

## 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? I 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 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, "Ástríðr!" 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 Ástriðr's face as she delivered final orders to her læknir before disintegrating into a whisp of rising air.

Kara bit her lip slightly.

Ástriðr. 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.

Kára could feel the uncomfortable pause in Ástríðr's thoughts.

ugh... Kára 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 Ástríðr's voice.

Kára was lost in a haze. Her mouth was becoming parched and she could barely move her mouth.

Kara! 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 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.***

*Kara, 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 Ástriar 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 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 Ástríðr? 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? Kára could feel a tear drop down her cheek. Ástriar... 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?***

Ástriar? 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 Ástríðr's, 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.

