

1.10 The Kárák [9]

Kára could feel her body crumple against a large wooden door before continuing on to skid across the rough sandy redstone floor. Her assailant grabbed her by the ankles immediately, a voice from behind bellowed, “Again!”

Her assailant picked her up by the feet and drug her towards a large redstone slab which was suspended by two pillars. Kara kicked furiously breaking a foot free and knocking her assailant back and away.

“I do not fear the likes of you Karak.” Kara whispered feeling defiant as she looked up at the tall, and very intimidating Kárák who spit blood at her.

The black hair of the Karak folded forward from the back of the Karak’s head and snapped shut in front of her face. Instinctively Kara reeled backwards but her could not move any further into the ground. The Kárák opened mouth wide showing her rows upon rows of dagger like teeth. In the blink of an eye the shadow of the Karaks hair receded and Kára could help but think the he had some sort of ability to control his hair, as the hair recoiled and slicked it against his head.

“What... Are you?” Kara stammered.

“I feel yyour ffear creeping in Commander...” The Karak hissed as he knelt down in front of her coming only centipaces away from her face. Kara could feel a sense of unease as the creature knelt forward, stared directly into her eyes, the Karaks pupils blinked, and then the outer set of lids of its eye blinked.

“Youussss... Still don’t undersstand what issth going on yet.”

“No,” Kára sputtered, “but I am sure you will tell me.”

“Oh, yess.” The Kárák said bringing his hand to hers.

The Kárák effortlessly lifted Kára to her wobbly knees.

Kara got a better view of her *twin screws bed* that she had been laying on for the last six hours. The Kárák tugged her by the hand causing Kára the fall face first onto the ground. She could tell her lips scraped the ground but could not feel anything. She felt herself twist herself in the Kárák’s hand and attempt to kick him in a futile effort. The Kárák chuckled as he lifted her off the ground by her hand. She was slammed

against the slab, her body slumping, but her limbs being forced into the shackles attached to the, X shaped slab.

Finally, I got you back. I really checked out there, do you know that place you go where you are like, no-where? You aren't here, nor there, but you just... are. Well that is where I was for the last, month. It is an Aetherial art I picked up when doing a tour of duty at the Blackrock Fjall. I befriended a strange and cooky wizard while I was there, and quite honestly I don't think I've every told anyone this... But... I helped him escape. There was no trace of him being a prisoner ever by the time I was done with the mainframe.

I am not sure I was allowed to say that last bit. So... let's just forget I said anything. Oh hey what does this knuckle dragger want.

Kára's face snapped to, a slight flush crossing her face, reducing some of her imflamation along her face.

"Too tight for you? You may not fear me but you will find fear in what we can do. The priests of Myrkr no longer will skulk in the shadows biding our time. This is our time, our moment. Long have you and your kind forsaken our lands and left our people to languish on the frontier... We shall bring about order to the land, and with it an end to your lopsided views.

Kára played into the role she had been playing previously, I call it the defiant punching bag. Takes a beating but will not relent, will not yield to brute force. They were never planning on killing me. And clearly too dumb to comprehend the ole Rusty Routine, his words not mine. I like to call it a vacation.

Sure your body endures more than you would want it to, but you can bounce back, might take a bit of rest, and a lot of attention from a

healer, but you make it through without having to remember anything. That time is just replaced by serenity. The hard part is, the longer you stay in the more your mind starts to destroy itself. Rusty, told me the longest he was able to hold vacation mode, was sixteen hours. Or for the numbers people out there approximately, seven hundred and twenty hours per month, and time allotted is that of one month per every six hours real time. You are allotted sixteen hours in vacation mode. So will accumulate sixteen RT to six RT, so about two and one third units. Which would translate into two and one thirds months. I mean who wouldn't give up a full day of real time to just have four months of serenity.

See what I did there? Oh... what is he saying?

“...Believe it or not, you are going to help us. The portal to the AETHER will open and Odinn be damned, Valfreyja be damned!

They have forsaken this realm. It is time that we reclaim what was rightfully ours!”

Kára's voice shifted towards her normal voice, “Can I get an oh yeah?”

Kára summoned a deep strength that burst her through the metal shackles at her feet. She went to leap to her feet when a large hand struck her back and slammed her against the now cracked slab. “Oh yeah?”

The Kárák grabbed her torso and jerked her downwards causing Kára to scream out in pain as she could feel a disconnection between her arms and her shoulders.

