

1.9 – Aftermath

Holy shit I wonder if an interconnected world would lead to a global government without borders. A government whose bureaucracy is not of the elected officials, but of those promoted into their positions of power. Corporations with more collective resources than numerous world recognized governments - I mean inherently some corps would grow to have more say in how a society is shaped than those elected officials.

I figure at their steady pace... they're... Maybe twenty thousand paces... we have... At most, twenty five minutes? How did I not get that right?

Kara pulled her eye away from the eyepiece of the sextant.

If the corporate collective controls the messages that pass through the land. You could control the narrative that people march to.

Kára scratched her head. Holding the sextant in her lap as she leaned against and with her back to a group of chattering officers.

People will balk at government surveillance but if you have them purchase it... they freely give up their freedoms one by one. Locking themselves into an ecosystem of their choosing of their design based on the circumstances they are born into. Shaped by the society that came before. Some people seeing social mobility as a birthright with how close to the surface they already are. Others still might catch a glimpse of the daylight, some climbing and some falling far. Others still are frozen in place, unable to climb. Each given an opportunity to move, never stopped but by their own design. That doesn't mean those further up don't have the advantage, they certainly do, but those at

the bottom can still get to the top, they just have many more opportunities to fail.

Hmmm... What was that relationship I was supposed to use?

Kara looked into the front sextant, and then through the main viewfinder noticing it looked foggy.

Who had this last? I over estimated.

Kara bit the inside of her cheek, and placed the sextant on the deep brown knotty oak table.

You would never use a majestic pine for a table.

She turned to look at her Captains, all seated passing dinner, and making light chat seated around the table. All except... She stared into the large map of the area that lay across a modest portion of table.

Kára began by clearing her throat softly, "Tah..." Kára coughed, took a drink from the mug closest to her. Cleared her throat once more, "Talík[7] , I want you and your Ætherial knights in position by twenty two thirty... Oh, and just in case something isn't quite as it seems. Also, I need you to spare a few knights to look after the Elder."

Talik pushed herself back from the table, wiped her face, stood, saluted, and said, "Colonel." As soon as Talik had left the tall and wide canvas tent. Kára spoke to rest, "Nevek, have a look at this would ya? I think my last run of numbers might be off. Looks a bit foggy." Kara picked up the sextant and tossed it to the Ranger.

Nevek just snatched that out of the air, with such grace. Her cowl didn't once ruffle once. Sometimes I can't but just think about how interesting of a person they are. And that dark mist veil thing is can get stupid creepy at night. I love it! Sometimes she has it up for so long and I even forget what she looks like.

A devious smile overcame Kara as she looked at Nevek, and said, "Good hunting." A raspy voice made its way through the mist of Neveks mask, "Colonel, this one will be memorable." Nevek stood, saluted, and finished with "Colonel." Before exiting the tent.

Kara took a deep breath and turned to Bófreðr. She placed a hand on his arm. "Captain, I am going to need you to keep moral up. This has taken a toll on their minds. I know it seems hopeless, but I know that we will make it through..."

"But Colonel... Kára... Just by us even being here."

"I know. Now this business of Serge?"

"Colonel. I understand what you think you saw, but I guarantee you are underestimating him.." Bófreðr stood and leaned his hands on the table.

He would totally be more intimidating if I didn't know who was behind that hulking mass of plate armor. How he sits in that thing still amazes me, but he does, and comfortably, or so I am told.

He once told me that the secret to the armor was these flexible joints and scales. I don't know, all I know is, that I am glad this guy is on my team

Kara smiled playfully as she matched his body language. "Fifty more copper says I beat 'em, an' you."

"Colonel, don't make a fool of yourself by putting your copper ahead of your abilities." Bófreðr said dryly.

Kára giggled briefly, don't forget Tom. He calls his giant hammer, TOM, The original Mjolnir. You know, like that one, but this one is better he says.

They both burst out laughing, no longer able to keep straight faces. Kara moved around the table to face Bófreðr. They put their hands together and Kara spoke softly, "Valfreyja guide us. Be it to your great hall, so be it, but until then." In unison, they finished, "Valkyrja will bring the light."

