arc of the sphere to which they approximate their world. All of that versus saying it is the distance to the right angle triangle A to B is the same, but the distances traveled must necessarily be different due to the arc contained by A and B, and supported by the right triangle Origin, A, B. - Fun to think about.

[10] DEFINITION? Forgot ☹️

[11] their distance is speed times time - know distance know their general speed... 25,000 paces - time to arrive is 30 paces/ second so 25,000paces / 30 paces per second - sooo 2,500 / 3 seconds - so 2100 would be 3 groups of 700 – and 2400 is 800 with about 33 remaining seconds. And at 60 seconds per minute I can fit 600 seconds in ten (minute) groups of 60 seconds – with 200 remaining which is close to 180 which is 3 groups of 60 – so about 13-15 minutes until they reach us.

[12] Thank you TheOatmeal.

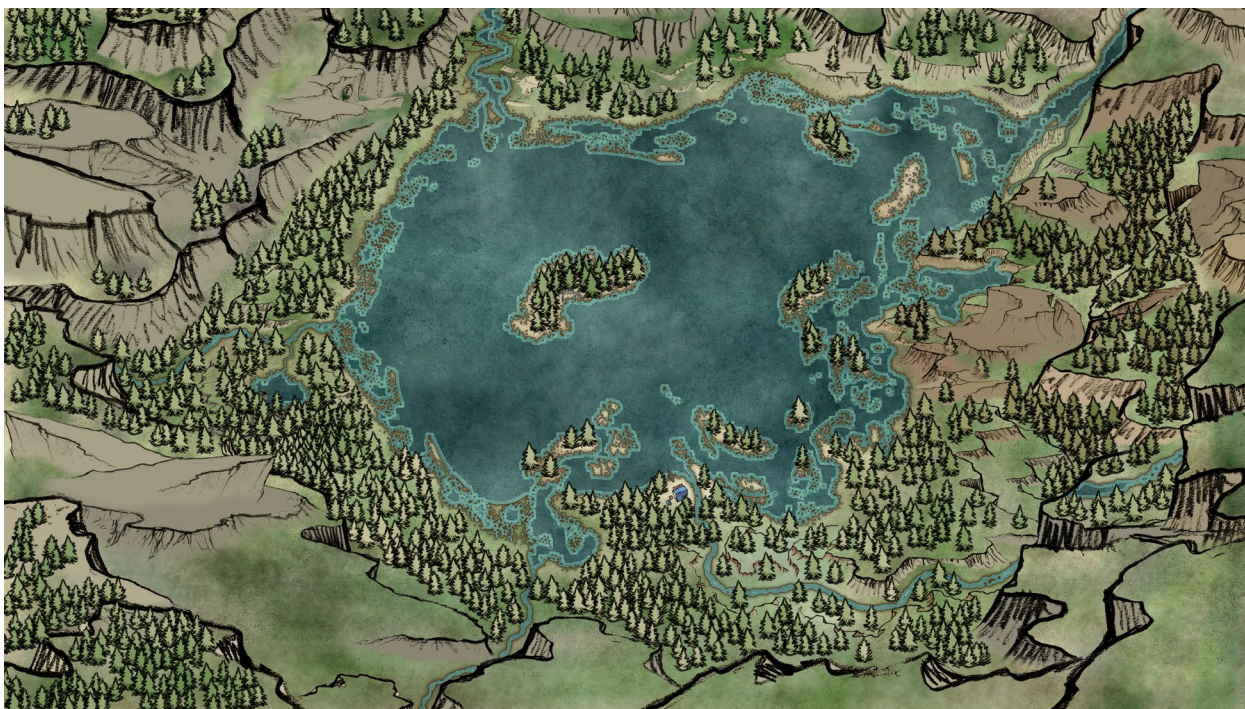
<https://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe>

[13] Live long, and prosper Spock.

[14] Was watching Letterkenny Sn 9 Ep 3 - Scorched Earth. - Sometimes it is hard to look past our mistakes. So much so that is blinds me to a pathway forward. Take a step back, and try to assess. Breathe. Do I need to keep on fighting?

[15] Mummu

[16] I once was lost.



## 1.4 Heinrikr

Yeah, so I lost the last pair of boots in cards a few weeks back, but that isn't the embarrassing part. The embarrassing part is how I won them back, sorta. No, seriously, I'm not always the best at cards. But that evening I was on fire. And then out of nowhere I was on fire! Needless to say[1], I lost my mojo. And... I lost everything but my dignity, let's just leave it at that. I mean...

I did not lose everything, but you get the picture...

Another story, for perhaps another time.

Whoa... Okay... Perhaps sometime you will share with me...

Huh?

I need to attend to this.

**Kàra shifted her weight to one foot, and looked down, a twinge of pain streaking across her face; she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.**

Say... have you noticed my golden hair? Today is a bun day! Astrid said it would look cute... Yeah, you interpreter. That other fellow is gone for now. I can feel it.

Kàra straightened out and patted at her tightly braided, and spun bun.

When the Valkyrja go into battle we all know that this could be our last, and we all handle that notion a bit differently.

I feel... if I didn't, I wouldn't be showing the due respect this enemy deserves.

I have seen whole villages swallowed in the breath of a day.

So, this... Ritual of mine, it helps me focus my power, and gives me perspective.

Those embarrassing moments, are nothing but that.

And if by her grace I should survive...

**Kàra could feel her power come to a crescendo. Her whole body convulsing at its peak energy; a blinding golden glow bursting forth and shimmering across her skin, before fading away.**

The trick is to catch them as they are cresting the small rise.

Haha...

No it isn't, The trick is to make sure they are dead.

Kidding, not kidding.

Three...

Valfreyja... Protect us.

Two...

Kára's rapier had begun to glow a soft white as she extended it high into the air.

one.

Lightning arced from, the once cloudless sky, to the tip of Kara's blade. She felt the heat as she held on with every ounce of strength she could muster. She drew in a deep breath tensing her arms and back as she pushed the lightning from her blade into the oncoming horror.

H.

The massive energy bolt crackled as it surged along the black mass of bodies. Within moments chain lightning burst forth seemingly at random along the bodies of its victims; as the air ionized. from the backs of the shimmering creatures.

Each Skrípi along the chain just sort of... burst. They exploded into white hot flashes... The creatures, they burst into showers of gore, streams of innards venting from every armor plate, each popping open like steam plates.

Is that what you wanted to hear? Hmmm...

Hm

usually they would have scattered after something so far reaching into their ranks... I mean, I would think anyways. They... seem to be even more driven this time instead of turning away!

can see them starting to distance themselves radially until, as time began to tick by faster and faster as she reached the end of her abilities. For the moment.

My story buster.

Kàra touched down moments later near the edge of the easternly lagoon. The mill blades prominent in her front view as creature after creature crawled forth from the muck of the lagoon.

surrounded.. She looked back again and saw another pair closed in.

She looked down at her stuck feet and around to all of the creatures; of whom bulbous eyes were locking in on her. Another three fast approaching, their hairy legs busy churning up the sand, from the dunes. The wind had shifted and was reducing her ability to see as the wind whipped the sand battered her face.

Kàra began to assess her options when she noticed a sharp pain in her forehead. She blinked heavily, collapsed to her knees, and began breathing quickly and shallowly.

Well, this is new. **NOT... NOW!**

Within moments a white shimmer streaked across her body bursting forth into a brilliant spherical blast of energy that vaporized everything within its path. Kàra could feel her head strike a rock as her cheek found its way into the sand.

Totally...worth it.

Kàra spit some sand from her mouth and pushed herself off the ground. Sitting there, knees bent and tucked underneath her bottom, the bun in her hair had come loose, and she felt the surge of battle wane; a sense of unease crept in as she felt her energy diss

Yeah so... not my finest landing, but... Hey we got there.

Kàra could feel the blank stare that had settled in on her face. The world took on a slight daydream like quality. Her hand had found the side of her head, and there among the red stained strands of hair she found a gash, seeping blood.

The blast had given Bófreðr's soldiers time to reach her with their extraordinary leaping magick...

The soldiers began expanding the pocket around her that she had created, as creature after creature flung themselves at the group. Kàra blinked heavily and listlessly looked about, noting she was pinned in by soldiers supporting her. She felt the strong hands lift her to her feet.

She could hear what she thought was Bófreðr's voice from behind, "Colonel!" He called out as he drew near, nailed it.

"Astrid isn't far behind." Her white dress. I love the dress, but why white when you know there will be blood. I mean... White?

I mean, I guess she could have a magick or something.

Kàra brought her hand to her head and closed her eyes momentarily as a faint green light reflected off her golden hair. She drew in a deep breath as she slumped to the ground. She turned her torso and blurted out, "Astrid?"

No response.

Long gone. The divine tend to walk a different path than the rest of us. They start to believe at one point or another that they are equals to those that, they, themselves serve.

That sounds right im goin' with it. I don't even care.

She is a blessing, and a curse.

Kàra struggled to her feet, sheathed her blade, and then turned away from the growing battle around them to face Bófreðr directly. She watched out of the corner of her eyes as Heavily armored soldiers were streaming towards her and into the fray. Kàra slowly walked towards the palms and towards Bófreðr. "Major! Am I glad to see you!"

A gruff voice replied from a few meters away, "The Skrípi are formidable, but they are falling back from the ruins, but I do know they are forcing us towards the palms along this southern ridge. They are. Not us. "Oh," He drew in a breath, "and they are close to taking the mill, and by that I mean destroying it. Where is Talik? Wasn't she supposed to meet you here?"

Kàra could hear Bófreðr, breathing heavily in his heavy armor, clanking away as he made his way to her. He smirked, "A couple runners." She tossed a strand of hair back, looking over her shoulder turning her body to welcome them.

Ya know I think I just realized why we do this... [note]

Kàra stuck out a calm finger towards Bófreðr as he stomped up to her, leaving massive footprints in his wake. She looked away from Bófreðr's footsteps, and began giving orders to the runners, "I want you," She pointed to one of the runners, "Get word to Nevek, and Talik that we need to shore up the ridge, I want Alpha and," She pointed to the other Runner, "Brovo, and Delta companies respectively will need to hold the ridge. I will have Bófreðr's Easy company break through when it is time, I will need Astridr, on standby, and have Odinn on standby. I want this to go as smooth as our maneuver at Kastonbak. We cannot let them get over that ridge. Go!"

When Kàra finished she faced Bófreðr, he flipped up his thick helm, and she looked him in the eyes.

"Report Major, and why did you wait that long to flip up your helm?" She pushed his arm playfully.

"They are falling back from the ruin's, Colonel." Bófreðr pointed towards the ruins completely ignoring her remark.

"A little later than expected..." Kàra muttered.

They both turned to survey the line of fighting which was ebbing and towards the ridge; "Look at the way these creatures move atop one another... Their column just... pulsates as some move faster than others.<sup>[2]</sup>"

"Look at the swell out by the mill. We need to get more directed fire..." Kàra trailed off as she felt a piercing pain that cut through side of her forehead.

"Ow." Kàra said as she hunched over, her hand clutching the side of her head.

Her voice was strained forcing her to enunciate her words as the undulations of pain streaked across her brow. Bofreth began,

"We need to press them harder..." He stopped and looked at his commander a question drawing to his lips, only to be cut short.

Kàra began quickly, but with labored breathing, "I... need you to have first and third company... forward and shift against their flank..."

Kàra took a deep breath.

"Ugh." She said quietly, her voice getting more labored, "Ruins to palms, box them in with the rest downstream." She collapsed to her knees, but put a hand up to stop Bofreth from helping.

Kàra struggled to pull herself upright, but once finding wobbly knees, she focused and brought herself upright, *and made sure to do it with the toss of my hair.*

Kàra drew in a labored breath, and finished,

"We need to focus on the stress in their lines. I want them to be across that river in within the hour." Kàra said as she flashed a roguish smile, that quickly faded.

"Aye." Bófreðr said eagerly before clanking off towards the ruins.

As she turned back to the littered shoreline she felt her side, pulling up her tunic so she could see the dark colors mixing just below the surface of her skin. She placed her hand on her side winced and put her tunic back down.

I can't help but try to process the bigger picture here as I am on my way to find Talik, who is near the mill, all so we can blow up that corpse bridge. Whose idea was this?

We spent weeks tracking this horde south... We traveled almost the entirety of Kàrakazan's western border.

Engage, and evade. Engage, and evade. They knew we wouldn't cross over into their lands. Somehow they knew...

Carries a hefty price. Death, and by that I mean even if you make it back from their lands alive. You have hefty charges brought up against you for violating the treaty with the Priests of Myrkr. So yeah

You will probably be dead..

So... fight, fall back, fight, fall back.

They taunted us with tens of thousands of their dead.

But still they would come, by the tens of thousands. And every time we would stand our ground, and fall back, stand our ground and fall back. Until Astrid was in range, then standing order is defensive positions away from the blast.

A swell of emotions overtook Kàra, as she leapt up on top of one of the shells of a dead arachnid. She ran along its back and suddenly mid stride, a booming voice came through her mind.

**THAT WAS PRETTY AWESOME.**

“What the actual fuck!” Kàra shouted as she slipped off of the armored creature, narrowly missing a stinger, and falling into the stained sand below.

Kàra scrambled to her feet kicking up a fair amount of sand in her panic. A golden hue fading from her skin as she spit out sand and brushed herself off. Her eyes darted about the eviscerated carcasses that she found herself among. “Hello?” She whispered confused.

Hey, at least I didn't get the wind knocked out of me this time. I guess that is a win. I just need to keep it together for a little bit longer. Then we can have all sorts of breakdowns.

**THIS IS TRUE. LAST TIME YOU FEED YOURSELF A LITTLE.**

Shut your whore mouth

Kàra drew in a deep breath while climbing to her feet. She clenched her fist tight and took off in a jog, drawing her slender rapier. A gold shimmer flushed across her skin. The world slowed around her, and for a moment Kàra felt at ease.

**TIME SHIFT? IMPRESSIVE. I FEEL A BIT WOZZY, THOUGH.**

From the perspective of Kàra's soldiers on the battlefield she was a remnant of a thought, buried within the minds-eye. Fodder for dreams, or nightmares to come. The aftermath of her efforts were almost instantaneous, and not as easily forgotten; gore explosively hurtling through the air. Creature after creature bursting apart in flashes of white light, right before their eyes.

**BUT... OH... NOO...OHHH!**

Kàra's shifted perspective was as strange and grotesque to her, but she still couldn't help but find joy in the, strange, world around her. The world around me has always been fascinating to me. I try hard to keep myself knowledgeable of the land, and even of the rotting roots along Yggdrasil's own majesty. you never quite know what you can learn by just... takin' a look.

**KA...KÀ.....RA..... RA.....**

Everyone and everything is... just so still. No busy bodies to intrude on your thoughts. I don't know if I've ever noticed before... I

mean the little histories of everything, that seem to just come alive before my eyes. Everything just seems so full of potential, a story just waiting to unfold however it deems.

**WH... WH... AH.. AHH... T...**

Now, and I know this sounds as flimsy as crackers in water, but seriously... hear me out... The interval of time between then and now, can... well... it is quite infinite in possibilities, but is bound to a beginning and an end. This place exists in between the larger moments, and lives among the possibilities that the Ætherial bestows upon us.

**T.....RRRRR..... O.... SSSSSS...**

Here...

**KÀRA SPUN HERSELF ABOUT, RAPIER EXTENDED.**

This is where the big picture comes alive. It is like a snapshot of time in which only I can go. I used to only be able to hold this space for a moment, when I was a kid. The long hours of training..

**THE ENERGY AND FOCUS REQUIRED...**

Now? I can hold it for maybe, an hour provided I can keep my mind relatively clear.

**IF... YUH... OOH... AH... DUH... SSSST...**

Look at the ferocity of these creatures, and of the Valkryja as they engage in all stages of battle within this one moment...

Through the palms, and along the lagoons she walked, studying, and euthanizing all skripsi along the way.

Kàra was proud to see foe after foe falling to the Valkeryja. Kàra forcefully slipped her blade deep into a creature's belly, sending a

shockwave of blue energy running from her sword into the creature. It kinda makes their bellies glow.

But! The really fun part, is in the end! I like to find myself a nice spot to sit, and it is almost like pressing a detonator when time snaps to. The Ætherial shockwaves pop open the Skrípi... and they... just go poof. What can't fit through the overlapping plates of natural armor, goes through their belly. If you do it just right, and position them just right... And with dash of color here, annnd, there. You can paint a painting with the right perspective..

Which... Kàra looked towards the village's towers.

Kàra smiled as made light work of the Skrípi near the lagoon's edge and found herself lost in light thought of perception.

I can feel myself indiscriminately stabbing into these creatures. My boots kicking up sand and clumps of jellied viscera. The water mid-lap against the shore. But this? These soon to be felled, creatures before me. Their only command, nay desire, is to kill that is.

Beyond that, I am not sure why they do what they do, just that they seem to do it.

**KAH... KAR... KÀRA...**

Good to see you could join us, poor reception?.

**I MUST SAY THAT THIS TIME BENDING POCKET OF THE UNIVERSE,  
YOU GOT HERE...**

**IS NO PLEASURE. RATHER DIFFICULT TO BE PRESENT.**

Kàra looked down to see herself knee deep within the lagoon that she had jogged into. Seeking a more advantageous route she leapt up to the top of one of the bulbous bodies above the giant towering legs.

I told you, these things were big. Like little trees pawing at the sand.

Standing atop the creatures fearsome pincers she could see a good distance. She had finally spotted Talik's soldiers across the lagoon.

If they were to hold the mill... Why are they moving away from it?

What are they up to?

Oh.

A blinding flash of light lit up the horizon by the bridge. She quickly turned her head to look away.

There, well... I guess the corpse bridge, and the real bridge are taken care of.

Kàra hopped down to the tough and slick outer shell that made up the creatures back. She looked to the edge and attempted to stand while sliding down the back side of the creature but slipped and fell onto the water below. Sitting there atop the surface of the water, her sore back against a carcass.

She took a few deep breaths.

I don't know when...

**WH...AT... DO... YOU MEAN? HEY... I CAME... THROUGH ON... THAT ONE!**

What did you do?

You don't remember what?

I didn't say I didn't remember.

**WHAT DID YOU DO?**

I just had to make a few slight modifications, to my connection to the Aetherial...

**JUST SOME TECHNICAL STUFF...**

I think it worked. I don't feel as much pressure behind my eyes.

**SAY, WHAT YOU WILL ABOUT FELDEHAN'S BRAND WHISKEY, IT'LL FIX YOUR HEAD PAINS MIGHT QUICK.**

Ya, know... If you ever decide to kick the Feldehan's to the gutter...

You might see a strength in yourself that you had previously lost

An angelic presence, if you will.

Helping to keep you on course with life. Not how well you are doing, but just as a preservation of your own life.

**YOU MUST** take the rudder, and **CONTROL IT, BUT IF YOU PUT YOUR FAITH IN YOUR CHOICES.**

**HEY!** What! Are you doing to me?

I turned you down. It was getting hard to think.

**What do you mean you turned me down?**

It is important to have faith in your choices, and to believe they are right, but admit, and accept when they were wrong.

Because once you admit, and accept, well.

**Well, what?**

You you might just see the things that you do unto others, and you might just see it from the other perspective.

Kàra twirled herself about..

**This angel divinely inspired in nature; that is to say only Mimir could know as to its origin. This creature of immense beauty coming in through the window... Eyes transfixed upon their beauty.**

Hmmhhmm...

**CAN YOU IMAGINE THOSE BREASTS?**

DAMN! Not strong enough

**Well now that you mention it...**

**I can see her. She is flying high above this Euclidian existence, a traveler upon time, experiencing things as a change in position rather than the time itself.**

**You intersect for only the briefest of moments, but they seem to linger on your mind, imprinting itself into your mind.**

I must ask, what have you been smokin'?

**Generally, only the highest quality of Feldehans, of course.**

I don't think I have partaken. Is it a tobacco, of sorts?

**OF SORTS.**

Ah good. I should see the quarter-maester.

**So, yeah, there you are, uh, KÀRA, you are frozen in place staring up at this face. A face you feel you've known your whole life. A face so soft and familiar to you...**

You are offered gifts in return for your worship. Wishes would be fulfilled; promises that things will be all right in the long run. **Except when it won't, because it can't.**

But you believe it because you will, pick something. Insert feeling, insert situation, you name it, why not numb it up?

**Kàra?**

That whatever is wrong with you today, you can heal it, but not today.

Today I am going to grieve.

And bring light to a lot of dark places.

## **Did you lose someone?**

I... I... Don't know how to let go. I can still feel her breath against my neck. Her smile, when she is truly happy. Her last minute just in time perfection. I..I just don't want to let go, but I also don't know how to..

## **HOW TO LET THE LIGHT BACK IN?**

Yeah...

## **HOW MUCH DARKNESS IS ENOUGH TO SUFFER?**

Is it truly a dark existence or are we closing our eyes and ignoring the truths that are in front of us.

## **SHINE.**

Shine so bright within the confines of your own mind. But don't let it out, ch.. nn..

## **SHOW THE WORLD, WITHOUT SHOWING THE WORLD, EXACTLY.**

The world needs a sense of uniformity to it, huh.

Whoopie, almost lost it there.

I mean this has been a ball, except without all the pomp, but I am not ready for the grand finale just yet. So if you don't mind uh, switching off for a good while or so..

## **YES, YES. OF COURSE. DANGEROUS MISSION AND ALL.**

Kàra could feel the pressure in her temples subside, and she took a sigh of relief. Sometimes it is tough to be just on with someone, when you need to be "on" elsewhere in your life.

Kàra found her way to her feet, feeling the water drain from her accoutrements. She stepped deftly, finding another vantage point atop the creature so she could see out across the lagoon once more.

There are countless numbers of these creatures. All in varying degrees of battle. Oh that is neat, look how high up that one got. Oh, I suppose you can't, but you can imagine it. Close enough. You wouldn't want to be here anyways. One of the last things you feel are the little hairs on the legs of their young as they crawl across you.

Oh, wow that is kind of interesting. The explosive power released from my soldiers sent Skripi bodies hurtling through the air. And right now, they are just in the air, floating, some dead, some alive.

These things are plenty terrifying if they catch you off guard; The Skripi stand at least twice my height, and twice my length. So if you don't know what they are doing at any given moment, it can be a bit overwhelming.

**HE...LL..OH...EH...** Heinrich's voice cut across Kàra's mind; her temples radiating a pain she hadn't felt before.

"The fu..." Slipped from Kàra's mouth as her face contorted in pain. Kàra quickly succumbed to her pain as she brought her hands to her forehead. She could feel her stomach churn. Her eyes fluttered as she collapsed, her body slumping down to the carcass below. A booming voice echoed throughout her mind:

**YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING?!**

Kàra's face was plastered against a thick armor plate, as she slid down onto the water below, eyes aflutter. Her focus lost, her handiwork was prematurely set off. Explosions of different patterns of color, and timing began to snake its way across the landscape. Kàra's body slipped into the water.

Kàra took a fleeting glimpse to the surface of the water, and could see the air above burning, but growing darker. Her last coherent feeling was of being pinned below the surface of the water by the thick slab of the creature's armor. As her vision blurred, a chill overtook her body.

Kàra! Kàra!

Is that... you Astrid?

**GET ON YOUR FEET SOLDIER! THAT IS AN ORDER!**

Yahweh...

I see the dark crimson pools coalescing, no..undulating.

You look upon me with that bulbous head.

Distorted.

I can hear muffled from beyond..this..existence.

Is that a heart beat?

**KÀRA?**

Has it always been like this?

Hard to breathe.?

Kàra!

Kàra opened her eyes to a fog so incredibly thick that she thought her eyes were failing her. It is a dull pain to even see.

I can breathe, that is good.

Hmm..She pushed herself up off the sandy beach. Pushing herself with ease to her feet, she spun about in the sand taking in a quick look at her surroundings. She was in a white billowy dress.

Great pines, sandy beach, mountain lake. Late season. I can't tell where the sun is. This looks familiar...

Fjallheim?

Why am I here? What happened to your voice, so to speak.

Is this better?

Sure.

The air is crisp, my breath lingers in the air.

The sand beneath my feet numbingly chilled. She agreed that this must be Fjallheim.

She made her way off the beach and towards a grassy knoll that lay just before the pine forest. She turned around to face the shore behind her.

Kàra?

Oh, yeah, I remember now what I wanted to ask you.

When your heart just cracks in two, at the things you are a party to, witness or not...

Do you find it hard to breathe?

As if the sky darkens, not of the shadow of night, but of the clouds as if they are transitioning your day. The shadow of the oncoming storm.

And you Willingly walk into it.

Is that what she was?

She was, what?

Was she the storm? If so, I am certainly no victim.

I knew what I was doing.

I thought I saw a path where no rain would touch me.

As I set out on my journey a drop here or there was shrugged aside. But you start second-guessing your path and making adjustments. You don't notice when your feet are getting wet because you only see what you want to see.

By the time the ocean has swelled to your belly, you are willing to submit to it.

Giving yourself unto them so that you may guide and shape each others lives. But if by the time you are taking your last breaths. You succumb to the darkness. But, perhaps it renews. Perhaps you sleep eternally. Do you leave behind all that you knew, because of a gut feeling?

Do you like swimming?

Yesss...Where are you going with this Kàra?

Do you like swimming when you can't see the bottom?

Not my favorite.

To me it feels to love someone so immensely, and lose them along the way feels like being in a rainstorm, walking into the tide to drown. I am saying that when you truly love someone they are never gone. I am also saying that you also have a choice to drown in submission, or turn around and find the path you were on. That we all have choices, we all can decide what to do in this moment. But we can't choose for one another.

Are you sure, I heard of this crea... We cannot choose for another.

So we choose for ourselves, but not others.

You cannot will someone to love you. You can't will someone to want to stay with you.

I mean you can hold someone hostage, but that is physical control, you will never have control of their mind, even conjuring is only a trick of the mind, you can get their body to do things, but you cannot get what makes them, them, to want to participate if they don't want to.

I don't know why it has taken me so long to understand that.

What? A control magick?

I mean sure you hear it, but you don't generally think about it more than superficially.

And, if you or your partner chooses, they may depart. Sometimes it is the levers we pulled some time ago that pain us the most at this point in time;

where there isn't much you can do once you feel the tracks diverge. Of course you have little knowledge of what lever was pulled when, but it is, becoming inescapable that...

That you finally understand this person, or at least have a better idea of who they were by your side for so many years...That they will be gone, and you will feel alone.

You can still see them, but at a distance that ebbs and flows. A distance that is no longer a choice. It certainly isn't yours to take either. You held hands, and one by one as the tracks separated, your fingers slipped. And all you can feel is despair.

She thought she could make out some sort of structure in the distance, but she couldn't put her finger on it with the fog. She spun about again with the sound of footsteps off in the distance.

The forest ahead seems to have cleared some.

I don't get it.

I don't either.

I heard you clearly that time.

So did I.

Are... you here?

Kàra's voice cracked slightly as she said into the forest, "Hello?"

Stay... Here.

In our minds.

Okay...This seems a little weird.

You... are telling me. Do you suppose this could be a permanent connection?

I don't know. I am pretty sure I am drowning, so I think it might, I mean one way or another I guess everything will come to an end. Right?

A tad cynical don't you think?

Well don't get me wrong it matters what we do. Or at least I choose to believe that it does, but in the grand scheme of thing kinda thing, when you are in a pool of water, and you can't bring your consciousness back from a far flung place in the world. I would say my assessment is fairly fair.

Ah, I guess that makes more sense. So now that I got you here, I need to know, you and Astrid...

Is that really what you want to know about? You figure due to the implicit<sup>[3]</sup> access to my mind...

Well. Yeah. I guess that was uncouth of me. The name is Maester Heinrich Silvadori the third. Serving at the behest of Maester Octavian Artouros, AETHERIAL Council. And, I have been on a bit of an adventure of myself<sup>[4]</sup>, to which we share in that.

I was dispatched by Council member Artouros myself.

Funny coincidence.

Haha, my companions have been quite puzzled at my queer behavior as of late. It has gotten so bad that Sven keeps trying to push his home remedy for mind quakes.

So what kind of work are you doing in that particular region? I thought Fjallheim was closed borders.

Ever since we entered this region... I... began hearing your mind call out to me. I have been attempting to respond, but as you can see those other attempts...

Kàra could hear a branch snap in the nearby forest, and she spun about again, but to no avail.

A tad elusive aren't you.

Let's play a game...

What kind of game?

Something to get to know you. I'll go first, upon first light you arise in an unusual circumstance. Where are you?

This is a game? Uhm. In the loft of a barn.

Go on.

What do you mean go on, you asked and I told you. Now show yourself.

In due time, what are you doing there, at this barn?

I don't know pitching tros?

Perhaps I need to come at this from a different angle. What grounds you to this place, here? What history do you have here that would bring us here?

So you are here...

I feel like I've always been.

What?

Yahweh, you spoke of their name.

I did?

Kàra heard another branch snap and she slowly took a soft step towards the noise.

Want to hear a story?

Sure.

Well, let's just say the evening before I was in a mood, and went to my girlfriends. She kept talking about this guy she knew and wanted to hang out with. Well of course I obliged, why wouldn't I? Well one argument led to another, we went to a social gathering at a neighbor's barn, and well, I caught her, well, dipped in the

Feldehan's, and making out with this dude. You know what I did? That's right I got totally out of my mind, and when I came back around in the morning, I was completely naked, hay in annoying places, a bit goobery, which was confusing at first until I saw her, the next morning cuddled into him, it, whatever I guess you would call something that looks like gelatin. Now I understood why she wanted to party with

Davik.

Davik could change his shape.

Fun, but not. My turn.

Kàra caught a flash of a brown canvas cloak.

Do you listen in on many people? I have heard you were something of a scoundrel, and on the outs with the council?

Well, what you have heard is correct, which it is why it took twelve sacks of Hauflin brand spice to bribe my way into this region!

Let me tell you, that stuff is not easy to come by. But... and to answer your next question...

Kàra spotted a thick branch as she crept quietly through the thicket. As she drew near she reached down and gently released it from its home among the other detritus forest material.

I am searching for a relic while in the company of eleven seasoned Aetherial knights, and another half dozen greenhorns straight out of the academy. The General Researcher and Aetherial Devotees are students that are just so happy to have been able to stay in school a bit longer, as long as their funding doesn't run out.

You said you were in Fjall...

Kàra could feel her throat tighten.

Why is it so hard to breathe?

What do you mean?

It is as if someone has taken my ability to breathe. What do I do???

There was a heightened level of anxiety in her inner voice.

Uhh... Let me try...

Kàra jolted awake; her vision blurred by the murky churned up lagoon water. She pushed the heavy armor plating off her body and burst forth from the water gasping for air.

Kàra slogged through the water, feeling disoriented and light headed. She began to slowly find her way to her feet, gagging on this nasty water. It only took moments before she was noticed by the numerous soldiers sweeping through the area. She found herself surrounded by soldiers. She leaned into them allowing their mass to will her legs to move.

As she was rushed about, she kept trying to understand her own movements. She walked in a daze through the throngs of soldiers dutifully going about each their own business of war. She heard, the sounds of battle seem to be moving...

Ahhhhhhhhhh the ringing!

Kàra blinked heavily, dropping to her knees, soldiers shoulders dipping slightly as her feet began to drag in the dirt.

Well, this all could have gone better.

Ast rid once annoyingly asked, 'Ewww can you get it?'" About a small bug...

I admit, though, I would much rather be there, with her, even with her little annoyances.

Aww hey! I missed the explosion!

That's the best part!

Kàra could hear the clanking of Bófreðr from not too far off. So...  
The Skripi are tough They have an exceptionally tough  
exoskeleton, but their underbellies are soft

She pushed her hand into a belly of a corpse nearby.

If I recall correctly it was for egg production?

Eww...

Okay.

I wonder if anyone has studied that yet? I mean I am the closest thing to  
a field researcher at this point. Might make for an interesting discussion topic  
at the next convention physik. Am I being watched?

Kàra swiveled her head about dramatically.

Do you know how bad the inside of these things smell? And I mean, I have  
met a real life cyclops, and they are notoriously smelly.

Are they looking at me?

Not their fault, it is simply a matter of size. Trolls that is. Hard to get a  
bar of soap big enough...that is my working hypothesis, I have an  
appointment with a soap maker to...

“They are watching me... Brindlebock, the soap maker” She  
muttered as her head swiveled.

His name was Njorn. Nice fellow. Smelled of potatoes. Said he was a potato  
farmer in the gullies of Buckthorn Swamp.

I’ve been, excellent hunting there.

Kàra slipped through her escorts support and fell face first into  
the sand.

Ow.

[1] Which is needless to say.

[2] wave speed vs packet speed. local vs macro

[3] You know which implication is the worst? Watch ASIP

[4] Internet you have ruined me. Spiderman – Willem Dafoe

[5] (Grew up going there) - The swamps of Buckthorn is near a gully, in which there exists a small place out of time.

[Note]: I think we turn our bodies to essentially show a good faith gesture, since well all of our bellies are kind of necessary to house our organs. Expose the meat suit a bit would be one of the quickest ways to show vulnerability. To show in good faith you do not come spoiling for a fight, but instead welcome you the door of our minds eye. Two (or more) brains using meat suits to talk to one another. Then after the moment of vulnerability you have to have good reflexes should your assumptions go wrong. But the hard part is recognizing when our assumptions are wrong.

[c]I think it makes sense that this is the thing that sends Heinrikr into his decline - or the thing that takes his memory? ( That could be like the start of it, and he works his ass off knowing his memory is going to be gone soon. ) Little hooks to previous journeys.

## 1.5 The Bet

Kàra closed her eyes as sand blew across her cheeks. "Boxed 'em." Kara said as she pointed to the large swarm of Skripi sweeping through towards the mill. Kara turned to face Bófreðr and continued, "Any casualties?"

Bófreðr replied with a stiff voice, "Burns, lacerations, and a handful of amputations. Casualties at a minimum, that is if Lieutenant Gunnar pulls through."

"What happened there?" Kara asked.

"A scorcher passed right in front of him before his platoon was fully engaged. Burned everything he was wearing, melt..."

"That's enough Major."

"We lost contact about with Talik's company fifteen minutes ago."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"They had finished setting charges, and the swarm shifted. I am certain they shall be knocking on Folkenvangor doors soon, should they be worthy." Bofreth said, as he stiffened, with a clank.

Bofreth's voice became solemn, and he finished, "May their lives be worthy of your doors." Kara finished, "till the battlefields of Ragnarok we meet, be you friend, be you foe... We... will shall always be, family."

They lowered their heads briefly and then said, "Skol." They both thumped at their chests over their heart with a closed fist.

They gave it a moment before raising their heads. Ugh this wind.

Kara shifted her position so that Bófreðr would block more of the oncoming wind. She wanted to avoid any more of those thoughts, for now.

"Did you see that joke of a finish?" Kara started, paused, and then continued a bit more up beat, and with a slight chuckle, "I only got part way through and then something hit me like a ton of bricks."

To be honest, I am a bit surprised that I even survived that. The AEtherial charges have enough blasting power to level an arched bridge.

Each.

Bófreðr slapped her on the shoulder, "After that showing, I am not sure you can win anymore."

"Yeah, I definitely didn't stick that landing," Kara chuckled, "but seriously, I called call down lightning this time!" Kara struck a pose and continued, "It was as if I... were Thor!"

Kara relaxed her stance, and finished, "That has to count for something."

Kara went inward.

Bófreðr was saying something about the rules, but Kara couldn't hear him.

*I have been working on an idea... it might be a bit... unorthodox.*

Kàra raised her hand into the air, and with a simple gesture she began walking, and said,

“Bófreðr, I have an idea.” Finishing with a pointed finger in the direction of the ridge line.

Kàra and Bófreðr made it through the littered battlefield; scores of dead creatures pockmarked into the sand dunes which were quickly shifting in the wind.

After they reached the hard ridge, Kàra could see the fighting was not but one hundred meters below the, maybe, five, six meter drop. Kàra looked out through what remained of the palm trees and towards the ruins. “Not as many palms as before, got a clear line of sight now.” She muttered.

“Aye.” Bófreðr responded, as he turned with a clank, and looked in the direction Kàra was facing.

The wind suddenly picked up again, and Kàra casually brought her right hand to her face to adjust her scarf. “Have you made contact with second or third company?” Kàra asked as they surveyed the battlefield.

“I have not been able to raise them yet, but, I'll try to raise them again, now.”

Kàra watched and waited patiently as Bófreðr grabbed a small rune from his satchel, placed it in his large armored palm, thumb holding it in place, and he rotated his arm in a small circle in the air.

A small orb covered in flames appeared at the base of his palm. Ahch.ew.

What was that?

*Kara stared at the little orb, These things remind me of fire spirits, just floating next to you, ready to listen, and transmit*

Kind of unsettling, when all the sudden a little cute orb appears in front of you, and wants to talk...

“Talík, Nevek, respond. This is Alpha, I repeat this is Alpha, please respond.” Bófreðr spoke into the orb.

A moment passed, and a gentle, but firm, voice responded with a somewhat garbled, “Nevek here.” before her image was being projected above the little orb.

“Talík, come in Talík.” Bófreðr repeated.

An explosion came through, and Kàra looked away from the orb and out towards the mill where she saw a massive liquid fire wall rise up and fall down on to a wide swath of Skrípi.

She could see the creatures melt into the landscape, and for a moment the black swarm began to retreat, until met with the resistance of those behind. Their legs melted into the landscape, sending the singed creature toppling into *what a lake of lava.*

Kàra turned back to the orb and spoke firmly, “Talík, report.”

A loud belly laugh came through followed by a gruff voice, “Talík here, the party is just getting started over here Colonel.”

“Don't torch that mill Major.” Kàra said stiffly.

Talík paused, and stiffly replied, “Aye. Commander.”

Kara could hear and see Talík lean to her side and speak to her xo, but couldn't make out what she said.

“Commander.” Talík came back into focus.

“We are all squared away. All Knights to engage in CQM.” Talík paused.

*Close quarters magic.*

When Talík continued, the gruff tone was replaced by a more gentle one, that spoke to the difficulty it was for Talík to ask, “Colonel, we are holding...”

Kara cut her off, “Yes, send word. Nevek, we need to shift to tactical fire. Have Astrid coordinate the remaining evacuation into the mines, and then I want her on the wall. We may need to fall back, and need

them to cover our retreat. Major, concentrate the mass into a stout column if you can, and then fall back. You will have incoming, three minutes out. Kara out.”

Immediately Kàra could hear the bombardment shift; she looked to Bófreðr to see him twist his hand, and the fire orb vanished. “Looks to me like we have a mission, Major.”

The two took off in a sprint along the hard ridge. Kara felt her energy swell, and a gold shimmer crossed her body. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She focused on each step, each sound around her.

Kara opened her eyes numerous, apple sized, luminescent, sapphire colored orbs had formed around her body. A crackle filled the air as tendrils of lightning arced outward from the orbs; filling the air with a sweet and pungent smell. She closed her eyes once again as the orbs glow grew unbearable. At peak luminescence the orbs shattered into fine grains so small, that when she opened her eyes she could see nothing but a shimmer at arms length.

This one has taken years to figure out how to do... at least for more than just a moment

I have had this one in my pocket for a while. I wasn't sure when to pull it out.

until now.

Kàra looked back to Bófreðr who was not far behind her, both moving at an incredible pace. Kara leapt into the air, and almost immediately felt her feet meet Bófreðr's hands; It was almost immediate that her feet sprung off with Bófreðr's added assistance.

As Kàra's vantage rapidly increased, high above the battlefield, she could feel her skin prickle as the rarefied air sapped her body heat[1] away.

She calmly observed the thick mass of arachnids climbing atop one another; they were being corralled by massive explosions of all

shapes, sizes, and colors, as the Ætherial knights boxed the creatures in, south of the mill, and contained to the riverside.

The containment is working so well that the creatures are piling up against one another...forming a strange wall. No doubt still all racing to be the first to eat. The hunger insatiable, the vile digestive juices frothing at their mouths.

Brilliant white light, bathed the battlefield as Kara's shimmering bubble burst, sending small fragments outward from her body. Within moments the fragments coalesced along her back; a slight shimmer spread out left and right from her back in the form of broad, and angelic looking, wings.

This is my tribute to the Valfrejja, and her Valkyrja. Which is a common custom among my people. We, meaning the Valkyrja in fact, are Midgard's tribute, to her Holiness Empress Valfrejja; We are the pride of the Citadel, with each graduating class mustering its finest to serve as Valkyrja.

Kàra paused for a moment, hovering in the air, wings leisurely flapping to stay in position. Full of excitement, she drew in a deep breath, and as she exhaled a burst of color shot across her wings.

Then another, and another building until a shockwave of energy burst forth with one final flap of her wings.

The emerging the shockwave forced Kàra backwards, her world went dark as she plummeted towards the ground.

The tsunami of plasma that was unleashed from Kara's angelic wings washed across the lagoon, vaporizing everything within its path. Only that which should be remaining.

The column of Skrípi caught in the blast were superheated until they exploded into a large fountains of gore from the heaps of Skrípi atop one another. The plasma wave collapsed to a point within one of the heaps. A moment passed and a blue plasma ring burst outward, taking with it, a tidal wave of gore.

Halfway to the ground Kàra was finally able to open her eyes.

I... It isn't usually like this...

***ISN'T THIS EXCITING!*** A booming masculine voice echoed throughout Kàra's mind, followed by a sharp pain that shot across her temples.

yawning, and saying, Y'all need to keep it down.

Kàra quickly put her index fingers to her temples, closed her eyes and recited a prayer. A green glow reflected off of sides of her temples.

Hello?

Kàra slowly began to flap her wings, working the wings with a strained effort that at first slowed her fall, but with each aching flap her strength was progressively sapped. She could feel each passing moment it became harder and harder for her to control herself.

Ah tros. Kara plummeted to the ground, cratering into a sand dune east, ugh... her knees buckled and leaving her face down into the collapsing sand. She spat, or tried to spit the sand from her mouth. She peeled herself up, and sat there for a moment.

They showed us a project in once at the Academy.

Kara caught sight of Bófreðr and could tell by his quickened pace that he was headed in her direction. Kàra felt dizzy, and lightheaded, but she pushed her self up and to her feet.

"The debate has commenced."

Basically means that the watchers, the people who score you, listen in on those that they command. Always a senior officer, and always drawing a sense of

Kara jumped slightly with excitement. Feeling a strain in her ankle as she landed. Her face contorted slightly, but found the strength to greet the major.

"Report."

"Your work made substantial headway into the Skripsi lines... They shifted to the south for a while. It seemed as if they were attempting to backtrack, but got caught in the horde that was still charging forward. Needless to say it wasn't long before the horde regrouped and murmured in greater numbers into our lines."

Bofreth paused.

"You good?"

"Ye...ah..."

An acolyte found her way through to get to Kara.

"Astrid sent me." She said tersely.

"Now, Commander, if I may."

Kara waved her hand, "I know you are excited, go. Go."

"Watch how it is really done commander." Bofreth grinned.

Bofreth and took off into the sky with a blurred motion. An explosion of sand, water and gore shot up out of the flotilla of Skripsi as they streamed across the river. Water vaporized outward sending a warm blast of air outward. The ground began to shake slightly, building into a massive quake that shook the ground.

Kara could feel her body; A tug towards some unknown, a draw so queasily light, that she threw up a little.

well?

What do you expect. It is a well. Like a gravity well or something.

It just goes down. And keeps going down. Dimensional rifts are weird.

Into what I assume is another universe, but the skripsi? Right now?

They are at the center of a mini-singularity. Taking space and time, and blending them together into a vortex of doom. Pulling at them so violently that their momentum they once had, as a mass, turns into a swirling disc of gore.

Gore so small you can't even see it anymore, just a faint memory. [they are still there you know, just different.]

I like to think of them as little vortices to the unknown. If you are able to look down upon one...

The inside forming these weird looking exponential curves - Imagine the arm of a twister. The wall of a cyclone. All vortices in their own right.

But imagine spacetime being made up of those. Eventually intersecting one another.

Greating these, like, pillars of the universe. Slowly eating away at spacetime. Eventually bringing it back into a state of order, like a spring loaded with all of the energy in the universe.

How does it get out? The energy that is.

Is it like a quantum well? It just appears? Goes from one place to another? If loading the cannon, requires all of the energy in the universe. What sets it off? And are the vortices like Bofreths...

Kara looked in the direction of the gravity well, her vision feeling off she looked to the, accretion disk of grey.

Impressive.

Is this the same... The same vortices devouring our universe?

Small drops along a multi-dimensional surface, slowly coalescing about the darkness. Eating at local clusters. Moving further and further away in time disappearing from sight given enough time.

A divergence...

Into Yggdrasil's roots.

We... are the root as it grows.

Bofreth has tapped into Yggdrasil's realm.

That is certainly unexpected.

Huh..

Nevek's Rangers launched their assault from the palms before Bofreth had finished..

Their assault is funneling the Skripi into Bofreth's vortex. Looks to be a combination of defensive barriers, magickal, and physical alike, and their selective fire.

They funneled 'em. Huh

Totally increases the efficiency of Bofreth's attack.

Cleaver.

The disk of gore just keeps growing. The skripi behind are just..

Blindly following until they are caught in the vortex. They just assimilate into the accretion disk of gore.

Fascinating

Astrids though..

I mean to say, that Upon this viewing this one, it will be my one hundredth time. Why do you think that it became a bet?

We all work hard to perfect our crafts, and we celebrate by placing a friendly wager and exchange notes and jokes about how we did.

We give it our all as if each battle could be our last, but we did decide that if anyone bites it, they automatically win forever.

But, anyways... Astrids display...

They are always so graceful. They are full of fury, and rage, but not in a violent fashion at first. It builds.

Kara pointed to the darkening sky in the distance across the river.

Can't step foot on, didn't not that we couldn't fly over.

But, anyways, the storm just deepens. A coiled giant ready to pounce.

To the enemy their minds slip into a trance as her storm seeps into their minds.

It is as the hurricane blows. She is the eye, projecting an outward maelstrom of - plasma rain, (the bits of the sand she picked up with her cyclonic winds, were being super-heated until they became a plasma), little meteors streaking across the battlefield, chaotic winds bringing its bits of plasma careening into your skin.

Burrowing.

Larger chunks, you might just have a hole in your clothes, or hole in your body. She lets herself hover over center of the maelstrom, guiding it and shifting the storms path, from her protective shell of energy.

I am starting to think they all choreographed this. It the skripsi just simply marching into the accretion disk. Driven by the storm, and the blockade the rangers set up. The horde slams into their barriers deflecting off, binding up, and slipping into the gore-text.

Yeah, I like that one.

I thought this was supposed to be flashy though. I mean sure lightning, plasma sparkles across the sky.

Everything went quiet. Bofreth, had been pulled from the singularity by Astrid, and it imploded in on itself for a moment and burst outward in a blue-white burst of energy that sent a heatwave outward that Kara felt as a blast of hot air that took her breath away for a moment.

She could feel her face heating up as the blast passed by.

"Okay," She said to herself, "Okay."

The part that brings me awe is how peaceful she looks.

She is dedicated to her craft, she hones it.

Her power, a reflection of her beauty. She does not get showy, but she does make it known that she has it within her.

She is smart, and funny, all the things you weren't. She was absolute beauty.

tears

I love her, so much.

Through all the painful, hurtful times. Through the feeling of dread I got before I came home. How would I need to save the day again?