“As I was saying,” The Kárák began to pace in front of her before slowly continuing, “Our brethren have been abandoned. Once we ceased being useful we were just cast aside.

Either they don't care about our plight, or they are dead.

They better be.”

Kára spit out blood towards the floor and began meekly before finding her strength, “I said can I get an Oh Yeah?”

“OH YEAH!” A rotund man burst through the wooden door behind them. Doesn't he see that? I mean come on He is right behind you. He just burst through the door and shouted, Kára blurt out OH, YEAH!.”

A slightly confused look crossed the Elders face before he grabbed Kára's face squeezing her cheeks.

“Let it be known that in a time of crisis, the guardians shall restore balance to the realm! Etched on Odinn's Tomb” The Káarak spoke.

Kara's eyes drew wide, and the Elder dropped her sending her hands slamming against the top of the shackle. and she choked out building her energy, "Should the guardians awaken, thy queen they shall seek.”

“Exactly! They will finally uncover Valfreyja's location, and we can finally let Yggdrasil do, as a world tree does, it devours.” The Elder said flatly.

“No! You can't! I will not allow it! The last time the guardians came, our world was set asunder. We cannot let the sapling grow! She is the only reason we are all alive.”

The Káarak chuckled, "So the stories say, but who writes those stories? We have uncovered Odinn's true teachings. Who is to say your teachings are superior? Odinn sought to cleanse this realm, but he didn't count on the guardians. Those pesky Knights you'd knight at night right after being in a fight. And Valfreyja?" The Káarak finished with a laugh.

He sure likes to hear himself speak.

"The Karak desert provides a plenty, as did that expedition inside Lidless Eye. The Alfater truly blessed us this day! Showing us the way to his hidden scriptures, to the horde you conquer skirmish, after agonizing skirmish, all to lead... you... to... here." The Káarak stopped and thrust his large finger into her chest.

Kara drew in a deep breath, trying to focus on her immediate^[3] surroundings Kara could see probably ritualistic, purple candles, and yeah... I am trying to do the thing again. I figure he has got another two weeks worth of masculine rage to get out. What about my knowledge of the Aetherial? Surely^[4] there has to be a way out of this.

But all Kara could do is watch as a group of people stepped forward. Blending into the mix the Káarak slipped into the group. Each person took

up positions that would shift every few moments. She couldn't see their faces, but she saw thick beards, and black hoods.

Gah, stupid eye socket filling with blood!

I can see a large large person's back He takes something and begins puffing away. The air is thick with smoke. Is that Feldehan's Desert Delight?

Kara followed the Karak as he circled the room. The fat cigar glowed a golden orange as he puffed, giving enough light for but just a glimpse at his beardless face.

I bet I have a couple options... I could use seduction, claim that I wish to defect. Nah I could...

Go along with anything he says... Eh

I could... Kill everyone in the room...^[5]

Kara could feel the table tilt taking strain off of her wrists, but felt new shackles being affixed to her legs. The large wheels spun and spun as it slowly ratcheted down forcing her to stretch her legs out across the ground.

Kara looked up to see her captors parting. Drawing into two semi circles on the outside of the Káarak, and her.

The figure stepped forward, puffing away dropping a bit of ash on her face as he stepped across the slab that was now fully sunken into the floor. He puffed away filling the space with even more smoke. He stepped out onto the slab, and then off again causing it to slightly rock after finding his footing along her torso. The Káarak added a spring to his dismount each pass. She was determined to not give him the satisfaction of her pain. She looked up to his face but a blurry patch began to give way to a chiseled jaw full of stubble. Maybe I am finally bleeding out? Things are just a tad less blurry... Soo... More like woozy, and blurry okay concentrate...

Did he start yet? Is he talking? I can't tell anymore.

"I have heard great things about you Colonel..." ope, heard that one.

ugh.

"Valkyrja leading the charge... And what charge should we levy in return? Hmmm?" The man stopped atop the table. She felt a quick sharp pain in her leg. She grit her teeth ever so slightly, but quickly regained composure, and put a smile on her face.

It was too late, he had caught her wince and began bounce in place, looking for her pain. Seriously guy? This is how you get your rocks off?

one thing at a time.

Breathe.

"You get a thrill out of this don't you?" Kara asked wheezing and coughing.

The man knelt down on the table and brought his face in close to hers. "Here's the thing." The foul stench of his last meal and smoke wafted into Kara's nostrils.

