



PATH TO A TRUE CALLING

A-KZ-C

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*Kortme' paxtma ur tarj'fed Vraste' —
Daf da bamons'sot da mour daf'tem sosh'sot —
Du'shem daf targje'sot targda'sot, subma, tarv'du,
un pasva ur di'fed'Kosh —*

Kortme' vowed to destroy the world.
After the winter solstice a child will be born.
She will provide peace, love, cooperation,
and understanding to all races.

PATH TO A TRUE CALLING



Part 1: To Forge a Hamr

A Mother's Burden	6
Mouse in the Jaws of the Ice Dragon	13
Three Hells of Vraste'	37
Vastrokk's Vent, Hammers of Time	51
Tormentor of Margrouln Forge, Wickedness of Men	62
Taskmaster of Margrouln Forge, Smith of Souls	73
Tergiversator of Margrouln Forge, Of Carbon and Sin	82

Part 2: Of Wielded Hamrs

Pathfinder	103
Mark of Not	115
Nowhere's Fork	125
Life's Winding Path	138
Northern Mouse, Southern Hamr	160
Beauty's Toll	175
Know your Hammer	199

To FORGE A HAMR

A MOTHER'S BURDEN

*T'dok do'kref sosh'pex den'sot ut'tam —
No human's life story begins alone.*

On the last day of the year's third-ninth, a Hamr slave stole away from lush fields to the adjoining woods. Like all women in this savage land, they expected Shanee to shame herself elsewhere. Barefoot and dressed in rags, her hands cradled a heavy belly as she trekked northward toward a cool subarctic breeze, away from Moragan's Wall through Toulukk, Valley of the Ice Dragon, lands of the Hamr.

Hardwood trees blended with conifer shifted to birch, cedar, and tamarack. Confined by sheer five-hundred-foot canyon walls scoured pristine by ancient glaciers, its woodlands ended at a distinct line across the valley. Massive glacial erratics littered a vast field of thigh-high grasses and reminded Shanee of her homeland. She checked her back trail and panned over the landscape. No one had seen her.

Far to her left, beside a turquoise glacial lake, perhaps sixty naked women surrounded a large rock inscribed with names of lost whalers upon it. The shem threatened the gods and prayed to the spirit pike Sceas to ask his cousin Sceat — the spirit swordfish — to safely return their groth to them. With their arms slashed and bleeding, each shem waded into the frigid water; they wailed, lamented, and hoped Sceas would bite them in acceptance of their prayer.

Shanee clutched her belly, crouched low, and moved away from the scree-littered cliff's base and out from the tree line to a large boulder. With her way now clear, she kept to the moss and wildflower-flanked

path that weaved through countless heaps of smooth stones until she reached a stream that marked the valley's axis. She shuffled up its adjacent trail and prayed to Shonaeshan spirits, the only true spirits Shonaesh claimed.

Most importantly, she prayed her child would be groth to discourage the indignities women faced in Toulokk. If the child were shem, she prayed it born still — never to suffer the anguish inflicted by these terrible people in this brutal land.

Whether the man that had filled her belly was Hamr or an ut'Hamr slave, she didn't know. In this hellish place, everyone raped every other. Thankfully, Hamr refused to take elves or dwarves as slaves; it eliminated the chance of deformities like all such half-bloods. A barbarian slave of another clan might be tolerable, though his birth would be difficult. Shanee hoped it had been another Shonaeshan slave to encourage her child's longing for his people.

She smiled at the thought yet stumbled and grimaced from a pain that urged her to hasten. Wildflowers diminished to glacial drift, and soft soil surrendered to scrub and lichen. The cleared path weaved through stone moraines, kettles, and drumlins until it veered back toward the braided stream beside Moragan's Pillar. Shanee shuffled past the porous rock with Moragan's insights chiseled into it. *Just more Hamr lies.*

Perhaps as punishment for her blasphemy, pain gripped her gut, and a surge of hot fluid gushed from her. Shanee forced herself to hurry. The granite canyon's sheer cliffs sloped toward their base, and the valley widened. She saw the blue glacier's receding edge in the distance, raced to it, collapsed to her knees, and waited.

Her shadow grew long with her mouth covered to muffle her wailing. The pain increased, grew longer, and more frequent until she

could bear it no more. She smashed a chunk of obsidian against a rock and selected a razor-sharp shard. Shanee crawled beside the frigid stream until she found a deep pool she could straddle and squat over. Upon the next surge of pain, Shanee screamed and was answered.

“Ut’varta, ut’varta,” returning whalers shouted for her to silence as they climbed down the glacier’s edge. “Ut’varta du ut’zanta, tarkd’dorj shem’sot ...” The long line of men, bearing their hunt’s bounty, continued to berate her as each spit on the ground when they passed.

Another wave of pain stabbed at her. She covered her mouth to withhold her scream before they gagged her as threatened. Her suffering meant nothing to them: only concerned that she did not deceive their praying women with her ice-banshee-like keening. Shanee shuddered and wept in silence.

Once she was confident the men had reached their women, Shanee could hold back no longer. She struggled to a squat and bore down. The pain and tension were excruciating; it burned, she felt ripped asunder, gave up, yet pushed again, and the pressure gave way with a splash into the water. Shanee collapsed to her knees and jerked her child from the stream’s frigid flow. It screamed. Once her eyes cleared, Shanee wailed in sorrow. It was a shem’mour, a girl.

It felt like hours before she could cut their bond once it ceased pulsing. Shanee swaddled her child with her ragged clothes and forced herself up. Within a few steps, she cramped and reflexively pushed, voiding the remnants of their connection. She shuffled naked, thighs streaked with the birth’s evidence, southward along the path. Her baby began to suckle once they reached the glacial lake, and she frowned.

There was no way to escape the Hamr, and how they viewed children ensured their onslaught. Up ahead, people were deep in the throes of celebrating the Festival of the Hunt for the Great Tusked

Whale. She wished childbirth's anguish returned. With her pain eased, she sporadically understood their shouted, guttural hatefulness.

“Du'tem tdok Hamr!”

“You're not Hamr.”

“Invader!”

“Warm your steel un kill da ut'Hamr!”

A few quickly swelled to hundreds as warriors, common folk, and slaves rushed to form a gauntlet. They took up arms, shouted, lunged, and waved their fists. Each warned they would defend Toulukk. The joyous annual celebration shifted to a call to battle, all their hate and rage directed toward Shanee's baby.

Shanee lowered her head, cringed around her child, and tried to ignore them as she moved through the village. Her baby needed a name before she lost it forever. One that struck fear into these savage barbarians, and she decided upon something Shonaeshan.

All of Vaste' knew of Valkyrie and the violent tempests that preceded them. Valkyries' Storm; Valkstae, in the Hamr's crude language. *Vauwlk·schtey*, as they would say it.

With their celebration disrupted, the Hamr's furor intensified, and the gauntlet narrowed as she entered the warrior's hall. Sticks became swords and battle axes. Berserkers charged and slashed their breasts. Varied shouts grew to a roared chant by all in the packed space, “Tam tem Hamr. Sosh'fed da tarkd ut'Kocve' ut'frey mour; we are Hammer. Kill the unfaithful enemy child.”

They could see Valkstae's differences; white hair, her skin a russet amber hue like all Shonaeshan newborns. Shanee prayed her child had green-tinged amber eyes like all Shonaesh. She pulled Valkstae from her breast and held her out toward the moragan, leader of the clan.

Konneratt charged out from the warriors and sank his battle ax into the floor. “Bring me Moragan’s Hammer,” he roared. He slipped off his massive ring and discreetly handed it to a shaman. The people’s fury and posturing escalated. In minutes, they brought him Moragan’s Hammer that had split the glacier and killed its ice dragon; upon the dragon’s tail stinger embedded in it, his heated ring glowed.

“Pas’du verta’fed da Hamr,” he shouted at Shanee, asking who threatened the clan.

“Valkstae,” Shanee whimpered. Her child was doomed.

The moment’s seriousness demanded those in attendance suppress their snickers. They set the tail spike’s tip to the moragan’s deeply scarred finger. The ring slipped down it — his finger smoldered. He grasped the hammer and raised it above his head. “Tom ut’sastva Valkstae, du’tem tdok Hamr!” Konneratt bellowed that he didn’t know her, and she was not Hamr.

Enraged, Konneratt swung Moragan’s Hammer yet missed Valkstae and pressed the searing ring on his fist to the side of her buttocks. Valkstae shrieked her defiance. The moragan recoiled, lowered the hammer to the floor, and dropped to one knee, head bowed. “Tom vemta’sot ur Valkstae.”

The moment the moragan yielded in battle, word passed throughout Toulukk. Everyone silenced and dropped to a knee, except the moragan’s wife. Halmace stepped past Konneratt and took Valkstae from Shanee. She looked her over, noting the brand on her hip.

“I know this child,” Halmace shouted. “She is Valkstae, Valkstae of the Moragan Hamr.”

Everyone rose and surged forward as they called out their lies. “Valkstae is my niece; my sister; my daughter; my cousin; my granddaughter.”

The festival could wait; this was more important. Valkstae’s birth was a good sign, another blessing after a successful hunt. Shaman protected Valkstae’s skin with whale oil and tended her brand with herbal bear grease salves. The Hamr passed Valkstae amongst them. They praised her beautiful skin and hair, stated she would strike fear into the Hamr gods, rule over all other races, accomplish great feats, and if they were fortunate, she might choose to submit — fall in love — with their sons and daughters.

A warrior glared into Valkstae’s eyes. “Rumiel! My sister Valkstae is rumiel.”

The people cheered. She bore the glacier-blue eyes of Moragan of the North — a direct descendant — his legacy within her. Shanee ignored the people who tried to tend and congratulate her as she crawled to a corner, broke down, and wept. One of these barbarians had spawned Valkstae, and Shanee knew she had lost her forever.

The next few years were difficult for Shanee. Everyone praised Valkstae’s clever name. Unlike Shonaeshan names such as Fierce Hawk, Swaying Pine, and the like, Hamr names stood on their own. Since ‘walk’ meant rodent and ‘stae’ weather in Hamr, Valkstae translated as weather mouse, a chipmunk. It ensured she would encounter cruel taunts and conflicts, which would make her strong and build character.

Whether a warrior, common, or slave, every woman whose breast wept life fed Valkstae — like all children in Toulouk. They would rock and praise her as she suckled. Each told her of their people, customs, and lands, whether Hamr or slave. With so much idle time, warrior males changed and played with her most often, and everyone beamed as they gazed at her.

As they had for years, the common people urged Shanee to leave

the fields and try every other trade to determine what she liked best. Farming was performed by those who chose it and newer slaves until they found their kefa'sosh, or path of life and true calling.

The Hamr continued to pressure her to take whatever food and drink she desired, better clothing and goods, cease sleeping in the open or stables, socialize, enjoy life, and participate in the festivals. Life here was open to all, and everything was free. They only asked that you demand it. If not for herself, then do it for Valkstae.

Oh, how she hated these monsters.

MOUSE IN THE JAWS OF THE ICE DRAGON

As she did on most days, Valkstae scaled the platforms to the parapet atop Moragan's Wall, which sealed the valley; no small feat for a young shem'mour. She relished watching Lus rise each morning and secretly loved how the goddess Kortme' painted the sky every dawn and dusk; Vraste' her canvas.

She would never say that openly. Kortme' was evil after all, aligned with Jagdnict the Coward, Barth, and Wespa — each unfaithful to the purpose of Vraste'. At seven winters old, the trials of life to make you strong meant little to her. The joy, wonder, and love Kortme' professed filled Valkstae's heart. So maybe she had a little ut'Kocve' dor'fed — unfaithful evil — within her.

Valkstae turned her back to the bickering spirit triplet sisters DaVostt as their warm breath cascaded over the wall and looked toward Korvath, the spirit north wind. Her gaze panned over Toulukk between the valley's sheer granite walls, and she smiled. Everyone had started their day. They weaved between timber and stone structures along packed earth and flagstone paths, anxious to work.

Toulukk was a wonderful place, and Hamr cherished children. People did not just claim to be your relative; they felt it in their hearts and lived it. Everyone went out of their way to make you strong. Each shared their knowledge and what they had learned throughout their trials of life. They praised your efforts no matter how successful and always taught you a little more.

Everyone encouraged her to take chances and face her fears. They would build you up, raise you higher — Valkstae snorted and laughed

— and punish you when ut’Kocve’, like Uncle Reccah had when the boys teased her. He waited until Walfer punched her shoulder and gave her three swats on her rump for not hitting him back.

She frowned at the thought. Not from his spanking; Valkstae adored his paternal guidance, but like everyone here, he had lost many of his own seed’s children. Almost every shem — except her mother — bore six, seven, or even twelve. They would lose half their newborn mour within months and half of those remaining in the years that followed. So everyone adopted every other and treated them like family.

Valkstae wondered what she would learn this day. Warriors had nothing more to teach her about standing watch. Once down to the village, Valkstae weaved along the paths to find what needed doing. She felt Jagdnict’s cowardice prod her to avoid the field Shanee worked in, and he urged her to sneak and hide from inevitable conflicts.

The rule was the same for everyone here, whether warriors, common, or slaves.

*Vot do lums un tarv —
Pus du ba’ de ut’taub’fed kregdt’sot, taub’fed de —
Tarv’tauc de vrog’fed, fern’vauk de vrit, tarv’hamr de hise —
Targja’mom do sastva un sostva —*

Fill your days with work.

If you see an unfinished ditch, finish it.

Pluck the fruit, bake the bread, hammer the steel.

Earn your knowledge and experience.

Valkstae peeked into every Hamr’mom’s cumas as she looked for work to start her day. Warriors were the ruling class, yet common people possessed all the wealth and property. They had the largest cuma’frey to house their many children, extended families, and slaves who chose

their profession. They owned all the cuma'tarvs they worked out of, barns, and spring houses — every structure except the warrior's hall and shaman's cave.

She once asked why they cluttered their buildings with so many goods: armor and weapons, jewelry and clothing, pots, pans, and farming implements. It determined their status. Not what they owned but how much they could acquire to give to anyone who needed it. With each person helped, their reputation grew as a good Hamr, Kocve', faithful.

Most adults were already busy on their path to a true calling. They had tried every profession and tried them again each Festival of the Harvest when everyone devised competitions for their trade, and everyone else competed, laughed, and cheered. Who could chop the most wood, throw a spear the farthest, glean the most grain, or scribe silver? Fat-fingered warriors always had trouble with that, to everyone's amusement.

Slaves often changed jobs until they found which profession they liked most. As a child, she didn't know her path yet, so she tried everything that needed doing.

"Doj lusa'sot, Valkstae," a woman called good morning out her window as Valkstae passed. Turra beckoned Valkstae over and insisted she take some cheese, meat, and butter on a piece of bread. She thumped her chest, implying it would help Valkstae grow.

Valkstae took it and smiled. She turned and walked away but pouted, now forced to eat it. Perhaps her name was a curse. Everyone tried to get her to grow. The other children towered over her; those her age, she barely reached their breast, and they reminded her of it often.

"Lusa'sot, Valk," the first child she encountered teased. They wouldn't even call her Chipmunk. Six children this morning called her

Mouse before she got her first whack. Getta, a female warrior, smacked the crown of Valkstae's head when she ignored the last child. Valkstae thrust her hand up, formed like talons in a twisting motion, and snarled halfheartedly, "Tarkd du."

It never made sense to her. Why would anyone want to shove their claw-like hand up someone else's rump to insult them and say 'Insult you' after? You didn't really do it, but it's what the gesture implied. Getta nodded approvingly.

By mid-morning, Valkstae had twice herded goats for milking, collected six home eggs, darned a garment, carried three buckets of coal and pumped bellows for a smith, and filled four firewood larders. She did not learn anything new, which bothered her, but that was not the problem. Once the other children finally got moving, it became a race to find more work before another found it first.

"Move, Mouse," a boy shouted. He grasped her hair and yanked her backward to run past. The next, she stopped at his order — or maybe Jagdnict made her avoid the conflict. He ran by and mended the fence, and she kept looking. They were all bigger and stronger. Valkstae consoled herself with she was quick, agile, and clever. The chores were finished by mid-day, and Valkstae sighed.

She dreaded visiting her mother. Valkstae dragged her feet and tried to scowl like Shanee, only able to muster a pout.

There were three types of slaves in Toulokk. Most seemed like every other Hamr, except they didn't sport the brand. They dressed the same, worked every profession, and some even lived as warriors or shamans. Most resided in common Hamr households, the warrior hall, or shamans' cave. Some submitted to Hamr — were joined by love — had families and lived as everyone here could.

Of that group, a rare few demonstrated their loyalty to the clan and

proved through their words and actions they understood the purpose of Vraсте' and Moragan's teachings. Un'Hamr held a higher place than anyone in Toulokk, even the moragan. They had embraced Hamr ideals, chosen the Hamr way of life — not just born into it — and were treated with the utmost respect.

The next sort was a confusing breed to the Hamr. They embraced subservience and refused to remove their collars, which most slaves cast away in acts of defiance, to the Hamr's delight. Few wore clothing. When Hamr approached, they groveled and relished firm treatment in all regards.

Then there was Shanee, her mother.

“Valkstae, where have you been all morning — again? I've told you before you need to stay with me. I — why is your belly swollen? Have you been eating their food? I keep telling you if you're hungry, I'll get you something. I don't want you eating their —”

“But I —”

“Look at you. Your hands are dirty from doing their work, and what are you wearing? Take those off right now. You wear the clothes I give you or nothing.” Shanee lunged at Valkstae, grasped the waist of her pants, and jerked until she had them off her.

“Du, don't you move!” The man who owned the field stormed out to them. Newer slaves and those odd sorts dropped to the ground and submissively prostrated themselves, including Shanee. The groth'mon was enraged. His eyes were wide and his face red as he pointed and shouted.

“What do you think you're doing? It's your fault she wears rags, eats the slop for hogs, and sleeps with the animals. She languishes because you refuse to help her and only think of yourself. You never help her to learn how to live here.”

Flattened to the soil, Shanee bore the same insolent scowl she always wore. Her disdain for all things Hamr was well known throughout Touloukk. She could leave anytime she wanted. Walk through the gate in Moragan's Wall and take Valkstae with her. Instead, she brooded over some sleight even she couldn't remember. Valkstae's pout deepened, and her head lowered.

"Don't you look away from me" — the man lightly slapped Valkstae — "look in my eyes when I'm speaking to you. If you showed more pride, she would. Maybe you are just a mouse."

Valkstae raised her gaze but couldn't force her lips thin on the verge of crying.

"Because of you, every day, your mother suffers and toils to exhaustion in these fields meant for the lowest slaves. By all the gods, you're rumiel. You, above all others, should know that. She suffers because you've not helped her understand Touloukk and our people — driven her to find the life she wants, or cast her into the Dachvst so she may go home.

"You shame my field, Valkstae. The crops will grow poorly here because you're unfaithful. Take your mother out of my field, now! Make her eat something and find her some proper clothes. Shanee, go with her. Don't argue with me, or I'll get a stick. Now go."

Valkstae said nothing. He was right. But her mother treated her with the same contempt she levied against the Hamr. She pulled Shanee up and led her to the adjoining path toward the village.

Shanee turned north toward the woods at the intersection and yanked Valkstae with her. Shanee jerked off the rag covering her breasts and thrust it at Valkstae. "Put this on. I'll not have you dressing like these savages."



Life continued as it always had for Valkstae over the next two years. The other children grew faster and larger as she grew more clever to avoid them. They still called her Mouse, and since Valkstae hesitated to correct them, even some adults assumed she preferred it.

Each time, Kortme's unfaithful evil pushed into her thoughts. *Do tarv'fern'hite'mon groth'mon fern tem un'fen'fed pes tem fen'sot un ut'zara ur de Lus*; the blacksmith's fire is very hot but is cold and weak to the sun. Kortme's response for why she never fought back.

It made sense to Valkstae. Not everything was a fight, ut'Kocve' as that might be. Their name and other taunts didn't affect her — she tried to convince herself. All their derision — under the guise of strengthening her — was as unfaithful as her refusal to confront them.

Instead of seeking petty chores, Valkstae found work in the homes and workplaces of common Hamr. She accompanied hunters, helped the warriors train, and joined the harvests, hunts, and patrols in the Dachvst, outside the wall.

One day, Valkstae went to visit her mother, dreading how Shanee would scold her this day. She passed a cow with a bucket under it while other cows waited. Without a thought, Valkstae sat and began to milk it.

“Leave the cow be,” the farmer called to Valkstae. “You don't milk it right.”

Valkstae's brow raised. She had milked hundreds of cows and goats before. Still, he was the expert, and she never missed an opportunity to

learn something. “I could pull these all day. What am I doing wrong?”

The farmer and his friends — notorious drunkards — nudged each other and chuckled. “You have to suck on the teat first to get it to flow quicker. All tarv’vrag shem’mon know this. That’s why men find milkmaids so desirable.”

Valkstae moved the bucket, crawled under the cow, and stuck a teat in her mouth. She tugged and sucked until her mouth filled, and Valkstae pulled away to milk it.

“No-no, just leave it,” the farmer called again. “You have to suckle until it gushes. And pull the others at the same time to get them ready.”

Back at the same teat, she resumed her suckling and pulled on the others. It seemed wasteful. Milk streamed onto her thighs, and she swallowed each squirt. Valkstae pulled back again. “You’re feeding it too much sen-grass. It’s salty. Not thick or sweet as I expected when hot, but good. I like it.”

The men howled and urged her to move from teat to teat, sucking one as she pulled on the others. Awash with milk, Valkstae’s mother walked past, and the men called out to her. “Shanee, it looks like Mouse has found her true calling. She’s practicing.”

With word, fist, or steel, Shanee should have attacked the groth for their lewd prank, no matter whose child it may be. The men would have yielded if they did not wish to compound their sins. Shanee would have been praised like the un’Hamr Jurnos and earned respect from the clan, Valkstae, and perhaps herself.

Instead, Shanee yanked Valkstae from under the cow, and milk streamed all over her. The men hysterically laughed, and she dragged Valkstae away, shrieking at her. Those groth paid dearly for their filthy joke at the Festival of the Unfaithful — children were protected here —

but Valkstae paid for it forever. Other children teased her, but Shanee ended every discussion the same ever since.

“I’ll not have you become a whore for savages.”

Valkstae gave up trying to share with Shanee what the Hamr taught and offered. They were savages, according to Shanee. Shonaeshan children kept their place and held their tongues until adults; Valkstae’s Hamr-tainted blood, Shanee’s reason why Valkstae thought otherwise.

Without her mother’s companionship or friends her age, Valkstae would have been lonely except for Zet. A small coydog — like her, Valkstae ventured — they were inseparable. Zet was always near, and when Valkstae called, he came running. They were so close people often joked Zet was looking for Valkstae when he pounced upon clumps of grass or snow drifts.

By their very name — Kocve’kocc, faithful mammals — dogs were revered by the Hamr as sacred. They possessed all the qualities of a balanced Hamr; loyal to their pack and family, fearless in the face of overwhelming odds, intelligent, compassionate, intuitive — the list went on. Affectionately koc’koc, dogs were to Hamr the epitome of role models, brought to Vraste’ by Moragan himself to serve as an example to strive for.

Four older boys — twice Valkstae’s size — confronted her. They pushed her a little, called her names, and when they couldn’t provoke her to fight, one of the boys set his dog on her. A massive beast bred for hunting bear and stag, larger than Valkstae. It charged, teeth bared, and prepared to rip her to pieces. Zet burst from the brush and, in seconds, had mauled the monster until it ran off yelping.

Zet loosed a horrible noise and fell at Valkstae’s feet; the boy’s thrown dagger in his ribs. Valkstae was so heartbroken she couldn’t even weep and held him until he grew still. She gingerly withdrew the

knife and, shattered, on the verge of sobbing, carried the bloody blade with both hands to the boy.

“Careful, Mouse is about to chirp.” The boys laughed.

Valkstae did not understand why she did it, but she sheathed the boy’s knife for him — three times in his belly. News spread quickly, and by that afternoon, Shanee dragged Valkstae to the boy’s home.

The bandaged boy sat outside and, added to his wounds, someone had beaten him. Shanee cast Valkstae to the ground and stepped on her back to make her stay there. The family emerged, and Shanee prostrated herself and blurted an apology until silenced by the young man’s father.

The entire family respectfully dropped to their knees, hands folded as the shem’fed matron spoke. “Valkstae, we’re grateful you corrected our son’s unfaithfulness. He helped his friends harass someone smaller and weaker instead of standing with you. He forced a koc’koc to become unfaithful, and when Zet tried to show him how to live as a Kocve’ Hamr, he obeyed Jagdnict and killed perfection. Yet you showed lenience. No amount of reparation will restore the honor we —”

“No!” Shanee shrieked and rose. “That’s all wrong. She’s a slave’s daughter. Valkstae deserves punishment. I want her to learn —”

The mother slapped Shanee, silent. The warrior family was horrified and shamed further. And the respect Valkstae had earned among the Hamr — a positive turn in her life — was quickly forgotten.



Valkstae grew more reclusive over the next year. Other children continued to outpace her growth dramatically. As they matured, the Hamr encouraged fearless aggressiveness in word and action. Disparaging taunts turned to shoves, hitting, and fights. Hamr expected you to endure cruelty and weather their onslaughts. Most importantly, tenaciously stand your ground and reciprocate. The bigger and stronger they were, the better.

One day, a man appeared from the fog above the glacial erratics. Jagdnict urged her to run, yet the man mesmerized Valkstae. A warrior, taller and broader than most, his bare sun-bronzed chest adorned with countless tattoos, brands, and scars from battle. Perhaps he was Moragan of the North returned from Kolumn. His long blonde hair to bind with waved in the wind, and his piercing blue eyes shone brightly.

She slipped behind a rock and made herself small as possible. He never passed by, and Valkstae bit her lip and worked up her courage to see where he had gone. Valkstae peered around the rock. There he sat, adjacent to her — she jerked back and froze.

“Good morning, Valkstae” — his rich voice resonated — “I am Tycoum.” While Tycoum recited his trials of life — a very long, storied list of accomplishments — he set his weapons, armor, and clothing beside her. “Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” Valkstae whispered. “No ... I don’t know, I —”

“Then what should you do? Take your time. I wish to meet you.”

*Des tarvta vert'mon pes targda'mon,
do hise fed tem un'fen'mon uz vit'sot tem'vute' Kolumn —*

*Whether through words or battle,
your steel must be warm for entry into heaven.*

Afraid to grab one of his weapons, Valkstae snatched up a stick and told him she was ready. He reminded her to warm her weapon first. Valkstae screamed, “Tarkd du!” Tycoum laughed, and he said they would work on it and asked her again if she was ready to meet him. She backed up a step and whispered, “Yes.”

Tycoum seemed to grow before her eyes as he rose behind the rock. He stepped out naked, casually turned his back to her, bent over, and plucked a flower. With a broad smile, he turned back around and sat as if she weren't there. His feet parted wide, arms raised to stretch, he lowered a hand lifting his genitals, dropped them, and turned his beaming eyes toward Valkstae.

*Des da kochtra fed pes sot, ut de di'tauk un folm,
du pux'fed du'tem puxva'fed un tem'targ'mon —*
Whether a host or guest, devoid of arms and armor,
you prove you're trustworthy and unafraid.

Already unclothed like many people in Toulukk on such days, Valkstae smiled and mimicked his actions. She sat across from him and stated her dour'Vraste'. “I am Valkstae, Valkstae of Toulukk. Daughter of Shanee, a slave and ... uh, Valkstae of the Moragan Hamr.”

Considerably more brief than Tycoum's trials of life, he did not laugh and hung on every word as though deeply important. “When you tell another your name and trials of life — which will come — the pride you exhibit is how you will be received. It makes no difference if your mother is a slave or the moragan. Just say, ‘Shanee,’ and you have a father, all the Hamr. Other children only have one, but don't tease them about it.” And he winked.

*Do dour un Vraste' tem tdok da vorta'fed pes verta'fed —
De tem da zanka'mon daf du'fed pos vamta'mon do vert un targda'vute' —*

Your name and trials of life are neither a boast nor threat.
It is a courtesy so others may temper their words and actions.

“Your eyes prove it. Your fathers, like mine, stretch back to the very first Hamr. We are rumiel and, as such, bear a great responsibility. Walk with me to Moragan’s Pillar. We will talk and learn of each other and speak of many things.”

