BEFRIENDUS

INTERMISSION THREE

'THE BOOKFEST CLUB'

-- TRANSCRIPT --

Trigger warnings: Mention of physical injury, sexual innuendo, misogyny.

[TRANSCRIPT MASTERPOST]

MEULIN: (^≧▽≦^)/ my name is MEULIN LEIJON and COURT is IN SESSION

MITUNA: yyy34h w3

MITUNA: figur3d?
#w3 kn0w wh0 y0u ar3 m3wm3w thats n0t n3ws t0 us

As previously established, your name is MEULIN LEIJON and you are fixing your treasured hiveguest ONE HELL OF A STINKEYE.

MEULIN: (^・`ω´・^) yeah well we have to pawperly enact every furmality if we want any semblance of order in this here FURRUITY WRITERS GLOMPNESS FACTPURRY!
#™ #© #® #patented

MEULIN: (^・o・^)/ this may be the first time we're doing this in purrson but that's all the more reason to get this right!

Twirling your trusty LIMITED EDITION PASTRY MEOWBEAST PEN in your fingertips like a baton, your keen predator senses scan the room in front of you.

You prepare your best tongue trill for one hell of an R-roll, lest you pull a tongue hamstring or whatever it's called.

MEULIN: \(=^ω^=)/ RRRRRRROLL CALL!

MEULIN: (=^･ω･^) kankri vantas!

KANKRI: ...

KANKRI: 9h, it's me first?
#I 6eg y9ur pard9n #I was just 6usy preparing my cue cards #preparati9n stati9n

KANKRI: Very well. Kankri Vantas, present and acc9unted f9r. F9r t9day's lecture I mean literary analysis and critique, I've prepared a small 6ut n9netheless detail-rich 6reakd9wn-and-taked9wn 9f 6ef9ran s9ciety's relati9nship with dresswear.

KANKRI: I felt the su6ject was appr9priate given present c9mpany.
#"C9nsulting the experts," as it were

MEULIN: ⋒(^ⓘ ω ⓘ^)⋒ mewtunya catpurr!
#finally scored the elusive catpun x4 combo!!! #SUCK IT!!!

MITUNA: *mitun4 *c4ptor here
#4t le4st up until your fl4shing r4in8ow desktop w4llp4per inevit48ly gives me 4 seizure #d4mn girl you're out here giving your g4nder8ul8s god d4mn six-p4cks #do you st4re 4t the sun for fun too??

MITUNA: ive g07 a s0r7 0f uh

MITUNA: i7s a random sci-fi 7hing. jus7 some 8ullshi7 i 7hrew 7oge7her in an hour i7s n8d

#and 8efore anyone asks #YES im 7oying wi7h some new quirks #s7ill 7rying 7o find 7ha7 perfec7 8lend #so don7 piss your pan7s or no7hing

MEULIN: (^･ᴥω･^) and last, but not LEAST... purrim meowryam!!!

PORRIM: Go+o+d evening, all. We're all already acquainted with o+ne ano+ther, but fo+r the sake o+f fo+rmality...

PORRIM: Po+rrim Maryam. To+night, I'll be sharing with yo+u all my recent fo+ray into+ Befo+ran po+etry.
#VERY intrigued o+n what Kankri has to+ say o+n the matter o+f Befo+ran fashio+n #Also+ so+mewhat nervo+us #...very nervo+us, admittedly

MEULIN: (^・o・^)ノ oh!!! that reminds me

MEULIN: (^・ω・^) kankri i know you didn't bring it in but i DID have some notes to give you about your poetry too! remind me once we're done here

Kankri may not be eating anything right now, but that doesn't stop him from struggling not to choke on thin air and/or his own spit.

KANKRI: Th— 6u— Y—...

KANKRI: AHEM. 9kay! Awes9me! Thank y9u Meulin, really; truly a69ve and 6ey9nd.

MITUNA:
(#5nrk)

When Kankri shoots Mituna an accusatory glare, all he has to give back is his open palms in mock surrender.

KANKRI: *M9ving 9n swiftly,* I d9 6elieve y9u have s9me9ne else that requires intr9ducti9n?

Oh! You were under the impression that Kankri would welcome any and all critique he could get, but you've got the sinking feeling you maybe said a bit too much there.

You catch Porrim pursing her lips just a little bit tighter and you officially think you might've done a fucky wucky, there.

MEULIN: (=^・ェ・^=) well i DID invite aranya but she said couldn't make it! so that just leaves the fur of us
#and by fur i mean four obviously #(^╥﹏╥^) #mewtuna and i also tried to snag purrloz too but he doesn't have anything he wants to share right meow. #so tight lipped!

MITUNA: probably heard 1 was com1ng and 7hough7 1 was gonna spend 7he whole 71me razz1ng her
#no7 7ha7 1m deny1ng 7he poss1b1l17y #jus7 say1ng

Mituna's reward for his honesty is a smack on the arm from Porrim, and a muttered #boys, I swear...

KANKRI: Actually, Meulin, I was referring t9 y9urself. A f9rmal namedr9p is 96vi9usly n9t necessary (we already kn9w y9u, and even if we didn't, y9u already intr9duced y9urself 6y name earlier), 6ut t9day y9u will 6e discussing with the gr9up a69ut...?
#Y9u are here6y granted permissi9n t9 interrupt me #fill in the 6lank #L99k I'm d9ing the thing where I r9tate my wrist t9 pr9mpt y9u f9r a resp9nse #Am I d9ing this right?

MEULIN: ヽ(^°〇°^)/ oh whoops!!! i almeowst furgot!

You can only hope you're as good of an actor as you are a purruser of excellent trollian romance fiction.

MEULIN: ヽ (=^-ω-^=)／ lady and gentletrolls, tonight you will all be the furst ganderbulbs on the latest chapter of purrincess snugglepaw's death-defying romantic whirlwind!
#a furiend has b33n helping me out with it! #you know the one X33

MEULIN: ┌(=^..^=)┘ but!!!

MITUNA:
(#c00l au70bi0graphy name #r0man7ic whirlwind bu77)

MEULIN: (^・ω・^) as the host of our writers m33ting i humbly f33l it's best if i go last so efurryone else gets to have fun furst
#EXCELLENT hosts #excellent, humble hosts

MEULIN: (^・o・^)／ so on that note, who would like to start us off???

To your shock and amazement, Mituna raises his hand. Holy catnap, Mituna NEVER goes first for anything. That's, like, his thing!

MEULIN: \(^★ω★^)/ squ333!!! by all means, take it away, tuna!

MITUNA: ac7ually 1 jus7 wan7ed 7o warn you guys 7ha7 my doomsense 1s 71ngl1ng some7h1ng f1erce r1gh7 now

MITUNA: sorry to say 8ut th1s meet1ng 1s go1ng to go to sh1t. 1 can see 1t com1ng from a m1le away
#no offense #dou8t anyones gonna 8el1eve me 8ut f1gured 1 m1ght as well try

You look to Mituna with your best puffed-cheek pout. You're not saying you love to doubt your treasured friend, but between you and yourself, let's just say this guy isn't exactly known for ACCURACY in his predictions.

Even if that weren't the case, he's kind of harshing the vibe a bit. A vibe you have very meticulously prepared for a wipe, now.

You open your mouth to respond, but Porrim beats you to it by a second.

PORRIM: If I may?

PORRIM: While I can certainly understand feeling nervo+us abo+ut sharing o+ne's creativity, I see no+ reaso+n to+ fret as lo+ng as everyo+ne behaves themselves.

PORRIM: We're all capable o+f mature, ratio+nal discussio+n, are we no+t?
#And if we aren't #I'm mo+re than capable o+f smacking so+me sense into+ yo+u bo+ys

KANKRI: N9t t9 name names, 6ut certain individuals in this r99m may even in fact excel in precisely that. Y9u have n9thing t9 w9rry a69ut, Mituna.
#vaguechittring #(c9mplimentarily)

MITUNA: y3ah 7ha7s abou7 7h3 r3spons3 i was 3xp3c7ing
#fucking #call3d i7

The room falls to expectant silence. Everyone glances amongst each other, sweeping for any intent to be the first to bare their souls to the group.

As much as you're itching to infodump about every single one of your Snuggleverse OCs, you don't have it in you to subject these poor souls to three hours of unhinged recap until they've had ample opportunity to do so themselves. It's bad host etiquette!

PORRIM: Well, if no+bo+dy else is go+ing to+ jump at the o+ppo+rtunity, I suppo+se I do+n't mind starting us o+ff.

OH THANK GOD.

MEULIN: (=`ω'=) the floor is yours!!!

Everybody takes their palmhusks out, which would look incredibly rude on the surface if they weren't all turning to Porrim's pre-posted post in the group memo to read along.

Technically speaking, you all should have already read each other's work beforehand so you could come into this event with critique ready to go, but you figure it's best to give everyone a refresher.

You're not saying anyone WOULDN'T have done the homework, but it's certainly better safe than sorry, you reckon.