"Maester Arturös' protégé stands between us and progress. i.e. that is to say, his son is in the way. But..." He punctuated his statement by moving in even closer making his square face appear overwhelming.

Arturos

"It is said that when the Bifrost was sealed seven crystals broke free and landed upon our realm. A few continents burst forth from the ground shimmering like starlight as they floated.

We were cut off from Yggdrasil we were cut off from Asgard!

The least we could do was unleash the Skripi upon you heathens one dimensional rift per island, to protect them from you. That when the time was circumstances were just a traveler would come, and Ragnarok would be upon us. Did you know your precious council member Arturos was there? When this all happened? He was the one who requested that Skripi confined to the seven realms, with room for the stray hitchhiker who would find its way deep out of the containment zone, maybe set up a new

colony. Who knows? But what I do know is that the treaty has been violated. One of the seven was discovered in Fjallheim. It sent up a cosmic beacon that gave several of us splitting headaches for a week until we learned to tune it out.”

The Karak spoke, and then tapped her face with his dirty boot, making sure to scrape the side of his boot along her cheek.

“What do you mean?” She asked coldly.

“In the once, vibrant city surrounding the world tree, then General Arturös along with the council of nine watched as the bifrost disintegrated at Valfreyja’s feet. They had put their faith in her, and she abandoned them just as Odinn abandoned us. You couldn’t imagine the feeling of the ground beginning to shake and lift into the air. The Bifrost was gone the sapling of Yggdrasil stalled eternally by the great Valfreyja.

We will reopen the bridge and let the sapling through to each of the nine forsaken realms!”

“Did you ever stop and wonder how they float?” The man said as he happily paced on the table. “The Fjallisles as you Northerners like to say.” The Kárák said and being so pleased with himself he had the wheel cranked down two more notches.

Kara felt her legs extend in awkward directions, and could feel a sharp pain of something tearing in her right leg.

“So anyways, continents don't float without some serious Ætherial energy being in play, and what I want to know, Colonel...” The man said and then stooped down low again.

Kara could feel the Karak's lewd gaze upon her, and then she felt the warm moist air from his breath as he talked at her. She felt woozy, and couldn't make out all of his words.

He took another sip of tea and exhaled in her face again. Kara felt a even more woozy, but snapped to a sloppy upright at ready position upon hearing, “Colonel Eiryk.”

“Aye.”

“At what point in time did the Ætherial College obtain the true first crystal? When was the first guardian awoken?”

“During the second crest of Valhalla, on the eve of the Autumn Harvest Festival. The exact dates are not know, but thirty or forty years ago.”

“Stop!”

“And where did the College obtain the crystal and first hear of its existence?”

Kara dutifully replied, "Operation Fire-Walker was an expedition to meet with the Brenna-Folk on the eve of the Autumn Festival. The festival serves as both a social event, and business opportunities."

"Stop!"

The Karak drew in a deep breath.

"Tell me exactly where the Æthelial College obtained the crystal."

"The Brennafolk hold their annual harvest festival on rotating intervals, but this happened to coincide with that of the Midgardian Autumn Fall Festival."

"Stop. What does this have to do with anything?"

"This particular festival coincided with the Fire-Festival. The entire tribe gathered within the islands shadow. This sacred ritual site is, perhaps the Brenna-folk's only asset. A simple yurt with a reflecting pool. Which led to the floating island." *Hi I am back. Did you miss me? You wouldn't believe the amount of garbage these guys will eat up.*

I would wager that the Brennafolk could match Midgard in a show of strength, but their nomadic nature could give them the advantage... Always on the move, never needing to leave assets behind for the enemy to capture or to feed its brood. The curious aspect of each island is its temporal place within our universe. There seems to be a energy field of some sort that if the Skripi were to move beyond the field it would kill them over time.

“Ah yes but you forget that those egg farms you raided along the way, those weren’t just for food. I would imagine that perhaps one or two eggs may be sealed away with just a little extra care... Might... Just... Hatch so to speak, and poof nobody truly knows where the quarantine fields are now... do they?”

ugh...

Look at this knucklehead eating it up.^[6]

"Once the operative was invited into the inner sanctom they waited for the elders to open the Æthelial seal which guarded the chamber of fire. Once open, only the holiest of the Burnt, may enter. How the Æthelial

College operative pulled it off so cleanly is truly the most interesting aspect."

He grunted and slapped her across the face. Momentarily the Karak's robe slipped away from his forearm and Kara could see the ornate looking M. "STOP"

The Kárák poked her in the chest again.