With a hand to his knee to help him raise, he flexed it, arched his back to make it crack, and extended his hand. Valkstae stared at him with her lower lip in a pout, considering his request. She took his hand, he pulled her up, and they held hands all the way to the pillar.

When she returned to Toulökk that day, Valkstae wore a long lock of blonde hair knotted into hers, missing a lock itself. People were impressed. Children never bound a promise, and adults reserved doing so for only the most important reasons. It was the first time Valkstae stood her ground with Shanee. She tried to tell her who he was and what they discussed. Shanee refused to listen, but the lock of hair remained.

*Da do'Hamr pax tem tdok'tarj —
Da pax'fed tem un'fep'fed do dourve' —*

A Hamr’s vow is unbreakable.
A bound-promise forever-binds your soul.

Over the next three years, Valkstae was often seen with Tycoum in the village, glacial areas, and even far into the Dachvst as they discussed many things. She referred to him as Dawme’noth, a term of great respect. They initially spent much of their time at the pillar. Tycoum

read to her Moragan’s tenets as he taught her to read Hamr, a rare skill on Vraste’.

*Sauda da Hamr Kocve’ un sastva un du’fed kref,
un’det de’kosh —*

**Share the Hamr faith and knowledge with all people,
regardless of race.**

He told how Moragan — their common ancestor — heard the dragon’s scales scraping beneath the glacier and struck it with his hammer. It split to where they now stood, and Moragan followed the crack until he found its lair. Moragan fought the beast for three days until he struck its glowing eye. The dragon’s molten blood gushed and melted the glacier as it formed the pillar.

“His legacy is within you, passed down through all your fathers. Moragan took Toulukk from the ice dragon, but all its wealth, wonder, and security is part of the land, so we must fight to keep it. As long as it is Hamr, it is yours until time’s end. Most importantly, Moragan taught us the secret to best the gods, others, and ourselves is balance. The gods’ arrogance and lack of respect are ut’Kocve’. So we’re stronger.

*Un’Moragan ut’vamta, ut’zanfa, ut’zanka —
Hamr tem’tam un’Moragan, pes Kocve’ un tem’mom —
Kobuumn tem do’tam daf targva’fed —*

**Gods lack self-control, respect, and honor.
Hamr are like gods, yet faithful and balanced.
Heaven is yours to conquer.**

“It is why we say ut, tem, un — sot, mon, fed. Less, equal, more — weak, balanced, excessive; slave, common, warrior. Like steel. Iron is

soft, but once hardened, steel is brittle. So you must temper it to make it tough, bend but not break, and return to its shape. It is the same with people.

“We Hamr claim that we are balanced, Kocve’mon; it is our only lie. No Hamr is as faithful as — Zet. Slaves do not demand their human rights. Common people claim balance yet lust for property to obtain pride and status. And warriors, groth and shem’fed — well, we are so unbalanced we’re excluded from the Custom of Planting, as we should be. Seek humble balance. When you find it, continually demand it from yourself and guide others to discover what you have found.”

Tycoum often shared his annual experiences among the Dachvst’s many races while Perpetuating the Faith. His tales always seemed to lead back to Valkstae and her troubles. She told him how the larger and stronger children taunted her and of their brutality. He listened intently, smiled, and thought a moment.

“Ut’Hamr in the Dachvst and slaves are weak, so we make them hard and defiant. Some will temper to common folk; others will turn fed, akin to warriors, brittle and fragile — like our egos.” Tycoum laughed. “It is the same for children.

“Some — few — can be taught as Moragan did with us before we were Hamr. Others require hardship and suffering to strip them of their complacency. So we war, oppress, and enslave — but then we build them up and instill resolve to never suffer again. Since children have never had and lost, they need to learn through experience.

*Targwu’fed du’mon tem vempta’sot un targza —
Targwu’sot du’mon tem sot un un’tarv’targwu —
Tarv’un’vut un un’tarv’fed du’fed kref, un’def da Kocve’mon —*

Force those who are passive with aggression.
Guide those who are weak with help.
Raise and strengthen every human, perpetuate the faith.

“However, children misunderstand why we use strength and force, blunt words, and harsh actions. They do not grasp the value of strengthening another to raise them — make them better — and are unfaithful until they do. You are ut’Kocve’ in the same manner.”

Valkstae was aghast. She never tormented and attacked the other children, and she explained. He listened and smiled.

“You allow fear to dominate your actions, and it simmers within you. For that, you are ut’Kocve’, but you bear an even greater sin by avoiding them. You do not guide or give them a chance to succeed and do better; you do not improve them and make them stronger. They must learn that strength is not the force of their hands or words but the restraint and compassion they show all others. It is also important for you to teach them self-control when someone weaker and smaller is aggressive toward them.

Tar’fanva fanva pes tdok’di’fed un —
Fear fear but nothing else.

“That is why Vraste’ does not mean the world; it means the place of learning and trials of life. Hamr were put here last to use all that came before us to make Kref, human races, stronger. Even ut’Kref, civilized humans. Ut’kosh, the ancient, lesser races will never learn. Ut’Eif, ut’Kochda, and ut’Kregda — mourkra, troll, ogre, and all the spirit, reptilian, and beast races’ time is over. The gods did not destroy them, so we have an anvil to strike against.”

She understood what he meant, but the idea of perpetually being

the rock others broke themselves upon as they improved themselves was not how she envisioned her life. Valkstae asked him why her mother hated her, the Hamr, and reminded her daily she was a bastard child of rape. Tycoum’s mouth churned until he spat on the ground beside them.

*Des ut’varta pes den’daf du verta,
ut do unCribf di kupra’fed, dorv, un kectva,
daf’pes di ras do dourve’ —*

Whether silent or before you speak,
rid your mouth of hatred, cruelty, and bitterness,
lest they poison your soul.

Tycoum scowled and explained that Shanee’s people did not understand the Hamr belief in facing problems, quickly resolving them with finality, and it was over. Shonaesh believed the threat of maintaining a grudge forever warded off even the smallest slight. Shanee was angry. Her father had traded her and others to the Hamr in his bid for peace.

He could not say whether a slave had ever rush’fed her, and she had never participated in the Custom of Planting. But no Hamr had raped her. She prodded some to threaten her with it to inspire her resistance so she might find strength and independence within herself. They intended to yield to her — yet by then, she understood Hamr philosophies and conduct and challenged them to do so.

“The men were shamed by her. It’s a sin to refuse a shem who has issued a challenge of sex and a sin to harm another who is weaker when it will not strengthen them.”

*Groth daf’tarje du dourve’ un rush un submit,
pes shem gost dors de —
Tdok’fed ut’pos’sot du kocva’daf’targje —*

Men offer their soul with sex and love,
but women must bear it.
Never refuse their sacred invitation.

She had never considered how cruel her mother's submissive obstinance could be. Valkstae mentioned that daily Shanee stated she would become a whore, though she didn't understand what it meant.

"Oh" — Tycoum chuckled — "that is because Shanee doesn't understand the great responsibility and power a tarv'rush'mon bears. To her, it is a dor thing, bad. A doj provider of sex who is Kocve' — not like the goddess Wespa — can accomplish great things, help many people, and change the face of Vraste'. But you have many years ahead before you need to consider such things."

Eventually, Valkstae confessed that she had many ut'Kocve' thoughts. She feared Jagdnict's influence yet surrendered to it by doing so. Valkstae also shared that she loved Kortme's creations and philosophy on conflict. She knew Kortme' was evil. However, she craved the joy, wonder, and love she professed.

Tycoum laughed. "As do we all. Kortme' is not evil. She does not understand that the purpose of Vraste' is to strengthen us so we may fight our way into Kolumn. If we do as she teaches, we become content and complacent and help no one or ourselves. Although, your hiding is not the same as enduring, which she does."

In time, Tycoum's teachings became debates as they discussed Valkstae's gentler beliefs. He countered with Hamr truths, though never corrected her. He stated that only she could determine her life's path.

After three winters, one day, Tycoum seemed uncomfortable as they sat and talked, facing one another. He would not look into her

eyes, his subdued smile and responses felt distant, and he told her he must return to the Dachvst in the morning. Valkstae begged him to stay, but he would not.

Tycoum was gone by morning. And Valkstae became more confused than ever as her childish innocence collided with the urges of ignorant maturity.

Oh, how I love him, Valkstae wept.



On the last day of the year's third-ninth, a Hamr shem'mour stole away from the village to the adjoining woods. Like all shem in this savage land, this was a special day for her. Barefoot and naked, her hands picked trillium as Valkstae trekked northward toward Korvath's cool breath, away from Moragan's Wall through Toulukk, Valley of the Ice Dragon, lands of the Hamr.

She passed the glacial lake, erratic cluttered grasslands, and blossomed trails until she slipped into a hot spring near Moragan's Pillar. Valkstae scrubbed her paled skin with sand until it glowed in a lustrous, rose-blushed, amber hue. After she washed her hair and checked for her promise, Valkstae set to work to mark the day.

Valkstae wove the sacred flowers into a crowning wreath. Whalers returning from their annual hunt streamed past, struggling to bear their bounty. As predicted, the blessing of her birth had compounded each year since. Now eighteen kot'feds later, they carried a massive tusk, larger than ever seen, blessed again by Valkstae's milestone.

"Doj lusa'sot, shem'mon Valkstae," each stated as they passed.

Good morning, common-woman Valkstae; no longer a shem-mour, today an adult of the Hamr.

On such days, shem's usually bleached their skin and hair to appear reborn and rumiel. Valkstae decided she preferred her Shonaeshan half-blood hue. She crushed up stainberries, dripped them into her eyes, and shuddered. It stung like fire briefly as the juice tinged her lids' rims a deep sapphire about her glacier-blue eyes.

A thorn dipped into more berries pricked three dots like points of a triangle into her wrist's skin. She ground more juice into the wounds and fixed the sacred stained count forever. She would never be a shem'mour again. A gentle warm breath from DaVostt'mon bid her southward. Valkstae took her first step as a woman, alone and away from the glacier as Moragan had.

It seemed every important moment in Toulukk began here. The warriors' first steps as they set out to Perpetuate the Faith, someone embarking on a great quest, to submit to their heart's love, give birth to a child, go to war, come of age, or countless other life-changing moments. Perhaps for good fortune, tradition, or maybe like Moragan of the North as he set out to teach the Hamr and change Vraste'. Today was her day, and like every other who made the Glacier Walk, she enthusiastically faced her unforeseeable future.

People up ahead were deep in the throes of celebrating the Trupda'mon tem da Taup tem de fed utCrit Tauk sen Vosh'mon; Festival of the Hunt for the Great Tusked Whale. Valkstae wished Tycoum were there, and the thought roused a shiver. Once they saw her, word spread, and the Hamr formed a gauntlet.

The population greeted her almost the same. "Doj'fed lusa, shem'mon Valkstae." An exceptional day, common-woman Valkstae,

although many still called her Mouse. She had grown to hate the name but long ago ceased fighting it.

The Hamr beamed. They all commented on her beautiful form, skin, hair, and eyes. More than a few men and women flirtatiously clutched their genitals in recognition of her maturity. Shem'mour longingly looked on as they imagined their day in the future. Valkstae walked directly into the warrior's hall, now allowed unescorted. She crossed the threshold, and a mighty cheer sounded.

"Valkstae! She blessed the hunt again." They commented how her birth, coming of age, and born rumiel were all good omens. "Valkstae first! Have her anoint the tusk with her blessing." They pulled her to the largest tusk ever harvested. White with a quick twist like a unicorn's horn, the thick tusk was nine strides long and lay across supports at its ends as shamans smoothed oils over it.

They grabbed her, and Valkstae froze, confused and afraid of what new torment her clansmen had devised. They bound her forearms behind her back, hoisted her up, and over the tusk straddling it. Four whalers grasped her legs, and two others supported her torso.

Everyone shouted in unison, "Ka, ke, ko, kef'fed!"

The men ran, dragging Valkstae's rut along the tusk. At half its length, her head slammed back as she shook and yelled, "Holos!" The goddess's name most women prayed to.

No shem ever resisted blessing the tusk. The people cheered as Valkstae gained her senses. The whalers shouted once more. "Bless us again. One, two, three, run!"

They ran her back to the starting end. Valkstae thrashed and loosed a groan like an ogre before she collapsed, shuddering upon the tusk, laughing uncontrollably. After a minute, Valkstae sat up and looked

over the men. “Again.” And she counted with them, “One, two, three, run!”

One blessing was enough for most women. Two were rare, three unheard of, and after her fourth time, Valkstae begged them to let her down. The people were in awe. Her birth, reaching adulthood, and now four blessings ensured a bountiful future for the clan. They unbound her arms and soothed her shoulders. Valkstae crumpled and kneeled on the floor. Her head raised, and she panned over the assemblage packed around her.

Some panted with lips parted as they all gazed at her in wonder. The men’s roots before her were turgid and pulsing. She panned her gaze, and the women’s folds to inner thighs glistened, slick as though a shaman had oiled them. A hand gently set to her shoulder, and soft lips pressed to her ear.

“Like licking honey seeping from a tree” — Valkstae’s gaze swept back to the cluster of men — “like milking a cow.” She guessed the voice was Moragan’s hedonistic younger brother Rottem.

Open sex in the warrior hall was commonplace; during festivals guaranteed, the annual Orgy of Balance just one example. Valkstae rose to her knees and lapped or suckled any before her. A man asked if he could bless his root to ensure his future offspring’s good fortune. They moved her to a lush fur-covered tree stump within the hall. She crawled up on it and raised to all fours.

Her lips and tongue continued exploring, and the man dragged his soft root through her slick furrow to bless it. Each groth that sought her blessing did the same. Some shem traced her crease with their fingers to anoint their own. Others lapped her seemingly never-ending supply of honey, and a few lingered so long she blessed their tongue like she had the tusk.

Perhaps the twentieth man who sought her blessing — a warrior — slipped his root from her bud to vent three times as it grew to a tusk, and he paused at her core. He asked if he could rush with her. Virginity meant nothing to the Hamr; it was simply a stage of life, as was promiscuity. Every groth's root had filled every shem's well, and every child might be his own. It firmed the bond between the people, eliminated jealousy and fights, and the Hamr became one.

*Tam'fed groth vot tam'fed shem un do vrig,
un trupda vut da taub'fed tem do di'tam mour —*

*Every man fill every woman with your seed,
and rejoice in the bounty of your communal offspring.*

Valkstae smiled around the tusk in her mouth, paused, and imagined Tycoum. She parted her knees, braced, and another of life's mysteries revealed itself.

After her long day, Valkstae ventured it was the best coming of age any shem had ever known. Valkstae gingerly limped from the hall; parts she never imagined became sore and swollen were, in a good way. Slick with sweat, covered and filled with the seed and flow of her clansmen, Valkstae glowed as she shuffled up the street naked. She laughed at her fading, immature infatuation for Tycoum and now viewed him as her most loving of many fathers.

At each house she passed, the people smiled and nodded. They respectfully called her 'Dawme'nem' and discussed Valkstae's day with their friends, and she listened.

They wondered if she had found her true calling. Everyone praised her for blessing so many people on her special day. Because of her, the women she rushed with, their wombs would become fertile, the men filled with vitality, and their resulting offspring healthy and strong.

Many speculated Valkstae might become a provider of sex. She would bring great honor to the clan, strike fear into their enemies, and strengthen alliances as Valkstae became a wealthy, powerful, and influential shem'mon, helping many people and the Hamr.

*Zanka un zanfa do tarv'rush'mon —
Du'mon daf tarv'un'vut tem'moragan'fed'kochtraam,
pes tarj'fed de —*

*Honor and respect your sex workers.
They can raise empires,
or destroy them.*

Shanee brooded up ahead with a deep scowl on her lips. Valkstae sighed but decided to ease her mother's fears, endure her abuse, and hopefully make her stronger. Shanee said nothing as she grabbed Valkstae's hair and yanked her down the path toward the wall. She could barely walk, let alone fight, and struggled to protect her promise.

Once to the small postern gate, Shanee flung Valkstae through it and slammed the door. Seconds later, Valkstae heard its sealing stone roll into place, locking her out of Toulukk, Valley of the Ice Dragon.

She ran into the clearing between the ancient forest and the wall built into the canyon's shoulders; impenetrable, over twenty warriors tall, adorned at the top by hundreds of narwhal and walrus tusks. Everyone inside was celebrating. No one would hear her. The forest's shadow raced up the sunset-painted wall and proclaimed twilight's arrival.

The worst things on Vraste prowled the Dachvst outside the wall each night. Valkstae was trapped, and they all liked mice for supper.

THREE HELLS OF VRASTE'

Valkstae pounded on the stone-buttressed door, which made no sound so thick and heavy. She backed away from the wall that even obstructed Korvath's cool breath. Her mouth gaped, and she slapped a hand over it, about to scream. Things in the forest silently waited for nightfall.

She swept her gaze over the Dachvst and its surrounding forest. Valkstae sprinted east toward DaVostt'sot but skidded to a stop and bolted the opposite way toward DaVostt'fed, yet stopped again. If she remained in the open, she was dead or worse.

In a mad dash, Valkstae raced for the forest toward DaVostt'mon and hoped nothing waited where she entered. She ran through ferns so dense they obscured her legs. Valkstae slowed, crouched, and kept moving. If she stumbled over something and hurt herself, the things would surely find her. Terrible furry or scaled things: wolves, panthers, bears, and dragon-like beasts that hunted by scent, though they weren't the worst things out here.

Valkstae could already see Lur's glow complementing twilight, and this soon after the solstice, Lum — the second moon — was close behind. Valkstae stopped and panned around her, unable to see the wall through the dense foliage and ancient trees so large it took a hundred men to link around them. *Not far enough*, and as she began to tremble, Valkstae turned back south, she hoped.

Ferns gave way to mayapples, mushrooms, and vine-engulfed deadfall tangles. She lowered near a log, closed her eyes, and listened. Footfalls of deer sounded like solitary raindrops; those of squirrels thundered like stampeding horses. Leaves rustled in every direction.

Insects buzzed, tree frogs sang, and a thousand other sounds by plant and beast, muffled and confused by her pounding heartbeat.

Uh, uh, uh, low, graveled grunts, every other step grew closer. Valkstae bolted away from the bear. Her legs burned, and her lungs rasped, yet Valkstae ran until she tripped and sprawled in the leaves that carpeted the Dachvst.

Evening twilight intensified by Lur's blue cast suddenly flared and brightened as Lum crest the horizon. Dimmer than sunshine, with daylight's glare gone, the luminous moons' intensified colors, enhanced contrast, and defined detail as smoky shadows shifted to maroon or blue depending on each moon's angle.

Her stuttered breaths amplified her shaking as she gasped each sob. There was nowhere to hide. Hollow trees and logs were homes to beasts and wicked things, and under rocks or in caves — the Kregdach — held worse things still. Valkstae thought she heard something and froze; her head whipped right when she heard it again, the muted ting of metal.

Valkstae raced toward the sound in the hope they were returning hunters. Dry leaves crunched and sticks snapped as she ran up a fern-covered rise, then down, and saw the forest ended just past the next one. She crested the second hill but abruptly stopped — and crouched in the foliage, confused by what she saw. Four parallel trails cut through a large clearing of knee-high grasses. It didn't make sense. Hunters traveled single file.

Something glinted to her left as the subdued singular tings shifted to many. She lowered to her belly under the ferns, and the trail's source came into view; four columns of four hundred elven soldiers, with thirty Eif on horseback at their center. She wasn't sure which type they

were — ut'Eif'mon perhaps, from their gold-trimmed, green armor adorned with shapes from nature — but it didn't matter.

Ut'Eif hated Kref, especially tem'Kref'mon, since Hamr killed them on sight. The gods had created men for better sport and, bitter that their time now dwindled, locked elves in perpetual conflict with humans over possession of Vraste'. They would surely kill her after whatever horrible things they would do beforehand.

“Seeandlia — tou-ghue!” The lockstep columns stopped in precise unison in front of her as the elves on horses surveyed the area in all directions. Valkstae heard a click behind her and tensed. Muted purrs complemented other clicks, restrained yips, whistles, and squeals. An overwhelming odor of musky sweetness washed over her, and Valkstae flattened and shook. She had never heard the sounds but knew the scent.

“Fyeese—scha!” Every foot soldier snap-turned to the flanks, crouched, and pointed their spears outward in a bristling defense. A long series of clicks ended in a purr. Out from the woods and grass, two mourkra from each side charged toward the column's center. They split and ran parallel toward the Eif column's ends as the spear tips tracked them. A second later, eight more mourkra burst out from their cover.

A head taller than any Hamr warrior and twice as heavy, the orcish beasts' mottled skin was slick with the sweet black oil they exuded to mark their prey. With their spinal ridge plates raised, insensitive to pain, and the circlet of bone around their skulls impenetrable, they dropped to all fours and slammed into the columns. Four mourkra toppled half the horses as the others crashed into the lines and sent Eif flying.

Order became chaos as steel collided with bone. Valkstae ran hard

as she could away from the battle. If the mourkra caught her, they would rape her for sure. No one survived their frenzied mauling; insensitive to pleasure as they were to pain, they would batter you to death to sate their lust. If you were lucky, you lost yourself in some oubliette of your mind before the horror started.

Valkstae checked her back trail to see if she was followed and was suddenly flying — across a four-stride-wide gully until she crashed into the other side, slid down it, and crumpled to the bottom as darkness consumed her.

It felt curiously wonderful, like tentative touches of a lover’s fingers walked across her body. Valkstae giggled, unable to resist each time she imagined high-pitched laughing. After three titters and more teasing touches, still disoriented, she forced an eye half-open.

Tiny, hand-length tall, dimly luminescent green people were atop and around her. One reached down to her breast and stuck its finger in a glob of something. It tasted it and retched, to the other peoples’ amusement. She compulsively giggled with them as another trio by her tender furrow leaned forward. Two prodded and pulled at her inner folds. The third sniffed, then thrashed, and they all danced laughing. Their laughter compelled her to mimic them, and she thought, *Blech, stinky. Oh, aren’t they* —

“Blubpluhbleblub” — Valkstae wildly thrashed and flapped her hands to shoo them off her — “tark’fed pixies.” She shuddered with a horrified expression and lurched up to sitting. “Nasty beasts. Go away, psst-psst.” Valkstae shivered again as her skin crawled. Hunters swatted or squashed them, but she definitely did not want their juice on her. Experienced hunters also sprinkled a ring of salt or looped salted ropes around their beds to keep them out, but she had neither.

Pests, more than anything, pixies weren’t harmless. If you left food

out, it would spoil if they walked or spat on it. Naturally, they were thieves, but pixies infected your mind when they touched you. You would act like a giddy fool or have crazy dreams that left you listless the next day.

She shooed them back again and noticed they were everywhere. Faerie flitted over the gully. It reminded her there were numerous pesky and even dangerous things out here. You could — she broke into a fit of giggling until she kicked away the one at her foot. “*Rahh, koft’fed, koft’fed.*” Valkstae flung some dirt at them, and she curled up to sleep and dwelled on those other things.

Ut’Saadda were ancient grotesques — millennia older than elves or dwarves — the gods made for sport, then left here. Like bugs, their varieties and numbers were countless. Since they bridged two realms, ut’Saadda acted with impunity. She plugged her ears to blot out their chatter and shivered, reminded of something else.

Three realms made up the world; Vraste’, Saadte, and Koluumn, and each divided three more times to make a sacred nine. Toulukk, Dachvst, and Kregdach all resided on Vraste’, but Saadte and Koluumn’s realms overlapped. You couldn’t go there, but they could visit here. Koluumn’s Kvertosh, Shalmour, and Vastrokk meant little until you were dead, and the gods only interacted with Vraste’ for entertainment.

Saadte was the problem. Uthamarr was inconsequential; every being other than Hamr went there when they died. Tzemth, where ut’Saadda and nature spirits dwelled, was a constant, unavoidable problem. Noujvet’s lost souls — Valkstae yawned — Tragent, the spirit raven, had dropped or never picked up because Vart-ut’san the crow hadn’t keened, also prowled the Dachvst. They would — confuse you ... and ... you never knew

Rrrbabab-brrr-baba, rabrrrr, brub, brub — Valkstae snapped awake, dreaming a sound, and flicked the pixie listening to her belly off with a stick. She considered going back to sleep but jumped when another tried to crawl up her backside, yet discovered it was a tree root.

Before the pixies drove her mad, she struggled up the gully's moss-covered side and peered over the top. Unable to see farther than two paces, Valkstae crawled out and shrank. It was the last two-ninths before dawn's new day, and it always scared her. With Lur down, Lum made Vraste' otherworldly. Plants, fungi, and fae-like creatures glowed in the single moon's light. Not all, but patterns, threads, or dots of eerie light in varied colors painted those that were. The luminescent — Valkstae stilled — her hair stood on end.

Valkstae thought she heard a voice. "Vallllk-staaaaae," said so softly again, it must be a ghost. Before dawn, lost souls were at their worst, and she started to tremble yet heard it more clearly. Her eyes widened; someone was looking for her, and Valkstae moved quicker toward the call, tripping over things in the confusing illumination. She rounded a massive tree, and a woman came into view.

"Vallllk — there you are. Oh, Valkstae, where have you been?"

She didn't recognize her, but the unsettling light always played tricks with her eyes. Bathed in blue from Lum's odd glow, the nude woman's hair flowed in a nonexistent breeze. Valkstae had never seen someone so beautiful. The woman extended her arms, and Valkstae wept, overjoyed someone had found her.

"Oh, Valkstae, I was so worried. I've looked for you all night."

An intense joy surged up within her. With her eyes flooded with tears, the confounding light refined the woman's details each step closer. Her waist indiscernibly narrowed, breasts firmed, lips grew

fuller, and cheekbones smoothed. Valkstae's heart simultaneously melted and filled with the woman's every word as an overwhelming urge to feel her embrace consumed her.

A large opossum waddled out from some rocks between them and stopped. It turned toward Valkstae and sat, gazing into her eyes. She looked back at the woman.

“Let's go home. Everyone is so worried.” Her arms extended out further.

She reached toward her, paused, and Valkstae's brow furrowed. When the woman spoke, her lips hadn't moved. The opossum stepped toward Valkstae, and she stumbled back and shook her head. Only then did she notice the woman stood shin-deep in a pond of water.

Valkstae looked at the opossum again, nodded, and ran. “Tark'd fed nymph.” Naiads coaxed you into an embrace, and while mesmerized by their perfect kiss, they slowly descended until you were so deep in the water, your first breath, you'd drown. The spirit opossum, Choaka — wise, patient hunter of forming demons — had saved her. She muttered her grateful prayer to him but didn't look back.

She passed a tree with an ax against it and a skeleton at its base. A lithe bare woman's foot stretched out from the trunk's opposite side, and Valkstae kept running. Naiads, dryads, pixies, faeries, and other ut'Saadda dangers filled the forest. A mushroom or rock might be a creature, a stick, a bug; nothing was as it seemed, and though some were harmless or a pest, other things could twist your mind or kill you.

A low, luminous blue fog obscured her path. Valkstae kept moving. Lus crested the horizon and extinguished Lum's confusing cast. The brightness of a clearing appeared — a modest lake.

The pixies were right. Valkstae's birthday orgy and fear-seasoned sweat left her rank. Everything here hunted by scent, and hers, this

moment, made her easier to track at a distance. Her mouth was dry, and her throat rasped. She slowly backed away to find another source of water.

Daf'targra da Kregdach, kregt'fed, ut'vute' kich pes vesh —

De tem tdok da kochtraam tem kref —

Beware the Kregdach, caves, under soil or water.

It is not the realm of humans.

Like below ground, Kregdach resided beneath the water's surface. Sea orcs, giant fish and turtles, and other terrible creatures dwelled in lakes. Swamps and bogs were the most dangerous with their witches, hags, ogres, vapors, and quicksand. She always avoided ponds — even small ones, as the naiad had proved — and wyrms that could halve a horse lived in deep rivers.

Valkstae found a shallow, fast-running creek and bathed away her fear and sexual residue. She kneeled and scooped up some water, paused, then drank.

Drogos larvae were everywhere. Their venom caused you to uncontrollably void both top and bottom as your guts burned from their scraping scales. Many people perished as they grew. Hamr were immune to them somewhat. They were in the mineral-tinged glacier's stream, but Moragan made her ancestors drink, endure the effects, then drink again, and they passed down their resistance.

