

DANIEL J. HULL

Legends of the Nightcore:
Origins



Copyright © 2021 by Daniel Hull

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Karina Ragnarsdottir

3

LEGENDS OF THE NIGHTCORE - ORIGINS



Chapter 1

Karina Ragnarsdottir

(Translated from Old Norse wherever possible)

Ragnar Agnarson looked down at his twin girls, sleeping soundly in their cots, smaller than the rest of the cots that filled the massive longhouse. It was a cold night, colder than Ragnar had ever remembered. It meant that the Alfr wouldn't be around to help them fight if the Varúlfur were to come tonight. Even without the wilding elves to help them, Ragnar knew they could put up a powerful defense against the Varúlfur, also known as 'the wolves that walked as men'. Though he was of Miðgarðr, many in the longhouse this night were of the berserker clans of the Hel-Fjords. Each was worth ten of the wolves and there were seventeen of them present.

Ragnar knew that despite their common appearance, these men hid something primal within them. On the surface, they looked much like Ragnar's people, sporting long hair in shades of brown, red, and blonde, and most had beards. They also wore the heavy furs over their large frames that are popular in the colder climes of the region. Unlike Ragnar and his people, who

wore their hair and beards in braids, the berserkers let their hair grow wild. But inside, under their skin, the berserkers contained great beasts of fury and destruction. Now, they had gathered to protect Ragnar's people from the Varúlfur that had become a grave threat to them all. Ragnar absently ran his fingers through the long red braids of his beard as he considered what would become of his people. Nothing good came to mind. Ever since the Mycenaean Greeks had pushed the Varúlfur farther and farther north in their greed to control the amber road and grow themselves into a powerful nation-state, the attacks on Ragnar's people from the wolves had only been increasing. Their world was changing. He could feel it in his bones. War was coming and victory was uncertain. The wolves were many and they were desperate. Unknown to Ragnar or his people, the wolves were also offered a truce and new lands if they removed the Northmen from this area.

Looking back at his daughters, he wondered if he would be able to protect them for much longer. Freyka and Karina were spitting images of each other except for one thing, their hair. Where Freyka's hair was black as a starless night, Karina's was an almost white blonde, like the sun on a summer day. They were the only reason that his clan still survived. The berserkers had shown up to protect what they saw as the twin goddesses reborn. Ragnar couldn't argue with their logic. His daughters had been born under a blood moon during a planetary alignment that had never been seen before in recorded history. Of course, Ragnar hadn't known of such things until a scholarly Greek merchant arrived at his doorstep to bear witness to his two daughters' existence. Ragnar had watched as his village's shaman had traded stories with the

Greek while he tried to sell his wares. These stories were the omens observed by the shaman and his ilk, traded for the Greek's knowledge of rare celestial events that had occurred around the twin's birth. Not every omen had been good, either. The girl's mother and Ragnar's life-mate, Seta, had died in childbirth.

After his life-mate was gone, it fell upon Ragnar to raise the twin girls with the help of the village's womenfolk. Word traveled fast and soon there were pilgrimages to their tiny village. It got so bad over the years that the wilding elves, the Alfr, had agreed to move them to a new location, secret and safe from prying interlopers. Life was good for a while and the girls quickly developed into proficient warriors under the tutelage of berserkers and Alfr alike. The berserkers had shown up on the twin girls' fourth winter and had quickly become protectors and teachers for the girls. Ragnar was grateful. It was said the having a berserker's protection was the greatest of blessings, one that came from the older gods.

That was the only reason that Ragnar didn't steal his daughters away when he first saw them defend the girls. It was the last of the old lizard tribes that forced them to act. Their people looked more like scaly birds than like any of the more common peoples that Ragnar knew of.

It was said they were more ancient than any of the more populous people of the area, but that their numbers were dwindling due to the cooling climate and the spread of humankind. In fact, Ragnar had heard stories of their three-horned lizard beasts that they used for everything from plowing to travel. But Ragnar had never seen one. Some believed they had completely died out.