Kara wished that they could have less, "We might die prayers." and more, "Thank you for this bounty before me."

Kara held onto Bofreth's forearms, and he, hers. "My friend," she began slowly, "We will show them how we truly ride upon the wings of the Valkryja."

Bófreðr nodded, and Kára could feel his fingers wrap firmly and then relax to a gentle embrace. *I care so much about Bófreðr. May Valfreyja protect him.* "I will see you shortly. I have to make preparations." They both smiled and broke their embrace.

"Colonel." Bófreðr said and took his leave.

Kara sighed and leaned against the table.

Kara could feel a low tremble shake the ground.

Sooner than I thought, I better hurry, that damn sextant Kara burst through the canvas flaps headed towards the easternmost, and closest to their encampment, entrance into the village. She glanced towards the large empty outcrop. There, she could see the figures of her soldiers, others were getting into position along the ridge.

They looked so well dug in with a great view overlooking the river. There were fireteams everywhere, all coordinating their fire, those little flame things come in handy. So yeah, they had their positions staggered along the landscape, with the intent to take it when it enters the river.

Kára broke out into a jog as she smirked looking out to the pockmarked battlefield, and the massive carcass of the, the siren, that's what I am calling it. Kára picked up her pace along the red stained path.

Kara felt waves of pain in her left temple causing her to tumble to the ground. A subtle voice began, Jahhmbee here. Then the voice deepened and revealed a darkness, Jambi, here. Jambi[8] ready to play!"

"What in the name of the nine!" Kara exclaimed before colliding into a stone wall. When she was able to open her eyes she saw what appears to be a dimly lit subterranean cave. Perhaps within the mountain itself?

There is red rock everywhere.

Kára's head was pounding as she rose to her feet. Why is the room centrally lit and what... oh... I know what this is. "I have a bad feeling about this."

She said before beginning to pace the dank room. A slight putrid odor emanating from the floor.

Well, considering everything else going on, I am not sure how Jambi fits in, but I really have a bad feeling..

Ástriðr, I... I am not sure I have ever told anyone this, let alone confessed to the sins of the past. But should I leave this plane of existence before reliving my heart... Without being able to voice my truth. Well. I don't know that I could live with that... Ha.

Oww.. Thuhht...

Kàra's body slumped to the ground, her face hitting moist stone with a wet thud.

Progress not perfection, right?

How sober is sober? This question is one that has been bothering me for a while now. What does it have to do with my recovery? What keeps me pointed in the right direction? In one word - Vulnerability.

I have not taken a drink in over four years. That doesn't mean I have been perfect in my sobriety by any stretch of the imagination. I have felt something missing for a while now in terms of feeling like I was on the right path, and I feel that this, even though I have never done this before, I feel that this is a good opportunity to humble myself.

I feel that through this confession, I can help myself stay out of the gutter. The truth will set you free, right? I know that this will be an imperfect version of my truth, but it will finally exist outside of my own head. I know that this won't be perfect, but it will be, and what that is, will only be clear when I am done.

When I try to think back to who I was before the mess of addiction, I have only blurs. I don't know if that is because of the years of abusing my mind with intoxicants, or if I suppressed much of it, I don't know... I just know I haven't unlocked those parts of my mind yet.

Some of my earliest memories related to what would become an obsession for me...

Were of this separation between what was okay to drink at home, and what was not. This one was yucky and this one was okay. This is adults only and these are not. Adult beverages were a family companion wherever you went.

You watch and listen. I wanted to be like these people! So I observed and internalized the rules and rituals and saying to myself that these examples are of how you are supposed to act, and this isn't. My adolescent mind drew distinct boundaries between facets of life. But, there would always be one that is a give, drinking.

I assured myself that this was the way. As the people around me with positions of power and influence, why can they flaunt their successes still be able to drink? How could these people be successful, if they had any sort of problem?

So, I figured I had a pretty good handle on how I should be living my life, and I knew the difference between right and wrong, if I would just apply these teachings, everything would be just fine.

