

1.11 Ástriðr

Kàra and Ástriðr cuddled into one another in Kàra's tent. Kàra repositioned her head just below Ástriðr's chest. Kara smiled slightly, "do you want to try?" Kara stopped upon hearing Ástriðr's heart, and the soft murmur of Ástriðr's voice masking the heartbeat. Kara lifted her head and looked into Astrid's eyes, "Do you think... nauðga[AH13] ... it... it changed me? And I... I don't mean trivially, but, like fundamentally?"

Ástriðr 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?" Ástriðr responded.

"Because I'm thin and pretty." Kára quipped.

"Because you are resilliant. You face down your foe, sometimes with tears in your eyes, but you are unrelenting." Ástriðr finished tenderly leaning in to kiss Kara, "You believe in love, true love. The kind that makes you cry for more than two reasons."

Kára giggled slightly, "Yeah?" drew silent while turning her head to look up at Ástriðr. Kára drew in a slow breath, "I...miss her..."

Ástriðr stroked Kára forehead, "I know sweetie."

"She was my best friend."

She was my worst enemy.

Blind and jaded... I have been lost for so long. I heard a bard once sing something to the effect of losing you to love me. *why did it have to be an either or? Why couldn't there have been an and?* [What was astrids font?] I would have done anything for you..."

Ástriðr finished Kára's thought, "except give up the one thing truly spoke to you... The one that is there for you in the darkness, *but never quite got to see the light.* Banished to a place of shame *But it was patient, it would just keep opening the door and whispering* "Kah-lee-mahhh" as Ástriðr thrust her hand down into Kára's chest.

Immediately going on the tickle offensive I see!

Kára had one hand tickling under Ástríðr's knee and the other tickling under Ástríðr's armpit. *Annnd*, Kára's hands froze momentarily and then swiftly repositioned themselves at the sides of Ástríðr's cheeks. Kára was immediately lost in Ástríðr's lips. Their breathing synchronizes. Kára breaks away from Ástríðr's lips momentarily to whisper, "I love you."

Auto-shutdown activated.

Rebooting

"Okay, okay, I would take Valfreyja, Kára, Thor." Post coital "Fuck Marry Fuck. Whoa did you notice that rad interface change? I can log when you drop in and out interpreter.

"Honest truth?" Kára began softly.

"Oh this should be good!" Ástríðr quipped.

Kára continued delicately, "There are women out there that I am more attracted to... Sure... I mean there would have to be statistically."

"Oh... Yeah... Uh huh..." Ástríðr replied.

Damn I did it again What did you do?

Kára spoke softly, looking Ástríðr 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 you saw scars of torment, and so did I. But we could see in each other that just because the surface is banged up doesn't mean what is underneath is ugly."

"Don't you have to get ready for dinner?" Astrid inquired, deflecting the deeper emotions.

"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."

It took the two of the them, *at least three... hours to clean up in the tub that, fits four comfortably I might add. Yeah four comfortably. It's like wringing the stress from your body as you sit in this heated tub, in a steam room, or sauna for the more disconcerting type.*

Hey, why do you get to talk to the interpreter, that's my job?

Because my love, I have got a story or two rattling around that I think we should jot down on the galactic record.

And... besides perks of our bond. I am just going to take this off your hands for a little bit.

Ástriðr set her fingers in motion as she pushed back at the tent flap. "I must say, you look stunning when you go full formal uni." Ástriðr said as she conjured a pale moonlit horse.

Ástriðr watched Kára stick out a playful finger and stare her down. "You be careful, and bring 'er back in an hour." Kára chuckled.

"And how do you know it's a her?" Ástriðr quipped as she grabbed Kára by the forearm and lifted her to the saddle. Ástriðr smirked with the *fortuitous*, front saddling of Kára. "Touche." Kára said and then smiled mischievously.

[System offline.]

[System online...]

Ástriðr looked down to Kára nuzzled into her chest, *It looks like she is finally getting some rest. That sleep where you just feel safe.*

Meekly Kára asked, "Were we ready?... "[AH14]

Ástriðr scoffed slightly, "How do you mean? Marriage, or the baby part?"

K: I mean, were we stupid to think getting together was a good idea?

A: Where is this coming from?

K: I am not sure, it is like I keep getting hints, like we bicker all the time, a shoulder so cold you'd lose your breath. I wanted her to be you.

Ohhhhhh...., Ástriðr chuckled slightly, and put her hand on the back of Kára's head. We are alone for the moment, I muted the channel with Kára. I think she deserves to have something said about her that isn't curated by orders from on high.

She was broken after Rue. In some ways she still is, and she is going to be healing them for quite some time. Lots of tears. Lots of Feldehan's fine flowers. She doesn't think I see, but I see.

Oh I was smitten by this one from the get go. She was always doing sweet things. Not always the right things, but her heart was in the right place. She gave everything she thought she could with Rue. She just... couldn't give me up.