Whatever the case, they must have been desperate to take on

two fully grown berserkers. Either that or they had no idea what they were facing. What happened next, Ragnar could never forget. No less than twenty of the scaly bird people attacked the two girls. At six, they still managed to fend them off long enough for Torl and Bar to arrive. And arrive they did, transforming into massive bear-like men, complete with fangs, claws, and thick fur. The bird lizards never stood a chance as they were torn apart. Only five managed to escape, and one had a wound that would prove fatal within hours. Ragnar had no idea what the berserkers truly were. While seeming human at most times, they hailed from an ancient line of humanity that had been blessed by Ursa, the bear god, and tasked with many duties over the centuries. Now, two had been tasked with the protection of his daughters. Several sleepless nights later, he had decided to let them continue in his daughter's service.

Later, they had been joined by fifteen of their brothers and sisters. Ragnar knew that didn't bode well. The wolves were becoming more than a problem over the past several years. They were becoming an existential threat to the entirety of the northern clans. The Alfr had helped as best they could, but their numbers were always small, and they couldn't abide the extreme cold. They had told him that they were migrating south, where it was warmer for their kind. Ragnar couldn't fault them, but it did put his people's survival in doubt.

His daughters had survived twelve winters. They had been trained as warriors and had far surpassed most of the men in his clan in skill and sheer ferocity. In addition to the seventeen berserkers, twenty-six others shared the longhouse with them. They were what remained of the southern villages and were great warriors all. That was the only reason any of them were still alive. The weak and slow had already been culled by the

wolves. Ragnar drew in a deep breath. This was the last stand, so to speak. If the wolves came, they'd go down with a fight, but they'd still go down.

A lone howl cut through the night, a dagger through the heart of every Northman and berserker present. Their end was nigh. It wasn't a question of if, but when. But this was no timid folk. They weren't going to hide in the longhouse and wait for their deaths. That would be anathema to their culture, their society, their traditions, and their beliefs. No, they would face the foe head-on and meet their respective ends on their own terms. Soon, more howls echoed the first. The howling continued until it filled the woodlands surrounding the longhouse. The Varúlfur quickly surrounded the house, many dozens of them preparing for the attack.

Two of the wolves began to probe the longhouse's defenses. It had no windows. The only point of entry was the double doors in the front. As the wolfmen ran their long claws across the heavy timbers and bronze hinges, the massive double doors to the longhouse burst open. The surprising act laid the two wolves out flat and before they could regain their footing, two massive bear-men came barreling out from between the doors, enormous battleaxes in hand. Each ax found a wolf and two howls were silenced forever. The howling continued but was soon drowned out by the singing of every man and woman that strode two by two from the longhouse, wicked weapons in hand. The last skald of their people raised his baritone voice in a battle-song of old, inspiring the war-party of the berserkers to join in and bolster all their spirits for the battle to come.

Ragnar smiled as he strode out into the night, his daughters by his side. Each held a spear in her hand, crafted by the Alfr, and fit to their size and fighting styles. As the rest of his countrymen

formed a defensive perimeter around them, Ragnar bent down to one knee. He was a large man, as were all his people and his daughters weren't full-grown yet. They were barely women at this point in their lives. Looking each of them in their purple eyes, another rarity amongst his kind, he couldn't feel prouder. Sinking his claymore into the snowy ground, he pulled them both in for one final hug, kissing each on their smooth cheeks. He smiled at his daughters through clear eyes. His kind didn't cry. They had no use for tears. Instead, he took one last look at their faces.

He knew they were beautiful. He had been told more times than he could easily count how uncommonly beautiful they were. Some considered it another omen, others merely wanted to possess them. That was one of the reasons that the Alfr had come to bring them away. Too many men were beginning to take notice of their development, even at such a young age. Now he could see the wisdom in their actions even more. Unfortunately, the Alfr were all but gone and his daughters were out of options.

"Fight well and we shall see each other again," said Ragnar, looking at the mirrored faces of his twin daughters in turn. "That I swear to you."