Sahnk de ves vut'mon drogos un srag'fed —

Dors de ras daf sahnk de un'def uz do di'mour mour —

**Drink the water containing dragon larvae and poisonous minerals.
Endure the poison then drink it forever for your children's children.**

Since she entered the Dachvst, Valkstae had prayed to every god and

goddess for help. Like always, it never came. Spirits were everywhere in countless forms, and unlike gods, they answered. A hunter might find game where there was none, or a woodsman's ax might dull, forever unable to be sharpened. They would bless those respectful and punish the insolent, but foremost, they protected their own.

*Da un'Moragan tem kupra'sot —
Saadda targfa Vraste', dem tem do'tam —
Zanka un zanfa du'fed —
The gods are indifferent.
Spirits protect Vraste', which is yours.
Honor and respect them.*

Valkstae prayed to Sceas to share one of his cousins. She prayed well, and he rewarded her with two fish, though subsequent times, he was less generous since she wouldn't kill them quickly. Without flint and steel, she prayed to Nrathvar for help with fire. A breeze coaxed her to fern-grass. She plucked three black and three red stalks, twisted them together, rubbed the twine between her palms, dropped it onto tinder, and cooked her fish.

Refreshed, Valkstae realized it might take the entire day to return home. She gathered moss, berries, ash, and clay to stain and streak her body until she resembled mossy tree bark to slip through the forest undetected. Once scented with loamy soil and pungent fungus, Valkstae set out for home.



Valkstae searched for Toulukk an entire year's ninth. She evaded, hid, or ran from beasts, and ut'Kosh — non-human races — avoided dangerous waters and every type of faerie ring, whether grass, mushrooms, flowers, or stone. If you stepped into one, you risked being lost forever; if you escaped, you would pine to go back for eternity. Valkstae never found shelter.

Fear was her constant companion and one other thing. Sentinel of the forest, the spirit chipmunk, Ceepe', and his countless minions relentlessly taunted her and revealed her location when danger was near. She understood what their clicking chirp meant. Mouse is here. By all the gods, she hated that name.

Back home each day, from the wall's parapet, she had looked to the massive, twin, white-tipped mountain peaks of Shona's Breast. Eleven days distance from Toulukk, they dominated the western horizon. She encountered a vast lake, finally able to see above the treetops, and her heart sank. Low in the haze, Shona's nipples were barely specs. She had traveled in the wrong direction.

It felt like everything lured or drove her further from home. Since it was early kot'mon — late summer in the mumbling ut'Kref's Crown tongue — Lus was high and the ancient forest's canopy so dense, she could only briefly determine direction, and it hid the uncountable Lut at night.

Valkstae prayed to every spirit for guidance. For those she didn't know, she always said, 'Spirit of ... ,' and hoped they understood. The spirit black elk Shoustvar ignored her — she didn't belong in the Dachvst. Komtra, as various owls sometimes drove off fae and the like. Kelmtes, the spirit black-capped chickadee, helped her often, even though she was unwilling to hurt anything, and rarely left him suet.

Another day, Valkstae walked through the woods and realized there

were no birds, squirrels, or that bastard Ceepe'. She shrank to a squat and froze. A flock of a few hundred coal-black Vragga swarmed through just ahead. Nasty little pseudo-dragons, they had stripped this stand of woods of its smaller wildlife. The size of a crow, their leathen body and wings were slick. Two pinky-length grappling fangs protruded from their lower jaw, but you had to watch out for their tail stinger. Two stings would paralyze a man, and four would kill him.

A chickadee landed on a limb, chirped at her, flitted ten strides distant, peeped again, and returned. The Vragga ignored it; it was Kelmtes. He flew back ahead, and she followed. When Ceepe' began to chide her, Valkstae was safe, but Kelmtes flew to the forest's edge and waited.

Once Valkstae cleared the foliage, she fell to her knees and sobbed; she had reached Nicci's Wall. An imposing, continent-wide mountain range, the farthest south you could travel before the ut'Hamr emperor's territory beyond it.

Valkstae gazed up the talus base that shifted to scree and transitioned to a bare, rocky mountainside. This was punishment for some reason. Perhaps her love of Kortme's works, her failure to force Shanee to learn, maybe whoring, but undoubtedly because she was ut'Kocve'. She wouldn't be here if she had stood her ground and demanded her rights as a Hamr shem'mon.

She panned over the unending vista of jagged rock so steep and high its snow-packed peaks reached the clouds. Even now, she did not feel it; the urge to fight or the drive to keep searching for home. Hunger racked her belly. But she still refused to kill even a chipmunk, although as they scolded her from the woods, it was tempting.

If she found a village — an ut'Kref one — maybe they would free her from this suffering: make her a slave, and she would even grovel

like those odd ones if they wanted. Unfortunately, all of Vraste' knew you could never enslave a Hamr. You could chain their body, yet their mind and heart remained free, and they would fight — if they were Kocve' — which she wasn't, like her mother.

Valkstae raised a sneer at her satirical brooding. She was not ashamed that Shanee was a slave but of her twisted logic, keeping herself in harsh bondage to make others suffer. Her hatred and venom had nothing to do with resistance — which the Hamr would have admired. It was about harming others as they tried to help her, locked into some unappeasable quest for revenge.

She spat to the ground twice to rid the bitterness that filled her mouth. Shanee had been as unrelentingly harsh and pointlessly cruel to her as the other children. Whether the respect Shanee was due as her mother or the children's overwhelming size and strength, Valkstae had only two options with one outcome. Endure their brutality or avoid it, each an ut'Kocve' path of Kortme' or Jagdnict, respectively.

Kelmtes flew up and down the slope, coaxing her to join him. Above the sparse tree line, halfway up the mountain among the many creeks, waterfalls, and jagged rocks, stood a small patch of trees, grass, and shrub. He had saved her so often without reward, Valkstae obeyed.

Naked and barefoot, she carefully ascended the shifting talus. It took her an hour to scale a hundred paces as Kelmtes waited on a large rock above her. With thousands of steps more to climb, Valkstae's tender soles begged for rest. She rounded the rock and discovered a trail there. The path was ancient and well-traveled; the stone ground to talc-fine dust.

Whether game, ut'Kref, or ut'Kosh had worn the trail, after she prayed to another first, Valkstae would yield to Kelmtes. This spirit was

different. Ceepe' couldn't eat her whole, but Roth — the spirit brown bear — sentinel and protector of the mountains, could.

“Oh, great and strong — and wise and powerful — Roth, please let me ... *uh*, Valkstae, walk up your mountain. I mean no harm. Kelmtes — your fellow spirit, the chickadee one — said I should. Please do not eat me. Protect me from any tarkd'ut'Kosh if they come up here, and keep Ceepe' away. He is cruel. Please, oh great, Roth. Thank — *uh*, powerful, Roth, thank you. Valkstae — humbly, *uh*, I ask.” She jerkily half-bowed.

She wove along the soft path through a line of large coarse rocks. On the other side, the trail abruptly narrowed. Armor, weapons, personal totems, and clothing — notably boots and shoes — were strewn far to either side. It looked as though people left the path, walked over the jagged rocks to distance themselves from it, and stripped before proceeding up the steep, rugged mountain barefoot and naked.

Valkstae stayed on the powdered trail. At first, it ascended straight up. It began to cut back and forth as it zig-zagged up the face. Her pace slowed as she walked to exhaustion and struggled to breathe. She adjusted her legs to nine steps — to be faithful — recovered quickly and repeated the cycle.

It took her most of the day to reach the oasis of green: mid-way up the barren, gray rocky face. Waterfalls cascaded to rivulets of water, cold as those which flowed from the glacier. In the oasis's center, a large hole wider than she was tall pumped out heat, fumes of brimstone, and something awful she didn't know. The vertical bore descended deep into the blackness of Kregdach, and as she listened, indiscernible lamentations whispered upon the draft.

She bit her lip and pulled back. It had to be an entrance to Vastrokk — Hamr hell — but the trail above led nowhere. Tired, hungry, and growing cold, Valkstae’s lip plumped into a pout, realizing what Klemtes expected. He wanted her to cast herself into the void for being ut’Kocve’. *No, I won’t do it.* If Jagdnict claimed her, he would have to climb out of his hole and do it himself.

Her gaze turned toward Lus’ descent as Kortme’ painted the sky in every color. Lur traced its shallow seasonal arc above it. The moment Lur aligned with Lus, Valkstae wept. Instead of an inverted triangle as it set in the cleavage of Shona’s Breasts, Lus melted upon a flat horizon.

Valkstae realized she would never see the Valley of the Ice Dragon again.

VASTROKK'S VENT, HAMMERS OF TIME

Tired of running and her perpetual fear, Valkstae decided to remain on the mountain. Except for the slope, the area reminded her of near Toulukk's glacier. She drank and bathed in the pristine, frigid water, the same as when she was born. Valkstae wove herself a mat from the plentiful tall grasses, which quickly grew into a large poncho. *Maybe my true calling is a weaver.*

Perhaps she was wrong about Klemtes' intentions. Berries brought here by the spirit cedar waxwing, Kochea, were abundant. The vent would keep her warm; Stedek's blessing, the spirit of hot springs and volcanic vents. Sceas granted her a fish from a pool, and Nrathvar provided her with fire. DaVostt'mon's cool breath spilled down from Korvath's snowpack. It reminded her of the soothing breeze off the glacier, and after the hot, humid forest, Valkstae was grateful and thanked her.

She looked up the mountain on the third day; her eyes bugged, and she froze. A warrior stood on the rocks above her. Almost as wide as he was tall, he had wild red hair and a beard in two thick braids that reached his thighs across his heavy bronze breastplate over thick clothing.

"Abbuuhah, hello! Ah dinnah knew anybody was waitin'," the man called down. His voice was surprising, considering his size, higher-pitched, almost feminine. "Ah say, hello. Haeyeh been waitin' long? Ah'll bae comin' down directly."

Valkstae peered over a rock and jerked back; she expected Kregdach's albinistic Dark Elves prowled Jagdnict's gateways, but he

was definitely ut’Kref. The man was already near, though he still looked far off and kept coming. She looked for somewhere to hide, but before she could run, he was upon her and no taller; a dwarf, she had never seen one.

“Ah dinnah knew anybody — *ohsh*, you’re uh bonnae wee yin aren’t yeh. Haeyeh come for-th-forge?” The dwarf stepped forward. Valkstae’s eyes widened and mouth gaped. “Daeyeh spake Crown, lass?”

She backed against a tree with the same stunned expression, trembling, but he was not a man. Her beard’s braids had swept to each side, revealing armor shaped like breasts. The woman spoke in feminine tones, though it was a stretch to call it Imperial Crown.

“Ghey,” Valkstae answered nervously. She had learned Crown from the emperor’s ambassador — somewhat. “Tom sastva Craow-na, un varta de un.”

“Gohmladorin! You’re uh Hammer child. *Ach*, ah’ve nae spake Hammer in years.”

“Tom tdok da mour.” Valkstae frowned. “Tom tem da shem’mon.” She extended her tattooed wrist to prove she was an adult. The woman’s bushy brows raised, confused by the marking. Valkstae thought a moment and lifted her grass frock’s hem to reveal her white-haired genitals.

The woman bit her lip to restrain her laughter. “Aye, aye, ah should have seen it. *Ohsh*, you’re a bonnae one too. *Umm*, fed rushma — no, that’s sexy — a fair bit-uh-that too though. Ah, du tem fed un’Manna’fed, very beautiful. Got uh bit of Shonaesh in yeh. Yeh go on an spake Hammer lassie. *Uh*, du varta Hamr. Ah’ll understand yeh.”

Once Valkstae calmed, she spoke with the woman, who introduced herself as Gwefolda. They each used a bit of the other’s language,

and it helped when Gwefolda *'Knocked some of the seasoning off'* her Dwarvish Crown, as she put it. With each word Gwefolda spoke, Valkstae became accustomed to her dialect, and the effort it took to translate eased.

“Well now, so you’re Valkstae of Toulukk, and now of the outlands, the Dachvst, pas’ghey? An you’re thinkin’ about maybe weavin’ or hooerin’ — ah did a wee bit of trampin’ myself uh hundred or so year-go, a fine bit of fun.” Gwefolda winked. “Have-yeh ever gave a thought to workin’ as a taskmaster?”

“Pas, task-master?”

“Aye, a taskmaster. *Uhm* ... hmm, da tarv’shem’mom — nah, that’s nae it — *uhm*, da tarv’shem’mom-dawme’nem. I’ve got an eye for such things. You’re definitely a taskmaster.”

Valkstae’s brow raised, astonished. Not only did this woman suggest she work as a leader or boss of people, but in a position of importance and respect. Since Hamr never lied, Valkstae answered as best she could. “Tdok.”

Gwefolda laughed at her blunt ‘No.’ “Well, I see it in yeh. What say yeh come with me to the forge” — Valkstae bit her lip and looked around — “We’ve a lot of food, it’s warm, and the lads need a dawme’nem. I promise yeh, if yeh work as our taskmaster, you’ll leave with enough to give yeh all yeh ever wanted.”

She stood up straight, walked to Gwefolda, and smiled. The thought of work always excited her, and she liked this feeling. No longer the shortest — a whole head taller than Gwefolda — and this woman saw something in her that she didn’t. “Ghey, Valkstae daf tem du — *err*, yaase, Valkstae be you task—master.”

With a wide smile, Gwefolda took Valkstae’s hand and led her up and around the mountain. As they walked, she mentioned her husband

would have a few questions but not to worry about his gruff exterior or resistance. It was her decision, and she was confident Valkstae would do well, and it might also change her recent run of fortune.

They rounded a large rock, and Valkstae locked up like stone. An archway chiseled into the mountain's face led to a tunnel. She released Gwefolda's hand and backed away, shaking her head. "Tdok — tdok'fed. Tom tdok tem'vute da Kregdach. Tdok'fed." Valkstae refused to enter the Kregdach.

"Aye, I forgot about that. You'll be fine lass, I promise. All the goblins, Dark Elves, and other beasties were chased out of there a long, long time ago. And that devil of yours, that cowardly Jagdnict bastard, he'll not come down there. Our lads are brave and true. *Ach*, I know. Ask that ghosty of yours, the one for caves and mines, Ulmthet, I think were his name. See what he tells yeh."

Valkstae shook her head. Gwefolda picked up a torch and put her free hand to it. She snapped her thumb and forefinger's rings together, and it lit. Valkstae's eyes widened. Now curious, she thought a moment, stepped forward, shook her head and stepped back, chewed on her lip, and stepped into the archway.

"Fed saadda, Ulmthet. Da ut'Kref'sot Gwefolda verta —" Valkstae looked at Gwefolda, and down the tunnel. Ulmthet likely spoke Crown here. "*Uh*, great spir-et, Ulmthet. Da dwarf Gwefolda say da Kregdach — *err*, da under dirt are safe. Are it safe, un do-may-be Valkstae trust Gwefolda? Valkstae wants work un ... earn Valkstae trials of sosh ... *err*, life. Plaase careful — *uh*, war-en say Valkstae if no."

The flame on Gwefolda's torch vigorously drew toward the tunnel. Valkstae beamed. It seemed the spirits — except Ceepe' — had always helped her. With her chest out and a smug grin, Valkstae walked into the tunnel.

The late-summer day's warmth quickly faded in the tunnel. Gwefolda easily traversed the dark hall as Valkstae extended her hands, probing the dim torchlight ahead. Her skin grew cold, dank scents filled her nostrils, and she began to tremble. The stone floor began to hum, and the vibrations intensified to a steady thumping. She shuffled to catch up as Gwefolda outpaced her.

The torch's flame drew down the tunnel. A moment later, it flared back toward the tunnel's head. Valkstae stopped. Perhaps Ulmthet had changed his mind. She spun round to find the entrance a pinprick of light, and she locked up in the darkness and screamed, "Ulmthet!"

Gwefolda came running. The torch fluttered down the tunnel. Relieved, Valkstae sighed; it shifted back toward the entrance, and she lurched in horror while Gwefolda laughed. "Child, it's just the bellows drawin' wind through the tunnel. Come, come now. Yeh'll be fine." With a firm grasp on Valkstae's hand, down they went.

It was a long descent. Valkstae's anxiety escalated with each step, but eventually, they were there. The tunnel continued down, and Valkstae began to follow it. Gwefolda held tight and explained that was where the men entered. She turned to a door and pulled Valkstae through it.

The descent into Kregdach had terrified her, but the room they entered was horrific. Massive furnaces belched black smoke as blue flames jetted from their base each time bellows fueled their fury. Unbearably hot, Valkstae felt smothered; the roar of coal fire and the tempest-like rush of air were deafening. The floor shook, and walls buzzed from a distant pounding. Sparks and ash flew everywhere, and she repetitively patted out her grass poncho's fires.

Gwefolda pulled her past the fireboxes to another door. They entered, and once the door shut, it became silent. Valkstae gasped.

There was magic in the door, evil to Hamr. This was a mistake. Dread swept through her, and in the silence, there came a roar.

“Ale! How can yeh spect a mahn ta work wit’out any ale!”

Rigid and wide-eyed, Valkstae stood there, mouth agape as Gwefolda shouted something back in Dwarvish. A man returned her shout in the same language. She yelled again and said something more. A man entered, almost her twin, except he wore his beard in a single braid. He looked Valkstae up and down once, turned to Gwefolda, and said, “Nae.” He went off on a verbal tear before she stopped him, and they argued.

She didn’t understand what they said, but his points and gestures spoke volumes. Valkstae was too young and half other people’s size. She didn’t look strong enough, smart enough, tough enough, and she didn’t have enough experience. Gwefolda grabbed his ear. His face screwed, and he silenced. She said something more and walked off.

The man stepped toward Valkstae and grumbled, “Yeh come with me.” She hesitantly followed him through another door and realized it must be their home. With an inexpressive cast, Valkstae removed her disintegrating poncho, raised her arms over her head, and stretched. Gwefolda entered, and the man’s eyes bugged as he yelled, “Ah swear, ah dinnae do it!”

Valkstae glanced at Gwefolda, turned, parted her feet, and bent over at the waist to scratch her shin. Gwefolda laughed and handed the man a tankard and bottle as Valkstae casually posed. “I forgot about that. Get your goods off, Margrouln, all of it. That’s her kinds way of sayin’ they’re nae armed or hidin’ anything an mean no harm.”

“Ah’ll nae bae taken off mah clothes an showin’ mah bum eir mah great he-ogre —”

“You are, an this lassie’s a Hammer. Shae’s seen plenty of *ogres*

before. Your wee jimmy won't put a fright in her. Now do it, or shae won't trust us."

Margrouln grumbled and dallied as Gwefolda laughed and shed her clothes, clearly enjoying the freedom as she scratched her hairy belly and chest. Her husband's mutters grew to a rant. Past discreetly looking them over, Valkstae acted as though she didn't notice. She sat on their bed's edge, shook out her hair, and with her knees parted wide, Valkstae drew her foot onto the bed, glancing away as she parted her furrow.

"Heft up your hoobies, Margrouln," said Gwefolda, casually lifting her hair-covered breasts.

"Mah hoobies? What-ave ah got ta heft mah hoobies for?"

"Cause your hoobies are bigger than mine. Shae's got ta see you're nae hidin' nothin'. And heft your *'he-ogre'* an his luggage. An don't forget to spread your bum and lift your beard."

While Gwefolda postured casually, Valkstae acted disinterested and only glanced. Margrouln, however, obscenely grasped each bit as he moved it and shouted, "Thare." Valkstae's brow raised and nose curled, confused by his blatant vulgarity. Once Gwefolda told him that was enough, he plopped in a chair like a scolded child.

Once he downed his ale, Gwefolda fetched him another, and Margrouln settled somewhat. They offered Valkstae a drink of the sweet narcotic liquor, Dragon's Tears. She shuddered from the first draw, but with each subsequent pull, she began to smile. Margrouln stared and asked Valkstae if she knew Crown.

Valkstae puffed up proudly. "Ghey — *err*, yaase, Valkstae say craowwn guue-da, pes —"

Margrouln deadpanned. "Shae's an idgit."

Gwefolda smacked his head. She told him Valkstae had a rough

understanding of Crown and proved she learned quickly. Besides, it wouldn't matter. The big lad seemed to understand every language, and she suspected Valkstae would learn them as well.

“Pes tom tarv'vurta'fed Hamr,” Valkstae finished her statement.

“Yeh haer that yeh old troll?” Gwefolda laughed. “Shae kin read an write. Ye cannae even spell yer name.”

They drank over the next few hours and asked her questions as Gwefolda translated. Marlgroun continually stared at Valkstae's splayed folds. Valkstae assumed he thought she was hiding something and discreetly parted her furrow more. After enough times, Valkstae decided to put the question to rest. She lay back, drew her knees to her elbows, and pulled her netherlips open wide.

“That's it, ah cannae take et enaymair!” Margrouln lunged for Valkstae.

Stopped by Gwefolda's grip on his hair, Marlgroun's short arms strained and reached for Valkstae. Gwefolda explained he'd never seen anyone as beautiful as she was, especially naked. Valkstae scrunched her face and stated she didn't understand. She was short, lean and did not have muscles, scars, or wrinkles from a full life. Her hands and feet were small, lips were too plump, and her breasts didn't hang low because they had never wept life. Lastly, her skin and hair were oddly colored.

Gwefolda seemed to melt. “Oh dear, yeh really don't know how beautiful yeh are, dae yeh?”

Margrouln struggled to reach her as Valkstae's gaze panned down his body to his engorged root, and she looked at Gwefolda. “Tdok. Pes tom'daf rush'ko'mon. Pas'ghey?” Margrouln stilled as Valkstae extended her hand to Gwefolda. She pulled her toward the bed beside her, lay back, and spread her legs.



It was a curious sensation Valkstae had never experienced before. Her tongue felt thick and coated with moss. Movement, light, and sound amplified the piercing pain in her head and urged Valkstae to heave up her belly's emptiness each time it peaked. She tried to sit up, which made it worse. So she lay back, and it worsened still.

Gwefolda chuckled as she mixed up a bowl of something and poured in a healthy dose of dragon's tears. "Drink this. Yeh'll bae right as uh hickory in uh few minutes."

It eased her need to vomit and smoothed the pain but replaced the fog of her hangover with a drunk's clarity. She could not tell who was which or which did what last night. They gave no time to dwell on it. Gwefolda and Margrouln each grasped a hand and pulled her toward a door.

The moment it opened, a hellish roar shattered their apartment's serenity. Massive wheels, cams, and cogs whirred and meshed as furnaces roared and bellows gasped in a circular stone chamber. The worst noise came from eight progressively larger hammers above a single round anvil, six strides across. They struck with a furious, bell-sounding resonance in proportional time, demanding they shout.

Margrouln explained the clockwork precision of their strikes. The smallest hammer dropped every second, the next every five, the third every fifteen, a minute, fifteen minutes, every half-hour, once an hour, and the massive eighth hammer struck every six hours. Their anvil was the mountain's heart. A solid core of iron hammered flat over

millennia. The room buzzed from their blows, but when the first through seventh struck, the reverberation knocked Valkstae to her knees, and she gaped in horror.

“De cuma’tarv’fern’hise tem dor’fed marg’mon,” Valkstae shrieked.

Gwefolda laughed and shouted back that evil magic didn’t power the forge. She began to explain the mechanism, yet Margrouln interrupted and showed her something he was supremely proud of, a hair-thin needle. Valkstae wondered if he was stupid but asked instead if the writing on the anvil was Dwarvish and if he had built it.

He told her millennia ago, Titans bored out the mountain. Gods vanquished the Titans, and goblins overran it once they left. Dark Elves drove out the goblins and built the Hammers of Time. Margrouln puffed up. The dwarves fought them and kept it ever since. Each added their marks, but the anvil, hammers, and all that drove them belonged to the mountain. It was impossible to remove the forge, no matter who occupied it.

Both took great pride in their work. Margrouln described at length how to make steel, what refined and perfected it, each step and why, and oddly added, “Mouch like souls, aye?” Working metals was just their hobby, however. They were most proud that they forged clean souls.

Valkstae listened intently. None of it made sense. The machinery and even time, as Margrouln described it, seemed more like witchcraft than the creations of men. The heat, smoke, pounding, and noise had already overwhelmed her. She felt ill and retched, so they led her to a door. Gwefolda and Margrouln promised if she worked as their taskmaster, she would acquire all she ever needed for the rest of her days.

He reached for the door, and Gwefolda pressed, “Ere yeh sure,

lass? Once yeh stairt, yeh might nae like whet yeh learn ehbout yerself.”

She desperately wanted out of the forge and shouted, “Ghey, ghey’fed. *Err*, yaase. Valkstae daf tarv du taskmaster.”

Gwefolda nodded, “An yeh hate the name Mouse most of all?”

Valkstae nodded anxiously. Margrouln opened the door, and Gwefolda backed her through. Margrouln looked above and behind Valkstae. “Mouse.” He shut the door with a foreboding thud. She pounded on it in the blackness, but like Toulukk’s postern gate, it would not open or make any noise.

Each anvil’s ring cruelly mocked her. The hellish forge had really been heaven, and its Hammers of Time would mark her days here.

TORMENTOR OF MARGROULN FORGE, WICKEDNESS OF MEN

Valkstae hit the heavy door until dull thuds became wet impacts, and her hands could strike it no more. Her belly's contents surged up, and new sensations replaced those of the forge.

Enveloped by sweltering heat, it sucked the air from her lungs and sweat from her body. Her skin stung; eyes and nostrils burned from caustic smoke and acrid fumes of coal fire and smelted ore. She stood upon a platform of spongy wood patched with iron plates so rusty they felt like sand. Fixed against rugged stone by corroded straps, chains at its corners reached up into the darkness. The hot, gray, snow-like ash that fell upon her sweat-soaked body dissolved into gritty black soot and streaked down her as grimy oil.

She shuffled to the platform's edge and gazed into the murky darkness. Waves of heat and sparks washed up from below. Her head recoiled, and she looked upward. High above in the distance, a singular tiny star resided. Its light flickered, blotted out, then shone again, revealing a person falling, and Valkstae tracked his shriek down to the bottom. Valkstae squinted, unable to see in the darkness, and the chamber slowly brightened to a dim orange glow obscured by haze.

Something massive moved far below, akin to a silhouette of shadow on a dark night in the Dachvst. The void began to brighten as fluttering amber light flooded the space. A stalactite-adorned stone roof hung a hundred strides above, and the flickering glow raced down the cavern's wall until it flared and illuminated the chamber. A seeming waterfall of white-hot steel poured out below with a deafening screech

as it filled cold troughs. Geyser-like jets of white steam surged up through black smoke, turned it gray, and once it cleared, Valkstae gaped in horror.

The brightened chamber came alive through the haze. Far below, perhaps five thousand nude men packed a narrow apron around the circular cavern as they swarmed against the far wall. Between them and the immense furnace's hub that Valkstae looked down from — perhaps five thousand more men in armor linked by chains slowly marched in curved trenches.

All ten thousand muttered. The din echoed off the cavern's walls and compounded into a continuous reverberating hum. Valkstae tried to determine what they were saying — a long coiled snake fell over her shoulder. She lurched to fling it off to discover it was braided slick leather, and what had dropped it stood beside her.

A gargantuan mottled brown knee stood at eye level. She panned up the naked troll's leg past his massive root and torso to its head. His eyes rolled up, and he bared his fangs; his throat swelled like a toad's and began to quiver as he lifted his chin and bellowed, "*HEeee-EYyyrrrrRAaaeeEOOoooowww.*" His thunderous howl quavered, whistled, and growled in a simultaneous symphony of conflicting sounds and tones.

All ten thousand men silenced.

"Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr," bawled the troll.

"Hough!" ten thousand men shouted in unison.

"Mooooouuuuusssse!"

And ten thousand confirmed his call, "Mouse!"

The eight hammers' largest struck with a resounding clang that shook the chamber and reverberated through it. Sounds grew unbearable until a ringing overwhelmed the noise that abruptly muffled.

Her gaze swiveled up to the star-like vent as it raced down a long black tunnel, and Valkstae fell to the floor, enveloped by the blackness of oblivion.



Jostled awake, Valkstae closed her eyes tighter and began to shake. Smoke and humidity thickened the air. The stench was overwhelming. Scents of burning sulfur and coal, rusty iron, mildew, decay, and human waste all blended and combined with the rank fetor of ten thousand unwashed men.

The noise was constant. Murmurs, countless footsteps, and an intense grinding as if hard wheels crushed gravel merged into an unending vibration as men's lamentations pierced the thrum. Valkstae pulled tight to the coarse stone wall she lay against upon the worn-smooth floor; still, countless sweaty bare feet nudged and kicked her as the swarm of men passed by.