Either way it left me thinking I was the one in the wrong. Well of course I was the problem, they tell me I am out of control. Was I the broken one? Yes, people don't seem to like me being around, as evidenced by lack of friends, and kids who would bully me.

So yeah, I can tell you now, looking back to me as a kid, I certainly believed I was the broken one. And I know I still carry that burden with me today.

I try to hide anything that could be perceived as a flaw, or an annoyance as best as I can, but I cannot seem to shake the feeling that I am at fault for a great deal that goes on around me, and maybe that is why I like to exclude myself from things, unless I know my skills and talents for sure could be of use, but sometimes even then, any hint of self-doubt, and I crawl into myself.

Why can't I make you people happy? Why?!

People picked on me for how I would dress, I just wanted to fit in, so instead I would refuse to wear things that would highlight my shape oh and maybe... Maybe I should look into that drinking thing, I mean I hear all the cadets are doing it. These people liked me, I was one of them, and I can tell you that feeling of acceptance is a siren song in itself. It is like you had the perfect kind of character build or something similar.

I thrust myself into a situations at times even when I shouldn't. What I frequently forget is that good intentions only gets you so far. But, what I have learned is that wise council comes in many forms. And by that, I mean to imply that what is good is marketed by those of means. Their influence shaping trends, that in turn spread like lightning along the AETHERIAL Multiverse. News here travels cross continents in moments. We obviously have rules in place to limit communications within the regiment, but sometimes when you start to lose your mind you might find yourself glued to those damn portals hoping for some sort of connection to the outside world. I've heard that something called the "net" used to exist and was very similar in concept of our multi-verse.

But I digress. I will tell you what, it is hard to tell what is right and what is wrong when you are surrounding yourself with fools.

So fuck it, this qualifies as an appropriate time, right? Became an appropriate slogan.

I needed to push it to the limit. There were long conversations about life, girls, hopes for the future, vomiting, and crying.

I was going to make it in this world, I had found my path.

I had all these dreams..

one broken heart later - and cliché, give me that drink.

The people who didn't imbibe were the weird ones.

I knew that I was on the right path, I could tell.

Ástríðr, I met Rue at a party.

I thought, I thought that maybe you were just a figment. Foibles of childhood laid bare and needed to be set aside to grow up.

I had convinced myself at this point that this was it, I was committing myself to trying. That through the darkness, we would prevail, and without them I wouldn't be anything, I would simply fade.

At this point I wasn't drinking to have fun anymore. I was drinking to die. I wanted to die so badly. Then maybe I could take the stress I see off my wife.

I couldn't function as a normal person anymore. I would do chores, crying and pleading for it to all to just end.

I remember pleading for help. I just wanted the insanity to stop. She seemed to have a whole heck of a lot more answers than I did.

She told me we were going to go seek refuge amongst our peers. They would show us the way.

I honestly didn't understand what else there could be.

Maybe I can do it.

Okay what did they say?

I could do something else, I could find distractions. "But", and this would be my whiny face, "everyone is having so much fun!"

There were so many days I couldn't handle it.

I cried a lot.

Kára lost her focus for a moment as she felt the sting of a lash to her bare back.

I wallowed in pity, afraid to reach out to friends who had gone through this before. I thought, what would these people know about why I wanted to drink myself to death.

I had an obsession that led me into situations I didn't have any business being in, saying things I would ultimately regret, and feel bad about, but couldn't take back.

I began to see myself, and who I had become, and I...

I didn't want to be that person anymore. I wanted to believe that things could be better if I could just somehow grow.

I was losing contact with the groups that helped me along my recovery, but I thought, "That is okay, this is for the better."

I no longer had wise council, and instead held my own council, and copious amounts of Feldehan's finest of weeds.

A crack of leather against her neck sent a flash along her vision sending everything into darkness briefly. Kára tensed her body.

I heard something fairly powerful recently. This person said, "that the purpose of going to meetings was first to cease the symptoms, but the real work only happened when we opened ourselves to solving conventional problems with conventional wisdom."