His daughters both nodded back at him, Freyka with a single tear, while Karina remained stoic in her demeanor.

Standing, Ragnar joined his voice to that of his people, singing the song that emboldened their thoughts, strengthened their bodies, and energized their beings. Two more voices joined in, much higher pitched than the rest. Ragnar nodded once more to his daughters as they sang the battle song shared by their people and the berserkers alike. Both daughters held their

spears at the ready, nodding slightly in acknowledgment of their father.

Another keening howl, louder than the rest, began the attack. Snarling creatures, a terrifying mixture of wolves and men came loping and bounding out from the tree-line and rushed the tight knot of massive bear-men and broad-chested clansmen standing shoulder to shoulder. They hit the single rank of defenders hard, but the line held, each defender knew their way around a battlefield while the wolves were better known as scavengers. It wasn't long before the snowy ground was littered with the bodies of wolves and splattered with blood and gore. The wolves continued to attack with the same results four more times before they brought down their first defender. A clansman got his ax stuck in the skull of a dead wolf and two more brought him down, one ripping out his throat before a nearby berserker could pull the wolf off him and break its neck. He wouldn't be the last as the wolves kept up the relentless attack, having little regard for their own lives for some unknown reason. One by one, the defenders fell, even the mighty berserkers lost two of their own by the time the sun had risen again. Even so, the wolves kept attacking. By now, the bodies of wolves were stacked six or seven high, and still they came.

When all looked lost and the defender's numbers less than twenty in total, the wolves charged in force, meaning to end the conflict and finally finish off the weary defenders. Suddenly, a group of six wolves exploded into a ball of fire. Then more balls of fire rained down, quickly decimating the wolves' ranks. Seeing a losing battle, the remaining wolves howled forlornly and fled back into the woods. The defenders turned to discover

the source of their salvation. What they saw, they didn't entirely understand. Large wooden contraptions, wheeled for travel, had been pulled to the edge of the overlook above the longhouse. Men dressed as Greek soldiers stood all along the ledge overlooking the remaining Northmen and berserkers. A group of six heavily armed Greeks rode horses down through the trees and snow to pull up before the survivors of the massive wolf attack. One of the men, older, thin, and weak looking, removed his helmet and nodded in greeting. The berserkers closed ranks around the twins while Ragnar raised his left hand in a calming gesture as he approached the mounted man.

"Greetings from King Balefest," announced the man, speaking their language crudely. "I am Hestis and I represent our great ruler. Who speaks for you?"

"I do," answered Ragnar truthfully. "I thank you for your assistance. We were tired of littering the front of our home with bodies."

"I see that," chuckled the man. "However, you are somewhat mistaken about our motives. We are here to make a deal, not to simply offer assistance."

Ragnar narrowed his eyes at the man, "Go on."

"Don't worry," said the man quickly. "What we propose will be mutually beneficial. A simple exchange. We will help you drive out the wolves so that they never return. How does that sound?"

Ragnar already didn't like the man, despite his people's timely assistance. Now that he was patronizing them, obviously thinking that the Northmen were simple and stupid, Ragnar liked him even less. Ragnar spat on the ground, showing the

man how he thought his words really sounded. Not to be deterred, the man continued to speak.

“Well, if you don’t like the idea, then we can turn around and leave right now,” continued the man, a smug little smile on his face. “We estimate that the remaining wolves will return within the hour and your people won’t survive the day.”

Ragnar stared hard at the man. He knew when he was being given an ultimatum of some kind. He also knew the man was right. If the Greeks left, they would be wiped out. It didn’t get by him that the Greek’s timing was so opportune. This felt more like extortion than anything else. Still, there was no other choice, and these soldiers no doubt realized that and probably counted on it.

“What is it you want in return?” asked Ragnar, crossing his arms over his barrel chest, and pulling himself up to his full height, nearly looking the mounted man in the eye.