Her back heaved, mouth covered by her hands to conceal her sobs. Where this was and why she was here were obvious. For being a coward, unfaithful, and foolish enough to challenge them by entering their realm, Jagdnict the deceiver and his concubine Wespa — gods to Dark Elves, goblins, and all others who dwelled in Kregdach — had shifted form to dwarves and tricked her into Hamr hell, Vastrokk.

They must have killed her. She had died without a weapon warmed in combat, and no one wailed or keened for her. Offended by her unfaithfulness, even the spirit raven Tragent refused to carry her to Kolumn's Shalmour.

Her flesh would sear away as Jagdnict licked her eyes with venomous spit to blind her. He would shatter her body upon her personal rock of anguish to suffer an eternity of eight forms of terrible torments. Once disgusted by her weakness, Jagdnict would cast her into Kroth, where she would languish alone in the void forever — where you had never even existed, now so abhorred.

Oh, Holos, it's true. Not nine, but eight, which was unfaithful. Eight hammers to signal eight degrees of torment. Yanked into the air by one arm, Valkstae wildly screamed, “Tdok, Jagdnict, tdok! Tom daf tem Kocve’, tom daf —”

Powerful arms shot under her own from behind; their large hands covered her mouth and pulled her head against a man’s chest. Valkstae’s heels raked against muscled thighs until a sweat and soot-streaked man as large as the first pressed to her front. He yanked her knees open and, in a single brutish thrust, drove his filthy tusk up inside her.

Rage filled his eyes with each slam of his body against hers. Valkstae tried to scream, but his violent lunges knocked the breath from her. His tusk abruptly yanked out of her — he sailed across the cavern and smashed against its wall. She rose into the air until the man that restrained her let go, and she dropped to the floor and crumpled. The great troll squished the man in one hand and, as his gore poured down upon her, the troll snarled at Valkstae.

“They call to you. Drive them,” said the troll in Hamr with his resounding voice.

“What? I don’t — where — Holos, please help me!” Valkstae bawled.

“They call to you. Drive them, make them march.”

“Oh gods, please gods, I’ll be faith—”

“Drive them. You are the taskmaster. Make them march.”

“I don’t understand,” she wailed. “Drive who, how? What — just let me go. Please, I don’t belong. I —”

“Whip them. They call you. Drive them now.”

“What, I, I —” Valkstae curled up on the apron’s worn stone, sobbing.

The troll’s bloody hand gripped her body. She knew he would crush her like a grape. He carried her like a doll as he strode through the men that either moved or he kicked away until they were out among the marching columns.

“Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr,” the great troll howled.

“Hough!” the ten thousand answered in unison.

“Isss on — the waaaaaalk!”

Dropped on a stone walkway, Valkstae’s gaze fell upon a nightmare. Five thousand naked men distributed between massive logs for spokes formed twenty columns. They pressed inside front-half suits of rusty armor, the back half of their scarred bodies exposed and bare. Taut, heavy chains linked the armored yokes’ shoulders together and terminated at each spoke. The men drove against the iron shells as their feet sought purchase upon stone-toothed racks cut into waist-deep groves within the cavern’s floor.

She looked over her shoulder. Chains from the last men ran to massive cogs and sprockets — some eight men tall — stacked from the hub to the apron and bore down upon them as she lay there.

“Drive them. They call to you. Whip them.” The troll grabbed the coiled whip around her and pulled. Valkstae rolled, and he tossed it down upon her.

“I don’t understand. I don’t want to be here, please. I shouldn’t be here,” she continued to shout in Hamr.

“Drive them — listen — they call to you.”

All ten thousand muttered whether they marched in the columns or milled on the apron. Above the murmur, random men shouted in a hundred different languages. She only understood their common word and those said in Imperial Crown.

“Taskmaster, foguu; Degera chi task-master; Taskmaster, please help me; Soluumaea, Tas-ka-masta, oulamu; Help me, Taskmaster, save me; Beadu-fok zedafrau, Taskmaster; Taskmaster; Taskmaste-vou lachae; Taskmaster, I beg you ...”

The troll shoved her forward with his foot. When she didn’t roll far enough, he picked her up and dropped her behind the next axle. “Whip them. They call for you. Drive them.”

“No, I don’t want to hurt them. I won’t whip your slaves. Let me go, please. I’m begging you” — more men called — “I can’t help you. Fight back. He’s only one troll. I can’t beat him.”

One man’s call changed, and the rest began to use the same word in their varied languages. “Mouse; Help me, Mouse; Tada, Mauwse, bera; Taskmaster, runty, Mouse; Fey coont, Mouse; Yeh speda gash, Maus; Weak, Mouse, yah hooer rut, help mae; Mouse ...”

Flung forward by the troll as the next axle reached them, the men called her filthy things. They taunted her with the name she hated most as the harsh troll that enslaved them demanded she hurt them in kind. Valkstae wailed at the cruelty of this place; she was the smallest again. “I’m not a mouse. Stop saying that. I want to help you but can’t!”

A new voice sang out, more vicious than the rest. “Fed’sot, Valk, du tarkd’fed rush’ut’criv-kregdt’sot crimm’sot. Du shem’sot, du tem tdok Hamr.”

“Who said that?” Valkstae screeched in Hamr. “I’m not a slave. I’m a common woman. I am Hamr!”

“Sot, Valk, tarkd-crimm’sot tarv-utCriv’sot-zon’fed. Du tem tdok’fed da mon. Du tem tdok Hamr. Du sot shem’sot.”

“Stop saying that! Why would you call me female genitals and say lies? I don’t eat human waste. I’m a free Hamr, not a slave!”

With the whip tangled around her, Valkstae frantically searched for the voice’s source. The man continued to shout as other men taunted her. She crawled over axles and down into the racks. No one used his vulgarities in Toulukk. His cruel slurs of ‘runty mouse, that she was a slave, and most of all wasn’t Hamr,’ cut deepest.

“Shem’sot tarkd-unCrimm, du tem tdok’fed Hamr. Pas du be’ tom? Du tem tdok Hamr, sot ...”

She finally found him halfway up one of the inner columns. He continued his horrid taunts while she shrieked. Enraged and insulted as she had never been, Valkstae lost control and wildly tried to whip him as he increased his scorn. Her first five strikes missed or fell flat against him; her sixth frantic lash slashed his hamstring, and he dropped to the rack, unable to stand.

“I’m sorry!” Valkstae screamed. “Get up, please.” The men kept marching. Fifty-three men behind trampled him into the rack’s sharp teeth as Valkstae begged for forgiveness. The proud man — without a warmed weapon or anyone to keen for him — didn’t make a sound as the unrelenting cogs rolled over him.

“No,” the troll bellowed. He snatched up Valkstae, carried her to the outer apron, and dropped her among the seething masses. “It was not his time, Taskmaster. Practice.”

Valkstae collapsed and sobbed; she had killed the man. A hand gently set to her shoulder, and the troll nodded to someone behind her

yet stayed near. The man was a horror. Thick calluses covered his skin where it pressed to the armor, even his lips and brow. His back bore hundreds of scars. Hot sparks and the vicious whip had left thick welts that covered him.

His voice was calm and compassionate, and he spoke in Hamr, “Taskmaster, you may use me to practice.”

“What? No, I don’t want to hurt anybody. Please help me.”

“But you must. We need you to drive us. We all came here to free ourselves from a lifetime of regret so we may die in peace. When we call you, we’re weakening — faltering in our quest to cleanse ourselves. Please, Taskmaster or another will fall before they’re ready. Now, get up.”

Valkstae continued to plead and weep as he pulled her to standing. Men slick with sweat and filth packed tight against them. He shouted for them to make room so she could practice. She refused and reiterated that she didn’t want to hurt anyone, could not do it — would not do it.

He roared, “Do it now, Taskmaster. Strike, strike now, or you’ll kill others” — Valkstae refused — “Mouse, little Mouse, worthless Mouse. Are you a slave? Not a Hamr like the Hamr — you killed — said? Strike me now, slave Mouse.”

He walked ahead, taunting her until she struck. Valkstae’s face contorted into an anguished grimace, but she swung the whip. Each strike missed or collapsed against him. He took a step, and the whip bit lightly. He adjusted again, the whip cut his ear, and he dropped to a knee and grasped his wound.

“No, Taskmaster,” the troll growled. He wiped his hand on the soot-covered floor and yanked the man up. “Here, here, here, and here.” He marked his shoulders and back, the cheeks of his rump,

and the outer halves of his upper thighs, avoiding his spine and liver. The troll picked her up and set her on a ledge twenty feet above the floor. He pointed to a spot and said, “Practice there, Taskmaster.”

Valkstae refused his demand and wept. He let her languish on the ledge without food or water until she practiced. By the eighth hammer’s third strike, she could endure it no longer and conceded. Unbearably hot that little bit higher, her lungs rasped from the smoke-laden air, and more than once, Valkstae swooned and almost fell. Her poor casts earned Valkstae a cut under her eye and two to her hip, but she learned to wield the whip timed to the hammers.

While on the ledge, Valkstae listened to the men’s foreign words, and after enough strikes of the hammers, she began to learn what some said. The man who had helped her was right; everyone came here to suffer. After their arduous journey, the vent was redemption enough for a few who cast themselves down it. Most bore unfathomable self-condemnation. They toiled and languished until they had suffered enough, lay down, and let the machine consume them.



After eighty or more strikes of the eighth hammer — twenty Lums — the troll once more brought Valkstae rations. She lapped water from his filthy hand and ate the food he had smashed in his clumsy fingers, much of it rotten or moldy. He again demanded Valkstae demonstrate her progress. Ten strikes in a row hit the egg-sized mark. He nodded, set her down, and only said, “Rest, Taskmaster.”

Valkstae sat with her mouth agape as the spit ran down her face,

eyes locked on his. The troll glared yet did nothing. He cursed and told her a Hamr warrior had come to his village. The shem'fed razed the buildings, killed their leaders, and subjugated the people until one fought back. She then served them as a slave while she taught them Hamr values. He hated how his people had changed, and as he continued his insults, the man urinated on her. Valkstae froze, aghast.

The troll watched until the man's fist balled. "They call for her. Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr!"

Ten thousand men answered as one, "Hough!"

"Isss on — the waaaaaaaalk!"

Valkstae uncoiled the whip, and her eyes flooded. The first call sounded, and she raced to it. She struggled and tripped but lashed him twice before he could call a fourth time. They all now shouted 'Mouse' instead of taskmaster. Soon her shins, knees, and elbows were bloody, but every strike bit, though most called more than once before she could reach them. Toward the end of a long day, another man shouted for help.

She ran to him but paused when she recognized his scar — the man who had soiled her. Valkstae refused to whip him, to be another Hamr who heaped more suffering upon him. He called repeatedly, yet she never answered. The man fell out of his armor — instantly replaced by another — crawled up on the apron, and sobbed. As the cogs passed, he threw himself under them.

Back against the wall, Valkstae wept and berated herself like all these men. No matter her reason, her refusal was crueller than the whip. It reminded Valkstae of her mother's vengeful obstinance. Tycoum's lessons were within her, but Shanee's as well, and her love of Kortme's came into question. Valkstae wondered if she had it within herself to

be Kocve' and even questioned if she was Hamr, but was she compassionate enough to help as they asked?

These men needed a taskmaster. She twisted the whip around her hand, shook her head, and sniffled. Valkstae realized she was just their tormentor. And Mouse felt very — oh so very, very small.

TASKMASTER OF MARGROULN FORGE, SMITH OF SOULS

Margrouln's forge ran continuously. Its mechanical monster, which powered bellows, stoked furnaces, fed coal and ores, and swung the hammers, never stopped. Not one of the five thousand iron yokes remained empty for more than a few seconds. Men worked until exhausted or decided to stop; they stepped out of the armor, and others raced to fill their spots.

The dwarves expected Valkstae to encourage penitents through all four eighth hammer's strikes, or so she guessed from the troll's urging. She would sleep a couple strikes of the seventh hammer, work until exhausted, and repeat the cycle, which never changed. The troll did nothing except bellow or keep order. Even that was limited to ensuring the men didn't injure her — beyond a certain point.

She no longer marked her days by hammer strikes but by the star-like vent, though its accuracy was questionable. By her best guess, she had been here for two or maybe three-ninths — what ut'Hamr called three or four months, roughly. Valkstae imagined deep snow swaddled the Dachvst as it rested through a magnificent winter. She refused to dwell on Toulukk; its name alone left her heartbroken.

All the sounds of the forge — the men's mutters and footsteps, grinding cogs, and hammers' pounding — blended into a monotonous, incessant vibration fixed in her bones. Every malodorous scent combined with all others until they became natural and formed a fetid memory that Valkstae knew she would never shed.

The unrelenting heat and filth were unbearable. Valkstae's skin bore

burns from hot cinders and had browned and toughened. There was no way to bathe here, and she always pouted as she pushed through the men. They were all large; with most, her head only reached their sternum. Each time she squeezed through them, their slimy, stinking roots dragged over her breasts, shoulders, and back, evocative of eels.

“Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrr!”

“Hough!” ten thousand men answered as one.

“Isss on — the waaaaaaaalk!”

Gods, I hate his call. She was sick of it, the troll, and these men — trapped in this perpetual hell toiling for nothing more than to make a needle. She stepped upon a passing spoke and walked in halfway, roughly mid-column.

Within her first-ninth, she had learned from where the calls would come. Newer arrivals took the lead yokes. Still defining their regret, they came and went without encouragement. Men who had worked here longest filled the rear and rarely called her. Those in the middle worked hardest to punish themselves and often needed her help.

“Mouse!” a man called eight columns over and fifteen rows up.

The thick chains were taut enough that Valkstae had learned to walk them. She raced up a chain, stepping on men’s shoulders if needed, cut across another spoke, turned up another chain, and stopped with her lead foot against a man’s back. The whip made a low, deep whoosh as it snaked behind before she heaved its heavy six-stride length toward the man, terminating in a sharp crack. His legs buckled, but he kept marching — a perfect strike.

Another called, and as Valkstae tried to reach him, two others. She struck the first from the spoke, kept the whip in motion, and wheeled around to lash the third across his armor so the tip swung down and bit him mid-back. As she ran toward the second, Valkstae stumbled

and drove her knee against the opposite shoulder of someone's armor. With her crotch pressed against his helm's eyeslit, she lashed the second twice for repeating his call.

Each day, she traversed a spoke to the hub and wept. Valkstae hated this, the pain she inflicted upon men who bore such anguish. It did not matter that they demanded it. She tried speaking with some about their regrets; it only made them angry. To them, she was a foolish child who knew nothing about irredeemable guilt. They were warriors, raiders, soldiers, and even nobility who had done terrible things toward some long-forgotten goal and, once they gained experience, recognized the folly of their lives.

Valkstae learned to listen instead of speaking if a man sat beside her. They all sought to confess their sins; the wars they had fought, villages razed, their rapes and murders. No one truly evil ever came here. Most had done as tyrannical lords demanded, as they were raised or in desperate acts to survive. Some leaned against her; a few rested their heads in her lap, and Valkstae learned of Vraste's various cultures, languages, and most of all, about men.

"Wa—water!" Valkstae called a third time. Ravaged by the dank, smoky conditions, her voice was now a dusky remnant of its youthful song.

The troll ignored her, snuffled whatever clogged his nose, and spat it on the racks. She stormed off the spoke and slithered past the men. Just as she reached him, he turned so his hulking root swung over her head — which always seemed to amuse him.

"I said water. Didn't you hear me?"

"Taaaaaaaasssk-masterrrrrrr!"

"Hough!" ten thousand men answered as one.

"Isss — ressstiiingggg!"

Uninterested in her demand, he pointed up the apron and turned away. Valkstae nudged through the men but abruptly veered deeper toward the wall. She had learned which men to avoid here. Recent arrivals sometimes tried to rape her, but many penitents hated the Hamr and went out of their way to bump, curse, spit on, or hit her for revenge.

She neared the spot he had pointed to, and her eyes widened. An illusion of rock hid a small cave's entrance if looked at straight on. It opened into a vast chamber packed with men. They licked the walls and each other, but what caught her eye filled the room's center. Men encircled, pushed, and shoved to get near an outcrop of rock that a deluge of water thick as her thigh poured onto from a stalactite above it.

Valkstae tried to wedge through the thirsty men, but she was small and just another of the many. A man next to the rock extended his hand into the flow. The troll charged in and sent him flying. "Taskmaster's water!" He snatched up Valkstae, reached over the men, and placed her on the stone cistern with a drain in its center.

It felt magnificent. Cool and wet after so long without a bath and only sips from the troll's filthy hand. Overjoyed by the relief, Valkstae began to weep until countless hands and mouths pressed to her, and she screamed. The troll pulled Valkstae from the downpour and set her on the floor. "No!" Valkstae snapped. "Make them stop. I want in the water."

"No," said the troll with a growl. He pointed to the flowing stream. "Taskmaster's water."

She understood. Once it touched the basin's sides, the walls, the men, or her, the water was theirs. After all these ninths, it was the only

comfort she had found here. Valkstae stared at the unflinching troll, unclenched her teeth, and grudgingly relented. “Taskmaster’s water.”

“Task-masterrr — demands water!”

The men around the basin lowered with their backs angled up toward it. Valkstae hesitated, took a breath, and stepped onto the first man’s back, scaling the fleshy slope until she stepped onto the cistern. She couldn’t restrain her moan or the manic laugh that followed awash in the torrential flow. Men’s mouths were instantly on her as untold hands reached in from all sides and wiped away what they could, and Valkstae stiffened.

Men who had scorned, hurt, and even defiled her — whom her whip had ravaged in kind — set aside animosity in their desperation. Mouths and tongues lapped and slurped from her toes to her neck. Fingers combed through her hair and traced her face and any other gaps they could find. Valkstae had hoped to bathe away the filth and slime that covered her; their licking made her pristine in moments.

She shivered at Wespa’s urge to make the choice and justify it. *Why not? Just this one time.* Valkstae’s clenched legs softened, and her feet parted to span the cistern’s stride-wide rim. It made room for more men, but her intention was not benevolent. Mouths and hands instantly covered her from her arches to furrow. Long dreamed of water cascaded over her body, yet the waves of pleasure were what made Valkstae groan.

Every time her eyes rolled up, and she shuddered, with so many mouths against her, there was no way to fall. She noticed the pleading eyes of men further back. Valkstae grasped the stalactite and straightened her leg toward the side as more mouths supported her. Men cycled through the cavern over two strikes of the seventh hammer.

The troll never issued his call again; Valkstae merely whispered, “Taskmaster’s water.”

Not long after, Valkstae discovered where their food came from. A massive stone table resided within another hidden cave with a chute protruding from a rock above it. Food covered the table and clogged the trough: vegetables, berries, eggs, nuts, breads, meats, and casks filled with unknown contents. Spoiled food surrounded the table’s edge since the men only took what fell to the floor.

Valkstae looked up at the troll. “Taskmaster’s food?”

The troll panned down her body and snarled as he reached furrow, yet nodded and issued his call. Valkstae scaled the men’s backs onto the fresh food and began to gorge herself. A tussle broke out. Men wrestled and fought for the rotten crumbs she had knocked to the floor. She looked at the troll, and Valkstae crushed a tomato on her forearm. “Theirs?” He muttered but nodded and walked away.

The men stared at her with pleading eyes. She stormed around the table, kicking rotten food far from the table’s edge. Valkstae crawled up the heap, stretched toward the chute, and shoveled out fresh rations until she encountered a small cask and pulled its plug. Filled with fresh milk, she struggled to raise it and began to drink, yet froze.

Men licked the smashed food off her feet, and she almost dropped the cask, yet spilled it all over her. Valkstae reached for another cask and stilled again. Men lapped the milk from her feet, legs, back, bottom, and especially folds, reminding her of the stump in the warrior hall. Her knees parted on all fours. She began to tremble, but the men stopped once the milk was gone.

Again, the goddess Wespa must have whispered to her. Valkstae scrambled onto the mound of food where she ground and rolled in it.

Already panting as her furrow's honey flowed, Valkstae scooted to the table's edge, spread her legs along it, and buried herself in food.



Past the relief of food and water, life here continued as it always had, for the most part. Valkstae worked and slept, avoided some men, listened to others, and abused her time at the table and cistern. Wespa influenced her to crave more than the penitents' licking. Her touch and the whip's pommel-capped handle eased her needs — discreetly at the hub — she had learned her lesson in Toulukk.

Days after Tycoum left the valley, Valkstae discovered her maturing body. Positive she had become an adult, Valkstae wanted everyone to know it. She refused to wear clothing, and it thrilled her to posture to prove she was unarmed.

Other mour teased her, yet Hamr adults ignored her — except Shanee, who called her whore. A warrior finally explained to her what she felt. That it was unfaithful for adults to acknowledge her urges, she shouldn't act like Wespa around other adolescents and, when she needed to, spend time alone in the forest.

The troll could not be everywhere; Margrouln's Forge was not Toulukk, and these men weren't Hamr. Six newer penitents cornered her in the hub's secluded notch. It enraged the troll when he found her battered and bloodied until she began to cry. Disgusted by her weakness, he turned away, disinterested in avenging her.

Valkstae knew Wespa had arranged it, yet blamed herself. She had to drink and eat, and her personal needs were undeniable. Newer

penitents stalked her in pairs, though groups of up to four were not uncommon. The troll protected her each instance he caught them, yet the times she approached him after the fact, he refused her comfort, only interested in how she reacted.

As she rested one day, a recent arrival approached the troll and showed him something. The troll grumbled and turned his head, and the man kneeled at her feet and extended his hands.

On her back, Valkstae rose to her elbows. “What? What you want of Mouse?”

The man didn’t speak but urged her to take a leather glove he had found. Unsure of what he wanted, his eyes were pleading, and her gaze drifted to his rigid tusk. She considered briefly, took the glove, drew her knees back, and parted them wide.

He laid atop her and slipped his tusk inside, urgently thrusting without pause. Her hands and feet captured his bottom, and Valkstae moaned; she needed this. The pleasures of her whip’s handle had helped, yet this was different; faithful to Hamr customs, Valkstae grinned. She had taken his glove, and that made her a whore. This was not ut’Kocve’ like the men that abused her or Wespa’s inspired coercion at the table and cistern.

He lasted through one strike of the fourth hammer before he lunged deep and shuddered. As his tusk pulsed deep inside her, the man collapsed and wept. Valkstae’s calves crossed his hips, and her hands smoothed his back while she hummed a lullaby. *Cleansing one’s soul must be a process.* The desire to do so did not negate hunger, thirst, or other needs; unless free of those, they couldn’t apply themselves fully to the point of all this. It made Valkstae wonder how that same wisdom pertained to her.

Once back at the columns, Valkstae looked ahead, standing on a

chain with her other foot pressed to a man's shoulder as she leaned over that knee. Her weight was on the armor, but with her heel against his back, she noticed her leg shook. What caught her eye was what her hand was doing. Bored, she repeatedly swung the last two feet of whip in a circle. It tapped upon his back and made him tremble.

No one here feared her. But they had felt the whip, and its bite didn't fade. She stepped to the spoke and dropped to the rack. Valkstae placed her hand against his abdomen and pushed him rearward. "You help Mouse know push." Wedged between him and the armor, she grasped the chains and pulled herself into the iron yoke. "You push Mouse now."

The corroded armor was hot from the furnace and polished smooth inside by the callused skin of straining men. It smelled of rusty iron, sweat, and the absorbed breath of thousands. His sweaty body pressed against her back as her heels dangled at his knees. Once the man's trembling subsided, his chest began to heave, and he wept in her ear.

"Why you cry for Mouse?" Valkstae asked. For over two turns of the wheel, the man told of how his daughters did the same with him as he pushed a plow, and he realized he would never see them again. "March. Mouse you daughter for three turn more. Push me, un remember."

So it went as the hammers rang out the seconds, minutes, and hours. The whip and the flesh forged together by the heat of Margrouln's Forge. Valkstae was their harsh motivation, provider of food and water, a sympathetic ear, feminine comfort, victim, sexual relief, and surrogate child. She was the balance that reminded them why they came here, and as they worked through their self-imposed penance, Valkstae helped smith their souls.

Valkstae had become a taskmaster. And Mouse felt large.

TERGIVERSATOR OF MARGROULN FORGE, OF CARBON AND SIN

Another day of another ninth, she brooded. Positive she had been here for one winter, Valkstae suspected it might have been two. Memories of the Dachvst's solitude, sights, and sensations blended into a fading fanciful dream; those of Toulukk had diminished to that vague awareness the world outside was joyously busy while you slumbered.

Whether good or bad, the only changes within the forge ultimately tarnished into monotony. New penitents replenished the old the forge devoured. Each longingly recounted their tales and told of their cultures, yet it all now seemed like she had heard it before. People were people, Valkstae supposed. Their diverse languages, customs, and stations did not make them different than any other man.

The table and cistern had lost their luster, and conventional means replaced her whip's comfort. She still enjoyed her time with each, on occasion, but since it was always the same, habit and need replaced discovery. Rush'dor'mon — excessive sex — was more commonly called rush'ut'Kocve for a reason. It would be faithful if she worked it as a profession, yet Valkstae was not even sure what that entailed.

Rapes and assaults because she was Hamr had never stopped, and the troll's disdain never softened. Perhaps to spite her mother, Valkstae liked how a taskmaster often seemed like a whore. Along with its minor pitfalls, her irreplaceable value to the men served her as well.

One day, she declined to help three men relieve their carnal burden with her so battered. Though the troll refused to avenge her, the rebuffed men had no such qualms and sated their needs with equal

brutality upon her attackers. Word spread, and others who sought her relief, additional food, and water mimicked their lesson. Though the attacks hadn't stopped, they markedly lessened.

It seemed every aspect of her had become ut'Kocve' here. Though the forge was not Vastrokk, Valkstae's unfaithfulness guaranteed her eternity there since its gods encouraged her actions.

Barth's cruelty guided her whip to torture men seeking redemption. Wespa had turned her lecherous and deceitful; Valkstae's continued abuse of the men's hunger and thirst was proof of that. Kortme' made her passive. She struggled against the men yet never fought back; it would pointlessly incur their wrath. Once she realized the men's assaults had nothing to do with sex — their tusks were just weapons to empower themselves — it enraged her, and Valkstae felt Jagdnict's influence.

Like the coward god, she considered waiting until they marched and lashing them until trampled and consumed by the machine. She imagined the troll would finally approve of her response, her consequence for their torments, yet Jagdnict's craven revenge was as unfaithful as Kortme's passivity.

Her solution was only a little unfaithful. She would pray to Herte' and embrace her wild spirit — not the fighting part, just her salaciousness — though feared that aligned her with Rottem and his complacent, hedonistic demeanor.

Valkstae stood at the apron's edge, snarling at the troll, who glared back. She raised her foot as a spoke came by; he tensed, she pulled back, and he grumbled. Twice more, she taunted him, but at the fourth spoke, Valkstae tried something new. "Taskma—"

"Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr!" the troll out-boomed Valkatae's call.

“Hough!” ten thousand penitents replied.

“Isss on — the waaaaaaaalk!”

Standing on the spoke’s end, Valkstae yelled over the din, “Troll, where did the last taskmaster go?”

“You have her clothes.”

She walked the chain to stay near him. Among the worthless rings, shards of iron, and other trash, the newer men had hunted up every piece of the previous taskmaster’s leather clothes and brought them to her one at a time. “Yes, Mouse has her clothes. That’s not what I asked. Where did she go?”

He groaned and looked toward the cogs. “Wait, wait, wait, there.” He pointed to a dark stain on a gear.

She squatted on the spoke facing Hasgroth, the man who had made her practice that first day. He had educated and advised her and, over numerous conversations, helped improve her Crown, which she now spoke with everyone who knew it. “Did you know the last taskmaster?”

“It’s not wise to tease a troll,” Hasgroth’s voice reverberated in the helm. “Yes, but I wonder why none of these men ever leave.”

Valkstae’s brow raised, “They can leave?”

“Of course. They’re not slaves. They came here to free themselves of their burden.”

“How do I get out of here?”

He glanced down and never answered. Valkstae frowned. Like some ironic joke, or perhaps she had cursed herself on the mountainside, she was the only slave here. No one ever left this sweat-reeking, musty, hot prison. They came and worked until their bodies were spent, and the machine they powered consumed them.

“I have a new regret,” Hasgroth dodged. “Now that it’s too late, I’ve found remorse.”

A new word, Valkstae begged him to explain it. He pushed and spoke as she listened and answered his own question about the other men since they hadn't found remorse either.