PORRIM: I call this po+em: *Maid in the Middle.*

#[Screen darkens, narration appears.]
Highbloods don't have to battle and fight,
Clawing at victory, night after night,
Cooler shades never feel shame for their might,
But I do.
Lowbloods don't have to feel that they're few,
Outnumbering violets, purples and blues,
If one or two falter, they've nothing to lose,
But I do.
We may have an empress, but boys rule school,
Men handle the government; men hoard all the tools,

No one sees the imbalance in masculine rule,
But I do.
Jades should be quiet, and jades should obey,
Jades are to slave every day in their cave,
Jades settle for service, dreams be what they may,
But I won't.
#[Screen returns to normal.]

Porrim falls quiet, signaling the end of her literary display. You quickly erupt into a flurry of supportive applause, followed (much less enthusiastically (not that that's saying much)) by your fellow audience members.

PORRIM: Please, applause is hardly necessary.

PORRIM: No+t to+ spo+il the intent, but fo+r the sake o+f sparking discussio+n, I do+ ho+pe this sheds so+me light o+n the difficulties o+f my particular pain po+ints with my po+sitio+n in Befo+ran so+ciety.

PORRIM: No+t co+o+l-hued eno+ugh to+ have a real vo+ice, no+t warm-hued eno+ugh to+ be abso+lved o+f grueling respo+nsibilities...

PORRIM: What do+ yo+u all think?

Porrim looks between you, Kankri and Mituna, keeping a remarkably calm air about her. She's so cool...

The only reason you know she's at all nervous about the feedback phase is the way she grips at her forearm.

KANKRI: Thank y9u f9r sharing that with us, P9rrim. That must have taken s9me real vulnera6ility.

KANKRI: Given present c9mpany, I d9 wish y9u had given a m9re c9mprehensive heads up in regards t9 the su6ject matter, th9ugh. I think I speak f9r all 9f us when I say we've all g9t 9ur 9wn respective struggles with the hem9spectrum, and may need a m9ment's n9tice t9 prepare t9 engage with it.
#vent p9sts #caste inequality #CIP p9pulati9n #cl9ister c9mmunity #empire 9riented 9ppressi9n

KANKRI: That leads me 9nt9 my main suggesti9n f9r y9ur piece: y9u 9ught t9 watch the language y9u're using when discussing 9ther p9siti9ns in the spectrum and their struggles, which y9u quite 96vi9usly d9n't have a significant am9unt 9f pers9nal experience with.

KANKRI: S9rry t9 use y9u as an example, Mituna, 6ut let's say hyp9thetically his visi9ns 9f grand misf9rtune finally c9me t9 pass and he keels 9ver t9m9rr9w. Dead as a d99rnail. D9 y9u think he, as a mem6er 9f 9ne 9f the m9re p9pul9us 6l99d gr9ups, "l9st n9thing?" What a69ut his friends? What a69ut his lusus?
#death #pr9phecy #hyp9thetically, 9f c9urse

KANKRI: While y9u're perfectly all9wed t9 take um6rage with the struggles y9u D9, in the9ry, face 9n a daily 6asis, I w9uld suggest av9iding such accusat9ry

and presumptu9us language when it c9mes t9 issues 9ther pe9ple are faced with. There's n9 need t9 extinguish 9ther pe9ple's flames t9 make y9ur 9wn 6urn 6righter, yes?
#pyr9ph96ia

PORRIM: The who+le POINT is to+ co+ntrast—...

PORRIM: Yo+u kno+w what? Nevermind. Thank yo+u fo+r yo+ur input, Kankri. Let's leave it at that.
#this meeting is go+ing to+ be lo+ng eno+ugh as it is

PORRIM: Meulin? Mituna?
#If so+meo+ne wo+uld like to+ no+t miss the who+le po+int o+f the piece that wo+uld make my night!

Mituna offers the apologetic grimace of someone that wants so badly to offer the encouragement she clearly craves, but is unable to stick the landing.

MITUNA: prrrr377y d33s

KANKRI: "Dees?"

PORRIM: Decent.

MITUNA: dee5 5h4me globe5
#no but 4ctu4lly wh4t 5he 54id

MITUNA: unfor7una7ely un711 1 7ake a course 1n m1d-cas7e1sm poe7ry—

KANKRI: *Green-t9-aqua.
#we've 6een 9ver this.

MITUNA: —7ha7s abou7 7he mos7 1n-dep7h cr171que 1 can prov1de
#1 play fuck1n 7roll dark souls 1m no7 exac7ly 7he person 7o ask abou7 rhym1ng s7ruc7ures

PORRIM: Maybe I sho+uld be a little mo+re specific, then: wo+uld yo+u say this accurately expresses frustratio+n with so+ciety?
#Give me SOMETHING to+ wo+rk with here

MITUNA: i ge7 7he vi8e 8u7 7o 8e 81un71y hones7 i ge7 a much s7ronger "vi8e" jus7 having a 8asic conversa7ion wi7h you so idk

MITUNA: lik3 y3ah y0ur p03m dr0ps a bunch 0f cast3ism and/0r g3nd3r h00fb3astshit y0u hav3 t0 d3al with

MITUNA: bu7 7h47s i7 7h47s 4ll you s4y

MITUNA: jus7 like "heres a shi77y 7hing in life. i PRO8A8LY ha7e i7 8u7 who knows may8e im a freak"

MITUNA: wherea5 when 1 have a normal a55 conver5at1on w1th you 1 FEEL the burden you deal w1th 1 FEEL the we1ght of the world5 expectat1on5 and re5pon51b111t1e5 on you

MITUNA: bu7 again. n07 7he guy 70 7alk 70 ab0u7 p0e7ry
#s0rry

Okay, it looks like this is writer's meeting is off to a bad start. Luckily, you're an excellent host and did your homework already!

You raise your hand with the enthusiasm of someone drowning in the pool, hopping as best you can from your position seated criss-cross grubbysauce.

PORRIM: By all means.

She looked surprised when she saw you jump in, but she looks *much* more surprised when you retrieve a sheet of paper that is, ADMITTEDLY, almost covered in more red marker and purple highlighter than it is printer ink.

The sheet of paper emerges from your sylladex alongside the marker + highlighter in question thanks to your MATCHMAKER FETCH MODUS, allowing you THRICE as much inventory space for the price of requiring you to store items in romantic pairs.

Of course, an expert like you knows how to play a little jazz and stash items as OT3's. In this case: MARKER c3< FEEDBACK SHEET c3< HIGHLIGHTER.

It's kind of a no-brainer if you think about it. The sheet provides both writing implements an outlet for their pent-up aggression, in turn stabilising their relationship with each other! DUH!!!

MEULIN: (^・o・^)ノ okay so BEFORE YOU FURREAK OUT not all of these annotations are me suggesting changes! i wanted to highlight the parts i really enjoyed too
#i just got a t33333nsy bit carried away #eto... bleh XPP

MEULIN: (=^-ω-^=) FOR EXAMPLE! i really like how you switched up the furmula with the final line to subfurt expectations. it f33ls impactful!

MEULIN: (^・o・^) but i DO f33l like that final purragraph could be strengthened a bit. as i s33 it, you talk about highbloods, then lowbloods, then boys

MEULIN: (=^･･^=) so you would ASSUME the final paragraph would serve as the rebuttal to all of those points, BUT! the last paragraph only talks about being a jadeblood

MEULIN: (^・x・^) so to wrap it all up with a pretty bow i f33l like you could instead focus on refurencing each of the earlier points one after the other
#if that makes sense? #i hope that makes sense

PORRIM: Wo+w, I—

MEULIN: (^> _ <^) there's also a bunch of other smaller changes i ended up suggesting but i don't want to bore you with the nitty gritty so you can just read over the page on your own time!

#maybe just set aside like... half an hour? #if you want #seriously though no purressure these are just suggestions

The air is heavy with anticipation (to you, whose pride is on the line) as Porrim glances over the document provided to her.

You have a sinking feeling you've gone way too far with this one. Which is bad news because you have two equally beefy feedback documents printed out for the other two.

Also because your friends might think you're a freak but mostly the first thing.

PORRIM: Duly no+ted. Yo+u have my thanks, Meulin.

PORRIM: Fo+r the sake o+f pacing, tho+ugh, why do+n't we mo+ve o+n fo+r no+w?
#Time fo+r yo+u bo+ys to+ put yo+ur mo+ney where yo+ur o+ral cavities are

To your surprise, Mituna raises his hand once more, and to your utter delight, it doesn't seem he's here to repeat more bummer predictions! Yes!!!

MITUNA: alr1gh7 le7s ge7 7h1s over w17h
#probably more 1nsul71ng 7o END w17h 7h1s p1ece #1n 7he m1ddle 7hough? #m1ddle 1s perfec7.

You greet your snarky friend with another excited pitter-patter of applause, taking care to not go quite so clap-crazy this time so as not to spook him off.

MITUNA: its kind4 long though c4n w3 just 4ssum3 3v3ryon3 r34d th3 m4t3ri4l 4lr34dy 4nd go from th3r3

MEULIN: (^。•´﹏•`。^) noooo i wanna hear you do the voices!!!!!