To what end shall befall that hand? Maybe fisting himself one last time?

Kara paused for a moment trying to read the Karak as he stood up and began to stroke his chin.

She ignored it after a moment and continued, "The crystal was, interestingly enough, sustaining a literal fire-wall, between the Brennafolk and the Skripi lands. Captain Arturös and his father General Arturös had made it this far, they were trusted honorary members of the Brennafolk post defeat of Brenna-Beard and his, uh gang. So... Uh... they just asked to borrow it, yeah! They asked the Brenna-folk to borrow their crystal, and they would be right back in like ten, fifteen minutes, twenty tops. Easy, no...

It was a no sweat five... hour ritual, and a ten hour sacrifice ritual after that, so many prayers you know? They were praying that they may enkindle Ragnarok."

"Stop!" The Karak shouted stomping his foot sending a shockwave of pain through Kara's leg.

"It was pilfered by the Æthelial college during the last great war... Only the Alves knew of its existence. The college has an encampment half way between Slavers Bay, and Kalderstrond. Get there. You will await my instructions.

Kara bobbed her head submissively, and looked up at the Karak who spoke again, "Our aims are not too dissimilar. We both seek the crystals. But, we will not let you herald in Ragnarok; your dark guardians shall never exist again!" or at least that last bit is what I wanted to tell him

I think I heard most of the other stuff, and I maybe mumbled the rest. But, of course don't take my word for it.

Kara laughed, winced, and then laughed again before a golden shimmer covered her body. *It is about time.*

"Well you see." He motioned for the wheel to be turned two more clicks.

Kara struggled to breathe, but caught her breath after a few moments, to which the Karak spoke, "You have your orders Colonel. Jambi, Jambi,... Jambi."

ohhh tros, no way, a big red, like blood soaked, like taking a bath in the tros. Blasts through the door sending wood everywhere, and I tros you not. He screams "OHHHHH YEAH!"

The fuck?

oh, my saviors. My best friends here to save me... Ástriðr, and Bofreth. one an angel and the other, a hulking grape like creature.

Are you frickin' serious? Why woul...? okay... okay. I can ask later.

Kára could hear Bofreth shout, "In good faith release her from the table... Do you get me?" Kára hears Bofreth shout. The hooded figures are encircling the Kárák, and slowly bleeding off into the shadows.

Kára could see an annoyed look creep onto the Karaks face as he motioned for the latch on the wheel to be set free. The wheel moved in reverse as Kara began to feel the tension decrease.

Kára could feel her body being lifted away from the torture mechanism, by an angel to my right, and a grape to the left. I love you both, this wasn't a for sure mission... Kára could feel her body drop landing on the cool bouldered floor. *ow...*

Kára felt her body be lifted onto Bofreth's back. "Weee I'm on a grape! Can I get an Oh, Yeah?" Kára blurted out with slurred speech.

Kára's focus shifted quickly upon making out Ástriðr's voice. She is talking to acolytes as the three of them ran next to our grape friend

here. Isn't crazy how manuverable medicine can be? Tortured for three weeks, and your first visit is on the house!

“There...” Ástriðr peeled away at various blood stained scraps of cloth that still clung to Kára’s body. Remember that thing I bought? Anti gratuitous clothing, an Aetherial spell so powerful, it literally touches everyones brain and rewrites a portion of it. I get choose who sees what, and when. Right now... I don't have much of a choice, but these people... They are my family. Oh... She is whispering “...on her right thigh. A dark and purple spot has been spreading here, here, and here. Kára watched listlessly as she saw Ástriðr physical body separate from her Aetherial self. Can you imagine preparing for this kind of training? Kára began to get dizzy as she saw Ástriðr close her eyes and lay her hands upon her body. Ástriðr opened her hands, a pale blue glow forming and pulsating with what Kára imagined was every heartbeat. Kára could feel a cascade of energy course through her body.

Ástriðr and company paused in an alcove, somewhere on thirty five I'm sure... Go to the mines they say, have a few laughs with the boys they said. They never tell you about the torture. Kára blinked listlessly, her hand gesticulating wildly to get Ástriðr’s attention who spoke with concern, “The dark spot is no longer spreading, but it did not go away. We have to keep her stable enough to get her back to my hospital.”

“At least it doesn't hurt as bad as it did.” Kára said in a raspy voice.

Is this really something that he would do?

He is a war hero. War heroes do not do these kinds of things do they?