“Well, you see,” began the man, his slippery yet crude method of speaking like splinters under Ragnar’s fingernails. “Our king has heard of your daughter’s beauty all the way back in our fledgling country. He wants to make her the first queen of Greece. She would want for nothing and would live a life of extravagance. And in return, we will drive the wolves into the sea, saving your homelands from their wretched incursion. There really is no down-side here. What say you?”

Ragnar raised an eyebrow at that last statement. No down-side? Obviously, these Greeks had a different idea of life than his people. Extravagance made one covetous. Wanting for nothing made one weak. Being a ruler of so many made one callous. These were not qualities that any of his people would want to obtain. Yet, what choice did he have?

“And which daughter were you thinking?” he asked, trying to buy himself some more time to think.

“Why, the one with hair like frosted honey,” said the man. “Karina, I believe is her name.”

Ragnar’s blood began to boil, thinking that this toad would take his daughter from him. Just as he was going to give his answer with his sword, he felt a small hand on his forearm. He looked down to see his daughter looking back up at him with eyes resigned to their fate.

“You know we have no choice father,” said Karina, a slight tremble in her voice. “We’re all that’s left of our people. Let me do this to save the rest of you.”

Freyka rushed to her sister’s side, her eyes pleading, but her voice silent. Karina rested her hand on her sister’s shoulder and slowly tilted her head forward. Freyka did the same until their foreheads touched. They remained that way for a long moment before Karina sighed and straightened back up.

“Perhaps one day I can return, and it will be like it was before,” said Karina, knowing in her heart that it was a lie. One way or another, she would never see her people again. At least this way, they would survive and live on without her.

It took some convincing, the berserkers were about as keen on the idea as Ragnar and Freyka, but in the end, they really had no other choice.

And so it was that Karina was led away to some faraway kingdom to meet some man that would be her king and life-mate, regardless of what she wanted. She had no illusions about what was happening. Underneath all the finery they would dress her in and the games they would play for her amusement, she was still being traded into slavery. She hoped the high price she was paying would be worth it.

They treated her like a princess. Well, like a princess in a gilded cage. They escorted her into a fine carriage, a conveyance unlike any that she had ever seen. After several days of travel with only her own thoughts to keep her company, she began to listen to the men speak around her. Karina was smart and she started to slowly pick up words here and there. After three months of travel, she had a fair understanding of their language, at least enough to get the basic idea of their conversation. That's when her heart broke completely.

She pieced together her broken understanding of their language well enough to make out one simple fact. They had forced the wolves there on purpose and had no intention of ever helping her father, sister, and other survivors to defend their homeland. In fact, they had told the wolves to finish them off and the land would be theirs to keep. Apparently, they were worried about her people eventually coming to rescue her and wanted to avoid that at any cost. Once they had extracted Karina, the rest would be left to the slaughter. Karina vomited when she learned of this, pantomiming a sick stomach from the ride when the soldiers looked at her questioningly.

Winter gave way to spring, and soon after arriving, Karina was brought to an ornate building of polished stone and garish statuary. It sat in a place surrounded by many buildings all clustered together and almost on top of each other. It smelled of many things and made Karina wonder how the wind ever made it into the sprawling complex to refresh the area of the stink. Up close, she saw that the building she was brought to was massive and then she spied the equally imposing stone wall. How anyone would need so many defenses was beyond Karina.

These people were good at cowering in fear, she decided. She had trouble keeping the disdain off her face as she was escorted through an over-sculpted garden and into the massive stone building.

Inside, everything was covered in an exceptionally smooth white stone that they called 'marble'. She was taken to a bathhouse. The bath was the size of a small pool and several women and a few girls were already in the water. The guards left her, and she was immediately attended by a pair of women who gently removed her simple garments, the underclothes that the soldiers had left her with after insisting she removed her battle gear. The other females in the room gawked at her as she was led into the pool, somehow warm and comforting despite the crispness that still hung in the air. It had been a long winter. She let them clean her with flowery smelling oils, dry her with plush cloth, and dress her in ridiculously ornate robes. Then they took a long time to paint her face in painstaking detail. Her disdain for these people continued to grow. If they thought she was so beautiful that it was worth slaughtering her entire people to obtain her, then why were they covering her up with all the garish outfits and goop. But Karina was smart. She'd wait, grow, learn, practice, and by the time she was a woman, she would take her revenge on them all.