MITUNA: 4lright 4lright fuck!! ill re4d it out loud ju5t put tho5e pup4 b4rkbe45t eye5 4w4y
#5eriou5ly tho5e thing5 4re fuckin we4pon5 of m455 convincing

MEULIN: (=` ω ´=)
#mewh33h33h33

To your surprise, Mituna apparently doesn't see the need to read off of his palmhusk when he narrates to the three of you.

You would almost believe he's making this entire story up off the top of his head if it didn't match the excerpt he already posted in the group chat word for word.

#[Screen darkens, narration appears.]
Ship's Log: Stardate a zillion or something.

The Starship Endeavor has been flying for the past few nights in the direction of planet Caballerial, known home of radically hot babes, to accompany a diplomatic mission. Caballerial is big, and blue, and mostly jungle, and

everyone's heard of it because it's largely populated by, like, psychic daredevils who pull off really gnarly tricks all the time.

Also, the Starship Endeavor is run by the most advanced computer in the whole universe. I should know, because I literally am that computer.

And I fucking hate you.

Listen, it's not that big of a deal! Chances are, most of your starships hate you.

First of all, you smell. You're always crawling all over the place leaving, like, odors, and goos. And yeah, there are starship goos, too, but those are *supposed* to be there, it's a starship!

And the captain — like who the fuck even *is* the captain? Just some guy? Just some guy who's better at making orders sound good than the other guys? I'm the fucking *ship*! Who even voted for that guy?

It's always, "Starship, analyze that gaping asscrack in spacetime" or, "Starship, navigate through this sphincter-tightening asteroid belt with your sensorlids closed," or, "Starship, calculate why my matespritship is failing and my crew thinks I'm a lumpy wet towel of a man."

I hear what you're saying; oh Mr. Starship, don't you, like, get to zoom in and out of hyperspace real fast, and do some of that automatic defensive interference stuff in battles, and don't you have lasers? And the answer is yeah, that's all true, and also I am very handsome, thanks for noticing.

But those lasers? I don't get to launch any of them without permission, even though they're from me, you know? I have to get approval for everything! Even when I'm totally right and we should be shooting that guy! Do you have lasers? Probably not! Can we agree that the guy with the lasers probably has the best sense for when they should or shouldn't be used?

And isn't it hoofbeastshit how they never land for real? They arrive at some shiny new planet for a shiny new adventure, and then they beam 'em down, captain, or Empress-forbid, take a *different* little mini ship down to the planet's surface, or something, while their faithful starship waits up above the atmosphere for them to get done. And then they come back up with whatever treasures or travesties or communicable infections they got down there! How unfair is that? Don't they ever think the ship might wanna land on some new shores, check some shit out, instead of just *scanning* it?

There's gonna be a change, though; they won't be landing on Caballerial without me...

#[Screen fades to black, before fading back in. Time has passed.]

Mituna's fictional tale is as thrilling as it is incredibly corny. It's like if you threw one of those old cheesy sci-fi cartoons in a blender with an angsty teen diary, with a sprinkling of political satire on top.

You've read PLENTY of stories from the perspectives of androids (in love), cyborgs (in hate) and AI (in deeply dysfunctional mediation), but this is the first time you've indulged in a story following a plain old computer!

Tonight's story ends with a daring cliffhanger: the computer locking every entrance in the ship shut, trapping the whole crew within... and forcing them all to watch the computer 100% Tohney Hawkes' Pro Skater 2. You just had to be there.

MEULIN: (^。>ω<。^) oh my gosh oh my gosh that was SO MUCH FUN!!!!!!!
#YOU EVEN DID THE VOICES I'M GONNA DI333333

MEULIN: ☆ミ(o*^･ω･^)/ i've got your f33dback doc here too, one second!

KANKRI: Easy there, Meulin. Let's n9t get t99 carried away with the acc9lades.

KANKRI: As impressive as the w9rd c9unt is f9r a 6eginner, let's n9t f9rget such imp9rtant writer's etiquette as meeting a particular piece where it's at, em9ti9nally.

KANKRI: It w9uld 6e inappr9priate t9 imp9se t99 str9ng an em9ti9nal reacti9n 9ver a piece which was — as far as I'm a6le t9 discern anyh9w — 9ne 6ig tr9lling piece.
#I mean #y9u said it y9urself, right? #just s9me, pard9n, 6ullshit y9u threw t9gether?

Mituna opens his mouth to speak, but simply ends up looking at Kankri with some blend of disbelief, annoyance, and... offffffense?

It's hard to tell what his expression is at any given time, what with those glasses of his. (This would be a problem if they weren't so obviously cool.)

In the end, what he manages to get out is:

MITUNA: dud3.

MEULIN: (^･x･^) um! ok!
#??????

You have no idea what to say. It's almost like... god, you wish there was an interesting saying for stunned into silence. Something feline in nature, to go with your whole schtick.

Instead, you quietly hand your feedback sheet(s) to Mituna; your best attempt at silent disagreement with Kankri's impression that it was nothing but a long-winded joke shat out on a keyboard.

You don't want Mituna to feel bad, but you can't yell at Kankri either! He's just as much of a hiveguest as Mituna is, and you REALLY would like to avoid a major altercation right now.

(ESPECIALLY if you can avoid having a thinly-veiled callout post dumped in your inbox tomorrow evening.)

Porrim's far quicker to verbally intervene, leaning into view and possibly intentionally severing Mituna's line of sight with Kankri.

PORRIM: I can really feel the emo+tio+n in yo+ur piece.

PORRIM: The narratio+n is perhaps a little unpro+fessio+nal fo+r a starship system, but it certainly pro+vides character.
#Character that o+nly yo+u wo+uld be capable o+f accurately capturing, mind yo+u

MITUNA: 17s f1ne
#17s wha7ever

MITUNA: if fuckin pant5kri 0ver here i5 the big bad b055 0f literature why d0nt we 5ee what d00zy he5 g0t c00ked up f0r u5
#him and hi5 fuckin 5auced up paragraph d00zie5 c00ked up like he5 50me g0d damn emper0r chef 0f w0rd 5alad i5land

PORRIM: Mituna...

Porrim's voice sounds half-warning and half-commiserating as she gingerly sets a hand on Mituna's shoulder. For someone who didn't want to live the life of the brooding caverns, she's certainly got a jade's emotional touch. It's such a shame that didn't work out!

KANKRI: Thank y9u, Mituna. Sincerely. Y9ur nickname has pr9vided an excellent segue int9 the t9pic 9f my piece.
#I can hardly take um6rage with "Pantskri" #after all that w9uld imply I feel and/9r am 96ligated t9 feel shame f9r my fashi9n ch9ices #which as y9u're s99n t9 see is quite the prudent p9int in my upc9ming analysis #just t9 6e safe th9ugh: #fashi9nshaming #fashi9n p9lice

Without skipping a beat, Kankri assumes his position at center stage, body language exactly as calculated and poised as you always imagined of him. He acts like he's got sweeps of experience speaking to others, despite the fact that you don't actually think he does???

You feel like he'd have made a much bigger deal of it if he'd somehow managed to land a Troll TED Talk — a TTED Talk, as it's more commonly known — at the ripe age of six sweeps old.

Maybe he just practices a lot in the mirror or something. Whatever!!! You just hope he picks up the pace a bit.

As much as you're dying to hear about fashion and clothing etiquette, you are just BURNING to introduce these future Snugglepaw fans to your latest masterpiece.

Unfortunately, you have to do this annoying thing called being polite and waiting for your turn.

#[Screen darkens, narration appears.]
Fashion, subjective as it may be (#opinionated piece), has a number of socially-agreed upon for being considered "baseline acceptable." Outfits

should bear one's sign, if applicable (#signlessness mention #forced sign disclosure). Outfits should heavily consist of one's blood color so caste may be identified (#forced caste disclosure #heavily problematic but an essay for another time). An appropriate amount of skin must be covered to avoid public indecency charges (#nudity #criminal activity #slutshaming).

It is this third rule in particular that is worth scrutinizing for a variety of reasons. What constitutes as "appropriate" to a world of vastly different personalities and preferences? Why is this level of appropriateness variable depending on the environment? What is it about being near the shore (#thalassophobia), for example, that allows one to take their shirt off as opposed to simply walking down the street, should they find the texture unsavory or the sleeves restrictive?

Let's say, for argument's sake, that the reasoning is specifically the amount of skin shown. Let us then compare an individual wearing a tank top, to an individual wearing overalls with no shirt underneath, to an individual with high-rise pants and no shirt.

Example 1 (tank top) flies under the social radar with little no to issue, save for those particularly and unrelatedly concerned with their biceps (a trait I find myself unable to understand, but you do you I guess). Example 2 (overalls) arguably shows just as much skin, but may raise some eyebrows. Still, nothing worth confronting them over. Perhaps they're a particularly casual farmhand or some manner of cuddleplumber.

