

## 1.12 – Kára and Ástriðr: New Beginnings

A textbook is worthless if it doesn't tell a story that connects the human spirits' penchant for growth.

Three distinct voices echoed throughout Kára's mind, her own, that of Ástriðr's, and that of Henrikr, a psychic hitchhiker bound to Kára's mind.

"To... To new beginnings!" Kára said with great sincerity and gratitude as she turned to better face Ástriðr.

"To new beginnings!" Ástriðr agreed with a smile that crept across her face that faded slightly as she turned her head to sip from her mug.

*Sometimes I can't believe I am here with you.*

*I could certainly say the same.*

*My heart is so full when I am with you.*

*We just mesh when it counts; truly undeniable.*

*It doesn't take any effort to be with you, and I have never experienced that before you came into my life.*

*I love you too dear.*

*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*

Ástriðr leaned in, lay her palm at the base of Kára's chin, and whispered into her ear, excentuating her words with gentle nibbles on Kára's ear, "Mmm, my love. Were it a dream. I would wish to never wake."

Kára could feel Ástriðr'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. The weight of Ástriðr becoming apparent as she lay on top of Kára. Ástriðr lifted her head, and kissed Kára's soft lips. A playful smirk crossed Kára's face, and a cunning grin appeared on Ástriðr's as she flicked her wrist and snapped her fingers.

The two of them were wrapped in energy fading into their standard attire, maybe a bit more "graduation yeezy" than standard fare. I mean bfr.

*Agreed.*

Their garments were of the utmost fashionable sense for their respective characters, in that they were clean.

*Point taken.*

Answer the question here of where are they going and why.

It is the look, seriously. It is the look. Dead in the water. My kryptonite.

*Your, what now?*

and look at things around me from a different perspective.

This..

**LADIES... LADIES... I WILL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT I AM STILL HERE.**

We know.

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 fool's 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 Ástríðr's face contort in annoyance. She watched as Ástríðr 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.*

Ástríðr... 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 McBruffin muffin and get to work?*

**WHUHHH... .. 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 HEINRIK DOES HEINRIK THINGS.**

“I can't see.” Ástríðr 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.” Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr and whispered, "What about before?"

“Before?” Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr.*

*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 Ástriar 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 asshat 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 Skripi 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 Skripi 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 inroads 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 Ástriðr, 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.

11/25/23

**INFLICTED 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 Kara, 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.*

**Ástriðr** 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 **Ástriðr** 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 Kára? 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 other peoples' 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 weepppoonn 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 bringin' 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.

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 abhors 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 its processing capabilities, and creating the infrastructure that our existence depends upon. Little tiny oscillating decisions, influencing others along the lattice that is Yggdrasil. A 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?*

Ástriðr turned and pulled Kára close. She kissed her passionately, pausing only to say, “Do you remember this part?”

*Mmmmmhmmmm 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 Ástriðr's body.

Curve...

Kára could feel Ástriðr'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... Ástriðr...

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 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-15th.

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.

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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.

okay we gotta stop. Focus...

*Love you baby.*

Love you sweetie.

Astris...

*He... Arturös 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, Arturos 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.*

*Ástriar...*

*.*

*.*

*.*

*Seeing into the thoughts of his victims. Twisting and turning your inner voice into a liability.*

*Ástriar...*

*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 Ástriðr's naked body, Kára's head resting on Ástriðr's chest.**

**Kara felt Ástriðr'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 Ástriðr 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. Ástriðr 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 Ástriðr's spiritual presence, and it calmed her.**

- .
- .
- .
- .

Buttering me up a bit? I asked Ástriðr.

*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." Ástríðr 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 cadddeeeegorrnyyy  
of livinnnggg!

*Indeeeddduh!*

I am grateful that we can tap into this creatures 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 Yaaaaahhh?

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...

ohokay.. Not like we have more disaster waiting for us after we get through this..

Shhhht... 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 nodes.

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 of 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 oooowwwwtttttuuuhhh.

You gotta turn down the "Taylor" channel.

Do what I want.

It's not safe in here.

Got that right. Kára and Ástríðr 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 sentence 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 Ástriðr'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

Ástríðr's face softened, a gentle look settling in. Kára could feel herself being drawn into Ástríðr's warm body as they shifted positions. Ástríðr 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.*

Ástríðr 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 Ástriðr would go it left an aching feeling in Kára's chest.

*Love you.*

Kára's free hand found the back of Astrids head, and she lovingly pulled her in tighter.

Ástriðr 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 Ástriðr'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.*

*Ius' 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...

Heinrikr.

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 asskhat 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 Ástríar?

*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?

Ástriar 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, Ástriar!

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.*

**Ástriðr 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,” Ástriðr 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?" Ástríðr 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? Heinrikr, 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 tracible funds." Bófreðr said sternly.

"OO Oooh! I got black-budget trace. Now! Dismissed soldier!" Ástríðr 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."

Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr, "Now where were we?"

Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr bounced off one another, giggled, with Kára going to her desk and Ástríðr suggling herself into their bed. Kára looked at Ástríðr, and then down to a few maps of The Skripi Lands, and Kaldarheim 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 Ástríðr, but instead she saw through her.

*Worried?*

Yeah

So lets get on with the story:

*Kara 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 Ástríðr reading that dude [[System Degradation 3%]]

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.

"Astriðr is right." Kara began, finding strength in Astriðr'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.

*Kàra 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 Kàra 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 Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr! 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."

Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr 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 Ástríðr 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. Kára placed her hand gently on Ástríðr'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.

“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?*

Kàra 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...*

*[[System Rebooting]]*

*[[System Online]]*

Kara opened her eyes to see Ástriðr standing over her, in her surgical garb. She groggily watched as Ástriðr pulled down her cloth mask.

“Am I gonna live doc?” Kára said in a gravelly voice.

“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 going to attempt the unthinkable. And you pulled him into it!”

“He understood the risks, and besides he found the Tiara. Without the tiara, the stones will still yield great power, but the ability to focus that power will be greatly subdued.”

“I just hope we can make it across the boarder without dying.”

“Me too sweetie. Thanks for the bang up job.”

“I could say the same to you. It has been an impressive year.”

“That it has. Might even say it was bangin’.”

“Oh, geez.”

.  
. .

“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...”

“You have to go don’t you.”

“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.”

“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 Ástríðr towards her. Kára’s dry lips pressed against Astrids; Ástríðr leaned in willingly with one hand of hers going to Kára’s face and the other steadying herself, she kissed back passionately.