Alas, it was not to be. Once the king beheld her, he was so enchanted that he insisted she remained just as she was. He couldn't abide by her growing old. He wanted to keep her young forever. He also didn't want her body marred by pregnancy and the inevitable scarring that would result from it, not to mention the chance of her dying in childbirth, just as her own mother had. That's why the king offered a sizable award to anyone with a solution to the problem.

In the meantime, he had his surgeons perform an unspeakable act upon her and remove her ability to have children. She was given something that made her sleep and when she awoke, she could overhear the man explaining that the procedure had been successful and that she would never become pregnant. They still had no idea that she knew exactly what they were saying. Her anger increased tenfold. Her people were now without any hope of survival. Not even through her. And, she would never have the joy of children herself. Now, all she had left was revenge. Once she was mature enough and had reached her full size, she would be more than a match for any of them, even the men. They were weak compared to her people and she would slaughter them all.

Even that was taken from her when the king was granted an answer to his problem. Spring had bled into summer and then summer cooled to autumn. Karina was led into a room she had never seen before that day. The king still hadn't touched her, of that she was thankful. Apparently, he was saving her for something special. Her skin crawled at the thought of what that might be. He had to be at least a few winters older than her father and was fat and pathetic. If he had touched her, she would have ripped his throat out with her teeth. *That* she was certain of. Now, she had no idea what to expect as her attendant indicated she sit on a wooden bench in the corner of a bare room with a simple table made of timbers in the center of it.

That's when *she* walked in. A woman with unnatural grace and blood-red eyes. Karina could feel the power radiating from her, a being she had only heard talk of in whispers among the merchant travelers that occasionally passed through her village when she was younger. An ancient species of great power that demanded respect, she was called a lilitu. Now,

Karina knew true fear. Was she to be sacrificed to this creature, this woman? For the first time in her young life, she began to tremble uncontrollably. More than anything, her own weakness angered her.

What the woman did and said next was confusing. She looked back at the attendant and spoke, not realizing that Karina could understand most of what she was saying.

“You may leave now,” she said, speaking down to the attendant. “The process takes time, and, in a day, your king will have his precious living doll. But I warn you, always keep her sedated and don’t feed her more than one drop of fresh blood a day. Anything more and she will become too strong for you to easily control. Make sure you have my payment ready. Do you understand?”

The attendant nodded his head vigorously and made a hasty exit. Turning back to Karina, she made no effort to speak to the girl. Instead, she bit deeply into her own wrist, her long fang-like teeth bared as she did so. Bright red blood began flowing from the wound as she roughly grabbed Karina by the jaw and forced her mouth open, pressing the bloody wound to the girl’s mouth. When Karina finally choked and engulfed the blood, the woman released her and smiled a bloody smile. Then, quick as a flash of lightning, the woman’s hands grabbed Karina’s head and twisted, snapping her neck like a spindly twig. Karina knew that she had just been killed even as the woman picked up her now limp body and placed it reverently upon the plain wooden table. Then everything went dark.

Her mind floated in empty blackness for what seemed like a moment or perhaps an eternity, it was hard to tell. When the world came rushing back in, the first thing she noticed was the smells. Then the sounds came rushing in, and she opened

her eyes as she cried out at the cacophony. She found herself on the same table in the same room that she last remembered. However, everything was different about this room. The smells of pine-tar, dust, sweat, and lilacs filled her nostrils with their overpowering aromas. The sounds of wind, birds, animals, and laughter filled her ears, though it was all obviously coming from outside. Then there was the sight of the room. It looked less polished than she remembered. The walls were dirty and cracked. The floor had crumbling bits of stone in the corners and the table had numerous grooves filled with the remnants of countless meals shared upon it. Everything she experienced disgusted her now.