So how sober is sober? I don't know.

I guess I just keep having to remind myself progress not perfection.

That is all I can hope for.

Insert award here.

[Astrid Yeah, right.

So where am I going with this?

[Astrid] Honestly I can't quite tell.

uhgg. Kára bit her lip. that smirk.

That smirk is enough.

How do I explain feeling like I'm stuck?

You gravitate towards one answer while still being pulled on by the rest of the gravity wells. You feebly attempt to escape only to be slung around passageways degrading over time, forcing a rewrite, a change of course towards the next lowest energy state. Ya know, ya do whatever is the easiest.

Each of us make decisions, based on the sum of all evidence we have. We are living each of us in a bubble of those inbetween moments, when we have to endure great stress, or great joy before hopping to the next one. our bodies flooded with hormones.

Ástríar, I see you in the corner of my vision. Some days I see you, and some days I don't.

So, who am I?

...

Am I Natalie?

Are we one?

ONE AND THE SAME.

Ástriðr, I tell you Rue... She... I... am always going to love her.

[Ástriðr] Shh... Sweetie, progress not perfection. I would expect you to. She was an amazing woman. It definitely had it's moments, but, I think you really need to ask yourself why she thought she had leave.

Hey, whose side are you on?

[Ástriðr] No sides ma'am. Just the facts ma'am. Is it possible for any breakdown in normal relations to happen just "all the sudden?" How many incursions were there prior? How many winners and how many losers? How can anything all one person's fault, ever? Why do you get to be that important?

I feel a lot like I just deserve a lot of what I get. ... My existence at times feels like a farce. Like why couldn't I have been born "normal"? Why did I have to be different? Why do I have to constantly waste time out of my day wondering if I am doing the right things for the comfort of other people.

I don't know if she left me because of how different I was, or if it was just our history of back and forth close minded, distrustful, and sure as fuck not vulnerable communication.

Afraid. We smothered each other.

We were not focusing on being interpreters of our own lives, but instead we were fixated on being the interpreters of other people's lives, especially each other's.

Every story gives a glimpse into their world.

A world that only exists when you look at it, when you interact with it, when you are a part of it. Nothing could exist the way we know it without having it have happened in the way that it did.

The future is not set, and fate is what we make of it.
What if.

You learned something, but when you learned it alters both how you perceive it as a past, future, and present tense. How much effort and care each of us gives to the individual levers, well that is shaped over what seems like a geologic time scale.

You are experiencing a moment newly remembering, or learning, and misremembering at the same time as bits of the other two draw your focus away from the present.

I oft imagined what it would be like to be standing next to her in a wedding dress. We just couldn't get past the natural order of things.

I couldn't see it from the perspective of losing someone, I felt like I was right there. I this person who wanted to transition into a new phase of life, and most definitely wanted her to be a part of that journey.

I couldn't focus beyond myself. I tried hard to never show that, but I secretly, even from myself, held resentment after resentment for even the most trivial of things. And she was no exception, we were not the most kind to each other over the last half of the union. Right up until..

When she walked. I was devastated. I had lost my companion, I lost sight of what a family should look like. I just wanted to acknowledge my personal truth, and that was not compatible with the life we were building together. The dreams we shared together. Those stolen looks. My brain is constantly flooded by these moments of nostalgia. The moments where we loved each other with such a passion. But I find that I still have to have counterbalance moments that reflect upon the boundaries I am establishing.

We haven't communicated since.. And I mean really communicated, like the little details, everything always feels so shallow, but occasionally I catch that smile, that smile that has helped me begin to heal.

It is hard to predict where we will start, and where we will end up; just that we will end up.

I wish it were easy to understand. You can either fight an eventuality or just accept it.

The difference between this and fate? Fate doesn't give you a chance to change its trajectory.

I may have been born this way, but that doesn't mean I must stay this way.

Kàra could feel rough and foreign fingers dig into her armpits as she was lifted and tossed into a partially open and massive, wooden door.

[Ástriðr] And what is it you are trying to change?

Myself.