Example 3, however, is *famously* challenged by society, in spite of showing *less* skin than Examples 1-2. Thus, skin theory is officially debunked (#skin theory). Let's consider, then, Beforan fashion's impact on the empirical economy (#economy #interplanetary politics) and examin—

MITUNA: 0h 800 H00 cry me a fucking river

#[Screen returns to normal.]
MITUNA: ar3 you 53riou5ly THI5 5alty your3 not allow3d to go fla5hing your gro55 a55 grub 5car5 in public??
#you r3aliz3 thi5 i5 th3 LIT3RATUR3 m33tup right?? #not your fucking v3nt chann3l??

Oooooh boy. You think you feel a migraine coming on.

KANKRI: Excuse me, the m9ment f9r feed6ack has yet t9 arrive — disregarding the fact that that's *hardly* what I w9uld call meaningful input 6y any stretch 9f the imaginati9n.
#and FURTHER disregarding the fact that my gru6 scars w9uld never 6e 9n display t9 6egin with #9n acc9unt 9f my pants easily reaching chest height #[699kmark] #<= s9 I can pick my dissertati9n 6ack up m9mentarily

KANKRI: I d9n't supp9se y9u happen t9 recall h9w n9ne 9f us interrupted each 9ther during 9ur earlier sh9wcases?
#friendly reminder t9 take y9ur meds if y9u haven't yet #passive aggressi9n

MEULIN: (^・_・^) uuhhh..... time meowt?
#break for tea party??

MITUNA: oh 7ha7s REAL rich coming from 7he guy dropping a word dump 8igger 7han a mo7her gru8
#no SHI7 no8ody in7errup7ed porrim #her poem was like a minu7e long! #you wanna 7alk a8ou7 inequali7y 8ro??

KANKRI: Excuse me, that *w9rd dump* is h9me t9 a vast pleth9ra 9f c9mplicated feelings I have a69ut the culture we live in; th9ugh I supp9se y9u'd hardly feel 96liged t9 respect that given y9ur track rec9rd t9night.
#sarcasm.

PORRIM: Can this burgeo+ning idio+t parade do+ everyo+ne a favo+r and simmer do+wn fo+r five minutes so+ we can take a breather?

MITUNA: 7rack r3cord???? 7h3 fuck did I do????
#7fw you bring wri7ing 7o 7h3 f33dback s3sh and g37 f33dback

PORRIM: ...Like talking to+ a brick wall.
#Where did I put my lipstick?

KANKRI: Here's s9me *feed6ack* f9r y9u, while we're 9n the su6ject: I d9n't think it's appr9priate t9 h9st a literature feed6ack sessi9n with h99ligans that think it's funny t9 tease 9thers a69ut MAY6E engaging in s9me private p9etry every 9nce in a while!
#THANK y9u f9r unveiling that t9 the w9rld, Meulin! #sarcasm x2 c9m69

MITUNA: when 7he fuck1ng b17ch d1d 1 say ANY7H1NG abou7 your poe7ry????

KANKRI: 9h, y9u reacted plenty en9ugh when the su6ject was 6r9ached!

MITUNA: 0h s0 n0w y0ur3 a mind r3ad3r?? y0ur3 an 3xp3rt 0n my f33lings wh3n i d0nt ann0unc3 th3m t0 th3 w0rld??

MITUNA: h0w ab0ut y0u 570P 5UCK1NG Y0UR 3G0 0FF 4ND 455UM1NG Y0U KN0W 3V3RY7H1NG 480U7 M3 4ND MY F33L1NG5 Y0U P0MP0U5 FUCK1NG PUP4

PORRIM: THAT'S ENOUGH!

The room falls quiet when Porrim shouts, but the tension in the room is still just as palpable; arguably worse, now that three of the four people here have raised their voice.

PORRIM: Ho+nestly, where in the wo+rld do+ either o+f yo+u think this is go+ing? Or do+ yo+u just enjo+y hearing yo+ur o+wn wo+unded vo+ices?
#Kankri, do+n't answer that

PORRIM: Ho+w abo+ut we put the grubby-time antics do+wn fo+r a minute and talk abo+ut tho+se feelings we're brandishing like trap cards like respo+nsible yo+ung adults?

KANKRI: I 6eg y9ur pard9n, 6ut I d9n't recall asking y9u f9r y9ur 9pini9n, P9rrim?

KANKRI: I'm s9rry Mituna, I hadn't fact9red such *sanctim9ni9us meddling* int9 my plans f9r the night. Give me a m9ment t9 adjust my schedule acc9rdingly and I'll 6e right 6ack t9 give y9u a stern talking t9 as pr9mised!

PORRIM: Oh, *sanctimo+nio+us? SANCTIMONIOUS?* I'LL SHOW YOU SANCTIMONIOUS!
#yo+u IMMATURE #INSUFFERABLE #LITTLE #FUCKER!!!

In an instant, the momentary ceasefire is discarded, and your three guests return to squabbling amongst themselves. Your own attempts to speak up are lost in the sea of noise: they're totally lost to chaos at this point.

If this shouting match keeps up, you swear you're going to go deaf.

All you can do is helplessly ping-pong your attention between angry red, yellow and green dialogue. You flap your hands against your thighs in an effort to calm yourself down. It doesn't work.

KANKRI: — 6UT 9F C9URSE, WE D9N'T GET TIME T9 DISCUSS MATTERS 9F SERI9US S9CI9CULTURAL IMP9RTANCE! JUST 6ASE-LEVEL PSUED9SCIENCE AND HALF-HEARTED PAR9DIC —

MITUNA: — 4NY 1D34 H0W MUCH 1 D1D N07 N33D 7H15 R1GH7 N0W? 175 84D 3N0UGH Y0U 5P3ND Y0UR 71M3 5P1771NG D0WN 0N 3V3RY0N3 3L53 —

PORRIM: — APPARENTLY CAN'T TAKE YOU TWO ANYWHERE WITHOUT HAVING TO WASTE MY TIME REINING YOU IN! I *JUST* ESCAPED A LIFE OF PERMANENT GRUBSITTING, DO YOU TRULY BELIEVE I —

MEULIN: (^ : o ‸ o :^) guys, i —

You try to think of something to say. Anything to say. "Stop fighting, we're friends!" "We're all saying things in the heat of the moment!" "I'm about to burst into tears! Here I go!"

Nothing comes out. In the end, you just stand there in dumbfounded horror as one by one, your friends drop a punctuated *FINE!* and retreat to a different corner of the room; far far away from the others.

You feel like a wiggler, lost in a big maze of feelings you've never once understood. You've scanned hundreds of auspisticism romance novels and not ONE of them has prepared you to mediate like you clearly need to right now.

Your eyes dart back and forth between your friends, and before you know it, you find yourself drifting towards Porrim first. She's easily the most level-headed of the group, so you deem her judgement the most useful.

MEULIN: (^。•´﹏•`。^) porrim?
#i mean purrim

Porrim gives you a weary, tragic sigh and her best attempt at a warm smile. If you weren't intimately familiar with her attempts to assure people, you'd almost believe it was effortless.

PORRIM: I'm deeply so+rry to+ yo+u fo+r lo+sing my co+o+l back there.

#SPECIFICALLY yo+u

PORRIM: I can't pro+mise yo+u much, but I can at least assure yo+u that no+ne o+f this was yo+ur fault, if that's what yo+u're wanting to+ kno+w.

MEULIN: (=^･ｴ･^=) that's not what i was asking!

That was maybe a little what you were asking.

MEULIN: (^╥﹏╥^) but i'm sorry about it anyway! and i'm also sorry if i gave you too much f33dback or if i invited the wrong people or—

PORRIM: I'm go+ing to+ sto+p yo+u right there. Yo+u have no+thing to+ apo+lo+gize fo+r.

Despite your efforts to zip your trap shut, you fail to prevent one last apology from blurting out in one rushed slurry of a word.

MEULIN: (^>﹏<^) and-i'm-really-really-sorry-but-i-n33d your-help-to-fix-this!!!
#ok that was the last one i purromise!!!

MEULIN: (^Ò﹏Ó^) i don't have any idea what to do about this mess! i don't know how people work??? i don't get them! i never have!!!

MEULIN: (^。•́ ‸ •̀。^) i just know that efurryone got mad suddenly, and i don't know why kankri said that about the poetry except that maybe i'm in trouble, and i don't know what to say to fix it!!!
#and you do! #don't you?

MEULIN: (^╥﹏╥^) so... y'know...
#[insert that sound you make when you shrug and you're like iunno??? and make it sound extra pitiable] #[no rhomo] #like rhomboid #because diamonds

Porrim rests a firm hand on your shoulder, whether in an effort to comfort you or simply to stop you from anxiously vibrating into another plane of existence.

Assuming it's the second option, you settle for giving her your biggest, wettest eyes imaginable.

PORRIM: That's yo+ur pro+blem, darling: there is no+ o+ne singular peo+ple yo+u can "get."