She was about to get up when she felt a hand press down on her chest, pinning her in place. Looking up, she saw the same woman with red eyes, now clearly streaked with flecks of blue, purple, and gold. Her face expressed no emotion as she shook her head in the universal sign of 'no'.

"Why did you do this to me?" asked Karina, using the enemies' language for the first time.

The woman actually looked surprised as she took a step back. However, she quickly regained her composure before she spoke. "I was asked to do this in return for something which I desperately wanted, and the king possessed," said the woman.

"That's all you need to know."

"Why would you help such a man do something like this, regardless of the reward?" pressed Karina. "What thing is worth your honor?"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," spat the woman. "I've not made you a vampire. You're a lilitu, like me. You'll be able to have and raise little princes and princesses until the end of time. What

I've given to you is a gift."

"Then you've healed me?" asked Karina, a ray of hope entering her thoughts. "I can have children again?"

"What do you mean?" asked the woman with a look of concern on her face, the second time the woman showed any sort of emotion.

"They did something to me that made my stomach hurt and I heard the man tell the king that I would no longer be able to have children," answered Karina truthfully.

The woman hissed and spat on the ground before narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

"Hold still," she said as she deftly snaked her hand up Karina's robe and penetrated her womanhood with two fingers. After a moment, she hissed again, even louder, and full of deep anger.

"You speak true," she said. "Which means that I was lied to."

"About what?" asked Karina.

"It doesn't matter anymore," answered the woman cryptically. "What is your name?"

"My name? ... my name is Karina," she answered.

"Karina what?" asked the woman, her pale face growing paler. "Karina Ragnarsdottir," said Karina honestly.

"No...no, no, no, no, no," said the woman as she fell to her knees and began to sob uncontrollably. "I'm such a fool!"

She hissed again before quickly rising back up, looking at Karina with a crazed expression. "Where are your people? Where do they reside now?"

"I have no more people," said Karina softly. "They were all slaughtered after I was taken. Please, I don't want to live like this. Kill me. Please."

"I could never kill you," said the woman forlornly, her mind lost in thought and her face painted in despair.

“But why?” asked Karina miserably.

“Because, you are my great, great, great grand-daughter,” said the woman, her face clearly haunted by her own failures. “I thought you were protected. Seventeen berserkers...they could have held back a small army. How?”

“The Greeks pushed the wolves into attacking us,” explained Karina somberly. “They were relentless and had amassed a large force. We had already fought for hours when the king’s men fought the wolves off. They did it to trick my people into giving me up in exchange for their help in defending our homeland. It was a lie. They took me and let me people die. If you won’t kill me, then at least allow me to get revenge.”

The woman was shaking her head the entire time, trying to come to grips with what the young woman was telling her.

Finally, she looked up, her eyes set upon Karina. Another hiss and she spoke again.

“The king has lied to me as he has lied to you,” she said. “You may call me Yerthu, and I’m not going to let you take your revenge. I’m going to help you get it. You’re a smart young woman, Karina Ragnarsdottir. If you hadn’t understood what they were saying or not spoken to me, I wouldn’t have been any the wiser and they would have duped us both. Now, they shall find out why all men fear the hidden among them. Our revenge will be glorious. They have no idea what they have unleashed unto themselves.”

And they did not. Suffice to say that Karina’s first few days as a lilitu were full of bloodshed and mayhem. The two of them found and killed almost everyone in the palace where Karina had been residing, and that was just in the first hour. Karina allowed a couple of the servant girls to ferry out the few children in the palace before the slaughter began. The rest died ghastly

deaths. Within the bathhouse, Karina experienced her first taste of blood as she drank deeply of one of the king's nieces, turning the bathing pool red. Red not just from the blood of the king's daughter, but also from the dozen or so women who had been enjoying themselves in the warm water only moments before. The two women of vengeance made their way through the palace, killing everyone, the only mercy being a quick death.