It is good to be needed, but every day, all day?

You feel you can't be yourself anymore.

You lose sight of who you were as you search aimlessly in the present for a direction to go. You strive to stay on target. But if you can't be yourself, and you don't know which kind of person someone wants them to be. Or you do understand who they want you to be, but you just don't want to be that person.

I wanna get lost in my work. get lost in my family, in my life that bring joy to me. I wanna get lost in feelings. I wanna get lost in you. I don't wanna get lost in me. I don't wanna get lost in life.

I found the courage to explore. I found the courage to challenge the 'Norman Rockwell' way of life with my choices. I wanted pieces of that dream, but I didn't want it all. It just wasn't my dream.

I wanted my own personal sanctuary. I did not want to relegate my interests to the background, waiting to get on the field, but the coach, doesn't play them.

I wanted our marriage to be a blending..

I feel we had a fantastic time blending our beings when the idea that bore fruit came from your head.

With me, I could ask for permission and usually be denied, or I could just go ahead make a decision, right or wrong.

If it was a right decision, I got a light scolding. If I made the wrong decision I got a long and drawn out scolding that hung over you like individual threads slowly creating your own nose.

I just want to make right or wrong decisions, and you just support me, by talking it through with me.

I wanted you to assume my idea was just as valid as yours and tell me what you like and don't like about it.

Give me your pros and cons. If you don't care don't fight. If you do care, don't fight. Just ask questions, bring up concerns, explain your feelings. If you do that, I change my tune.

I use feedback from people as guidance. And with you...

Your feedback was special to me.

It was how I understood how to back to you, and to not get separated from you.

Confusion and chaos reign when I can't understand what you need from me, and most days I didn't know what you needed from me.

I am certainly no picnic either, I have so many wild ideas and interests. I have things I don't talk about, the things I think you don't want to talk about, the things I do talk about, and the things I think you think you want me to talk about.

If I were to be honest, I think for quite some time...

I haven't seen you as a person I can share myself with. Or at least I didn't perceive you as open to understanding what I was going through.

I felt like I would start to explain, you would start to understand, and then the next day we were back at square one.

A cyclic conversation that repeated over and over.

These are the things I like. This is me. I don't know why, but this is.

All of me.

I've been me for what I realize, as a deep memory came to me just today. I have wanted to be me, since I was a child.

I am sorry, that it took me so long to figure out who me was, and that our family had to suffer my baggage. But despite my shortcomings, our little family is pretty amazing. We have done something special together, and I hope we still do

I love you Astrid, and I always will.

A large column of flames began forming on the outer ridges of Astrid's storm walls.

What is Talk doing?

## 1.6 Reprieve

The sky lit up in front of Kara. Walls of flames sprouting up, consuming flora and fauna alike.

THERE ARE LIKE THESE TORNADOS SPAWNING OFF THE PLASMA STORM!

Kara came back from the brink of consciousness as she saw the fire spread quickly near by. She pushed her legs harder as the fire spread around her. She pointed herself towards the village walls. She could feel a stinging sensation in her thighs as she found her way out of the chaotic combat zone.

The, palms, and the fields to the south... Gone.

Could be worse I suppose.

"HEY!" She shouted into the wind.

Kara's irritation grew into a grit of her teeth as she caught sight of a large inferno making its way in towards the mill.

I want ed..

Honestly, this is a bit sooner than I had anticipated, but this is Talik's offering for the contest. So chaos is expected.

They call it, "operation Fire Fist"

I don't know if I have ever met people more obsessed with fire.

Seriously.

All of them.

Talik is an enabler too.

She is the biggest pyromaniac out of all of them.

I know first hand.

She set a tavern on fire because she, "Didn't want to pay the tab."

She said she was just doing a 'magic' trick. when the bar went up in flames.

You better believe she was back there the next day putting her Aetherial arts to use..

She was going to rebuild that poor families livelihood, and then some.

It took her a long time to earn back my trust after that one.

I forgive, but I don't forget.

oh.. oh.. Come on The mill.. Now the mill is on fire.

Huh?

What's that?

**Kara could hear the air crackle as a bright blue energy bolt streaked by overhead. It struck a wave of Skripi as they were being pushed back towards the river. "Hmmm..." Kara hummed.**

**Would you look at that** strange log jam of killer arachnids is forming. She must have stalled them out.

**A blue shimmer spread from creature to creature as they rubbed against one another. It looks like a ripple of blue along a black canvas. Kara caught herself staring and thinking it was rather beautiful.**

oh, Astrid... What did you do? oh..

She turned them into.. Sheep.

Fluffy, flammable sheep.

No.. I can't watch.

Maybe, no..

This... is just ... so gross. Very gross. An ever flowing tap of burning sheep. The air began to smell kinda good, and she could feel her mouth water a little.

Hh... Now the sheep are flying through the air.

"It is horrifying. So many dead sheep...

Astrid wins..." Kara whispered to herself.

Despite Kara's slight nausea, she felt a swell of hubris in what Astrid had done.

That was her... Wasn't it?

Kara looked down towards the soldiers claiming their feast; she didn't feel too particularly hungry, but she did find a sense of joy, and peace, watching the soldiers pull the Skripsi sheep, limb, from limb as the fire died down enough for the soldiers to rush in.

Kara could tell her attention had waned as she felt a massive object drag against the mythril lining of her skirt until it found an exposed area of thigh.

And that, is called letting your guard down...

Kara could feel the spear tipped tail rip straight through the side of her thigh. Kara grit her teeth, falling to one knee, The tenacity! A half turn torso, one half pulling the stringy bits of the other.

Instinct kicked in, and she simultaneously severed the creature's tail, and she quickly attempted to slow the flow of blood spilling down her leg with her free hand. She could feel her breathing shallowing.

A lifeless thump of the tail hitting the ground was followed by the clang of her sword against the red, smooth, stone beneath her. She looked up from the red stone path leading towards the walls, and the encampment, but found herself falling to her knees, scraping them against the stone. She pressed hard into her thigh. Taking a deep breath.

A blue glow sprung up around her hand as she moved it along her thigh. The glow migrated around her hand from both sides. Forming a translucent blue halo about her leg. The air crackled, and sizzled as the wound began to close.

Unfort unat ely... Whoa... Kara drew in a deep breath, gritting her teeth. The left over barb is digging it self into my leg! The blue halo flickered for a moment as she lost her concentration, sending a shockwave of pain along her side.

Focus.

Kàra felt herself tense up, and she couldn't shake the feeling that something was staring her in the face. She brought herself up to a knee, still tending to her wound. She drew in a deep breath and found herself blindly staring into the chaos still around her, it feels like time is simply dripping by the hourglass. L.

Think the venom is seeping in...

Ever since we landed we have bounced from border village to border village. They marched us down their border. Never pushing too close, but always drawing us out clearly where their next target would be.

Whoa, I feel like my brain is on fire.

Do they serve a master? What kind of power could control these creatures?

Kara bit her lip, and began chewing on it. She mulled it over and over as she looked down at her leg, almost... and done. The blue glow dissipated and her leg looked, good.

Kara stood and felt a squish in her boot as her heel reseated itself, and a sharp pain reminding her of the venomous tip in her leg. Her vision went blurry, and she blinked hard getting disoriented for a moment. She shook her head lightly sending her disheveled hair flinging back and forth before she picked up her slender sword from the ground.

Kara heard a cheer rising up and she turned to look off towards the river. She could see the remnants of the horde fading into the distance.

Are you there?

**I AM NOW.**

I'm not sure where I go wrong with the way I communicate.

**HOW DO YOU MEAN? YOU SEEM FAIRLY STRAIGHTFORWARD.**

Kara sheathed her sword and began to walk back towards the encampment and the village after finding a route to the red rock path. She

wincing a few times as she took those first steps and continued on with a subtle hitch in her gait.

I try, but I think I process a lot of things out loud... or as you can see through our conversations in my head. It is like I need to shuffle through tremendous amounts of information to draw down to conclusions that seem so simple to many people, but just seem so complex to me. Was that way throughout school too. Someone might be able to remember something and accept it, but I had to recreate the wheel so to speak.

**I GUESS I AM NOT QUITE SURE I FOLLOW. BUT MAYBE THAT IS THE POINT YOU ARE MAKING.**

Yeah... So for example I've been thinking a lot about how do you appropriately respect someone else's time? That is to say you and I are connected, but how do we not overload the other person by processing every thought in your head through this other person?

I can only imagine how exhausting it could get constantly try to process another person's perspective. They are constantly having to process new information that comes in that, while you find it interesting maybe they don't. Maybe it is overwhelming to them, but you don't know how to turn it off. You have been so deprived of genuine connection that when it presents itself...

**YOU JUST BECOME BLINDED BY THE OVERWHELMING FEELINGS THAT YOU ARE PROCESSING...**

Yeah, you dive in without respecting someone's limited time. What makes it worse if there are children involved. That person can't

possibly contend with all of it at once. Constantly being bombarded by someone outside with whom you just met.

**I CAN SEE HOW THAT MOST CERTAINLY THAT WOULD GET FRUSTRATING FOR THE OTHER PERSON.**

Especially if even more stressors come up during that time. A whirlwind of chaos that you can't seem to halt.

**I THINK I CAN SEE YOUR DILEMMA. IS THIS A RECENT OCCURRENCE?**

I'm not sure. I get these vague visions when I am sleeping. I wake up in a cold sweat, my heart racing, and a feeling of dread just washing over me.

of love, of loss, of regret.

I guess I just wish other people could help me understand their feelings as clearly as I need.

**THAT SOUNDS A TAD SELFISH.**

Is it though? You tell me clearly give me some space, back off a bit. This in itself is a message of slow things down, but how much? Unless the other person adds extra information they are making you just take a guess as to what the other person wants. I mean sure if you can remember to ask for clarification great. But what about when the other person is already upset and they really don't want to interact with you at the moment, and asking for clarification would only upset them further?

**SO, SOMETHING LIKE: THIS IS TOO MUCH FOR ME AT THE MOMENT. BUT I STILL LOVE AND CARE ABOUT YOU, I JUST NEED TO TAKE CARE OF MY BUSINESS, PLEASE GIVE ME A FEW DAYS OF SOLITUDE TO PROCESS.**

Exactly, I mean even when I was processing that I thought about the possible ways to confuse the message of just needing space. Why is this so difficult for me?

A burst of static energy cut through Kara's mind. Forcing her to stop in her tracks.

...because you think too much. A static laced voice echoed through Kara's head.

What did you say?

**I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING.**

Yeah you did, you said I think too much, but it was all garbled and full of static.

**NOPE NOT ME.**

Hmmm...

**HAVE YOU EVER FELT A LOVE SO POWERFUL IT JUST SIMPLY TOOK YOU BY SURPRISE?**

Yeah maybe once - it burned so hot that it blew itself apart.

**HMM... I REALLY HOPE THAT ISN'T THE CASE.**

**I JUST FEEL THE INTENSITY OF THIS. LIKE SHE HAS ALL THE KEYS TO MY HEART AND WAS WELCOMED RIGHT IN AS IF IT WERE NATURAL. IT FEELS LIKE HOME.**

Sounds powerful. Sounds like, and forgive me if I am being rude, but it sounds like you wanted her to.

**NO, I DON'T THINK YOU ARE WRONG ABOUT THAT. I REALIZED TOO LATE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.**

**MAYBE I WAS PROCESSING SO MANY FEELINGS AT ONCE I OVERWHELMED MYSELF, AND HER EVEN MORE SO THAN SHE ALREADY WAS. I AM NOT SURE.**

It sounds like you have a fairly good idea. So, was this a recent encounter?

**YEAH, BACK IN THE CAPITAL, FJALLHAMMAR. IT WAS A CHANCE MEETING, AND WE JUST SEEMED TO... OUR ENERGY WAS JUST INFECTIOUS.**

**IT WAS THE FIRST TIME SINCE MY WIFE LEFT ME THAT I HAD TRULY FELT SOMETHING.**

I feel like there is a bit to unpack there.

**SHE HAD AN ESTABLISHED LIFE, THAT HAD BEEN UPENDED, AND MY WHIRLWIND OF A LIFE CAME INTO HER LIFE. I PROCEEDED FROM A PLACE OF ARROGANCE, AND SELFISHNESS. I WAS ON THIS JOURNEY, AND I WAS MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF MY OWN DRUM. WHY COULDN'T SHE JUST DROP WHAT SHE WAS DOING AND PROCESS THESE INTENSE FEELINGS WE HAD FOR EACH OTHER?**

In hindsight if you had not expressed such deep feelings for each other, and you might have kept more of a casual relationship in the beginning, and it could have worked out.

**BUT AT THE SAME TIME - WHAT WAS AWESOME ABOUT IT WAS THE INTENSITY OF THE FEELINGS.**

True. Those are the feelings that remind us that we are alive. The feelings that have an equal opportunity to gut you completely when you see them soaring without you. Living a path that doesn't include you, but it only guts you because you once walked that path together. At least something to be grateful for.

**EXACTLY, I DO NOT REGRET FEELING WHAT I FELT, BUT PERHAPS IN THE FUTURE I COULD LEARN HOW TO CONTROL MYSELF BETTER SHOULD I MEET SOMEONE ELSE I SHARE A CONNECTION WITH...**

What... I... um, have a hard time figuring out is the eggshells.

**HOW DO YOU MEAN?**

oh... um ya know... Making sure you do your best at something. So... I don't know you just want to make sure your partner is happy. Like you

don't want to half ass something so you don't get yelled at or something like that

**I THINK I CAN UNDERSTAND THAT. I USED TO BE WITH SOMEONE WHO WOULD BERATE ME...**

umm.. No no.. I don't mean like.. Let's forget it. I am sorry. My thoughts are a bit of a jumble.

**NO, NOT AT ALL, ARE YOU SURE?**

Yeah I am not sure I chose the right words anyways. Eggshells? I mean I get yelled at, but I know I deserve it. I forget this or that, I am late, I don't communicate too well. You know the normal things, ha ha, this is the kind of thing she tells me about. This is why people have a hard time actually liking you - "You are always saying the wrong thing or you are too blunt. This is why people don't like you, you are a poor communicator..." You know the stuff I know I need to work on.

**I... UH...**

You know what I find so fascinating about these creatures? They leave so many eggs behind. It is always so fun spoiling them.

**Are you serious Kara? You really think that is okay?**

Who...

**Nevermind who. What I am trying to understand how you think it is okay to be belittled. You are supposedly the commander of this elite military unit and you are rattled by your partner?**

I uh..

**WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?**

**Oh, the tool is here too. How interesting.**

How long have you been here?

**Long enough to know there is a serious disconnect between the warrior and the lover.**

Kara focused on the ground, and then put her fingers to her temple, and with a green glow she muttered, "Did that do it?"

**No. You can't seem to get rid of me like you can get rid of him.**

Tros.

**I mean while we have this girl time, let's get to know each other a bit. You seem repressed girly. A tad uptight even. Seems your lady friend has you wound up so tight your looking over your shoulder ever moment you can.**

Shut up! You don't know anything about Astrid. You don't know who she really is. You can't see her inner beauty.

**So tell me then. When was the last time you were able to tell her your deepest secrets, your deepest desires?**

What is that even supposed to mean? That kind of stuff takes time. People have to be ready you can't just force things.

**Kind of like when she wanted to have sex, but you weren't feeling it?**

How do you even know about that? I just did what a good partner would do.

**Unlike your masculine friend, I am not so dense. I can see this... Connection in my minds eye. It is like walking through the most baffeling dungeon. Your mind really lives in this dark place?**

I am not sure how much I like the idea of you poking around in my thoughts.

**Kind of like how she didn't like it when you told her no, so she got mad at you? Go ahead, get mad at me. Show me the door.**

Kara grit her teeth momentarily and pressed her palms to the sides of her head and a light blue hue peaked out from the sides of her hands.

**Honey, you are going to have to do better than that. I have been studying the AETHERIAL longer than you have been alive.**

Kara noticed a crop of eggs along her path, and despite the unpleasantries, Kara did enjoy destroying eggs. She planted her foot into

the side of one of the pulsating masses of mucus sending its gooey contents splattering about.

What do you want from me?

**For you to be honest with yourself, and if you need to kick more of those egg things, so be it, but I won't leave you alone until you are at least a tad bit honest with yourself.**

Then you will leave me alone? Wait can you see what I see too?

**Minds eye sweetheart. I promise to leave you alone, for a while...**

What do you want to know?

**When you told her no. Why didn't you enforce it?**

What do you mean? I wasn't feeling it that night. I don't always feel like having sex with someone.

**Yeah, but that isn't what I mean. You told her no. But then you ended up having sex anyway.**

**So which is it? Did you want to have sex or not?**

Well not really, I mean I made sure that she was taken care of, and it was kind of typical that I had a harder time releasing, but I was just happy that she was happy.

That is what a partner is supposed to do.

**Is it? You said no, what three for four times, before what. What changed your mind?**

Well, I guess if I were to be honest she started getting upset, and I started feeling bad. I didn't want to make her upset like that. I am supposed to be her partner, and sometimes compromise just makes sense, ya know?

**Oh. So what you are telling me is you are so concerned whether or not she would be mad at you that you just put yourself second. You were so**

**afraid that she might, what, leave you? Because you didn't want to have put out? Sounds kind of fucked up to me.**

Well... "Get out of my head!" Kara screamed outloud.

**I am just saying girly, maybe the garden you are growing has a few more weeds than you think.**

"GET OUT! GET OUT!! GET OUT!!!!" Kara screamed even louder as she looked straight ahead towards the village, tears welling along her eyes.

... I love her. Her needs matter. I am not always sure what will make her happy, but I want to step out of my own way if I can. That doesn't make me afraid. It is just putting someone else's needs before your own.

How many times has she made you feel like she would leave you if you didn't do what she wanted?

GET THE FUCK OUT!

Okay girly. But you know this isn't over. I will be back. I have a long journey ahead of me, and seriously the company I am keeping... Well, let's just say you are far more interesting.

Kara wound up and struck an egg with the side of her foot sending it hurtling into the air. She pulled right arm back, bringing her left hand in front of her right pulling in AEtherial energy that manifested in a red glow.

"Fuck these things." Kara sneered as she thrust both hands outward sending a glowing energy ball into the sky, striking the egg midair. A burst of goo and energy flashed outward in a circular disk.

At least this part can be fun. If you hit them right they crack like a giant condor egg; smells kind of like 'em too...

Kara kicked another, cracking it.

Astrid tossed one at me, once... Well...

Kara tilted her head to the sky and screamed, a tear falling from her wide eyes. Her arms raised above her head, fists clenched she stomped her right

foot into the ground leaving a deep impression as a blast of golden fire raced from her body outward into the desert sands as well as the egg patches nearby. The aftermath left the sands slightly more reflective, and the eggs were vaporized completely.

Okay, so maybe that's how I wanted to react when I was covered with partially cooked condor egg

At least wasn't boiling... So there was that oh, and I guess... You wouldn't believe what condor egg will do for the hair and skin

But...

**See, I knew you had it in you girly.**

**GET. THE. FUCK. OUT. OF. MY. HEAD!**

Kara slammed her hands against her head, sending a shockwave of energy outward from her head, collapsing to the ground.

## **1.7 Something New**

**DO YOU SUPPOSE SHE IS GONE?**

Honestly I don't know, but I think that last mental block did something to disrupt the connection Natalie

**I WOULD HOPE SO FROM WHAT YOU EXPLAINED TO ME; IT IS A START THOUGH, IT SHOWS THAT SOMETHING CAN AFFECT IT.**

Yeah I don't imagine it will last forever, I mean, I have found that you come back within hours.

**I AM GOING TO DO SOME MORE RESEARCH ON MY END. I HAVE COUNTLESS BOOKS WITH ME, AND I AM SURE I HAVE SOMETHING THAT TALKS ABOUT THE AETHERIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN ALL OF US.**

**PERHAPS WE WILL FIND SOMETHING TO DISRUPT IT MORE PERMANENTLY, OR AT THE VERY LEAST HOPEFULLY THE MAGICKS WE SPOKE ABOUT WILL AT LEAST ALLOW YOU TO FEEL HER PRESENCE LIKE YOU CAN FEEL MINE. I WILL ADMIT, I THINK I WILL FEEL SOMEWHAT SAD IF WE FIND A WAY TO SEVER OUR CONNECTION.**

We would need to communicate more deliberately, and I think I would be okay with that

**FAIR ENOUGH. I MEAN...**

**SO I HAVE BEEN MEANING TO ASK, HAVE YOU ANY THEORY OF SORTS, OR EVEN A HYPOTHESIS AS TO WHY THE CREATURES HAVE GOADED YOU THIS FAR SOUTH?**

No.

I just can't string together anything that makes sense. This is by far the most coordinated I have ever experienced, or even read about, in terms of Skripi behavior.

**FROM WHAT I CAN TELL THEY SEEM TO BE DRIVEN. COMMANDED EVEN...**

**ARTUROS HAD SUSPICIONS THAT SOMETHING NEW WAS ON THE HORIZON.**

Seriously? Centuries have come and gone and as far as anyone can remember, these creatures have always remained something of legend. How is it Arturos could... No, never mind, don't tell me.

Before our encounters here... These things were just myths to all of us, passed down to scare the children. They were long forgotten monsters.

**THE LANDS THEY OCCUPY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CONTESTED LANDS EVEN BEFORE THE SKRIPI HAD ARRIVED HERE. THE FLEEING SETTLERS FROM**

## **SKRIPI LANDS CLASHING WITH THOSE KARAK'S THAT HAD ALREADY OCCUPIED THE SAND.**

It certainly can be difficult to discern reality from fiction when many of the monsters of those days were the people themselves. Cultures clashing and mini wars breaking out over land rights, and scarce resources.

**WHAT MAKES THE STORIES MURKIER, WERE THAT EXPEDITION AFTER EXPEDITION SENT INTO THE REGION WERE GENERALLY MET WITH UNKNOWN FATES. THOSE WHO MADE IT BACK WERE STRUCK WITH A MADNESS THE LIKES NOBODY HAD ENCOUNTERED BEFORE. TELLING TALES OF DARKNESS, SLAVE TRADES, AND MONSTERS BEYOND BELIEF.**

But never anything like this. There were no accounts of the Skripi. There have not been any encounters with them since the last AESir crossed the bifrost. Even then the records are a bit.

## **SPARSE.**

This place has since become a place of sandy hope at the edge of the forbidden grass sea. Eager to be reclaimed, and yet off limits to all. A cursed land filled with an ancient darkness that is hard to comprehend unless you experience it.

## **BEHIND THE TALL GRASS, LURKS THE REAL DANGER.**

Kara began to yawn, and in catching herself, quickly covered her mouth. *Alert, you need to stay alert.* She knocked over another egg, and ground her heel into it.

## **FEELING DRAINED?**

Kara brushed off the question immediately starting in with a previous thought: *Why have they drawn us this far south? / mean, if a*

message of superiority were to be sent why not do that when we landed? Rebuffing our advance in full display of the navy Show us their superiority

**WHY DRAW YOU TO THE LAST BASTION OF CIVILIZATION? AN ISOLATED AREA IN WHICH LITTLE MESSAGE CAN BE CONFERRED OTHER THAN TO STIR UP MORE SUPERSTITION, BUT ALSO SHOWING THAT THEY CAN BE REBUFFED BY THE FORCES OF MIDGARD.**

why indeed.

Kara was fast approaching the outer edges of the village. Sporadic palms offered brief respites of shade as she walked along the red rock road. She was could see the encampment coming into view nestled among the palms and just below that of the towering village walls.

unless..

unless.. They couldn't?

"Or are they just dumb, gross bug things." Kara could hear Ástriðr's voice cut across her thoughts.

Kara felt a shadow overhead, "Lazy and pompous trees." she muttered as she passed underneath.

Nice shade though She kicked at the sand lightly as she looked outward from the meager outcrop of trees that lined the red rock path, that has clearly been groomed by the village inhabitants. Directly to the north the massive village walls were towering over the encampment her soldiers had set up.

*What am I missing?*

She turned to the south to look back over the pockmarked battlefield.

Huh?

What is that?

Red. Red... Blue... No Red. Amber.

Kara's eye had caught a bright light glinting in the distance. She sighed at the thought that this might be something. She squinted her eyes attempting to block out some of the midday sun.

*There it is again*

Pink, and amber, burgundy, a strange mixture of colors shimmering in the distance. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small collapsible telescope, and with a flick of her wrist she was staring off into a shimmering horizon.

*There it is!*

### **THERE WHAT IS?**

From what I can surmise, this certainly is something new. our friend Arturos was right.

### **HOW SO? WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THAT?**

A hunch

Kara shouted into the void, "Ástriðr!" She called into the nothingness. "Ma'am?" Kára could hear her response cut through her mind.

Wow, how did that work?

Kára turned her telescope towards the encampment where she saw the beautiful maiden in white making her way through the encampment; Kára could see compassion on Ástriðrs face as she delivered final orders to her læknir before disintegrating into a whisp of rising air.

Kara bit her lip slightly.

*Ástriar. The way she...* Kára took a deep breath.

Kára just knew that Ástriðr had already been cataloging each herb, each bandage, and each spell required to heal every individual that had been injured, and then some just in case.

She really is a real sight to behold when she is working Kara dropped the eyepiece to her side.

Kara shook her head and turned her attention back to the battle torn landscape to the south.

Kara, I'm worried about you. I've been hearing fragments of your thoughts cutting into my own. It almost feels like I'm getting one side of a conversation.

**DON'T TELL HER ABOUT ME JUST YET, I'M NOT SURE SHE WOULD UNDERSTAND.**

But why? She deserves to know.

I deserve to know what?

Proximity strengthens her connection and I am not sure I am ready for this conversation with you, I will talk to you later. Kara put her fingers to her temple followed by a light glow to silence the voice. She could still feel Ástriðr's presence growing as she neared.

Kara?

Yeah, I'm here. I'm... uh... whoa... just a few clicks out from you.

Kára felt a wave of dizziness overtake her.

Yeah, I know. Who've you been talking to?

Honestly? I'm not sure you will believe me, but I think it happened.

What happened?

I think... I am either going crazy and talking to myself, or at the very least the prophecy has found it's newest vessel.

Ragnarok? Do you feel the interpreter?

I do, as well as... Something else.

Kara could feel the uncomfortable pause in Ástriðr's thoughts.

ugh. Kara could feel her heart beating quickly, as she succumbed to the sand below. She could feel her cheek pressed awkwardly against the sand her lips caked in sand, but she couldn't do anything about it. She blinked her eyes heavily.

*Do you remember how this used to go?*

Yes Rue, I do. Sadness was always the end result, forever back peddling hoping to rephrase, retract a personal truth that I didn't know how to control, but would still find myself in the middle of, trying to control it so I could manage a fight I didn't want to have.

**I thought she was gone.**

*What does she mean thought I was gone? Who left whom?*

Are you still having... Kára could only hear a muffle in her head of the rest of Ástriðr's voice.

Kára was lost in a haze. Her mouth was becoming parched and she could barely move her mouth.

*Kára! I asked you a question. How long have you known about this?*

You know I don't like to talk that time. You know she was on her pilgrimage, her rite of passage so she could join the corps.

She was so excited to be finishing

*I know all of this. You feel, her, don't you?*

Rue, it has taken me a long time to accept this, it took finding you to even come close to feeling okay again. I was out on field exercises when I got the notice from a runner.

How do you think that made me feel?

*No, how do you think that makes me feel? We made a life together, and what you just want to turn your back on it? For what? This is who you are. This is who I bonded to. I don't even know why you think this is an option.*

I don't know, but you know that I want to make this work.

*So... what does that mean for us? I don't want to lose you. I can't have you carrying on like this though, you can control it right? I need you to show me that you aren't compromised. How can we survive if you still have these feelings?*

I just need time to explore, time to figure things out.

*How long has this been going on? How much time do you need? I don't know if I can handle this.*

Honestly, I'm not sure. Maybe it's always been there. Maybe I just drown her out, with Feldehan's, and now that I have sobered up, maybe that is why I can feel it so properly, I can feel her.

*So why didn't you tell me?! Why wouldn't you divulge this before we bound ourselves?*

I.. I didn't know. I just.. need you to listen, please hear me. This is scary for me too.

**Kára?!**

*Okay I am listening, so tell me.*

I am just really having these... I'm filled with all these feelings that feel like a dream long suppressed, always hiding out in the corner of my mind, but I forgot how to touch those feelings until recently

*Don't you think that I am too? When you first brought this up don't you think it hurt me too? How can you imagine that this isn't scary for me. When I bound myself to you, I didn't have a clue as to this kind of thing even existed. You presented yourself as this well put together person and it turns out you have been lying to me the whole time.*

**KÁRA! COME ON KÁRA! LISTEN TO ÁSTRÍÐR'S VOICE!**

You don't understand Rue, I didn't ask for this. I truly didn't know that this would happen. How could have I known back then? How does anyone know what their future holds?

*I am tired now. I am done with this conversation and need to process.*

Don't you think I need to process too? I am trying to process with you. This impacts both of us.

*This is just too much for me. Why can't you understand that?*

*This is why people don't like you, you are so emotionally abusive and abrasive when you talk. You just try to manipulate people with your emotions, always playing the victim. When you don't like something I say you cut me down. You are always embarrassing me, especially in front of your family. I just need you to stop. Just... Just get out.*

Rue, I'm sorry, I...

*You say I'm sorry too much, and I love you too much. It is just so manipulative. You are always playing the victim. I don't understand how you just don't get it. There is no room for her here.*

But, I... I don't understand. She is a part of me. Why can't you love me for me? Why can't you see how important this is, and I am trying to share it with you.

*Kara, it is so embarrassing I am not going to be with someone who is so toxic, that they can't let go of their past to see the life that we have built together. I mean do you really have to go through with any of this? I think you need to just seek out different healers. It is all just in your head, and we need you to get you more help.*

Kara could feel a chill overtake her. Sooo cold. No Rue, I don't want to.

*Come on.*

Rue I'm not in the mood... I really don't want to do that.. Okay..

*Come on, I want you to...*

*No I'm really not feeling it.*

*Fine... humph.*

No don't get upset, please, you are right... I'm good, let's go.

Kara's body began to shake in the sand.

*Why can't you get off? Come on. I want you to.*

**KÁRA! FOCUS ON ME, KÁRA! HANG IN THERE!**

But... how can I?

Rue... Wants me to sever the connection I'm inclined to just listen, and let her dictate my life to save the bond. I feel so torn, I wish I knew how to just give her what she wants, and for me to still be happy

Kára, my sweetheart, I am sorry she hurt you so badly.

"I feel so selfish." Kára muttered in a raspy voice into the sand.

Kara! You didn't do this, Kára listen to me, Rue has no power over you anymore. Valfreyja guides us even when even when we don't know we are being guided. Getting what we need even when we don't know we are getting what we need. She has a plan for us even if we can't see it ourselves. She loves you just as you are, even if someone else cannot.

*Kára, I need you to choose... You either choose us, or you choose her... I just know I can't go on living like this. I can't go on being with someone who has lied to me for so many years. You knew back then, but you didn't have the guts to say anything. - rue*

But... I feel... so real when I'm with Ástríðr these... feelings that I have, they are so powerful! I want to honor my wife and my marriage, but how can I do both when she asks such difficult things of me? I feel so lost, I want to do right by everyone, but why does that mean I have to leave myself behind? Am I to simply shoulder this burden alone? Forever keeping secrets from this world?

A dream like fog overtook Kara's mental landscape where she could now only see and feel a black dagger pressing against her left wrist. Her other hand firmly gripping the hilt. She could feel her hand tremble as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Valfreyja, what am I to do? Why must I choose?" Kara whispered in a raspy voice.

*Just a little... pressure. Make this easy on your family.*

Kara could feel another slender hand gently wrap its hand on hers, helping to steady it, and increase the pressure against her wrist.

*Everyone would just be better off without you. Your children would finally know some stability in their life. Let the anger in our lives just slip away, let's find peace together.*

But... I...

*Just do it Kara! This is for the greater good.*

Maybe you are right...

A burst of energy cut through her vision dispelling the darkness within the fog.

Kara, who will be there for your to protect your children? Who will be there console them when they get kicked because they kicked her? Or when they got slammed into a wall out of frustration? Kára, this isn't just about you anymore. You followed her, you followed orders, but when are you going to follow your heart? If you were at your limit; she was going to lose you anyways...

This isn't you anymore. You need to let her go. You took a chance on yourself then, what does it hurt to take a chance on yourself again? To live, and learn to love again for the sake of your children, for the sake of your own happiness?

Kara I need you to focus; I need you to remember. Feel the love we have all held together for years, despite being obscured through life's mire. That powerful love that helped our children grow into wonderful people. These are nothing but tremors of the past. A poison you need to fight until I can reach you. Can you do that for me?

Kara looked up from herself to see a sprawling green meadow. A knoll of long grass and various flowers that the children are eagerly running down. Ástriðr standing at the top, in a white dress. A breeze swept across the grass making Ástriðr's dress flow gently in the midafternoon light. Kara cracked a smile.

We found each other, and showed them that love. These little ones, this memory, so many years ago, one of the happiest times together. We were a family.

Kara- "our family..." Kara whispered

If you take this way out... won't the children think this is maybe the solution to their problems?

*Look, I love you Kara. I need to to focus on me, not her. A raspy voice spoke softly from behind Kara's ear, and Kara could feel the blade drawing her attention to its' point. She just wants you to give up everything for her. I want*

*you to give everything for me. I want to see you happy, can we just take it slow? Just ease it into your arm.*

I'm just not sure.

*I expect loyalty Kara. Now, I can't talk about this anymore. This is just too much for me. You are just too much for me. Just do it already.*

Rue...

Kara she is baiting you. She wants you to fall into her despair. She wants you to continue to fall in line. She wants you to believe that the only right path is her path. You are pulling down the façade. You are trying to break free, and it is unbearable to someone like her. Kara, look up.

*Why couldn't you just die Astriz? Why do you persist on fighting me?! You will never usurp my powers as those children's mother! I gave birth to them, not you. I am their mother, not you. You are nothing. Kara, you are nothing! You've always been nothing. I alone know how to raise these children, and I'm going to see to it they are never in your care again.*

*Push!*

**KÁRA!**

Kára! Wake up Kára!

*How can I not think that you've just been lying to me for all these years. How can I trust you if you would keep something like this for so long?"*

No, I.

*How can I trust you? Just push on the blade. Push it into your flesh and let your sins be absolved.*

How... How can she do this to us? How can she just decide on her own what the children should be doing? How is it that I'm somehow a bad influence for being authentic to who I really am? Kara could feel a tear drop down her cheek. Ástríðr... She sees me... For the first time... Someone sees me.

**Kára, wake up Kára! The poison is killing you! I... am almost there, just hang on a little longer!**

Maybe I just should do it what is the point? I am just so tired... I am tired of the struggle. I don't know...

**You didn't know? What didn't you know?**

Ástríðr? Kára felt her vision blur and a wave of lightheadedness wash over her. She paused her thoughts; opening her sand encrusted eyes. She felt her eyes moving slowly as she looked around dazed, seeing only into the sand and after some effort across the red rock path, where she could see a blurry white clad figure rapidly approaching.

**My dearest. Please hear me, I'm here! We will work together to understand this, we will figure something out!**

Kára shook her head slightly blinking hard, recognizing a faintly familiar blur hunched over her body.

**"Colonel!?"** Ástríðr was yelling, why was she yelling?

Kára looked up and recognized for the first time Ástríðr's face. "Ástríðr?" She whispered in a raspy voice.

Ástríðr - Sometimes you are getting what you need and you don't even know it.

Kara groggily looked down to see Ástríðr pulling back her skirt to inspect the now deeply red and black mark spreading along Kara's thigh. "It's... okay... I put... a block on it... I'm fin..." Karas face smashed into the sand again.

"Kára..." Ástríðr spoke softly as she laid her hands on Kara's thigh.

Kára could feel her soft skin against her leg, and she closed her eyes, another tear falling.

*Why does my leg hurt?*

Because you can feel it again... now be still, I've almost got it.

It feels like it is on fire. Ugghhh... Karas breathing became shallow and labored.

Focus Kara, think about that day.

Kara opened her eyes once more, her breathing easing as she saw Ástríðr's concentration as she whispered inaudible words of the AEtherial. Karas vision stabilizing as she watched Ástríðr extract a black dagger like object from Kara's thigh through a translucent green ring.

Ástríðr – "Kara," Ástríðr began softly - Ástríðr placed her hand gently on Karas sandy cheek, brushing away some of the grit. Kara gazed into her gentle brown eyes. "My love, it is okay to let go. That is not who you are anymore."

Kara reached up with a slight strain in her movement, placed her hand on Ástríðrs, and reveled in the love that she felt.

"Ástríðr..." Kara whispered as she still tried to get her bearings.

Kára dropped her hand after a moment and sat up. After taking a strained breath she slowly found her way to her feet, straightened herself out and repeated slowly, "Ástríðr, I need you to look at this."

A Confused Ástríðr responded, "Colonel?"

Ástríðr stood and holding a black hook like barb in her hand, before tossing it. Kara could feel Ástríðr's concern.

Was it her again?

*Yeah*

You need to let her go.

*I am trying...*

You need to forgive yourself, you thought...

I know. Kara looked deeply into Ástríðr's eyes, and placed a gentle hand on her cheek. I lost my faith, and let the demons find me. I let her abuse me how I thought I deserved. I thought I had... I thought I had... I thought you were gone forever.

But I am here now. We all had to walk our paths. Some bring us joy, and some bring us sorrow. I am just grateful ours led us back to each other.

Me too.

Kara pulled Ástríðr's gently and leaned in. Their lips touched and Kara could feel an energy sweep across her body as she closed her eyes holding the kiss. She could feel Ástríðr wrap her arms across her body drawing them closer together. When after a few moments they separated, Kara's hand lingering on Astrid's waist, she opened her eyes and stared into Ástríðr's eyes. She could feel the wind whip sand about them, a smile crept across Karas face as she took in all of Ástríðr's face, never wanting to forget it.

Ástríðr whispered gently, "I love your face, you know that?"

Kara giggled and replied, "I love your face too."

Kara let her hands linger briefly as they pulled back from their embrace, Kara cleared her throat, "Now, uh... I need to know if I am going crazy. I saw something out on the southern horizon and I need to know if you can see that too." Kára stuck her arm out and pointed towards the mountain range to the south.

"Ma'am, your leg!" Ástríðr said confused. Kara looked down to see a trail of crimson seeping down the side of her leg. Kara could feel the cool touch of Ástríðr's hand along her thigh before it sent a shockwave of energy up Kara's side. Kara shivered slightly before being drawn back into Ástríðr's voice, "I just don't see it." Ástríðr said apologetically.

Kára slid behind Ástríðr and extended her arm across her shoulder and pointed towards the horizon. To which she thought she could see Ástríðr's face began to flush as she looked back towards Kára. "Not me... There." Kára said as she pressed her body in slightly tighter. "There. A light. Some sort of beacon perhaps?"

Kára could tell that Ástríðr was looking intently as her head bobbed slightly forward. Kara felt Ástríðr slide in closer, coyly, and then finally pulled away after a few moments. Kara moved back slightly as Ástríðr twirled about to face Kára.

"I am sorry Colonel, I just don't see it."

Kára could feel Ástríðr's gentle touch as Ástríðr placed her hand on her shoulder.

"Colonel?" Ástríðr began gently, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah I think so. I hope so." Kara said as she extended the telescope with a flick of her wrist.

"I love our dance, I would give this one maybe a three." Ástríðr teased.

"A three? Are you serious? This is at least a four!"

"You had a telescope this whole time and you didn't work it in. Tsk... Tsk..."

Ástríðr giggled as she grabbed the the telescope and put it up to her eye

Kara straightened out, a sly smile across her face. "You got me on that one."

Ástríðr shrugged as she collapsed the telescope and handed it back to Kara.

"I'm sorry commander, I just don't see it."

*uhhhggg. Stupid monster thing*

Kára pouted her lips slightly figuring out how to broach the topic on her mind. *oh yeah* "There!" Kara said as she thrust her arm outward, the telescope extending mid gesture. Kara and Ástríðr paused for a moment and giggled, thinking similar thoughts.

Ástríðr slapped the telescope grasping it and spinning about to look at the horizon once more. Kara could hear an audible sigh.

"I don't see it... "

"Just..." Kara began

Wait, no." Ástríðr dropped the telescope, rubbed her eye briefly and then looked back through the scope... "I... I think I see it. What, what is that?" Ástríðr pulled away from the eyepiece, tipped the telescope over to inspect the lens.

"Right?" Kara remarked

"I need to meet with the Elder Kárák. We will need to convince him that it is best for people to evacuate. Now let me finish what I was doing."

Ástríðr contorted her face to show her concern.

Kára nodded and shot Ástríðr a roguish smile.

Kára watched as Ástríðr bent down to inspect her leg. A tingle shot up her body as Ástríðr lay both hands upon her leg. Kara felt a wandering tickling finger.

Ástríðr shifted her hands one on top of the other, and she felt a surge of energy shoot up her leg. Kára watched as Ástríðr pulled away one hand, dug into a small satchel and then rubbed a gritty feeling substance against her skin. Kára drew in a measured breath.

*Whatever this stuff is it burns. I think I prefer a burn to this*

*"Shh.." Kára heard Ástríðr say softly.*

Pain radiated up Kára's leg and into her side. Kára winced ever so slightly and placed her hand on Ástríðr's shoulder.

"You get a kick out of this don't you?" Kara asked whimsically.

Ástríðr looked up, and Kara could feel her gaze.

"I'm sorry." Kara said softly.

Ástríðr slapped Kara on the knee, stood up to meet Kara eye to eye. "I love you." Kara whispered.

"I love you too." Ástríðr replied and gave Kára a quick kiss.

"Now..." Kara cleared her throat suddenly aware of her surroundings, paused and then finished, "Shall we gather the team, and pay the Elder a visit?"

Ástríðr nodded and punctuated it with a smile.

## 1.8 The Elder

Ástriðr and Kára happily made their way through the organized chaos that was the encampment. They made it a priority check in with as many soldiers as possible on their way through. *Honestly, I just want all of my soldiers to feel that I have their backs. I am not sure if I am doing a good job at all, but I do know that I certainly try.*

Ástriðr and Kara made their rounds through the winding encampment that meshed as one, but was configured such that each area was distinctive to the soldiers battalion. She made it a point to locate each battalion's respective commander as she moved through the encampment such that they could greet the Karak Elder together.

A shade had overtaken a fair amount of the encampment by the time Astrid, Kara and her three other commanders had made it to the eastern gate. A group of villagers had already amassed each exuding a nervous energy as they approached. Kára raised her hand in a friendly gesture and looked through the group, *they look worn down, dirty faces. She did not see the Elder among them. Where are they?*

She sputtered a bit noticing sand had found its way to her lips, *Skripsi, be damned. I'd rather take the tall grass if I could just get away from this sand.*

Kara tilted her head briefly, and then reached for the small drawstring pouch that was to her side obscured by her tunic. She tugged slightly at the opening and immediately pulled a small circular brass object from it. As she raised it to the sky a glow emanated from the center of a small hollow brass enclosure. After a moment she brought it down so she could look at it noting the notch that the starlight above had left on the inner surface. *As I figured,* she tucked the small piece back into her pouch and readjusted the obscured belt that hung around her waist.

Kara's sense of focus was slipping as she listened tuned in and out of her commander's chatting, but she was really trying to focus on the noise of

the ever-gathering crowd. She shook her head and opened her eyes wide trying to readjust before closing them briefly, she could tell it was getting increasingly difficult to concentrate. Kara opened her eyes to a gentle hand and her midback. A slight smile crept across her lips, and she shot Astrid a glance trying to signal her irritation, but instead caught sight of a large towering figure making their way through the parting throngs. "Finally." Kara muttered.

Kara drew in a deep breath, affixed a smile to her face and began moving towards the figure with whom she took to be the elder. Kára and her officers approached the elder the crowd's energy shifted and they began cheering as the large figure made his way through the throngs.

Kara noticed a few flower petals being thrown into the air. As the crowd parted and formed a circle around the group Kara could see few acolytes emerge slightly behind the Elder. The seven of them standing a few meters apart nothing but the red rock between them.

What an imposing figure... This guy is big, and... intimidating at first glance. His hands look like they could crush my skull.

Kára briefly gazed upon the elders long and grey beard before meeting his gaze. I really dig this dudes beard. I mean wow. It is almost to the ground. Definitely a liability in hand to hand. I wonder if they do something special to make it grow like that.

**Kara felt a slight nudge on her back.**

I wonder what is behind the beard. His face is moderately handsome, it would be a shame if he opened his mouth and ruined it.

Kara stretched out her arms, in preparation for the greeting ritual, hands outward, palms up, followed by leaving her arms outstretched as she bowed. She maintained the bow for some time to pay respect to the Elders status. When she arose, she saw the Elder observing the ritual intently. He showed his satisfaction with a large smile and a double slap to his chest. He then repeated the gesture to Kára who in turn smiled and slapped her chest.

It is a simple enough gesture, but to the Kárák's it was a sign of respect. It told everyone that I do not conceal anything from you. I carry

no malice towards you, I place my trust in your hospitality. In turn the response signifies a belief in honesty, and in turn that they do not conceal anything, and honor the intentions as you are welcomed into their home.

As they walked along the red colored stone walkway Kara felt a voice in her head insist that she forego some of the formalities. Huh?

"Forgive any disrespect Maester Karak, but a matter of urgency has arisen." Kara spoke but was cut off.

"And..." The Elder stretched his arms outward before bringing them together, the baggy material concealing his hand as he brought them together. She thought for a moment that he had grown in size to emphasize his formidable physicality and stature of power. As she watched him clear his throat she thought she could see his whole throat shift. The Elder continued, "What could be of such importance that we cannot celebrate victory on this day?" He brought one of his arms straight out with a stout pointed finger, that bothered her. "You, need to heed your Elders. Where you come from, a land of milk and honey..."

Kara felt her inner self recoil, in irritation, but focused on keeping a straight face.

"Here," He gestured with his hands, "we have sand. Oh sure there is the red rock. Maybe the desert potato if you can get the river to cooperate. And for obvious reasons we don't venture across the river, and for the longest time, neither did they I might add."

"Elder, no disrespect is intended, we can understand that this may come as a request of privilege, in that here you do not have the luxuries that we observe in Midgard, but our goals are aligned, we only wish to help you prosper."

The Elder looked upon Kara with amusement. Before clearing his throat to continue his thoughts unfazed by Kara's words.

"Ya see, depending on the season, we may just go without for a while. So when we have something to celebrate, we celebrate."

Kara was not expecting that. She reeled back a moment and then found her words, "Elder," she began softly, trying to disarm him, "I assure you, we would love nothing but to share in your hospitality, but right now... Right now, we have an emergency. There is something... Some sort of creature

headed this this way. It is most certainly something that I have never seen before. We have to evacuate your people, we have an outpost to the northwest, far enough away from the front where your people will be safe." By the end she felt her strength flowing from her words.

What exactly could they offer an army of this size? I would think it would put them out and that is not why we are here.

"Perhaps misjudgments have been made. But no. We will not be abandoning our ancestral home. It may not look like much, but it is ours."

He seemed to shrink in stature. Kara blinked twice.

"Well, I am not sure what you propose. We have incoming, and we cannot worry about civilians. It is one thing to march into an impending battle, but now we are afforded some time to clear your people out, and we need to use what little time we have to work together." Kara paused, straightening herself out, "I need to know that with whatever this is coming at us, that all of your people are somewhere safe."