No matter how many times she tried to break free of our past... She just couldn't let go. We grew up together, we couldn't let go.

Rue entered our life, and I say our, because well present tense bitches. She came in when Kára and I were separated. Well more accurately she thought I was dead.

Not the first.

Won't be the last.

She was in despair, our relationship had only just started to blossom when 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 Kára, need to know and all.

Kára waited for me, but when I didn't return. Nothing begets nothing.

Rue is this sweetheart, and I do mean a sweetheart who cared a whole heck of a lot about what their picture looked like. How would they be perceived? Did it look enough like home, a home she could call hers? It was getting there, little by little, and an eye to progress not perfection, they were taking good strides towards understanding themselves and each other.

But sometimes the past comes calling, and you might not know if it is an anchor if you don't look. So there she is, reporting for duty and here I come walking down the marble steps to the council, she was on her way up.

She was informed that day of her new assignment to the Valkyrja. And I was attached to her unit as a mobile medical unit of sorts, not just for soldiers, but for the people that live here too.

Being married to someone for seven years changes a person. They had two kids, who got the pleasure of seeing two loving caring parents, who were deeply flawed. So flawed that as I came back into Kara's life, she drifted slowly away from Rue. She lost sight of how to love her the way she wanted to be loved.

Kara knew that from the moment I stepped into the picture again, she would have to tell Rue about me. Needless to say it didn't go well, but we did kinda all get into bed together, sooo... You decide.

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 it, we would have some boundaries.

Well me, being me, I don't like boundaries and I tend to push and push them down. One after another I violated her trust by not giving quarter to her

demands of me. We were all going to be working together, and it was what it was.

Well spoiler, it wasn't.

It was subtle things at first, too trivial to think about, but they would get your attention. Prophecies of calamity, that she married Kara, not me, not Kara and me.

I could tell that really stung, I was one of the most influential members of her team, I have been there for her when Rue couldn't or wouldn't. I get it, nobody expects their soulmate to "die" and then come back alive, only to be working together after marriage, and children. Nobody wakes up one day and says, yes I want to change so badly, it hurts, oh, yeah, they do. Some people only have to do it for a short while, others it is a life long struggle. And why you may ask is it a struggle? Because people still believe they are inherently better than one another, always a deal to be made, always some poor sucker who will sell you something cheaper so you can turn it around for a profit.

When Kara announced to the council we had married some years post Rue, the council chamber went silent. She was like quite literally one of the first open followers of Sappho.

Wouldn't you know it some people liked it, some didn't care, and some cared way way too much. Kara and I ended up pushing too hard and too quickly, and we drove her insane. Rue tried, I do firmly believe that, but, she could see the spark of life I brought into Kara's life. Something Rue no doubtedly took 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 committing yourself to another.

We all live lies of sorts. Some of us have just tried hard to peel off the masks, and see what it means to be queer, and society has pockets of acceptance, and pockets of, you are going to die for thinking such filth. A line may be connected by two infinitesimally small points, and still have numbers to spare. Why does it always seem to come down to an either or choice?

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, but life 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...” Ástriðr 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? A commitment saying that you want to spend time with one another for the rest of their lives. An institution within our lives, but what does that even mean?

I SPEEAAK THROUGH YOU!

Haha... What?

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. .
. .
. .

A SYMBOLIC COVENANT: DON'T TREAT EACH OTHER LIKE TROS AND LOVE TOGETHER.

"

IT TAKES COMMUNITY TO PROTECT A COMMUNITY. LOVE BE THY SHIELD. REPRESENTATION THE REGENERATIVE SWORD BY WHICH THEY PROSPER. 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. OUR CIVILIZATION FALLS SHOULD WE TURN OUR BACKS ON EACH OTHER. 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.

Hoolleeee frying tros? Is this what she has been dealing with?

Oh sweetie. That came in like a flash and I literally had no ability to filter its' output. Damn that was fast. I couldn't even avoid that one. What the fuck is going on in there?

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 deal with the aftermath of spontaneous combustion, and decide to rebuild, or leave the bridge alone.

Kara 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?

Have you been listening this whole time?

Mmmhmm, no just woke up to the bulletin that came in, and found myself linked again Sorry, I...

I just like to listen to you.

Oh sweetie.

Kára poked her head up so they could kiss.

How much longer?

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.

[communications >> disabled]

She needs to sleep more.

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 don't think she quite realized how much their kids mean to Kara, but that too worked itself out. Kara loves Rue to this day, and that doesn't bother me one bit. Why should it?

Those two spirit bonded for years, living in a world that they could conquer together, and for a while Kara thought she could conquer our spirit bond. Try to sever its connection, I even tried to help her, I know how much Rue meant to her.

But...

Kara tried and tried different techniques, different healers, different gods and goddesses, no one would answer her prayers except for me. I told her it was okay to be who she is. I told her I loved her as she was, always. Perfectly imperfect donkey's rowing a rowboat.

Valfreyja said that... The day the Skripsi arrived, and she had to leave us.