The king wasn't so lucky. Karina returned the favor he had given her and ripped his manhood off with her bare hands, crushing the mess into a bloody pulp before his very eyes. Then she plucked each of them from his head so that the very last thing he would ever see was his own future being destroyed, just as he had destroyed her. Yerthu wanted her pound of flesh as well, so she killed the king by drinking him dry, then fed the corpse her blood. While in the middle of the act, Karina gave her a questioning look.

"If you kill someone before you feed them your blood, they will not become a lilitu, but merely a lowly vampire. The king will live forever, or until someone takes his head. But he will never see anything ever again, and he will never procreate," explained Yerthu. "In fact, after what you did to him, he will never experience carnal delights again. And he will forever thirst for blood, a far worse sensation than what we experience. He is now effectively a prisoner in his own body, forever denied any of earth's pleasures, but forced to walk it for all eternity."

They left him like that, first babbling incoherently, then pleading for mercy, and finally threatening vengeance. Together, they began traveling the world, learning of all its myriad wonders. Left in their wake, the king used all his considerable resources to capture them, even managing to catch up with them once. The two laid waste to an entire battalion of the king's soldiers

before a group of them got lucky and managed to kill Karina's maker and ancestor. After that, the king had weakened himself so much that he was soon deposed and run out of Greece. You see, the collection of city-states began to change and shed the old ways of governing in favor of one more aligned with the will of the governed. They had no more use for authoritarian rulers.

Karina cared not for such things. She was free. Free of all responsibility but unfortunately, also free from the things that make life worth living. Still, she soldiered on, making new friends, finding first love, then many new loves over the centuries. Her life had been bloody, strange, lonely, but always interesting and exciting. But most of all, it was hers to do with as she pleased and with complete and total freedom. Of course, all good things must come to an end.

* * *

Now, over three thousand years later, Karina had been captured. Not by the ancient Mycenaean Greek king, who had never given up chasing her in his quest for an act of vengeance that he was not due, but by something wholly different. A young upstart group calling itself the Order of the Purifiers that had suddenly risen to prominence at the onset of the Dead Plague. Barely eight centuries old, the group was bent on world domination and the subjugation and enslavement of the common peoples of the earth. They had been lucky, even with all their resources, in capturing her. She had gotten sloppy, having tired herself out

by eliminating a small army of walking cadavers, an oversight she would not soon repeat.

They had collared her and taken her to a make-shift prison. It sat at the top of a ridge, consisting of the burnt-out remains of what looked like a brick warehouse. The roof had caved in long ago, and the Order had the building cleaned out, leaving only bare brick walls adorned with a few remnants of the greater structure. They had also set up several dozen heavy cages within the shell of the building, some already occupied. It was within one of these cages that she was violently tossed, kept there for some unknown purpose. Frowning, she awaited whatever came next.

The captivity wasn't without its upside, however. Within the rows and rows of cages that the Order had placed, there were other beings like her, beings that weren't merely human. She had to admit that she was impressed. This Order had managed to capture several Varúlfur, Rakshasa, Vetala, Vrykolakas, Lycaons, a pair of satyrs, and even a minotaur. There were many others that she hadn't come across or at least, couldn't identify. One such cage held a familiar face. The once-mighty Greek king had been reduced to a mewling and babbling mess of a man that was even less whole now than when she had left him. Karina raised an eyebrow when she noticed the stumps. Somewhere along the way, someone had taken his hands and when he continued his mewling, she noticed his tongue was also missing. Apparently, he had pissed off more people than just herself over the years. That put a little smile on her face.

Imagine her surprise when, after centuries of roaming the earth, she now came across the former Greek king during the worst plague that this world had ever seen. And sharing adjacent cages in a make-shift prison, no less. Outside of the

prison's remaining brick walls, zombies, the rotted remains of once-living people, now roamed the earth, a scourge inadvertently created by her very captors. The disgusting things had turned over ninety-nine percent of the human population into more of themselves, death made animate. To make matters worse, this Order was pretending to be the shepherds for the remaining survivors, offering to protect them from the living dead. But Karina knew better. They were the Greeks of this time, pretending to help when all the while, they were the cause of everything.