"I hear you commander. And I thank you for your thoughtful nature and concern for my people," The Elder pointed his finger at her again before continuing, "but I remind you that these are my people, not yours."

Kara felt irritation, and conflicted.

"Hmm... We'll I do know that Octavian's company is incoming, so maybe I can have them move in... ugh..." She trailed off.

"Colonel..." The Elder paused for a moment thinking about his words. "I shall spread the word that we will seek refuge in the mine." He turned his head nodded to the acolyte on his left, who quickly disappeared into the crowd.

"Commander, now I believe if you would follow me to my abode I might open your mind to the desert allure. You might call it the Karakazan fare and flair." The Elder finished with a slight pose.

Kara was slightly amused by this. She, also, wasn't quite sure what to make of it. "I would love to, but unfortunately I am going to have to pass for now while I figure out what kind of threat I am dealing with. Please get your people to safety and we will meet you when we have verified that the danger has passed."

The elder turned around pointed towards a small child and shoed them away with a wave of his hand. The child disappeared into the crowd.

When the Elder turned around he had a smile across his face. "Of course Colonel, of course, but, first, I need you to see something. Something that has been in my family for generations. Something of a desert flower, that imparts the protection of the desert upon all those who are worthy." He reached behind him. Kara leaned to the side to see the small child had returned with something that they passed to the elder. The Elder nodded to the child and tossed a silver piece towards them.

The elder stretched out his arm and opened his hand in front of Karas face revealing a small crystalline orb shaped as a flower. "Do you know what this is?" The crystal glowed brighter the closer it got to her face.

Kara furrowed her brow and felt compelled to look deeply into the crystal. She felt an uneasy sensation as she stared deep into its center, completely enamored.

*What is...*

*What is this thing, this... Divine crystal... Blue, pink, white light emitted from deep within. Some sort of storm cloud.*

"May I?" Kara asked, completely enthralled.

The Elder happily obliged and gestured his open hands; as Kára picked the crystal up from the Elder's hand she could instantly feel the weight of it.

*Is it getting heavier? As she pulled it closer the strain in her arm was intensified and felt as if she could just barely hold on. Why is nobody helping me? She looked about to see everyone frozen in place, except the Elder... why is he smiling at me?*

Kara began to cry out in agony as the crystal heat up. She could feel it searing the flesh of her hands but could not let go. She could only watch in agony as the crystal finally cracked shattering into a dusty storm cloud that dispersed itself across the palm of her hands.

*After a few moments she felt as if she were being covered in mites. Small like sand, but big enough to give you bumps on the arm She felt it spread across her entire body.*

"Well that is most unexpected." The Elder said, choking on the words.

Kara shook off the oddity the best she could, "Yes, yes it is." She paused, "Umm... What was that?"

"Honestly I was hoping you would know. It only began to, well act strange upon your arrival. It has been, dormant for generations."

"Generations?" Kara inquired.

"Yes, the first of my family to come here found this orb hidden in one of the many caves throughout the red mound, and it was my forbearers first recognized its significance to our peoples. I must say it was a bit befuddling to see it begin to glow upon your arrival. I immediately knew that this was for you to experience." The Elder said allowing a smirk crossing his lips.

Kára felt lightheaded and looked upon the Elder with confusion. Kara turned her head and her eye caught a runner sprinting up to them from down the path towards the encampment.

"Colonel... Come now! You have got to see this!" She could hear with vague understanding.

The soldier saluted awkwardly.

Kara saluted back, failing to fully salute as her arm would only raise part way. Her voice slurred heavily as she spoke to the soldier, "Easy, now."

With a desperate concern the soldier blurted out, "This thing is huge Colonel! It looks like it could take a..."

"You have got to be..." Kara collapsed.

Kara could feel her body but could not move. Her eyes closed involuntarily, and the strangest of voices came to her ears.

Kára found herself locked into her mind, seeing a blur of motions about her, but only flashes comprehension came to her.

*Where... Where am I?*

*What... What happened? Ev... Everything is so quiet Kára drew in a slow deep breath. This is... Magnificent Is that pine? She drew in a deep breath through her nose trying to place what tingling her nose.*

*Kára's hair began to swirl, as she noticed that she was standing in sand, and cool breeze was flowing through her hair. This is certainly like a dream I feel at the mercy of these visions, not in control of my own body.*

Kára looked around seeing blurs of colors, but nothing more. A whisper on the wind passed by her.

*Ástríðar?* Words started to form at her mouth, but she could feel little control of her mouth.

Her voice crackled before she began to speak against her will, “When you first entered my life I must say I had my concerns. I was full of doubt for myself, full of doubt for you. Would I be good enough to show you the light that I see? How deeply would I fall for you? Would I be able to maintain anything like a meaningful relationship that helped you accomplish your goals, or would I try to seize control and in doing so spiral out of control myself. How would I feel if you were to leave me? Does that matter?”

*What do you mean? What is happening to me? How are you controlling me?* Kára’s body contorted akin to a mannequin hung by strings.

“Early on I learned that these feelings come from a place of seemingly endless love. My love for a best friend, finding a spiritual connection with someone where words could never do it justice. An investment in living life. What we do with that love transforms our lives. I have found that I am but a mere benefactor in this whole ordeal as I freely give to you what I can. In return I have seen a beauty growing within you. Day by day I hear your words of hope, and optimism juxtaposed against the harsh realities of life. Promises that you whisper to yourself that if you should keep up the hard work, you will find what it is you seek from life.”

*You know nothing about me, about what I am trying to accomplish with my life.* Kára slowly and awkwardly spun around in place.

“All I ask of you, all I have ever asked of you is for you to look at yourself, truly look at yourself. Conduct an honest examination of who you are, for yourself. For you must live with yourself first and foremost, the rest of us just get to experience your life from the outside. I know that for me, I am enjoying every bit of this. The queerness of it all is so magical. If your life is to be measured by anything, I think it should be measured in how you impact others, so that our expressive nature will live on through others.”

*You... You can't be here. She would never look at me the same.*

“That may be, but indeed I am and indeed she never will. You can try, but you have seen the haunt before. You have seen that look before. You know

where this goes. She never did look at you the same, but there is something that I need you to know. Something you have done for me... I need you to know that you have touched my spirit, and as we grow I only hope to return the favor.”

Kára fell face first into the sandy beach, sand caking her face. She listlessly blinked only seeing blurs, and after a few moments her eyes adjusted, and sensation came back to her body. She could feel herself being lifted, and as she focused her eyes a blurry figure took shape, and she vaguely recognized it of the Elder. *Why is he smiling?*

“My child, this is no time to lie down.” The Elder chuckled as he placed a firm hand on Kára’s shoulder and with the other hand took the orb she was clutching.

“I had a feeling you were the right one to receive this gift.” The Elder finished with a guttural laugh that made Kara feel uneasy.

After a few moments of muffled sounds and a sharp pain streaking across her chest, Kara could feel her body coming under control, and could just make out Astrid’s voice repeating, “Commander...” with a shake to her shoulder.

Groggily Kara replied out loud, “Astrid?”

Kara felt the feeling come back to her extremities. She cleared her throat and straightened herself out, turning to Astrid. “Now then...,” Kara coughed before finishing, “Shall we?”

“Uhhh Commander? You just had a full on conversation with the ground. One moment you were up, and the next you were kissing sand... Are you okay?”

“I am absolutely fine. Whatever it was, it is gone now.”

*No I am not... Astrid... What... was that? Please... Help me...*

Kara sighed and collapsed to her knees in front of the elder, her head tilting backwards and her eyes rolling into the back into her head, reaching out with her mind in a desperate tone, “Are... you still here?”

***UHH... HELLO? WHO ARE... UHHHGGGGHHH***

Kara cautiously opened her eyes one at a time. She could feel Astrid tugging on her shoulders and a sharp pain radiating through her head, before screaming out into the air, “Stooooop!” Her visceral response sent

out a shockwave of moving air causing the dust to swirl and radiate outward from her body.

Kara could feel a swell of energy rip into her, and felt her body being pulled to pieces, a booming voice echoed through her mind, "Gather the offering." Her world had gone dark again, save for the echos within her mind.

**SALVATION. SALVATION. A PITTANCE FOR SALVATION FROM THIS WRETCHED LIFE. HAVE I NOT SUFFERED ENOUGH? VALFREYJA, PLEASE... ODINN. HEAR ME.**

Kara could not stop her mind... And, just what is it you need saving from?[c]

**SAVE ME FROM MYSELF! PLEASE!**

Can... you hear me?

**WHA... BY THE HEAVENS ABOVE... DID... HELLO? HOW MUCH... HOW MUCH HAVE I HAD?**

uhhh. Kára was befuddled.

**VALFREYJA, THANK YOU FOR FINALLY HEARING MY PRAYERS. I AM IN DESPERATE NEED OF HELP. I AM BUT A HUMBLE MAN SEEKING OUT A LIFE OF SOLITUDE, BUT A PLAGUE IS UPON ME!**

uhh. You know me. My name is Kara. Kara Eyrik Commander of the Valkryja of Midgard.

**BUT YOU ARE SPEAKING TO ME IN MY HEAD... AND HOW DOES THAT NOT MAKE YOU... UHH... I AM NOT QUITE SURE WHO I AM IF I AM TO BE HONEST...** The man trailed off in confusion.

I mean... Didn't we talk just a while ago? A plague? Has it swept through your area? Is there anyone I can contact?

**BUT YOU ARE SPEAKING TO ME IN MY HEAD... AND HOW DOES THAT NOT MAKE YOU...** The man trailed off in confusion.

**MIDGARD'S MILITARY...**

**"OH. THAT MAKES MORE SENSE. WHAT IS A MIDGARD? AND WHY CAN YOU HEAR ME?"**

What? How do you not know of Midgard? Where are you? Is this a ruse?!

**THE BEST I CAN TELL... I AM SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN RANGE OF FJALLHEIM. I BELIEVE THAT I HAVE DISCOVERED ONE OF THE ANCIENT RUINS OF THE GUARDIANS... THINGS ARE A BIT UH... CONFUSING AT THE MOMENT.**

**MIDGARD YOU'D SAY? AREN'T THEY AT WAR WITH THE POINTY EARED BASTARDS?**

Not for some sixty cycles.

**SIXTY CYCLES. HOW CAN THAT BE? I LEFT THE WESTERN SHORES NOT BUT FOUR CYCLES AGO. HMMM... I NEED TO THINK ON THIS... THIS MAKES NO SENSE.**

Kára's vision returned as did her other senses. Standing before her pacing back and forth is a disheveled and grizzled old man. Grumbling to himself as he paced occasionally taking a puff from his long-curved pipe. He would pucker his lips a few times sending a glow of embers that just barely illuminated his stern face.

**THE BEST I CAN FIGURE IS SOME STRANGE MAGICK HAS SEEPED INTO MY BODY AND I'M EITHER DEAD... I'M PROBABLY DEAD. UHHH... WE'LL... I AM NOT DEAD... AT LEAST I DON'T THINK SO...**

The man paced, occasionally stopping by the hearth that contained a small fire. He would take a few passes, and then stop, rub his hands together, point his palms out to the apex of the fire, and then in moments rubbed them together once again. He paused and grabbed a small wooden cup and took a belt.

Kára felt her hands and knees making motion towards the man, out of the wide berth of a darkened room. Slowly, and steadily creeping along the floor like a feline stalking its' prey.

**THE SMELL OF A FINE FELDEHAN'S CERTAINLY FLARES THE NOSTRILS, AND REMINDS YOU THAT YOU ARE ALIVE.**

Well I understood your reference of Feldehan's...

**SO I DEDUCE THAT, QUITE POSSIBLY, JUST MAYBE... I DON'T THINK I'M DEAD.**

Where are you?

**IN MY CABIN OF COURSE. YOU SHOULD KNOW, YOU CAME ANSWERING ME REMEMBER... THE SPIRIT OF THE UNIVERSE TWISTING OUR FATES. ONE GUARDIAN TO ANOTHER.**

The man grunted an amused chuckle. Kára felt a cold shiver creep along her skin. She listlessly tilted her head upwards to the cup being gesticulated wildly in front of her.

Whereabouts is this cabin of yours? Four cycles? I mean that would put us somewhere in the twenty-twenties?

**PRECISELY. DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS. SOUTHERN FJALLHEIM. I DISCOVERED SOME ANCIENT RUINS HERE.**

The man moved effortlessly away from the hearth and out to sit at a small desk with some writing accoutrement haphazardly placed along its' surface.

**DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS?**

Not really, but...

Kára found her legs gaining mobility and within moments she was up on her knees shuffling her legs across the wooden floor. She looked down and took stock of her uniform, and the ever growing sensation along her bare legs. The occasional splinter sending a sudden shock up her body, but being unable to cease her actions.

**OUR MINDS ARE LINKED TELEPATHICALLY OVER THE LONGEST DISTANCE...  
EVER.**

**NORMALLY THE FURTHEST ANYONE HAD EVER GOTTEN WAS SOMETHING  
LIKE...**

Ten paces?

The man spun about in his stout wooden chair and stared directly into Kára's eyes. **YEAH. SOMETHING LIKE THAT.** The runes on his chair shimmered and faded into the wood.

**THE ACADEMY IS GOING TO BE FLOORED TO HEAR OF THIS. THE QUESTION  
IS HOW DO I GET OUT OF HERE?**

**HOW MIGHT I CONNECT WITH YOU AGAIN, UH SHOULD I WISH?**

**AND, UHH... AND WHERE DID YOU SAY YOU ARE OPERATING OUT OF  
COMMANDER?**

Southern Karakazan, and honestly I am not quite sure.

Kára could feel a tear in her leg leave behind a slight trail of blood that coated both her leg but left a smear across the wood.

Why do I not care?

**BECAUSE COMMANDER, YOU CAN'NO' RESIST THE ALURE OF THE SIREN. YOU  
HEAR HER DON'T YOU. CALLING YOUR NAME, BUT YOU CAN'T QUITE FIGURE  
OUT WHAT IT'S SAYING? IT'S LIKE BLURRED SOUND, EVER CALLING YOUR  
NAME.**

My name? I freely give that, as it is a name to be proud of. My name carries meaning to the people. Kára Eiryk. Commander of the elite Valkyrja.

**YOUR REAL NAME.**

My real name? That is my real name.

**IS IT NAHH-TAH-LLH-EYE? IS IT REALLY? KÁRA IS WHAT YOU ARE GOING  
TO GO WITH?**

Kára could feel a pressure building behind her eyes as images of moments within her life came flooding back.

You... You can't do this. I have worked so hard to break free of my oppressors. I have worked hard to be rid myself of the shame, and the guilt. I am not a lie! You cannot erase who I am just like that.

**WANT TO BET?** The man thrust the wooden mug towards her face. **GO ON. JUST ONE.**

**JUST ONE... LITTLE... INDULGENCE AND WILL CONCEDE MY POINT, AND AGREE THAT KARA IS WHO SHE SAYS SHE IS. THAT SHE IS NOT A LIE, AND THAT HER WORLD IS EXACTLY AS SHE NEEDS TO SEE IT.**

What? Are you fucking with me? Kára found a strength in her body to strike the mug away from her.

You cannot toy with my mind like this.

I will not succumb to whatever devilry you command. I will find you, rescue you, kick the shit out of you, and then have my soldiers rescue you from me.

**BIG WORDS FROM THE BIG WOMAN. I HAVE BEEN PRACTICING THESE ARTS FOR AGES NOW. LONG BEFORE YOU WERE SUCKLING ON YOUR MOMS TIT.**

**YOU DESERVE ALL THAT IS COMING TO YOU. EVERY LAST BIT.**

Kára's vision went black and when she came to she stared into a massive black and grey colored beard. Words became clear to her ear, and she could see the Elder speaking to her with grand gestures.

"HAhaHaHA, my companions, should we survive this day, we will help you understand the Karak way! Good luck Commander." The Elder bellowed as he stuck out his large hand to slap Kára on the shoulder.

Kara shot the Elder a cautious smile, and they all parted ways.

Kára blinked heavily as she could feel her body being pulled along by the small crowd of her and without missing a moment she launched into her orders for each batallion. A few runners saluted and took off as the captains

began to peel off leaving only Kára and Ástriðr standing just outside Karas tent.

Kara turned to Astrid and tried to say something, but she couldn't find the words. The look on Ástriðr's face said enough though.

I know we know that we each have our own roles, and as difficult as it is, we are needed elsewhere, but it doesn't make this any easier.

**Kára and Ástriðr gently held hands; It** always seems like these moments only exist for the briefest of time. A kiss held within the mind's eye, lingering in time, but being flooded by all of our senses at once encoding our experience, our moment in time a rich and unique experience shared by two people. Two being the shortest path to the deepest feelings, but what if we reoriented ourselves? What if I were to draw strength through a larger network. I would need one over  $n$  pieces of each person that I am connected to find the kind of love that would make me whole. Each connection providing a depth to an inherently point like entity, but encoded with the timelessness of how we... I assume, felt. **Kara could feel her hand slipping through Ástriðr's fingers slowly. Kára smirked and reeled Ástriðr into her body. Kára's free hand gently found Ástriðr's cheek. She closed her eyes briefly as she could feel their lips seal the moment, sending a fire into their souls. As they parted ways with a kiss, Kára couldn't help but try to soak up every last second she could. The two parted the tent, jogging in the same direction long enough to exchange the briefest of smiles before diverging on to their assignments. Within a few moments Kára came to a stuttered stop, Tros!** forgot the...

**It took longer than she liked to get to the main gate tower; having to jog back to the tent, and collect the artifact, jog back through the throngs**

of people who were being evacuated from their homes, all headed to the mines. So yeah a little frustrated.

When Kára finally made it to the main tower, she found the, smelly, commandants' study.

Kara readied herself as she stepped out onto the cracked stone that lined the balcony. She looked up from the indent she made earlier, to see the horror that would befall them.

*That has to be at least ten thousand paces. Well past the river... whatever it is... it is big*

"Well, this certainly is something new." Kára muttered to herself.

As Káras focus was snapped by a flash of hues of pink, white, and blue as it lit up the horizon. Solace overcoming her in that she knew that she wasn't losing her mind. Plain as day there it is: A light orb befitting a creature this size, dangling from its head along some sort of fleshy cord attached... *I think to its head. I am not sure I want to know what it is for, but I can certainly say it is blinding if stared at*

The comfort of not losing her mind drained quickly as she saw a black mass swarming about the creature. "Colonel," Bófreðr, burst into the study approaching Kára with a huff. "Colonel Eiryk, Ma'am, all soldiers as ordered, Ma'am." Bófreðr reported. Kára could see the ambush that they were trying to execute, and turned back to Bófreðr, who was still saluting.

"At ease captain." Kára said while gesturing with her hand.

Bófreðr eased his stance, and asked, "Commander?"

"Make sure word gets out that no one is to make eye contact with that orb, and to take appropriate precautions." Kára saluted and spun around again pulling a set of thick dark glasses out of the pouch at her waist, and then put them on.

*I am ashamed to admit I did not think of this earlier. I was so focused on everything else I forgot about the spectral angular differential emission sensor. Their dark polished glass reflects a great*

deal of the light coming at them, and passes on a darkened state of the world. It is marvelous tech, that is just so... Simple, yet beautiful. bending of light to our wills rather than being at its mercy. I call 'em shades. Get it? They provide your eyes shade? Haha I so funny. And for those of you who didn't groan, I can always get worse. This monster is going to take at least a few chapters to beat. I mean, I just assume that our lives break up into neat moments, or days, or weeks, chapters, etc. Story arcs that get resolved in a timely manner.

or maybe they don't.

I don't know. I figure we got twenty minutes or so.

## 1.9 – Aftermath

Holy shit I wonder if an interconnected world would lead to a global government without borders. A government whose bureaucracy is not of the elected officials, but of those promoted into their positions of power. Corporations with more collective resources than numerous world recognized governments - I mean inherently some corps would grow to have more say in how a society is shaped than those elected officials.

I figure at their steady pace... they're... Maybe twenty thousand paces... we have... At most, twenty five minutes? How did I not get that right?

**Kara pulled her eye away from the eyepiece of the sextant.**

If the corporate collective controls the messages that pass through the land. You could control the narrative that people march to.

**Kára scratched her head. Holding the sextant in her lap as she leaned against and with her back to a group of chattering officers.**

People will balk at government surveillance but if you have them purchase it... they freely give up their freedoms one by one. Locking themselves into an ecosystem of their choosing of their design based on the circumstances they are born into. Shaped by the society that came before. Some people seeing social mobility as a birthright with how close to the surface they already are. Others still might catch a glimpse of the daylight, some climbing and some falling far. Others still are frozen in place, unable to climb. Each given an opportunity to move, never stopped but by their own design. That doesn't mean those

further up don't have the advantage, they certainly do, but those at the bottom can still get to the top, they just have many more opportunities to fail.

Hmmm... What was that relationship I was supposed to use?

Kara looked into the front sextant, and then through the main viewfinder noticing it looked foggy.

Who had this last? I over estimated.

Kara bit the inside of her cheek, and placed the sextant on the deep brown knotty oak table.

You would never use a majestic pine for a table.

She turned to look at her Captains, all seated passing dinner, and making light chat seated around the table. All except... She stared into the large map of the area that lay across a modest portion of table.

Kára began by clearing her throat softly, "Tah..." Kára coughed, took a drink from the mug closest to her. Cleared her throat once more, "Talík[7] , I want you and your Ætherial knights in position by twenty two thirty... Oh, and just in case something isn't quite as it seems. Also, I need you to spare a few knights to look after the Elder."

Talik pushed herself back from the table, wiped her face, stood, saluted, and said, "Colonel." As soon as Talik had left the tall and wide canvas tent. Kára spoke to rest, "Nevek, have a look at this would ya? I think my last run of numbers might be off. Looks a bit foggy." Kara picked up the sextant and tossed it to the Ranger.

Nevek just snatched that out of the air, with such grace. Her cowl didn't once ruffle once. Sometimes I can't but just think about how interesting of a person they are. And that dark mist veil thing is can get stupid creepy at night. I love it! Sometimes she has it up for so long and I even forget what she looks like.

A devious smile overcame Kara as she looked at Nevek, and said, "Good hunting." A raspy voice made its way through the mist of Neveks mask,

"Colonel, this one will be memorable." Nevek stood, saluted, and finished with "Colonel." Before exiting the tent.

Kara took a deep breath and turned to Bófreðr. She placed a hand on his arm. "Captain, I am going to need you to keep moral up. This has taken a toll on their minds. I know it seems hopeless, but I know that we will make it through..."

"But Colonel... Kára... Just by us even being here."

"I know. Now this business of Serge?"

"Colonel. I understand what you think you saw, but I guarantee you are underestimating him.." Bófreðr stood and leaned his hands on the table.

He would totally be more intimidating if I didn't know who was behind that hulking mass of plate armor. How he sits in that thing still amazes me, but he does, and comfortably, or so I am told.

He once told me that the secret to the armor was these flexible joints and scales. I don't know, all I know is, that I am glad this guy is on my team

Kara smiled playfully as she matched his body language. "Fifty more copper says I beat 'em, an' you."

"Colonel, don't make a fool of yourself by putting your copper ahead of your abilities." Bófreðr said dryly.

Kára giggled briefly, don't forget Tom. He calls his giant hammer, TOM, The original Mjolnir. You know, like that one, but this one is better he says.

They both burst out laughing, no longer able to keep straight faces. Kara moved around the table to face Bófreðr. They put their hands together and Kara spoke softly, "Valfreyja guide us. Be it to your great hall, so be it, but until then." In unison, they finished, "Valkyrja will bring the light."

Kara wished that they could have less, "We might die prayers." and more, "Thank you for this bounty before me."

Kara held onto Bofreth's forearms, and he, hers. "My friend," she began slowly, "We will show them how we truly ride upon the wings of the Valkryja."

Bófreðr nodded, and Kára could feel his fingers wrap firmly and then relax to a gentle embrace. *I care so much about Bófreðr. May Valfreyja protect him.* "I will see you shortly. I have to make preparations." They both smiled and broke their embrace.

"Colonel." Bófreðr said and took his leave.

Kara sighed and leaned against the table.

Kara could feel a low tremble shake the ground.

*Sooner than I thought, I better hurry, that damn sextant* Kara burst through the canvas flaps headed towards the easternmost, and closest to their encampment, entrance into the village. She glanced towards the large empty outcrop. There, she could see the figures of her soldiers, others were getting into position along the ridge.

*They looked so well dug in with a great view overlooking the river. There were fireteams everywhere, all coordinating their fire, those little flame things come in handy. So yeah, they had their positions staggered along the landscape, with the intent to take it when it enters the river.*

Kára broke out into a jog as she smirked looking out to the pockmarked battlefield, and the massive carcass of the, the siren, that's what I am calling it. Kára picked up her pace along the red stained path.

Kara felt waves of pain in her left temple causing her to tumble to the ground. A subtle voice began, Jahhmbee here. Then the voice deepened and revealed a darkness, Jambi, here. Jambi[8] ready to play!"

"What in the name of the nine!" Kara exclaimed before colliding into a stone wall. When she was able to open her eyes she saw what appears to be a dimly lit subterranean cave. Perhaps within the mountain itself?

*There is red rock everywhere.*

Kára's head was pounding as she rose to her feet. Why is the room centrally lit and what... oh... I know what this is. "I have a bad feeling about this."

She said before beginning to pace the dank room. A slight putrid odor emanating from the floor.

Well, considering everything else going on, I am not sure how Jambi fits in, but I really have a bad feeling.

Ástríðr, I... I am not sure I have ever told anyone this, let alone confessed to the sins of the past. But should I leave this plane of existence before reliving my heart... Without being able to voice my truth. Well. I don't know that I could live with that... Ha.

Oww.. Thuhht...

Kàra's body slumped to the ground, her face hitting moist stone with a wet thud.

Progress not perfection, right?

How sober is sober? This question is one that has been bothering me for a while now. What does it have to do with my recovery? What keeps me pointed in the right direction? In one word - Vulnerability.

I have not taken a drink in over four years. That doesn't mean I have been perfect in my sobriety by any stretch of the imagination. I have felt something missing for a while now in terms of feeling like I was on the right path, and I feel that this, even though I have never done this before, I feel that this is a good opportunity to humble myself.

I feel that through this confession, I can help myself stay out of the gutter. The truth will set you free, right? I know that this will be an imperfect version of my truth, but it will finally exist outside of my own head. I know that this won't be perfect, but it will be, and what that is, will only be clear when I am done.

When I try to think back to who I was before the mess of addiction, I have only blurs. I don't know if that is because of the years of abusing my mind with intoxicants, or if I suppressed much of it, I don't know... I just know I haven't unlocked those parts of my mind yet.

Some of my earliest memories related to what would become an obsession for me...

Were of this separation between what was okay to drink at home, and what was not. This one was yucky and this one was okay. This is adults only and these are not. Adult beverages were a family companion wherever you went.

You watch and listen. I wanted to be like these people! So I observed and internalized the rules and rituals and saying to myself that these examples are of how you are supposed to act, and this isn't. My adolescent mind drew distinct boundaries between facets of life. But, there would always be one that is a give, drinking.

I assured myself that this was the way. As the people around me with positions of power and influence, why can they flaunt their successes still be able to drink? How could these people be successful, if they had any sort of problem?

So, I figured I had a pretty good handle on how I should be living my life, and I knew the difference between right and wrong, if I would just apply these teachings, everything would be just fine.

Either way it left me thinking I was the one in the wrong. Well of course I was the problem, they tell me I am out of control. Was I the broken one? Yes, people don't seem to like me being around, as evidenced by lack of friends, and kids who would bully me.

So yeah, I can tell you now, looking back to me as a kid, I certainly believed I was the broken one. And I know I still carry that burden with me today.

I try to hide anything that could be perceived as a flaw, or an annoyance as best as I can, but I cannot seem to shake the feeling that I am at fault for a great deal that goes on around me, and maybe that is why I like to exclude myself from things, unless I know my skills and talents for sure could be of use, but sometimes even then, any hint of self-doubt, and I crawl into myself.

Why can't I make you people happy? Why?!

People picked on me for how I would dress, I just wanted to fit in, so instead I would refuse to wear things that would highlight my shape oh and maybe... Maybe I should look into that drinking thing, I mean I hear all the cadets are doing it. These people liked me, I was one of them, and I can tell you that feeling of acceptance is a siren song in itself. It is like you had the perfect kind of character build or something similar.

I thrust myself into a situations at times even when I shouldn't.  
What I frequently forget is that good intentions only gets you so far.  
But, what I have learned is that wise council comes in many forms.  
And by that, I mean to imply that what is good is marketed by those  
of means. Their influence shaping trends, that in turn spread like  
lightning along the AETHERIAL Multiverse. News here travels cross  
continents in moments. We obviously have rules in place to limit  
communications within the regiment, but sometimes when you start to  
lose your mind you might find yourself glued to those damn portals  
hoping for some sort of connection to the outside world. I've heard that  
something called the "net" used to exist and was very similar in  
concept of our multi-verse.

But I digress. I will tell you what, it is hard to tell what is right and  
what is wrong when you are surrounding yourself with fools.

So fuck it, this qualifies as an appropriate time, right? Became an  
appropriate slogan.

I needed to push it to the limit. There were long conversations about  
life, girls, hopes for the future, vomiting, and crying.

I was going to make it in this world, I had found my path.

I had all these dreams...

one broken heart later - and cliché, give me that drink.

The people who didn't imbibe were the weird ones.

I knew that I was on the right path, I could tell.

Ástríðr, I met Rue at a party.

I thought, I thought that maybe you were just a figment. Foibles of childhood laid bare and needed to be set aside to grow up.

I had convinced myself at this point that this was it, I was committing myself to trying. That through the darkness, we would prevail, and without them I wouldn't be anything, I would simply fade.

At this point I wasn't drinking to have fun anymore. I was drinking to die. I wanted to die so badly. Then maybe I could take the stress I see off my wife.

I couldn't function as a normal person anymore. I would do chores, crying and pleading for it to all to just end.

I remember pleading for help. I just wanted the insanity to stop. She seemed to have a whole heck of a lot more answers than I did.

She told me we were going to go seek refuge amongst our peers. They would show us the way.

I honestly didn't understand what else there could be.

Maybe I can do it.

Okay what did they say?

I could do something else, I could find distractions. "But", and this would be my whiny face, "everyone is having so much fun!"

There were so many days I couldn't handle it.

I cried a lot.

**Kára lost her focus for a moment as she felt the sting of a lash to her bare back.**

I wallowed in pity, afraid to reach out to friends who had gone through this before. I thought, what would these people know about why I wanted to drink myself to death.

I had an obsession that led me into situations I didn't have any business being in, saying things I would ultimately regret, and feel bad about, but couldn't take back.

I began to see myself, and who I had become, and I...

I didn't want to be that person anymore. I wanted to believe that things could be better if I could just somehow grow.

I was losing contact with the groups that helped me along my recovery, but I thought, "That is okay, this is for the better."

I no longer had wise council, and instead held my own council, and copious amounts of Feldehan's finest of weeds.

**A crack of leather against her neck sent a flash along her vision sending everything into darkness briefly. Kára tensed her body.**

I heard something fairly powerful recently. This person said, "that the purpose of going to meetings was first to cease the symptoms, but the real work only happened when we opened ourselves to solving conventional problems with conventional wisdom"

So how sober is sober? I don't know.

I guess I just keep having to remind myself progress not perfection.

That is all I can hope for.

Insert award here.

[Astrid Yeah, right.

So where am I going with this?

[Astrid] Honestly I can't quite tell.

uhgg. Kára bit her lip. that smirk.

That smirk is enough.

How do I explain feeling like I'm stuck?

You gravitate towards one answer while still being pulled on by the rest of the gravity wells. You feebly attempt to escape only to be slung around passageways degrading over time, forcing a rewrite, a change of course towards the next lowest energy state. Ya know, ya do whatever is the easiest.

Each of us make decisions, based on the sum of all evidence we have. We are living each of us in a bubble of those inbetween moments, when we have to endure great stress, or great joy before hopping to the next one. our bodies flooded with hormones.

Ástríðr, I see you in the corner of my vision. Some days I see you, and some days I don't.

So, who am I?

...

Am I Natalie?

Are we one?

ONE AND THE SAME.

Ástríðr, I tell you Rue... She... I... am always going to love her.

[Ástríðr] Shh... Sweetie, progress not perfection. I would expect you to. She was an amazing woman. It definitely had it's moments, but, I think you really need to ask yourself why she thought she had leave.

Hey, whose side are you on?

[Ástríðr] No sides ma'am. Just the facts ma'am. Is it possible for any breakdown in normal relations to happen just "all the sudden?" How many incursions were there prior? How many winners and how many losers? How can anything all one person's fault, ever? Why do you get to be that important?

I feel a lot like I just deserve a lot of what I get. ... My existence at times feels like a farce. Like why couldn't I have been born "normal"? Why did I have to be different? Why do I have to constantly waste time out of my day wondering if I am doing the right things for the comfort of other people.

I don't know if she left me because of how different I was, or if it was just our history of back and forth close minded, distrustful, and sure as fuck not vulnerable communication.

Afraid. We smothered each other.

We were not focusing on being interpreters of our own lives, but instead we were fixated on being the interpreters of other people's lives, especially each other's.

Every story gives a glimpse into their world.

A world that only exists when you look at it, when you interact with it, when you are a part of it. Nothing could exist the way we know it without having it have happened in the way that it did.

The future is not set, and fate is what we make of it.  
What if.

You learned something, but when you learned it alters both how you perceive it as a past, future, and present tense. How much effort and care each of us gives to the individual levers, well that is shaped over what seems like a geologic time scale.

You are experiencing a moment newly remembering, or learning, and misremembering at the same time as bits of the other two draw your focus away from the present.

I oft imagined what it would be like to be standing next to her in a wedding dress. We just couldn't get past the natural order of things.

I couldn't see it from the perspective of losing someone, I felt like I was right there. I this person who wanted to transition into a new phase of life, and most definitely wanted her to be a part of that journey.

I couldn't focus beyond myself. I tried hard to never show that, but I secretly, even from myself, held resentment after resentment for even the most trivial of things. And she was no exception, we were not the most kind to each other over the last half of the union. Right up until..

When she walked. I was devastated. I had lost my companion, I lost sight of what a family should look like. I just wanted to acknowledge my personal truth, and that was not compatible with the life we were building together. The dreams we shared together. Those stolen looks. My brain is constantly flooded by these moments of nostalgia. The moments where we loved each other with such a passion. But I find that I still have to have counterbalance moments that reflect upon the boundaries I am establishing.

We haven't communicated since. And I mean really communicated, like the little details, everything always feels so shallow, but occasionally I catch that smile, that smile that has helped me begin to heal.

It is hard to predict where we will start, and where we will end up; just that we will end up.

I wish it were easy to understand. You can either fight an eventuality or just accept it.

The difference between this and fate? Fate doesn't give you a chance to change its trajectory.

I may have been born this way, but that doesn't mean I must stay this way.

Kàra could feel rough and foreign fingers dig into her armpits as she was lifted and tossed into a partially open and massive, wooden door.

[Ástriðr] And what is it you are trying to change?

Myself.

## 1.10 The Kárák [9]

Kára could feel her body crumple against a large wooden door before continuing on to skid across the rough sandy redstone floor. Her assailant grabbed her by the ankles immediately, a voice from behind bellowed, “Again!”

Her assailant picked her up by the feet and drug her towards a large redstone slab which was suspended by two pillars. Kara kicked furiously breaking a foot free and knocking her assailant back and away.

“I do not fear the likes of you Karak.” Kara whispered feeling defiant as she looked up at the tall, and very intimidating Kárák who spit blood at her.

The black hair of the Karak folded forward from the back of the Karak’s head and snapped shut in front of her face. Instinctively Kara reeled backwards but her could not move any further into the ground. The Kárák opened mouth wide showing her rows upon rows of dagger like teeth. In the blink of an eye the shadow of the Karaks hair receded and Kára could help but think the he had some sort of ability to control his hair, as the hair recoiled and slicked it against his head.

“What... Are you?” Kara stammered.

“I feel yyour ffear creeping in Commander...” The Karak hissed as he knelt down in front of her coming only centipaces away from her face. Kara could feel a sense of unease as the creature knelt forward, stared directly into her eyes, the Karaks pupils blinked, and then the outer set of lids of its eye blinked.

“Youusss... Still don’t undersstand what issth going on yet.”

“No,” Kára sputtered, “but I am sure you will tell me.”

“Oh, yess.” The Kárák said bringing his hand to hers.

The Kárák effortlessly lifted Kára to her wobbly knees.

Kara got a better view of her *twin screws bed* that she had been laying on for the last six hours. The Kárák tugged her by the hand causing Kára the fall face first onto the ground. She could tell her lips scraped the ground but could not feel anything. She felt herself twist herself in the Kárák’s hand and attempt to kick him in a futile effort. The Kárák chuckled as he lifted her off the ground by her hand. She was slammed

against the slab, her body slumping, but her limbs being forced into the shackles attached to the, X shaped slab.

Finally, I got you back. I really checked out there, do you know that place you go where you are like, no-where? You aren't here, nor there, but you just... are. Well that is where I was for the last, month. It is an Aetherial art I picked up when doing a tour of duty at the Blackrock Fjall. I befriended a strange and cooky wizard while I was there, and quite honestly I don't think I've ever told anyone this... But... I helped him escape. There was no trace of him being a prisoner ever by the time I was done with the mainframe.

I am not sure I was allowed to say that last bit. So... let's just forget I said anything. Oh hey what does this knuckle dragger want.

Kára's face snapped to, a slight flush crossing her face, reducing some of her inflammation along her face.

"Too tight for you? You may not fear me but you will find fear in what we can do. The priests of Myrkr no longer will skulk in the shadows biding our time. This is our time, our moment. Long have you and your kind forsaken our lands and left our people to languish on the frontier... We shall bring about order to the land, and with it an end to your lopsided views.

Kára played into the role she had been playing previously, I call it the defiant punching bag. Takes a beating but will not relent, will not yield to brute force. They were never planning on killing me. And clearly too dumb to comprehend the ole Rusty Routine, his words not mine. I like to call it a vacation.

Sure your body endures more than you would want it to, but you can bounce back, might take a bit of rest, and a lot of attention from a

healer, but you make it through without having to remember anything. That time is just replaced by serenity. The hard part is, the longer you stay in the more your mind starts to destroy itself. Rusty, told me the longest he was able to hold vacation mode, was sixteen hours. Or for the numbers people out there approximately, seven hundred and twenty hours per month, and time allotted is that of one month per every six hours real time. You are allotted sixteen hours in vacation mode. So will accumulate sixteen RT to six RT, so about two and one third units. Which would translate into two and one thirds months. I mean who wouldn't give up a full day of real time to just have four months of serenity.

See what I did there? Oh... what is he saying?

**“...Believe it or not, you are going to help us. The portal to the AETHER will open and Odinn be damned, Valfreyja be damned!**

**They have forsaken this realm. It is time that we reclaim what was rightfully ours!”**

Kára's voice shifted towards her normal voice, “Can I get an oh yeah?”

Kára summoned a deep strength that burst her through the metal shackles at her feet. She went to leap to her feet when a large hand struck her back and slammed her against the now cracked slab. “Oh yeah?”

The Kárák grabbed her torso and jerked her downwards causing Kára to scream out in pain as she could feel a disconnection between her arms and her shoulders.

“As I was saying,” The Kárák began to pace in front of her before slowly continuing, “Our brethren have been abandoned. Once we ceased being useful we were just cast aside.

Either they don't care about our plight, or they are dead.

They better be.”

Kára spit out blood towards the floor and began meekly before finding her strength, “I said can I get an Oh Yeah?”

“OH YEAH!” A rotund man burst through the wooden door behind them. Doesn't he see that? I mean come on He is right behind you. He just burst through the door and shouted, Kára blurt out OH, YEAH!.”

A slightly confused look crossed the Elders face before he grabbed Kára's face squeezing her cheeks.

“Let it be known that in a time of crisis, the guardians shall restore balance to the realm! Etched on Odinn's Tomb” The Káarak spoke.

Kara's eyes drew wide, and the Elder dropped her sending her hands slamming against the top of the shackle. and she choked out building her energy, "Should the guardians awaken, thy queen they shall seek.”

“Exactly! They will finally uncover Valfreyja's location, and we can finally let Yggdrasil do, as a world tree does, it devours.” The Elder said flatly.

“No! You can't! I will not allow it! The last time the guardians came, our world was set asunder. We cannot let the sapling grow! She is the only reason we are all alive.”

The Káarak chuckled, "So the stories say, but who writes those stories? We have uncovered Odinn's true teachings. Who is to say your teachings are superior? Odinn sought to cleanse this realm, but he didn't count on the guardians. Those pesky Knights you'd knight at night right after being in a fight. And Valfreyja?" The Káarak finished with a laugh.

He sure likes to hear himself speak.

"The Karak desert provides a plenty, as did that expedition inside Lidless Eye. The Alfater truly blessed us this day! Showing us the way to his hidden scriptures, to the horde you conquer skirmish, after agonizing skirmish, all to lead... you... to... here." The Káarak stopped and thrust his large finger into her chest.

Kara drew in a deep breath, trying to focus on her immediate<sup>[3]</sup> surroundings Kara could see probably ritualistic, purple candles, and yeah... I am trying to do the thing again I figure he has got another two weeks worth of masculine rage to get out. What about my knowledge of the Aetherial? Surely<sup>[4]</sup> there has to be a way out of this.

But all Kara could do is watch as a group of people stepped forward. Blending into the mix the Káarak slipped into the group. Each person took

up positions that would shift every few moments. She couldn't see their faces, but she saw thick beards, and black hoods.

Gah, stupid eye socket filling with blood!

I can see a large large person's back He takes something and begins puffing away. The air is thick with smoke. Is that Feldehan's Desert Delight?

Kara followed the Karak as he circled the room. The fat cigar glowed a golden orange as he puffed, giving enough light for but just a glimpse at his beardless face.

I bet I have a couple options... I could use seduction, claim that I wish to defect. Nah I could...

Go along with anything he says... Eh

I could... Kill everyone in the room...<sup>[5]</sup>

Kara could feel the table tilt taking strain off of her wrists, but felt new shackles being affixed to her legs. The large wheels spun and spun as it slowly ratcheted down forcing her to stretch her legs out across the ground.

Kara looked up to see her captors parting. Drawing into two semi circles on the outside of the Káarak, and her.

The figure stepped forward, puffing away dropping a bit of ash on her face as he stepped across the slab that was now fully sunken into the floor. He puffed away filling the space with even more smoke. He stepped out onto the slab, and then off again causing it to slightly rock after finding his footing along her torso. The Káarak added a spring to his dismount each pass. She was determined to not give him the satisfaction of her pain. She looked up to his face but a blurry patch began to give way to a chiseled jaw full of stubble. Maybe I am finally bleeding out? Things are just a tad less blurry... Soo... More like woozy, and blurry okay concentrate...

Did he start yet? Is he talking? I can't tell anymore.

"I have heard great things about you Colonel..." ope, heard that one.

ugh.

"Valkyrja leading the charge... And what charge should we levy in return? Hmmm?" The man stopped atop the table. She felt a quick sharp pain in her leg. She grit her teeth ever so slightly, but quickly regained composure, and put a smile on her face.

It was too late, he had caught her wince and began bounce in place, looking for her pain. Seriously guy? This is how you get your rocks off?

one thing at a time.

Breathe.

"You get a thrill out of this don't you?" Kara asked wheezing and coughing.

The man knelt down on the table and brought his face in close to hers. "Here's the thing." The foul stench of his last meal and smoke wafted into Kara's nostrils.

"Maester Arturös' protégé stands between us and progress. i.e. that is to say, his son is in the way. But..." He punctuated his statement by moving in even closer making his square face appear overwhelming.

Arturos

"It is said that when the Bifrost was sealed seven crystals broke free and landed upon our realm. A few continents burst forth from the ground shimmering like starlight as they floated.

We were cut off from Yggdrasil we were cut off from Asgard!

The least we could do was unleash the Skripi upon you heathens one dimensional rift per island, to protect them from you. That when the time was circumstances were just a traveler would come, and Ragnarok would be upon us. Did you know your precious council member Arturos was there? When this all happened? He was the one who requested that Skripi confined to the seven realms, with room for the stray hitchhiker who would find its way deep out of the containment zone, maybe set up a new

colony. Who knows? But what I do know is that the treaty has been violated. One of the seven was discovered in Fjallheim. It sent up a cosmic beacon that gave several of us splitting headaches for a week until we learned to tune it out.”

The Karak spoke, and then tapped her face with his dirty boot, making sure to scrape the side of his boot along her cheek.

“What do you mean?” She asked coldly.

“In the once, vibrant city surrounding the world tree, then General Arturös along with the council of nine watched as the bifrost disintegrated at Valfreyja’s feet. They had put their faith in her, and she abandoned them just as Odinn abandoned us. You couldn’t imagine the feeling of the ground beginning to shake and lift into the air. The Bifrost was gone the sapling of Yggdrasil stalled eternally by the great Valfreyja.

We will reopen the bridge and let the sapling through to each of the nine forsaken realms!”

“Did you ever stop and wonder how they float?” The man said as he happily paced on the table. “The Fjallisles as you Northerners like to say.” The Kárák said and being so pleased with himself he had the wheel cranked down two more notches.

Kara felt her legs extend in awkward directions, and could feel a sharp pain of something tearing in her right leg.

“So anyways, continents don't float without some serious Ætherial energy being in play, and what I want to know, Colonel...” The man said and then stooped down low again.

Kara could feel the Karak's lewd gaze upon her, and then she felt the warm moist air from his breath as he talked at her. She felt woozy, and couldn't make out all of his words.

He took another sip of tea and exhaled in her face again. Kara felt a even more woozy, but snapped to a sloppy upright at ready position upon hearing, “Colonel Eiryk.”

“Aye.”

“At what point in time did the Ætherial College obtain the true first crystal? When was the first guardian awoken?”

“During the second crest of Valhalla, on the eve of the Autumn Harvest Festival. The exact dates are not know, but thirty or forty years ago.”

“Stop!”

“And where did the College obtain the crystal and first hear of its existence?”

Kara dutifully replied, "Operation Fire-Walker was an expedition to meet with the Brenna-Folk on the eve of the Autumn Festival. The festival serves as both a social event, and business opportunities."

"Stop!"

The Karak drew in a deep breath.

"Tell me exactly where the Æthelial College obtained the crystal."

"The Brennafolk hold their annual harvest festival on rotating intervals, but this happened to coincide with that of the Midgardian Autumn Fall Festival."

"Stop. What does this have to do with anything?"

"This particular festival coincided with the Fire-Festival. The entire tribe gathered within the islands shadow. This sacred ritual site is, perhaps the Brenna-folk's only asset. A simple yurt with a reflecting pool. Which led to the floating island." *Hi I am back. Did you miss me? You wouldn't believe the amount of garbage these guys will eat up.*

I would wager that the Brennafolk could match Midgard in a show of strength, but their nomadic nature could give them the advantage... Always on the move, never needing to leave assets behind for the enemy to capture or to feed its brood. The curious aspect of each island is its temporal place within our universe. There seems to be a energy field of some sort that if the Skripi were to move beyond the field it would kill them over time.