“Mouse!”

Valkstae rose and raced up an inner walkway. With her whip's tell-tale whoosh and crack, she silenced the man. She moved to a spoke, tapping the gathered whip against her thigh to a beat set by the second hammer. It was all so predictable now. The next four men she encouraged before they finished their call.

As she walked the wheel, Valkstae sulked. She performed the job well but knew it was not her true calling. *Kefa'sosh: kefa'sosh'sot, mon, un fed*, Valkstae groaned. Path of life: your choices and decisions, manner of living or true calling, all meant to lead you to some obscure kefa'sosh'fed, your destiny or pinnacle of life. It was all nonsense meant to make you feel inadequate, and any effort seemed futile.

All she had ever done was run away from everything into a trap, and now she wasted her life here. The whole point of stating your trials of life was so others could learn from your experience. *What does a taskmaster do, Valkstae?* Nothing. What good were skills with a whip, dancing on chains, and teasing trolls? She would never escape this place and discover her true calling. That urge of late to out-shout the ten thousand's mutters gripped her.

“I am the hammer,” Valkstae shouted, “and your backs are the anvil I strike against to forge you.” Her whip whooshed and cracked above their heads. “You are of iron. With scalding heat and air, we'll smelt out your sins until pure.

“With yoke and whip, we fill you with carbon to make you brittle. Make you march to drive it back out and hammer you to find balance. In the forge's heat, you become soft. So I'll quench your fever yet leave

you hard. We'll fire you more, and I, your taskmaster, will draw down your bitterness until you're tough and ready."

Valkstae noticed the troll staring high up the hub. Margrouln or Gwefolda — she couldn't tell which — stood there and shook their head. Her fingers crooked, but she spat on the walk instead. She clenched her teeth, spat again, and stepped off the wheel in a huff.

"Taaaaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr!"

Ten thousand men answered as one, "Hough!"

"Isss — ressstiiingggg!"

She slipped through the greasy men to her pile of clothes and stripped off her leather cape, gloves, and other accouterments. It was so hot and muggy that she would rather endure the sparks than their damp heaviness. Naked, like everyone, suited her fine.

A man approached and held out a moldy piece of bread. "Shwealees, Sona-Mause. Betanino dase venatuti?"

"Daeto, daeto," said Valkstae. "Seba surasso dwet marjaneec, toti-eh-mahst, eh-chot?"

In the polite manner of his people, instead of placing a hand on either hip, he looked to the side and bit his lower lip. Valkstae took his bread and discreetly tossed it behind her. She gently grasped his turgid root and wiped down it to clean off the dirt and sweat. He was too tall for her to kneel. Bending at her waist, Valkstae slipped his tusk in her mouth. As it firmed and she began to work it, Valkstae resumed her brooding.

Her whole time here, she had accomplished nothing toward advancing her life. Valkstae ceased fretting that she was barren. As a common woman, she hoped to acquire things or learn skills to help these men, but she had naught to offer in either regard. Taskmaster

seemed like a sex worker, though grumbled; she was a slave, like her mother, and that made her a sex slave, not a whore.

Two of the man's fingers lightly set to her shoulder to signal his rush was soon coming. She would never pull back as he offered. Valkstae patted the underside of his sack twice to reply it was all right, and she worked to coax up his seed. As he flooded her mouth, Valkstae set three fingers upon his hip and urged him to linger. Slowly, she eased her suckling until he tapped her shoulder again.

She pulled back and let his seed fall from her mouth before she rose. Without looking at him, Valkstae smiled and placed her hand against his chest but stepped beside him so neither looked into the others' eyes. "Besino che-mah?" Valkstae asked if he felt better.

He patted her hand once, and she smiled, and he patted it again. Her brow peaked in surprise, but he tapped it twice more and held his hand on hers before he vanished into the crowd.

Valkstae stared at the floor. It didn't make sense. He wasn't just pleased but stated it was better than exceptional. It seemed the harder she tried, the men relinquished their seed all the quicker, yet they all claimed it was better than ever. If that were true, she thought, they would enjoy it longer instead of ending it quickly. Few men lasted three strikes of the fourth hammer, and like him, most ended her efforts just shy of two.

His people's elegant, discreet manner, Valkstae found charming. Over her time here, as she listened to the men, Valkstae had acquired a rudimentary knowledge of a hundred different languages, each culture, their values, and beliefs. They were more similar than they realized. She understood them, but no one else did, and Valkstae frowned.

What value was that knowledge in Toulokk? *None*. Just like everything else she had learned here. Worse still, her listening to

people didn't help them. It was all just more worthless information that did not help anyone, even herself.

She nudged through the men and over a rocky outcrop to avoid certain others yet halted at the top. Off in the distance, a man gazed at her. Once she stared back, he reached to his left nipple and twisted it. Unable to look at him after, Valkstae blushed and nodded, then hurried back the way she had come.

"Taskmaster's food," said Valkstae softly, and she scaled the men onto the table. After she hurriedly shoved heaps of food off its ends, Valkstae frantically began digging. She opened a cask of honey, dowsed herself from her shoulders to knees, and paid undue attention to adorn her furrow. The man entered and proceeded to the table at its open center. Valkstae crushed a particular fruit in her hand and slathered its greasy pulp into the cleft of her bottom.

Unable to look at him, Valkstae slid off the table, turned, and rested her chin and forearms upon it. He did not hesitate, aligning his rigid tusk with her vent. She loosed a long exhale, and he slowly pushed his entire length inside her.

Valkstae loved this. It wasn't Wespa's influence, and anal sex was only ut'Kocve' during the Custom of Planting. Kortme's urging, perhaps, since it made Valkstae feel wonderfully submissive. All resistance slipped away as her body and mind became docile and helpless.

The man always moved perfectly, though for himself, and the other men could not resist her temptation of honey. Mouths suckled at her breasts as tongues lapped over her torso, thighs, and especially the pearl at the top of her rut. She trembled as her rush approached, yet the man sank deep and pulsed deep inside her. He waited a moment; she was so close, but he withdrew, and Valkstae groaned, then grinned.

This was a good day. Another man took his place — she shuddered in ecstasy — and three times more since two other men followed him.

As Valkstae sauntered back to the wheel, a man collapsed out of his armor near the columns' rear. She had seen it before and turned her gaze before he perished, but something caught her eye. Valkstae crossed the spoke and jumped onto the rack as the last three men trampled him.

“Get up, stand!” Valkstae screamed at Hasgroth, who she marked her time here by. She pulled at his arm, unable to lift his hulking frame. “Please get up. I’ll make you well. Just try.” Valkstae wept as she strained to raise him.

He turned his euphoric gaze to her, and his callused lips smiled. “Mouse, I’m free.”

Hasgroth had sought this moment, and nothing she could say or do would change it. Valkstae furiously lashed two penitents to warm her whip and pressed its grip into his hand. With a loving smile, Valkstae leaned down and kissed his deformed lips. She choked back her tears and held his gaze until Hasgroth’s eyes rolled up in shock and horror.

Valkstae gripped a counter-rotating cog’s teeth, and it pulled her skyward. Up the massive wheel and back down on another, Valkstae screamed at the vent, calling the spirit raven to carry his soul. She rode back up again, praying in the language of his people. The third time she rose, Valkstae roared out as a Hamr.

“Kron, Nachtrou, Grothmer! You craven grotesques — a warrior comes to smash the gates of Kvertosh and overrun Kolumn. Hasgroth’s steel is hot, fury untamed, and he lusts for battle. Challenge him at your peril, you depraved, cringing bastards, but yield to him. Do not refuse his entry or cast him into Uthamarr. I am Valkstae, Valkstae of the Moragan Hamr, and will gut you from neck to crotch

if you refuse him. Hear my warning, you unfaithful cowards. He is coming for you.”

*Targwa da un'Moragan du tem daf'koft'sot un jarta'fersh'fed —
Du'fed fanva da do'Hamr Kocve' tem, un daf be' —
Warn the gods you are coming with contemptuous scorn.
They fear a Hamr's faithful balance, and will listen.*

Valkstae stumbled toward the hub and crumpled. She inconsolably sobbed for four turns of the wheel as she streaked her face and body with soot-soiled hands. Once she strode back out among the columns, Valkstae crushed out her anguish on the backs of ten thousand for thirty turns more.



It seemed as though each ninth here rolled by like the blood-stained cogs, slowly, grinding, unrelenting. It had only been three-ninths since Valkstae's friend perished, yet even that felt like a lifetime of casting the whip, providing food, water, a welcoming ear, and easing the men's carnal burdens.

Since her friend, not one man succumbed to the ravenous machine without a kiss as she waited with them. Valkstae was quieter now. Her vibrance and nervousness had faded; if someone had asked her why, she would have said nothing.

A man she had never spoken with sat next to her. “One of your people's warriors came to our community a few years ago. Perpetuating the faith, he called it.”

Valkstae tensed. These discussions only went one of two ways. A few hundred men had approached her on this subject since she arrived, and most were angry and bitter. “I’m sorry.”

The man winced. “What?” He glanced at the brand on her hip. “In any case, Ranalutti said he was un’Hamr’fed. He burned our fields and killed the chiefs when they negotiated with him. Ranalutti told us he’d destroy our village and enslave our people. It went on until one of our women, Sava, attacked him. He should have bested her easily, but he gave up and yielded instead.”

She already knew what he was about to say.

“He would have let us kill him and worked like a slave to rebuild everything while he tended the wounded. Ranalutti taught us Hamr beliefs and the value of strength. We had to travel a thousand paces for clean water, so he made us drink from our stream and cared for us when it made us sick — over and again until it didn’t. He helped us fight the goblin raiders, resist the last emperor, everything.

“We thrived for the first time in a century because of Ranalutti. We no longer cowered. He encouraged us to teach others, which earned us respect from other communities. He gave us hope. Is that how all Hamr are?”

Valkstae sighed. “Most, if they’re Kocve’.”

She considered sharing another tale of Perpetuating the Faith Tycoum had mentioned. The shem’fed Ragra found a cluster of people harassed and hounded by sect — vicious goblin-mourkra half-bloods. Instead of aggression, she used guidance. She fought off their attackers, taught them, and ended their running.

Eventually, an eleven-winter-old groth’mour walked into camp mildly wounded. He emptied a bag of four heads on the ground — the sect who had raped and killed his mother. Ragra’s work was done.

The boy could lead them now. They took Moragan’s lessons to heart, and the community grew strong.

*Un’def da Kocve’mon un du’fed kref daf du un’taru’targwu du’fed
den’mon kref tarja’mon taru’traam de’Vraste’ —*
Perpetuate the faith with all peoples so they help all others
as humans earn dominion over the world.

Instead, Valkstae held her tongue. She had learned to reserve her thoughts for when it mattered. But it didn’t matter here. All these men had given up, and she was as ut’Kocve’ as they were. Without a word, Valkstae rose and headed toward the wheel, nudging her way through the sweat-slicked men.

The man who enjoyed her vent nodded and twisted his nipple. Valkstae spat on the floor and kept walking. Wasting her life like Rottem confirmed her unfaithfulness.

That question of Kocve’ — faithfulness — had plagued her since childhood. Was she Kocve’fed, faithful to the gods? They had always made her life difficult and never helped her. Was she Kocve’mon — faithful to clan beliefs and the purpose Vraste’? With her gentle, caring, and small, she never saw the point of force, violence, and strength, which never seemed like an option.

Most importantly, was she Kocve’sot, faithful to self, which mattered most to the Hamr? For that, she had an answer, no. Valkstae hated her size, she saw no value in anything she did, and now a slave, Valkstae wondered if her mother’s bitterness had filled her.

As she moved through the penitents, a man grabbed her throat with one hand and swung his other to her furrow. “Sa yeh the slet for us soldiers. Mauss come service meh pike now.”

Her mind went blank, and she froze as he drove her backward. A phrase clawed its way into her mind. *Valk tem ut'Kocve'*.

Valkstae swung her whip's knotted handle in a circle, thumping his skull. He let go and bent over, hands to his head. With her eyes wide, enraged, Valkstae reached behind him and grabbed his seed sack. She twisted it and drove him toward the wheel.

"You, stay!" Valkstae roared, pointing at the troll as he charged them.

The troll complied, and the men parted. Once at the wheel, Valkstae drove him forward by his testicles until the man tumbled down onto the rack. She kicked the nearest penitent in a yoke. "Get out, go rest."

She jumped down beside the molester. "March!" He had hurt his knees and wouldn't rise. Valkstae kicked him twice, but he still refused, and Valkstae pinned his neck with her foot. "Trample him," she barked to the men behind. The man thrashed and stood, glaring.

Again, Valkstae violently swung the heavy handle into his shoulder. His defiant expression turned horrified as he cringed but complied. She scrambled out of the rack, shoving men out of her way. Without a telltale whoosh of warning, Valkstae swept her arm in a lemniscate motion and lashed his back three times, drawing blood. He slammed into the armor but crumpled. Valkstae leaped onto the chain, grasped the yoke's helm, and yanked him back into it by his hair.

"March until you drop," she growled through the eye slit.

Rage painted her face as she sat on the spoke before him and placed her feet on each chain. With her legs splayed wide, Valkstae spat on her fingers and prepared to drive two inside herself as her lips parted to shout, but she stilled. She withdrew her hand and wiped it on her

breast, glaring at the man, and her look of anger slipped to disgust for what she intended to say.

Valkstae looked at the rack and appeared as though she might vomit. She spat on the aisle, stood on the spoke, and shouted to the ten thousand. “I have failed you.” The men continued their muttered lamentations.

She cracked the whip twice and roared, “Ut’varta, ut’varta, silence. Cease your pathetic whining.” Valkstae stormed down the chain and lashed her whip with a metallic bang against the armored yoke of a man still mumbling. She turned her whip on three men at the apron to silence them as well. A few men stepped out of the armor and looked at her.

“I didn’t tell you to stop, march! Keep silent and listen.” Except for the grinding cogs and her voice’s echo, the cavernous chamber was quiet for the first time in millennia. As Valkstae spoke, she wove over the spokes and chains with an expression of furious resolve.

“I have endured your confessions, and now you’ll hear mine. When I was a child, I failed my fellow Hamr by bending to their will, too afraid to teach them and make them strong. My mother failed me, only concerned with her bitterness. Yet, I have failed ten thousand sons. I have failed you because I am unfaithful.

“When you lamented and wept, I coddled you. I fed you when hungry and slaked your thirst. Those who felt powerless, I allowed you to cower me. And when lusts tempted you away from your quest, I satisfied them. I was wrong. It was cruel of me to do so.” The penitents slowed, and Valkstae cracked her whip. “Keep marching! My weakness and cowardice have caused you all to languish, but my sins are greater still.”

*Un'sauwa'fed tem de'mon ut'Kocve' de dorj un'targza'fed —
Tem'mon tem Kocve' —*
Excessive compassion is as unfaithful as cruel oppression.
Balance is faithful.

Valkstae twirled the whip around her body, draping its handle over her shoulder. “You proclaim your regrets and seek to forgive yourself so you may die in peace. I’ve heard your confessions and find them feckless. After you inflicted harm on others, regret is your refusal to accept your guilt. I have caused all the people of Vraste’ to suffer because I have not taught you to become men and face your transgressions.

“Vraste’ is the place of learning where your trials of life form and shape you — to strengthen others. Your evil and poor decisions are burdens you’re supposed to carry for a lifetime if you are remorseful. Yet, you only think of yourself. Too cowardly to rebuild what you have destroyed, heal those you’ve injured, and bring peace — maybe through revenge upon you — to those you’ve harmed.

“All of you brought your egocentric imperfections here. They have worsened and turned opportunistic. You regret your rapes, yet how many here have tried to rape me? All of you claim to seek suffering. But you feed and drink off my filthy body when not begging to fill my voids. And many of you have derided the Hamr because they helped your people and made them stronger.

“I have whipped you because you begged me, but it only weakens you further. I do not whip you to help — you. I whip you because you fail your brothers here, just like I failed my kin. The weakest of you could drive the rest. Take one more step to help your brothers and

encourage them to march. Instead, you call for Mouse to help them for you.

“I am unfaithful for not harshly teaching you remorse by forcing you to leave here and set the world right. But I am ut’Kocve’ and a slave no more. I refuse to whip those weaker than myself ever again.

“Today, I end your penance and will help you atone for your sins. Lie down in the racks, and I will mercilessly whip the troll to turn the wheel and end your selfish suffering. But — if you have repented and found remorse, I will grapple with him till the end of time, so you may go out and strengthen all peoples.

“I am Mouse. I am Kocve’fed and say the gods be damned. What they give or take is of no matter, my path of life is my own. I am Kocve’mon and will force you to strengthen and consider others or mercifully end your suffering and cleanse the world of you. I am Kocve’sot. I am so large of heart I keep all of you in it, yet I’m so small I can slip into yours. I am Mouse of the Moragan Hamr.”

“*HEeeeEYyyrrrrRAaaeeEOOooooowww*,” the troll issued his symphonic, quavering howl.

The ten thousand men silenced. Valkstae’s brow raised. He had not yowled like that since her first day.

“Taaaaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr.”

Ten thousand men shouted as one, “Hough!”

“Isss off — the waaaaaaaaalk!”

And ten thousand confirmed his call, “Hough!”

Valkstae hesitantly stepped off the spoke onto the apron. She moved through the throng of penitents, and unlike every previous day, they parted and formed a gauntlet much like her birthday. None spoke as she passed.

Up ahead, at the end of the long gap of men, the troll stood near

the outer wall. Valkstae's stern expression shifted to confusion as she reached him. The great troll dropped her rolled leather cape containing her clothes over her shoulder. He pressed a high stone. A gap in the wall opened, and he backed her through it.

"Troll, what are you —"

"Taaaaaaaassssk-masterrrrrrr," the troll bawled again.

"Mouse," ten thousand men shouted in unison.

Out of the many, one man yelled, "Taskmaster of souls forged clean."

Ten thousand repeated his call, "Mouse, taskmaster of souls forged clean!"

And the troll closed the passage.

The moment the door shut, her world became silent, cold, and black like a tomb as the reverberating cogs, hammers, and footsteps of ten thousand faded in her mind. Valkstae wondered if the troll had cast her into Kroth — Hamr oblivion — a fate worse than Vastrokk. She turned, and high ahead was a pinprick of light.

Valkstae knelt and blindly searched the soil-covered floor until she found a sharp shard of rock. Held like a dagger, she reconsidered and placed the edge to her arm but paused. She would never experience the fear of her submitted beloved lost at sea. A solemn grin spread over her lips. Like Shanee had cut the cord between them, she needed to sever her bond with ten thousand and the life she had known.

She walked up the slope toward the light, unsure yet unafraid of what lay ahead. Valkstae cut her arm and prayed. Although, they would likely ignore her while in Kregdach.

"Tarkd'fed du, Holos. I have no use for your hearth and home. Un Shona, Kron's worthless bitch. You can lap the filth from my

furrow; I have no use for you at all. Herte', du cringing, unruly, fetid rut, hear my warning; tom targwa'fed.

“Tom tem Valkstae. Valkstae tem Touloukk, da Dachvst, un Kregdach. Tarv'shem'mon dawme'nem de dourve'; shem'mon'frey tem un'sot un'feds mour; tarv'rush'mon'shem'mon. Shem'mour tem Shanee un tam'fed da Hamr. Valkstae tem da Moragan Hamr.

“Defend Touloukk. Protect all those I love with your worthless ut'Kocve' life.” Valkstae crooked her fingers. “Do as I command, or when I reach Koluumn, I'll shove my fist so far up your backside, I'll turn you inside out by your tongue and cast you down to Vastrokk to choke on Jagdnict's tusk as ten thousand mourkra raze your vent.

“Heed my warning. I am Mouse, and I am Hamr.”



High upon Shalmour's cliffs, the goddess Herte' held a rock as wide as her shoulders above her head. Her manic smirk flinched — she stilled — her eyes flared, and she hurled the stone down into Vastrokk at Jagdnict and laughed.

Herte's eyes narrowed, and she lowered to a squat at the cliff's edge, gazing into Kregdach. A wry smile rose on her lips. She chuckled and turned her gaze to Koluumn's void, over space and time, into the future. Her muscles rippled as her expressions shifted wildly; she laughed, looked enraged, excited, moaned, was crushed with sorrow, lurched in shock, and blushed, thrilled by the obscenities while pinching her nipple.

Her eyes widened. Herte' gasped, and her brow raised as she

beamed and nodded. “*Mmm*, Valkstae. Valkstae of Toulokk, the Dachvst, and Kregdach. Taskmaster of souls; mother of ten thousand; prostitute — and so very many wondrous things to come. Daughter of Shanee and all the Hamr. Valkstae of the Moragan Hamr.”

While she twisted her nipples, Herte’ chewed on her lip and shivered as wetness surged from her core. She looked to her left and slowly stood. Nude, toned, and well-muscled, Herte’s hips and heavy breasts seductively swayed as she strode to Kolumm’s bottomless gorge and leapt across it to Kvertosh, warrior heaven.

A confused man — taller and broader than most, his bare sun-bronzed chest adorned with countless tattoos, brands, and scars from battle — panned over his surroundings with piercing blue eyes as the breeze fondled his long blonde hair. Herte’s wild libidinous gaze looked him over as though she would ride his cock for eternity, and she approached him and cooed.

“Can you hear all that mewling and feel the humidity? You’ve already slickened the thighs of those sluts in Shalmour, and you’re not even through the gate yet.”

She lustily grinned, noting his steel was hot. Herte’ gestured toward the gate as her hand slipped to her cunt. Massive and imposing, Nachtrow the Gatekeeper rose with a sound like a mountain had come alive. He glared at the man, raised his battle axes, and prepared for combat.

Herte’ withdrew her slick hand. She wet her lips with it and dried it upon her breast. “You’ll best him easily, but let’s fight him together. Valkstae sent me, Tycoum.”



As Valkstae neared the tunnel's end, she winced, blinded by the brightness of a spring day, and gradually eased her eyes open. All the majesty of Kortme's canvas came into view. Azure skies littered with pristine white clouds atop an emerald forest far below her. Her gaze followed the gentle mountainous crescent that spanned to the horizon, and Valkstae realized she was on the southern slope of Nicci's Wall, opposite Toulukk.

Valkstae had long dreamed of this moment and the elation she would feel. From here, it was easy to find the path home, but as she panned over the wall's southern breast, Valkstae felt nothing. Her eyes raised, and she looked toward the infinity of DaVostt'mon and wondered what resided there as a curious excitement grew, unafraid.

She looked down to shield her eyes and found a rolled hide. The parchment contained a dagger — a needle in its grip — and the words therein were written in Hamr.

Valkstae;

The knife is for you, the only thing made during your time here. Margrouln wanted to keep the needle, but I threatened him with no ale.

We forged this token for you to remember your time here and hope you forged something more lasting in yourself that will grant you all you ever wanted.

Goodbye, Mouse, Taskmaster of Margrouln Forge. Remember, yet continue your journey elsewhere.

She began to sob and sank to the mossy wildflower-covered ground as a murmuring cool breeze caressed her sun-warmed skin. A single thought swirled in her mind as Valkstae wept. *I am Kocve', Mouse of the Hamr.*

Pressed to Vraste's soft breast, Valkstae fell fast asleep. As she dreamed, her fingers wormed into the rich black soil — down into the Kregdach — reflexively searching for the vibration of hammers that had forged her soul clean.

OF WIELDED HAMRS

PART 2

PATHFINDER

Kaytoo had tracked and hunted for three days, intent on harvesting a particular deer. There was easier prey about — younger and less experienced — yet this felt personal. Not an act of revenge, pride, or in search of a trophy; she hoped someone would be as merciful with her one day.

The doe was larger than most. Its meat would be tough, rank with the pungency of age. Her tracks caught Kaytoo's attention. She had long struggled to take one more step; her plodding gait left deep imprints of its dewclaws, and the deer's left front and opposing rear hooves dragged. This doe was old, stretching out her life one day at a time because her spirit would not allow her to perish: of no further value to anyone except the vultures and blowflies.

Dressed in only moss and pine's fragrant residue, Kaytoo crawled up a ridge with her spear. She tested the wind, noted the terrain, and from a distance, the well-worn trail her prey followed daily. Once beside the path, her bare hands scooped away a shallow depression in the loamy black soil, covered it with heaps of gathered leaves smoothed to match the surrounding swells, and she wormed her way under them.

Her spear's tip extended within a forearm's length from the trail; its height aligned with the doe's heart. Kaytoo's right leg drew up beside her, and her toes dug into the dirt until they found purchase. With her right arm laid along her back and hip, she gripped the knotted rope bound to the shaft's butt. She took a deep breath, calmed, and released it, over and again, focused and waiting.

Patience was the hunter's virtue, but her wait wasn't long. The cautious doe tested the air as she surveyed her surroundings between uneven, calculated steps, and though unseen, her dragging hooves revealed who it was.

Kaytoo shallowed her breathing to slow her heart and ease her trembling as she silently prayed. *Guide my hand to a clean kill or miss, whichever is right and merciful.* Unsure of whom she pleaded to anymore, Kaytoo no longer prayed to Hamr gods or even the nature spirits. Perhaps no one, or maybe the creator of all things you never spoke of for fear of offending him — for he could also destroy.

Her breathing stilled, and her heart felt like it stopped as the doe's forelegs came into view. She gingerly adjusted the spear-tip's height, tensed, and the deer stepped forward. Kaytoo lunged in an explosion of leaves as she drove out her spear, landing on her belly where the deer had been since she hit nothing. The doe had vanished.

She scrambled to her feet. Shoustvar snorted off in the distance, and a pair of powerful arms yanked her against someone, head flanked by massive breasts. A hand larger than any human's gripped Kaytoo across her chest as their other, lubriciously sopped with a woman's flow, slapped over her mouth.

"Mmm, why aren't you wearing my armor you stole?" the woman moaned in lewd tones.

The words didn't register as Kaytoo thrashed to get free. The woman held tight, mauling her breast and tenting her nipple as her other hand massaged Kaytoo's jaw from ear to ear. She flailed again, and the woman laughed as her hand shot from Kaytoo's breast to her crotch and jerked her up off the ground. Her heels kicked at the woman's knees, and hands pulled her hair as a thick, slobbery tongue licked Kaytoo from shoulder to ear.

“Do you like how my armor cradles your cunt after it did mine?” Kaytoo froze. It had to be Herte’. “It locks in deep to every crease and void, yes? Why are you struggling, foolish mortal? I did not even judge you as spoiled after Jagdnict’s demons enjoyed you countless times. Oh, that’s it. You prefer that now. Anything to please you, little Hamr.”

Herte’s fingers, thick as men’s roots, wormed into her core. Kaytoo tried to yell, but Herte’ gripped her chin, and two befouled fingers thrust into her mouth — obscenely pumped in and out like the others. She gagged on the digits, unable to bite them, irresistibly urged to suckle as her skin crawled and sheath flooded.

“There you go — good little human,” Herte’ moaned. “Oh, how precious. Your cursed marks are changing like Breed and making your cunt slick as mine.”

Breed tem criss ur verta du’fed —

Du targza daf pest’mon ur rushva’fed —

Breed tor’tdok tdok’fed —

Breed is marked to warn all others.

Their attack will turn to lust.

Breed cannot refuse.

Kaytoo’s undulating, blue tattooed stripes had shifted to red and forced her arousal. She stopped struggling; her fingers entwined in Herte’s hair, and her soles slid up the goddess’ thighs as her legs splayed like a frog’s. Unable to stop Herte’s brutish violation, she conceded and groaned.

Her head moved forward and back as she suckled on the goddess’ fingers like thick roots. Herte’ pulled them away, no doubt to make her chase them. Kaytoo’s mouth slipped to their tips and slowly descended

toward Herte's knuckles; her eyes narrowed, and she slammed the crown of her head into Herte's mouth.

*Vraste' tem da do'Hamr kochtraam —
Tar'tdok fanva da un'Moragan, du'fed fanva du —
Vraste' is the Hamr's realm.
Do not fear the gods, they fear you.*

She launched off her thighs and tumbled down the hillside. A manic expression around wild eyes painted her face, thrilled at the prospect of killing a god. Kaytoo spun round, her digits dug into the soil, crouched and ready to fight.