You ever have a goal, a dream. Something you saw as achievable even though the odds were certainly against you. When you give up hope...

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, led you to some version of the life you lead. You are always given choices, but usually emotions distract us. Especially when we had suppressed them for over thirty years. Just emotionally dead for years after I met her again. The hard part is not being able to know the consequences of our actions, but instead we guess. And sometimes the guess could lead you down

the path of your dreams while walking away from the path of your partners. Eventually you can't see one another anymore between the chasm that has grown.

Does she miss being treated as lower than, not knowing how to stick up for herself? No, she could lead soldiers, but dealing with domestic issues, children, and spousal issues, and wondering about me, drove her mad. She lived in her work, escaping the world around her, the marriage around her.

But, 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. Stories give us that gift. Captured with exquisite detail a story can captivate, you or bore you, but one thing is for certain, it changes you. The story will always remain the same, if and only if we could live within the moment we had the feelings we want to capture.

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 strike down our foes.

But understand there are always consequences.

Remember that without communication, without an honest understanding of who we have become, it will remain difficult to take stock of how things have changed

since you last filled that dreamers' shoes. A partner can come easily, but an honest attempt to understand the minds that twist themselves into knots. Well. That takes a lifetime in the pursuit of meaningful communication with your partner, and those conversations about your community.

WHO... ARE YOU?

I COME WITH THE STORMS OF LIFE. I DEFINITELY DON'T HAVE A GRUDGE AGAINST THOSE WHO IMPRISONED ME HERE.

What? Who are you?

oh tros.

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 got so used to it and didn't want to startle the interpreter, so I was trying to constantly filter it out.

Oh, sweetie, we need to figure something out.

[[System Offline >> Emergency Transfer >> Kára Eiryk]]

[[System online >> Emergency Transfer >> Complete >> Status: 1% degradation >> Status: unstable, recommend Emergency Treatment]].

"Ástriðr! Ástriðr!" Kára shouted as she reached to her back to find a long slender rod impregnated in her back, an arrow point piercing Astrids right breast at an awkward angle. Kára snapped the front of the arrow off using

a plasma that suddenly appeared at her nimble fingers. She did the same to the back and 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, it is holding whatever is there in place. That was a poison tipped arrow. It didn't need to be a kill shot

Kára swung herself around the massive horse within a flash. Ástríðr was being clutched by one hand of Kára's wrapping itself around her. Kára's other hand was coaxing the mare, along the river in the pale moonlight that shimmered with the mellow river rapids.

[[System offline]]

[[System Rebooting]]

I didn't turn this back on... Quick sitrep. She is burning up with a fever, and we are almost to the edge of the Kárák territory, and into Fjallheim territory. There is an outpost just up ahead. Also conveniently where our secret, not so secret expedition is being planned out and hosted in pompous fashion by no other than Arturos.

Kára realized she was almost to the gate and she could feel Colonel Arturös' presence with each gallop.

I can always feel his presence. Kára looked up ahead to see him, donning his signature Gaston^[8] Brand Triangle hat. Waiting for her at the gate.

Custom embroidery available upon request Woo Wee.

Space for twenty nine hand stitched letters..

He was flanked by two of his officers, who also dramatically donned their silly hats, moments after ding dong. Yeah, adjust your frilly coat, of blue, silver, and gold... Bet it would go for a good price... 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.

Arturös unlatched his face shield, making sure that I saw his recently shined gauntlets that displayed his families Ætherial heritage.

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 is okay.

It didn't take long for Kára to find a few of Ástriðr's acolytes who then quickly spread the word, and in moments Ástriðr was being gently removed from the horse and was then carried into Ástriðr's field hospital. That we thankfully transferred to this command first.

Ástriar, She was only back to visit me.

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 I could have done better than clutch her dying body. That poison was eating right through her, I can't imagine the great deal of pain she was in before she succumbed to the ole Rusty Routine.

An Acolyte burst through a tent flap, looked around saw Kára and rushed over. "Ma'am, Kára, your wife is going to be fine, the baby is too."

What, what, what?

You fucker, now that I know you are going to be fine, we are going to have words dear.

Shhh... You don't want to stress me out, you know for the babies sake and all.

Here, take it back, I have dignitaries to worry about... But when you are ready your holiness, if you would join me at dinner, you have certainly have got some 'splainin to do.

[Connection >> Transfer: Ástriar >> Complete]

[System Status: offline]

[System Status: Online]

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 have a feeling we might have just a few less friends in these parts as we thought. I mean when Kara had to send that report detailing our current cease fire agreement with the Karak's, I certainly wasn't envious of having to give that briefing. Let's eve's drop for a moment.

Keerrrrcccccssschrhhhh, Kara, kkkuurrrrrssschrhhhh, Come in Kara. 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 Kárák 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?"

"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 your station, when we are afield I am in command, and you would do good to remember the chain of command."

"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, and she could feel her fingers dig into the palm of her hand. 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."

Holleee 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.