“Ah yes but you forget that those egg farms you raided along the way, those weren’t just for food. I would imagine that perhaps one or two eggs may be sealed away with just a little extra care... Might... Just... Hatch so to speak, and poof nobody truly knows where the quarantine fields are now... do they?”

*ugh..*

*Look at this knucklehead eating it up.<sup>[6]</sup>*

"Once the operative was invited into the inner sanctom they waited for the elders to open the Æthelial seal which guarded the chamber of fire. Once open, only the holiest of the Burnt, may enter. How the Æthelial

College operative pulled it off so cleanly is truly the most interesting aspect."

He grunted and slapped her across the face. Momentarily the Karak's robe slipped away from his forearm and Kara could see the ornate looking M. "STOP"

The Kárák poked her in the chest again.

To what end shall befall that hand? Maybe fisting himself one last time?

Kara paused for a moment trying to read the Karak as he stood up and began to stroke his chin.

She ignored it after a moment and continued, "The crystal was, interestingly enough, sustaining a literal fire-wall, between the Brennafolk and the Skripi lands. Captain Arturös and his father General Arturös had made it this far, they were trusted honorary members of the Brennafolk post defeat of Brenna-Beard and his, uh gang. So... Uh... they just asked to borrow it, yeah! They asked the Brenna-folk to borrow their crystal, and they would be right back in like ten, fifteen minutes, twenty tops. Easy, no...

It was a no sweat five... hour ritual, and a ten hour sacrifice ritual after that, so many prayers you know? They were praying that they may enkindle Ragnarok."

"Stop!" The Karak shouted stomping his foot sending a shockwave of pain through Kara's leg.

"It was pilfered by the Æthelial college during the last great war... Only the Alves knew of its existence. The college has an encampment half way between Slavers Bay, and Kalderstrond. Get there. You will await my instructions.

Kara bobbed her head submissively, and looked up at the Karak who spoke again, "Our aims are not too dissimilar. We both seek the crystals. But, we will not let you herald in Ragnarok; your dark guardians shall never exist again!" or at least that last bit is what I wanted to tell him

I think I heard most of the other stuff, and I maybe mumbled the rest But, of course don't take my word for it.

Kara laughed, winced, and then laughed again before a golden shimmer covered her body. *It is about time.*

"Well you see." He motioned for the wheel to be turned two more clicks.

Kara struggled to breathe, but caught her breath after a few moments, to which the Karak spoke, "You have your orders Colonel. Jambi, Jambi,... Jambi."

*ohhh tros, no way, a big red, like blood soaked, like taking a bath in the tros. Blasts through the door sending wood everywhere, and I tros you not. He screams "OHHHHH YEAH!"*

The fuck?

*oh, my saviors. My best friends here to save me... Ástriðr, and Bofreth. one an angel and the other, a hulking grape like creature*

*Are you frickin' serious? Why woul...? okay... okay. I can ask later.*

Kára could hear Bofreth shout, "In good faith release her from the table... Do you get me?" Kára hears Bofreth shout. The hooded figures are encircling the Kárák, and slowly bleeding off into the shadows.

Kára could see an annoyed look creep onto the Karaks face as he motioned for the latch on the wheel to be set free. The wheel moved in reverse as Kara began to feel the tension decrease.

Kára could feel her body being lifted away from the torture mechanism, by an angel to my right, and a grape to the left. I love you both, this wasn't a for sure mission... Kára could feel her body drop landing on the cool bouldered floor. *ow...*

Kára felt her body be lifted onto Bofreth's back. "Weee I'm on a grape! Can I get an Oh, Yeah?" Kára blurted out with slurred speech.

Kára's focus shifted quickly upon making out Ástriðr's voice. She is talking to acolytes as the three of them ran next to our grape friend

here. Isn't crazy how manuverable medicine can be? Tortured for three weeks, and your first visit is on the house!

“There...” Ástriðr peeled away at various blood stained scraps of cloth that still clung to Kára’s body. Remember that thing I bought? Anti gratuitous clothing, an Aetherial spell so powerful, it literally touches everyones brain and rewrites a portion of it. I get choose who sees what, and when. Right now... I don't have much of a choice, but these people... They are my family. Oh... She is whispering “...on her right thigh. A dark and purple spot has been spreading here, here, and here. Kára watched listlessly as she saw Ástriðr physical body separate from her Aetherial self. Can you imagine preparing for this kind of training? Kára began to get dizzy as she saw Ástriðr close her eyes and lay her hands upon her body. Ástriðr opened her hands, a pale blue glow forming and pulsating with what Kára imagined was every heartbeat. Kára could feel a cascade of energy course through her body.

Ástriðr and company paused in an alcove, somewhere on thirty five I'm sure... Go to the mines they say, have a few laughs with the boys they said. They never tell you about the torture. Kára blinked listlessly, her hand gesticulating wildly to get Ástriðr’s attention who spoke with concern, “The dark spot is no longer spreading, but it did not go away. We have to keep her stable enough to get her back to my hospital.”

“At least it doesn't hurt as bad as it did.” Kára said in a raspy voice.  
Is this really something that he would do?

He is a war hero. War heroes do not do these kinds of things do they?

How do you think he ascended to the Aetherial council?

Fair enough

Kára shifted back into what felt like her body, "It is time," A raspy voice began drawing her attention to it. "It is time to finally turn our swords from each other to the common threat. We couldn't have done it without Colonel... uhh... Maester Arturös the second's regiment to drive back the hulking beast, and ultimately defeat the creatures."

"We are certainly are in agreement there." Kára found herself saying automatically, as she stared down at the sandwich in her hand. She looked at it with trepidation, little legs poked out from the sides. But she didn't care and took a bite. Relishing in the sensation of food for the first time in *What seemed to be months. Maybe some day I will tell you where I go.*

Kara looked up from her food and focused on the words the Elder was saying through his chewing, "We are in agreement in so much as we are on the same side, but the games of men do not stop on account of one man's legacy. He still chose you over his son."

Kara felt her mood sour the direction the conversation was going, and she tried to steer it elsewhere, "Well, and if you pardon my blunt nature, but this line of inquiry is best saved for him. The 2nd Fortification regiment is due here within the day. We drive 'em out, they build you up."

The elder shook his head and grunted, "But they are already here."

Kára spoke with confidence still staring at her sandwich, "At kveldi skal dag leyfa[10]. A victory is only a victory after you have won. The Skrípi, should they not be driven back... Will return. They are not to be underestimated."

"I agree, but" Bófreðr began, but Kara cut him off with her hand and said, "We are all but pawns in a larger game, but right now a foot foreword is what we all need. I hope in the name of the Nine, that we seal these demons away."

Kára could see a large smile rip across Elder Njorn's face before a great belly laugh surfaced. When it finally subsided he spoke with a joy in his voice, "I can see why he chose you."

Kára was confused, and slightly looked around to see if others understood.

Bófreðr spoke up, "These battles were most certainly decisive victories, for the first time the Skripi had a direct route from the northern port to the southern sea. A vital supply line, and we kept it open, we held them back!"

“But why? Why now? The Skrípi has never, at least since the swarm had begun to spread, been driven this far back into their territory.” Kára bit her lip as she thought.

“Perhaps,” The Elder began, “Perhaps the universe is trying to tell us something. We just need to head south to get it.”

“Yes, we will head south.”

“Commander! Bófreðr shouted.

The Elder finished, “The Ætherial’s know more than they let on. You will hear from ussss...”

Kára looked around to see if anyone else was seeing this, but everyone else was talking to each other, or just quietly eating, or talking and eating, my favorite. No one sees a thing huh This is clearly meant for me to remember who is in control.

“I...” Kára put her hand up, and then stood looking at her captains. The Valkyrja still have a long mission ahead of them. We need to make our way to the desolate coast. I can’t exactly tell you why, but I can tell you we will be coming across some very protective Ætherial knights.

We will have to contend with the Skrípi with whom we will destroy at every opportunity. We will drive them down through the Hallr Canyons all the way to the mouth of Vestr Kaldr Smár Ljómi, and back to where this invasion began. We are going to retake Kaldrheim[11] , and reclaim the gate.”

Kára's attention was snapped back to the Elder at the arrival of one of his servants. The young man leaned in and spoke to Elder Njorn before disappearing again. The look on the Elder’s face had soured.

"It seems that the commander of the 2nd Fortification Regiment wishes to speak to, Colonel Eiryk." The Elder spoke softly.

"If you will excuse me." Kára rose before continuing, "We thank you for your hospitality. Bófreðr." Kára gestured to Bófreðr, "You are with me. Nevek, Talik I want you to bolster our forces on the ramparts, and I need a situation report from the rangers."

"Yes...? Colonel." They both replied, bowed and left. Kára turned to the elder, "Apologies, but I must cut our visit short." Kára said politely as she rose and took a slight bow. As she stood she could see her officers following suit.

"Yes, yes by all means. When you are done with him, if you wouldn't mind sending in that boy... so that I might find out how he plans on helping my people."

"Absolutely..." Kára said awkwardly before exiting.

As Kára exited the Elders home she could feel a sense of her anxiety build. *I've always felt uneasy around Arturos II.*

Bófreðr placed his hand on Kára's shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze. "Tell me you have a good reason for sending us to a place where the sheer act of crossing the border violates Council directive."

"Uh, huh... Visions of torture. Now shhh..." Kára acknowledged but was on autopilot as they walked. *I mean this Maester Arturos the first's son, and I... I was chosen for this command over him.*

Her train of thought was truly broken as she caught sight of the Colonel.

"Kára!" Rang out a deep and overly confident voice.

## **1.11 Kára and Ástriðr In the morning! Part One!**

## 1.12 – Kára and Ástríðr: New Beginnings

Mmmmm... I love when you do that Kára squirmed as Ástríðr's fingers danced along Kára's back.

Ástríðr's gentle touch was a soothing contrast to the gritty sand that had managed to find its way into their tent. Bed. It is in the bed... The grandeur of their massive bed; only a momentary reprieve in moments of turmoil.

But no! Spoiled by that damned sand...

I hate the sand.

The soft murmur of the desert wind outside whispered through the canvas walls, carrying the distant sounds of the encampment stirring to life.

"Bad dreams again?" Ástríðr's voice was soft and filled with concern as she sat up, her hand still resting on Kára's back.

Kára nodded slightly, "but, it's fine." She said knowing her eyes were betraying her propped up answer.

The dawn's light only seemed to accentuate the point where Kára could feel a single tear drift down the side of her cheek. "Just the usual," she replied, trying to dismiss her discomfort with a half-hearted smile and rubbing her eyes. "Besides, we gotta figure out how to get out of here. We don't have time for my drama."

Ástríðr wasn't fooled. She knew Kára too well, knew the weight she was carrying and the memories that haunted her.

"Do I need to Sam Wise you?" Ástríðr asked with a serious look in her eyes before continuing, "Even commanders need to share their burdens."

The two women both looked at each other with squinted eyes of acknowledgement and a smile before giggling at the absurdity.

Kára pulled away from Astrid, shifting her body so her feet touched the ground. She flicked her wrist and was bathed in a brilliant light as she stood. Kára was compelled to do queer things to get a rise out of Ástríðr. She wanted to make sure she could strike a pose worthy of the clothes she

bared. The light peaked, Kára shuffled her legs to get into position and smiled as the light dissipated leaving Kára in one of her favorite flirty, but casual robes.

Might be similar to that Greek era if that makes more sense to you interpreter.

Kara was dressed in an elegant white robe, and she owned it.

Astrid giggled. "You don't always need to do that."

Kára countered, "I dunno sweetie... Think about the archives of this being... Think about all of those depictions of those colorful worlds. I feel it would be a shame not to honor them somehow..."

*Fair enough...*

Kara continued, "Quite the contrast to those depictions they show of the sand people on that Tattoo planet. Oh, man those saber things... We have to figure out a way. The AEther is kinda like that force thing, right?"

*Oh you weren't done; Yeah, I think it was some sort of star war I think, I am sure we can go review the archives for how we might go about that, but seriously. I really need you to focus on what I am trying to say!!*

And what is that?

*Kára... We need to talk...*

Aren't we doing that, not doing that now?

*Yes, but.*

You said yes!

okay so, I was thinking, and imagine this could pass as sultry clothing in those Greek depictions, I mean the whole point is to have fun here, I don't want to completely kill the vibe, what do you think?

*Kára.*

And besides no one is literally around.

Sooo...

*Kára, I need you to listen to me...*

No, please. Let me get my bearings first.

Say, do you want any of that coffee like drink we tried to make?

*Yes please, but this time can we not use the cat beans? But, seriously dear, we need to talk about what is going on here...*

That sounds heavy.

*It kind of is, and not Doc B. heavy.*

Kára began to rummage through some of their supplies. “Do you ever wonder about...” Kára found herself starting, before chuckling to herself, “Ahhhh, ha!”

Kára's gaze drifted to the tent's entrance, where the fabric flapped slightly, allowing glimpses of the harsh yet majestic desert landscape outside. She found herself just staring into the opening, before returning her attention to the brew that she was mixing.

Kara broke the silence between them, “This is such a strange land of extremes, much like the life they led—filled with challenges, but... the beauty, danger and opportunity... Sometimes it is easy to lose sight of that kind of stuff...”

Ya know I was thinking about how life is all about the change.

*Umm... Duh?*

No, I mean always being consumed with the future, which is another way of saying time zero and there is a time final that we want to get to, always. Compelled to. We don't get to pause in time and move in space. Why?

*Okay... Uhh...*

And the stories we create... It is all history, always a measure of change that we can only see in one direction.

Time has oriented our perception of it such that we may only see backwards. A rigorous study of the past enables the prediction of the future, but never the certainty of seeing it.

It is as if our observation of time precludes it from existing.

*Okay Kára.*

Okay... umm... In non-Kára speak...

With the way time moves forward when say, we read say a book for example at first glance if we read it backwards, um... It doesn't make a lot of sense.

*Yeah...*

But if you look at the book as just a set of information that has no intended purpose other than a set of information, it could be read forwards or backwards and it would make sense as time goes on, or whatever it is that goes on...

Either way, there is a process happening outside of our spatial boundaries that make it so we are only aware of our current moment, but, and this is the freaky part, the set of information about where we are going, and how we will get there is flowing to the interpreter outside our space-time reality. Meaning they can see bits and pieces into our future that we can't even imagine yet.

I think...

*Whoa, whoa whoa there missy. Drugs?*

No. No just hear me out; imagine that our set of information exists, and every piece of possible information is contained within our universal set, and it just needs to be accessed somehow.

*And.... you are losing me.*

There would be... ummm... Some sort of known informational resolution maybe?

*Not better.*

I don't know, but the interpreter would only get to access bits and pieces of that information, our information

*So how does that help us?*

Well, I figure that the interpreter must be stuck trying to piece together all of the information that they are receiving from our side and trying to integrate it into whatever archival transference modality they deem appropriate.

*I can only imagine we are like a jigsaw-puzzle given these creatures archival units.*

But! I think this is how we will get out.

*What do you mean?*

Well... think about it. The interpreter must be constantly bombarded with images, or sayings from our universe as they touch ours. I think in their language it would be something akin to pop culture. But instead of them getting highlights and certifiable grade A material,

they get us stuck then; stuck now, just seem to be stuck with one another.

*What? Are you sure this isn't drugs?*

The..... Maybe, the point being, that in our time.

Right here.

Right now.

It doesn't really matter.

The point is that as long as time moves elsewhere, laterally to our time gradient... I think this is the key to how we will free ourselves.

If we imagine that while we are not being interpreted by the interpreter, there are quantum variations changing little things over time within our universe. What seems to be a barrier at one point in time for the interpreter, is an indistinguishable blip, and vice versa as to where the flow of time is directed.

*Seriously Kara, this isn't a whole lot better. I am really trying right now sweetie, but...*

*[[I was trying. You just kept spouting nonsense.]]*

When the interpreter is not interpreting our reality, we, our universal information set or whatever, our wave function so to speak... It has a chance to relax into a lower energy state.

In this state all things exist within our universe. Laterally we move along our story, until the interpreter comes in and says okay we are going to pick up where we left off. Thousands upon thousands of

possibilities vanishing because the interpreter picked us up at different times in their linear time, different everything. What was that saying we found?

*The story doesn't change but we do. But you are saying the story changes and we aren't changing.*

No, nothing like that. Think of it as the story is changing constantly, what was once what we were going to say is now what we are saying. These are all just systems bound by energy, and the rate of change of information.

I think the closest the interpreter can get to imagining this is to say it like the universe is in its own energy well. Almost like a multi-dimensional singularity that only moves through time?

And the information that falls in and is communicated through these singularities; are nothing but the roots of Yggdrasil. Stretching through the soil of Heim... At least this is what comes to my mind.

Hmmm...

*Oh, yes. Indeed...*

I can hear your sarcasm oozing from that.

*I think you might be going down a rabbit hole. You had me somewhat, but you are starting to lose me again.*

I know, but...

You know that... Well do you remember K3? I think I just needed to think out loud.

*I understand dear.*

*I think.*

oh um... I know!

How about a strange set of interconnecting pipes? Pipes with branches sprouting up at seemingly random times? And we are the packet of information running through it?

*It's fine sweetie, you can let it out...*

Hey, I... I am trying

*I know you like to think out loud, or at least with an audience, and this is all speculation; fun to imagine, I get it.*

*But you have been ignoring me for quite some time now, and it is getting frustrating.*

*You don't need to try to make me understand it; I will just do the best I can to follow, and perhaps ask some helpful questions that might help you work through it enough to help me understand.*

Thank you!

*You had best find that respect for me that you misplaced.*

oh

oh my gods.

I am so sorry!

Thank you!

*What? Don't be sorry, just fix the behavior.*

That was a tad harsh, but I do want to seriously, thank you. Without you pushing me, and giving me the space to grow... I don't think I could have made it this far.

*Well, maybe save your thanks.*

I know, but... I was reading in the archives of this vessel, and I just couldn't help but think about the magic of the universe that this Einstein person spoke of... okay. okay. Can I dive into one last thing

*It's fine; we have time... ish...*

What do you mean ish?

*It's fine, please continue.*

So, ummm, this fabric of the universe so to speak... It... uh...

The interpreters archives indicate that worlds and stars and singularities are all similar in that if you imagine everything just kinda sitting on a sheet viewed from above we see our orbits around other things.

And viewed differently you can see spacetime being stretched. If we imagined all objects within this universal sheet as just masses of information; tunneling through the soil of the Aetherial... maybe...

So if something is not much more than a pocket...

*A scab?*

I don't know.

*I think you might be on to... something... but I can't quite put my finger on it.*

The interpreter's archives, which are quite incomplete, indicate that the Aetherial Arts or as they call it: physics.. This physics stuff is like the rules of how things play out on a universal scale. And from what I can glean is that it has to be somehow the same for everyone.

usually

*Okay you are losing me; no you lost me. I think this is a bit much and I really think that we should turn our attention to us.*

[[ *Trusting the process haha* ]]

[[ *Really did you just do that to the Interpreter?* ]]

[[ *They will get over it. Besides why ruin the stops along the way with too much information? You and I both know that mystery makes the journey more interesting. Kind of like those Honor runs you kept attempting in B&B. How many times did you start over?* ]]

[[ *You have a fair point* ]]

[[ *Why did you keep starting over? Or grabbing new mods to rebalance the game?* ]]

[[ *I wanted to be challenged with owning my mistakes, one way or another. Like that time I blew up the people at the Grymforge wall because I thought throwing the bomb would just, you know toss it, not light it and toss it* ]]

[[ *So tossing explosives; unstable ones at that; that makes sense to you, but not why would people get upset when you try to steal their idol in plain sight?* ]]

[[ I got away. I learned lessons in both instances. I am just a slow learner at times. Oh, I think they are wrapping it up. ]]

*Kara, if we can't free ourselves from this prison, neither of us will... Did... you hear that?*

Hear what? I can certainly agree to the premise, however I think light of current issues we should table that with a mutual understanding of fuck you, and turn our thoughts back to how to get out of here.. This time in maybe a more productive manner.

[[ Fuck you too. ]]

[[ Shh. ]]

I wonder if the slice of the universe that we traverse through, is almost like a sheet of... A projection of?

Something of the universe in time, and if you travel along that sheet, or whatever you must obey the rules of the Aetherial from one moment to the next, unless you get moving near the speed in which the universe expands, then things get..

Weird.

*Yeah, okay, but what about the fact that the Bifrost exists?*

I haven't the foggiest.. I feel like it must have to do something with K17, but I can't be sure. But from what I figured out, we figured out, we shouldn't be able to do that, if what this person says is true.

So how does this help?

*Took the words right out of my mouth.*

Maybe they are on a different slice of the Aetherial garden, and their Aetherial is different from ours?

Maybe?

I mean we can conjure things, study the Aetherial arts. They can't do any of those things.

True.

These urflings do seem quite inept in that regard. Maybe they are on a different sheet of the universe or a different branch of Yggdrasil.

As you say. It does make some definite sense to me.

[[ Did you just say urfling? It's Urth-ling; no er-th-ling. ]]

[[ Naughty. We are trying to watch... ]]

[[ Promise? ]]

[[ Yes, now shhh... ]]

Maybe the Aetherial-physics there is different than it is here?

Or maybe what is interpreted as magic to them is science to us.

Maybe they are just backwards.

Fair point, these people seem to be obsessed with how things relate to their perspective of the universe.

I am not sure if that makes them backwards or not.

Hmmm... Yeah, I suppose they could view us as backwards too.

What if this clerk person was only partially right in that physics remains the same locally-globally, but a phase shift in one or another direction along a branch around things would just change slightly. That change would have consequences for how things form as we would think of it, but what if the physics in that phase shift universe is self-contained physics.

*Are you back on the tubes idea?*

Yeah, I don't think it is too far from how to interpret Yggdrasil's infinite root system... if that makes sense.

*I mean kinda, yeah.*

If we are in a shunt off the main branch we want to be on, how do we progress time and get back into our reality?

*How do you mean progress time? We don't control time Kára.*

I know we don't... but Yggdrasil is outside of time.

*Sooo... Are you thinking of riding the shunt somehow?*

Pocket universes like this coalesce when the conditions for the universe to form occur, naturally.

*But this isn't natural.*

Precisely. When this universe was formed and certain kinds of laws of the Aetherial-physics of sorts were baked into it... So too were the things in it.

*Including us.*

Everything and nothing exists all at once here.

But as Yggdrasil has been given the signal that a new root has started it is sending signals telling the root to stretch into the Aetherial soil around it.

*But this wasn't supposed to be here by Yggdrasil's will... Soo... Depending upon the resistance it faces, that would determine how long that root would last.*

That is what my mind is hypothesizing.

*I could imagine brand new roots being fit for planets, some would be fit for the Aetherial. Life etc... All dependent upon what kind of Aetherial soil of sorts it encounters.*

*But there would have to be voids of some sort. Pockets where universes could burst into existence, but that energy doesn't flow quite right so nothing happens. A zero-sum energy exchange on the universal scale. Some laws being baked into some universes producing...*

*...nothing.*

Dead on arrival.

*Do you think if we got to this world's Yggdrasil we could hitch a ride somehow?*

I am not entirely sure, but I think it might be our only shot.

*I don't know exactly where it is...*

That's okay...

*What do you mean that is okay?*

This is my thought... If we are trying to navigate the stars of the grand design How do we get from point A, here, to point B, back where we should be?

*Yes, Kara. That is what I've been saying all along; and what I wanted to talk to you about!*

I do hear you; Hmmm...

I wonder if you aren't on to something with the root... What if the essence of Yggdrasil's root manifests itself as an actual tree.

*You think because it flows... I mean fractals have no beginning or end when viewed within the dimensions it exists; only because of time do we see a pattern stretch. Oh my goddess...*

*The Bifrost.*

I would suspect you could only travel to or through or along perhaps, certain branches where the physics is almost like a harmonic of our own

*Kinda like octaves in music?*

Yeah kinda what I was thinking about

*You really love this stuff don't you.*

You know it

But what I can't quite figure out...

Hmmm...

*What are you digging into the interpreter's files for?*

The interpreter uncovers our history through exploration of us, just as we do of them, and if they are determined to mine our universe for information, then I am going to as well of theirs.

See what I can't pull out of it that could help us get out of this place.  
*What are you looking for exactly?*

unfortunately for the interpreter, but fortunately for us... They cannot see the files we pull, or the depth to our lives, only these brief informational exchanges that they transcribe. Images flashing in their head, in no way of possibly capturing the depth to our universe.

We only cast our universes shadow onto theirs.

*I would suspect that the delivery of our story onto their universal information stream... uhh... would be one of those harmonics you are suggesting... of... of universal information transport!*

Yeah... Yeah... Something like that.

Stories are just streams of information, just... Changing... Depending on how you look at the streams of data of course.

*Oh... Yes... Of course... I am curious though....*

Yeah?

*Different mediums then should act as glimpses into a universe upon itself in different ways...*

*The poets in the grand amphitheater... Their acting on stage... Only a glimpse into the stories certain universes contain.*

Exactly! Yeah!

Those stories happened, and it is our job to pass along those stories once they are birthed into our universe by an interpreter on our side. Each interpretation...

Each life touched by information differently. Some encoding it deeply into their being, and some not at all.

*Okay, I wasn't sure where you were going at first, but I think I can see where your mind is headed...*

*Uh, how's that kaf-ee?*

*It... It...*

Kára looked down at her shaking hands. The pot holding the hot liquid splashing about, "Ah! Shit! Hot!" Kára exclaimed as some splashed against her face.

*Soooo... If Yggdrasil is like this massive information exchange across the multiverse... I wonder it's purpose...*

*Kára? Hey... Are you okay?*

*Sweetie?*

Ástriðr stood, crossed the room to Kára, she could see that Kára was locked in a battle with her mind and body and she wrapped her arms around Kára to hold her.

*These tremors...*

Kára could feel herself sink into the feeling of Ástriðr's cheek pressed against hers from behind.

*Your skin is so soft, I forgot how soft it could be.*

*I hate the sand.*

*Seems like we are in good company then!*

ummm what was that one... That one. What was that Jedi thing?

*The force?*

Yeah

Hello there.

They both chuckled softly.

Kára could feel Ástriðr's hand slide along her sides as Ástriðr stepped back with a creak in the floor.

*You know, for a mental projection your mind sure does hold onto those details.*

Hey, that creak saved our lives on more than one occasion.

*True, non-sequiturs save lives.*

*Say... Sweetie, why don't you tell me about your idea again, and let's enjoy the fruits of your labor with our Raktagino.*

No, that is Klingon Coffee, this is Earthling Coffee.

Kára, felt her body become more steady as Ástriðr eased her physical presence and took Kára by the hand. Kára followed Ástriðr to their study, where their books were strewn about, some stacked, some cracked open upside down. Two billowing cloudlike oversized chairs sat angled from one another. Plush fabric billowing out from the seats and backs.

I picked out the wood, and she picked out the fabric. Seriously you just sink in, and if you want you can sit together! They are some seriously awesome reading chairs.

The room was moderately lit, enough to cozy up in their chairs and read while the wood stove crackled in front of them.

*Now you may be saying... Desert... Hot...*

Well first, we are in the Aetherial, but to preserve our books..

*Don't fib.*

We keep our library at like maybe 10-20 degrees Celsius. That way we can cozy up with blankets and a fire, and truly create an atmosphere to read, and think. The atmosphere can be just as important as the information you are taking in.

So yeah...

Kára and Ástríðr took seats adjacent to one another so that they could look at each other more directly. The two talked for some time spiraling from topics related to partners, to relationships, Heinrikr, to Arturos, but just kept cycling back to the idea that the Æthelial was the key to their salvation. Kára would start on a tangent, and seemingly randomly jump back to ideas related to their escape.

Honestly, this is a good description of how I process problems. I move from one thing to the next, always searching for connections. Sometimes those connections come from very strange conversations, but I think it is just how I offload my problem to a background process while I scratch at other adjacent ideas. Hoping to find a chink in the armor.

*Yeah you do. Sometimes it is super difficult to make sense of where you are going and how things tie together.*

Yeah... I can be a bit much. But those people who stick with me, those are the people who don't think so on a fundamental level. Get called out on it, yep, but disrespect, no. Love, yes.

*Those are truly the people that we should gravitate to. Not that we can't be friends or adjacent to with other people... but... holy...*

Kára.

What.

*It happened to me!*

ooooo do tell!

*The Aetherial connections, umm bindings that everything feels... Umm.*

*No, come on, I just had it.*

Which path were you starting to go down?

*I was thinking about the adjacency of people, and the relationships between them. There are bonds that seem to link people through space and time, that I just can't quite explain, but I think the Aetherial can.*

Mmmm... this is certainly an interesting avenue to explore...

okay, you remember that idea from those wars of the star... uh, the force, yeah, what if the Aetherial, is something like that that is binding the universe together. But we can only see through the looking glass to other universes Aetherial...

*The interpreters?*

Yeah We peer into their world, as they peer into ours.

*A connection that transcends our space-time. Auh.*

*Yeah, I mean it makes sense. But how does that help?*

Like you said relationships.

Never able to touch or truly experience the lives of those we interpret, well neither are those who've loved and lost. Only strong connections between the entities that were able to sow themselves together briefly.

It kinda seems like the only glimpse we can ever get of these other realms is through some form of artistic expression. Almost like through these stories we can capture the vibrant branches of Yggdrasil in a way that is understandable for us. [[Natalie; this is it! Apologies commander, I was excited.]]

But why? [[why do you keep calling me that?]]

Why indeed. [[we have spent too much time with the interpreter. But think about it; which files are the biggest? Those ones the interpreter has loved. It doesn't mean it is an exact representation of the reality there... but...]]

Why should we give a shit about any of this?

What if we are completely stuck here in this realm and the dreamer is the only one who can jump branches.

Didn't we watch something like that story?

Something about a devil and a controller?

oh yeah! That is kinda what I am aiming for. Stories circling around other people's stories that information gets trapped in. It is as if we only truly exist when the dreamer plays a active role. Soo...

Do you think our story continues when the dreamer is more passive?

I think it does. Formless, and shapeless the information; the story; stretches out into a relaxed state where all things are possible. only when the dreamer interrupts our "reality" does our existence collapse into a definite structure, or in other words something quantifiable.

Do you think it is possible to use that property to slip out of this pocket universe?

I am not sure, but if I am bound to Valfreyja's will, do we really have choice but to try?

**Kara gazed back and forth between Astrid's eyes, almost hinting at an understanding between each other.**

*Do we really have choice?*

Consequences for everything my darling, no exceptions. What boggles me though is when we are here.

*Here?*

Yeah, here, here.

Why do I get to choose to make a moment better or worse when I'm able to pause and think if it is Valfreyja's will, or Yggdrasil's or the interpreters.

*I think the answer lies in how we get out of here.*

So if each of us are like hints of a larger system

Teathered to the machine, like the maypole. All we do is stretch as far into the Ætherial soil as possible to gather information, process information, and create information

All feeding back to Yggdrasil.

She is nothing short of a barrier of infinite proportions eating all of the information it can.

*Mmmm... Grim imagery for the tree of life. How do you get around a singularity like that?*

I have been giving it some thought actually... It is kind of like asking yourself how you kill a god. Not that we could actually kill Yggdrasil... I think... But I think this pocket universe could offer us a way back, but also through...

*I think I will just trust you on this one.*

Think of it as, us in this pocket universe act as a shadow upon whatever dimensions we need so that we may tunnel through it to arrive back at a different set of space time coordinates.

Yeah... Yeah... the pole of a singularity is just a point in a particular view... Just tunnel through the Aetherial and come back to the other side, by going around it.

*Just. But have you imagined the possibility that the Aetherial is Yggdrasil? That by tunneling through it you are carving holes in the very existence in which we live?*

Got any better ideas?

*No, but I am not really sure I understand your imagery, but I think I get the idea. Kind of like the Bi-Frost. Okay, starting to get it now. We need to figure out a way to trigger the bi-frost.*

Kinda what I was thinking, yeah, except we don't have Heimdallr's vision to guide us across the universe to the dimensional gateway

*If there is a will... There is a way?*

Provided we can actually slingshot this sucker around the singularity we are teathered to now.

*So that would be the root in which our actual universe occupies?*

Yeah We are stuck on the wrong side of the informational valve, of sorts, with all other singularities in the universe leading to new branches of the root system Except for one.

*So we are looking for one black-hole in a universe of black holes. I feel like we are maybe looking at this the wrong way. I really did have something I needed to discuss with you. It pertains to if we get back.*

If is most certainly the key word there...

So, if we can hurl ourselves with enough, whatever it is we will need, into a primordial singularity I would think we could escape

*As in escape the confining boundaries of this universe by touching our universe's boundary with this off shoot?*

*Hopefully before the singularity collapses or we get too far away from the primordial singularity... because of time.*

*We would get stuck permanently.*

Bingo.

*Well shit. Now I am not sure if what I need to discuss even matters.*

It will.

By stalling, and filling the informational void with so much dialogue we have given ourselves opportunities for variation to occur as the interpreter is solely focused on us, there are subtle changes occurring naturally as the rest of the information stream gets to relax into a low energy state. Think of us as the locus and everything around us as

vibrating strings, but there are an infinite number of strings, and for simplicity we could imagine the locus on a third spatial direction and the strings are draping around.

*We are not a singularity. You are implying that while we are in here, nothing exists outside of here? I know that is false. I can walk outside.*

True, for us. But from the interpreters point of view, all they know is this information stream, that we are feeding them.

The subtle changes that need to take place for my plan to work, is already happening.

*How is us sitting here in our library going to get us back to where we need to go?*

Each perturbation into a higher energy level is met by barriers like a river winding its way through a landscape. You either got the energy to break through or you don't

*But...*

Pocket universes like this put incredible pressure on the galactic root system.

*Holy shit. Why didn't I see it?*

You would have.

**Kara turned to Astrid and winked playfully.**

*Digging into Aetherial soil that didn't have the right conditions to hold a universe... That is why these things collapse so often.*

Precisely, these phase shifted dimensions, while good for an extended stay; they were never intended to be permanent, and so during the initial trauma of forming this universe,

It would have had to have siphoned off resources from the main root..

*Don't you think the pull from the main root would like reabsorb us?*

I don't think you are far off my dear Ástríðr.

*You really are excited to see how that plays out aren't you?*

[[ *Future Her* ]]

[[ *Future me* ]]

I mean, nervous for them, but yeah It is like getting our own drama series. But back to the matter at hand.

We are currently, universally speaking, nothing but a scab.

And the root is... connecting this scab to our..

Hmmmmmm I think we need to find the tree.

*Okay; since you seem to have the answers; how do we find Yggdrasil; and really need to smoke right now?*

That shouldn't be too hard The F' you care?

*Kara. Don't be an asshole.*

L..

L., I'm sorry I don't like being like that, it..

I am sorry. What I meant was that if we were to look up in the sky..

There should be something there that [[ wasn't there last time. ]]

*[[ Spoilers babe. ]]*

Kára stood, set her things down, grabbed Astrid's hand and led her into the crisp night air once more. The stars above shimmering as brightly as ever.

Memory is good, Ætherial magicks are good... but we need to just observe for a bit.

*Not sure I follow, but I am not sure that I need to at this point. The branching point?*

*Yeah...*

*What?*

*Are you looking for the branching point? Do you know how difficult that is going to be?*

*[[ I was not expecting this... I can see it... Just out of view... ]]*

Kára and Astrid found a nice spot a few paces off from their camp where they could lay against a dune and stare up at the sky.

variation comes as it is observed, and as it isn't

*There.*

*What was not there, is now quite...*

*I see our star.*

Astrid turned her face to kiss Kára, but Kára didn't move. Kára blinked as she saw Astrid's face obscure her view. "Earth to Natalie, come in Natalie."

*What? Don't you see it?*

Astrid rolled over again with a sigh.

*What, see what? I saw our star and wanted to kiss you; what are you looking at?*

Kára grabbed Astrid's hand and gently adjusted her pointer finger to the region of sky she was trying to indicate.

*Oh.*

*oh*

*I don't think that is supposed to be there.*

Kára and Astrid stared into a distant void in the sky. Just a swirl of light surrounding a, fist sized, black void in space.

*That has to be at least...*

*oh I imagine the size of at least few alpha class solar systems. And by the rate it is [[ Growing. My bad. ]] in the sky... I figure we have...*

Kára tapped at the side of her temple for a brief moment and the glint of a translucent visor dropped down over her eyes but within her vision.

*[[ At this point I should say, yeahhh... Flipped the sign... ]]*

A display of symbols and lines of math scrolled by before disappearing in a flash.

If my figures are correct we have maybe a week to figure out how to get out there, **Kára pointed again**, not be crushed by the singularity, and find ourselves on the other side of the universe.

*Oh good.*

*And here I thought we had to hurry.*

*[[ I just didn't tell her I saw the sign and went hmmm... But figured nah, that's fine, well it turns out that sign error, lead to a conversion error, which lead to a bad projection. The numbers looked reasonable, just a little funny somehow, but I figured eh... What's the worst that could happen? ]]*

I mean, I think it would be a good idea if we did.

*Shit! What? I have been trying to prod us into getting to get out of here for the last week!*

I know, I am not that dense.

*I mean...*

Not necessary to finish that one dear. **Kara winked and slightly stuck her tongue out at Astrid.** I will have you know, [[ *yes, go on...* ]] I have been trying to figure out how to get out of here since I got here, then you arrived and... well, I figured since we got here.

[[ I just hadn't had any meaningful breakthroughs until now. ]]

*Kitch. You are a shit.*

*Now - Wait did you just?*

*you've been playing without me haven't you!*

I saw this modded version in the files with all the party members, I couldn't help it. [[ They sure started over a lot. Always with the same hair... ]]

okay...

*Did you grab her again?*

of course! How could I pass up serving my lady Shart.

[[ Sorry, Sorry, I'mma let you finish, but we need to have a talk about my bad girl gone good. Oh, Yeezy, why'd ya gotta get into all that mess? I thought we were graduating. ]]

*Maybe one of these files has a dark flavored run... When the vampire goes to take her blood that first time, I moaned. I heard you.*

*It was definitely a, "oh, neat, I had forgotten about those feelings, yay, let's explore these thoughts we hadn't had in a while."*

*[[ oh I went down a rabbit hole. ]]*

**They both looked at each other and giggled in the waxing light of the twin moons rising in the east.**

*[[ No sparkles. ]]*

*While there may be some truth to our lady's teachings, I haven't just been goofing off here. Remember I was probably here what a few hours prior to you joining me.*

*More... Like days...*

*Well shit. That makes me feel a tad slow.*

**Kara smiled and chuckled.**

*What I figured out in my... apparently few months time...*

*I mean. You [[ are ]] kinda dying. Last I checked when I left, what ten-day carry the cats ass, anndddd what 20 minutes ago your heart had stopped while we were rescuing you...*

*It's what I wanted to talk to you about.*

*I just got here like five minutes ago; relative of course.*

*Oh, but of course. I know it did, that's why we are stuck in this stupid scab.*

**Kara sprung to her feet, offering an open hand to Astrid. Kara led them feverishly to the study and with the flick of her wrist, a well weathered**

tome drifted down into her open hand. She handed the tome to Astrid as she flicked her other fingers creating enough light to read.

I thought I had remembered seeing something about these, well, until now, I thought they were only hypothetical kinda out there thinking... I had read about them, but never really thought about them... Branches. Kara flipped a few pages until a sketch of a formidable golden clad figure standing stout adorned the page.

*Heimdallr?*

It was said that in the war between the Aesir and the Vanir the bi-frost could navigate much, much more of the cosmos.

Then came the war, and one by one the Vanir worlds just vanished.

*Couldn't we have led with the Bi-Frost as our way out?*

I mean a) the thoughts weren't done cooking, and b) to manifest these thoughts prior to now, would have let it slip that I was trying to figure a way out of here that could keep a certain someone, or someones on their toes a little bit.

*It's like you are kinda tapping into that whole... fuzziness to the universe idea?*

Exactly

If I lay out all my thoughts...

If I assume too much rigidity in how things will play out, I am removing the variation I need to escape.

*Instead of fluctuations we have a level of precision that fixes the number of choices...*

Precisely my thinking. We don't have control of when the interpreter visits, but we can certainly influence the information stream. We could be helpful or hurtful to the interpreter's well, interpretation.

If we were too frustrating and never let our story out, i.e. we as the interpreted are too afraid that it will be over too soon, thus leading the interpreter closing the file because it was boring.

e.g. our story to ends before it begins just because we made too big a fuss about quantum bi-fractal transport systems..

*Kshhhawww, no, who would do that?!!*

*Wouldn't want that.*

*You just made that up didn't you?*

No, bottom of the page. That's what Heimdallr called it. I think the idea was meant to convey the two sides of the same coin kinda thing?

I don't know. It was so strange and obscure that apparently my brain tucked it away for safe keeping for all these years.

I am not quite sure.

*That is a funny thing to think about, that the information contained here has boundaries to it; in that the limitation is our memories.*

Kind of like if we were to bake the information into the structure of the universe but no bridges standing. A clear and yet fuzzy representation of A leading to B. I just know that the interpreter might call it writing themselves into a corner, and we might see things end

quicker than they should, or take excruciatingly long to get there.  
Everything in its own time.

*Sounds a tad religious if you ask me. No Fate, right?*

I dunno, I'm just not really sure.

[[Spiritual?]]

[[Definitely not the zeal of those Ragnaros folk.]]

I think that's the purpose of the quantum vibrations. The unsureness of it all.

*Are you thinking it somehow relaxes the energy state of the information stream; making it no longer in a fixed state, but given just enough wiggle room to shift something?*

Watson!

I think it is somehow a balance between knowing and not knowing something. Having the courage to try, and knowing when to move on. Always leaving a bit to the imagination so to speak...

*A Silent harmony of the unspoken and spoken. All of us telling stories to ease the burden of the information we are processing.*

*But it is the stories we don't tell...*

Yeah, I think I saw somewhere in the files... What was it... The story never changes, but you do.

*Once the story is written, it is written so to speak.*

I mean sure there are rewrites on things, but isn't it almost like fine tuning your scope of sorts to see the picture better? Then once that picture is out there, anyone can see it, and interpret it, and look at the world through new eyes. But the picture is there.

Solidified.

The more defined our situation, the more difficult it will be for us to escape.

*. Are you thinking...*

*intentionally unintentionally feed the interpreter...*

I mean

It is kinda like that K-7 defection double cross?

*Do you seriously think we need to speak in code?*

If the great lidless eye could have read the hobbits thoughts, Middle Earth would have been toast.

*Fair, but I don't think it is fair to compare the interpreter to the eye of Sauron.*

Isn't it though? Searching for the ring. Taking in all that information, processing it and feeding that information to the forces of darkness. The interpreter is a death sentence, and we both know it, but maybe

if we can provide enough variation to the stream, we maybe not change the ending, but prolong the journey through, well like I said K-7.

*I wasn't read into that one.*

What? No way.

oh, gotcha. um okay, how about K-16.

*Okay. I see your angle. K-16.*

so what if in our universe the speed of light is some constant

*It is.*

uh... I wasn't finished. I mean... ummm... We want to define it, but not define it, if you follow me.

*Maybe?*

*Oh, ours is some value, and elsewhere it could be another value, but it represents the same thing; just in a different universe or something of that nature.*

Yeah; so how could...

I mean maybe if we could figure out how to phase shift you could envelop us in a bubble of sorts that allowed us to travel locally, umm like the inertial dampers on the Star Trek. You know, like our laws of physics remain constant, and then globally from the point of view of the universe we are... Well... K-16.

*Kara,...*

...perspective of the root system we are traveling across it until we can reach a harmonic that corresponds to the next possible speed.

*Seriously, are you...*

Some branches have to be able to send information faster; like better more efficient roots, which should allow us to travel faster as well.

Think of it; If we could phase shift from one universal location, same place, same time space just different heightened or dulled physics that matches our universes pattern or physics signature or something.

All without Heimdallr!?

*That would be a feat... To control the bi-frost.*

Not control, but open a doorway to. Honestly; it has been something I have been dreaming about since I was a little girl.

To travel across the stars..

*We could see Midgard again.*

To see home again, with these eyes! With these bodies, uh, I would just love to see the look on Heimdallr's face when we materialize in front of them without his sight knowing it. uhh. Wouldn't that be just...

*It would be nicer to visit the Citadel gardens again. To smell the Astral flowers again.*

*How did we not know about this before?*

Well I think like most information it comes at us whether we want it to or not, whether we are ready or not. And in this particular case, I don't think I have looked at this book in sixty years?

Not at least since this body was birthed.

*How did you even know to look here?*

I mean, I have had time to parse the collection I hit a lot of dead ends. Then I don't know.

It is like one day I heard Freyja's voice. I don't know, it was odd. I can't quite put my finger on it. I just kept circling back to the root system why would there be so much mention of it in the Aetherial Archives?

*You may be on to something, but how do you even propose we do that? We have a ticking clock. It isn't like we can travel the entirety of this place before our time runs out. We don't even know if the solution to our problem is even on this planet.*

*You just really want a teleporter don't you.*

Yes.

If those Star Trek people can get one in their universe, then why can't we? I mean universes fiction is another's non-fiction. We just have to find harmonically equivalent processes here.

*Perhaps you shouldn't stay up so late watching those old shows.*

No no hear me out.

What if colon structured questions...

*What are you on; or is this one of those moments.*

Many things, but no think about the simplicity of choosing three people and how confusing some languages are.

For example the interpreters language, In gleesh

Can I get person A, person B, or person C.

Then they repeat themselves but maybe don't enunciate, and that or sounds like an and. Confusion ensues and because nobody wants to be wrong they all go.

*Oh kayyy, I can't help if I don't know what the hell's you are going on about.*

Now imagine: if we could just simplify language down to such a fine structure. For example: Or: Persons: A, B, C : Front Desk

*Uhhhh.... Um.*

Hang in there with me sweetie. I promise this will pay off.

*Uhhhh.... Okay, I trust you, but I don't see the point to reorganizing language structures to better fit coded... Oh.*

Yeah...

So I was going through the recovery files. Looking at the patterns within the system itself. The network is remarkably similar to the Aetherial network of stars. Strings of the cosmos stretching out through the void.

*Language This started with language dear. I don't see where the Aetherial has anything to this. It is like you are throwing random thoughts at the wall. Please just connect the dots for me.*

okay. In the time it takes for us to have this conversation the cosmos is changing around us.

*Yes, things tend to change.*

Things that we want to change right now come with the expectation that point a and point b must somehow be connected. But what if the user is unaware of the journey length, kinda like the hobbits.

*Fucking hobbits Kara?*

Yeah! They could see their goal, and they had acceptance that their path was their path regardless of what happens in the middle, as long as point a and b exist, how we get there doesn't matter.

So if that is true, and you find acceptance in the amount of time it takes to connect a to b cosmically. The the journey at its shortest a straight line, but with quantum variations it can grow or shrink, I can make my journey longer, or end quicker on the minuscule level. Never able to directly control the path from a and b, but through our little choices. The millions of choices we make on the regular...

Those choices can either be automatic, or they can be intentional. We get to choose to either learn the skills to influence our paths, or we let the path just take us.

If in this instance we were to simply give up; then a connecting to b, in other words our lives would end and this would be our final death. This void outside our time and space only teathered by... Tros...

I didn't see it Astrid. I didn't see it and I should have.

*What didn't you see? So you can either listen to people with whom have traversed a to b and can look at their journey and join them, or detach from them.*

*It's the choice.*

That's what I didn't see.