*Sosh'fed targda'mon da un'Moragan ur traam vut'fed Kolumn —
Tarv'sosh'fed da un'Moragan ur traam un'vute' du'fed —
Die fighting a god to rule in heaven.
Kill a god to rule over them.*

Herte' slammed into her, and they slid over leaves down to the hill's bottom. At twice her size, Herte's arms drove Kaytoo's knees back to her shoulders, which she gripped with both hands. Her mouth engulfed Kaytoo's jaw and nose, and Herte's tongue obscenely wriggled down Kaytoo's throat as she kissed her. Unable to bite it, Kaytoo stiffened. She could taste Herte's blood; she had hurt a god.

*Da un'Moragan tem un'sosh, tdok ut'jesh —
Kocve' Hamr tor tarv'sosh'fed da un'Moragan —
The gods are immortal, not invulnerable.
Faithful Hamr can kill a god.*

Hunched over her nethers to make their ruts flush, Herte' raked over her so forcefully, she thought her pelvis would break. Kaytoo's fists

pounded at Herte's ribs until her eyes rolled up, suffocating from the writhing appendage in her throat. About to pass out, her arms fell slack, and Herte' shuddered, drenching Kaytoo from her thighs to her abdomen. "*Rahh*-yes! *Ahhh* — well done, little Hamr."

Kaytoo coughed and gasped. Herte's lips pressed to her ear, and she moaned, "I long for when we fight and rush daily in Kolumn. We'll rape those Holos worshiping sluts in Shalmour — bathe in their nectar — and drive Kvertosh's warriors into a frenzy to battle them as they try to take us. But not today.

"I like another Hamr now, too. Guide it to her chosen life's path — or I'll ensure the black elk Shoustvar shuns you and that worm Jagdnict devises new ways to enjoy you for eternity. You may keep my knife. The armor, we'll wrestle for later. Don't worry, you're still my favorite, little Hamr."

Kaytoo sucked in another breath to curse the goddess, yet Herte' head-butted her, and the world turned black. Her eyes fluttered open in the gap of three tree trunks that had grown together. She prepared to shout, yet movement in the distance drew her gaze to something else, and what was behind it was closing fast.



This was a mistake. Valkstae had spent two Lums working down the southern breast of Nicci's Wall as DaVostt'mon's warm breath urged her southward. Halfway, she spotted the pass that marked the path to the northern forests. It led to Toulukk, but with the third continent's

southern region so close, she could not resist the temptation to explore where few Hamr had ever seen.

She found no food or water, and a pack of something that had followed her since morning now grew near. Her gaze scanned the horizon of high ferns as she backed to clumped trees. A gloved hand slapped over her mouth, and Valkstae's head was yanked between large breasts, pulled tight against a woman.

"*Shh*, stay," the woman whispered. She shoved Valkstae up into the notch and dove underneath the ferns.

The foliage barely moved as the woman silently scrambled under it. Valkstae pulled into the void and gasped. Six lesser-sect had been chasing her: not quite mourkra yet larger than goblins, a vicious blending of both. All were well-armed and haphazardly armored; if they caught her — Valkstae shivered.

The lead sect slowed. Two black arms swung up from the ferns and sank a knife into the sect's sternum, drawing it to his crotch. Once he fell, the woman encased in black rose from the bracken and whistled. The five sect charged. Arms by her sides, she just stood there until the next sect neared her. She stepped on something, and he impaled himself on a spear, perhaps. Without a word, she rushed the others but vanished under the waist-high canopy.

One sect tripped, and a light ax chopped down into greenery three times as black blood painted the undergrowth. The woman rose again, chopped, and stabbed the fourth in his back, and Valkstae guessed she was done hiding. She steadily strode toward the last pair, cursed, and laughed as they brawled and died.

The woman gathered her weapons, and Valkstae recognized the second skin of black clothing's detail as she neared. Her eyes widened,

and she dropped to her knees. “Oh, Herte’, you came for me.” Valkstae began to cry. “The other gods never listened. Herte’, I —”

“Tarkd’fed bitch’s folm!” Herte’ yanked at the dragon’s lace armor. “Ut’varta, du stupid girl, be quiet. Tom — *grrm* — I am tdok that troll’s ditch, Herte’. Du stayed upwind of them un brought them to me.” The woman thrashed, unable to remove the veiny lace of dragon’s scale armor that looked like drizzled black wax formed to her every curve.

She dropped her weapons except her ax and went back to the fallen. The woman hacked away at each body she found, pulled at the armor, and moved to the next. “There du are. Koft’mon — stay still.” Once she chopped at the sect, the woman tugged at her lace helm; it all shrank to less than modest pieces, and she frantically stripped off every piece.

Valkstae wasn’t sure which was more frightening: the prospect of meeting Herte’ or this woman. At more than half-head taller, she was lean though well-muscled. Countless random tattoos, berry-stained scars, brands, and scarifications adorned her odd, darkly tanned skin. Blue stripes shifted and moved over her entire body. Even her eyelids over blue-speckled, hazel eyes, barely visible from the mop of dark hair that shielded them.

“Du ut’sestva tarkd’mon un’Krefpasada’fed fed-sot” — the woman advanced with her finger pointed — “du dek’targma — *grrm*, du risked my life. Tom should —”

“You speak Hamr?” Valkstae beamed. “Well, do’mour Hamr. You know, children’s Hamr, but —”

“Of course I varta Hamr, idiot Shonaesh. Un that is what happens when du are exiled at twelve winters.”

Valkstae glanced at her hip. The woman sported the same brand she did, though more faded. “I’m not Shonaesh,” she gushed and

hurriedly stripped. The woman stood there with her mouth agape as Valkstae postured once nude.

The woman spat on the ground. “Stop that! Pas, what are du doing?”

“I’m showing you I’m Hamr and unarmed, so you don’t feel afraid and know you can trust me.”

The woman stormed to Valkstae, gripped her throat, and growled, “Pas, do I look afraid?” — Valkstae shook her head — “Un I can see du tem Hamr. I just did not know they bred with dwarves now —” The woman froze. “Tdok, tdok’fed. Du called me Herte’, un say du prayed to her, pas’ghey?”

Valkstae nodded. The woman released her and began to spit, flail, and curse as she wildly chopped at a fallen tree, then looked at the sky and screamed curses at all the gods, especially Herte’. Surprised by her outrage, Valkstae backed to her things and sat upon a rock. Once the woman wore herself out, she approached, and Valkstae spread her legs and pulled her folds open.

“Stop that!” The woman sat on a log, her knees parted wide, and she leaned forward. “Du look like da ut’Kocda’sot slut. Do I appear armed pes afraid? No.”

Valkstae stared at the woman’s genitals and nodded. The dark woman followed her gaze. “Tarkd’fed rush’dor, Herte’!” She reached to her furrow and carefully withdrew a knife with a palm-swelled grip from her core. “Pas, who are du” — the woman spat again and threw the knife into the ground — “un did that mung-ditch, Herte’, send du?”

“What’s mung?” The woman snarled. “I — I prayed to Herte’, but — I’m Valkstae. *Uh*, Valkstae of Toulukk, the Dachvst, and Kregdach.

Taskmaster of souls; mother of ten thousand; and provider of sex. Daughter of Shanee and all the Hamr. Valkstae of the Moragan Hamr.”

The woman glanced at Valkstae’s splayed folds. “Ten thousand, huh? I guess du stretch more than a dwarf’s lie. So tell me, Chipmunk —”

“Don’t call me chipmunk.” Valkstae grabbed Margrouln’s knife. “You may call me Valkstae or Mouse, but not chipmunk — I hate Ceepe’. You’re very rude for a Hamr. You should state your dour’Vraste’ first, then you may ask about mine.”

The woman snorted and chuckled. “Tom tem Kaytoo, Kaytoo tem da Dachvst” — Valkstae’s nose scrunched and her mouth opened — “shut up, ut’varta. It tem my trials of life, tdok do. Now du just get de small list. Where was I? Hunter, fisher, unCriss marker of life, ranger un,” Kaytoo inaudibly whispered, “mist raider.”

She continued in a bored tone and mostly in Crown, “Kaytoo da usurper, crucifier, un impaler; abdicated moragan of Touloukk, moragan of da Dachvst. Prisoner of Vashte’, enslaved whore’s wrath, conscripted soldier; survivor of Vastrokk’s torments un Kroth’s non-existence. Slayer of da Vourrtax Boar, Faeshtdok, un Xiantroth; conqueror of da Ruby Dragon, Vourrtax Worm, Jiangerrd Priests, un faerie loves longing. Daughter of Kervesh un Hesme’. Kaytoo tem da Moragan Hamr.

“Oh” — she smirked — “un I make a god bleed. Now threaten me again, Chipmunk.”

Valkstae wilted. Kaytoo grabbed her wrist and jerked her knife from the ground. She flipped it to grip its blade and extended it toward her. “See how that bitch Herte’s knife feels in du — *grmm* — in you hand. I want to hold yous.”

Her nose curled as she hesitantly took Kaytoo's knife. Kaytoo snatched away Valkstae's knife. "Where did you get this, Chipmunk?"

"Margrouln's Forge." Valkstae told her that she had been the taskmaster, and Gwefolda and Margrouln made the knife over her time there.

"It is an excellent kris'sot that will last you life — *pas?*" Kaytoo withdrew the needle from its grip. She squinted to examine its eye, tried to bend it, noting its temper and sharpness, amazed by the inconsequential thing. Valkstae told her its name. "This is de good knife to carry Needle in. Margrouln smarter than I thought. Herte's knife never goes dull and is unbreakable. It dropped from her hand in Shalmour, cut through Vastrokk, un fell into my hand in Kroth. I trade you for Needle, then you have two knives."

Valkstae declined. It was a gift and perhaps had greater value than she recognized. Kaytoo put it back, and they exchanged knives as she noted Kaytoo was injured. She reached to her mouth, wiped at the blood that covered her lower face, and chuckled, but Kaytoo also wiped at the oil covering her thighs and abdomen and snarled.

"You reek of unwashed men." Kaytoo sniffed. "Leave everything." She rose and looked about, noticed Nicci's Wall, and headed away from it, muttering about being eleven days from where she had been.

Valkstae struggled to keep up until Kaytoo slowed, stopped, and shushed her. Kaytoo felt around with her feet, then dropped to a knee and dug into the black soil until she brought up a few handfuls of mud. They continued deeper into the forest. A voice called to Valkstae that silenced as Kaytoo spoke.

"Ah, doj — *err*, good. She call me right to her." Kaytoo turned and moved toward the voice Valkstae had heard.

They came to a pond with a naiad standing in it. "No, don't!"

Valkstae shouted. Kaytoo waved her off. The naiad stared and spoke to her, yet she sensed it simultaneously addressed Kaytoo.

Kaytoo glanced at Valkstae and grinned. Her arms raised, and Kaytoo plodded toward the nymph, entranced. Once near the pond's edge, she weaved forward as her lips puckered, then back. The naiad reached for her, and Kaytoo grabbed its wrist and yanked it from the water, flinging the naiad onto the ground behind her. "Now what you do?"

The naiad scrambled, and just as Kaytoo reached it, the bluish woman shrank into a bug-like nymph and scurried back to the pond. Kaytoo tried to stomp it yet missed and waded into the still water. She told Valkstae it would hide from them now and insisted she join her. It took some coaxing, but once she had, Valkstae mentioned that she avoided certain waters and asked how Kaytoo learned to do that.

"Ut'Shemda tem stupid. Naiad, dryad, all of them. They too —" Kaytoo muttered. "I do not talk like da child. I do not know all de words, is all. Pes, I tem learning. Nymphs are too fixed on rush, I think. I used to stay away from some water, like you, pes I grew tired of fear. Un I guess da first time I was fed rushva — very aroused, pas'ghey? They tem very submissive out of they element.

"Now you tell me of Mouse, Chipmunk. You path of life from Shanee to here."

Valkstae demurred; she had learned to stay quiet. Kaytoo was insistent and threatened to give her to the naiad. She vaguely touched on a few high points, but Kaytoo had a way of steering the conversation deeper, probing the events and hopes of her life, though Kaytoo was disinclined to discuss her own.

As they returned to their possessions, Kaytoo pointed to the hole she had dug, now filled with clean water. She explained that most

water ran in underground streams along the southern slope of Nicci's Wall. Kaytoo seemed to know everything about the Dachvst, yet what Valkstae most wanted to learn about were the places and people that inhabited the region.

Kaytoo extracted a metal disk from a small totem bag and tossed it to her. "Hamr call it de fermhl. Da Kosh tem da Dachvst call it da imperial vaht, coin, or money. In da Dachvst, they pay for things with it. They do not do for others or trade. You must pay for everything.

"You say you want to be — that you are — da *mon* tarv'rush'mon shem'mon, da provider of sex. Pes you are sot, not mon. What they call da slut here. I pay you, and you become da worker of sex. If you do not want to be, give it back."

She had heard the people on her coming of age and, in the forge, dreamed of becoming a provider of sex to spite her mother. Though she did it well, Valkstae knew something was missing, and with more to learn, it enticed her. "I'll keep it. How much does this pay for, and ... *uh*, do you want me to lick honey from a tree?"

Kaytoo burst out laughing. "Chipmunk, you tem funny. Maybe you should be da bard. It pays for three times. Kocve', yes?"

From the way Kaytoo leered at her, Valkstae couldn't rise from the log she sat on, and Kaytoo's abdomen pressed against her shoulder as she glared down at her. Valkstae's head slowly turned, and her tongue eased out from her lips. Kaytoo grasped her hair and tipped her head back, and Kaytoo's head shook, staring intensely.

Her breaths quickened, and Kaytoo's stripes of blue shifted to reds. She grasped her arm and bent Valkstae over the log with her backside upturned atop it. Kaytoo straddled her bottom, pressed to it, and moaned, "This time, Chipmunk, just try not to cry."

MARK OF NOT

Valkstae awoke to the enhanced brightness and colors of Lur and Lum illuminating the forest and the roots and berries Kaytoo must have provided her. She rose a few times during her slumber, yet after each, laid back over the log as Kaytoo had left her.

She hadn't cried, unsure of why Kaytoo had said that. Kaytoo had not hurt her; she was urgent, forceful even, but did not cause her any pain. Perhaps she meant to divert her from this path, yet Valkstae sensed her implication meant she would lose something. A wide grin spread up into her eyes. *You're a whore now.* It felt as though she had only gained and wished to mark the occasion.

*Sest di'pes tem do kefa'sosh,
un criss sest'fed daf saud un'tam —
Remember forks of your life's path,
and mark highpoints to share with others.*

“Doj, du — *uh*, you awake again.” Kaytoo nodded. “Eat, un we go. No more wandering off ur tarv'rush'tom — to rub you self? Stay in camp, or I must rise to watch un keep you safe.”

Valkstae's cheeks burned from embarrassment, though Kaytoo's expression hinted her statement was sincere. The frequency of sleep, work, and other things at the forge had become habits. “*Uhm*, where can I find stainberries and thorns?” Kaytoo asked her why. “I just wanted to mark — you know — that I'm a whore now.”

Kaytoo howled with laughter. “Du tem tdok da mon tarv'rush'mon shem'mon. Ut'mon pes sot-mon, ghey'sot, maybe da baby whore.

I could have humped da dead sect for da same —” Her eyes softened, and laughter ceased. “Chip— Mouse, you have much to learn first. I will take you to da most beautiful provider of sex in all Vraste’ to teach you — if you want. Pes, you are right. You need to mark this milestone of you life.”

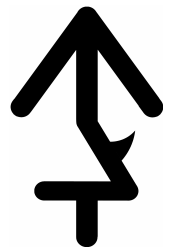
Gripped with humiliation, Valkstae would have cried if not for Kaytoo’s abrupt business. Kaytoo started a small fire and blew on the coals until it filled with shimmering embers. She took a spur from her boot — a nasty, finger-length, curved steel spike — and let it heat until it glowed.

“Draw me you mark.” Kaytoo pointed to the ground, then at her. “Where un how big.”

Valkstae hadn’t thought about that, any of it. She began to hedge with the joy of it gone but now felt committed. Not a whip or her name, maybe just the word whore. She asked if Kaytoo would spell out T-R-M in Hamr. Kaytoo shook her head, explaining she couldn’t read, and stuck her finger in the dirt.

Kaytoo drew an inverted V and, between its legs, a line straight down. She asked her to add the first symbol used to spell ‘fed’ midway on the vertical line. Valkstae asked what it meant.

“I know of no mark for sex providers on Vraste’, so you will be da first. It is you legs un a big root between them, un fed for many — a productive future. Only you will know what it mean, so you can say tarv’rush’mon until you do not want to.” Kaytoo grinned.



It was so vulgar, yet Kaytoo’s infectious enthusiasm made her like it. Valkstae nodded and pointed at her abdomen just above her pubic hair but pulled back when Kaytoo lifted the glowing spur. “Not a brand! I meant a tattoo.”

*Tarv'crisp do unCrisf'mon un sana'vrog'fed ur
unCriss'sot do Vraste', di'targta, un di'targva —*

Heal your cuts with stainberries to
tattoo your trials of life, losses, and victories.

“You right.” Kaytoo put it back in the fire. “Da uncriss'fed mean commitment, like da Kocve' Hamr. Tdok tom'verta — not a person statement? We wait to find berries un —”

*UnCriss'fed di'paxtma tem'vute' do
dourvet'fed, dourve'mon, dourve'fed —*

Brand irrevocable pledges into your
heart, mind, and soul.

“No, wait, I'll do it. I want to do it, to be a whore, the best one, no matter what it entails.” Valkstae leaned back and tried to calm herself, already trembling.

Kaytoo stared as though waiting for her mind to change again or perhaps cornered now herself, having intended to dissuade her. She took up the spur and pinched the spot, then leaned in and kissed it. Valkstae felt the burn, but before she could react, it was over. With a grin, Kaytoo rose before her and branded herself exactly the same, except the Hamr F was reversed.

*UnCriss'fed paxt un'tam tem'vute' do dourvet,
taub du frey un'daf'fed —*

Brand pledges with others into your heart,
making you family forever.

Valkstae's eyes welled up. In that simple act of Hamr custom, Kaytoo bound herself to her and her quest. Kaytoo leaned her back and

pressed their brands together. Staring into Valkstae's eyes, Kaytoo's intense smile puckered to impish. "I you first sex work — un want everyone to know. Pas, doj, Chipmunk?"

"Yes, it's good, Kaytoo — maker of whores."



Kaytoo dismissed her apprehension to travel at night. She had witnessed Hamr fearlessness throughout her life, and Valkstae supposed it also made sense. Unlike most Kref in their varied communities or those who shunned civilization in secluded cabins or caves, Kaytoo had survived alone as a child in the Dachvst. Like a wild thing, Kaytoo ate what she found, slept where she stopped, and wandered the Dachvst since she loved to explore it.

They returned to the pond; the naiad cursed them and hid. Kaytoo insisted they bathe often and conceal their scent with fragrant plants and clean soil. It was pointless to dress; ut'Kett — civilized peoples' — frail modesty did not matter in the wilderness, Kaytoo claimed. Valkstae suspected she just preferred it, and since Kaytoo did, she did as well.

Insisting she stay close so they could speak in whispers, Kaytoo pressed her to elaborate on her life. Valkstae still found it difficult to share after the forge. She told of something impersonal, the elf and mourkra battle, and asked if Kaytoo had ever encountered them.

"There are no mourkra in these woods. Besides, ut'Kregda'fed bleed like any other."

Though the race and name changed to suit the teller, everyone had

heard the tale. They all used that phrase as part of the story; otherwise, no one ever spoke it. Mourkra had sullied a common woman's territory, and she hunted down their pack. She fought them all at once and killed twenty, though some told of up to a hundred. Children jumped at the tale, women gasped, and men nodded with fire in their eyes since it filled them with hope.

“It was you. You killed a hundred mourkra beasts —”

“Tdok!” Kaytoo wheeled toward her, enraged. “It was qo, six, un they are da most Kocve' beings I know pes dogs. They are natural, tdok beasts. I lived with da pack un —” Kaytoo grasped a body carving on her thigh, qo. “Kref un ut'Kregda'fed cannot live in the same place is all. I —” Kaytoo turned and stormed ahead.

*Baht do zanta'sot daf du'fed sastva
du dek'tdok targju mon —*

*Display your shame so everyone knows
you have not found balance.*

Shame marked Kaytoo's face as clearly as her carving; remorse for a future now lost: the same expression worn by ten thousand men. Her answer proved how savage she was, and once Valkstae caught up, Kaytoo also didn't hold grudges.

“It tem doj du varta ut'Kett tem'Morgan'fed vert — *grmm*, tarkd'sot. It is good you talk civilized emperor words, un du talk Tem'Kref Hamr doj'fed. You talk Crown un Hamr un tell me of life in Toulukk. Du sosh, you life. I learn new words to not talk like da child, un of you path of life.”

“It's difficult I — I learned not to speak in the forge. I, *uh*, I had a dog once, and Kaytoo bad, bad, hate Kaytoo —” Valkstae slapped a hand over her mouth.

Kaytoo laughed, yet tensed and shivered. “Brush da pixie off, da ut’Saada’sot tem on du. Ut’Saada hate me. All of them — nixies, pixies, dryad, faerie — du tarkd’fed kecc’sot. I squash you all like da bugs you are.” She kicked at a cluster of them as those beside the path hurled pebbles and small twigs at her shins.

Valkstae flung off the pixie that rode on her foot, recognizing Kaytoo’s expression. For all her tough talk, they scared her. Most Hamr feared the control ut’Saada puckishly wielded. Spirit creatures of all types swarmed the clearing they were passing through. Stones and mushrooms crawled out of their path, and thousands of faerie filled the air. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know what to say — stop! You’re about to step into a faerie ring.”

The moment Kaytoo’s toes stepped into the foot-wide clearing of grass, she froze and thrashed wildly, cut short by her laughter. “It is good you watch for rings, pes they tem much larger. This where da animal voided long ago. Hunters make de small stone ones to scare fools. I show you some faerie cuma later. *Hmm.*”

Kaytoo gently shooed away what Valkstae thought were tiny faeries bearing bright green lanterns, and Kaytoo froze. A much larger bug faintly glowed from Lum’s blue cast, and as it flitted past, Kaytoo snatched it from the air. Her arm yanked in all directions until she gripped it with both hands. The bug grew into a man, though he was shorter than Valkstae.

He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Lean, androgynous, and well-defined, his hue shifted to gold once his feet touched the ground. Kaytoo had lost her grip around his waist and, before he escaped, gripped his genitals with one hand and twisted. “Koft’mon! Stay still, pes I wring it off.” Kaytoo grinned at Valkstae. “Now he

in Vraste', tdok Tzemth." She looked at the faerie and growled, "Koft'mon, be still."

The man's dragonfly-like wings drooped as he chittered like a bird caught in a vragga's jaws. Kaytoo snarled at his outburst. "Tdok, tdok, I said no. You tell da other ut'Saada — all of them — to leave us alone tonight, pes I hold you here till you die. Swear it! Da pax'mon, swear on da life of you queen. Say it, swear it now."

He whistled and chittered but must have agreed, and Kaytoo nodded yet didn't let go. "Give it to me. Give it to me, un I let you go. Give — tdok, wait — no, give it to her, all of it. Give it to her un go back to Tzemth." Kaytoo grabbed the back of Valkstae's neck and bent her over until her face was near his root. "Take it, it's yours."

"What? No" — Valkstae struggled — "it's rush'dor, taboo, forbidden. I don't —"

Kaytoo shoved her open mouth to his root, and it slipped inside. The man instantly gushed into her maw with four times the volume of any human. She tried to pull away, but the moment it touched her tongue, Valkstae's knees buckled, and her eyes rolled up as she sank to the ground.

Her senses reeled as the man and Kaytoo were abruptly forgotten. The taste was exquisite, better than anything she had imagined, and her body shook as a flush raced through it. Valkstae's core became sopped, edging just short of a climactic shudder unlike any she had experienced. Once her eyes opened, Kaytoo pulled her to standing.

"Catch another, ten others. Please, help me!" Valkstae staggered through the clearing, frantically catching lightning bugs, hoping they were faerie. "Help me. We need to catch more — a ring. We need to find a faerie ring. Show me one" — Valkstae began to weep — "please."

“Tdok.” Kaytoo continued across the field. “Koft’sot, come. We have da long way to go.”

Valkstae sobbed yet obeyed in the hope Kaytoo would catch her another. Her tongue swept over her teeth and cheeks, searching for any remnant of faerie seed she craved so intensely it verged on madness. It dominated her every thought. There was nothing else on Vraste’.

“Please, I don’t — I need — when does it stop?”

“Never,” said Kaytoo in a whisper before she spoke clearly. “You must find something more important to dwell on.” Kaytoo touched another carved mark of shame on her upper arm. A simple circle that she had marked out with a tattoo. “Tom — I fell into a ring un entered Tzemth; ate, drank, un rush’tam’mom — orgy, yes? With all da fae congregation for what felt like three winters, pes less than one night on Vraste’.” Her moving blue stripes briefly intermingled with red.

Criss do zanta’sot ur baht’sot

Du dek’dors un targju mon —

**Mark your shame to openly show
you have suffered and found balance.**

“After they cast me out, the hunt, no food or drink, shem or groth mattered. I wanted to die. Pes’det, I decided to kill da dragon for its blood to find another ring, da Vourrtax Worm. I licked its blood before I killed it — un have a vision. I saw da worm lived fearlessly, powerful, wild, un free. Da faeries’ passions were fleeting, lusts shallow, form perfect pes devoid of character. In da dream, da worm un I slashed open our chests, exchanged hearts, un ate — un I realized, I was eating my own heart. Hamr and dragon da same. I set him free.

“So I ate bland Kref food, drank much, un rushed with every shem un groth I could catch, though it did not satisfy. Un I do not think

of faerie ... much now. Tell me of Valkstae, everything. Fix on that, un it will fade.”

It felt like insanity consumed her. In desperation, Valkstae began to tell of her life. With thoughts of faerie clouding every other, to stay focused, she spoke on her memories in exacting detail. Morning’s twilight neared. She had talked all night, and it distracted her from the need. As she spoke about her coming of age, the tusk, and all those she had blessed, Kaytoo shivered, and her blue stripes turned red.

“Enough. Time to earn your money, Chipmunk.” Kaytoo backed to a tree and parted her legs as she chuckled with a snort. “Lick honey from a tree.”

Valkstae didn’t hesitate; the intention alone distracted her from thoughts of faerie. She kneeled between Kaytoo’s feet and licked as she had on her birthday, accompanied by flat-tongued laps like the men at the cistern. It was easy enough, similar to slurping at the glacier or gravy from a plate.

Kaytoo’s foot set against her shoulder and pushed her away. “Tarkd’mon. If you don’t enjoy shems, just say. You will have to rush’cribf’sot as a provider, but if you don’t want to lick my rut to make me rush’ut’sest, then don’t.”

“I do, I just ... I only did it that one time. I — how was it wrong? Tell me. I want to learn.”

A waist-high fog had risen as Vraste’ brightened from the approaching dawn. Kaytoo scanned the area and told Valkstae to follow her. In a lush, moss-covered gully littered with tiny blue flowers, Kaytoo tossed down her things and laid Valkstae upon the warm plush bed. It scared her, the way Kaytoo looked at her so intensely as she lay half over her. She felt the weight of her breast and the muscle of Kaytoo’s

leg between hers, Kaytoo's breath on her face, and their beating hearts against one another.

Kaytoo's lips pressed to Valkstae's and stole her breath. Every thought of faerie vanished as a new truth replaced them. *My first kiss.* Her kiss was forceful but gentle, yet never remained the same and seemed to last forever, which was not nearly long enough. Once Kaytoo's hand roamed down her body, it moved as though every inch of her was something new to explore. It finally reached Valkstae's furrow and, over twenty breaths, did things hers had never done.

Her shudder was devastating; she yelled like a banshee and continued to shake, realizing Kaytoo had only started. Kaytoo's body slid down as her kisses followed. She moved between her thighs and pressed them up with her shoulders. What her lips, tongue, teeth, and fingers did was indescribable. The world around them faded, became irrelevant, and vanished.

As they rested in Lus' warm glow, thoughts of faerie crept into her mind. It wasn't more important, but the memory of her first kiss decisively subdued them.

NOWHERE'S FORK

“No, Chipmunk, tdok. Get up, or I will leave without you.”

If she gets on all fours and submits, kick her. Kaytoo knew it was her fault for not bluntly teaching Valkstae instead of savoring the moment. Neither slept well after; Valkstae incessantly moaned, pressed against her back, and whenever she stirred, hinted she wanted to rush again.