How do you think he ascended to the Aetherial council?

Fair enough

Kára shifted back into what felt like her body, "It is time," A raspy voice began drawing her attention to it. "It is time to finally turn our swords from each other to the common threat. We couldn't have done it without Colonel... uhh... Maester Arturös the second's regiment to drive back the hulking beast, and ultimately defeat the creatures."

"We are certainly are in agreement there." Kára found herself saying automatically, as she stared down at the sandwich in her hand. She looked at it with trepidation, little legs poked out from the sides. But she didn't care and took a bite. Relishing in the sensation of food for the first time in *What seemed to be months. Maybe some day I will tell you where I go.*

Kara looked up from her food and focused on the words the Elder was saying through his chewing, "We are in agreement in so much as we are on the same side, but the games of men do not stop on account of one man's legacy. He still chose you over his son."

Kara felt her mood sour the direction the conversation was going, and she tried to steer it elsewhere, "Well, and if you pardon my blunt nature, but this line of inquiry is best saved for him. The 2nd Fortification regiment is due here within the day. We drive 'em out, they build you up."

The elder shook his head and grunted, "But they are already here."

Kára spoke with confidence still staring at her sandwich, "At kveldi skal dag leyfa[10]. A victory is only a victory after you have won. The Skrípi, should they not be driven back... Will return. They are not to be underestimated."

"I agree, but" Bófreðr began, but Kara cut him off with her hand and said, "We are all but pawns in a larger game, but right now a foot foreword is what we all need. I hope in the name of the Nine, that we seal these demons away."

Kára could see a large smile rip across Elder Njorn's face before a great belly laugh surfaced. When it finally subsided he spoke with a joy in his voice, "I can see why he chose you."

Kára was confused, and slightly looked around to see if others understood.

Bófreðr spoke up, "These battles were most certainly decisive victories, for the first time the Skrípi had a direct route from the northern port to the southern sea. A vital supply line, and we kept it open, we held them back!"

“But why? Why now? The Skrípi has never, at least since the swarm had begun to spread, been driven this far back into their territory.” Kára bit her lip as she thought.

“Perhaps,” The Elder began, “Perhaps the universe is trying to tell us something. We just need to head south to get it.”

“Yes, we will head south.”

“Commander! Bófreðr shouted.

The Elder finished, “The Ætherial’s know more than they let on. You will hear from ussss...”

Kára looked around to see if anyone else was seeing this, but everyone else was talking to each other, or just quietly eating, or talking and eating, my favorite. No one sees a thing huh This is clearly meant for me to remember who is in control.

“I...” Kára put her hand up, and then stood looking at her captains. The Valkyrja still have a long mission ahead of them. We need to make our way to the desolate coast. I can’t exactly tell you why, but I can tell you we will be coming across some very protective Ætherial knights.

We will have to contend with the Skrípi with whom we will destroy at every opportunity. We will drive them down through the Hallr Canyons all the way to the mouth of Vestr Kaldr Smár Ljómi, and back to where this invasion began. We are going to retake Kaldrheim[11] , and reclaim the gate.”

Kára's attention was snapped back to the Elder at the arrival of one of his servants. The young man leaned in and spoke to Elder Njorn before disappearing again. The look on the Elder’s face had soured.

"It seems that the commander of the 2nd Fortification Regiment wishes to speak to, Colonel Eiryk." The Elder spoke softly.

"If you will excuse me." Kára rose before continuing, "We thank you for your hospitality. Bófreðr." Kára gestured to Bófreðr, "You are with me. Nevek, Talik I want you to bolster our forces on the ramparts, and I need a situation report from the rangers."

"Yes...? Colonel." They both replied, bowed and left. Kára turned to the elder, "Apologies, but I must cut our visit short." Kára said politely as she rose and took a slight bow. As she stood she could see her officers following suit.

"Yes, yes by all means. When you are done with him, if you wouldn't mind sending in that boy... so that I might find out how he plans on helping my people."

"Absolutely..." Kára said awkwardly before exiting.

As Kára exited the Elders home she could feel a sense of her anxiety build. *I've always felt uneasy around Arturo's II.*

Bófreðr placed his hand on Kára's shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze. "Tell me you have a good reason for sending us to a place where the sheer act of crossing the border violates Council directive."

"Uh, huh... torture. Now shhh..." Kára acknowledged but was on autopilot as they walked. *Now execute the plan as intended... Please..*

Please help me..