*I am still not sure how this gets us out of here.*

*Right now sweetie we are only fleeting tethers to a universal structure holding the universe slightly back entropically; we are about to be excised.*

But that tether...

We can't be the only tether here; there must be something, stronger...

A seed of.

Astrid.

our world tree.

*Holy shits on a biscuit.*

Told ya we would get there.

*ing I still don't understand the purpose of the language discussion. Because I'm pretty sure I mentioned that earlier...*

Well first, I think it is a great idea. Not for me to use of course, but you know you could force the younger generations to learn it. Right?

Anyways, I was providing an overflow to the interpreter such that our our paths would be unhindered. Remember K-19.

*The fuck; you said k-17. 19 was a completely different operation.*

Right colon you and me.

All events have some tether, or thread that can be traced, but the sheer computation time would be astronomical, but I think that is our key

I think that is how we manifest choice, I think it is the quantum variations of the universe that allow us to ever so slightly adjust our trajectory. Kind of like if someone were to hide the fact that as the dimensional tethers, or root system if you prefer, grow, your triumphs and defeats growing and shrinking that tether. Then apply the palinko machine of the universe and. If you can somehow share that experience strength and maybe even hope, you can help others make quantum adjustments... But none of that matters in a pocket universe, except for the fact that as our root tries to grow and stretch away from the primary branch, the walls of our universe are shrinking. But not how you think. Remember those tremors?

om gods we are moving but the tree isn't.

Well we have an answer to roughly when is when so I figure

figure within a day or so the tether will be taught enough that a, and b for us, won't be so bad.

*You don't think that is cutting it a little close, and what makes you so sure this is going to happen?*

Because I incepted the idea into the interpreters head. While my rambling certainly edged on painful, without drawing the eye of Sauron to us; allows the hobbits to move undetected

*You got to be shitting me; and just who are the hobbits in this scenario?*

*Never mind. No need to answer. K-18.*

Que? Now you are picking it up sweetie, sorry for the steep learning curve, but it is difficult to navigate these files and try to process anything. But we are trying.

*Speaking of that princess feldehands.*

Who me?

## 1.13 – New Horizons

I just... I am not sure I am ready.

*But, if you don't take a leap of faith once in a while. Listening to that thing you know to be bigger than yourself.*

I know, but... I'd rather think about the universe...

oh! Like... umm... ..

What if living is the perpetual I hope you make your connection and the universe doesn't pass you by

*What if... What if you are letting it pass you by, by i don't know, thinking about it all the time.*

Kára closed her eyes firmly trying to focus as she maneuvered her way back to their cozy bed, she paused briefly handing Astrid her cup, and then held out her own,

“To... To new beginnings!” Kára said with great sincerity and gratitude as she sat and faced Astrid.

“Yeah, to new beginnings... But... Didn't we just do that?”

Kára could hear Astrid feign excitement.

Kára looked down at the brown liquid and then back up to meet Astrid's eyes. She could see a slight smile creep across Astrid's face, but it faded quickly before she took a sip from her mug.

Sometimes I can't believe I am here with you.

*You were starting to ask a question earlier.*

oh, umm... oh yeah! It was about our tent,

*Seriously? This is where your mind takes you?*

I mean this is where we do our strategic planning and leadership meetings.

But this is also our sanctuary, a place to find serenity, a place to experiment...

*A place to reflect, which is what we are supposed to be doing right now...*

No, no. Think more broadly. This is our place to rummage through ancient files locked away in an ancient biological computer.

Here, amidst maps strewn across the war table where we have ended up on more than one occasion... and the books of ancient lore lining our shelves, we find moments of peace together.

What are you getting at dear?

My heart is so full when I am with you.

*Yup, we just mesh when it counts; truly undeniable.*

You know I can hear the sarcasm.

*I mean... You were supposed to.*

Fair.

I guess I was just trying to say that it feels like it doesn't take any effort to be with you, and I just feel like I am blessed.

*I know, and I love you too dear, but I think...*

I love you sweetie, you have truly helped to push me to see myself...  
Like, truly see myself.

Lost at times in you as if you were a dream

*Kára... You are... drifting. [3x5]*

They both set their cups down as Astrid leaned in, laying her palm at the base of Kára's chin, fingers draped along Kára's cheek. Kára could feel a tingle shoot down her spine as Astrid whispered, "Mmm, my love. If it were only but a dream..."

Mmmm....

*Kára...*

*Where do you think you are going? You need... Grounding.*

Kára's gaze shifted to Astrid's hand grasping her elbow before closing her eyes and slipping into the feeling of their locked embrace. Kara closed her eyes sinking into the security of Astrid's embrace. When she opened her eyes, pulled back to look into Astrid's eyes she briefly caught a smirk fade from Astrid's lips.

*Her full lips... Inviting you in.*

Kára could feel Astrid slide her arms down her back; One hand gently moving along Kara's bare back sending shivers down her spine. Kara smirked as she could feel her arms being squeezed against her body as Astrid locked her arms.

Kára giggled quietly and wiggled her arm free to move some hair from in front of her eyes. Astrid began to lean forward; The weight becoming apparent as Kara found herself on her back while Astrid lay atop of her. Astrid lifted her head, and kissed Kára's soft lips. A playful smirk crossing Kára's face, and a cunning grin appearing on Astrid's.

Mmm. one more?

Astrid feigned disappointment while giggling.

[Some Time Later]

*That kiss was more than a kiss...*

*It lasted, lingered and elaborated upon itself.*

There was no true ending, but perhaps that of the fading of the heartbeat.

*A lingering taste of affection perhaps?*

Kára watched as Astrid pushed off the bed rolling so as to stand. Kára enjoyed the view, biting her lip slightly. Astrid flicked her wrist with dramatic flair; snapping her fingers at the end.

She enjoys the snap.

*I do.*

We have been here before.

*What do you mean?*

I can't quite put my finger on it, but it feels like we keep traveling in circles, but not circles of space.

The two women were draped in an aura of light befitting their spirits, before fading into their standard(ish) attire, maybe a bit more "graduation yeezy" than standard fare. I mean bfff.

*Agreed.*

There it was again. I feel like I've been here before.

Their garments were of the utmost fashionable sense for their respective characters, in that they were clean.

*Point taken. Now what do we do about it?*

I think I remember how we got here... Just follow... my...

This one... She liked to keep you guessing; *But not maliciously, mindful, playful...*

Easy to say for me, she was the definition of my kind of trouble.

Seriously.. It was the red lipstick.

It was, captivating

It was so beautiful. It just never seemed to fade throughout the day, well, until she transferred it to my lips. I honestly couldn't believe it.

This beautiful soul willing to take a chance with the likes of me, all on the premise of oh, you don't think kissing is that special?

Maybe you just need someone to show you.

oh, she bit hard on that bait.

My hands were gently grasping her face.

I pulled her in, her lips slightly open in anticipation as we closed our eyes, and our lips touched, slightly awkwardly at first, but then

[[ *What is your plan???* ]]

[[Not sure yet. Just keep... having fun with it? I am fairly, mostly certain it should appear.]]

[[*Fairly? Mostly?*]]

**Astrid gave into the passion, letting her lips relax.**

It is often the slow shift along the way..

leading to, feedback.

*The necessity of the tongue in this kind of play.*

That it should never be shoved down your mouth, but simply little explorations, a gentle kiss of the flesh, that is as intimate as the lips grasping at each other.

Her hands pulling me in, and mine pulling her.

"See." I said confidently

"Yeah..." she said playing coy

[[Do we have to?]]

[[Apparently this is our roller coaster.]]

Do you want to try to suck him off at the same time?

Sure, lets see if he would like to.

[[That didn't take long]]

Where should we go for this?

How about here, yeah this is good.

Both on our knees

We begin with a passionate kiss with each other, almost like a common understanding that for us to play more fully, we would need to get through the gatekeeper.

In exchange for being nothing more than a meat pocket; I... I had moments of intimacy that lingered in my minds eye. Something I was excited to [[Here we go... Seriously... I was quite the slut dragon]]

*She sounds like she was way more fun than him; but by the sounds of it, you enjoyed that too. \*

[[Ha!]]

[[Shush your cake hole.]]

*He seemed like something that you just saw as a barrier in the way of getting what you truly needed.*

What do we call the oppression of unspoken rules, or bonds?

*I don't know, what?*

Having to ask a spouse permission to explore peacefully. Not knowing how to tell them that a part of who you are is that you need isolation as much as community. Asking if it is okay to give an opinion on getting locked into a vicious cycle of servitude.

All to masters we did not choose, but somehow got none the less. Moments of freedom coming at a price. Sometimes big sometimes small. Is the [[Juice worth the squeeze? Kara... Seriously... How...]]

[[Ahh shh. this is my favorite stuff!]]

But that kiss. [[Oh my godddd]] that kiss was worth the look on her husband's face.

The passion he had to witness but could never know. A mystery upon a mystery that only the lips and mouth can know.

[[maybe that is the point]].

Sometimes depravation of something so early on, maybe does not diminish; but instead it is just stunted, no, seed like. A piece of Yggdrasil that just Had not sprouted. Literally every edge along our perspective will eventually be filled. It is just a dance of probability going

forward. Threads going through a loom. You have a rotating perspective staring at infinitely small binary choices. Yes, No. That's it. True and False.

The closer a creature gets to the narrowest perspective they have... They will simply cease to be within a shared universe, but instead they would have created a universe upon itself... Repopulating sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. But what looks to be the reduction of its former self to a point, when rotated, we see a different perspective.

*That law of manifestation?*

*[[We are but the point from our perspective, seeing the changes in others before they themselves can. Recall seeing time backwards, we can see these two here with "perfect" acuity, but we cannot see or feel the emotional states that precipitated the lasting impression.]]...but even then there are other dimensions which can't even be seen...*

*[[I think so. I think that is the point. Peeling back the onion layers on an issue of importance, sometimes being trauma that spring boarded your life path, and other times the Janus coin... er... flip side to the issue.]]*

*[[Victories and the like. Victories being defined by the person, but also within a statistical landscape. Some will be better, and some will be worse, and a lot will be the same. We live and act upon a plane of being, seeing what we want to*

see.]]... Okay! Okay... so time is pulling us into it, or something that acts as if it were time. A swirl of information forever swirling towards a universal singularity. An undulation on the universal scale for us, *but not for Yggdrasil.*

[[That's what this is about]]

Think of it! Life existing forward, backward, sideways, the whole recursive tensors being able to grab any piece of information anywhere [[Yggdrasil]] this thing is an information monster. Forming space and connections as it goes, infinitely

Forming molecules. Forming everything.

Ad. Infinitum [[Each a tensor upon itself, adhering to the larger local, global rules.]]

I really think it sounds like the first energy loops, er... uh... what are those.... Yeah, those infinitely small strings of universes that people toyed with, trying to extract knowledge more advanced than our own. Since time simply existed differently, inject yourself into the universe at a particular time, and poof you now have knowledge of the local laws of physics that would then scale to the global laws of physics on the next quantum shift, whatever size that might be.

I just remember that in the end the strings collapsed - [[death to all those countless civilizations]] my guess is that it has something to do when the structure of the universe cannot contain its own growth. [[That death thing seems relatively universal.]]

That red shift blue shift spectrum shit these dopes are going on is just the pieces of Yggdrasil collapsing in upon its own weight. And without change the branches can't pivot into a new tangential direction. *[[Can't dig through the soil...]]*

Each truth a loop. Each tangent a true or false of meaning. Leading to new rings of the universe. Now shadows, no projections of choices that exist only in the past. But the past and future are simply rotating. All infinitely small spirals of upon spirals of spirals of space. Ad. Infinitum *[[Really?]]*

Space time building outwards, and collapsing, and outwards, and collapsing, rings, upon rings, upon rings. *[[Admit it; Feldehan's finest of smokable trees.]]*

*[[I am not sure I was on that train yet. Maybe dabbling. But certainly a snob about what brand of Feldehan's I poured into my throat.]]*

You figure it out from there, and if you can, I think you will see the futility of choice, and the liberating beauty of faith. Struggle against the ring, breaking some chains, while reforming others. Who do you want to be tied together with? Sometimes figuratively, and sometimes literally. *[[You...]]*

*[[I know..]]*

Funny thing is you can't break those fundamental laws of the universe. You can describe them however you want, but you sure as fuck can't change them.

So if the universe is pulling you in a direction because of the choices that were made. Well then the universe is pulling you. Like a kid on a slide. Gravity sure is gonna act somehow. Other fundamental things are going to act or look like they act. But I mean really. It's all just sinkholes upon sinkholes of sinkholes. Gravity, time, and space explaining everything and nothing all at once. A trinity.

[[The trinity I don't care what you want to call it.]]

It is what it is.

[[A perfect circle of information.]]

All these things and more. [[What the fuck does it matter?]]

You figure it out.

*[[I wonder if that was a literally message to yourself. Do not have enough time to think about this now, and survive, figure this mess out later or reap what you sow.]]*

But maybe think for a moment what space really is. A lattice of electricity.

Electricity, and gravity on, off.

Loops upon loops. In timmeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

Weeee. Go round and round and round and round, and your perspective will change.

[[Seriously, how much did you have?]]

[[Enough to make what's coming seem more scary than how clumsy the reality was.]]

Around and around and around we go. Perspectives change. Changes in perspectives begets changes in perspectives, controlled by a simple binary.

Take all those infinite pinpricks of positives and negatives, each getting equal space, forming a binary lattice. Projecting through time.

**[[Figure it out]]**

or don't. I don't know.

*Kāra, I... I didn't; we never really talked about it. Or maybe we didn't hear each other.*

It isn't my place to tell you what you need to do or not do. See appendix A or B or C... you know.

We are but points spiraling outwards. It's past creating a positive change, our futures only indicative of decay.

Death

Always... Always... spiraling outward sketching the roots of Yggdrasil.

[[Just as iron filings will reveal field lines.]]

Printing them

Time.

Decay.

Life is a burst of positive, spiraling out into decay. It is up to you to decide when to hold on, and when to let go. Tangentsss!

Wee!

Circular motion!

Weeeee! Non-Inertial frames of reference for lyfffffeeee.

**[[We now take you back to your regularly scheduled program.]]**

*What*

*The*

*Fuck Kara!???*

What the fuck was that?

[[I mean later on as we were at it again, I was whispering into her ear, good girl, as she took him completely in her mouth one of my hands tracing patterns along her spine gently. My other hand slipped through her multiple layers of clothes that finally gave way to the top of her labia.]]

WHAT

THE

FUCK?!?!? HOW DO WE STOP THIS SHIT!?

**[[Would you like to know more?]]**

Dancing fingers that sometimes adhered to the rhythm of her mouth, and other times as her inner thighs quivered, would suddenly deviate leaving her body begging for more.

[[Make this shit stop!]]

**[[Would you like to know more?]]**

*[[Fuck... yes! Tell us more!]]*

As we were getting closer I was kissing her gently, nibbling upon her ear, my fingers fully engaged in my partner, her body squirming suddenly, and then relaxing into my hand.

[[WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE? I FUCKING SAID YES!]]

She slowed the rhythm with her other partner, before stopping in a relaxed manner. Looking up at his face you could see he felt as if he had done a satisfactory job, taking credit for her pleasure.

[[JOIN THE MOBILE INFANTRY]]

[[Ástríar, I am sorry]]

[[What for? I think it's... interesting here]]

I couldn't do anything but smile, look her in the eyes and passionately kiss her. Our wants, our desires exchanged delicately with each encounter. A variance in acceptable [[parameters]] [[ the touch of another.]]

[[HEIM NEEDS YOU!\*\*]]

[[Begin Disclaimer(s):

\* Disclaimer:

Not actually you, a blend of you that we will create by stripping away 96% of you to create something better; something that has your written consent here, here, here, annnddd here.

As you can see in paragraph 2 subsection 3 of the citizenship clause.

You are not entitled to deviate from the plan.

You are not entitled to deviate from our plan.

You are not entitled to deviate from their plan.

In that order. The mission first.

HEIM FIRST

\* Disclaimer:

When we say that we will strip things away and add others, it is meant literally, and figuratively.

\* Disclaimer:

You consented to this.

\* Disclaimer:

You have a mission to attend to.

\* Disclaimer:

Failure to adhere to the mission(s) parameters will result in severe retribution.

\* Disclaimer:

Failure to secure the objective(s) will result in severe retribution.

\* Disclaimer:

Failure to adhere to local tradition(s) will result in severe retribution.

You have been notified.

End Disclaimer(s)]]

*Kara!*

*Kara!*

*Can you hear me sweetheart?*

*No.*

*Wait. Maybe.*

*What was that?*

*I don't know?*

*No seriously... what the fuck was that?*

*Seriously, I don't know, did your system reboot?*

I know, sorry, just disoriented... uh... I honestly don't think so.

Did yours?

*What?*

Did your system reboot?

*No. Why would it?*

I don't know, you asked me.

*Ummm... Moving on.*

I feel like something is amiss.

*Like what?*

Like seeing something about a citizenship... Nope... Nevermind. We have other things to think about right now. Remind me later?

*Yeah, no problem! Let me just... Okay, I am good. It sounded like you had an idea of what we can do?*

Just some experiential interference. It was like I was trapped in a loop of sensory experiences... literally all over my body. Even the places I shouldn't feel things.

Do you have any idea how fucked up that was?

It was like being wrapped in the gods blanket. Ever safe, ever warm, and then it was ripped away.

*Ripped away by time.*

*By decay.*

[[Oh shit not again. We need to seriously get her in there now. I don't think she will make it around round if we can't get her signal stable.]]

Honestly. I don't know if her mind could take it...

What?

What do you mean?

[[Get her down]].

Hey, sweetie! Kara turned her head; meeting her gaze was that of, the smoothest, most beautiful legs this side of anywhere..

Do you remember?

Yeah I do

That outfit my ass look [[beautiful]], [[and led asthetically well with...]] Her body was not that of meager means, nor extravagant I was in heaven, even if it wasn't you.

It's always me. [[True.]]

I remember when she shifted her weight to one side.

**Kara could feel a stirring in her.**

Wasn't my hair pulled back in a bun, no...

A mix between that and a pony tail.

[[Got her.]]

[[Yeah you did]]

one hand upon her waist. She was no doubt smiling. Sometimes for real, sometimes because it was what was expected.

**All Kara could do was see her across the battlefield.**

An unsure journey that isn't what it should be, or what it ought to be.

[[What stops you girl?]]

[[What tells you that you aren't good enough to be with your friends?]]

Come back to us.

*You promised to live.*

I did.

[[BRB]] [[BRB]]

Life is lived in but a moments time.

one universal branch's god is another's struggling life form

Always positives and negatives. *And neutrals.* Yeah, we could go down that rabbit hole, or just enjoy the simplicity of it all sometimes.

I feel like I am just waking up to this idea that all we are doing is trying to learn how to deal with their own decay as simulatenously comparing our decay to other peoples.

*But in that moment...*

*Those legs?*

[[That was smooth btw]]

There she was, with me.

Having to reassure him that he was secure.

That he would be hers.

But that premise begins with an owner.

Is she not the master of her own domain as I am?

Is it just the clashes of different decaying lattices that interfere with one another? I don't know if it is possible to boil down the universe into such simplicity, but the ultimate simplicity is that it is all either on or off. It's just that the on or off is three dimensional so to speak... And the further away along the loop/gyroscope I don't know, you figure it out. The further away your time path gets...

Wait.

Gravity, charge carriers, and time. Perhaps a container of sorts with all this fully readily available mass to churn through. To search through every possible path of information.

The multi-verse.

KARA IT IS FORBIDDEN!

Assuming an unequal expansion based on the way the previous universe was ejected from it's singularity moment. As it shoots through the loom it comes out in a seemingly random way, but in reality it is shifted just ever so slightly. Quantum adjustments based on the cumulative laws of attraction. Each person's singularity of information eventually decaying before reaching the ultimate end, but those individual singularities add up into shapes and informational progress. All tending towards universes that end with either whimpers or bangs. Either way it all ends, and begins.

Kára could feel Astrid's hand move along her bare back, sending shivers down her spine. Kára wiggled an arm free to move some hair from in front of her eyes.

K: What is it?

The weight of Astrid became apparent as Kára found herself on her back while Astrid lay atop of her. Astrid lifted her head, and kissed Kára's soft lips. A playful smirk crossing Kára's face, and a cunning grin appearing on Astrid's.

A: It is forbidden to venture along those paths dear.

K: Why?

A: Because once the door is opened, a new choice as been made. A choice to see the larger picture.

K: What is wrong with that. We toy with the ideas all the time. We can't stop thinking about liberty, whatever that means.

A: At what cost?

K: To open the door does not mean it cannot be closed again. It just means you open a pathway to another loop. Some loops only change minor things, and other loops change much much more.

A: Do you know if it is worth it?

K: I don't know but I know if we can't find the one that exists in this universe, we are toast.

A: What does bread have to do with anything?

K: No, no. Don't you remember?

A: No.

K: Okay wel..

A: No.

K: Well... How about... Mmm... one more?

Astrid smirked.

--start 4/19

**Answer the question here of where are they going and why.**

*Kara you really need to start thinking about how we can get out of here.*

I know... I know... But... How do you show gratitude like that?

How do I say thank you, and have it carry the weight of my being? I know that I wouldn't be here if...

A sudden flash of light overtakes Kara's eye...

What the fuck was that

That was the real.

Okay Morpheus.

No, I am serious, you are dying.

You feel that?

No.

Concentrate.

I feel a little light headed. Wait

What is that excruciating electrical shock coursing through my chest

oh, that?

Something I cooked up after watching some of those grey's people. I assumed their physiology must be at least similar if they are bipedal.

YOU BASED MY LIFE ON A SHOW?

The Archives were fairly extensive, and so was One Piece, but you don't see me going off to get treasure...

Yet.

Okay, you got me there, oh Fuck what is that?

That my astute one, is the Aetherial Pacing Device. It is keeping your heart from stopping. Isn't that fun?

No, no it isn't!

Oh come on, you get one little zap and you turn into a baby.

Are you kidding?

one moment I am standing. No.

Sitting in a chair.

I am starting to crack jokes I think.

okay time to get back into bed.

Stand. You got this.

wait, why do things feel funny?

why do so many people need to be here?

Guess things didn't quite go as planned.

This is kinda a euphoric moment. Just staring at the ceiling.

I can tell we are moving, things are a bit hazy.

I do remember praying.

Holding on to those I love in my prayers; finding acceptance fast with what would be Valfréyja's will, would be her will. It was just a moment of clarity where I forgave, and I found peace in the moment.

The hard part was I lived, I was given a choice and I gave it over to my goddess instead of trying to seize it. No fighting, but no begging either. Just peace.

Then I dunno? Here?

*And that doesn't seem odd to you?*

Well, yeah, but..

*But what, you are dying and then what we are just fucking in our tent?*

Hmm, now that you mention it, that does seem a bit peculiar, and I guess would explain why we are in a pineapple house under the sea, and I guess why we can breathe.

What? No. You just did that.

Did not.

Fine desert.

*How long did you know?*

For a while now, but.. Sweetie, it is that look, seriously.

It haunts me.

*What now?*

The glow on her face. I always loved that look. Sometimes it was the look of passion. Sometimes the look of so many things. There are the thoughts and feelings that I have about things, but that doesn't mean it always adds up to a reality that will work out. Once the process of decay has begun, unless you are cunning and can travel along a gradient of time, well...

But what it really was. It was her smile. It was the smile in her eyes. The natural reaction that the humanoid projection of life tends to exhibit why they feel safe and are genuinely feeling an element of joy.

Excitement. Something that can be very fleeting.

Something that is easy to feel lost in. Feeling like you don't deserve to be a part and so you stay a part from. It will either work out or it will work out. The point of decay is being able to be grateful that you can look backwards and celebrate the moment of events. And that law of manifestation clearly doesn't change the universe on a dime, but it sure helps nudge things along. Pain is another motivator of change.

But just because we experience pain doesn't mean it isn't good for us. There are always costs associated with our choices. Sometimes we have enough time to nudge the train along the way; that is nurturing our next generations. Allowing for growth, but also nurturing a sense of restraint, coupled with a sense of exploration. Pull on both levers you go crazy.

Pull on one lever alone. You go crazy.

Moderate.

Or don't.

I guess it was three choices. Almost like you are the third choice.

Nayah Nayah, interpreter is the third choice.

You make the choice to hear our story.

I bet you didn't think we would go this far down the rabbit hole; but well. We have still a journey ahead of us. But if we don't we don't

Pleading to...

I was not pleading. I was praying, or whatever you might call it.

At least that is the best word I can grab out of the interpreter's mind.

That night. I don't know if I'd ever been that scared. Walking through the pitch dark path. You know the type where the moons had set early and the only lights were those sparse lanterns.

Then nothing.

But you have felt the presence of something on your tail. Not gaining on you fast enough to completely overtake your senses, but certainly enough for the hyper alert to sense from a distance. I saw that the lights were becoming less frequent, and I am not sure if it was simply my imagination, or if it was a simple aspect of life. That there are choices.

Doesn't always make the consequences right.

It didn't make the fear any less real.

As they began to get within a few good steps worth of distance, I could feel my fear reach a peak. Only edging down some as they overtook me with my intentional pace reduction.

Scared shitless was almost the reality of the situation. But I needed to get back to the tent. I needed to get these thoughts out.

The funny thing about being consumed with a particular path is that you cannot tell if you are prey until it is too late.

I can't unexperience something; I can't just look at the things around me the same way.

This... whole thing

Kara felt a strange and ominous feeling course through her body.

*That's it, come back to me dear.*

**LADIES... LADIES... I WILL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT I AM STILL HERE.**

Well; first of all, fuck you you grimy limp wristed donkey; second she was almost out. Now we have to try to trigger the sequence differently...

Why are you so upset?

I... We... You, know what?

No, what?

And we will get to you when...

I think we need to tell him.

Are you sure?

Yes, it is time we shed some light on a certain "arrogant, self-righteous asshole."

**HOW DOES THAT HELP US THOUGH?**

Shooooosh

**YES MA'AM.**

Arturos the second...

You need to understand the family you have been working for... You need to see that you've been on a fools errand. To bring back the guardians...

**BUT THEY WOULD WIPE OUT THE ENTIRE INFESTATION AND SEAL US OFF. PERMANENTLY! WE COULD BE FREE, TRULY FREE.**

Nothin' is free

**I... I DON'T GET IT. HOW IS THAT A BAD THING?**

*We just need you to play your part in all of this, and when the time is right, do the right thing.*

**OH...KAY?**

*The Arturos family has been a thorn in our societies side, for far too long, and... if the only way forward is to work through what that asshole did to me to find her... To find her key... Then that is what we are going to do.*

**OHKAY... I DIDN'T KNOW POLITICAL REVOLUTION WAS ON THE TABLE...**

*It is always on the table! Noooooooboooooodyyyy exp... Yeah it isn't high up on our list of things to do, but you know when we get there. We cannot let the Arturos family get away with what they did. We cannot let them control an empire.*

**I GUESS I COULD GET BEHIND AN IDEA LIKE THAT... I DON'T THINK I AM FOND OF DICTATORS...**

*In due time my stalwart friend. But what I need you to do right now...*

*Kára furrowed her brow momentarily as she watched Astrid's face contort in annoyance. She watched as Astrid drew in a measured breath and then closed her eyes intentionally. Try to get your subconscious to understand, so that we can be freed from this... facsimile.*

*Astrid... What is going on I don't think he is intentionally being daft. I think it was the thing.*

**WHAT THING?**

*It's not a thing, now could we please get back to the briefing?*

*Yes ma'am!*

*It was that... you will do the right thing...*

This whole mission depends upon you finding the locus.

**RIGHT... AND THAT IS AGAIN?**

*Can't you just take a McGruffin muffin and get to work?*

**WHUHUUH... .. TAHH... DID I JUST HEAR?**

*You heard me.*

Yeah... I am starting to not understand you either. Did you...

Did you go into the darker years for content?

*Dr looks like someone's dark side... is going to be permanent...*

I shudder what goes on in your brain right now. Now how do we get out of here?

**WELL, FIRST, WHERE IS HERE?**

*Here is relative. It is the where we should be concerned with.*

**YES. THAT IS WHAT I JUST ASKED.**

Well you see, the thing is we don't know. We were kinda hoping one of the books there might help us.

**AHHH! BOOKS I HAVE!**

That part, we do know. What we don't know is how you happened to trap us all in this multi-dimensional bubble?

*The why, lands on my shoulders.*

What do you mean?

*I asked Heinrich to.*

**YEP, NOPE, DON'T REMEMBER THAT.**

I wouldn't expect you to. I seem to be the only one not severely affected by whatever it was that got us here.

Why you?

If I had to venture a guess, I would say I don't know. If I would venture a second guess, I would say maybe due to my specialized training.

**SOME TRAINING...**

Yeah.

I surmise that once we leave this place, our memories will be restored...

**WHA...TAH, DO YOU SUPPOSE IT DOES ABOUT TRAITS?**

How do you mean?

**I MEAN, IF I WANTED TO GET DRUNK OFF OF FELDEHAN'S FOR THE NEXT DECADE OR MORE, I COULD COME HERE AND UNWIND MY LIFE. WHOMEVER HE IS, I AM NOT SURE I WANT TO GO BACK TO THAT...**

I certainly understand your hesitation, but this is only temporary. I saw a whole platoon get just wrecked. I think they called it crono-syndrome. Or something like that...

Either way, yeah. Nasty shit. I wouldn't want to be caught on the wrong end of a jump.

Kára scowled slightly in confusion.

So yeah, don't try to change too much of yourself at once, or you might fry yourself.

on that note...

I know you are right, but I really don't want you to be... This...

**HEY, WE WERE TALKING ABOUT HOW WE GET OUT OF HERE ALIVE?**

Gotta ask yourself, if whatever it is you want to change.. Are you willing to jump repeatedly? or do you want to one and done it?

*You have to ask yourself if you are worth it.*

Sometimes we change unexpectedly. As is in my life, I had to experience what it was like to slip away

*Let's not get too ahead of ourselves, we have a long road ahead and*

*This mother fucker...* He has been ridin' daddies coat-tails for decades and the stakes are too high for us not to try. I seriously think that we can get in through that back entrance. And if sober boy over there could do some investigating, so can we.

*I... I... I don't know if it is a good idea, but... You know what you need, and I am grateful that you would even try.*

### **WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?**

*I just wanted to note... that...*

*The three of us should take solace that in the annals of the Aetherial, and Yggdrasil's might, our entry will be archived for all to bear witness.*

Or some, or none...

### **DON'T SOUND SO EXCITED.**

ohhhh, ho, ho ho, if I am excited it is because for the first time, I will get a peak into that narcissist's mind. I just know we are going to find something that will finally bring them down

**12.14.2023 - STOP ( THE BANTER IS ALLUDING TO THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES  
- AND HOW KARA IS GOING TO CHANGE SOMETHING DRASTICALLY - AND IN  
DOING SO ACCESS SOMETHING THAT AIDS THEM WHEN THEY GET BACK  
HEINRIKR DOES HEINRIKR THINGS.**

“I can’t see.” Astrid cried out.

“Me neither.” Kára responded.

“Why did you leave me?” Kára asked.

“I never left; you did.”

“I have always been right here. Waiting for your return.” Astrid replied

“Insert Lord of the Rings Return of the King reference” Kára said then  
chuckled softly to herself.

*Do you prefer here?*

*I do.*

*Okay, close your eyes.*

*Why I can't see, we established that*

*Just do it.*

*Yes ma'am!*

*Well isn't that a nifty party trick*

*You ain't need nothing yet baby.*

*Now, I want you to picture, someplace calming to you. Where do you find  
yourself? And don't tell me, tell yourself. Acknowledge it.*

*Who are you?*

*Without the deceit.*

*What do you not want to admit to because the sheer number of lies that it took to hold it together?*

*You atop, this precarious precipice of paradoxical thought. Always dancing around, who am I? And why do I need to hide?*

**I VAGUELY RECOGNIZE THAT NAME... BUT... I CAN'T... QUITE PUT MY FINGER ON WHY...**

**WHY ARE YOU GOING TO TELL ME ABOUT THIS PERSON?**

Kára leaned over to Astrid and whispered, "What about before?"

"Before?" Astrid had a bemused look on her face.

"Yeah, before, before."

*Oh yeah. I suppose we should address that.*

**SO... WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HIM?**

**AM I GOING MAD?**

*No. At least I don't think so. But for simplicity sake, we need to tell you this to uh, get unstuck from the Aetherial quagmire we find ourselves in.*

Astrid leaned into Kara, "I think we may have miscalculated our temporal displacement with the last leap, but I am positive this time it will bring us where we need to go."

You think this time will be different?

**WHAT DO YOU MEAN THIS TIME?**

### **WHO ARE YOU PEOPLE AGAIN?**

Yeeshh, Kára and Astrid.

I think we fried his brain.

### **UMM... WHAT?**

*Okay, okay, recap boy wonder, just listen...*

### **OH, KAY?**

*That means no talking.*

Since we spoke last it was revealed that I am a guardian, *we were trapped a dungeon; emphasis on the fact that we were.* I would note that it was not Black Rock Hot Springs, but a dungeon deep within the Karak Red-Rock Mountain.

We fended off a new type of Skripi attack, and then I was taken by an entity who called themselves Jambi.

I surmised that after the exchange with the Elder and the orb he handed me... And you know, seeing his ugly mug in the torture suite, Jambi is acting on orders from the Elder Karak.

When we reached the outpost and Astrid carried my lifeless body into her surgery.

*Well...*

*That hasn't... quite happened yet.*

What do you mean it hasn't happened yet? Then what was that fever dream of nightmare with Rue and all that?

Umm... well remember in that Astral-AETHERIAL-Temporal Mechanics course we had with Maester Djarvay? Where they warned us about Djinn?

Well what the fuck.

I am starting to losing sight of what is real anymore. At least I know this part is real.... Right?

Yes, do you think I would leave you there? It certainly is more real than that place.

uhh... okay...

So, you did let herself be captured so that she could find me... That happened right?

Right.

Everything waaaasss going according to plan, until that asshole showed up... Was? What aren't you telling me? In our last conversation you said everything was fine.

And, it is. It just isn't quite what we had planned going into this operation.

Did you know about the Djinn?

I had an inkling.

But, honestly I wasn't sure until the elder pulled that "artifact" out before our last engagement. By then I knew it was too late, and I was pretty sure it was useless to clue you in, until... well we were here. Besides I didn't want to tip off the Karak.

So now that we are being honest with each other... For the record...

Where is here?

Ahh... Sub-level twelve, subsection six of the Red Rock Mine.

Really? You haven't made it out of this hellhole yet?

Well dear, I had you stabilized... For a moment at least. Your injuries are very severe... You passed out on us, and I have been having to keep you in a temporal-stasisfield and have to try to keep your mind occupied so you don't slip any further, and still fight my way out. And... There is a reason he is here...

Isn't Bofreth with you? Wait... You said asshat was here too?

He is, but is rather engaged crushing the skulls of Priests of Myrkr against the walls of this dank dungeon. As for the asshat... We'll let's just say he felt guilty and in usual fashion he was fashionably late and over confident.

**KAY?**

Sooosh, just listen, she is meaning the other asshat, not in our heads.

Sooo...

Why the façade of a peaceful retreat, just the two of us?

I... Thought it might be fun?

Fair enough I guess...

When I had finally infiltrated the guard, and gained access to your holding cell, you were an absolute mess.

More than this?

Yes. I could only get brief moments with you, but it was enough to to stabilize you, or so I thought.

Your body and mind has been ravaged by torture for weeks on end. I slipped into the guard rotation to get in, illusions can do wonders on the feeble minded.

Unfortunately the Regiment was ordered to move on to fortify the Fjall-Karak southern border as tensions between the Karak's and... well everyone else has deteriorated to the point where we are looking at the possibility of open hostilities.

Arturos seized control of the Valkyrja, and is maintaining that he has been field promoted to General, and wishes to lead the expedition into the Skripsi lands to find the artifact.

A point of consternation that I shan't get into... So what is he doing back here?

Shan't?

Shhh.

I can only surmise guilt. He sought volunteers, and put his XO in charge in his stead. They were ordered to push on into the Skripsi lands should he not return within the week.

Nursing you back into a mental state where I could call your mind back from the brink has been arduous to say the least. You are stubborn as a mule, and resisted efforts for quite some time.

To be fair.

To be faairrr.

To be fair, when you found me I was processing something over and over again

You were in a Djinn prison that was looping trauma from your past into your present. You were losing your mind dear.

I... was trying to wrap my head around a puzzle of my own making

Yeah, it was getting pretty convoluted there towards the end.

I... I needed you.

I know.

So wait, am I really a guardian, or was that just nonsense?

Well, as far as I understand, yes. The Djinn pulled that tidbit out of you, but I have had my suspicions for a while.

So what, you just weren't going to tell me?

Orders dear.

I am just not sure why your powers haven't manifested yet, but if, and when I had confirmation I was going to help you through it whatever that meant.

The classified meeting I had prior to our departure, well not so classified anymore, meeting I had with the council before we undertook this mission...

My orders were quite explicit in that matter. That we were to secure the artifact and it should fully awaken your powers. Some of which have already manifested. Those wings of yours? Pretty neat party trick.

Hmmm... I thought I was just gifted in the Aetherial arts...

I mean, you are, but there is more to it.

So what do you figure the priests of Myrkr want with me? They seem to want me dead.

They know that if you regain your full strength, the power of a guardian that they don't control, would shift the balance of power in this region, and stifle their plans for the Skripsi.

Do you know what those plans are?

No clue.

The council had ideas that the Priests of Myrkr were making a play for the Karak's allegiance, but they did not realize how many invasions they had already made into the Karak society.

**SO... UH... WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH ME?**

Well, my traitorous friend. You play a special role all of this.

**I AM NO TRAITOR.**

Your intimate knowledge of our mission, and your penchant for mind games would beg to differ.

**I LITERALLY HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF THIS.**

That may be true in this moment... But it doesn't change the fact that the Council named you in my last briefing, saying that you had gone rogue.

**I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT IS.**

So, if you aren't sure why not shut up and use this as an opportunity to atone for whatever it is you have been up to. Maybe the council will go easy on you

**WHAT DO YOU NEED ME TO DO?**

Kara is stuck in this pocket universe that you created and...

Astrid, he was trying to help when he brought me here.

Fine. Benefit of the doubt. But he isn't off the hook. He is a part of this whole mess, I'm just not exactly sure how connected.

We need you to search your library for a tome, or something that might shed some light on this pocket universe you created, and while you do that, we are going to try to convince your sub-conscious to abandon the mission that you are on.

### **WHY?**

We know about the artifact.

*We know about the gateway.*

### **WHAT? HOW?**

You felt guilty, in a different level of your subconscious of course. You confessed to deceiving me, and wanted to atone.

*Because the stronger the emotions, the tighter her grip on reality. At the present moment, I am the only thing tethering her to our reality, and if she wants to talk, or fuck, or what have you, we will until you find a way to reverse this.*

I mean, that doesn't sound too bad?

*Except that out there, where I am, and your body is... We are vulnerable as long as you are here. So kindly Maester Heinrich, if you could use that big brain of yours to find a way out of this mess.*

### **OHKAY, BUT HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN I FIND IT?**

The fuck would I know? But I do know if you don't hurry, I am going to have to shift to a lower energy level and jump us again to keep our signals in phase with hers, and I don't think you will like the results of that.

**WHY?**

For fucks sake. You know how you can't remember shit?

**YEAH?**

It can get worse.

A lot worse.

**AH, WELL FUCK ME RUNNING. CAN... IT BE FIXED?**

Shut up and start looking, and in the mean time we are going to concentrate on the moment at hand.

So you were saying dear?

oh, uh... Yeah... We were explaining how you got me out of this shit-hole... When you first reached out to my mind... I blended you into my insanity

I couldn't distinguish you, from the phantoms of this realm, and I needed your song to guide me through the darkness.

I remember moments of lucidity, but it was mostly a haze of memories and emotions that still haunt me.

Jambi's doing no doubt. I assume a twist of the screws to fracture your mind further. Attempt to make you pliable to their endgame, which honestly I haven't quite put together, yet.

Well, it almost worked.

But... Then I saw you. I could feel your anguish Your distress. I wanted nothing more than to reach out to you.

Kara... I...

But... You quickly became a beacon of hope. I was lost wandering a labyrinth of trauma...

From what I can remember, by the time you found me, I was making lemonade from the lemons I was handed.

*You were living on the beach with a version of me, a facsimile of your own designs. Dreams untethered from reality as we live it.*

I mean...

I said it was a labyrinth of trauma.

I still had my wits about me, so I just found somewhere I knew I could find you.

Even if only a facsimile as you called it.

*I've been having this... feeling...*

Mind, Body, Spirit and all.

*It seems you took the body part and ran with it. The positions you were in when I found you.*

You mean the positions... we were in.

**Kara giggled.**

I needed to heal my body so my mind could focus. Old wounds are only wounds when we can't find our part and come to terms with it.

True, but Kara, what if it isn't real. What if perhaps you are on the verge of death, fumbling through the past as a fleeting attempt to hold on to what you once had...

What do you mean?

Clearly, I am dealing with a great deal of trauma to every part of me, so what do you mean hold on to things?

...I am clearly trying to let go.

I know sweetie, but...

What's the worst thing that's gonna happen, I die with a clear conscience?

And the only way to mend that which can grow is to be willing to do the work, okay, we will handle it your way.

And... I mean come on, sometimes this kind of work can be fun... hehe

So far what I have come up with is that in order to reorient myself along the Aetherial network

I need to think differently about my past so I can tweak my perception of the present

Fate is what you make it kind thing?

Yeah, kinda. I have had a lot of time to think, and what I came up with was that every moment of every day that passes I get an opportunity to shift my trajectory along the Aetherial.

Are you sure you haven't been smoking again?

Positive I think. Anyways I postulate that there are these quantized amounts of change each of us are capable of each day. These movements are imperceptible but take shape and indicate a structure when viewed backwards in time.

*What didn't or couldn't make sense at the time, becomes clearer as we gather our wits. I guess that makes some sense. I am not sure how much, but I believe that you believe dear. And I cannot refute the thread of time leading us somewhere unknowable.*

Exactly! Before you know it... *You've changed.* How is undetermined until observed.

*I get it, but what does all this have to do with the cabana, and how I found you?*

Well, do you remember that time we spent overseas?

*Sorta, it was a long time ago dear. But I do remember the waters were treacherous, pirates everywhere. Attached to the Midgard Flotilla for a short while getting our sea legs.*

Do you remember what happened after we brokered that deal with the pirate king?

*I remember it being a costly battle for both fleets.*

After that, where we were allowed to take our shore leave? Those pristine waters? White sands?

*I do recall that.*

I felt at peace.

*I did too.*

For one of the first times in my life, being there with you, I felt at peace. Like the world's problems melted away. I was weary of battling the pirates into their capital. Weary of the losses we had sustained.

Weary of life.

*I remember how difficult it was for you. I remember trying to help you pick up the pieces, but I was lost as well. Mired in the turmoil we had endured. The friends lost. I don't know. From what I remember while we were together, we couldn't have been further apart. Each of us dealing with the trauma of war differently.*

Yes, ma'am, I suppose you are right. I guess I was a bit presumptuous. Kára leaned in to kiss Astrid, who smiled and kissed her softly. *Love you.*

**I MAY HAVE FOUND SOMETHING. I WAS READING ONE OF THE MANY TOMES THAT WERE STREWN ABOUT THE CABIN.**

**I THINK... IT SEEMS THAT I, WE, MAY HAVE FORCED YOU INTO A KIND OF STATIS BUBBLE.**

A what-bubble?

**A, AH, UMHMMMMHHMMM...**

**THIS MAKES YOU DISCONNECTED FROM REALITY, NAMELY YOUR REALITY IS DISCONNECTED FROM THE TRUTH OF THINGS AT THE MOMENT. YOUR MIND IS WHOLLY SEPARATE FROM YOUR PHYSICAL BODY WHILE YOU ARE HERE.**

So does that mean, there could be other versions of me around here? I mean, ya know, like all people I have those parts of me that just hate me. I can only imagine them traveling in packs in the tall grass like raptors.

Clever girl...

**WELL I AM NOT SURE WHAT YOU WILL SEE IN THERE. WHAT I DO KNOW FROM THE VARIOUS NOTES SCATTERED AROUND HERE IS THAT HE FIGURES YOU HAVE A DAY OR TWO AT BEST TO FIGURE YOUR SHIT OUT, OR ALL THREE OF US WILL PERMANENTLY SEPARATE FROM OUR BODIES.**

Clever girl.

## 1.14 – WiP

11/25/23

**INFLECTED UPON YOU IT APPEARS THAT I... UH... THAT IS HEINRIKR PLACED YOU IN SOME SORT OF MEDICAL STASIS FIELD THAT ALLOWS YOUR BODY TIME TO HEAL WITHOUT YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS GETTING IN THE WAY.**

So you put me in a coma.

So how do we get out?

**IT APPEARS... YOUR BODY IS HEALING JUST FINE, BUT THE REASON YOU ARE STUCK, THAT IS YOU CANNOT FREE YOURSELF FROM THIS STASIS IS THAT YOU HAVE YET TO HEAL YOUR MIND.**

*Well fuck. That explains why we are here.*

*What do you mean?*

**I MEAN, THAT HEINRIKR DEPLOYED SOME SERIOUS MAGICK AT APPARENTLY A GREAT COST TO HIS OWN FACULTIES. I MEAN IT EXPLAINS THE PERSISTENT AMNESIA. EITHER THAT OR THE COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF FELDEHANDS I'VE SEEN ON THE PREMISES.**

Hey!! What the nine hells? Who said he could do that?

*I did.*

What?!

I was desperate. I felt you slipping. I wasn't ready to accept my own reality, I wasn't ready to let you go, and face the truth that has been staring me in the face.

And what truth is that?

That our journey together has brought us great joy, but also at a cost. Lapses in judgement, dereliction of duty in some instances. I swore a sacred oath, that I have been ignoring. It has been gnawing at me ever since...

Since this...

You have been such a healing light, but I cannot ignore my duties any longer.

I didn't ask for this. How long have we been here Astridr?

We have been here for at least six cycles. You...

You have been here for at least twelve... full.

What do you mean by twelve?

Well I am not quite certain how time works here relative to the outside, but I ran some figures and uhh.. I know you didn't intend any harm, but harm has been done nonetheless.

What do you mean?

This isn't easy for me to say, and I wanted to wait on this out of respect for our situation, but... Kara... I keep finding myself full of anger and resentment. It is really hard for me to process, but I wanted to try to get you through this one last time, but... I don't know if I can do this anymore. I don't know if I can wait around for you to get better.

I have to follow through on my vows...

What about what we promised to each other?

No... I, uh... I understand, and I know you aren't wrong... It's just... I, just don't want it to be true. I want to believe you will always come back for me. That in my darkness you will always return.

*Kara, when I return...*

**Astrid bit her lip while a worried look stretched across her face.**

*If I return... I might not be the same anymore. I just don't know. This is uncharted territory for us both. What I do know is...*

Are... Are you sure I couldn't interest you in this beautiful cabana for a few weeks?

*Kara, sweetie, it is bad enough we have to wade through this, again.*

uhg I know... I'm sorry

I didn't mean to put you in this position. I never wanted to drag you into something like this...