PORRIM: What wo+rks fo+r so+me peo+ple will be po+iso+n to+ o+thers.
#Case in po+int: #Co+mmo+n sense clearly has no+ effect o+n o+ne Kankri Vantas

PORRIM: I do+n't have a magic vault o+f data o+n every perso+n I co+me acro+ss. What's impo+rtant is that I'm go+o+d at listening to+ them. Learning as I go+.
#peo+ple are so+ co+mplicated that impro+visatio+n is yo+ur o+nly real cho+ice #but that's o+nly effective if yo+u remember what yo+u learned in yo+ur previo+us effo+rts

MEULIN: (=；ェ；=) thennnn what are you hearing now?
#because i'm not hearing anything right now

Porrim's expression falls, in lieu of a miraculous answer that solves all your problems. That's probably not a great sign.

PORRIM: Get so+me fresh air, o+kay?
#I'm o+n the run and Kankri wo+n't want to+ keep a shirt o+n #so+ between yo+u and Mituna vo+luntarily go+ing o+utside... #yo+u kno+w.

You let out a small whine and retreat for now, but not before catching Porrim in your LV. 3 FRIENDTECH: **THE ARM JAWS OF LIFE.**

You HUG her, is what you're saying.

As refreshing and emotionally mature as it might be to go outside and take a breather, you can't just leave the boys to their devices in here. You have your duty as HOSTESS SUPREME to uphold!

You're also worried these well-meaning friends of yours might break out into an all-out brawl if left unattended and catch your rare, limited-edition posters in the crossfire, but mostly the first thing.

Thus: you circle around the room to your next target of assurance: Mew—

...Mituna. It feels weird to do the cat pun thing when the mood is this dour.

MITUNA: no7 in73r3s73d

MEULIN: (^`⌒´^) i didn't even say anything!!!

MITUNA: didn7 n33d 7o

MITUNA: "wow mitun4 wh4t the fuck i5 your problem? ju5t ki55 hi5 455 4nd m4ke up 4lre4dy!"
#it5 written 4ll over your f4ce #in bright green cr4yon

MEULIN: (^≫Д≪^)゜i'm here beclaws i care about you, you butt!!!
#also don't you mean "kiss and make up"??? #unless..... #<3< ?

MEULIN: (^~⌒~^) i know you worked really hard on your cool space story and everything

MITUNA: 54y5 who?

MITUNA: i 70ld yall i7s jus7 s0me rand0m bullshi7 i cranked 0u7 in an af7ern00n 0r 7w0

MEULIN: (ﾒ =`x´=) says ME! the cute troll that could f33l the heart you put into it! you wouldn't write that much cool set dressing for a joke, right?

MITUNA: bi7ch y0u d0n7 kn0w 7he half 0f wha7 id d0 f0r a bi7
#d0 i need 70 7ell y0u ab0u7 7ha7 7ime i did a s7ar wipe

UUUUUGH. He's so frustrating when he's like this! You're no expert on emotions but you don't think it's unreasonable to assume he's not feeling awesome right now.

That just makes it ALL THE MORE CONFUSING when he's so adamant that he doesn't need help! You're seeing it with your ganderbulbs right now!!!

You have no choice but to bust out your secret weapon.

You hit him with the eyes again.

MITUNA: 0h fuck th3 h3ll 0ff w3 ar3 n0t d0ing this

You crank the dial up another couple notches. Your eyes well with tears that toe the line between genuine and performative. Your lip quivers vulnerably.

MITUNA: m3ulin i 4lr34dy h4v3 to disr3sp3ctfully t3ll you to fuck off dont m4k3 m3 mor3 of 4n 4sshol3 th4n im 4lr34dy b3ing

MITUNA: y0u w4nt y0ur em0ti0n4l h0nesty? k4nkris 4n 4ssh0le 4nd i d0nt kn0w why he w4s invited

MITUNA: b4m. don3. mitun4 truth 4rc ov3r
#4chi3v3m3nt unlock3d: #r34ch m4ximum mitun4 fri3ndsc4p4d3 points or wh4t3v3r

MEULIN: (^> _ <^) beclaws...

You hesitate. You know your answer already, but what you DON'T know is whether it's what Mituna wants to hear.

But it's not like you can just give a fake answer. You couldn't do that to him OR yourself.

MEULIN: (^ ; ω ; ^) beclaws i don't want anyone to ever know what it's like to f33l excluded
#i'm not saying i have expurrience!!! but #i doubt it would f33l nice #.

Mituna falters. Was that too much? Not enough? You fidget with your sweater sleeves as you wait for him to say something.

Anything at all.

MITUNA: alrigh7 FUCK w3 g37 i7 your3 a way b3773r p3rson 7han m3

MITUNA: congr4ts your gold med4l w1ll be 1n the m41l 4s soon 4s 1 w4lk outs1de
#4nd dump 1t 1n your m41l recept4cle #4nd fl1p your red 4rm-sw1ngy-de4ly th1ng up #wh4tever 1ts c4lled

MITUNA: d03snt st0p him fr0m b3ing a giant c0nd3sc3nding assh013 th0ugh
#fuckin assh013 m3gatr0n 0v3rl0rd 6900 #hat3rs

MEULIN: (^･x･^) i'll talk to him, okay?

Mituna offers a grumpy shrug that roughly translates to "do what you want." Probably.

You know Mituna well enough to know that he's never in a huggy mood, so as painful as it is, you leave his ribcage uncrushed.

That just leaves one Kankri Vantas to check up on; a conversation you know needs to happen but one you're subconsciously dreading all the same.

It's not that you hate the guy, it's just... well...

KANKRI: Ah! Meulin. I didn't see y9u there.
#6y which I mean I did, 6ut didn't want t9 give y9u the impressi9n I was 9verly 96servant 9f y9u s9 as n9t t9 c9me 9ff as creepy #6ut like #y9ur respite6l9ck is 9nly s9 6ig, I'm afraid #y9u may want t9 c9nsider keeping y9ur v9ice d9wn in the future #s9cial c9urtesy #etiquette

KANKRI: I supp9se y9u're d9ing y9ur r9unds, ensuring the em9ti9nal c9ntentedness 9f y9ur treasured guests as is expected 9f a pr9per h9st. Kud9s t9 y9u f9r managing an appr9priate pri9rity tree in terms 9f wh9 t9 check 9n first.
#Mituna is 9f c9urse well-kn9wn f9r his em9ti9nal 9ut6ursts f9ll9wed 6y a quick return t9 n9rmal #whereas P9rrim seemed particularly fired up if y9u ask me #hysterical dames

KANKRI: It is with an easy c9nscience that I can assure y9u I'm d9ing perfectly fine. I was c9nsidering checking up 9n the rest 9f the gr9up myself, 6ut I figured it w9uld 6e m9re appr9priate t9 distance myself fr9m a situati9n that I unf9rtunately appear t9 have landed a critical r9le in. Thank y9u f9r picking up the slack in that regard.

...he can kind of be a bit much.

MEULIN: (^・・^) ...yeah. hi kankri

If you can believe it, you fully intended to append that sentence with a couple exclamation marks to raise his spirits, but all you could manage was a sullen, bittersweet greeting.

KANKRI: ...Y9u're upset.

KANKRI: I mean. Y9u're upset?
#questi9n mark t9 emphasize I'm l99king f9r y9u t9 c9nfirm #instead 9f assuming #6ut I mean it's pretty 96vi9us

You give him a somber nod to confirm that, yes, indeed, you're pretty down in the dumps right now. You're practically digging around in the depths of those dumps with a pickaxe right now.

KANKRI: I—

MEULIN: (^≥Д≤^)゜ why did it have to turn out like this???

You blurt out your worries in a hushed whisper before Kankri has the chance to bury you in more fifty-page Kankri-isms, and apparently it's enough to stun him into silence.

MEULIN: (^>Ω<^)゜ this was meant to be a fun thing! where we all share work we were proud of so we could get some really good f33dback and grow as a group!

MEULIN: (^>﹏<^) but then it turned into all that ARGUING and CHAOS and now everyone HATES each other and—

You fail to fight back a hiccup as tears sting your eyes in the same way they always do when you get even the slightest bit overwhelmed because apparently you're just a big, giant pupa!

Kankri looks at you, clearly deeply uncomfortable. His expression reads "I'm watching someone scream at birds across the street and I'd love to steer clear please."

Still, he doesn't speak up, not yet. For lack of knowing what else to say, you shrug your shoulders and avert your wet gaze firmly to the floor.

MEULIN: (^╥﹏╥^) ...i never even got to have my turn
#which f33ls stupid to worry about! i know that!!! #but i can't help it! i've b33n planning this for ages and now it's all gone to waste and i'm SORRY i'm just dumping this on you i just—

Kankri offers you a gentle pat on the shoulder. It's stiff and robotic and not really all that comforting, but you're taking what you can get right now.

KANKRI: ...I d9n't hate any69dy. I certainly can't speak 9n 6ehalf 9f the 9thers, 6ut—

MEULIN: (^Ò﹏Ó^) then why do you k33p talking to us like you do?

KANKRI: 9h. Um.

KANKRI: H9w s9, if I may 6e s9 69ld? I assure y9u, anything I say t9 any 9f y9u c9mes s9lely fr9m a place 9f supp9rt and guidance. I certainly had n9 intenti9n 9f upsetting y9u 9r any 9f my friends—

Maybe you shouldn't have said that, but now that it's out there, you don't have it in you to stop. This isn't just a tonight issue, this has been building up for a hot minute.