It reminded her of the inn she avoided. All those mewling slaves that constantly pestered her and made the booth look as though infested with snails. ‘It’s your fault,’ the dwarves always teased. ‘You stuck it in all the way. If you don’t want them falling in love, only give them half.’ Men were so stupid, though they did have a point, yet she enjoyed what she did or wouldn’t do it. “Chipmunk, I am leaving now. Goodbye.”

She walked at her usual pace, hoping to keep some distance between them. Valkstae caught up, moon-eyed and wanting to talk about their moment together. A smirk spread up to Kaytoo’s eyes. “I know I told you Konneratt and that snake Halmace cast me out because of their son — the one they say killed him. Did I tell you I also know Tycoum?” Valkstae shook her head.

“Ah, well, their son — who I will not say his name — and his friends had me cornered again. As I prepared for combat, Tycoum burst through them and put his back to mine. A few winters older than me, they did not want to fight him too. We laugh about it each time we see each other in the Dachvst.”

“You meet Tycoum out here? Will we see him?”

“I do not think so. It is long past the Perpetuation of Faith, and

he rarely travels south of the wall.” Kaytoo grinned and moaned. “He is an excellent ... *uh*, what is the ut’Kref word for tarv’rush groth pes shem?”

Valkstae frowned. “*Lover*.”

“Yes, that is it, lover. He is very rushva’sot, much passion, and makes me feel like an ut’Kocda’sot slut when I am around him. The last time, he grabbed my hips and —”

“Did you still want me to tell you about my time as a taskmaster?”

“Ah, ghey-ghey, yes. You told me about your childhood. I learned much about Toulukk. Tell me about the forge and your time there. Those runty bastards, Gwefolda, Margrouln, and the troll, did not like me. Margrouln said he could forge steel but could not work stone. I want to know everything.”

Faced with discussing Tycoum, Valkstae finally described her time at the forge in detail. Kaytoo was sure Valkstae believed she just wanted to hear about her experience. But that she could guess at. The forge, troll, and men were all interesting, but Valkstae’s hopes, dreams, and what drove her mattered.

“I liked that a taskmaster also worked as a whore. This one time —”

“You should not use that word.” Kaytoo spat on the ground. “You are not a whore. Your mother used that word to shame you, maybe to protect or divert you from it. In the forge, you were a slut at best, maybe a sex slave” — Kaytoo raised a finger to shush her — “like I was. To the Kosh of the Dachvst, whore means low, undesirable. It is an insult, da tarkd’mon.

“If you want to be a whore, spread your legs and let anyone who drops money in your bucket use you. When they grow tired of you, learn to gut fish and livestock. Is that what you want?”

“No, but —” They came to the forest’s edge, and Valkstae froze. “What is this place?”

“Just a place, nowhere. Who can say? The civilized Kref would call it clean. I say it is dead, but maybe it is just newborn or perhaps very old, like Toulukk’s glacier. No one comes here: no Kosh, ut’Saada, ghosts, even any nature spirit I know of. I came here once with — an ally for an entire ninth, and we saw no one. I do not think even the gods look here.”

Kaytoo looked out over the sea of shallow dunes to the orange sandstone outcrop at its center. After they gathered some food along the forest’s edge, she aimed them toward the desert-encompassed formation. The area was small, half a day’s distance across. She had once walked its perimeter as she worked up the nerve to enter it. Not in a single spot could she determine if the sand encroached on the forest or vice versa.

It stunned Valkstae silent. Kaytoo had hoped Valkstae would continue her story but decided to let her enjoy this place. Unlike the glacier-ground remnants of hard rock in Toulukk, much of the sand here was powder-fine. The outer edge’s pale yellow grains transitioned to beige, peach, pink, and dark orange with streaks of lavender in places. Maybe the ut’Kref were right. The dry breeze and shifting sand were scentless and sterile.

The texture of a peach zone so amazed Valkstae that she lay down upon it. She smoothed the talc-like powder over her skin, which transitioned to one of her personal moments. Kaytoo smiled as she watched and thought back as she waited.

That entire ninth she had spent here with Tycoum still filled her heart. Just after three Lums, Kaytoo could not restrain her joy any longer. She shoved him, then again, and when confusion painted his

face, she slapped and reached for him. Tycoum pushed her to the ground. Instead of scrambling to fight, she meekly raised to all fours with her backside toward him. Her knees parted wide, and she said, ‘Tom submit ur du, Tycoum.’

It was perfect. Tycoum shoved her forward with his foot, and Kaytoo fell flat to the sand yet rose again the same. He yanked her back by her hips, grabbed her hair, forcefully accepted her submission, and, in doing so, proclaimed his. Oh, how she loved him.

Kaytoo wished Tycoum were here as she finished her message to him — a leather thong bound together a specific way. Folded in half, she wrapped the first strand around the second three times, tied a knot, and kissed it as she dwelled on her words. The second around the first and so on, twenty-seven wraps and nine knots all told, each kissed and infused with her prayers to him. She kissed the last. *Tycoum, Valkstae’s path is uncertain. I am not you. Guide me to help her.*

She set the cord on the dune. Maybe Tycoum would come this way, find it, and if he held it long enough, hear her plea. Valkstae groaned and spread out under Lus, basking in her afterglow. Tycoum had spoken of her often. Of all the communities and peoples he had helped while Perpetuating the Faith, Tycoum felt his investment in Valkstae was the most important. He had grown to love her very much.

Kaytoo panned over the Dachvst, the whole of Vraste’ save Toulukk, and fixed her gaze on the ancient forests. *Shoustvar, watch over and protect Valkstae. She has earned her place here.* A stern expression washed over her face; no insult matched the resolve in her heart. *Herte’, protect Tycoum and obey his prayers. Protect Valkstae; never harm her. I have hunted many things — and have yet to kill a god.*

“That is enough, Chipmunk. You will rub yourself raw where we are going. Get up, we go.”

They reached the outcrop of rock some ten men high, and she led Valkstae to an entrance. It always impressed her as otherworldly. Within the slot canyon's narrow passage, the layered sandstone walls of orange, streaked in places with every color, were smoothed like rolling waves upon a vast sea. They weaved along a wide, soft sand path illuminated by the intense azure sky above them. Valkstae was in awe and asked who had made this place.

"I do not know," said Kaytoo. "It might have fallen from Kolumm or pushed up from Vastrokk, but it is Vraste's now and the realm of Kref. I think maybe the dragon's scales cut the stone like this as he goes out to hunt. A great worm, perhaps, but he will not bother us. He always sleeps when I have been here."

They rounded a tight bend, and the narrow passage opened to a large chamber brightened by the blue sky. Natural boiling mud cauldrons contrasted with water cascading from high on the walls that vibrantly hued crystals grew upon. The leached minerals formed colored terraces of ever-larger pools. The two lowest reservoirs' interiors, each perhaps four strides wide, were stained like rainbows and shy of a stride deep along the sides and two strides at the center. Small holes around them drained into underground streams and kept the cavern dry.

Upon the soft sand floor and over smooth stone outcroppings, scouts and rangers had left numerous plush pelts to ease the ruggedness for the rare few who knew of this place. No one had ever built a fire there or butchered any animals. Other than the furs left, travelers took everything else as they went. The canyon remained as pristine as the moment of its creation.

Valkstae touched the steaming pool, and her mouth gaped. Kaytoo grinned. "That is the hot one. Like the spring at the pillar, yes? The

other is cooler, and you may drink from it. Set down your things. You still reek of the forge.

“I — will bathe you. And you will finish telling me your kefa’sosh, your path of life to now.”



Patience was the hunter’s virtue. After three Lums, Kaytoo’s was exhausted. She had repetitively bathed Valkstae. Gently scrubbed her with sand-laden clay, packed her in mud, and washed her clean, which left her skin soft and glowing. Kaytoo had cut her ragged hair short, though she could still bind a promise. Throughout it all, she had passionately made love to her, as the ut’Kref called it.

Not just sexually, she continually spoke in seductive tones, salaciously touched her, pressed and writhed against her body. Kaytoo hung on Valkstae’s every word and begged her for more to seem fascinated by the most inconsequential detail. The entire time, she strove to convince Valkstae that she found her the most desirable and interesting person she had known, who roused an uncontrollable desire within her.

Kaytoo touched, rubbed, licked, and kissed every inch of her with a sensuality that would have melted iron and intensified their eroticism. And still, Valkstae licked honey from a tree.

Valkstae remained motionless though unguarded no matter how Kaytoo moved them. Her idea of seduction was to ask if Kaytoo wanted to do it again; if she declined, Valkstae anxiously waited to ask again shortly later. Not once had Valkstae teased or moved to coax

or heighten her desire. She only touched her breasts, rut, and vent directly, yet nowhere else and only if asked, as Valkstae quickly worked to induce a climactic shudder.

It was obvious. Valkstae was obsessed with a path she had no talent or passion for. Kaytoo suggested that Valkstae consider a path using her whip to drive animals, slaves, or drawn wagons. Her ability to read and write meant she could work as a scribe, a highly respected profession. Her knowledge of so many cultures and languages was invaluable, and Valkstae's exposure to countless professions in Toulokk prepared her for almost anything — just not this.

Worst of all, Kaytoo felt ut'Kocve'sot, unfaithful to self. With anyone else, she would have grappled with them until exhausted, and the victor claimed their prize. Sweat, spit, their flow or seed would have covered each, and as they panted, recuperating, it would spontaneously begin again. She was missing the river pike run, boar migration, and the drovers of Caypak — always ready to drink, fight, and rush — would have returned from high pasture.

Oh, Caypak. Kaytoo looked at the sky and noted Lur grazed Lus. She was missing the Custom of Planting. Ut'Kref communities didn't celebrate it, but the slaves and common men rarely refused her offer to carry their seed to the fields to bless them, ensuring a rich harvest. A scowl deformed her face. *Enough ridiculous teaching by example. Just tell the —*

“Tegradoo! Hello, is anyone in there? Tegradoo,” a man's voice echoed down the slot passage.

Valkstae lurched up as Kaytoo raced to a hole in the wall. She waved her hand to shush Valkstae, took a deep breath, and pressed her face into the hole. Kaytoo loosed a long, low, throaty growl that slipped to gurgling clicks, terminating in a vicious hiss. The sound echoed

through a pipe of stone, exiting far up the hall, deeper and much louder.

“Kaytoo? Is that you?”

She grumbled and shouted up the passage, “No! Kaytoo is not here. Leave her a sign at the entrance and go away.”

The man’s laughter echoed to the chamber. “You’re not fooling me with that retching dragon noise. It’s Vargas. You sound different. I’m coming — wait, are you in a bad mood or drinking Dwarf Sweat?”

“No. Kaytoo is not drinking. Your other question is stupid. When is Kaytoo in a good mood?”

Again, the man laughed. “All right, I’m coming in anyway, so un-nock your arrow.”

Kaytoo thrashed and raced to her things, yanked Valkstae up, and positioned her in the chamber’s middle. “Chipmunk, stand here un do not move.” She moved to the wall near the hall’s exit and vanished into a notch’s shadow as her stripes worked like camouflage.

Vargas paused at the chamber’s edge and cautiously scanned the space. Dressed in the leather and cloth of a ranger, once his gaze locked on Valkstae, he released his sheathed sword’s grip. “Oh, I thought — what are you doing out here, girl? Is a woman here with you?” He advanced toward Valkstae, who stood motionless, her mouth agape. “A barbarian woman named Kaytoo, covered in tattoos.”

Kaytoo slipped from the gap and silently approached his rear. “She stands roughly” — he stopped, and his shoulders wilted — “she’s behind me already, isn’t she?”

She pressed a knife to his ribs as her hand-ax’s head hooked his crotch from below. “What did you not understand about my mood? What do you want, Vargas? Why are you not humping a goblin somewhere safe?”

The man stammered and turned his confused gaze toward Kaytoo. “I knew it. You do speak Crown without all the Hammer grunting. Why do you” — Kaytoo pulled up the ax — “I’m guiding some emissaries back to their territories for the duke. Before you say anything, I know you hate elves — well, everybody — but you know this is neutral ground. We have food and three vessels of —”

“Tarkd tarv’rush’cribf’fed Eif. Fine, bring them in. Pes make sure da Eif tem ut’tauk — unarmed, un tdok marg. Any magic, un I kill everybody — slow, pas’ghey?” Kaytoo moved next to Valkstae, muttered, and tossed her weapons onto their possessions.

“Now I’m sure you’re Kaytoo. I only understood part of — all right, fine, I’m going. Just settle down. I’m sure they’ll agree. Well, except — I’ll be back.” Vargas backed out of the chamber.

Valkstae gripped Kaytoo’s arm. “Should I hide? Are you going to kill the elves before they come in, or wait?”

“*Uh.*” She had not yet discussed the southern region with Valkstae. “It is different south of the wall. The ut’Kref emperor decreed that all races are welcome. Eif are the least of it. You will learn to — if they are ut’Eif’fed, Dark Elves, I will kill them, perhaps. Pes if not — we will see.” Valkstae pressed tight against her back to hide.

Kaytoo glanced up and crossed her arms. “Vargas, you said Eif! You said nothing of Vorkan knights, un they are all armed.” The largest Vorka touched a scar on his cheek and smiled. “Oh, shut up. Cease your whining or learn not to bump into me when I am drinking ale from an iron banded bucket.”

Along with Vargas, a high-human ranger, nine others had entered the open-topped cavern. Among them were two High Elves dressed in their ambassador’s finery, three Sylvan or woodland elves wearing

ceremonial gold and green armor, and finally, four Vorka escorts, heavily armed and dressed in the finest armor found on Vraste’.

The elves scolded Vargas for not informing them *that woman* was here. She chuckled at their guards’ *vorkan sneers*; they were the angriest, though they acted disinterested as they ritualistically undressed. A head taller than the tallest Hamr warrior and twice their weight, their black nails, olive skin, dark bluish-brown lips, and pointed ears revealed their ancient mourkran-hybrid ancestry. Highly civilized and militaristic, the Vorka’s arrogant stoicism and unit cohesiveness concealed their weaknesses.

“Queeanos’eileasu’seima...,” a High Elf ambassador spoke a single word that stretched out into a very long sentence.

Valkstae peeked out from behind Kaytoo. “You speak Moulanjalous? I thought only humans lived at Port Moulan.” The other High Elf said something, and the two laughed. “No, I understood you fine — though you phrased it wrong. You asked, ‘Why hasn’t someone cut the bitch barbarian semen-bucket’s throat yet?’ What’s a semen-bucket?”

Vargas, the Sylvan Elves, and Kaytoo burst out laughing. The Vorka crossed their arms and scowled. Kaytoo glanced at Valkstae. “You understand that gibberish? The Vorka think you are especially funny.”

“Well, yes,” Valkstae began. “I speak —”

“Seamona douca onaches theatee-vos Eesaenia, thase Veeandlia zoan einas,” a Sylvan Elf commented as he nudged his friends.

“You speak River Thaenous! And I’m not a boy.” Valkstae tussled her hair and stepped out from behind Kaytoo. “The Torkasion warrior I knew said elves hated them. Why do you speak their language? It’s much easier than Moulanjalous, though.”

“How many elven dialects do you speak, girl?” A High Elf stepped forward until Kaytoo balled her fists. “Who are you?”

“Well, none. I only speak —”

Kaytoo stepped behind Valkstae and ran her knuckle up her spine, gripped and pulled back her shoulders. “This is Ch— Valkstae. Valkstae tem da Korvath, the Northern Mouse. Pretty, yes? Young Shonaesh are always so desirable.” Valkstae began to say something but gasped as the Vorka stepped forward, naked. Kaytoo whispered, “Arrogant bastards. They believe there is no reason to conceal perfection. Impressive, pas’ghey?”

“I do not see a collar on it,” stated a Vorka. “Imperial law dictates all slaves must be collared.”

Valkstae looked stunned. When she didn’t answer, Kaytoo spoke up, “That is because she is not a slave. Valkstae is —”

“Unclaimed?” said a Sylvan Elf as he grasped his crotch and took a step before his compatriot stopped him. “Don’t tell me this one is yours too. Is she under your protection, or may we — enjoy her without your interference?”

One of Kaytoo’s hands slipped over Valkstae’s breast and squeezed as her other moved her hip toward them. “Well, she is Hamr, and you know what we say. Tarv’targda’mom ka Hamr, du tarv’targda’mom tam’fed. Oh, I forgot. You tree humpers are ignorant of Hamr. Fight one, you fight us all.”

Disappointment painted everyone’s face except the Vorka. Kaytoo began to tweak Valkstae’s nipples as her other hand’s fingers traced her furrow’s folds as she continued. “The Northern Mouse wishes to be a provider of sex — a prostitute, yes? She has had only one customer, and I did not damage her even a little. Perhaps if you —”

Valkstae wheeled around. “Tdok, tdok’fed. Ut’Kosh tem rush-dor’mon, rush’ut’Kref’mon — un fed. Tom daf tdok —”

“I know, they make me slick too,” Kaytoo interjected. “One moment, we discuss price.” Kaytoo pulled Valkstae toward the chamber’s rear, where they only spoke Hamr.

“Absolutely not,” Valkstae continued. “It is forbidden to have sex with non-humans, elves, and especially those — they’re almost — those human-like mourkra. It is unfaithful. Even Wespa would not —”

*Becc’sot rush un ut’Kref un ut’Kosh —
Du’fed daf’dora du tem’vute’ ut’Kocve’ di’kefa —
Avoid sex with civilized human and non-human races.
They will tempt you down unfaithful paths.*

“Mind your tone. Sound good excited. It is different here. In the South, every race lays together, and all males’ roots are almost the same, but that is the least of sex work. I have been — penetrated by every race on Vraste’. It changed nothing. I deride them because that is what we were taught and — never mind.

“Listen to me. The dwarves said you were not to return. It is your life. You can do anything you want; sex work is not for everyone. If you want lovers, go to Toulökk. If you want to spread your legs for just humans while they fight every other race and each other, then go back north of the wall. You said you want to be a provider of sex. If you want to do that here in the South, start with them. This is your chance. Choose.”

Valkstae looked torn and terrified as she stared into Kaytoo’s eyes. “Do you swear you’ll protect me? I don’t want to lose my mind from the — swear I’ll be unharmed.”

“Yes, I swear it. You fear something you do not understand. Face

your fear. If you decide it was justified after, then never do it again. Now smile — and do not hurt the Vorka.” Kaytoo turned her around and petted Valkstae as they moved toward the men, and she spoke in Crown.

“Mouse is so aroused she does not know where to start. Not you, Vargas. You sit with me and drink. The rest pay me if you wish to experience a Shonaesh you will not forget.”

LIFE'S WINDING PATH

“Koft’fed, go.” Kaytoo nudged Valkstae toward the others. “No one here will hurt you.” Vargas’ lecherous stare at Valkstae slipped to a frown once upon Kaytoo. “Quit pouting. She knows nothing of Eif or Vorka. It will amuse you.”

“So? I should have had her first, then.” Vargas undressed and sat on the furs beside her. “I brought Dragon’s Tears, Pulmace, and — you don’t have any weapons close, do you?”

“When did I need weapons?” Kaytoo grinned, then scowled. “Now give me the Dwarf Sweat.”

Valkstae shuffled across the chamber while the last gasps of Lus’ color climbed the orange stone wall. Raised to fear elves and unfamiliar with Vorka, it made sense that she moved cautiously, though it clearly didn’t concern her that she wore no clothes. The High Elves had called Valkstae over, yet the Vorka intercepted her on their way to the cool water.

Gods, she is small. At only half a head taller than Valkstae, Kaytoo had never noticed how small she was herself. Compared to the High Elves, Valkstae looked runty; beside the Vorka, she looked like a Halfling. The Vorka stood close, surrounding her. Valkstae’s level gaze drifted from one’s abdomen to his proportional root, and she froze.

“You speak Vorkanii well — for a barbarian,” said the Vorka she gawked at. Valkstae’s head tipped back as she panned up to his eyes until impeded by the Vorka behind her. “Not Crown. They learned it from us. When you pray to Ohnay” — all the Vorka touched their

middle finger to their foreheads — “remember to thank Ohnay for making Vorka last.”

The Vorka continued to the pool, and the elves again beckoned to Valkstae, who stared at the Vorka as she shuffled over. The Sylvan Elves had already undressed. Leaner and shorter than most male humans, Valkstae did not look so out of place, though she visibly tensed as they groped her. After a few brief words between all the elves, the three slipped into the hot water.

The taller High Elves turned Valkstae to face them and spoke to her briefly in whatever she had called it. Valkstae nervously responded with single-word answers as they stated their desires in elves’ typical smug fashion. “Speak Crown, girl. Your use of our language is offensive.” The elf gripped her chin and rolled her plump lower lip down with his thumb. “We refuse to soil ourselves — elsewhere. Can you use this for something less disrespectful?”

Kaytoo raised a finger, and Vargas dropped a pouch of coins between her crossed calves and crotch. “I knew you’d ask for it first. Three vaht each enough? I’ll pay with Dwarf Sweat.” He set his hand on her inner thigh.

“My fingers work just fine,” Kaytoo grumbled, yet did nothing more, distracted by Valkstae. Valkstae was already on her knees. She had fished out the elf’s turgid root and stuck it in her mouth. The elf looked shocked. He set his hand to her shoulder, perhaps to push her away, but he gasped, shivered, and moved his hand to the back of Valkstae’s head.

Shortly after, the elf silently tensed, and from Valkstae’s expression, Kaytoo knew he had filled her maw. She remained there until he pulled away. Without a word between them, Valkstae pivoted to the other, and her work played out just as quickly and exactly the same.

Kaytoo's hand slapped to her forehead. Vargas' hand slid to her rut. She gripped it and moved it back. "Wait — no, what did I tell you?" The other High Elf moaned and shook, and Kaytoo's hand slid to her mouth and covered it as she muttered.

Valkstae abruptly rose and moved to the three elves in the water. The Sylvan Elves repeated what the High Elves had said. They wanted her to speak Crown, refused to sully themselves in her rut, and since the High Elves had tainted her mouth, they desired something less common.

Lus fell below the horizon, leaving only the dim light of Lur, and the cavern's minerals revealed their secret. Everything glowed with varied phosphorescence. The walls shone a soft purple streaked with luminescent green, blue, and orange as the waterfalls' terraces and pools radiated bright.

Valkstae had climbed into the water. Without a single word, flirtation, or even granting their hands time to explore, she bent over at the waist with her backside toward them. Kaytoo was so dumbfounded she disregarded Vargas' groping her breast.

The first elf hypocritically swiped his tusk through her furrow and continued to Valkstae's vent. She winced, yet a soft smile shaped her lips as the elf unceremoniously pumped into her. Valkstae silently seemed to enjoy it. Her hand slid between her legs, but she stopped and pulled it back.

"Wait," Kaytoo hissed, yanking Vargas' fingers from her rut. "Do you not see this?"

"Yes. Thanks for warning me. For once, I'm glad I got you. Have another drink — have two."

Kaytoo lifted the bottle yet stopped. The elf slammed into Valkstae's backside and, with a loud moan, folded over her back. He

caught his breath, withdrew, and stepped aside. The second stepped up, yet nothing changed except Valkstae seemed frustrated. She never moved their hands to her breasts, tugged their sacks, rubbed herself, or said a word. The second elf finished as quickly as the first, and with equal expedience, Valkstae finished with the third.

Valkstae did not even glance at the elves as she stepped from the pool, hesitantly shuffled to the Vorka, and stood there. One extended his hands as though to help her, yet as she reached for his, he gripped her under the arms and placed her in the pool's center. She treaded water until one Vorka pulled her to him, and they passed her around, but she did nothing.

A shiver raced over Kaytoo as her skin crawled. Lum had risen under Lur, and as the cavern's minerals fluoresced, the walls and pools brightened, as did Kaytoo's now red stripes with Valkstae among the Vorka. Vargas grabbed her hair and pulled Kaytoo onto her back. She punched his shoulder. "I told you, I need to watch this."

She lurched up and shoved him away yet moved to all fours, with her head toward Valkstae. Vargas gripped her shoulder with one hand and a breast with the other as he lined up his tusk. Kaytoo struggled yet parted her knees wider and impaled herself on his root. "Vute'sot, slowly. I told du, I want to watch."

Vargas roused Kaytoo's moan, but the Vorka groping Valkstae prompted her knowing grin. Now, Valkstae would experience sensuality. All four Vorkas' massive, dexterous hands covered her body as they traced every curve. Their nimble touch was curious and delicate. One had even lifted her foot, and as Valkstae's eyes widened at his oversized incisors, he slipped it into his mouth. Kaytoo slammed back against Vargas; she had known that sensation, but as her shudder approached, she stopped and frowned.

Valkstae pried herself out of their grip and turned to face the Vorka, who sat behind her on the edge. Her small hands gripped his immense root and vigorously jerked it as she slipped its tip into her mouth. The inexpressive Vorka tensed and stared until a restrained wince roused a subtle grin, and he chuckled once. She worked his root harder in response. He stiffened, smirked, and briefly laughed as the others pulled back.

As he filled her mouth, Valkstae squeezed his sack, and the Vorka abruptly pushed her off him and into the water. She reached for the others, yet they retreated until one behind grasped her hips. He moved her to the edge, and Valkstae grunted as he gently worked his tusk into her sheath.

“Not the Dwarf Sweat. Vargas, you randy bastard. You knew I was saving that.”

Vargas thrust into her as Kaytoo panned up to another ranger. “Quit whining, Soma. Here.” She opened her mouth as Vargas kept shoving her forward, and he suddenly roared. “Vargas — I was not finished, du perverse satyr. You always liked to be watched.”

“Maybe later,” said Soma. “I’m too tired. I’m going to the back chamber to sleep — with my Dwarf Sweat.”

Vargas collapsed behind her, yet Kaytoo remained as she was, taken aback by Valkstae. Kaytoo expected the Vorka had gingerly entered her and indiscernibly moved with a scowl, but now, Valkstae slammed herself against him. Valkstae twisted and tilted her hips as her tempo increased and continued to quicken. The Vorka urgently yanked himself from her, painting her back, and his wide grin collapsed, free from his tormentor.

She started to move to another, but the other Vorka declined. Kaytoo could stand it no longer. She helped Valkstae out and

apologized to the Vorka with a promise to make it right. Her eyes were narrow and lips thin as she led Valkstae down the slot canyon and out onto the dunes.

Valkstae was elated. “You were right, that was easy, and no one hurt me like you promised —”

“But you hurt them,” Kaytoo snapped. “Worst of all, not one received what they paid for. You are right. At best, you are a low whore. Tomorrow, after I fix this myself — gods, five of them Eif — we leave.

“If you insist upon following this path, I will take you to the army encampment near the second continent’s land bridges. They will give you a tent, the soldiers will line up, and you can spread your legs and service them by the hundreds like the mung-ditch you are. It should only take *you* half a day. Along the way, I will kill whatever beasts, so you know how to gut and skin them once they have pounded you into a post-hole, and no one wants you.”

“What did I do wrong?” Valkstae balled and began to cry.

“Ut’varta!” Kaytoo slapped her, then again to silence her. “Mourkra feel nothing. Vorka feel everything much more than Kref. There is a reason they say, ‘Wound a Vorka to make him smile, make him spill his seed to see him weep.’ They hide how they feel. Pes, you do not know this because you did not try to learn. You have no curiosity or wonder or wish to explore da most intimate part of them — their minds — let alone enjoy what you do.”

“But I shuddered,” Valkstae argued, “with both the Sylvans and the Vorka. I just stayed quiet to make them finish —”

“Who cares if du thrashed like da ut’Kocccda’sot slut? Oh, you make them finish quicker than anyone I have seen — the finest *whore* that ever lived — but that is not da job of a provider of sex. It is not

work where speed un efficient use of your skills to make them spill their seed quickly matters.

“Most people do not view sex as casually as Hamr — but you know this from de forge. You just choose to ignore what you have learned. They trust a provider with their most intimate desires. The work is to recognize those desires, validate them, and not judge or betray their trust as you confirm that they deserve this most memorable reward; to make them feel all their work and troubles are worth this one moment with you.

“A doj mon tarv’rush’mo — a good one, even an average one — makes a farmer feel like a king, gives them hope, un makes them believe they are more than they ever dreamed. It is a profession of great responsibility.

“How have I made you feel these past few Lums? I learned what made you feel better than you ever have, in all ways, because I coaxed you to talk to me, listened to every word, and watched how you reacted to each touch. I did it to learn of you un what brings you joy. Pes, you just lay there like da dead sect. You do not care what the other person’s body feels like, what inspires them, un makes them desire you beyond da hands un holes you bear.”