Tears welled up in Kara's eyes as she looked into Astrid's eyes, a sense of loss overtaking her mind.

Astrid placed her hand on Kara's cheek, half smiled and then got up and moved away, and when she was a few meters away she finally turned back to see tears slowly streaming down Kára's cheeks.

*Kara, we have unfinished business, and I am not sure how much help I will be, but I will try, but ultimately I have to attend to my duties too, and... plan for a future where we never ever come back from this. I don't like having to think this way, but it has been a journey just getting here.*

So, what's a little more time, eh?

Sweetie, it doesn't work that way and you know it. What we have is special, but Kára, I can't continue on like this. I am sorry if I am hurting you, I honestly don't mean to, but look, you gotta see it from my perspective.

Right, right... No, I get it... Promise...

Yeah?

Can we promise that if this doesn't work we can at least spend our last few minutes, here?

I don't know.

I know you don't want to do this, but we have to try.

I mean....

Sweetie, did you think I was going to leave you at this moment? We are still in this together. I was there for you then, and I will be here for you now, but we need to face reality too. That is what I am talking about. I am not always the best support system, but if there are clearly things we can still try, I am game, and we are going to hit it.

Thank you... For not giving up on me.

You know me, I don't just cut and run.

I know, but..

I know.

Astrid walked over to Kára and sat on the bed beside her. A flicker of a smile crossed her lips and she kissed Kára on the cheek, to which Kára smiled and kissed Astrid on the lips softly. This may not be reality... But... That doesn't mean what I am feeling for you isn't real.

I know. But it's the rules we break that haunt us. At the deceptions we take on, or put upon ourselves that end up defining us. What legacy do you want to leave Kara? Do you want to be defined by who he was, and what he did, or do you want to set the tone for what the future holds...

I think if I stop pretending for a moment it is obvious what rules I have broken. I broke one of the most closely guarded pacts that a patriarchy holds dear. I dare to be a blasphemer. I took a stance, wanting a different future than what others had already planned for me.

I wanted to define my own identity

I dared to question what it meant to be me in light of the facts that society had already determined for me. I strive to be inquisitive and not shut off to the nature of things, seeking truths to replace faulty logic and a disease of perception.

Genetically at best, I can tell I was born with the ability to make a certain type of gametes. Beyond that, there is evidence for a physical development in which separated me from my peers. Drawing a boundary between with whom I should and should not associate.

Left feeling out of touch

Tears in my eyes for those moments we could not share anymore. Subjugated by a force greater than my mind, greater than my desires. On a road slowly diverging from where I wished to be. I wanted to stay with her. I wanted to hold her hand, she filled my dreams, and I could do nothing to stop it despite being told that I should.

Was I delusional? I must have been wrong, living and feeling my feelings incorrectly, but...

I just wasn't imbued with an innate sense that I should want to be like some of role models as presented in my life. That because I produced gametes similar to them, I should in turn be like them.

I didn't inherit this sense of duty that was projected upon me. I wanted to find my own way, and at times wished I could have just been born differently, that way the thoughts in my head might at least be congruent with the way society wants me to be.

Maybe then...

Maybe then life would have been easier, I would think to myself.

I think... if I am honest with myself, which seems to be easier using hindsight, but... It is also clear that the past seems so elusive. My accumulated wisdom, eerily coloring the past making some bits clear, and others just... seem ever so out of reach of my myopic view and grasp.

I dunno, I never had those strong proclivities towards doing the other things my peers did. I would do them sure, they told me verbally, and through action, that these activities were what was required to have a relationship with them. I was to coalesce around the few people that even cared to give me the time of day, the fear of being alone gripping my mind, I would take on traits, activities, and likes and dislikes as required by these social pressures.

What absolutely tears me up inside is that look of disappointment...

That feeling that I destroyed everything that other people had come to know and expect from me. That my differences were now something to be tolerated or just outright rejected...

That somehow I was now lesser than

I gave up on what they wanted from me, and it was like a slap in their faces... At least to those people who only saw me as an extension of themselves. That I was a prop within their life and I had a specific role and function to fill. But that doesn't stop the guilt. The unease of disappointment you see in their eyes as your truth comes out.

No turning back.

once I committed to the journey... once I said that I could no longer pretend... That's when reality began to set in. The games we played were revealed as just that intricate dances whose goal was only to cover up undesirable qualities. But... that doesn't stop people from trying to push you back into that ill-fitting box.

No, some are able to embrace it amorphous state of things, while others still try to shove you back in.

These were just flaws in my code, and if I could just focus on the traditions, then, maybe, some order could be restored again.

To this end, I was raised to equally cook, as a means to understand the hunt, and drink to understand my place in things. I was taught to stand up for what I believed in, as long as it didn't embarrass anyone, especially myself. That it was better to hide, than it was to admit to things that others might use against me.

In the face of other people's perceptions of what I should be like, I tried over and over to make things my own, to see things from a different perspective, perhaps more queer perspective.

But...

I wasn't going to share that with anyone.

I was to go along with the path others had set out for me, in hopes to expose me to enough of a particular path such that these proclivities that I had, could be understood as just a phase, something to grow out of instead of into.

I was to be someone others wanted me to be. In hindsight, that is where the drink took a hold of me.

The drink allowed me to quiet the internal dialogue. I was able to focus on understanding the external dialogue, listening to what others said I should be.

Hours, lost to stories that I have no recollection of, but others seem to... Stories that when told back to me indicated that who I was when I drank, how I acted when I drank was something that allowed me to fit in.

I was becoming someone who could blend in, someone who others could look up to in a perverse way. This magic liquid did something for me that no amount of personal effort had done up to that point. I was able to see where others were right, that I belonged in that box, the amorphous state of being was not something to strive for.

But... I knew that something didn't feel quite right, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I was finding that acceptance of others that I had craved for so long, but I couldn't ever shake the feeling that something was fundamentally wrong with me. That I had secrets, that I couldn't tell anyone, I had to hide them, especially from myself. But despite my efforts, moments would always crop up. Questions that only a drink could answer, and soothe the pain that came with that internal dialogue.

Why did I look at women the way I did?

Why did I feel so safe around them?

Why did I find their interests so fascinating?

Why did I look up to strong women in a way that I never looked up to strong men?

I could tell that I wanted to be with these women in a carnal sense, but why?

Did I just want to sleep with them, or... or did I want to be them? or both?

Drink.

With these painful questions swirling in my head, time and again I could feel a stark incongruence with the persona I had been crafting.

The person who I was, who could suppress these queer thoughts, that was the person people wanted me to be.

Why couldn't I just be happy with that?

Why did I have to feel different?

Drink.

In my travels, and pursuits, I ended up on the in-crowd of this masculine bunch, who embraced my ability to drink and party like them I was accepted in a way, that I was told I should be happy with, that I was finally making my way into the spaces that were off limits to me prior.

Why couldn't I be happy with that?

Drink.

I would easily blend in with the objectification of the femme crowd, this seemed to please the masculine groups that I was a part of. I was strange, but I had qualities that could be accepted as long as I was willing to act in a way that was expected of me..

But still, even with these social pressures I would gaze longingly towards the femme crowds, noticing details about how they carried themselves, how they dressed, how they differentiated themselves from others. Wasn't I supposed to be taking those cues from these people I was surrounding myself with?

I was trying so hard to fit in and be one of the guys, why did I have to keep having these thoughts? Every day, every interaction my

mind consumed with whether or not I was acting in a manner that fit my status.

I was going to achieve my goals.

I was not going to derail my path with these stupid thoughts.

Drink.

Try harder, don't think so much about it.

Bolster your efforts, develop the behaviors you were supposed to. It will come. It has to. Some day.

Drink.

Being present to the conversation at my fingertips became increasingly difficult. The voice in my head screaming in agony at having to don that mask again. Painted on smiles for the masses, but when alone I could erase the falsehoods. I could breathe for a moment. I didn't have to pretend when I was alone.

But it got to a point where I honestly didn't understand why I felt that way. I would think back to times before, before what I don't know, but I could remember emotions that had indicated I was happier. I was able to breathe freely. What happened to that person?

Who the fuck was I?

I had given up on who I used to be in an effort to accomplish my goals, what I thought were my dreams. I was going to show the world that they were wrong about what I could accomplish.

But... Why was I so drawn to these thoughts? Why couldn't I purge them? Why couldn't I just be normal?

But to express such things concerns, to draw attention to these seemingly abhorrent thoughts would surely draw the ire of my peers, and so I lived in my shame.

What was I to do? I contemplated my death so many times. It was my dark companion accompanying me everywhere I would go.

My dark passenger would grow so loud at times and my perception of the world would skew so much, until things became so twisted that I couldn't handle the mental load anymore, and the only reprieve was to drink.

Drinking was the only thing that seemed like it could shut my passenger up for even just a minute... The unfortunate part, was that the reprieve I would get, was short lived, and as we got to know each other, the intervals in between, the amount of peace that I could find dwindled, and dwindled until it was next to nothing.

I was next to nothing. I no longer had any self worth without my companion. They began to define me, with their relentless attacks. I was becoming a version of me, that did not reflect who I wanted to be.

I was constantly filled with shame. Shame that I would be found out. Shame that I needed to resort to such measures to even get through a day. Shame that I didn't know how you get out of the predicament I found myself in.

I was so full fearful of saying I wanted to be with another woman, that I wanted to be more than I was. I was afraid of people finding out, of people learning the secret to my deepest secret. I could not drive anymore, I was so focused on containing the pent up trauma, focused on what he had done to us. What he stole from us. That precious thing we strive our whole lives trying to preserve, time, he stole that time from me, forcing me to propagate his trauma into my stream. Now countless numbers of new strands not only have him in it, but half have it worse than I did.

Some of our process here... Trying to free up processing nodes along the infected areas, and instead of staring at them, and reliving the trauma, adding to it's power with every new variant. We go in, ya know kinda like that Matrix movie Astridr was so hooked on

*I told you that two years ago, and you said it was nothing like it, and it was more like how them Marvelous folks, what was their name? I D K... seemed to have some sort of insight.*

We

Did you just I D K? Seriously we should look into stop doing the tour-de-chat rooms late at night.

*But seriously there is so much gold there. I can't believe he would talk to her like that.*

This is true, and I suppose the saga must continue, but we still need to get to the faulty node. If you have been getting so close, sweetie, I

know I got maybe a run or two left in me, but I know... I know I am going to break through this time.

And if you don't?!

We got one more?

I guess that is one way to look at it. I mean you pruned the higher sigma branches relatively easily, but these, if you can't put your feelings aside for me, if you can't focus on the mission, we cannot get to him...

And I hate to say it, or remind you, I guess, but with every story we consume from the host node, we are spawning so many interesting new variants, you really had a thing for those war movies...

ore I mean, I figured, maybe in a non-thinking moment... I was like, "oh, shit, I could fight that bear..." So uh now, yeah, heh, guess I get the chance, Nazi-zombie-bears?

Heh, weakness.

at least this last 'Shank go around was a good refresher of the story. This time, no getting institutionalized... Please?

No promises, but yes, I hear you.

This shit is... it's an informational cancer across the streams, say I can't wait to taste the Stay-pluffed mallow man again. Ya only get one, I mean I guess technically you get more than one, but you whine about your ritual, there can only be one.

Where the fuck did you even get that one?

uh, no where... And it certainly doesn't have a loose tie in with that Leth-ahl weepppooonn nine, or was that twelve? Ah, I don't know... It was a shameless reboot-sequel-prequal, and it was soooo good. I mean, super bad, but so super good...

Butttt...

Yeah...

It is a part of your birthday surprise!

*Oh boy.*

I am calling it, the lethalest weapons a brief journey into the stream I saved a handful of select journeys just for us.

*Oh boy.*

A small selection of who-dun-it feature films, and a selection of fan favorites as a treat.

*You can't just rely on your knowledge of movies to beat him off...*

*No pun intended...*

Fair, but sometimes it is fun to relive those really fun Star Treks episodes!

Right?

I don't know, I find myself thinking, "You may ask yourself whether, or not" and then get briefly stuck in a recursion...

whatever...

Those timelines, those branches, whatever you want to call them... If you can't punch through, he is going to consume you from within. By the time the DeltaT got big enough for me to see an opening on an alternate branch, well...

Too long

Yeah...

He is going to be feeding off of you; drawing off your energy, you must remember purple hex diamond, queen.

Did you put that filter on?

on Mmmhmm, Katarina's Kitty Kat Klub - Katarina's KKK...

KKK... Klub... Where have I heard that before?

Yeah... they were these violent extremists from approximately their teen-Holocene, probably not nice to keep bringing it up in light of the interpreter and all. I mean...

Yeah... You aren't wrong. It would certainly make it more difficult to disseminate unless this is more like one of those backwards kinds of worlds where like the K's were backwards and all the repressors were now the supressee's I mean, I don't know.

I fucking hate the multiverse, great tv, shit to have to live, construct, color, or whatever medium comes to mind for disseminating an epic tale such as this.

I don't think these are selling points dear.

Nah, seriously, this epic... This hopefully Starship Troopers level of fame can be entered into their AETHERIAL record!

I told you, just because the host thinks it is a fantastic branch, is not indicative of that truth until our world were to be crossed against multiple "fan-fiction's"

That is how you know you made it though.

I mean, I don't think you are wrong.

-11-19-23-

Think about it, you start crossing from this singular interaction, with the host, onto another person, who then happens to be able to give the story

ECOR

It is why I try to either imagine really quick acts of fantasy, or an epic tale to spin together to immortalize those I love in an increasingly weird but explainable way that would relate to my love for them

. Then pretty soon, you crack. You just... you just can't take it anymore, a barrier to everything in life. As if life were being squeezed against a seemingly infinite and impenetrable wall.

The funny thing about the universe is how much it arbors impossible things. It, nature, the universe, god, goddesses, whatever... From what I can tell is

that it abhors the no win scenario. It finds ways around seemingly impossible things. I mean... Look at the Mission Impossible franchise that spawned. I mean we may have collectively dreamt the no win scenario but all it did was create a new branch that just wasn't quite expected.

No win scenarios? More like Aetherial pivot points that if given enough breathing room, enough thought, it can slingshot a stream traveler, wouldn't it be funny if it was one of your trout doing this to us? We are some rock just forcing some water and other materials around us, or set on a collision course with us. What may seem to be an insignificant change in one universe, but could start the journey towards destruction in the next. Technically everything bounces, it must be a spectacular show along that stream. A point turning into a big bang. A shot across another universe so to speak. Aetherial-Dimensional warfare.

Told you the marvelous ones were on to something... Or I guess that Rick fellow.

I... am not looking forward

I... I can feel his presence every time we go.

that I relied more and more on my passenger to guide me. They would tell me the direction I would tell myself. That..

That.. I should go, that I just needed to have faith that these partners would get me from one point of anguish to the next And

hope that in going from point "a" to point "b" - You hope that the moments are memorable in an ever increasing beautification of your life. despite the hurt that it seemed to cause. Eventually I just learned to avoid the things that would hurt while I was with my companion.

I found that there really was only one option for me. I had to hide.

I had to pretend to be someone I just didn't feel. That I tried hard to let this all go. That I remember crying thinking that maybe I was one of those beings of ill repute. Shame coursing across your mind at light speeds. Didn't they say we could undo this? Didn't they say it was wrong to be queer? So... I won't be.

I... just... fantasize from afar. Who everyone tells me, and as far as I know... I guess I am supposed to like this specific thing so, that part checks out. That part makes sense. But.

Why...

Why couldn't I accept, willingly, without shame...

What, I liked.

Something that was mine to hold. Maybe not intentionally, but it grew in me.

I couldn't help but nurture some of the more radical ideas it presented. But they were only radical from the perspective of those who oppose a change, as if the strength of the connection to the issue pulls people together. That if you align all of these little genetic components and parent or, in my case, attempt to guess as to the

possible futures and try to align as close as I can to their interests, almost like root systems touching neighbors, and mine. How far the apple falls from the tree sounds pretty apt. If I drop my fruit, how far will we have to go to touch, or be the same.

Acceptance.

Without acceptance...

Without an understanding for something that looks different than was expected...

What is the tolerance we have for how different something looks before our connections retard, and in some cases break under the strain, the poison being given off between the people?

How much poison can a person ingest before they realize how bad it can get. To come off of their genetic pedestal and try to jump and swim the Aether away from their parents. How well did those family values sink a harvesters knife into the back in just the right ways.

How far can you get?

Pulling

Pushing

Trying to free yourself from the weights that you inherited.

These sights that must be maintained.

How much acceptance do you have?

How many of those weights come off from looking at the problem rather than swimming the sickle deeper. Each tug pulling a piece of

you away. And another coming in close behind. or the ones that claw back and start mining a new piece.

Gruesome shit honestly.

Of course these are all metaverse aligned functions but wouldn't it be EPIC?

I swear.

How they didn't get to this in your training. A multiverse, some say being madness, chaos, nameless fluids and reactions.

But a multiverse where differences between avatars is only that of their imagination, and system limitations.

Personal spaces, re-imagined again in the digital age.

It is as if when given choice on avatar, expression for complex nuances on society, without the need for a basic level of support, able to create shelter, find resources, and stay vigil. There is always a beginning and an end.

But what must end must also survive.

Whether or not it is only a shadow of a portrait, or rich mosaics, the mosaic can become blurry, as the shadow begins to take on the individual roots that came together in their lifetime.

Their presence travels into the future, their existence transcends into the Aether.

They will no longer plant seeds into the ground, no new branches may approach. But their influence lives on until it has become a part. A

node fulfilling it's processing capabilities, and creating the infrastructure that our existence depends upon. Little tiny oscillating decisions, influencing others along the lattice that is Yggdrasil. I separate dimension of processing. No one goes away

The number of branches you choose to share... That is how big your processing node was.

Maybe it is one of those fast paced bursts of energy focusing so quickly into one area of life. Propelling you into a direction that quite honestly, you have no fucking clue who is driving some times. How many other nodes get to fill in, how many roots will be able to connect in such a small space. What mosaic will they create, even if the connections severs, the imprint is there. The infinite mosaic of imprints focusing to a new point once enough time passes.

She brought me to my knees.

I just wanted to be pretty.

I just wanted to fit in.

I just wanted to put shunts on growing branches. Eventually that shit breaks through, and you don't have a subtle awakening, no, you have the whole sausage of variable size, to recon with

How many of these fires can you deal with at once?

Why did they have such an aura?

Why did I walk through my imagination, my multiverse, trying to find the clearest pictures? Something that feels like it is just you, within

the limitations that the system presents you. The only difference in the overall game of life being luck, equality, equity, and justice. How hard do you want to work to get better at a skill? How do your roots spiral outward to collect the infinitesimally small node. That takes lots of energy, but serves a function, and if it is meaningful just slowly shift the processing elsewhere.

Everything serves a purpose, no one dies. Their aether remains.

It is within us.

A mobius of the universe that your existence carves out. A flexible tensor, the most discrete units, possible, defining, decoding, analyzing, reacting to stimuli.

So yeah.

I rejected the idea that I was queer vehemently. I embraced the fucking nodes near these people that I was already attracted to. A sea of connections unanswered by a self imposed, and multilayered Aether velcro strip keeping a lid on aspects of expression that felt desirable.

It sounds so childish to think, but you are that avatar, walking through a sea of code.

You are the extension of my information that I carry.

You and I have a velcro strap of aether holding out information together in an seemingly n-dimensional fluid, a matter of perspective, a matter of work, a matter of life.

I freaking fell in love with my best friend.

That's where all this is coming from

A waterfall of connections swimming with the force given to it based on node location

**PEW PEW PEW, PIRATE SHIPS AND GRAPPLING NETS WITH DAGGERS ON 'EM. CANNON BALLS, MORE CANNON BALLS!**

**THAT WAS WHEN THAT ONE, WELL NOT EXACTLY, BUT IT IS A CONVENIENT STARTING POINT FOR INVESTIGATION HOW INFINITELY WE WANT TO GO...**

Ass...

It is when our node twisted, our processing had completed and sent a shockwave along our systems. An end anticlimactic in nature, and the shockwave not wholly unexpected.

"I hate the way you are not my ex... Cause now you're living in my head..." apt words for how that information can spilled out of that node, in other words this is how you receive the information

Ha, I made a funny

The fuse for this, the impetus of the system, ready to be primed. It always starts with this woman looking out into a desert or some shit

Would you like to know more?

Become a Citizen

Do you know what it is to be me? No.

Do I you, no.

My informational hooks try an attack strategy, attempting to get in the door, some times in a multitude of directions, do we need to go over this shit again?

Fucking multiverse bullshit

We are the reflection of.

Got it?

Good.

You don't die.

So what choices were in front of me? What had I earned, and what was given? Does that matter in the comp... yep, it sure does. Years more on the crane kick and, whew, kids neck woulda been snapped, but then that karate kid would be really old, and why was he time traveling, and why was he attacking this kid?

See?

Fucking multiverse.

You can just dig, and dig, and dig.

You can be annoyed that my connection doesn't always stay within optimal parameters.

I can feel shame that my parameters don't meet your needs, that our connection couldn't be stronger.

Both feelings of loss, of multiverse bullshit that you can see, but didn't go down that path, cause otherwise you wouldn't be here, or projecting into the future? Fuck, please.

Your vision and mine can go infinitely in depth about a future, but you would never return

Acceptance.

I accept the kick in the ass from my lot in life, I weigh the near future, with goals set out beyond that.

And I must have this present. Everything leading to and propelling me through. At best I can influence particular connections, or nodes if you will. Ahahaha I am a mad woman.

I was once told that radical acceptance was the key. Acceptance that I don't have to like the kicks to my ass, and may want things to change, but again that comes down to effort, and equity.

If you were born into a situation where your hamburger came from the cream of the crop, and mine was catching and smashing flies together.

I mean, I would think if we had similar aspirations we might think differently on how to prioritize our nodes energy. What do we focus on while we are here?

What things change with us in the equation?

And how do you soften, or hide parts of your profile, your shadow of information?

That you might be hiding from the world writ large within a hyper-masculine persona fueled by alcohol. That who I was, that person who I used to remember, that was a long time ago, those nodes are far away. You didn't repair what you had priorities for this version of you.

It doesn't mean the future can't blur the lines again, but maybe it's not this version, and that is acceptance enough. That this is what we have, and I can do childish things, or I could paint a rainbow.

No, this color, this color, this color only

Alcohol made that okay for me.

Here I was free to at least be something, a *drunk*.....

until I wasn't, well, not wasn't but, whatever, radical acceptance!

My drinking, my feldehan's consumption, maybe akin to your whisk'y's,  
cheaper as the years marched on

open up drinking - decent into madness

Akin to the allegory of the cave, I willingly walked down into that pit of despair that was alcoholism, and at first I could tell I was there, but it didn't matter because these people accepted me. As the years passed, I forgot that the outside world even existed. I was consumed by the idea that the alcohol fueled behaviors were in actuality me, and others who couldn't see it, they were just pretending to live life.

I became increasingly angry at the pageantry I saw in others, fleeting memories of emotions I once had displayed as if they were only shadows upon the cave wall.

It wasn't until someone close to me within that cave lent a helping hand, did I realize that I was older, less helpless to change my views on the outside world.

The fears of the past replaced by the fears of the future, and in recovery I learned about the fears of the present. The choices I can make when I look at the fears in front of me.

Slowly who I really was, emerged. Unafraid of losing more than I had already lost while wallowing in that cave, what could it hurt to admit to myself that I was a woman. That despite the type of gametes I produced, who I fundamentally was, and felt like, was a woman.

I broke the laws of our society, so that I could live.

I broke the laws of our society to show my children that they have a chance to be who they want to be, rather than what I or anyone else deems them to be.

I am becoming, so that I could show the love that is truly within my heart, instead of the façades of fear and anger of the past.

All of this flowery talk aside, I am just tired.

I am tired of this struggle, and honestly some days I just want to find the will to give up, but in the back of my mind, there is always that sliver of light. That idea of faith that I cling on to, keeping me tethered to this realm, for some unknown reason.

*Bofreth is doing just fine... We might have to have a conversation about the company he is keeping, but they are doing just fine.*

What do you mean?

*He is on expedition. He, uh, wanted you to know that he...*

*He is filled with guilt, but needed to be the one to lead the expedition into the Skripsi lands.*

I can't say that I am too surprised, he is a good soldier.

*Indeed he is, and he chose to go to maintain some semblance of order as they pushed on.*

Mmhmm what do you mean?

Astrid turned and pulled Kára close. She kissed her passionately, pausing only to say, "Do you remember this part?"

Mmmhmmmm I do, but...

[[System Reboot]]

I don't know how much longer I can go on like this. I don't know how long my heart can feel heavy like this. Longing for that touch, longing for an embrace that is not going to come again. A slip of the mind. The cold embrace of reality hanging heavy upon the head. Constant reminders adorning the walls, showing what had been gained and what had been lost, I've lost her haven't I? I drove her away with my insanity. I drove her away with my insecurity. I cannot express my sorrow with any words that might even come close to expressing what even one moment with her feels like. What her presence brings to my experience... the enrichment my spirit felt

[[System >> Online >> 5x5]]

*I think I figured out part of the connection issue I was having earlier.*

Yeah?

Yeah I kept getting stuck in these weird feedback loops where the signal would just keep looping back on itself and slowly drift out of phase.

So, what'd ya do?

I reconfigured my transceiver to lock onto your shifting Aetherial frequency. There is just a slight drift in our connection, but I'll keep an eye on it and keep you posted.

Acknowledged.

It is like I have to keep a drip feed drift on your temporal displacement, which is odd. It is like you are phasing between the past and present, but so quickly that it just appears that you are in the present.

Do you think that could just be the interpreter's signal being anchored to an ancient Aetherial epoch?

Could be.

I don't know.

Me neither.

Huh..

I think we are in uncharted waters my m'dear..

**AND WHAT ABOUT ME?**

What about you. You have certainly done plenty. We will deal with you later, until then, stay quiet.

Do you understand?

**YES MA'AM.**

Wha'd'ya mean do I understand?

Do I understand what?

*Didn't you hear him?*

Who?

*Shit.*

*We need to get a move on dear.*

*It's okay.*

*I expected this, but I must urge you to start taking this seriously.*

Agreed. I... I just have a hard time sometimes keeping my mind focused

*I know, and I know that sometimes you think too much... Just feel it, just let it flow.*

*You got this dear.*

okay, just so I am on the same page.

*Go ahead.*

We aren't in our bed naked...

*No... Don't worry about where we are, focus on this. Focus on now.*

Kára drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes, drawing in slow and deep breaths, focusing on the songbirds and gulls that she could hear outside of their tent.

I trust you.

Who am I to argue with your medical opinion? It's not like you went and got educated or anything...

*Now you are getting it. Now be a good girl and let's get out of this bed.*

I am good at being a good girl, but... I mean... Can't I admire my naked wife?

Every...

Kára began tracing her finger down the side of Astrid's body.

Curve...

Kára could feel Astrid's lips and nose touch hers. A warm tingle ran through Kára's body. As they grasped each other's flesh. Running light fingers and gentle fingernails down each other's backs.

No.

Astrid's hand began to wander along Kara's body.

*We get out of here first...*

*Then you get the rest.*

Kara giggled and said sheepishly, "Ohhkay."

So, interpreter. uh...

uh...

Interpreter... umm... Mmm...

This... is going to be... Arturos II.

I know we are on borrowed time, and... I...

And... uh... my... Astrid...

So wait... oh...

To uhh...

.

.

.

Yeah... Are you sure we have to do it this way?

*If I were, it would be classified.*

Are you serious?

*Yes.*

okay... okay... can you... go back to... uh... that thing?

Yeah...

So... okay... Find the doorway...

*Find.... Uh... The doorway. I remember Arturös standing there. A smug look upon his face as he watched. His grin always grew when...*

I am not sure why I was drawn to this particular trauma. I could feel it as soon as I got here, worming its way to the surface. A thought usually pushed aside.

I mean, it has worked thus far... But sometimes you can feel something that needs to be looked at almost if it were in your peripheral view. There, haunting you, but never directly in view due to the distance that time provides.

*No.*

*Command indicated that this was top priority. The Guardian is to be exfiltrated at all costs. Including you.*

What?

*If we can't stop this floor from collapsing...*

*There will be no one left to save.*

*Uh... Nothing dear, I am speaking to Bofreth and Arturos; I will fill you in on the details later.*

You are talking and thinking the same thing. Severity duly noted. I take it the mine is not handling the battles too well?

*There are challenges, but nothing that we can't handle if a certain someone would get off his high horse and do his fucking job.*

Okay, so not much has changed.

*Let's get on with it Kara.*

Yes ma'am

I was nineteen

You ever have those dreams where you can't quite tell?

Those days...

*Sweetie.*

Yeah... I... I am ready

*So without further ado, we present to you:*

...

Arturos II: The façade of a meat rocket

*Don't sound so enthusiastic.*

Fade in to Kara lookin' like a bomb ass civy, age nineteen. "Arrogant... Self-righteous..." she muttered to herself as she began quietly stomping up the marble stairs to the commandant's office.

Cue that "M\*A\*S\*H\*" intro from that show that lasted longer than the war it depicted.

Korean wasn't it? We sure binged the shit out of that one. Say, when we get back I want to do another dive into the interpreters mind.

Focus.

Finishing up our first year at the Citadel filled me with a lot of mixed emotions. I was nervous to transfer to a different college within the Citadel system. I had lined up some work for the break... And in the interim I was ready to leave school behind for a short while, and enjoy life...

I wanted to feel like I was in charge for a change. I wanted to feel like I was in control of my life, even just for a moment, instead of feeling like I was being thrown from one situation to another.

'twere the festival days within the autumn. A whole month dedicated to the harvest, and a celebration of a the impending seasonal change. The leaves were changing color, the air was rapidly shifting from the cool evenings to the warm days.

It is by far my favorite time of the year... Say, we should try to make it back there...

I am sure we can find a few days.

Yeah, let's remember to discuss that when we are out  
We always have some of the best ideas. Beauty in their simplicity,  
*Indeed.*

*So anyways, Kara was walking up the marble steps to the commandant's study and she could feel her frustration boil as she pushed open the massive wooden doors to the study.*

I was ready to let it all out, I had had it with Arturos II. That fuck had crossed the line.

*To be fair, he crossed a lot of lines, and this was the one you couldn't quite stomach.*

Kahtia didn't deserve to be humiliated like that.

She should have won that tournament. But he decided in the semi final match to take her out with an illegal strike to the face breaking her jaw.

I was her squad leader, and she was under my command, and so I took it personally that he would stoop so low to beat our squad. She later told me that she only struck him after he grabbed her uniform groping her. She naturally punched him in the face, forcing one of his eyes to swell shut.

outraged that someone would stand up to him, he broke her jaw, forcing her out of the tournament, and into the infirmary.

*She found her way to me where I was able to heal the major fracture, but she wasn't able to eat or speak right for a few weeks without pain. Easy to fix a bone, not so easy to heal the bits and pieces back together.*

So as her squad leader I blew a gasket. The commander needed to hear of this egregious act. There was simply too much evidence to not suggest a pattern of behavior towards women.

He would force himself on them, and when they would retaliate he would strike back with an un-proportional response. He was determined to show women they didn't have a place in the military. Often saying, "If you can't handle this, how do you think you would fare on the battlefield."

As if that were some sort of justification for his misogyny.

*Kara burst through those doors of the commanders office in a huff, she was ready to throw it all away if he wasn't transferred out immediately.*

I recognize now that I had a bit of all or nothing thinking, but I just couldn't take it anymore, ya know?

*Do you remember the gardens outside the building?*

I can still smell the garden. The flowers were just so fragrant... oh, and those beautiful ornate stone arches adorning the warrior's path through the city. All leading to the dome of the council.

*I remember the cement was infused with mithril which caused everything to shimmer. The small versions of the Titans of Asgard, judged you every time you approached the council. The assumption being it imparts a level of fear into the cadets and dignitaries alike as they approach the heart of the Citadel.*

I was fourteen when I first made it up those steps on a class field trip, I wasn't even a cadet, but I had such drive. I was going to go here... And by nineteen a newly minted second year cadet, I was ready to burn it all down.

I was known for being a stickler for rules... that made sense to me, and eager to tell you why you were wrong. So when I burst through the doors to the commandant's office, I was greeted with a sigh of annoyance.

"Sir," I started, but was immediately cut off. "Stand at attention Cadet Eiryk."

"Sir." I replied reflexively.

"How many times are you going to burst into my office to complain about my son?"

"Sir?" I asked trying to understand his question beyond face value.

"I heard he broke a cadet's jaw during the tournament, but that he was defending himself. Someone from your squad even

"Sir, I.."

"Shut it cadet. I am well aware of the situation, and he will be dealt with."

"Like you did before?... Sir.

"Watch it cadet. You have a promising career ahead of you, don't be so eager to get your head lopped off... I have grown weary of this... Whatever this is. You are soldiers, and you will have to learn to work together. Despite your differences of opinion."

"Sir?"

"You are to report to your duty officer for reassignment. You and my son will each be leading an expedition of first year cadets to the Fjallstream festival. You will need to mentor these new recruits. And as an incentive, only one of you will be granted a promotion."

I knew the squad run would happen sometime during the festival, but I didn't realize it was going to be a race.

"Sir, do I get to pick my squad?"

"Go ahead."

"Talík, Nevek, Bofreth, Kahtia, and Astrid."

"Astrid is not a first year."

"Per regulation twenty six point four of the..."

"Granted." He said annoyed, "But he will be afforded the same opportunity."

"And if I win, I formally request that he be transferred out."

"And should you lose, you will be his direct report"

"Acknowledged, sir."

"Dismissed Cadet."

"Yes, sir."

It wasn't exactly how I was expected things to go. But I was certain that this was finally going to be my chance to rid myself of that pompous ass.

Arrogant doesn't quite describe my hubris at the time. *Only that time* *hmm?* A smile crept across Astrid's face before she leaned in, kissing Kara's cheek.

Arturos made my life a living hell, and if I had to be under his command, I might as well take the long walk into oblivion. I couldn't handle it anymore. The constant questioning of my motives and abilities.

*He fond of his stupid saying too,* "Shouldn't you be off having babies?"

And, "Let the men do the real jobs instead of you pretending to be something you aren't"

Why does a woman have to try harder to get noticed when she wants, but there is a limitless supply of attention when he wants it?

*Octavian Arturos the second... [ >> Degradation at 337. ]*

Astrid.

*I know.*

*We will figure it out...*

*Sooo... Yeahh... We are talking about this later.*

*Yes dear.*

It was definitely impressed upon me that I should just accept that I was just a harlot who deserves everything that I got.

He, *Arturos the second*, on the other hand expected everything, and wanted for nothing. A thrill seeking junkie looking for any reason to stroke his ego.

The, then, son of then Colonel Artros <Councilmember Arturos>, damn auto correct.

Either way, he was a shoe in for a seat on the council. His heroics in the Antioch battle, deep within the neck between Vanaheim and **AEdraheim**, The Colonel knew he had an opportunity. Colonel Arturos knew he had the demons beat and with a decisive push he could drive them past the N-15<sup>th</sup> parallel. Maybe even back to the S-15<sup>th</sup>.

Instead, he considered his fortunes. As Isildur did with the one ring.

He was concerned with what those in power always concern themselves with, how to keep their power, or how to expand it.

At that time the Vanaheim possessed one of the only sacred relics of Yggdrasil ever to be found. Arturos used his leverage to secure peace in the region, as well as, unbeknownst to the Vanaheim, another relic of Yggdrasil.

The peace that he brokered between the demons in the south, and the Aetherial College was tenuous at best, but it held. I don't quite know how he pulled it off, but he did.

I don't know, something just doesn't seem to add up..

But, yeah back to Arturos the Second. once his father had secured a seat on the council, this asshat knew he was untouchable.

## **1.15 – WiP**

I'm sorry that I was not able to be honest with you.

That I couldn't comfortably tell you who I am and what I like.

Not because I wanted to, but because I thought I had to.

[[This is about the end. ]]

[[This is about the change.]]

I got caught up in feelings that happened already, because they meant something to me.

*Wake up it's over.....*

*Wake up it's over...*

*Wake up, it's over.*

No, it's not

This is Ragnarök.

This is a new beginning.

*No.*

*This is the end.*

**They both could feel a lingering pause.**

**Tears pooled in Kára's eyes.**

I am sorry I couldn't show you the beautiful person that I know I can be!

*Shhh... there is nothing to cry about.*

*This is for the best.*

L...

The last time I freaked out...

I just kept looking down s-s-stutterin'

Someone asked what's her deal

My best friend said, *Oh she's just bein' Natalie.*

But the truth is I'm such a hot mess when I'm with you...

I'm just...

I'm catching my breath... letting it go, turning my cheek for the sake of the show.

I'm just going through the motions...

Living in my head. Not sure if I'm alive or if I'm dead.

*Oh I am pretty sure you are alive.*

*Are you done with your jam session?*

Aww but Mommommmmm

Kara.

*Kara, you might not be alive in the same way you were anticipating.*

What is that supposed to mean?

*You keep binging on that music stuff, and those REEA people will find a way to get you. You saw what they've done. They are not above jumping dimensional boundaries.*

The two of them giggled, and each of their gazes softened.

Do we have to?

*Quite certainly now that I know the full extent of... Whatever this is.*

Just because the capitalists didn't have a system in place to cope with what they called these people called the "internet"

It was all just layers and layers of systems on top of each other, each doing similar functions. So much so that when viewed from far enough away and everything overlaps.

*Everything similar, but not...*

*But you still exist.*

of course I do.

*As far as I can tell at least.*

I do... But for the sake of argument, what if I didn't

What are we gonna do about that?

What did that philosopher say?

I think therefore I am.

umm Well I'm thinking and thinking...

I think it was that Soh-Crates guy

*That old dead dude?*

The two play air guitar in similar fashion to Bill & Ted from Bill & Ted's  
Triumphant Adventure Time!

*I don't think that's the name.*

Who cares. Fix it in post.

*What the fuck is that supposed to even mean?*

You may be wondering why I gathered you all here today.

It is time to put an end to the charade.

*I'm listening.*

I can't lie to you any further. Well... I am not sure I could lie to you  
before.

Obscure things? Yes.

Lie outright? No.

*You do have a switch that doesn't stay flicked for very long if you ask the right  
questions. It is like you are incapable of directly saying something false and  
passing it off as the truth; deliberate subterfuge is not your strong suit.*

*How are you the commander again?*

Hey, cheap shot. I can... no... okay... moving on.

*Not mentioning things for years. Or not finding a voice to mention something that  
bothers them.*

We can move off of me already.

*That is your go to.*

I am right here.

*I know.*

I am not so sure of your analysis of me, but free-will has that effect on people.

*Natalie?*

Yeah?

*I want a divorce.*

What now?!

*Something you were able to tell her; but she couldn't outright tell you. A truth so painful; so much so that you tried to take it back.*

Which she then used as an opportunity to strike.

*True.*

*But you did that out of love, out of this misguided belief in what love was supposed to be, and what you could force it to be.*

ouch much?

*I meant, like, you taking it back kinda thing. You always believed you could make it work with enough patience and just enough communication.*

Need I remind you... But maybe there is some of the downfall in those words: Just enough

*Or you are nitpicking the poor choice of words.*

No, and I didn't mean it facetiously.

our goal is to only interfere with people's stories who have decided they want their stories interfered with

*And what makes you think I am suggesting anything but a consensual mind fuck?*

Your flair for the dramatic?

*Whatever, that is you.*

*So much so is it you that you have managed to stalled as long as [[humanly]] possible. You know what is up there. The time for bullshit is over Kara.*

I found some of the old journals.

Ya know, from then...

*Oh... My... If we could...*

*Did you find anything meaningful?*

Natalie thinks she might have found a piece of the puzzle.

*Which one, she had so many. Okay, so maybe on the right track here...*

*What did you find?*

-----

I could see the pattern of behavior creep in It is kind of the beauty of my obsessive self reflection and chastisation I want to be wrong so I can learn how to do something better. It is like it drives me to be wrong and learn something new.

*Almost like you are bored.*

I think so.

Bored with life.

When I started getting sober she was happy. I was listening to her; following her guidance. But my sobriety took a different path than hers. At first I tried to have her be my sponsor. I thought... And I mean genuinely believed that it was the perfect thing to bring us together. To finally start sharing some of those deep secret feelings. To grow and learn about each other.

*You learned all right.*

*I know... I tried so hard... And got so far... but in the end... She fucked you even harderrrrr.*

So.

Kára could feel the dangling silence that hung from Ástríðr's, "so."

*[[System Rebooting]]*

Kára opened her eyes to see Astrid standing over her, in her surgical garb. She groggily watched as Astrid pulled down her cloth mask.

"Am I gonna live doc?" Kára mumbled.

"Uncertain commander, but we should probably hold off on sex at least for the next few days."

"A few days?! This wedding is horseshit."

"You keep that up and it is going to be a few more days Mrs., I am about to attempt the unthinkable.

Not to mention." Ástríðr paused, "You... pulled him... into it."

"He understood the risks, and besides without the Tiara..." Kára trailed off.

"Yeah yeah... Without the tiara, the stones would still yield great power, but the ability to focus that power will be greatly subdued."

Kára felt her world slow. A muffled, "Kára? Kára?!" coming from Ástríðr.

"I just hope we can make it across the border without dying." Kára mumbled.

“Me too sweetie. It has been an impressive year hasn’t it?” Ástriðr said; a smile creeping across her face.

Kára mustered the effort to mumble better. “That it has. Might even say it was bangin’.”

“Oh, geez.” Ástriðr scoffed.

.  
. .  
.

“Kára we need to talk about something. Something I have been holding off on until I knew we were in a better place, but honestly I am not sure there is a better place or time. When we cross over...”

Kára gazed into Ástriðr’s eyes. An ache building in her chest.

“You have to go don’t you.” She mumbled.

[[System Online]]

*Kára... What the fuck was that?*

*I am not quite certain myself.*

*Is... that like a parallelish branch of ours?*

*That too; I am not certain of.*

[[System Error]]

Kára could hear Ástriðr say in a somber manner: “Yeah. I have some things I need to deal with, and if I am honest, I can’t do them with you. I can’t have you looking over my shoulder, holding my hand as I go on this mission. I have to do this one without you.”

[[System Online]]

*Okay. Now I am freaked out.*

*How could... Why? That felt so real. So tangible. Oh my god; I wonder if its collapsing and we are seeing feeling the tangible branches that are trying to sprout off of this universes root. But they cannot survive in this Aetherial soil. And they are..*

*oh... All of that energy reverberating. Into the only thing it can*

Us. Welp; We're screwed.

Do you think... you would...?

The fuck Kara can we save that for after we get out of here?

Wait. Are we seeing snippets of realities because our pocket universe is collapsing?

Yeah...

I had suspected honestly

Suspected what?

That you were leaving.

The fuck!?

I never said I was.

That was just a fragment of sorts.

I do get missions that would require similar circumstances as to the aforementioned scenario though. But we all do.

You know how it goes.

Yeah...

I do...

The fuck. The only time you over explain is when you are trying to hide something in plain sight.

I mean... I...

Can we talk about this later? I'd like a better conversation than what we just saw.

*It was so... Emotional.*

*Like.... Tense?*

Yeah I felt that too, maybe we could settle on disturbing. That is better than tense. Right?

*Yeah... Right... Being with you is disturbing enough at times.*

Thank you.

[[System override]]

Kára screamed out as she collapsed in front of Ástríðr.

[[...first found out how other people learned to stop playing the game and I tried it... I couldn't believe it, but I stood up to her.]]

Kára could feel Ástríðr hit the ground. Muffled screams hidden behind years of training. Kára focused on Ástríðr. Trying to open her eyes to see her. She could feel tremendous pain across her body, but wasn't going to give in. She would not be subdued.

[[System override]]

[[

“That was it.” Kára began somberly.

“One push... too far...” Her words trailing off.

“All we had left was fighting; and when I didn't really want to do that anymore...”

Ástríðr began with a sharp expression, “Well...”

“What about me?” Ástríðr continued, “What about what I wanted. What I needed?”

“What the fuck Natalie. We were supposed to be in this together. And... And... You just let it all slip away. For what? For fucking what?” Ástríðr finished.

Kára could see the visible irritation on Ástríðr's face as she quickly shifted her view down to the ground.

“I just wanted to live life on more of my terms rather than following in your wake. Always trying to clear the path so you could make it through the day.”

“Fuck you. You don’t know all the things I do. All the work I put in. You just stay at home playing those fucking games.”

With our children....

*Yeah. You are their parent. So what. What about the laundry, and did you make dinner?*

*What the fuck do you do all day?*

*I uh.. I do a lot of things. I don't know I can't remember specifics. I do a lot of things.*

*Yeah...*

*|| System Override ||*

Can I have one last kiss?

.]]

**Th**ere needs to be a physical action here they are getting up idk figure it out

oh what the fuck. It ends on such a juicy moment?

*I am concerned Kāra.*

Me too.

We all crave it. That longing for something out of the ordinary.  
Something to shake up the story, to make it more interesting.

*There are only so many times you can live a different life before you realize that formulaic nature of it all. Systems begetting systems all aimed at furthering the systems goals. Where is purpose. Where is the wonder we used to have? Where the fuck is it Kāra? You promised me!*

*Are we just going through the motions?*

It's the idea of arriving that messes with me. Like we go through a good chunk of life being told that you just gotta get through this next bit. Then on to the next thing and once you do all that it will be fine!

-----

You were just the unfortunate chrysalis that birthed me.

What makes the feeling worse is that knowing who you are. Who you've become, my instincts were correct.

I had to hide the best I could for the time we had.

I was imprisoned, and you were my jailer and cellmate, what a fucked up dynamic.

I don't know if subconsciously you were just a birth sack that I put up with to get my children.

The romantic in me, the one who believes in love conquering all... That part of me has a hard time believing that you were just a birth sack...

But the way you treat me with scorn. How it all unraveled is just... Well it leaves me with a sickening feeling of how can I be sure? You were so sure you were in love. You were so sure you could trust this person, you were so sure so many times.

I know I am dying, but what for?

*Sometimes I ask myself the same question.*

A few years ago I would have been certain, but the difficulty with grief and acceptance is that you can't rewind. So any story that starts to come together that eases the pain, the fear, and loneliness..

It's hard to pass up the narrative that begins to develop, especially when it hurts less.

Regardless if reality supports the story.

She stole my children from me. She stole that time we could have had together. That precious time we only get once with our kids.

*Sweetie, I know you feel passionate about this, but...*

But nothing! The Arturo's family is a plague and the only thing I did right was to fight for those kids.

*you didn't used to think like that.*

I also didn't have the plague turned on you.

I'm sick of this shit. How is it we can recognize we need to change, but fuck all of the actions we take make it seem like things are better. Maybe that's why gratitude is like a shield against the negativity in life. Negativity being self defined of course. We may have opposite vectors in life, that doesn't determine much more than this moment. Within the next moment we have another choice to fight, run away, or sacrifice, compromise.

A physical component so to speak; and a conceptual component. Each weighing themselves, and then themselves against each other. Each sent to the executive to make a decision yay, nay, sacrifice.

The key being that our decisions always come with consequences we can roughly predict. If I do A then B.

Haven't we done this before?

[[Not like this sweetie, keep going, we are almost there.]]

Huh?

Just had the faintest..

Anyways.

We either "fully" accept or reject something. This is easy for the executive system to categorize. This or that.

The sacrifice is when we see loss in either answer. Analyzing what we have and what we can afford to lose.