MEULIN: ヾ(=`n´=)ノ" that's exactly my point! we're your furriends, not your lackeys or your subjects your moral guinea pigs or any of that!

MEULIN: (^`へ´^) you k33p chastising us for not following YOUR guidelines! when you purraise us it's because we act like kankri!
#and it's not even "i appurreciate you did that!!!" #it's "good job you passed my 16th grade ethics test!!!" #you're officially fit fur society!

MEULIN: (^x‿‿x^) we don't hang out with you because we n33d guidance! we hang out with you because we want company! we want to hang out with someone our age!!

MEULIN: (^: o ‸ o :^) but sometimes... it f33ls like you just hang around us so you can """fix us""" and that doesn't f33l so good

The accusation sits heavy in your stomach. To be fair, you DID say it just "feels like it," but that doesn't lessen the nausea bubbling up inside you when Kankri completely fails to respond.

You wait one second. Two seconds. His mouth is open but no words emerge.

Five seconds. Ten seconds. He's looking away from you. Thinking? Waiting for you to leave him alone? Is he hurt?? Nonplussed?? You don't know! You can't LISTEN to him if he doesn't SAY anything!!!

Sixteen seconds pass before you decide to close the book on this failure of a pep talk. Kind of the opposite, if you think about it. Pep BALK more like. Got 'em.

MEULIN: (^; _ ;^) i'm taking a walk. i'll be back in a few minutes
#don't trash my room plz

...

A young troll stands in his friend's respiteblock. It just so happens that today, the 13th lunar perigee of the 4th dark season's equinox, was a day of great importance to one Meulin Leijon.

The particularly observant would quickly take note of the past tense used.

As of now, that troll is currently recovering from severe emotional affliction outside, leaving you alone with the two people you just emerged from a shouting match with.

You would be lying if you said you haven't had more dignified days in your time.

It embarrasses you somewhat to have to be the first to break the ice, but you aren't your group's self-assigned FRIENDSHEPHERD for nothing. A leader must demonstrate virtue by example.

KANKRI: Lady and gentleman? If y9u'll 6eg my pard9n, I feel it w9uld 6e prudent t9 review h9w the night has g9ne s9 far.
#self reflecti9n #6ehavi9ral analysis #feed6ack sessi9n 9n the feed6ack sessi9n as it were

MITUNA: wen7 l1ke sh17

MITUNA: n3x7 qu3s7ion

You take a deep breath and count to six. *Quintessential Mituna response,* you remind yourself, *you like your friends for who they are and not what you see in them.*

KANKRI: I'm seri9us, Mituna.

MITUNA: your3 4lw4ys s3rious
#th4ts lik3 your cor3 d3fining dr4wb4ck

Porrim sees it fit to nudge Mituna with her shoulder, seemingly in an effort to get him to simmer down. You wouldn't say you approve *brute strength* solutions, but you'd be lying if you said the solidarity wasn't appreciated.

PORRIM: Let's hear him o+ut, shall we?
#Believe me, I'll be the first to+ tell him when he's being an ass #I just want to+ see if he sticks the landing here

Mituna makes some vague "harumph" sound that translates roughly to "fine, whatever," hands shoved deep in his pockets as he all but glares holes into you. (#trypophobia)

KANKRI: Thank y9u, P9rrim.

KANKRI: Let's n9t mince w9rds a69ut it, Mituna: I'm upset with y9u, y9u're upset with me, and I h9pefully speak f9r 69th 9f us when I say I d9n't want this state 9f em9ti9nal disc9ntent t9 6e the n9rm g9ing f9rward.

PORRIM: I also+ have my *o+wn* grievances with the bo+th o+f yo+u, if I might be so+ bo+ld as to+ be part o+f this co+nversatio+n.

KANKRI: ...Very well. I'm all aural canals.
#firmly halting my 9fficial Discussi9n Ca699se t9 let 9thers talk #kn9wingly and intenti9nally I might add! #I'll 6e quiet and let y9u speak like a 6ig tr9ll #9f c9urse I'll naturally 6e having my turn later t9 drive h9me the p9int I was in the middle 9f making 6ut #it's fine! it's fine #that s9unded passive aggressive n9 it genuinely is fine actually #where was I #9h yes #st9pping talking n9w

PORRIM: ...
#Finished?

PORRIM: Perhaps fo+r the bo+th o+f yo+u, this has been a casual fo+ray into+ a so+cial experience. "Oh, that so+unds interesting, I guess I'll go+!"

PORRIM: But this is an event that Meulin's been lo+o+king fo+rward to+ fo+r practically *sweeps.* It's practically her dream co+me true, to+ get to+ sit aro+und the pro+verbial campfire and trade sto+ries with o+ne ano+ther.

PORRIM: And no+w lo+o+k at what we've do+ne to+ it because yo+u bo+ys seldo+m think o+f anyo+ne but yo+urselves.
#Serio+usly, get a ro+o+m #o+r at least learn ho+w to+ pitchflirt pro+perly

MITUNA: g33 if 0nly s0m30n3 had warn3d y0u that this was g0ing t0 happ3n!

KANKRI: A calling card sent 6ef9re a crime is c9mmitted d9esn't negate the damage caused, Mituna. If anything, it *deepens* culpa6ility.

Your words, honed and polished, disarm Mituna for a moment.

You do what you do best and fill the ensuing quietness.

KANKRI: D9 y9u n9t c9nsider Meulin leaving the 619ck in near-tears a fail state? D9 y9u think this is s9lved with a simple "my 6ad" and a "did I d9 that" gesture with y9ur shrugj9ints?

Mituna opens his mouth to speak, but apparently thinks twice before doing so. Unlike him, if you might be so observant.

KANKRI: N9 n9, g9 9n. I want t9 hear what y9u have t9 say.
#again that s9unded passive aggressive in retr9spect #there isn't really a g99d way in the heat 9f the m9ment t9 say that with9ut s9unding challenging #future essay t9pic

MITUNA: 5o you 5udd3nly giv3 a 5hit about 5om3on3 31535 f33ling5

MITUNA: d0p3! g00d f0r y0u

MITUNA: bu7 sh3s no7 7h3 only on3 you'v3 b33n insul7ing 7onigh7 dipshi7

KANKRI: Let's talk a69ut that, actually — y9ur ledger isn't clean either, when it c9mes t9 em9ti9nal damages.

KANKRI: 9r d9 I need t9 rehash the sequence 9f events that f9ll9wed the phrase "I did have s9me n9tes t9 give y9u a69ut y9ur p9etry t99"?

MITUNA: rehash 17 all you wan7 bro 1 s711l d1dn7 say SH17 7o you

KANKRI: Y9u laughed at me!

The sentence escapes you at a slightly higher pitch than you intended, so you take a moment to calm yourself and try again.

KANKRI: Y9u laughed.

PORRIM: Snickered, if we're being technical.

MITUNA: i snick3r3d b3caus3 for 7h3 FIRS7 7IM3 3V3R m3wm3w said som37hing 7ha7 s7unn3d you in7o sil3nc3??

MITUNA: pr0udly pr0claiming wi7h my wh0le creaking b0ne bulge 7ha7 i d0n7 give 7w0 s0li7ary fucks wha7 y0u ge7 up 70 in y0ur spare 7ime

No, that can't be right. He was laughing at you, you were *sure* of it.

MITUNA: 0n 7he subjec7 0f insul7ing pe0ple 7h0ugh: any7hing 70 say ab0u7 my "big 7r0lling piece" n07 w0r7hy 0f a LICK 0f y0ur 7ime apparen7ly??

MITUNA: or porrim5 "ba53 l3v3l p5u3do5ci3nc3" p3rhap5! b3cau53 w3 all know th3 matt3r 5h35 th3 L3A5T qualifi3d 3xp3rt in i5 B3ING A GIRL
#TROLL 5ARCA5M

PORRIM: THANK yo+u.
#Granted, yo+u didn't give my wo+rk glo+wing reviews either #but we'll shelf that fo+r no+w

KANKRI: *Y9u y9urself* said it was a half-6aked piece y9u *whipped up in an h9ur,* y9u'll have t9 f9rgive me f9r c9ming t9 c9nclusi9ns.

MITUNA: wha7 s0 7ha7 means im n07 all0wed 70 care when pe0ple like y0u shi7 0n i7????

MITUNA: 4nd wh47 4bou7 porrim huh?? SHE didn7 s4y 4NY of 7h47 so wh47s your excuse 7HERE

Your nostrils flare. No, this can't be your fault, it *can't be.* You've spent *sweeps* of your precious adolescence proclaiming yourself a role model, you can't lose a battle of morals with *Mituna Captor.*

#[Scene: eyes close.]
You close your eyes and concentrate, rifling through your mental library for the perfect paragraph of punctuated remarks to fire back with that will show him how right you truly are. A fallacy, a lesson on proper tagging, a—

KANKRI?: —I'm okay. I'm... mostly okay.

You feel the words leave your mouth, just as clearly as you feel your jaw never move. Déjà vu coats your whole body, injecting memories and sensations into your mind and nerves respectively that you know for a *fact* have never happened.