She spent a solid month in the cage, being fed just enough to survive, or so she led them to believe. The fools thought she was a vampire, but she was far stronger than those undead beings. No, she was alive and could survive for long periods without blood if needed. The Order's soldiers also occasionally moved the cages around, probably to try and keep the prisoners disoriented. She spent her time studying everything about the prison and the shock collar they had placed upon her neck soon after she had been captured.

The Order was nothing if not thorough. With overlapping redundancies, there were always numerous guards present. A changing of the guard simply meant that there were twice as many guards on watch for the fifteen-minute intervals. The collars weren't any better. They would shock the wearer with any attempt to remove them, and they could also be triggered by remote devices that the guards all possessed. The longer she was held prisoner, the more she felt escape may be impossible under the current circumstances. She would have to bide her time and hope salvation wouldn't come too late.

Late one day, just as the sun began to set, pandemonium broke loose at the prison facility. The guards were all yelling and

pointing into the sky while their superiors were calling for them to take up position all along the ridgeline where the make-shift prison rested, overlooking a large cornfield surrounded by rows of longleaf pines. The men grabbed automatic rifles and ran in both directions, trying to set up a long defensive formation, all facing west. Looking in that direction, she could see a tiny ball of fire screaming towards them. A meteor wouldn't cause this kind of commotion. Whatever was coming, these men and women thought bullets would somehow be effective. Through all the commotion, the guards mostly forgot their charge, the prisoners.

Karina smiled as she realized that not enough of them were watching her. As one guard came running by, just a little too close to her cage, the girl launched herself against the side of the cage and forced her arm through it as far as she could. It was just enough. She managed to hook the man's sleeve and drug him in close, ripping his arm from its socket. A moment later, she was drinking the man's blood as she fumbled around his pockets for the keys to her cage. She regretted both actions. The man had no keys on him, and his blood tasted like raw sewage. Still, it provided some sustenance and she had enough strength to kick her cage door open, violently breaking the chains holding it shut.

Freed, Karina took a moment to free several others, busting their cage doors open with a heavy spear she found lying near the minotaur's cage. Unfortunately, that great creature had died from too much experimentation, a great loss to the world. Using the incredibly strong and heavy spear, she pried door after door open, until she came to the last in the line.

She had wedged the spear in when she saw that this cage held her old nemesis, the Mycenaean Greek king of old. He

was still mewling and using his stumps in a pathetic attempt at pantomiming something. She tried to feel sorry for the wretch and considered continuing the effort to free him until she remembered that it was him and him alone that allowed the extinction of her entire people. Her scowl turned to confusion when the darkening sky suddenly lightened above her.

Looking up, she watched an event that she had never experienced in all her centuries. A massive wheel-like structure was hurtling through the twilight sky, throwing fire for kilometers from its entire leading edge. Shadowing the falling structure was a small white-winged vehicle. Missiles were streaking through the air from numerous places on the ground, both near and far from where Karina now stood. Many impacted upon the larger object, but some seemed to target the smaller one. It became obvious that the smaller craft was being piloted by someone with no small amount of skill as the craft deftly avoided each incoming missile with grace. Moments later, it streaked overhead, and the Order's machine guns fired upon it, some bullets apparently scoring hits. Her eyes followed the trajectory of the swiftly crashing craft. The larger object hit somewhere far away, and she decided to seek out the craft, her curiosity getting the best of her. Besides, anyone who the Order wanted dead that badly could make a potential ally, and she had precious few of those these days.

Karina withdrew her new long-spear and left the former king to wallow in his misery. As she walked away, she could hear the king gurgling after her. What he said, she didn't know, nor did she care. She had a new enemy to face, one that thought they knew just how superior they were. Karina smiled. This Order had just bitten off more than it could chew, and she intended on making more than one of them choke on her spear. However,

there was something she had to attend to first. Karina began heading towards the crash-site of the smaller winged vehicle off in the distance. She knew she had to check it out and search for anyone who may have survived... but that is another story.

THE BEGINNING