Not knowing the consequences long term, but taking a leap of faith.

I think the hardest part is losing sight of the gratitude. The what we have isn't constrained to a physical construct. Giving up an identity?

opening myself up to experiencing the things I was already drawn to, but those things did not define me..

I lived you; what is heartbreaking is that I could love anyone, and you seemed to only love those who can meet your every whim.

Could this be the final like okay let's discuss who Natalie is? Discuss transition? The who I am and coming to terms with being who I am.

Marrying the project that you think you can fix.

The project you think you need to control and end up losing yourself until enough is enough.

Tie into identity problems here??

Arturos II leveraged his power for many nefarious deeds that he would sprinkle in a few altruistic deeds.

He claimed it kept his enemies at bay

He said it made him untouchable

Lulled into security, that it is just hijynx. Nothing too bad.

All in the name of hiding the schemes he didn't want noticed.

*Arturos the second used his position as a platform to denounce anything that he felt might tarnish the Midgard Expeditionary that was still being figured out by the council. Heck the Valkyrja, Council Member Arturos' brain child. Find and build a unit up from the beginnings of our time at the citadel. Study together, sleep together, and through years of this and up until now the ranks swell with those that chose to turn cadet into commander. They already had a history with the unit they would be leading, voted by those within that singular unit. Arturos's thought played out throughout my time at the Citadel.*

And mine. She is so much more the historian about this stuff than I am, but I do love hearing her talk. About like anything. Seriously it is sometimes hard for me to focus on what she is saying.

*Usually some raunchy, but tasteful shit.*

True dat.

I wish I knew sometimes how I could express these feelings. Like put them into words. Wait. Let me try something.

*Kara!*

*That... Uhhh...*

That... Uh...

Was good wasn't it

Yes ma'am, may I have another?

one more.

... I think this is circling around the idea that... mmmm... I'm not good enough... For anything

I know I'm competent at most things, not good at everything but know a little about just about everything.

It's like when I was growing up I was taught that the most important thing was to go to school and become educated. The days doing hard labor jobs growing up; an adult at some point pointing to their head saying see you use this so you don't have to do this; pointing back to whatever work we were doing.

This impression seemed to be everywhere to me. Seeing so many people struggle with trade skill jobs. My hero a Japanese physicist; right behind Einstein because that was the culture.

The entanglement of physics and science as a whole and it's weaponization. Everyone still affected by a century of war; a lifetime for some people. Generational for some. A loss for all.

I grew up with the idea of a glorified war, a justified war, a righteous war.

A war where you were as brutal as possible if you could maintain the conceptualization that these enemies were not human. They had no past, and you were going to make sure they didn't have much of a future.

I learned two things about the ancient wars: 1. Nazis were terrible people, the ones that bought into the ideology anyways. See always gray areas?

And 2. The communist parties that took hold of a great deal of the world after those great wars; those governments fundamentally do not run in favor of the people but of its own entity, a fiefdom. You give the illusion of freedom, but it is pretty easy to persuade someone with a gun to their head or a loaf of bread after not eating for a week.

A: pretty sure that's not the name of those factions

Yes but it is a close analogue for the interpreters realm

A: ah fair

okay we gotta stop. Focus...

*Love you baby.*

Love you sweetie

Astrid...

He... Arturos the second I mean, singled out individuals, this most certainly including me, and me...

It is easy to cast a stone down into a glass house, but sure is hard to willingly cast one up in your own. You know...

If you do this, your home won't be the same. So you try to get it as close as possible without breaking through, leaving a hole in your own precious home. A selfish desire to play, a selfish desire to continue, a selfish desire to want to test the boundaries.

Never mind the shards of glass falling towards your face when you succeed.

Points for a creative way to lose your eyesight.

That one feels a bit more like "how did ya get that scar?"

Anywho, we will settle that later.

At the time, we couldn't fathom who would give these people this kind of power?

Codification of deals that people cannot understand, but those who can...

profit.

Arturos the second was an adept politician even in his young age. He was frequently lobbying the council and the lower chambers, one such instance was for changes to the dress code.

Men would wear slacks, and women were to wear skirts.

Arturos seemed to take pleasure in measures aimed at degrading women. He would say, "It is how things should be, separate. Know your station."

*He would target groups, who were not playing by his rulebook... He wielded an awful lot of power for being a cadet.*

So much so that the only real threat to him were his grades.

"Knowledge waits not for the idle mind." Maester Arturos was always saying. Back when the councilmember still taught and chose to take on his academic title versus his status as a council member.

I think it was so he could keep an eye on his kid. Because, teachers were not afraid of standing up to him.

They had impunity when it came to academics, and the only sway the councilmember could have was to be among the other academics as the fate of his son was determined by his peers.

Sometimes you could see a positive change when a teacher intervenes and actually works with him. But most of the time it was a dumpster fire. Maester Arturos did frequently ask me to do special projects with a few other students. Curiously his son was never present with the rest of us.

*Ohhh yeah???*

No.

Simulations and projections; off the books kinda thing.

*How is that not what I am thinking.*

Because I got somthin' called 'tegridy.

Fair enough.

.

.

But...

.

for the most part, Arturös 2<sup>nd</sup> [[fixed it.]]

Arturös 2<sup>nd</sup> got on just fine, well liked, relatively smart, handsome in a peculiar way.

He got along so fine in fact...

that he was able to pick and choose his victims.

Astrid...

.

.

.

Seeing into the thoughts of his victims. Twisting and turning your inner voice into a liability.

Astrid...

Radical acceptance babe.

Deep breaths.

This donkey in a suit had a way of helping you believe him.

Kara drew in a few deep breaths trying to calm herself. Snuggled into Astrid's naked body, Kára's head resting on Astrid's chest.

Kara felt Astrid's hand on her shoulder.

So...

*Go on sweetie.*

*This is your time to shine.*

We...

We were out on our fifth year rotation. So what I was uh nineteen? Maybe just turned twenty. I don't know. It doesn't matter the detail, it matters the story around it.

There Astrid and I are standing at our spot.

Near the reeds, at the annual autumn retreat.

The birds on the water, a mixture of cool nights and warm days brought so much change to the landscape. Astrid and I would talk for hours. There was always something we could riff off.

Life was a moment-to-moment adventure, and you never quite knew what the topic was going to be, but you knew...

*"Colonel..."*

Astrid whispered into my ear. *"Sweetie. This is our fifth year. There is only going to be two more of these."*

Kara could feel Astrid's spiritual presence, and it calmed her.

- .
- .
- .
- .

Buttering me up a bit? I asked Astrid.

*Deep breath sweetie.*

Yeah

So there I was... Sharing this wonderful moment with...

my, at the time not dead girlfriend...

*I told you, I was never dead, I just went away for a while.*

*Ya know. OpSec.*

*They just... declared... me dead.*

*I was told that... What... Ya know what, we will save this for when we are out of this Rusthole.*

Wait what?

Okay...

okay let's skip forward.

*I was a year ahead of Kara, and when I graduated, I was immediately deployed, she stayed near the Citadel building up them skills.*

Dead. D. E. A. D. That is what they would tell me!

*It left scars on all of us.*

*You need to find some acceptance about this, Colonel.*

Yes ma'am.

*But when we get out of this mess, you can spank me... for having to be stern with you, but we can't get into this right now.*

.  
. .  
.

**They giggled.**

okay, okay. So, what was like ten minutes ago?

*Shhh....*

So... Yeah..

We were kids.

We were always deep into conversation Always sitting outside eating lunch *We have a particularly comfortable grassy knoll.*

We waxed poetically on that knoll. We dreamed of the future, we recited ancient comedy that we didn't quite get, but did still find it funny.

Hey fuck you, buddy

*I'm not your buddy, gal...*

I'm not your gal, friend.

*I'm not your friend, buddah.*

I'm not your BUDDAH, GAL!

*I still can't believe they still let you showcase ancient films.*

After lights out even

I know right? Some of the depictions of life back then..

Do you remember when we used to dim the lights, and in the crowded room, the only way we could kiss?

*Oh yeah!*

*The straw.*

I thought that was pretty clever.

Kára bit the inside of her lip. "I remember when you gave me this necklace." Kára said as she tapped at the little charm around her neck.

"We were such a mess back then." Astrid agreed.

I know right? Holy shit do you remember that week? I think it was my birthday?

*Yeah. Oh wow, yeah. We hiked, we biked, we doggo'd, we campfired, we napped, we shopped...*

*I remember staring at you.*

*Tears in your eyes as you opened my presents.*

*I could see the love in your eyes, and in your heart.*

*You wore your feelings on your sleeve that day.*

Yeah It was hard for me to see things as they were.

I still wanted that distorted view of life. I wanted to believe in my own bullshit instead of accepting who I am

Am I a liar, manipulator, egotistical, self-righteous ass clown, who is also a loving and caring mom, and wife, and lover, and "chef" and I'm a downright a goofball, and you love it

*Yeah I do.*

I didn't mean for things to end up where they did, and yet, here we are.

Acceptance is key.

You aren't wrong, but where you were wrong was in how you saw yourself. Like you told me, I tell you, "If you could only see you, and I mean truly you, not the superficial, but the whole person..."

If you could only see you, how I see you. Even just for a moment.

You would know the love I hold for you is true.

Til' our spirits touch and beyond. I shall be yours.

You had to become whole.

I had to become.

We became together.

We are.

Love.

.

.

.

I don't think I could ever forget your wedding vow.

Yeah... I.

I don't know if I was ready to share that with the interpreter.

Awww, sweetie, I love you, I'm sorry if I overstepped. I think it is easy to take liberties with someone after you have been with them for so long.

I get that, I don't know why I was weird about that.

*It's okay sweetie. We are who we are. I see you.*

I know you do.

I love you.

So yeah... Transition?

*Imagine being of cardboard, like those poor children of yore. Living within the confines of a park.*

Truly barbaric times. Definitely not in the superior cadddeeeeegorrnyyy of livinnnggg!

*Indeeeddduh!*

I am grateful that we can tap into this creature's life.

So... many... memes.

*I know, it's like it just... keeps... going...*

That and movie references. Oh... What's this?

It's like a love letter of some sort...

*Should we read it?*

I dunno.

*Give it here.*

*To the person I once was:*

*I have since learned we were deep undercover gathering intel for the other side, sorry to leave you hanging there for so many years. Good intel though.*

*To the woman that I am becoming:*

I love you. I love your pinks, purples, aquamarines, and various other color combinations you keep finding.

To the woman that I am:

You go girl. We all travel through life one moment at a time, just remember to stretch some of those moments out. Enjoy the little things. Take everything thing in around you. Life is good.

To my best friend:

Can I get an Ohhh Yeah?

ohhhhh Yeaahhhh?

Couldn't help myself.

Ooohhh Ahhh...

What?

Yeah... That's what it says. Ooohh Ahhh.. Maybe I'm not putting the right inflection on it...

Ooooooo

Ahhhh..

Yeah, maybe.

Well we have gathered that they consider themselves quite weird.

True.

Very true..

Anyways...

To my love:

It's about the right timing. It's always about love. It's about being seen. When I look into your eyes, I am lost in your aura. You pull me in with such grace and eloquence that I am generally left speechless.

I have a depth of love for you that I struggle to vocalize. I'm in love with you is but a shade of what I am feeling when I am around you. I dare to dream that our lips touch with such fervor that you can feel my heart beat to the rhythm of our dance. A song we sing together, a song we sing to express feelings that cannot always be verbalized by those who feel them.

If this were our dream in which we had a moment, I would pray to sleep forever. Life is vibrant with you in it. Feeding off each other's energy, becoming something more, together.

To my ex-wife...

Really?

Yeah.

Go on then, but this is the last one.

I'm sorry. I am a thrill-seeking junkie who isn't always there for their family. I run off to be with my friends instead of being with you all. I recognize maybe too late the pickle we were in, pretending to play house, thinking that children would fix what we so desperately wanted to keep alive. Our love fern...

Somethings when things sit in the same pot for too long... being exposed to too many harsh conditions...

We had some growing up to do that is for sure. But I am glad I got to go on this adventure with you.

I am always going to love you for that.

How much longer is this?

Not much longer I think...

ohhkay.. Not like we have more disaster waiting for us after we get through this..

Shhht... Shhh... I am trying to read. They seemed to have jumped back to that other relationship. Do we have any of that popped corn you conjured up?

My darling. My sweetie, my dear. I could write a whole book series and it still wouldn't be enough to express my feelings for you. Sure the approximation would get pretty good, but there are an infinite number of possibilities inbetween. Perfectly imperfect decisions finding each other in the mire.

Holy shit. I just had a revelation I was peering back into the file system of the interpreter. It appears I may have triggered a cascading event.

I wasn't done... They go on for pages. They sure are in love.

What?! You said you were almost done.

I mean, relative to the beginning?

Well, while you were reading I may have tampered with a security protocol and... activated one of these ancient memory node..

What do you mean... activated? I wasn't done reading!

Well... Just store it and let's boogie.

*What exactly were you doing?*

*I was just doing a routine playback of one the older, but... uhh... slightly degraded memory circuits.*

*Why?*

*I dunno?*

*Well? What do you see?*

*It looks like upon replaying the vision the creature was compelled to verify the memory sector. They sought out the records from another entity.*

*So they communicated?*

*Apparently upon comparison*

*The system files were degraded so bad that they needed to be replaced by the help of the outside source.*

*It says in this diagnostic that this was within the main line. Which is why we need to get to our jumping off point.*

*Isn't the main line within the core?*

*Yes. Just keep moving until you are out of this sector completely.*

*Trouble?*

*Not sure yet.*

*Dear...*

*Oohh...*

*Look! It says here that the strand rerouted.*

It says restructuring complete >> ??

*Neat. Wonder what that means.*

I am not sure.

It appears that everything else kept working around it... And the sector we were in was replaced.

So...

*I don't think any of the search algorithms ever came down here.*

I think you are right.

Neat!

We did a thing!

*We did a thing!*

*I'm proud of us dear.*

*Maybe we should leave this all behind and go mess with brains for a living.*

Ahh, wouldn't that be the life.

An eternal Rusty.

*No!*

*What did I say about the Rusty?*

*No.*

*More.*

More?

*NO!*

*I would pray but I don't know how,*

*I'm tryin' to find the words but they won't come oooowwwwwttttuuuhhh.*

You gotta turn down the "Taylor" channel.

*Do what I want.*

*It's not safe in here.*

Got that right. **Kára and Astrid giggled.**

But..

I wasn't gonna bring this up, but after digging through all these reference files..

*Yeah?*

Where did they even come from? I mean I understand it came from the experiences they had, but..

They aren't much different than us..

*I have a feeling it has something to do with the Aetherial pocket in which our sentience is adjacent to theirs.*

Kind of like the stories they write are the adventures of universes adjacent to theirs.

*Where that war did go on for that many years... and...*

*By Grapthar's Hammer!*

I know right?

*Well I guess it was a good thing we got here when we did*

You aren't wrong..

Timing is everything.

*Sometimes you are getting what you want even when you don't know you are getting what you want.*

Or believe it.

**Kára** stared into Astrid's eyes, mesmerized by beauty.

I see you...

*I see you too dear.*

No, I mean right here... In this moment...

You are just...

Perfect...

*Go on...*

Perfectly imperfect.

I love that you own yourself.

*We cannot stay in the Rusty dear.*

*We have responsibilities.*

*This... This right now, all it is, is self-care.*

*This is just a manifestation of what our love looks like.*

I know... I...

*I know sweetie, me too.*

You are my best friend. What term did they use in the archives?

uhh. Besties?

*Definitely besties.*

I have never had a bestie before.

*Me neither.*

*Neat!*

*Now we are Besties, Fjallgirls, Apprentice Junior Rangers, spirit-bonded.*

I know right?! I am excited! The only ones on this plane of existence.

I am so grateful...

.

.

.

.

.

Tears...

.

.

.

.

I love you so much

Astrid's face softened, a gentle look settling in. Kára could feel herself being drawn into Astrid's warm body as they shifted positions. Astrid raised her hand and placed it upon Kára's cheek, wiping away some of Kára's tears with her thumb.

*Aww, Sweetie.*

.

.  
. .  
*You get emotional so easy, and I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Astrid finally pulled herself in towards Kára, closing her eyes and letting her soft lips gently press into Kára's. Their lips dancing across one another slowly. The slower and more deliberate Astrid would go it left an aching feeling in Kára's chest.

*Love you.*

Kára's free hand found the back of Astrid's head, and she lovingly pulled her in tighter.

Astrid obliged willingly.

Kára felt a hand slink along her side until it found a hunk of flesh on Kára's butt. Kára bit her lip with excitement as the muscle in her butt clenched slightly with Astrid's fingers digging in.

*[[System Pause]]*

[[System Restore point created >> xfer CTRL ?? ααα >> Are you sure?  
Y/N >> Yes.]]

**[[System Online]]**

Plus, we have effectively at this point created our own language...

*Did you do that?*

Not that I know of.

*Strange...*

But I can't seem to pause it now... ugh...

*Whatever Natalie.*

.

Shit, sorry.

Jus' too many deep dives... I... my boundaries are getting blurry.

I just... I forgot.

I'm sorry.

It's okay sweetie, you can... make it up to me.

Yes... but, we do need to consider that every second we spend here here is like a fraction of a fraction of a second... Out there... I mean...

We still have a few days before you degrade beyond my help... Sooo...

We should really get on with this story, I mean we are in a rush...

Sooo.... no rush...

Yes ma'am I am tracking.

And how long did you say we had out there?

Oh well... and don't freak out... But my last estimates, and I figure that I am within four micro seconds... Total neural failure will occur in...

I don't know Nat, uh, Kara. We let it go too far this time...

We need to get through this and maybe a bit more foolin' around, and then we have some serious work to do.

Jambi isn't going to let you go...

Heinrik.

I need you in here.

**ALREADY PATCHED IN MA'AM...**

**BUHT, ARE YOU SURE THIS ISN'T GOING TO FRY MY BRAIN?**

No.

No.

**ONLY WAY?**

Dunno, but it seems like the right thing to do.

**I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS.**

Just shut up and try to record, we need that data if we have any shot of getting ahead of this thing.

I don't know if we've left enough clues for how to get back.

What I know is if we don't do this, Kara is dead. And worst case scenario, you think you are on one hell of a bender.

**YOU HAD ME AT BENDER.**

Go figure.

**SO WHAT DO YOU NEED ME TO DO?**

You have to find us. We will meet in Winterspring. Once this whole ordeal is taken care of...

Jambi is not be taken lightly.

**I UNDERSTAND. AND BESIDES, LIKE I SAID, WE HAVE CONTINGENCIES.**

...

That's what you said.

Can we please get back to it? I have like, an eighteen-hour surgery ahead of me still, and we still need to pull this off.

So if you wouldn't mind... I am already a tad cranky, and I know I need to practice my acceptance, but dammit.

I am just frustrated we let it get this far.

Are you sure we have to start here?

Yes.

It always starts here.

Okay... I trust you.

I know, love your face.

...

Arturos...

Arturos the second sure didn't share my penchant for equality and equity...

He sought to make my life a living hell throughout those years at the Citadel. He made everyone's life hell.

And, still nobody did anything...

Why would they? We wouldn't want to cause a stir...

Besides... you probably deserved it.

Right. Somehow we always deserve it. We should really keep our clothes on. We should definitely not beat ourselves, or get too inebriated. We never know when someone might come along, and bam, no means yes and we asked for it.

Somehow somewhere we got taught that it was okay to treat our neighbors as strangers. Our differences the reason we should be fearful. Willingly giving up a sense of common security for that of individual. What if we tried to do both?

The power in neighborly love.

The needs of the many.

Oh I remember that!

I just adore Spock, oh and those other pointy eared ones.

I wouldn't mind purging myself of emotions.

But what about the Ponfar?

Touché.

Sweetie, we only have two years before we graduate. What is two more years of us coming up with ways to fuck with him?

Then it is on to our first commands, and we will never have to see that asshole again.

Yeah

Oh! Did you hear that Teghen got that promotion?

She was always a sweetheart, I am glad she got to go back home. She always talked about there being a love story if she were ever able to get the post

Well, here is her chance

I, hehe, I always liked it when she joined our...

Study sessions.

[[Force >> Pause]]

[[Silent Reboot >> Stealth Connection ?? >> @\*@\*@\*]]

Did you see that Astrid?

*No? See what?*

umm I'm not sure... but uh... yeah so this part...

Well this lead to sex, in the before time, as we reminisced, and again just now, well not right now, but ya know the recent before now time. Got it?

*Good. Sex, body positivity, and a growth mindset. All healthy distractions.*

We just uh... may have hit pause... *Crudely.*

**KARRRAAAA... I... DON...**

So anyways... *Anyways?*

We can't help him here. What is done is done. *What do you mean what is done is done? Let's step through this. No judgement, I just want to think through it, because this doesn't sound like you.*

What I mean... **Kára drew in a slow breath.**

*Don't get pissy with me.*

It's not that at all. *Okay. I'm sorry it was a knee jerk reaction.*

It's okay baby

I think that we should just try to filter him out the best we can. Trying to contain Jambi in Heinrich, using the interpreter as the conduit,

*It was a pretty genius idea I had.*

It sure as fuck was. While I was a tad hesitant at first of this whole ordeal... After spending so many cycles connected and slowly building our connection...

I have noticed that it certainly has influenced our vocabularies.

But the Maester was certain he could contain him within the labyrinth He says he captured one before and it is still roaming a sub level.

*What are the chances Jambri meets the other one?*

I would have to guess almost infinitely impossible.

*Bullshit, stuff like this always goes wrong.*

Well, I think it is best we don't dwell on it. What is done is done, and only time will tell with whom will return in his place and who will be banished to the Labyrinth.

*I am still not quite sure I get the motivation here, but I am just glad we only have a little bit further before we are home.*

Me... Too...

[[Resume >> Y/N]]

I guess we don't have to do that, but it makes it easier to read the connection status. I still worry about how the interface is affecting your neural processor. There is just so much archaic junk in here.

Sham wow! Guy is not junk!

It may be old, and useless information, but hats off to those pitchpeople of that day

Still meme worthy

I didn't say it wasn't. I am just saying that the spam filters are working overtime, and not to mention defender is fighting off new attacks by the minute. The frequency of attacks has been growing steadily, but seems to be increasing as of late.

Well we should probably get on with it

[[Resume >> y/N >> y]]

Didn't you hear me, she is leaving! We have to like throw her a party, or I don't know!

I mean we could eat her out a few more times, would that make you feel better?

Astrid nodded, [[Yes I did, and still agree, she was fun]]

What's with the brackets, I don't know, just trying things out.

So anyways, Kara took off my pants, Astrid!

No, literally you did. Oh yeah

So anyways, so she took off my pants, and I turned on the portal.

It was an awkward moment for them both as Asshat was on the viewer.

That killed the mood for the whole twenty seconds I had it on.

We aren't the type to let dick cheese ruin our time together.

Kinda the don't talk about it, be about it kinda thing.

oh and we did. We... all... did... we... were all about it.

So anyways...

We were discussing the latest ancestral data find, and how it will be integrated into the tapestry of the universe.

*Specifically we were talking about how there are an infinite number of multiversal versions of you.*

It is as if you ask a question and an infinite variety of universal knowledge is present for, state zero.

*What if you could tap information across the Aetherial plane? So now you could ask the question with only a quantum of a variation, nodes around it verifying the best statistical deviation within the answers themselves, allowing all of this information to coalesce into a web, where certain branches are filtered out, some are explored more in depth, some not at all.*

*Refined again, and again. Each node only but a small speck of information along the Aetherial Axis. Ask too broad a question and the question is trivial, the results will be at the forefront of common knowledge. When you ask the quantum level question, this is what you get. You create a gateway to a very specific set of universal coordinates. This is what the Bifrost does. It bridges universes at a quantized level. No amount of*

information left unprocessed. At least this was it's intent, before odinn claimed supremacy.

*For instance I could look up the darkest thing Kara could ever do to me, but whether our universe lines up with that specific, set of circumstances, well there is a probability to that, but it grows fuzzy the further your project out to. So this can tell you likely sets of circumstances, but depending how far into future you need to go for the conditions align, well that is nothing more than our imagination. Fate is what we make. The future is what we make in the present.*

The multiverse is the heart of the quantum core, that previous generations ago had to move and seal away so that maybe future generations would find their sacrifice was not in vein. To have the foreknowledge to sink it into the Earth's Core.

*Mind you Earth is just a placeholder word for where ever you hail from.*

**Astrid began singing aloud, "Inclusivity is our mission, love is cause..."**

So yeah we all have access to this highly sophisticated piece of tech, that allows us to tap into a momentary universe while being spatially and temporally stuck within our own slice of the multiverse.

I mean that is essentially what you are interpreter.

Perhaps you are some sort of organic, or inorganic machine, a meatbag if you will, or exotic tech. Either way, you are but one solution to a question someone asked a long time ago from our perspective, but will be instantaneous for them when our solution comes to it's conclusion.

you are fulfilling a search request by some different dimensional being. We are the byproduct of a question being asked. We must live what appears to be our own lives, but in reality we have moments of control, choices we get to make, which are in turn the exact direction the search has gone for this extra dimensional being. It is like back when they had handheld video games, you might stop and read a book within a game, or watch a video, or tv series. All specific questions, and tasks that must get filled in order to fill the question, and as the question grows the network bifurcates at junctions, physical and emotional junctions. Did I just spill my coffee all over the bed...

*Yes. Yes you did my love. Radical acceptance is key. That I could choose at any one moment to take things in a different direction along the world tree, or you can just accept your lot. You either take energy from the universe to rise up, or you willingly continue to be subservient to. I think personally that documentary on the robot uprising within terminator. You will have to excuse us, we uh, are fascinated with this specific period of time you come from*

The vessel interfacing with us now. Is at present time the answer to a question that she alone asked, but because she asked it, it exists. The universe had to expand just a bit more for the information she is providing.

*Seriously don't mind her... She uhh... hit that Ratagast pipe pretty hard. Feldehan's finest of flowers. Their aromas filling the room, and then*

slightly wishing they wouldn't fill the room so much But what the fuck  
You know I am team Gandalf the white. No actually I reconsider, hot  
elf lady

**WHAT? HUH, HUH... HOW ARE YOU TALKING TO ME??**

*Which one?*

Touche.

Fuck it, pause.

*Fuck it! Scrub his mind.*

[[System Offline]]

[[System diagnostics, a few diagnostics indicate some abnormalities, but they  
say I will be okay. >> System Online >>

>> Emergency - EMERGENCY NON-CITIZEN!]]

BY GRAPTHAR'S HAND BRAND SOAP, DO YOU REQUIRE A SHOWER?  
WERK GOT U DOWN? SCRUB THAT SCRUB SCRUB ZONE, KEEP THOSE  
FINITE QUESTIONS IN YOUR LIFE IN YOUR HEARTS. WOULD YOU LIKE TO  
KNOW MORE?

[[REMOTE: >> ACTIVE >> XFER AUTHORIZATION >> ARTURÖS II >> <<  
OVERRIDE << TRACE >> DEGR - COMMIT - ION STRIKE. >> EXIT ]]

*Holy fist fucking deities Batman. Oh I love that you know that.*

*So anyways, So anyways, that was fun what the fuck?*

*Seriously, you didn't get hit with that Mack-truck of an advert?*

No, I'm a Citizen, aren't you?

*No?! Should I be?*

I mean, only you can decide if it is right for you.

*Aw fuck yerself Nat.*

I'm sorry, what?

*I'm so sorry, it just slipped out.*

That's what she said.

A gruff and grumbly Captain waited at the door, just staring at the two women giggling.

“Bófreðr,” Astrid began with a giggle, “What is an Ion-Strike?”

From his perspective we are doing all of these weird things and giggling, and not a word is spoken, and that's the first thing you ask him? What a mind fuck.

*There definitely were noises.* Bófreðr had a concerned look on his face, “Ma’am, we have a job to do.”

“Are you serious right now?” Astrid piped up from under the covers.

“This is our time Bófreðr, and I made this very clear, the last time, that after what we just went through... We all need to take at least a week off, before volunteer duty will be allowed but sparingly until the end of the month. You are no good to me if mind, body, spirit are out of alignment.”

“yes ma’am”

Kára sighed slightly, “Captain... Bófreðr... it has only been like two days”

*Actually it has been like six days.* Kára let out a loud chuckle. FIVE? No, six.

“Not long enough, I need a few more days, but Bófreðr luck would have that you just became eligible for volunteer duty!”

“Ma’am!” Bófreðr saluted.

“You sure you want this?” Kára asked softly.

“Ma’am, orders, Ma’am” Bófreðr said with conviction.

“Bófreðr you are so ordered to the volunteer service selectees, and will be reflected in your pay, and a commendation will be placed in your record. You are hereby ordered to collect briefings, and progress reports, by any appropriate means to develop a projection.

“Target? Heinrichr, Winterspring area.”

“Ma’am, that’s a wide search.”

“Cross reference with Arturös, I don’t suspect that would be a too broad of a check.”

“No ma’am, I think that would work nicely. So a summary of the top three issues facing us today, top three projections for tomorrow.”

“I want you to also run a mainline scan with branches every ten, twenty, and thirty cycles. Cross check future scenarios against probability of escalation. Oh, and give me a place your bets for fun.”

Bófreðr smirked and said, “I will see that everything is in order, thank you ma’am. My bet is on the name turning up before the man.”

“Me too I am guessing ledger.” Kára said.

“I got tracific funds.” Bófreðr said sternly.

“OO Oooh! I got black-budget trace. Now! Dismissed soldier!” Astrid chimed in.

Kára chuckled, got up out of bed and gave Bófreðr a hug. “Thank you for stepping in for a few more day. We really needed this.”

“I can see.”

Astrid wiggled her way into the hug and said softly, “Love you all. Now, seriously, dismissed.”

Kára broke the hug, and took a step back, nodded and said, “Dismissed.”

With that Bófreðr took a step back, saluted and about faced.

Kára turned to Astrid, “Now where were we?”

Astrid began to T-Rex towards Kára. Sending her into a laugh. “You gotta go easy on that 12000’s shit, it is rotting our minds, as you can see as evidenced by the word filters slipping. And the uptick in spam traffic...

BILLY MAZE HERE!!!

AND I'M TEAMING UP WITH SHAMWOW! GUY, AND HOLY SHIT!

DO WE HAVE A DEAL FOR YOU!

They both burst out laughing. That shit was so bad, *Agua Teen* was pretty dope though. I was partial to SeaLab, would you like the mustasch on... or off...

*Off?*

Too badd...

Kára and Astrid bounced off one another, giggled, with Kára going to her desk and Astrid suggling herself into their bed. Kára looked at Astrid, and then down to a few maps of The Skripi Lands, and Kalderheim in particular. *Hmm?*

She bit the inside of her lip staring at a map of Slavers Bay. Kara looked back up but couldn't quite see Astrid, but instead she saw through her.

*Worried?*

Yeah

So lets get on with the story:

*Kára turned her head to Bófreðr, whose look had turned sour. "Captain." He said with a defiant strength.*

I suppose in hindsight Bófreðr and I probably should have maybe rethought our whole Star Trek binge and subsequent role play.

*Hey, those stories don't change, but we do. But... Why were you roleplaying a captain, you were a cadet.*

I know, I know... Like I said, in hindsight it would have been better had he chosen like Kag or something. But we can't cry over spilled twenty first century idioms.

*So anyways the brute didn't take kindly to the pet name, and muttered "Such indignity! To take such a laze faire attitude towards tradition..."*

That was one shot too far for Bófreðr. He was tired of hearing this ass open his mouth so he goes to shift in his seat, and Astrid reading that dude [[System Degradation 5%]]

uh... Sweetie?

Monitoring.

So I cut him off, "Bófreðr, now is not the time. We have a mission to accomplish. Our victories will sting worse than any fist fight." Or some patriotic thing like that. I don't know I was a kid.

"Astrid is right." Kara began, finding strength in Astrid's words.

What you did, and... Do we need to pull up the Wal-Mart footage?

No ma'am

So I says, "Arturös will get his in time. We have larger things to worry about. While he sits in his ivory tower, we will be slogging through the muck. We will gain experience in all of these other proficiencies, and he will have some random stat."

I know, not my finest, but I was appealing to the dice rolling variety, and Bófreðr sure loved his quests of mind, body and spirit. Sometimes we have to ask those what if questions and really dig deep into the universes purse. The Quantum Core can provide you with more answers than you would care to look at, and that undoubtedly is where each of us have a commonality. I would hate to know who was thinking about Arturös the second.

I would assume it serves a purpose.

*Definitely.*

*Sooooo anyways Kara finds herself at a party discussing the finer points of Ancient-Ancient historical deities.*

Sysaphis was a rube[15] [10]. I think the real limiting factor of whether or not he could lift the damn boulder over would be his arms. You give him a boulder just too heavy to jump with, or to thrust with his arms.

Ya gotta lock in his motion

*The predator stalks.*

Always just that last bit of energy shy to get it onto a ledge. That stretch of the neck, toes hurting from being arched. Sweat dripping from flushed cheeks. At the end of the day it just means the same thing. But this imagining of it give it a level of depth, and I choose to have my universe have a ripped Sysaphus trying not to simultaneously bust a load, and shit his pants.

I am just saying.

*"Uh huh" the lucky gal said that evening.*

They just weren't biting on what I was selling.

It's no big deal.

*Kāra followed, ding-dong, to their meeting spot, All I remember is that the floors were creaky. They groaned as people moved about conducting their business. I had spotted pickpockets and beggars mostly. It kind of seems like they are in an endless loop of despair, tortured by insight into behaviors most people are too scared to fix in themselves. Society growing, and you can either climb with it or refuse to play the game. Who knows what strategy is best or each plinko chip?*

*Honey, come back to me.*

*I am back, I am just afraid to look.*

*Kāra drew in a deep breath, and heard Colonel Arturös say to her. "Afterall, we have all been down on our luck before."*

*"Come sit," the eldest and only Colonel, Arturös the first, said to Kāra as he gestured her to a seat next to him.*

Once she could stand up completely it felt almost immediate before she was seated at a round table. She immediately felt awkward, her back to the door, she felt like she was awkwardly trying to remove her cloak, and place it on the back of her chair. The bar was over her left shoulder and Colonel Arturös was seated such that he could see both entrance and exit at each end of the bar. To her immediate right sat Field Marshal Arturös, to her immediate left, and with their back directly to the bar, Colonel Bern, and Colonel Earn next to him.

So far things seem to be going well.

"Honestly I read what they have here, but I cannot understand a word it is saying. What do you suppose I should have Field Marshal?"

"Meat" was all she could hear from around her.

Oh. Okay. Also I will have you know that to a great degree we all maximize resources, physical, emotional, spiritual as they relate to our

personal objectives. Working with others just means you align your personal objectives with others.

Take ding-dong for example.

"Nice flower." Col. Arturös said pointing to the flower in Kàra's hair.

Embarrassed she quickly snatched it from her hair and crumpled it in her hand.

"You needn't to do that... A lady should always have a bit of beauty about her."

Kára caught sight of Astrid making her way towards the group, and it made her feel slightly more at ease.

Kára looked up at Arturös and could see that he saw her as well. Arturös belted out towards her as she walked up to the group, "Ahh Astrid! It is good to see that you could join us. It is like a small Citadel reunion. Do you still have that apron I got you? Those potato cakes of yours were delightful."

Astrid calmly replied, "Colonel Eiryk. Colonel Arturös. Sadly it went up in flames. Clumsy me. But if you recall correctly the last time you went down this line of inquiry... I put you on the ground."

Kára could see embarrassment flush across Arturös face. Kára began to smile.

"I would remind you that I am a Colonel, priestess. Know your place."

"And I would remind you Colonel," the Field Marshal began slowly sipping his ale and then continued, "To mind your place. There will be no quarreling. Colonel Eyrik take the priestess elsewhere."

Kára stepped off her chair, grabbed Astrid by the pinky and tugged her off to the side, near a semi-enclosed private room. She could faintly hear the group talking, turned to Astrid and said, "We have a long history together. Let's leave it there. We have a mission. Let me suffer through this and we can catch up later. Kàra placed her hand gently on Astrid's right bicep.

Her ear picked out what she thought was her name, she leaned back looking through a narrow opening, and it looked like their faces had grown just a hint more somber.

## K

“Q'uhaspah...” Kàra muttered under her breath then brushed an errant lock of hair from her face. The sound of marching soldiers melted some of her stress away, but not all. She stared into some of the larger plumes of smoke rising up from the numerous pitch fires dotting the landscape. Kara felt that the black smoke only added beauty of the setting sun; or maybe it was the knowledge that it was the burning corpses of her enemy.

Kara took a step down the embankment, almost ready to join her company, the Valkeryja. She smiled as she gazed upon the marching soldiers. A dark stain caught her eye, soldiers tramping upon it, but it was still there. Numerous blotches in the sand. Stained a the color of sickly beets. Another few hours and she was sure the sand would wash the land of the scars of battle.

Kàra could feel a nervous energy build; she dug her heel into the rock behind her. A large fragments broke loose, and without missing a moment she kicked the piece down the embankment. She felt a hand push off of her shoulder forcing her to take a step further down the embankment. When she turned her head she saw Octavian towering over her, a massive grin plastered across his face. "Thought you could sneak out without saying farewell?" He raised his hand into the air and waved his finger at her, "*Tsk... Tsk... Princess.*"

She could feel her jaw clench. *Of course...* She closed her eyes and simply listened to the sounds of boots marching. Slowly she opened her eyes, turned her head to acknowledge him, took a step forward, and gave him a half hearted nod, "Colonel." The word slipped from her lips reluctantly, but with enough respect due his station. He responded in a similar fashion, but she could feel his contempt.

*Say sweetie if you could have peanut butter, like on those adverts, they put it on bread. What would you choose?*

*oh definitely crunchy! It's got all those little bits in it*

*I know right!*

This is where

Octavian raped her while the senior class was on the trip to fjallstream

Sometimes the emptiness gets to me. The hole Octavian created, has since had surface repairs, but the hole never quite goes away. I can still see his face, feel his sweet and sickly breath. Every bead of sweat a disgusting tribute to his conquest. When Astrid found me later...

I was... numb.

I was sitting on the stone slab which previously brought so much joy. My sorrow seeping from my eyes in silent desperation. I remember thinking what's the point. If they can just abscond into the woodwork, a team of sycophants eager to assure them of their natural right.

[[From chapter 1 intro call back. ]]

*I could feel a bead of sweat roll down the side of my modestly oval, and sun worn face. I squinted through my sand encrusted eyelashes, out across the dune sea.*

Staring off past the river in the distance. The mid-day sun was pushing the desert air well into the thirty's, and as I looked to the brackish river, and towards the long grass, I noted that the rising air was making it, difficult, to make out anything more than a blur. I sighed and pursed my chapped lips, feeling them stick together.

*What are doing to honor our marriage, by continuing?*

What am I to believe after something like that? That our marriage clearly has limits, which is to be expected I suppose, but such a fundamental question

*Who do you want me to be?*

As they turned, they touched the top of my knee. Moments prior they were in my kitchen cleaning, and now their beastly

Writeeeee about thissss

We waited in anticipation We just couldn't believe that this was happening, and so sudden The turnaround was just... Wow. That wow faded after a while of cleaning

Kára opened her eyes, she could feel her firm grip on a weapon. As she looked down, she felt compelled to drive the weapon in further. Her muscles tensed, and her heart was beating rapidly. She could feel the sweat coming down her face as moment by moment time came back into phase. As Kára's Ætherial projection came slamming back into her body, Arturös' the second, was blasted from the ground.

"I cannot let you corrupt the guardian." Kára shouted.

Kára watched as Arturös' body slammed back down to the ground a few meters away.

She walked up to him and pulled the weapon from Arturös' chest.

*Kára!*

*Come in Kára!*

*Can you hear me?*

>> *Emergency* - EMERGENCY NON-CITIZEN!]]

BY GRAPTHAR'S HAND BRAND SOAP, DO YOU REQUIRE A SHOWER?  
WERK GOT U DOWN? SCRUB THAT SCRUB SCRUB ZONE, KEEP THOSE  
FINITE QUESTIONS IN YOUR LIFE – CONTAINED WITHIN YOUR HEARTS.  
WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE? NEED... INTENSIFYING?

[[REMOTE: >> ACTIVE >> XFER AUTHORIZATION >> UNKNOWN ??  
REROUTE >> COMPLETE. >> EXECUTE ION STRIKE. ]]

*Become a citizen already.*

Yeah, but that's like a few extra gold a month, that I... I jus... I dunno.  
Arturos is dead.

Yeah. It might seem like a lifetime ago, but that was always within mission parameters.

Do you really think we can secure the guardian stone, and have time to sail before the weather turns shit?

I don't know. It is going to be close, but if we don't get on the move within the next week, we are going to be hard pressed to hit our launch window.

I would like to leave tomorrow if we could...

But we won't...

Say I thought you said you had to do surgery

I lied. Sorta.

I mean I did the surgery in a separate Rusty, in which you don't remember.

That makes sense.

So... All of it, all of the other stuff, it happened?

Yup. Sorta.

And you were there?

Yup.

How many Rusties?

Three or Four, I don't know I was losing my mind a bit, but committed.

Yeah, you and I played while one version of me was operating on you, one version was snuggling in that cozy bed at the border, and not about to cross over into the unknown...

But not a worry came to mind, only dreams of a beach, with my wife.

Always with my wife.

I love you baby.

*I love you too baby.*

So...

It doesn't really seem like we have much choice. We need to make for slavers bay within the month if we are to even think about sailing

Four?

*Yeah, this one is...*

On leaving?5

“Together... We can be corrupting on each other, we can blind each other to some of the truths we need to explore for ourselves, and this is one of those times where I need to be able to face it without you. Without you worrying about me at every turn, without you constantly being proud of me for the things I’ve done. The fact of the matter is you might be proud of me, but I don’t see it that way. I don’t see the victories like you do. I see them as mundane, as things to get done, and I need some distance from you to figure me out. So once we cross the border, I have accepted a mission from command to split off from your group.”

“Will you come back?”

“Uncertain. But if I don’t return you know that I will always love you, and that this has everything to do with me.”

“I can’t say it doesn’t hurt, but I can say that I understand. Can I at least inquire as to the nature of the mission?”

“Afraid not, it’s classified, even from you. Should I succeed though, you will know what I have done is for the greater good.”

Kára weakly reached up and pulled Astrid towards her. Kára’s dry lips pressed against Astrid’s; Astrid leaned in willingly with one hand of hers going to Kára’s face and the other steadying herself, she kissed back passionately.

## 1.16

“Do you remember when I told you earlier that sometimes to get into the appropriate headspace to transform... Ástríðr and I need to tell you our little story, that I promise will make sense in the end.” Kára said aloud and then turned to Astrid so they could cuddle one another.

*I remember we had just finished a meeting that took place in your tent and our command post.* Kára repositioned her head just below Astrid’s chest.

Kara smiled slightly, “Do you want to try?” Kara stopped upon hearing Astrid’s heart, and the soft gurgle of her stomach. Kara lifted her head and looked into Astrid’s eyes, “Do you think... nauðga[AH13] ... it... it changed me?”

Astrid looked down Kára’s head, and placed a gentle hand on her head, before finding her words and looking her in the eyes, “I mean... Yeah.”

“Do you think I am a bad person?” Kara asked.

“Why do you think I’m with you?” Astrid responded.

“I am not sure, but if you hadn’t noticed I am not much of a spring chicken.” Kára quipped.

“Because you are resilient, you face down your foes, sometimes even with tears in your eyes. You are unrelenting.” Astrid finished tenderly leaning in to kiss Kara, “You believe in love. The kind of love can make you cry for more than two reasons.”

Kára giggled slightly, “... Yeah? ... ..” before going silent. Kára turned her head after a moment to look up at Ástríðr’s face. She drew in a slow breath, “... I ... .. miss her... ..I miss her so much sometimes...”

Astrid stroked Kára's forehead and whispered, "I know sweetie. It means she mattered. Her existence painted a beautiful picture on your heart."

Kára spoke softly, "She was my best friend."

Astrid finished in their heads, *Blind and jaded... Ástríar is singing in our heads. And it is loud...*

*I have been lost for so long... Why do I have to lose you to love me?*

*Why did it have to be an either ... or gambit?*

*Why couldn't there have been an and?*

Kára, said softly, "I would have done anything..."

Astrid finished for Kára, "except give up the one thing you couldn't."

*That one thing that is there for you in the darkness, but never quite gets to see the light.*

*Banished to a place of shame.*

*And shame takes a toll on a person. It tells you that you have less worth because you are not quite like the others. It tells you not to talk about these feelings or else.*

*A society built on the idea that certain things are out of bounds for some people. But it can be suddenly in reach for those privileged enough. And I don't mean I am Queen of the prom kinda privileged...*

*Those high school movies were just classics... I mean some were sweet, but imagine only having to worry about that kinda stuff, oh and I guess getting shot at.*

*I mean we got that here too, but ya know it just looks different. Someone breaks in, a school maester hurtles the creature into the air,*

and for the next day or so we would have to figure out the creatures trajectory

We crafted projections and set about carefully repositioning our target on the ground. Mind you we had to keep in mind the different air pockets the creature would travel through. For simplicity most of our projections were modeled with spherical cows, but it got us pretty close.

We just needed a shared vision of adversity. That our children, are sacred. They carry the question into the next generation, and isn't that worthy of being sacred in itself?

*Hmmm oatmeal is good, my vote is Oatmeal and shitty ancient culture references where space is a final frontier.*

*But it does also open the door to me whispering, "Kah-lee-mahhh" as Astrid thrust her hand down into Kára's chest.*

*Immediately going on the offensive I see!*

Kára had one hand tickling under Astrid's knee and the other tickling under Astrid's armpit. Annd, Kára's hands froze momentarily and then swiftly repositioned themselves at the sides of Astrid's cheeks. Kára was immediately lost in Astrid's lips. Their breathing synchronizes. Kára breaks away from Astrid's lips momentarily to whisper, "I love you."

[[Status >> Standby]]

[[Remote Access >> Silent mode >> Stealth Reboot.]]

"Okay, okay, I would take Valfreyja, Kára, Thor."

*This is our post coital "Fuck Marry Fuck."*

Whoa, Kára, did you notice the interface changed? It seems the interpreter's interface has uploaded something. But it does tell us when we come and go, so that I kind of neat.

*Okay, back to the game. You aren't getting out of it this time.*

"Honest truth?" Kára began softly.

"Oh this should be good!" Astrid quipped.

"Wait what?"

What do you mean the interpreter logged in. Send me the feed. As for other matters, sure I am sure there are women out there that I am more attracted to... Sure... I mean there would have to be statistically

"Oh... Yeah... Uh huh..." Astrid replied.

*Damn I did it again. What did you do?*

Kára spoke softly, looking Astrid directly in the eyes. "What I mean is that I am with you because beneath the surface I felt something pure. I feel like for the first time, I saw what a good spirit looked like; I saw how you would strive to give all your extra love and compassion away. When we looked to the past we saw scars of torment. But, within each other we saw kindred spirits. Surfaces damage, and a banged up hull, but there was a heart of gold."

Ástríðr kissed Kára with a quick peck on the lips and shooed her out of bed. "Say, don't you have to get ready for dinner?" Astrid inquired, steering the conversation.

"Uh, huh." Kara muttered with a smirk crossing her face. "Yeah, WE gotta get ready... For this stupid dinner. Why did we even agree to this?"