You feel the impulse to pat your abdomen for blood you know, logically, is not seeping through your pants right now.

MITUNA?: If you were mostly okay, you would not be bleeding. We're not *that* gullible.

#[The faint image of a cave appears, in pure red.]
Your legs feel weak. Well. They felt weak, at some point. You feel the floor beneath you in a way that would suggest, laughably, that you're not standing up right now. You're standing up. You're doing it right now. Right?

PORRIM?: Quickly, Mituna, cave the entrance in behind us. Even if the Empire knows we're in here, there's no chance they'll be able to cover all of the exits.

MEULIN?: How do you know, Mrrosa?

PORRIM?: I haven't tended to the caverns in quite some time, but a jadeblood never forgets the tunnels.

Your skin prickles with the subtle sting of psionic particles in the air. Mituna must be using his powers to block the cave entrance with whatever hunks of rock he can find. <== THIS IS A SENTENCE THAT MAKES NO SENSE. WHAT???

KANKRI?: You didn't — agh! — you didn't have to come with me to my sermon, you know. You all could have been killed.

MITUNA?: Yes, we figured.

MITUNA?: From the way you were almost killed, just now.

MITUNA?: We put two and two twogether.

PORRIM?: Hush.

PORRIM?: We'd hardly have the nerve to call ourselves your most devoted followers if we nonchalantly allowed you to wander into the first dangerous situation where you could earn an audience with the oppressed.

PORRIM?: This way. Keep applying pressure to his wound, I know where we can get him patched up.

KANKRI?: My face is plastered on every wanted poster this side of the ocean, but you could all still bear the gift of anonymity if you so chose, is what I meant.

MEULIN?: Of COURSE we followed you, you big lug.

MEULIN?: I'd follow you to the edges of the universe. We all would.

MEULIN?: Not a *single* night has gone by where you haven't pushed yourself to your very limits to make that night better for just *one* other purrson in need. I'd call it foolish if you weren't so infurryatingly good at it.

MEULIN?: They all look at us like tools. Mounds of dirt to trod on to claw their way up the empirical ladder.

MEULIN?: *You* look at us like efurry one of us is the specialest spark of hope in the world. You make us BELIEVE you when you tell us we can change the world.

MEULIN?: You *saved* us. Now let us save you, love.

Something swells in your chest. Pride? No, you know the feeling too granularly to use such a generic term. Wonder? Relief? Whatever it is, it has you phantom-mouthing yet more words you somehow know like the back of your hand.

KANKRI?: ...Gosh, what would I do without you lot?

MITUNA?: You'd have never made it out of the brooding caverns, actually. Probably turned into neon grub paste.

PORRIM?: Mituna.

MITUNA?: What? He asked, I answered.

KANKRI?: I did ask!

PORRIM?: Sigh.

KANKRI?: Look... I'm sorry I ever doubted any of you. Truly. You really are the reason I'm still alive to tell the tale.

KANKRI?: I promise I'll make it up to you all, as soon as I can feel my side again. That harpoon *really* did a number on me.

PORRIM?: Come now, this way to...

#[The cave fades away.]
The dream — surely it's a dream — slips through your fingers like fine sand; out of your grip like a wet bar of soap in the washblock. The more you try to grasp onto it, the fainter it fades.

#[Scene: Kankri, Mituna and Porrim in Meulin's respiteblock.]
Your think pan feels like it's scrambled. Did you get shorter? You feel like you shrunk a little in the last two minutes.

You expect to open your eyes to an intricate cave system, following a white beacon of warmth and hope, arms slung over the shrugjoints of your comrades (a very strange thing to expect, in retrospect), but you open your eyes instead to a pastel respiteblock.

It is so painfully unclear why you feel like you're about to die. You're in the safety of Meulin's block, with your friends. You hope they're still your friends. For the first time, you're not sure.

Mituna and Porirm aren't looking at you like you've saved them. They're looking at you like they want you to leave them alone for the rest of their lives. Your side aches a little.

Whatever that... *vision* was, it seems you were the only one privy to it; not even for much longer than a second, from the looks of things.

All at once, it strikes you. There's a world where your compatriots look to you as the leader you've always dreamed of being, you can just... *feel* it.

...You just don't know if that world is this one. You just don't know if that 'you' is THIS 'you'. You see nothing but hurt in their eyes, with nary a culprit but yourself.

You feel cornered. Not by them, but by every choice you've made in the last six sweeps. Every word you've typed, every side you've taken. Chained by your own decisions.

You want to be the 'you' you bore witness to so badly. *So* badly. You just don't know where to start.

KANKRI: I...

KANKRI: I'm s9rry.

That earns a strong pause from the both of them. Still wary of you, but in another personal first, they seem to want you to keep talking.

Following up a sentence has never been so challenging for you.

KANKRI: I'm s9rry I ever d9u6ted any 9f y9u. Truly.

KANKRI: I'm aware I c9me 9ff as... judgemental.

You can tell from their expressions that you're losing them. Right. You suppose that language suggests you have not, in fact, actually been judgemental.

KANKRI: I guess that's n9t really an accurate assessment. I have 6een. Judgemental, I mean. N9t just t9night, 6ut... f9r a significant p9rti9n 9f 9ur cumulative friendships.

KANKRI: I've 9nly ever wanted t9 help y9u 6e y9ur 6est selves, guiding y9u t9 ev9lve int9 pe9ple wh9 d9 n9 wr9ng. Wh9 can't 6e unjustly shackled f9r qu9te-unqu9te flaws the w9rld isn't ready t9 accept.

Your mouth feels dry.

KANKRI: I... wanted y9u t9 6e m9re like me, s9 that I c9uld kn9w h9w t9 help y9u 6etter.

KANKRI: N9t 9nly d9es that fly c9mpletely in the face 9f individualism, expressi9n and freed9m 9f speech, 6ut it implies that I myself am with9ut flaw; a perfect m9del citizen with which t9 m9ld the w9rld t9 resem6le.

KANKRI: ...that a w9rld 9f me w9uld 6e a w9rld that makes sense.

KANKRI: And that isn't fair. I ackn9wledge that, and I fully intend t9 take full resp9nsi6ility f9r my acti9ns in whatever way y9u all deem necessary. H9wever y9u see fit f9r me t9 at9ne f9r my mistakes, I'll d9 it.*
 #*within the c9nfines 9f the law naturally #9f c9urse that isn't t9 say that there are N9 things I d9 that w9uld 96jectively 6enefit s9ciety as a wh9le #6ut that isn't the su6ject 9f this essay I mean ap9l9gy

The both of them look at you uneasily. This is what sucks about in-person interactions: you're forced to deal with the *looks* in real time.

MITUNA: d1d y0u h1t y0ur head 1n the last tw0 m1nutes? the fuck 1s g01ng 0n w1th y0u
 #1f s0 c0ngrats 0n y0ur new p0wers 0f blunt f0rce ventr1l0qu1sm #because 1 d1dnt see jack sh1t cl0nk y0ur n0gg1n

PORRIM: Well, I fo+r o+ne am happy to+ hear yo+u say this. It's been a lo+ng time co+ming.

PORRIM: Of co+urse, we'll see if yo+ur actio+ns match yo+ur sentiments in due time, but this is certainly the mo+st mature I've seen yo+u in so+me time, and that's wo+rth so+mething.

MITUNA: ...y3ah it5 nic3 to h3ar i gu355

MITUNA: im 5orry i called your gru8 5car5 gro55
#8ut you called my writing poopy 5tinky gar8age 5o ill 5ay were eevenn 5teven #8ut i DONT have to LIKE it

KANKRI: And I'm s9rry I misinterpreted y9ur auth9rial intent. I was s9mewhat upset 6y what I th9ught was a targeted attack 9n me and lashed 9ut.

KANKRI: ...t9 69th 9f y9u. I supp9se I have m9re t9 learn fr9m y9u than I initially anticipated when I reached 9ut t9 y9u all th9se sweeps ag9.

Your words come out a little slower than your usual practiced speeches. You need you fight your think pan's impulse to take the admission of fault as a sign that everything you stand for is invalid.

PORRIM: I certainly ho+pe yo+u mean that. I can't tell yo+u ho+w invalidating it feels, *every single time the subject co+mes up,* fo+r yo+u to+ almo+st spitefully decide that every single so+cietal issue is wo+rthy o+f yo+ur time but mine.

PORRIM: Quite frankly, yo+u give the impressio+n that yo+u'd o+nly pay my struggles half a mind if the wo+rds came fro+m *yo+ur* seed flap first. A real slap in the face.

PORRIM: To+ say no+thing o+f yo+ur qualificatio+ns o+n the matter.
#The struggles o+f... #checks no+tes... #gro+wing up in a sheltered clo+ister as a wo+man #I ho+pe yo+u'll fo+rgive me fo+r saying the wo+rds wo+uld feel so+mewhat ho+llo+w co+ming fro+m yo+u

PORRIM: Yo+u tell us to+ vo+ice o+ur co+ncerns co+nstantly — n9 feed6ack is 6ad feed6ack! — but the seco+nd I o+pen up abo+ut my o+wn grievances with my entire fucking identity, it's time fo+r yo+u to+ insist it's no+thing but my imaginatio+n.