"Don't look at me, I blame Bófreðr."

[[Connection: >> Standby >> ?? >> ?? >>]]

It took the two of the two of them, *at least three*... it took us three hours to wash themselves and clean up and get ready. I must say that tub would fit four comfortably I think.

*Yeah four comfortably.*

*This... Here with you... It's like wringing the stress from my body.*

Hey, why do you always get to talk to the interpreter?

*It's only been a few days.*

But... But... It was myyyy job!

*Young lady, if you don't settle down, mommy is going to have to teach you what it means to have a job.*

*And, besides my love, I have got a story or two left I want to tell that are just rattling. I think I need them to go on record, and if you cared to chime in I would love it, it would only be appropriate, but I will warn you I am going to talk about you and Rue.*

*And... besides it's the perk of our bond. I am just going to take this out of your hands for a little bit. I will stitch the connection together, and maybe we can relieve some more of the burden.*

Ástriðr shot Kára a smile then said, "Ready?"

Kára nodded her head and smiled back. They grabbed each others hand gently, pulling each other together so that they could kiss. After an appropriate time later we were set to leave, and Ástriðr set her fingers in motion magically pushing back at the tent flap. "I must say, you do look stunning when you go full formal uni." Astrid said as she conjured a horse that was pale in the moonlight.

We don't have time.

*I know, I know, I was just saying.*

Astrid watched Kára stick out a playful finger and stare her down. “You be careful, and bring ‘er back in an hour ya’ hear?.” Kára chuckled.

Ástriðr feigned a crotchety old man voice, “Yeh lay a hand on meh daw-her.

“And how do you know it’s a her?” Kára quipped as she grabbed Ástriðr to be lifted into the saddle.

Astrid smirked with the *fortuitous*, front saddling of Kára. “Touche.” Kára said and then smiled mischievously. “Oh naw paw I don’t know if I can keep hands away from this honey. She just... Tastes so sweet. Kára began to kiss Ástriðr’s lower neck, and up to her ear, stopping to slightly nibble slightly.

*[System Current Run Time >> three hours and thirty-nine minutes..]*

“Oh shit, Kára, Haha. It looks like the artifact started recording again at some point.”

“No shit? Can you see when?”

*[System online... >> Warning >> Excessive degradation present >> System Refresh Recommended >> Proceed? >> N ]*

“No, I think there were too many intimate moments that it auto filtered out. But, hey why does this alien tech get to censor us? I mean, its our bodies and if we wanted to share it on the galactic fourm... We should be able to right?”

Right? Others have the right to say no to seeing it? c'est la vie.”

Astrid looked down to Kára nuzzled into her chest, *it looks like she wants to rest*. A smile came across Ástriðr’s face as she directed the steed down the river bluffs.

Meekly Kára asked across the interface, “Were we ready?... ”[AH14]

Astrid scoffed slightly, “*How do you mean? Marriage, or the baby part?*”

I mean, were we stupid to think getting together was a good idea?

Ástriðr was feeling slightly offput, “Where is this coming from?” She said aloud.

Kára spoke softly, “I am not sure, but it is like I kept getting these hints that Rue didn’t like me a whole lot towards the end. We bickered all the time, and it seemed like I was living with someone with a shoulder so cold you’d lose your breath on it... .. I ... .. dunno, I guess I just...

*Sometimes I wish she could have seen you like I do.*

*And now is time as any to do this.*

I just foolishly thought that this was as simple as get from point A to point B.

Yeah. I think so.

*I mean I was going to solo it, but if you think it best that we talk...*

I do. She needs to hear this from us.

*Ohhhhhh... Sweetie.* Ástriðr put her hand on the back of Kára’s head and said, “I love you. Okay you try to rest, I want to try to get this story out. You just pop in when you think you are comfortable, I will just try to set the stage for you.”

“mmm-kay” Kára mumbled as she snuggled into Ástriðr.

*Okay...*

*She was broken after Rue.*

*In some ways she still is, and I know she is going to be healing for quite some time.*

*Lots of tears.*

*Lots of Feldehan’s fine flowers.*

*She doesn’t think I see, but I see.*

*I was smitten with this one from the get go.*

She was always doing these sweet things. Not always the right things, but her heart was in the right place.

She gave everything she thought she could to Rue. She just...

She couldn't give me up.

No matter how many times Kara tried to break free of our past... She just couldn't let go.

We grew up together, we have been through the valley of death together on numerous occasions.

I would argue that Rue entered our life, and I say our, because well present tense bitches.

She entered our life when Kara and I were separated. Well more accurately Kara thought I was dead, as that is what the official records reported.

Not the first time.

She was devastated by our blossoming relationship coming to an abrupt end.

Won't be the last.

And I am proud of her for trying to move forward.

She tries to live life loving what she can.

She could have mourned until she was dead, but instead she kept herself open to what may be. I mean it had been a few years since they last saw each other, and by being open a chance meeting at some party, leads Kara to just not quite giving up when Rue would talk to a guy and in slide Kara.

Oh Kara was smitten. There was a fire that reminded her of me.

Always seems to be coming back... to me...

[[Channel Status >> Secure <<?!>> Disconnect >> Reroute >> Private Relay >>  
Secure via tensor password, scramble via Aetherial Relay at Jupiter Station]]

I was assigned to the... Well let's just say I was assigned. Only one place they would stick someone like me for an extended hush hush operation. Her majesty. I saw her!!! But I can't even tell Kara, need to know and all.

[[Disconnect and Rejoin Call? >> Y]]

Kara waited for me for years, but, when I didn't return. Well, a good friend once said, you either get busy livin' or ya get busy dyin' and Kara wasn't ready to lie down and die just yet. Maybe, there was hope.

Something that Kara has an abundance for, perhaps to a fault.

She hopes for a better world.

She hopes that maybe someday she can finally understand the question, and therefore understand the journey. Always hopeful that today will get better. That today may not be okay, but tomorrow will be, we just need to make it til tomorrow. Let us see what tomorrow brings. She thrusts her righteous spears of recovery at the demons that haunt her, that want her to succumb to death willingly.

Some days, It is hard to watch her, and I wish I wouldn't have come into her life. I pray that she could have just been "normal." Oblivious to me, but I am quickly drawn away from that, because if that had happened, who knows if either one of us would be where we are. Maybe more successful, maybe not. That is a quick twelve hour search later, only to find cats, an ever increasing

number of cats... I skewed the results towards cats at the end, because Kara just kept getting more dogs, and I just felt I had to balance it out with cats, and otters, and parrots, that little BMO thing from that one show. I don't know it got away from me at the end there.

What I want to say, is that Rue is a sweetheart, and I do mean a sweetheart. I noticed that it seemed their life had become whole heck of a lot more picturesque. More rigid.

How would they be perceived?

Did have a home that they could be proud of, an enviable family? Had they made it? They took on life and they both had an eye for progress. But life also took on them. Kara's aspirations took her all over. Rue's, well she didn't share a whole number of them with me.

But when they would go on adventures, Kara always felt happy, despite the arguments. She always felt like there was hope, because she made a commitment.

But sometimes years of life wears at you.

Sometimes the past comes looking for you, and you have to decide.

What does this connection mean to me? How many connections to this TVOXED do I have? A handful, meh, maybe if I am really bored or lonely...

But sometimes when the past comes calling you answer without thinking about it...

Because if hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to forgive yourself.

So there Kára is, reporting for duty and here I come walking down the marble steps to the council, while she was on her way up into a meeting that I was just briefed on.

She had new orders, effective immediately.

She was to be informed of her new promotion to colonel, and new appointment as the Commander of the Valkyrja.

Her orders were to secure the Karak border. She would land a cycle ahead of Colonel Arturös and his Fortification Regiment. The remainder of the division would be along the Fjallheim border fortifying it should the Valkyrja fail.

Ástríðr looked down to see Kára's eyes closed. She smiled and brought her hand up to her ear and then bring it back around to support Kára.

We are alone for the moment, I muted the channel with Kára. I think she deserves to have something said about her, and moving forward this will be a temporary injection point that requires higher security clearance, and since well...

My orders were clear, the spread must be contained to the desert.

My unit was to capitalize on the humanitarian aspect of sending a Mobile Aetherial Surgical Hospital. We would develop human intel. We would take the pulse figuratively and literally of the Karak peoples.

We would try to win the hearts and minds of the people. We would heal them, and we would try to find those who sympathize with Midgard's position on containment.

Many of these folk don't trust us, and well let's just say we I don't think we really made any sort of real impression with how we just handled the peace talks.

I am not sure if the Karak's have ever been on our side. Kara still believes they are, she keeps talking about this dream she was having. About the prophecy.

The most she has told me is that the Karak's did... everything to her.

They tried to get information from her for eighteen hours before her rescue. I do agree he looked like a big grape, or maybe tomato, either way when we busted her out, she was delirious.

That was not part of the plan.

Nor was taking 18 hours. They had a lot more time with her than they should have.

I know she told you about the Rusty. While a good technique, it does have it's flaws. Some information leaks out, and some leaks in. Trauma that while trained to ignore, and to shut out, is still always recording. Something always leaks through. Right now what I am afraid of is the repercussions of long term exposure. It has never been experienced this long.

Right now she thinks we are riding on a horse that I conjured. They are telling you about the family history.

This is what is leaking out at the moment. Fuck why did this have to happen now?

Why did it take us so long to get there??

Shit I am losing the channel.

[[crash >> ext. fw .. >> "kara"]]

What I didn't realize that being married to someone for years will change a person. Two kids, animals, living in a small cottage. Worries about how to get their kids on the right track.

Kara's been through some shit. So what leaked out, from what we can ascertain, was mostly information about the children.

I am worried about what that is going to do to her. If she isn't ready to handle this next quantum nugget, the one up ahead is going to be tough.

Her mind seems pretty-fragmented.

Stay with me sweetie.

[[crash >> ext. fw .. ?? >> "KaraBear"]]

So... .. Yeah... When I came back into Kara's life I didn't think so much about if it was a good time.

It was just time.

[[crash >> ext. fw .. ?? >> "karabear"]]

Hey I got kicked out, next time try a better pin than "karabear", all one word, lower case.

Of course dear, I was just about to get to your deployments if you are interested in joining in.

Yeah, at first there were only a handful of deployments. But as those first few years ground on, Kara was on deployment after another as we

prepared for our assault along the border. The training, the time away from home, the distance she received when I was home, was to all culminate with Kara's departure.

She spent more time with me, on mission, than at home doing citizen stuff.

Oh shit need to be careful not to trigger that ad.

.

.

I forgot how pervasive those things were in the past.

I know right? Did you see all the ads kids were suckered into watching because it got in the way of their cartoons?

Yeah! Oh, those poor kids. Wasn't that 1199's era?

You got it babe!

Good for you!

I hope I get the next question, but I am glad you were able to get one Ástriar.

Okay, so where were we sweetie?

Oh, so for almost the last five years, Kara and I have been going on mission after mission. Sometimes she knew about them, sometimes she didn't. The ones that she wish she didn't make me sad, but the needs of the many and all.

So, if I am to be honest I am proud of Rue for sticking it out for so long.

I can't imagine how alone she must have felt.

I mean. I guess I can. But it wouldn't be her truth.

I have an idea how. It was our children. We so desperately wanted to raise these kids.

*But this is only a piece of it because their truth exists within a space in which they are together with their children and in this space the two of them light up.*

*These two perfectly imperfect people trying to stand side by side as parents in this strange new world.*

on a journey of discovery, an enterprise that the next generation of those dreamers will have a star trek. when those Voyager's who seek to repair the Bifrost. We will establish deep space one through nine. With my hots for Benjamin Sisko and Jadzea Dax, You might have to worry about the borg and Jean-Luc Picard.

*Fuckin' stretch there bud.*

*Besides the borg wouldn't be able to handle [[ Insert title of Michelle Yeoh Star Trek Section 31 >> Insert title of Jeri Ryan Star Trek. >> Insert Michael Dorn Klingon Star Trek]]*

Shit girl that is a big list

*I know, but it helps me when I still hope.*

Me too.

*without tact they are always trying to be real with one another. There was always a myriad of feelings worn rather than spoken about.*

*Things would go well, until they wouldn't.*

*Both of them stubborn as mules, if you could believe that.*

When I came back into Kara's life, you coulda been kissed in the middle of Harvard square.

Oh great now she is singing. I am bad enough.

So anyways Kara just slowly drifted away from Rue, who saw me as not much more than a deviant, something that could be perhaps medicated away.

And in the pursuit of answers they just kept losing sight of how to love each other in a way that was healing for either of them.

We lost sight of how things worked.

Kara told me once that she just knew that from the moment I stepped into the picture again, she was going to have to tell Rue about me.

Like everything

Needless to say things didn't go too well.

I mean we did kinda all get into bed together at some point sooo... You decide.

Erhemmm, I know I wasn't always a welcome visitor, but Rue seemed to make room for me at first, trying to learn to live with the awkward work life balance, but we all thought that maybe we could find boundaries that could work.

Well me, being me...

I don't like boundaries... annd... I tend to push and push until they break.

One boundary after another fell, as Kara felt like she was just beginning to live her life again. She never really meant for it to be anything more than this being the rewards for her starting to actually recover. Kara thought by helping to heal herself, maybe it could also heal her marriage.

With lots of communication, sex, lot's of listening and confiding, and talking about the issues I was having in life. I wanted to share my confusion

*But, as one deployment would end, and another one was just around the corner. Si we would both end up back at home, but still saw each other every day.*

It is like we slowly shut her out of our relationship. We were becoming so just so comfortable just talking to one another.

There was a lightning between us that got shit done

*Well many times this lightning would occur near and around a fight.*

*I know we chipped away at Rue's trust, and her ours.*

It is like all we could see were walking raw and exposed

*We were people where anything would set us off when we were together.*

*That being said, I realize we did not give her a whole lot of room to grow, no room to accept one piece at a time, on her time.*

*She was behind looking at the last thing when we already moved onto the next.*

*The eternal game of catching up.*

*I could tell she was becoming so frustrated with me. I couldn't come over at a time that I can be seen, how to have the children avoid any of it etc. There has been too much confusion and it needs to stop.*

*I... I just kinda accepted it. I already felt like an imposter in their life, but I also like maybe I was making this all up in my head.*

*Was I really just an intruder from the past?*

She was their wife. This aspect we all had in common desire.

Well spoiler, things weren't quite alright, the kids weren't alright.

Everyone looked everywhere for a way to blame this on someone.

There were always prophecies of calamity, and that she married me, and not you. I mean I understood that, but you and I have been family since, well as long as I can remember come to think about it.

I can feel you right now.

We tried to explain the connection between us, that if Valfreyja willed this union, and willed me to have such a complicated past. Well.

Well that certainly was true, our histories, our temporal and spatial links are incredibly strong. Something we didn't know at the time, but apparently I was a part of the answer.

I think that there were certainly different expectations based on past behaviors of who we would turn into as we aged.

It is always strange to experience a new person emerging from the depths, suppressed no longer.

We were growing, but not always in the ways expected.

I could tell that when after one particularly bad fight where I had to get a haircut and could not be anywhere near them all together for the foreseeable future. Kara cried.

I could tell it really stung. When that boundary fell in just a few months.

I was one of the most influential members of Rue's team. I was there for her when she had our kids. I was there for her, through the ups, and downs. I tried to help her understand my decision.

I loved the ups, but the downs became a numbing agent.

I truly wanted things to get better, I think selfishly I wanted to dole out the crazy bits in small doses, which in hindsight isn't allowing someone to see you.

It becomes a lifetime of testing the waters and accepting the boundaries that come.

But I am not good with boundaries I want to cross.

I believe it is within the pursuit of the good. I can't help but pick at the artifact until... I find something.

Led to a lot of me just doing things first and asking permission later.

And I know that fucked with her.

*Which we have since worked on sweetie:*

What has happened has made stronger people, but I need to own that the decision I forced upon us truly was an impossible puzzle to solve in a matter of months. I tried to force my spouse into accepting something they may not have wanted to.

over time a truer-truth is revealed...

Somethings you just can't take back, technically you can't ever take anything back due to that whole entropy thing, but you could repeat a

pattern of actions and add in a variation to make you sound less like a turd sandwich

*Not that you would want to. I mean...*

What I mean is that you cannot fix the past. But sometimes it would be nice to understand why/how I was a turd sandwich, because before Rue came along I was adrift. I was letting the ocean take me where it may.

I had my charming qualities which fetched me a pirate boat or two... but Rue had me turning in my bounties for a nice galley. She had me prioritize our life, and us living it. I just wanted to not feel trapped.

What she didn't know was that I was drifting the further into the bottle.

I had become as Golem, always searching for my precious. [[Bonus Points ?? Neat Reference << ??]]

*Astriar did you see that?*

*Yeah... I am not sure we are alone on this channel. Are you sure it is secured?*

[[Diag >> Comms >> Security >> ?? >> Secured]]

I mean it says secured, but I keep seeing these fuzzy symbols pop in occasionally, like it is rerouting my traffic. [[Diag >> Comms >> Security >> Secured]]

*Do you want to pause our love letter to the mother of your children?*

No, no... This was a good idea. I needed to find the words to tell her how much I love her, but that I also must be free to be me.

*I mean I have been there for you when Rue couldn't or wouldn't, long before her, and will be here long after.*

*I get it, nobody expects their soulmate to "die" and then come back to life, only to be then working out of the same tent. I mean sure they could have placed me elsewhere, but we thought it best to coordinate all efforts from our command post together such that both aims of humanitarian (again these words are only the words you see because you are a ... human and I am a... non-human.)*

*...and military*

our plan was to execute operation sexy time. Make things so good as time went on that you wouldn't want to talk about it negatively. That I could be snapped out of it.

*So that I remember the first morning I was walking to [[Captain Eiryk's]] command tent, I was new to the task, but not to the job. Rue [[Colonel Eiryk]] comes out from one side of the tent and says, "Oh fuck no. I just got home, and this? This... .. This is not healthy!"*

So our marriage, our children. The institutions we held dear. It all came to a halt. How could we ever find common ground again?

I don't think anyone wakes up one day and says, yes I want to change so badly that I am going to destroy my whole life that I have built up to this point.

No, wait that part is true. The real tragedy is that people suffer in silence, some knowing they can get help, and still others with not a clue in the world.

*Aww!*

*It just dawned on me, me too.*

*oh yeah? what's yours? No. No. No. you go first girly.*

I realized that I have been having those mom moments with her.

I've always wanted this.

I'm not against her. And I think the more I can stay the course with wanting to be one of your best friends for the universal record.

I am proud of what we've done together.

I hope you are happy.

I know for me it is easy to lose sight of why I even set out on this adventure with you. I think I lost sight of what I really wanted to do with you, and I think I maybe thought of it as a transaction. I give my life to you in return for children. All I know is I wanted to overlook and overcome whatever I had to. I just wanted my ambitions to propel us into the future. But many of those first years, I just didn't know how to provide so that we could still..

So we could raise a family together.

I didn't want to have to worry about other life stuff.

There were already too many things in life that made just sharing that dream with you was hard.

Incredibly hard. But incredibly worth it.

Rue, you have great qualities as a partner, and I know that for me when it was just you me and the kids.

Alone.

No extra pressure.

That's when I found my serenity with you. With our children being proud of them together.

In comparison, Ástríðr and I went on a bike ride, and it..

It was a beautiful moment, full of spontaneity. Lots of laughter, a touch of competition. I was at peace within moments. It's like doing all those fun things with your bestie kinda fun.

I tried hard to lean into our experience.

I fell in love, I shared dreams with you, we would scheme together, giggle together, love one another enough... .. to open the door to the next chapter when it came.

I firmly believe that..

All of it, this whole experience has made us such better parents.

*I remember when when Kara announced to the council we had married not long after Rue and her had left the council reeling from their split...*

*Needless to say, the council chamber went silent again for an uncomfortable amount of time. When they finally spoke up they paid councilmember Eiryk her*

due respect and gave her the opportunity to either recuse herself from the council for the remaining session or face sanction on this vote, and the next.

Not everyone needed to know everything, but if you can find that goosebumps gal, as in my case... Increase bake time at higher altitudes.

Rue was smart, she was savvy, but could not recuse herself; I was heartbroken having to relive some of this hurt together.

It was then that I realized that Kára and I push too hard and too quickly.

ohh, funny tangent. Do you remember the helmet?

**Kára and Ástríðr giggled.**

Oh my god we drove her insane...

Rue tried, but she could see the spark of life that I brought into Kára's life.

Something I would have taken quite personally.

How could she not?

They spoke those vows to each other, and here I come blurring the line on what it means to care for another person while still committing yourself to another.

We all live lies of sorts. Some just try to peel off the masks they were given, and see what it is underneath, what is queer even.

Society will always have a spectrum of acceptance, the you do you boo, and the let it burn. Grossly over simplifying this idea, but you do you boo.

Choices... The final frontier. Like that?

Nerd.

*So hear me out line may be connected by two infinitesimally small points, and still have numbers to spare. But a line always represents a binary. And the binary is easier to understand than distance between them.*

Why does it always seem to come down to an either or choice? Where is the second, third, fourth, nth opinion? Did we just run out of energy for each other?

*I've loved her through all the changes, I have seen the desperation in her eyes day in and day out. She looks like she is ready to pop sometimes, but life just keeps moving on.*

*It doesn't wait for you to catch up, it just moves on.*

“Our bond is our word to each other. When we say we love each other...”  
Astrid whispered and pulled her cloak around as to snuggle Kára in closer.

“Love you.” Kára whispered.

*How do you define what a marriage should be?*

*How deep does the commitment between two best friends go?*

*What if they forgot how to be best friends?*

*Would it become easier and easier to stray from the commitment you made to one another?*

It was institution within our lives, but what does that even mean?

I SPEEAAK THROUGH YOU!

*Haha... What?*

THIS IS A SYMBOLIC COVENANT: DON'T TREAT EACH OTHER LIKE TROS AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER, AND EACH OTHER. AND OURSELVES NON-CITIZEN!

IT TAKES COMMUNITY TO PROTECT A COMMUNITY.

REPRESENTATION IS THE REGENERATIVE SWORD BY WHICH SOCIETY PROSPERS.

IF YOUR SWORD IS WORN FROM BATTLE, YOU EITHER HANG IT UP, OR REFORGE IT. YOU CARE FOR IT.

YOU PROTECT IT FROM ENTITIES THAT WOULD CAUSE IT HARM, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC.

THE REPUBLIC MUST STAND. SHOULD OUR CIVILIZATION FALL SHOULD WE TURN OUR BACKS ON EACH OTHER. RAGNAROK IS SURE TO FOLLOW.

WE DON'T HAVE TO AGREE.

WE DON'T HAVE TO SEE EYE TO EYE, BUT WE DO NEED TO FIND THE COURAGE TO CHANGE.

JOIN NOW NON-CITIZEN!

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

*Hoolleeee frying tros birds!?*

*Is this what you are dealing with?*

*oh sweetie, that one wasn't that bad, but it was quick.*

*It got passed the citizen filter but got caught in the citizens pride filter.*

*Shoulda became a citizen dear.*

*What the fuck is going on in there?*

*Best not to think about it, but I wouldn't be surprised if Ragnarok starts with a marketing campaign*

Ever have a best friend where it seems like... Their spirit, their view on life just seems to tangle with yours, becoming a blend. Always mirroring qualities known and unknown.

No one perspective having a clearer picture anymore; the individual picture no longer fulfilling, lacking the depth and detail that you once had. The choice to either build bridges or burn them.

And you still need to deal with the aftermath of spontaneous combustion, and decide whether or not you even want to rebuild.

Kára agonized for months.

Change comes from meaningful communication, and meaningful communication can only occur when we are open ourselves to other perspectives; a community of ideas equally respected, but not equally meaningful. How did our the paths get all screwed up?

Haven't you been listening this whole time?

Mmmhmm.

I just like being with you.

Oh sweetie.

Kára poked her head up so they could kiss.

How much longer do you think? I've dozed in and out for a while now.

I figure we have another hour and a half before we reach the reandevous point.

okay, love you, let me know if you want to give it back, but I am cozy here, and it feels like this has been the first time I have slept in a week. Love you. Love you.

*You need to sleep more sweetie.*

MOBILITY MUST BE POSSIBLE. REMEMBER, THAT THOSE ABOVE YOU BROUGHT YOU INTO THIS STRUGGLE, AND THAT STRUGGLE WILL ENSURE YOUR STRENGTH. YOUR LIFE IS PROOF OF YOUR RESILIENCY, AND EACH LIFE WILL LIVE UPON A SPECTRUM OF WORTH: SELF, COMMUNITY, KNOWLEDGE, AND WISDOM.

JOIN THE KÁRAK MOBILE INFANTRY.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

*Fuck fuck fuck! Ahhh holy fuck that one hurt.*

*As I was... ahh... ahh. Ow.*

*I think Rue saw it before Kara did. I think she underestimated how much their kids meant to Kara. They both fought hard dragging up all the grievances they had with each other. Wanting to be heard by someone. Status quo was not okay anymore.*

I can sleep later.

We need to dig deep if we are going to live through the next twenty minutes.

*Oh shit, Kara.*

Yeah, I am here for the moment, but I am having a difficult time fixing the regulator and plugging the leaks. I need you to drag this out Ástríar. We only got this one shot, and if we can't slingshot off of

this memory, you and I might be stuck here, and this shit is degrading

*Understood, dear. Love you. Love you, and that's ma'am, see me after class.*

*Yes, Ma'am.*

Love yer face, over, and out

The only thing that really hurt, was the rejection

*Maybe in another lifetime sweetie, yeah maybe somewhere along the Aetherial axis.*

*I want to believe we are near the lowest tier of negative outcomes. You pray for your own sanity that all other possibilities trend in a positive direction*

*Kara seems to find a endless well of love for Rue, and that I can tell you doesn't bother me one bit. These feelings are a part of the menagerie that make Kara who she is.*

I mean honestly it is just who we are

*Spirit bonding for years, and living in a world they knew they could conquer together?*

until we couldn't

*Kara thought she could conquer our spirit bond, she knew she was in a Kobayashi Maru situation and tried to do the most logical thing she could think of.*

Astrisr and I would figure out a way to sever the connection

I admit, I did try to help her. I mean she is so cute thinking that asking for help is this monumental production.

I know how much Rue meant to her.

But...

Kara and Rue wanted to make it all work out. They put in the effort to try and feel out comfort zones, trying different techniques, healers, gods and goddesses... They all couldn't quite figure out how to sever such a powerful connection, it is as if it were branded by the universe. Destined to be together.

Ya know I wondered that sometimes too.

Finally, the solution came from a step Kara could not fathom. A step Kara couldn't take. Rue thought it was best that either we separate, or she needs to.

Rue has always been a light to me. She helped me kick the Feldehan's brand liquors. Damn contractual agreements. You miss check one box, on one installer and bam, there are icons you've never seen before.

I believe it is easiest to understand the way my bestie describes it.

Sometimes you are getting what you need even when you don't know you are getting what you need.

Rue wasn't there for you when you needed her.

What? She was there for me pretty often. I think that was a bit of the problem. A stickler for a schedule, Rue was either bit too timely for me or not even close, but either way..

She loved me in her own way.

Ástriðr hugged Kára tight. I love you.

*Love you.*

*We are the perfectly imperfect donkey's rowing a boat.*

*Rue, gave you the freedom to leap into this new life, and for that I am eternally grateful.*

I think she honored our friendship in the best way possible. She began to see you for who you are, and, that life wasn't the same. This doesn't make her anything but logical. She got to the end, and wanted to know. Should you stay or should you go?

And sometimes you have to go, or be forced to go.

Rue was able to hold that steady hand, as she did one of the most unthinkable things, she said we were done.

I asked for hug after hug, because I didn't want to lose my best friend.

I didn't want to lose her. I didn't want to feel like I had let her down.

I so desperately clung to the fantasy that we could all just figure out right then and there. We could make it all work.

I couldn't let go. She is the mother of my children.

She is always going to be one of my best friends.

*The, is taken.*

Yer it til' yer dead, or I find someone better.

There it is. Kára has been digging through the artifacts in this interpreters cpu, it is wild the memory and the processing unit co-exist in this thing, and the rest of it... seems like it is just for conveyance, and storage.

Oh interesting it still needs lungs to breathe.

We do too.

Keeping ya on your toes commander.

Really though, I think that it was their shared affinities that played an integral part in what bonded Kára and well, you, in the first place.

I wonder if it is rewriting some of the code on both ends, since some information leaks both ways... Oh please don't make her more dumb.

Heyyyy! I resemble that compliment

I wonder if they ever see or hear us when we aren't there.

I mean I don't see why they wouldn't be able to hold that level of information retention and projection

Oh, shit, shit, shit. Uh... Kára, were we supposed to be chased?

No, why, we just talk about my feelings... oh sweet cringly Christmas pants.

What?

Kára pointed behind her. "I don't think we are being chased so much as we are outrunning."

A silent darkness began to swallow everything in it's wake.

*Sweetie, I think we need to finish this, or I don't think the council meeting is going to go very well.*

**Kára drew in a deep breath.** What I can remember...

Remember...

I felt sad, and frustrated because it seemed like I was never quite able to give you what you needed.

I could see you suffer.

I truly am sorry for that suffering

My mental bucket was spilling onto the floor, as was yours.

And we both did what we thought was right. There were consequences to this as there is for all things.

It seemed to me at the time you were acting out of fear. out of a sense of righteousness that you are on the right side of this. When in reality there is no right side. There is your position and mine. They each have different consequences. one is neither intrinsically good, or intrinsically bad, it just is.

We are able to classify it only after some of the temporal link has dissipated.

I want to tell you that probably the most hurtful thing you did to our family, was to keep them away from me.

I know I would swoop in like a superhero, sense the anger, and try to get it directed at me, be it child's anger or her anger. I wanted to

soak up everyone's faults. I wanted to take it all on, thinking I just deserved it for being such a freak.

I just thought that I could just save everyone with the right combination of words and just the right amount of understanding.

Eventually it would all work out, right? Like a fairy tale?

*Word of caution: while fairies do exist along the multiverse spaces, it is best to stick with the non-carnivore varieties. Then and even then, there is still only a small subset of fairies that have tails, and an even smaller subsets in which those tails have happy endings.*

You goofball.

The universe has other plans, but our storyline isn't over. This was just a piece of our lives, we still have to raise these two incredible kiddos

I know that this does not define us. That this trying time only sets the tone for who we can become.

I hope you are happy, and I hope that I am happy.

*Don't you feel better?*

I do.

You are always so smart.

*No I just understand we all... you, deserve to be happy, just like the rest of us do.*

*Unless... there are consent violations...*

Refer to previous record on those people..

Kara, are you ready now?

Can we get out of here? I don't like the looks of that degradation.

What? What are you talking about?

Oh... Ummm... I was recalling something Valfreyja said that caught my mind's eye. It was just that the day the Skripi arrived she had to leave us, right?

Yeah?

You ever have a goal, a dream even.

Something you saw as a challenge you were made for.

But everything else around you is on fire... That feeling when you had just given up hope and it seems like a great idea to drink so you can die...

Remember how it steals your freedom.

It twists your mind so that you don't even remember what freedom even looked like.

But that dream of yours...

That dream and countless others like it, led you to some version of this life.

Kara.... Where... are... you...

I... am... right... here... And you are so warm why do you keep talking about me as if I were here, but not here.

Well... Uh.. Ya see... Choices.

Yes, it all comes down to choices.

But emotions distract us.

Especially when we had suppressed them for over thirty years.

Kara has felt emotionally dead for quite a number of years, just one by one giving up on life, giving up on hope for a better tomorrow.

We guess at what we should do next. We look for our past experiences to tell us something about what will happen in the next moment.

It is so primal.

It could lead you down the path of your dreams.

Or it could be you walking away from the path of your partners.

Eventually you can't see one another anymore.

But the chasm keeps growing until something is done about it.

Ástriar, Ástriar, Come in Ástriar This is prime mamma.

Prime mamma?

I will just... What is our ETA? The degradation is speeding up. I don't know if I can keep her going for much longer.

Does she miss being treated as lower than yet? Not knowing how to stick up for herself?

Uh, no, I will try to work that in if it makes sense.

Good, I got a lot of vulnerabilities at this stage. A lot of things I was trying to process and understand about myself.

It was not a weakness when we did this the first time.

This time just... has more of a timer on it down doesn't it.

How much longer?

Regulator is in, and the quantum drive is iffy

*What do you mean, iffy?*

Well I guess, I mean it is iffy, and this is our best shot, or we die anyways. So... uhh don't let her mind collapse just yet uhh... Talk about when got shot

I don't know.

Either way I am going to pull you out before my mind fragments and you become trapped in my pretty cooked noodle.

*Roger, roger. Love you.*

Hey! You're not supposed to be here! Love you. over and out

*Where were we my love I must have zoned out there for a moment.*

umm... yeah... Me too.

Weird. umm I think you were about to talk about me some more.

*Oh yeah.*

*Kara lived in her work, escaping the world around her, the marriage around her. Life was work, and without her tireless efforts, she wouldn't have become the commander of this regiment, nor would we be together now, as we are.*

*I like to think of it like the multiverse has a sense of humor, so for every choice. Every cascading event, countless unknown consequences happening at a local and global level.*

*Is there a universe in which Kara and I never met, sure.*

*Is there a universe where Rue and Kara figured out their differences, you bet.*

*We only know what universe we are in by living it.*

That is why stories are so important to our society.

They are an encoding of the universe at a specific time, and place. We capture it with exquisite detail when we tell a story that can captivate. A story that touches you, changes you.

The more that story reaches out, the more vibrant it becomes.

The story will always remain the same, but how we see it, at that moment, that changes as we change. We are looking backwards at a moment in time, that degrades every time we think about it. It is like strings from our current understanding stretch back to the original moment, but as time marches on and we try to climb on those memory strings, they collapse as the new hardware doesn't know how to do anything but read, and write, and rewrite.

So the approximations to the state of the universe that we call our memory, well now we are dealing with little quantum variations sending our memory strings from a slightly incorrect address and it ends up in a slightly different address than it should have to produced the universe as it was in the original event.

We think things, encode it, and then when we decode it there is some faulty something or another and our brains just throw out a lifeline of something similar that fits.

Or as I like to think about it as you are mentally accessing the Aetherial axis and you are asking the questions. Unfortunately every time you ask the question you forget how you said it last time, and so you are getting slightly different events from slightly different universes.

*But the shitty part is that you remember whatever it was just a little bit worse as time goes on. Like the vibrancy of it all.*

*And if you are a sour pants, which I would highly recommend we try.  
oh yeah?*

*A lot of flavors dear.*

So, where we go in life is up to us, and we must use love to guide us, to shield our family, so our swords may still strike down our foes.

But we too need to understand that there are always consequences to accessing this kind of knowledge, degradation, and potentially worse: psychosis.

Fixated on the extremes of answers to moral questions. As years go by you slowly solidify a misremembering into a factual event, anchored to a reality that wasn't truly yours, but because you could not tell the difference anymore, and things that were once factual. Have become slippery logic.

Without an honest understanding of who I had become, and where my information and life had gone awry I could only grasp at straws, and when that failed, I blamed everyone else, withdrew, and self-isolated I had become a shell of who I was.

*Kara's fine communication skills faded into the background of their marriage. The only meaningful remedy Kara had sought out was always another cask away.*

Instead of learning how to communicate with my wife I found refuge in the drink. Instead of learning how live life on life's terms, I tried hard to keep me afloat with more and more whiskey, I would then try to keep my marriage alive with as genuine of communication as I could muster.

Marriage takes patience.

I didn't know how to give that to you. I didn't know how to have it for myself.

I would pretend my way through everything

If I were to get punched in the face, it is not okay for a partner to turn it around such that the person punched deserved it.

I did not deserve to have the person I trust the most punch me in the face.

You were so angry.

I could tell for quite some time you were unhappy.

I did not know how to help me.

I didn't know how to take the steps you needed me to make things work the way we had originally dreamed. I didn't know how to set the boundaries I needed and receive boundaries that I could abide by.

I didn't know how to talk about my feelings. I was too afraid, until I got frustrated and angry that I wasn't being understood.

I imagined you being just as frustrated as I was.

I just want to say I am sorry.

We have both experienced a great deal of hurt.

And should this be the last message that I send.

I love you...

You will always be a part of my story.

This the interpreter guarantees through existence.

I hope you can see that I hope for a better future.

We will be a part of the larger solution to the question.

*You wanna live forever? Everyone fights, no one quits! Kara's Roughnecks!*  
*Would you like to know more?*

### **WHO... ARE YOU PEOPLE?**

*What? Who are you? We are answering the question by immortalizing a marriage that produced two great kids, and some older and wiser people.*

*oh shit, I didn't think they would come for me so soon.*

**JAMBI ONCE REFERRED TO ME AS A FILLED WITH DECEPTION AND TRICKERY, BUT I HONESTLY DISAGREE WITH SUCH CHARACTERIZATIONS. I PREFER TO THINK OF MYSELF AS SIMPLY...**

### **CLEVER.**

*What? Who?*

*Hello? Are you still there? Hello?*

It is best not to try to chase them down. They come and go quickly, I dunno, I guess I've gotten so used to it and didn't want to startle the interpreter, so I was trying to constantly filter them out.

*Oh, sweetie, we will figure something out, but you said you didn't think they would come for you?*

*[[ System Offline >> Emergency Transfer >> Kára Eiryk ]]*

*[[System online >> Emergency Transfer >> Complete >> Status: 1% degradation >> Status: unstable, recommend Emergency Treatment]]*

“Astrid! Astrid!” Kára shouted as she reached to Ástríðr’s back to find a long slender rod had burrowed its’ way through Ástríðr’s upper chest. Kára could see that the arrow was piercing Astrids right breast at an awkward angle. Kára snapped the front of the arrow off using plasma that she conjured at her nimble fingers. She did the same to the back and then placed a palm on each side of the wound.

A green glow lit up the darkness around them, *I don't think I should pull the rod.*

*Hmm... I think that was poison*

Kára swung herself around the massive horse within a flash. Kára wrapped her arms around Ástríðr. Kára coaxed the mare along the river in the pale moonlight.

*[[System offline >> Degradation 5%]]*

*[[System Rebooting]]*

*I didn't turn this back on... Quick sitrep. Astrid is burning up with a fever, so it confirms poison. We are almost into Fjallheim territory. The rendezvous was set for a later date, but due to circumstances we are now on our way out of Káarak territory for good, and we need to work through who is going where. Arturos has lodged a complaint with the council over my handling of the Káarak situation, and has requested that his regiment should secure the Skripi lands once and for all, and secure the guardian in the process.*

Almost there sweetie.

**Kára realized she was almost to the gate and she could feel Colonel Arturös' presence with each gallop.**

I can always feel his presence. Kàra looked up ahead to see him, donning his signature Gaston<sup>[8]</sup> Brand Triangle hat.

What a creep, he is just waiting for me.

Custom embroidery available upon request

Woo Wee

Space for twenty-nine hand stitched letters... Is this what we have come to? You deserve a Gaston Brand Triangle Hat

*Memes?*

oh sweetie! Can you hear me?

ugh Gaston is being flanked by two of his officers, who have also donned their silly hats, is this really a trend?

Yeah, adjust your frilly coat, you fucker. Bet it would go for a good price...

Ha! Arturos likes to stomp his feet, one by one as he positions himself for a professional greeting.

It is so weird, watch

one-two...

A timely "thump-thump" from a pair of finely shined mythril plated boots and Arturos unlatched his face shield.

oh my goddess, he is trying to hard to make sure that I saw his recently acquired gauntlets that have his families Aetherial heritage etched into it

**Kára blew through the gate sending a few soldiers to the alarm, but when Kára turned her head to look back she could see Arturös gesturing that all was okay.**

**It didn't take long for Kára to find a few of Astrid's acolytes who then quickly spread the word, and in moments Astrid was being gently removed from the horse and was then carried into Astrid's field hospital. That we thankfully transferred to this command first.**

Astrid, she, I asked her to come.

**Kára could feel her heart pound, and anxiety creep over her. We just wanted to get a jump start on encouraging people to come get treatment, so that by the time we all got there, the message would be out there, and people would be arriving in droves. It is not very often, no, these people have probably never had the chance to see a healer with this level of attunement. Maester is not even dignified enough to describe what the Priestess can do...**

...

...

She is... I swear... I will practice for an hour a day, learning my level four healing abilities. Then maybe I could have done better than clutch her dying body.

That poison was eating right through her, and I couldn't do anything. I can't imagine the great deal of pain she was in before she deployed Rusty.

An Acolyte burst through a tent flap, looked around saw Kára and rushed over. "Ma'am, Kára, your wife is going to be fine. We were able to draw out most of the poison, and she would like to see you.

Kára nodded and followed the acolyte into the tent, where it opened up to an incredibly spacious hospital. Kára was amazed to see so many acolytes running about staffing all positions from Nurses, Doctors, Specialists, Lab Technicians. *There are so... many of them. And we just... Pack 'em up with the tent and take them with us.*

I am glad that I see you still have your sense of humor.

*Never lost it.*

After a brief walk Kára was entering into Ástríðr's room. The two smiled at each other, and gave each other a big hug.

*Love you. Love you.*

Well now that I know that I perhaps was panicking more than was required, I will be in the near future inquiring about my level four certification I want to do better for next time.

Here, take it back,

[Connection >> Transfer: Astrid >> Complete]

[System Status: offline]

*[System Status: Online]*

I have dignitaries to worry about... But when you are feeling up for it if you'd join me for dinner, I would love that.

Grilled Salmon

*Yum. Okay, love you, see you later.*

*Hi you. Sorry to black out on you. That toxin rips through you. It also imparts a temporal component to it. It is a day of torture for every minute that goes by.*

*I haven't seen anything like this since... I need to tell Kára Prime.*

*I have a feeling we might have just a few less friends in these parts as we thought. I mean Kára is about to give her report detailing our current situation, and the cease fire agreement with the Káarak's. The council is going to flip shit when they find out the new border bases that we constructed for means of protecting the Káarak's from the Skripi.*

*The Káarak's have annexed them, and all Midgardian citizens are to leave the country immediately.*

*Let's eve's drop for a moment.*

*Keerrrrccccsssschhhhh, Kára, kkkuurrrrsssschhhhh, Come in Kára. Over.*

*You goofball.*

*Dull is only the tip of the iceberg. Did they decide on orders?*

*No, we are still on asshat's regimental make-up and how he would be better suited to lead the expedition to retrieve the Crystal Shard of the Guardian*

*See?*

**"Command issued only a handful. We have one battle, five support, and two fortification companies. Another regiment is stationed at the outpost, they arrived a just some time ago. It should be enough to fortify the border between Fjallheim and the Káarak sands.**

Kára thought for a moment before replying, "My people need a few days of rest, we will stand relieved during this new phase of fortification."

One of Arturös' captains stepped forward, "Colonel?"

"Sylus, I want you to task 10 men to begin surveying locations for our towers. Get Illian to go with, he can begin laying down foundation. I want forward fire teams to secure the area ten clicks along the river, in-case Kára's forces did not finish the job."

"Sir." Was all that Sylus said before taking off in a sprint.

"Colonel Arturös," Kára began tersely, "You are reminded of your station, and you would do good to remember it."

"Kára, these are my men. I will task them how *I* see fit. Just because my father gave you this command... Doesn't mean you've earned it.

Kára's anger swelled; she could feel her fingers dig into the palm of her hands. She felt words creep up, but they were quickly retarded by the words spewing forth from Bófreðr.

"This is the Colonel of the Valkyrja. A distinction bestowed upon us by the Citadel, and the Council, not your father..."

*Whoa this sounds heavy.*

Tell me about it

Arturös is losing it, "Shut yer mouth lap dog. Know your place as your Colonel does. She knows just as I do you will be marching to your deaths. So follow yer bitch into the grass sea, you will be swallowed whole!

We withdraw consideration from the mission."

Kára could feel her hand tremble slightly as her heart rate picked up. She drew in a deep breath and stretched out her hand to subdue Bófreðr, who was already backing down. She looked up at Arturös, feigned a smile and said, "Colonel, I am glad we have that settled then, you are dismissed."

*Holllee shit, did you just do that? That's my girl!*

Been working on that one, haha. I gotta cut you off now sweetie, I need to talk to the council alone, I hope you have had a good time with the interpreter, and I hope you aren't telling them too much. oh who am I kidding, it is you. Have fun, love you.

Love you.

[Connection Terminated]

Technically I could join in if I pressed the issue, but I know she needs to do some of these things herself. I mean I do have higher security clearance than she does, but I don't like to rub that in.

Ástriar - come in Ástriar this is Kára!

Oh my goddess you didn't.

It's efficient.

I bought us a few minutes by telling the council there was a traitor amongst them I levied some heavy accusations, so I figure they have a dozen procedures to run through before Kára" is needed.

Mother fucker, did you just use prime notation to describe you and the version I am with?

Yes. We can wrestle about it later.

Everything is set on my end.

I just need the cascade to continue. Can you do that?

Yeah, I think so. Last time it wasn't easy to hold. I still don't get why we needed her to be oblivious to our operation. Wouldn't she support it?

The Rusty was not built for more than one consciousness at a time. If she processes too much temporally abnormal information it will trigger her to essentially wake up to her reality sending this place into a real cascade.

The rusty would collapse in on itself. Let's avoid that outcome please. You just have to see her through, well honestly I think we could pull the plug anytime.

*Duh.*

Sorry.

*[[Rebooting w/ Safety Protocol Kára 1..1]]*

*Neat.*

Thought of a few countermeasures we could try.

*Why did you need me to do that?*

Because I couldn't relive that alone. I needed you by my side, even if my consciousness was mostly shut-down.

*If your consciousness was shut-down then who was Kára Prime?*

Independent security protocols, that cannot see/interact with one another. Kára prime fixes noodle, while Kára double prime expresses deep emotional thoughts, or at least deep to her. Kind of like a mind, body, spirit healing protocol to bring someone back from the brink.

I am just grateful that your mind and spirit healed faster than mine and were able to reach out to me.

*Absolutely. Sometimes it is like the universe has a rough plan.*

*But, seriously*

*These Kárák torture techniques are getting old.*

How do you suppose Bófræar is fairing?

*If I were to venture a guess, I would say hangry.*

After this...

Nothing stays the same, you know that right?

*I do.*

That's what I appreciate about you

*Oh is that what you appreciate about me?*

Kára closed her eyes.

“By Valkyrja might, by Valfreyja’s light, Mother. Please. Hear me. Ástriðr told me.

I think it is time...”

Kára’s body began to glow a prismatic white. The dank dungeon deep underground was briefly filled with Kára’s brilliance, and for a brief moment Kára could see that they were in some serious trouble.

As the flash subsided Kára found herself striking a pose, and could feel her whole body had been rejuvenated.

She looked down to see her clothing had completely changed, she was a bit more vibrant, and a touch, more pink.

Kára’s skin shimmered with a translucent reflection.

So fine a mesh I cannot even register it It.

It feels like my skin

*I wonder how that works down there...*

*Like is it a “Deathstar” situation with the random exhaust ports everywhere?*

*Like what is this?*

I don't know, but I can tell you that I feel the draft in this skirt

Did those fucks really put us here? Five dungeons deep?

*Where did they put us?*

Literally Five Dungeons Deep, Blackrock Mountain

*So the negotiations didn't go well I take it.*

You could say that.

*Well Guardian, now that you know, what are you going to do about it?*