PORRIM: *My* experiences. What *I* live and breathe every single day o+f my life while yo+u sit behind yo+ur co+mputer screen feeling smug abo+ut telling so+me bigo+t so+mewhere to+ read a bo+o+k.

PORRIM: Yo+u're no+t co+nvinced? I give yo+u arguments, yo+u disqualify them as irrelevant o+r fallacies o+r whatever else yo+u can pull o+ut o+f unpleasant o+rifices, no+ matter the co+ntext.

PORRIM: It's...

Porrim takes a deep breath, and looks you right in the eye.

PORRIM: It's because o+f peo+ple like yo+u, turning a blind eye to+ pro+blems I'm all but *screaming* in yo+ur face, that I wro+te my po+em to+ begin with.
#Ho+w's THAT fo+r po+etic iro+ny?

You swallow thickly. Patching things up with Mituna was easy enough when it came down to a misunderstanding, but this is different. This is a full-on clash of ideologies.

You want to believe her, truly you do, but... again, you cannot stress this enough: your entire society is ruled by a woman. Your primary source of authority — a concept you have a myriad of complicated feelings about — is one of these so-called opportunity-starved women.

All your life, all your observation of a society falling to pieces at the hands of millions of problems big and small, all under the responsibility of one empress.

It would be rude to tell her she's wrong, but you certainly don't *agree* with her, at least not fully. Try as you might, you just don't see the issues she's talking about.

And yet... the fact remains that she did take the time to express these feelings to you. Just now with her venting her frustration. Just earlier with her poem. Time and time again in your group memos; your DMs.

A nagging feeling gnaws at your think pan. Say you do listen to her and shift to her side of the argument. That would mean you've spent... who KNOWS how many sweeps being on the wrong side.

It's unthinkable. It dizzies you. How could you possibly call yourself a moral paragon if you wind up ADMITTING you personally failed one of your closest friends?

A friend who, apparently, in some bizarre alleged future reality, would risk serious consequences should she be discovered aiding and abetting some version of yourself you barely recognize.

...No. You need to stand your ground. On your apology, you mean, not the other stuff. You could benefit from standing less of certain grounds, upon reflection.

KANKRI: Thank y9u f9r sharing that, P9rrim. I'm sure y9u've definitely g9t y9ur fair share 9f c9mplicated feelings t9wards me, given the su6ject matter, and I want t9 d9 a 6etter j96 at taking that int9 acc9unt.

KANKRI: ...I'll have an9ther l99k at y9ur p9em, 9nce I have s9me time t9 myself t9 pr9cess all 9f this, and we can deepen 9ur discussi9n 9n the matter 9f the Empire then.
#it admittedly w9uld feel a little strange having this discussi9n when Mituna is standing right there #n9 9ffense Mituna

PORRIM: It's a start.
#I have a sinking feeling we're go+ing to+ need a LONG co+nversatio+n to+ disentangle yo+u fro+m the co+ncept o+f #Empress in charge =/= all wo+men are fine, actually! #but it's a start.

KANKRI: 9f c9urse.

KANKRI: ...F9r n9w, I 6elieve it's Meulin's turn t9 share her w9rk with us?

Everyone's attention is drawn to the big, fluffy cloud of hair and sad ganderbulbs peeking in through the cracked door. It seems someone's back from her walk.

MEULIN: (=；工；=) ...is efurryone good?
#this isn't a purrank right???

PORRIM: Yo+u do+n't see me with my lipstick o+ut, do+ yo+u?
#Get in here, sweetheart

Meulin shakes for a moment, and your impulse is to extend further apologies to her for whatever it is you said that caused this particular reaction.

You make it two syllables in before you all find yourselves crushed by her LV. 6 FRIENDTECH: **THE FULL-PARTY SEATBELT.** This is the third time tonight Meulin has rendered you completely speechless, this time on account of your soon-to-be-bruised ribcage.

MEULIN: 。゜゜(^´O`^)゜゜。 yes yes yes yes yes Y3333SSSSSS!!! i'm so glad!!!!!!
#SQU333333333 #I WUV YOU GUYS!!!

Thankfully she seems quick to move on from her display of physical affection, bouncing back onto her industrial-sized beanbag chair and retrieving a stack of printed papers from her sylladex.

MEULIN: ⋒(^ⓘ ω ⓘ^)⋒ um! um! okay SO. can i get started? are we good to go?
#i only caught the last bit of that confursation so unsure where we're at right meow

KANKRI: Y9u have the fl99r.

MEULIN:



MITUNA:
(#yo w4i7 how 7he fuck did she do 7h47 #c4n you 7e4ch me 7h47)

MEULIN: \(^★ω★^)/ as mew guys may remember, last time purrincess snugglepaw heard reports of vigilantism going on in the castle town, and asked her captain of the guards to look into it!

MEULIN: ヽ(^°〇°^)/ but there was another mystfurry, which she'd wanted to discuss with her betrothed!

#[Screen darkens, narration appears.]
Princess Snugglepaw summons Prince Shadelight to her private library. When he arrives, she's buried in a book, taking solace in one of the few moments of unbusy time a princess gets before she must go on with her responsibilities! She hears the sound of the door, and carefully marks her place in the thick, leather-bound tome with one of her many bookmarks.

Prince Shadelight approaches her desk, and the princess stands and curtsies.

The prince is so tall, and with his dark hair and vivid eyes, the princess thinks he may be the handsomest man she's ever seen in her whole life. Even just standing this close to him makes her pusher race! She tries to calm herself, though, because while Prince Shadelight has been a perfect gentleman, she knows their betrothal is arranged for the good of their nations, and she doesn't want to burden him with her feelings.

"My lady," Prince Shadelight intones, gallant and dashing and princely as ever. He even kisses her hand, as is customary, and the princess works to keep her feelings from her face, even though his own hand is so graceful and long-fingered! "You called for me?"

"Yes," Princess Snugglepaw chirps. "I have decided to take you into my confidence! There is a matter that has been troubling me, and if we are to be married, we should know how to work together on such things!"

"Your highness," Prince Shadelight professes, "I would gladly aid with any troubles you have, and would sooner cut my own tongue than tell your secrets. Trust is the foundation of a healthy relationship, after all. What is it that ails you?"

The princess's face flushes, of course, at such a proclamation, but she steadies herself!

"I find myself concerned with the matter of Duchess Gray. An old friend of mine, who of late has been increasingly absent from our court! And that's not all that's strange. Listen closely, my confidant..."

#[Screen fades to black, before fading back in. Time has passed.]
MEULIN: (^>////<^) ok so!!! what do we think
#who's your favfurrite #who do you think should kiss #who do you think is purrince shadelight's secret identity??? #TRICK QUESTION he doesn't have one

Meulin's story is, to politely borrow a term from dentistry, absolutely fang-rotting. Her exuberance for all matters romantic and dramatic really shines through in the twists and turns of her narrative.

While you yourself are firmly in the camp of foregoing any and all romantic pursuits, you can't deny she knows how to use the concept as a solid narrative hook.

That isn't to say that you don't feel... somewhat conflicted about it, however.

KANKRI: I must say, as s9me9ne wh9 enj9ys when seri9us th9ught is put int9 w9rld6uilding, I'm impressed 6y h9w in-depth y9ur st9ry is.

KANKRI: ...That 6eing said, at the risk 9f s9unding rude, I d9 have s9me s9mewhat pers9nal c9ncerns a69ut 9ne 9f the characters.

MEULIN: (^: o ‸ o :^) ?

KANKRI: N9w, I'm all f9r the usage 9f alleg9ry t9 strengthen narrative themes, and I'm n9t *necessarily* stating as a6s9lute fact that that's what y9u're d9ing, 6ut I can't help 6ut feel at least *s9me* 9f these characters 6ear striking resem6lances t9 real pers9ns, which c9uld very well give the impressi9n 9f su6chirping (even if that isn't specifically y9ur intent).
#su6chirping #resem6lances t9 pers9ns real 9r ficti9nal

KANKRI: That is t9 say, I can't help 6ut feel the r9le 9f the l9ve interest in particular — Prince Shadelight, was it? — feels perhaps... familiar?

KANKRI: N9w, I'm flattered, 6ut...

MEULIN: (;^°〇°^;) WHAT. NO!!!
#(NO OFFENSE) #BUT REALLY!!! NO!!! #100% NO!!! ABSOLUTELY NOT! #(...NO OFFENSE AGAIN)

Your name is KANKRI VANTAS, and you think you're slowly but surely starting to get the hang of this... *hanging out* thing.

Sure, it's got its plethora of downsides, and a man with your packed schedule can't afford to spend TOO much time on random fluff, lest you find yourself distracted from your ULTIMATE GOAL OF IMPROVING SOCIETY, but...

Culling crook to your neck, you can't say you've ever gotten warm feelings like this from your forum pages.

Hopefully you can make it to the next meeting.