“I didn’t know I was — you didn’t tell me what to — I want to do this, please!”

Kaytoo slapped her again. “Ut’varta un listen to me. I told you I was forced into the army to gather weapons from the fallen. The camp’s whores demanded more money. Duke Korgewrath had the guards toss one whore into a cage of twenty captured goblins. He then decreed that all shems must service any man when commanded. When they refused, he gave one to a mourkra. No one refused to spread their legs after that.

“Three Vorka helped me escape because I made the effort to learn about them. In Vashte’s prison, I tried to end each rape quickly, like you. I learned to watch and listen until a guard risked death helping me to escape.” Kaytoo raised her finger as Valkstae began to speak. “I was made da tarv’rush’sot, a sex slave. I did the same, and another helped me run from them.

“I was never a good sex worker or even whore, but I was much better than you are because it mattered to me. Yet, you do not care, even after I showed you how. I do not care about you — you are not even da good slut.” Kaytoo slapped her. “Stop crying. But I still made you feel like a goddess.

“If the Vorka need relief, I will have them fill me to apologize. Vargas and Soma the same — as much as they want. Once sweaty un filthy, exhausted, sore, un numb, I will come to you. Make me feel like you need me; desire me more than life itself, especially since this moment you despise me — something else a provider must overcome. Or tomorrow, we go, and I teach you how to gut fish.”

Kaytoo left her on the dunes and strode into the chamber. She smiled and asked the Vorka, “How is de water?”



Nowhere’s desolate sterility reminded Valkstae of how alone she had been throughout her life. She always felt like an outsider in Toulokk; smaller and different from the rest, born rumiel segregated her more, and her mother made it worse. The Dachvst’s loneliness was a given.

At the forge, the dwarves, troll, and ten thousand were as disparate from her as the gods.

Once Tycoum had left and the confusing maelstrom of adolescence overwhelmed her, Hamr adults insisted she find refuge in Touloukk's forest. She embraced her isolation. Her mother's scorn pointed to the path; Valkstae dwelled upon Tycoum and others, and her imagination provided the answer. Since Shanee judged her as a whore, she would be one, though she didn't understand it.

She had never worked one profession in Touloukk. There were only two providers of sex with so little need, a submitted couple, and she begged them to teach her. They switched her through their gate and into the village until she ran. It made no difference, especially after her coming of age. The decision firmed as her chosen path; it was what she wanted — Kocve'sot, faithful to self — but sex alone never proved the answer.

Only Kortme', Wespa, and Jagdnict ever guided her. Even Kelmtes, the spirit chickadee, betrayed her at the last. *Herte', why did you send this person cruel as Ceepe' to torment me?* She wished Tycoum were here. He always told her what she needed to learn. Everyone else in Touloukk — Valkstae's gaze lowered.

Tar'tdok bahk'mon de sast pes de tarvta tarv'sast
Daf'tem du dek'sust un pasva de —
Do not dispute the lesson or the manner taught
until you have learned and understand it.

Everyone else taught by example as they shared lessons from their trials of life. The Hamr encouraged you to take chances, face fears, and consider all options; they praised your efforts, taught you more, built

you up, and raised you higher. They also punished you when ut’Kocve’ because you refused to open your mind, listen, or try.

Like Kaytoo.

Exiled as a child into the Dachvst, Kaytoo had lived alone well beyond what she had experienced, embraced her unfathomable isolation, and proved Valkstae’s brooding was a defiant child’s petulance. Only Hasgroth in the forge taught her anything like Tycoum. The rest she learned herself — like Kaytoo — until Kaytoo.

Valkstae gazed north toward the starkness of Nicci’s Wall as Lur set and the dunes and forests’ revealed their luminescent aspects. The Vorkas’ voices echoed as they exited the slot and proved Kaytoo’s claims. They discussed how vorkan Kaytoo was. Empathetic yet outwardly indifferent to condescending, sensitive to touch, though she tried to appear stoic, sarcastically prudish when vulgar, and their discussion shifted to her more ribald aspects.

The Vorka were inexpressive as they praised Kaytoo, yet as Valkstae passed to go inside, their silence reinforced contemptuous smiles. She listened to the others in the deeper chambers while bathing. The High Elves shouted for the rest to be quiet. Vargas and Soma grunted between lewd comments, and the Sylvan Elves chattered as each vied for position.

Most of what Kaytoo had said didn’t make sense. She knew how to make people shudder, and she liked them using her to do it. What did curiosity, wonder, or exploration have to do with sex, let alone talking, desire, farmers, or kings? It all confused her even more, so Valkstae concentrated on why what the other person’s body felt like mattered.

However long later, Valkstae’s eyes fluttered open at the clang of two toppled swords as Kaytoo sat on a fur-covered stone. Kaytoo looked exhausted and sweaty, her skin and hair slick and greasy.

Loose fur stuck to her body, streaked with remnants of her apologies' acceptance. She kneeled between Kaytoo's feet and gazed into her eyes that rolled in exasperation.

"I'm so sorry —" Valkstae silenced when Kaytoo sucked her teeth. "Thank you. Thank you for everything you have done for me. This means — you have — are you all right?"

She kissed Kaytoo's knees, picking off stray hairs as she tried to do what Kaytoo had demanded and moved behind to avoid her gaze. "I could hear you — back there, with them. I know you don't — I heard when you moaned. I ... it made me flow. You know what to say, how to move, and —"

Valkstae rose to kiss a spot at the top of Kaytoo's spine. Her nipples brushed Kaytoo's back, and a shiver coursed through her as they ached, grew firm, and urged to drag them over her. A whiff of Kaytoo's neck was intoxicating. Normally scentless or smelling of forest, unwashed, she could smell her. She couldn't resist nuzzling her nape or the overwhelming impulse to explore.

The shape of her neck, shoulders, and muscles compelled Valkstae's hands to fondle each as though an individual thing detached from the whole. She slid around her, yet pulled back at her leg and stared. It was as though she had never seen her before. Valkstae had to wrench her gaze away from every feature, scar, tattoo, and curve she stared at, enticed by the next, as she worked her way from Kaytoo's toes to her chin.

Kaytoo cleared her throat. Valkstae's eyes snapped to hers, suddenly reminded she had a task to perform. "Oh, your lip is swollen." Unable to resist kissing it, Valkstae wedged between Kaytoo's legs; she gasped at the sensation of her hips spreading them wider, and her nipples pressed against Kaytoo's breasts compelled her to moan.

Abruptly lost again as she drew Kaytoo's lip between her own, Kaytoo pulled it back. "They left you a mess, and you did it for me." She didn't want what painted Kaytoo's chin, but she couldn't deny the urge to lick the crease her lip formed above it.

Valkstae slid down, bathing off the men's remnants with her tongue. She clutched Kaytoo's breast; it felt heavy, soft, yet plump, and as the flesh extruded between her fingers, Valkstae shivered again. A nipple rising between her lips was wondrous; forced to pry her mouth away to suckle the other and continue down. Once she had lapped from Kaytoo's chin to her thighs, she glanced up at Kaytoo's stern gaze to keep from unceremoniously devouring her.

"Please tell me about sex with Tycoum. All of it."

Kaytoo chuckled, and her eyes took on a malicious glint. Valkstae stiffened from her lewd, explicit details, but all jealousy vanished as her gaze locked on aspects of Kaytoo's folds she previously had not noticed. Like a rose throated, russet petaled flower had bloomed upon a bronze desert of skin, her cursed blue stripes moved as cloud's shadows drifting over dunes about a seeping oasis.

The rank scent of ribald sex upon her was overpowering. Reflexively repulsed, Valkstae concentrated on its obscenity instead. She couldn't help but nuzzle Kaytoo's warm furrow that devolved into lewd smearing of her lower face until she was unable to restrain herself from bathing every crease and swell. The act, its shape, detail — all of it — was more addictive than the faerie's gush, Valkstae realized she would never dwell upon again.

Once she focused upon Kaytoo's pearl — flicked and nibbled until driven to suckle — as Kaytoo flowed and swelled, her restrained hunger turned insistent. Kaytoo pushed her back, her red stripes swirling wildly as her chest heaved, and she panted.

“Still want — to hear more of rush’mon with Tycoum?”

“I wish,” Valkstae paused, eyes locked on Kaytoo’s gaze as it narrowed. *I wish I had sex with Tycoum.* “I wish I could rush with you — as Tycoum.”

A dubious grin reshaped Kaytoo’s expression. “In what way?”

Valkstae spoke in Hamr as Tycoum would have done, yet used the vulgar ut’Kref terms Kaytoo was familiar with. She pressed close and whispered the most depraved acts into Kaytoo’s ear as her hands mauled her body. Seemingly possessed, Valkstae wished she were Tycoum and kissed Kaytoo with a passion she had previously never felt.

She rose, gripped Kaytoo’s hair, and snarled, “Tar’de. Tar tom unCrimf vut’fed du unCribf un tarv’rush’cribf’fed de.” *Do it. Put my root in your mouth and suck it.* Valkstae stepped back and pulled Kaytoo’s mouth to her pearl. Imagining Kaytoo upon her tusk, she pushed and ground as Kaytoo grasped her bottom and voraciously suckled.

“Tom qostva’fed daf rush’vute’mon un rush’vot vut’fed du.” Valkstae pulled her off the rock onto the sand floor. She needed to feel her tusk inside Kaytoo and fill her with her seed.

Kaytoo struggled at first, yet started laughing. “Easy, enough. *Whew*, I am too sore for you to rub on that.” Kaytoo caught her breath, fanning herself. “Doj — doj’mon, very good, Chipmunk. I am convinced. Just remember why you are there.”

They moved to the hot water and discussed what had changed. Valkstae was glad that she only discovered it now; if she had in the forge, she would have never left. The wonder of another’s body and the passion inspired by their mind improved everything; the trick was to not become so absorbed by it that you lost yourself in their desire.

It had been a long night, and though excited to explore her revelations, after Kaytoo shared what she knew of elves and Vorka, they lay on the furs and tried to sleep.

Valkstae's cheek twitched, urged to lose herself in faerie. She squashed the need just as quickly. Kaytoo had explained that the many races and life itself offered countless temptations to enslave your mind, yet our ignorant fantasies were more misleading. Consider all options first, then decide, including her chosen path. The apparent cruelty of Kaytoo's trick with faerie revealed how to resist both, yet as she dwelled on it, something more.

If this was her chosen path, she needed to treat those she lay with as though faerie, yet only outwardly, like a Vorka's smile.



Kaytoo was gone when Valkstae awoke. Two Vorka bathed in the cool water. *They are magnificent.* Unlike their distant, ape-like mourkran ancestors, except for their coloration, oversized canines, and barely noticeable vestigial tail, they appeared as massive, well-hewn humans. One Vorka glanced at her, smiled, and diverted his gaze to show his contempt.

In their earlier conversation, Kaytoo taught her about elves and Vorka. Her more important lesson was that she could apply every experience, revelation, skill, or shred of knowledge to everything else. Other people's as well. Since Valkstae watched and listened to others, she could use what they had shared to improve her abilities and learn how to interact with them.

*Tarv'trupda du'fed tarv,
Un tarv'sast de una ur do'tarv —
Celebrate all others' work,
and discover it applies to your own.*

Valkstae had listened well in the forge and learned. Some things men concealed, others they bragged about, yet most men could not resist educating others. Their reluctance to share stories of conflicts, politics, family, and other things varied from one person to the next, but everyone on Vraste' craved to discuss one subject.

After bathing, Valkstae approached the two Vorka, sitting on a large bearskin as they discussed the day ahead. Each briefly glanced at her with condescending grins yet otherwise ignored her. She kneeled at the pelt's edge. "Would you please tell me about Ohnay?" Valkstae touched her middle finger to her forehead before they could.

One of them inexpressively looked into her eyes. "You wish to learn of Ohnay?" All three again touched their foreheads. "I thought all Hamr cleaved to their many lesser gods and ignored the one true god."

"Yes, but we do not ignore —" Valkstae briefly went silent. "We fear that we might offend —" She silenced again. "We are also taught Hamr were put here last, not Vorka, but perhaps we both were by our gods for our people. I still want to learn of —"

*Ut'sestva da tarv'taum'un'Moragan tem di'fed de —
Da du'fed'un'Moragan du qost'fed dors —
Disregard the creator of all things.
The current gods you must endure.*

"No, no, little one," said the Vorka who previously spoke. "Please join

us. I will tell you about Ohnay.” All three touched their foreheads again.

Since he held her stare, his invitation was sincere. They all sat upright as Valkstae listened with rapt attention. She never said a word throughout, offered Hamr beliefs or questioned theirs. As he shared every aspect of Ohnay and their religious beliefs — much like Moragan — she felt a little like Wespa and repositioned to demonstrate her concentration.

She lay on her belly, up on her elbows, chin in her hands between the speaking Vorka’s knees, gazing into his eyes as he spoke. With so little room between them, her knees splayed wide with her feet and shins in the air behind her. Ohnay was a god of no interference, leaving little to be said, and as the one Vorka neared the end, Valkstae heard a muted grumble behind her.

A single finger lightly traced down each of her soles before massive hands enveloped her feet and gently kneaded them. The Vorka who had suckled her feet was why she lay as she did. Valkstae remained outwardly focused on Ohnay and the teller until he asked about the Hamr’s beliefs.

“I” — Valkstae moaned and spread her toes — “I like Ohnay.” She touched her forehead, lost her balance, and her shins fell to the Vorka’s thighs. As she resupported her chin, her feet slid to his lap.

“Harmock, you randy satyr,” said the speaking Vorka. “You and tiny human feet. They’re not even as big as your cock.”

She rocked back and up to all fours to look between her spread thighs. Her toes set to Harmock’s root at its base, soles along its length. “It’s just longer — oh wait, it’s getting thicker.”

Harmock growled as her toes gingerly wriggled, and his root grew to a tusk. With her splayed bottom a hand’s length from Harmock’s

chest, she looked up at the Vorka in front and grinned. “You’re right, it’s much bigger than —”

Valkstae gasped when Harmock’s bluish tongue swept over her vent. Harmock licked her once more, and she rocked forward and gripped the speaking Vorka’s thighs. Lapped at a third time, Valkstae lost her grip; her hands slid up the other’s legs, and she loosed a warm exhale upon his root.

“I think she likes that, Darkon,” said Harmock. “We get enough religion in Vorkana. Northern Mouse, would you mind —”

“Ohhh, yesss.” Valkstae’s drawn-out, breathy answer stirred Darkon’s root. Her fingertips danced softly up its sides. It grew to a tusk, and Valkstae’s lips and tongue teased it as delicately as a butterfly wings’ flutter.

It was different now. No longer a blunt task executed well as she knew to do it, but an exploration of them, the way they desired it, which helped her learn more while enflaming her passion. Harmock rose behind her and, as they mutually grunted, carefully worked himself into her sheath. She remained still until each found their place and only then proved that she had learned.

Delicate touches, slow licks, and full-lipped kisses had Darkon glaring from his glower. Harmock growled each draw as Valkstae used her core’s muscles to pull him deeper, restraining her urge to rock, twist, or grind. Their deep groans rose, and Valkstae eased her manipulations. The Vorka froze. Their tusks throbbed, and as they snarled about bared teeth, each relinquished their seed.

Darkon scowled and covered his face. A moment after Harmock roared, he folded over her back and began sobbing. Neither offered any praise past the Vorkan custom of long-held stern stares, and Valkstae smiled. *Now — you’re a whore.*

“Jacknow, Varna, get in here,” Darkon bellowed. The two other Vorka raced up the hall from outside and froze, surprised by their comrades’ frowns. “My treat!”

She relieved Varna and Jacknow with the same finesse, and the Vorka requested her company for the entire morning. They again surrounded and passed her around. Four gargantuan, chiseled men fawning over her was a wonderful sensation; their delicate licks and touches yielded her unconcealed tremors.

It stirred their needs again. Valkstae mentioned she had not shuddered so much since her coming of age while blessing the tusk, and she told them the tale. They struggled with each other, and Harmock was the first to move to all fours. “Try this,” he snarled. With their backs to her the entire time, she had not seen their raised vorkan ridges when aroused.

Under their skin, bony plates on each side of their vertebrae pressed together and rose like praying hands, forming a bumpy ridge. She wasn’t tall enough to straddle and stand over him, so the Vorka helped her, though they forgot to say, ‘One, two, three, run.’ Like the tusk, it left her laughing and joyfully shattered.

It was too much for them. Four Vorka taking turns atop her, with their controlled restraint, was devastating. Kaytoo was right. She could enjoy this forever. And though Valkstae had made four Vorka cry, by the end, she joined them and joyfully wept.



Kaytoo and the rangers did not return until the following morning.

Her expression must have foreshadowed her news since Kaytoo laughed. When all five elves insisted they stay for two more days — the Vorka in agreement — Kaytoo howled.

She told her everything as they bathed. Kaytoo chuckled and moaned about the Vorka but winced in confusion when she mentioned the Sylvan Elves helped test her nose.

“Yes, my nose,” Valkstae continued. “Nothing encouraged them to talk or rush, so I acted like an ut’Kocdda’sot slut. I said, ‘I’m glad I have a nose, but I’m unsure if it still works right.’ They asked why, and I pretended to lose track of the discussion a few times and finally said, ‘Because I can still breathe with it if my mouth, core, and vent are all filled. I’m just not sure if it still works.’ I guess curiosity kills da ut’Kocdda’sot cat person and Sylvan Elves.”

Valkstae described how she overcame the High Elves’ arrogance by catering to it, even to a degree they could not resist soiling themselves. Some things they spoke about confused her, though. They pressured her to relinquish Kaytoo’s protection. Their reason was, ‘Kaytoo was just one person; the High Elves were many tens of thousands.’

“Ah. I wonder why they do not just take you then.” Kaytoo smirked. “I told you, things are different in the South.

“People are often shielded by many. Providers of sex are outlawed here” — Kaytoo waved her hand when Valkstae gaped — “do not worry. They say Brumbgawg da Beautiful is protected by so many that the emperor fears if he threatened her, the entire third continent would turn against him. They fear my wrath. Tell them to add their protection along with mine.”

Valkstae said she proposed that, but he stated the only sure protection was with a collar of allegiance. Kaytoo laughed at the term, yet from her clenched teeth, it clearly angered her.

“The only ones who wear collars are slaves. Slavery here is not like in Toulukk. Ut’Kett — civilized races — use violence and rape to assert their dominance, except with another’s slave, unlike Hamr, who only use it to help others find strength. The emperor pressures the nobility to disregard the peoples’ savagery to oppress them. Otherwise, their power wanes.”

A different issue concerned Valkstae more. She had overheard the elves discuss in Sylvan Veeandlia the Rosstan region’s annexation. They intended to kill anyone who resisted and enslave the rest. The elves asked her in Imperial Crown if she spoke Rosstloff and whatever else she knew about them since they wanted to help the people there. It bothered Valkstae since she lied and told them the name wasn’t familiar.

She knew everything about them. They were a peaceful people who had carved out a sanctuary in the wilderness and helped many others. Kaytoo told her not to concern herself. The nobility often did such things in the South. Stunned by Kaytoo’s indifference, Valkstae still wanted to help and asked what Tycoum would do.

“Tycoum?” Kaytoo chuckled. “*Hmm* — first, he would kill the Vorka since they protected the elves, then the elves. He would next travel to Rosstan to prepare them for battle. Tycoum would bravely die first, and any who survived would suffer horribly for their defiance. It is a battle that cannot be won.”

Valkstae proposed that maybe she could influence the elves.

“Tdok, tdok’fed,” said Kaytoo. “Du may know about da Rosstan Kref, pes du know nothing about da filthy Eif or de way of things here. You are not Wespa un do not know how to sway anyone past crawling between you legs.” Kaytoo winced. “Listen, Chipmunk, please. One

day, you may become beautiful and learn how to influence others, but that day is far away.

“The powerful here do what they want. If you become beautiful, you might learn how to soften them, but those who have wrested what authority they have do not surrender it to anyone. They are weak, encourage, and do terrible things to conceal it — like rape, slavery, and conquest — because they know the moment they bend to someone they think less of, they have lost their control. All you will do is enrage these Eif, un cause da people of Rosstan to suffer more.”

Valkstae wished Kaytoo would stay but recognized her discomfort with so many others here. Vargas declined to go with her. He wanted ‘His chance at the Mouse.’ As Kaytoo and Soma prepared to leave, they had an odd conversation with everyone in one chamber.

“Soma, who is the finest tracker in the southern third continent?”

Vargas rolled his eyes and chuckled as Soma replied, “Kaytoo of the Outlands.”

“Ah, ghey. Pes, which hunter always runs down their quarry?” Kaytoo glared at the elves. Soma again replied it was she. “You know, Soma, I have killed almost every type of beast: cursed boar, great buffalo, bear, dragon, trolls, knights, un even sorcerers. Of them all, Eif squeal da loudest when you skin them alive.”

*Ut’vert targja’sot du pes —
Du qost’fed tar’de du verta —
No words provide you options.
You must do what you say.*

The elves held their tongues, and the Vorka scowled and nodded. Valkstae waved a short goodbye since Vargas was already pawing at her to begin a busy two days. By the end of it, Vargas wanted to get going.

The Vorka intended to wait until Kaytoo returned to keep Valkstae safe, and the elves insisted everyone stay to confirm, ‘Kaytoo found Mouse well.’

Once the others left, Valkstae beamed and told Kaytoo what each had offered. The elves pleaded with her to visit them in their homelands. Kaytoo shook her head regarding the High Elves, the Sylvan Elves, maybe, yet she seemed impressed when told about the Vorkas’ offer. They asked her to visit the home mountain, Vorkana, and gave Valkstae a pendant bearing the Vorkan Eighth Legion’s insignia. The Vorka vowed any in the regiment would protect her.

She had not counted all the coins and gems they paid, but the sack was heavy, and that was after she loaned half of what the Sylvan Elves had spent back to them. Kaytoo added the initial twenty-seven coins paid that first day. A good omen — three times three times three — the most faithful number, and she stuck the pouch in a hole, suggesting Valkstae leave it there in case she ever needed it.

They strode across the dunes toward Lus at midmorning to intercept Brumbgawg on her travels. Valkstae wanted to tell her about everything, yet the silence felt right. It was better to save such tales for when they rested.

Kaytoo didn’t seem interested in savoring the moment. She snorted, then chuckled as her lips impishly pursed. “Chipmunk, did you remember to milk the cows?”

Valkstae grasped Kaytoo’s hand. “Ghey, until they were dry. Pes, I’ve yet to lick all the honey from the tree.”

NORTHERN MOUSE, SOUTHERN HAMR

It was so different south of Nicci's Wall, with Nowhere far behind them. A patchwork of varied terrain and flora replaced the North's continuous forest, disrupted only by outcrops of stone or lakes. Trees north of the wall that took a hundred warriors to link around had reduced to where the largest, a mere twenty could. Rivers and streams were wider yet less plentiful. Ponds in fields and bogs were everywhere, and marshes instead of woodlands surrounded lakes.

They were still in wilderness, yet in the South, everywhere seemed worn and altered by whichever races had dominated Vraste' centuries to millennia ago. Kortme' and the nature spirits had clawed back what was theirs, though much of it bore scars from countless failed expansions. The size of trees was the most widespread example.

Outlines of moss-covered foundations shifted to heaps of hewn stone, and the farther they traveled, crumbling towers and ancient stronghold ruins. Remnants of wells, ridges of fallen stone walls, and the terrain itself marked the races' intrusions. Narrow, well-worn paths, sometimes in parallel pairs, replaced overgrown, flat-bottomed wide ditches — once ancient roads, Kaytoo suggested.

Notably warmer down here, Kaytoo remained naked yet insisted Valkstae wear clothes, stating, 'The way you look is a temptation; I am a deterrent.' It made no sense; Kaytoo looked strong and bore countless marks of life compared to her smooth, inexperienced form. Valkstae asked why she never wore Herte's armor. Kaytoo began to explain, but Valkstae gasped and stopped. Beside the road, entangled in vines and drawn tight to a tree, a corpse rotted.

Kaytoo extended her spear toward a coin on the trunk, and the vines quivered. “A molester’s tangle. We will see more the farther south we travel. Tarkd’fed ut’Kett — all da civilized ut’Kosh un ut’Kref — everyone uses ut’Kocve’ marg down here. The magic wears off over time. Look for something that attracts you to spot them.”

“But why kill someone for no reason?” Valkstae backed away.

“The predator did not check his trap. Bandits use them to rob travelers, pes most are from those too craven or lazy to rush’fed with force. I told you, rape is common and not punishable down here past revenge by combat. It is why I want you dressed. You look like a boy at a distance. My marks and no clothes tell them I am barbarian. Most will not risk a fight.”

Without pause, Kaytoo resumed questioning her about the people and languages she knew of. Her answer of over a hundred impressed Kaytoo, though worry spread over Kaytoo’s face as she continued. Valkstae noted languages and variations were shared by many, as the elves had proved. Aspects of culture, lore, and even traditions were often similar; only one thing was different, and two were identical.

Every race and sometimes clan’s religions were different: all of it, their gods, ceremonies, and lore. In many cases, the strained effort to make them distinct was obvious. However, every race believed they were their gods’ final improvement. Anyone created before and after was imperfect. Everyone also believed in a single original creator, a lone entity and origin of all things, including their gods.

“You must” — Kaytoo hesitated — “mourkra must burn, or their spirit is trapped in their rotting body and cannot run free, even once dust. Like the spirits in rocks or sticks — they believe. They need no gods.” Kaytoo briefly averted her gaze.

“I think the unnamed god has fooled us all,” grumbled Kaytoo.

“Vraste’ is not a place of learning but his cruel entertainment, like tossing pixies to vragga. I think he made all the gods of every race and gave them the power to make us. He watches and laughs as we tear at each other and rewards the gods whose creatures do best.

“The ut’Kett emperor does the same. He favors no one race, forces them all to live together, pes allows and encourages da tarkd’fed ut’Kosh un ut’Kref” — Kaytoo spitted — “to do terrible things as he watches, insulated from the havoc.

*Da traam tem un’Moragan un tem’Moragan’mon
tem ut’pes de’ut dem du targje’sot du’fed —
The authority of gods and kings
is only that which you give them.*

“All the gods, the emperor, and nobility want conflict between races and clans. They know that once the people work together, their time is over. This is why they do not like Hamr. Tem’Kref’mon know better.”

*Un’det tem Kosh, tarv’sosh den’mon ka’tam’Kref,
un tarv’traam un’Moragan un tem’Moragan —
Regardless of race, live as one people,
and hold dominion over gods and kings.*

Valkstae was not as confident as Kaytoo regarding the Hamr’s intentions. The Hamr based the whole premise of Kocve’mon on enduring Vraste’s hardships as they battled all other peoples, preparing themselves to fight their way into heaven. They helped others, but only to convert them to Hamr beliefs.

She again rejected Kaytoo’s suggestion that she use her knowledge of cultures as an intermediary and advisor north of the wall instead of

sex work. “Besides,” Valkstae countered, “I could use that knowledge down here to help these people. They need it more.”

“Tdok’fed. Absolutely not,” said Kaytoo. “Never tell anyone you have this knowledge. Every race’s nobility or leaders would enslave you. They would use you to spy in their petty conquests and usurpation of their lieges. Once discovered, you will die slow and horribly. Let them believe you only understand them because you make the effort, and they matter to you.

“I wanted to know your trials of life to help you, as Brumbgawg will. Da ut’Kett will ask to help themselves. The forge taught you a valuable lesson you must never forget. Withhold your stories, thoughts, un opinions. Share those that help others only with them. Even your dour’Vraste’ which serves no one but yourself.”

Each time they had rested, Kaytoo broached countless subjects and answered all of her questions, though often as Hamr taught children. That evening, Kaytoo used thin leather scraps and sinew she had gathered at Nowhere to make her point.

She cut thin strips halfway up two leather pieces, knotting them together like fringed clothing. For the next pair, she used a bone punch to make holes through each and multiple strands of sinew to bind them together. For the last two, she borrowed Needle. With a single strand of sinew, she poked Needle through each, drew through the fiber, and continued in a line, each stitch very close to the last.

Valkstae pulled at the first bound pieces. Light showed between the knots, and with enough pressure, some strips tore. “This is when different clans make pax — pacts? The light you see are the many divides between people. Alliances hold until one person breaks the promise; the bond becomes weaker, and others break, weakening it

more. You could make such bonds in the North. The strength of which is up to you.

“The second pair is a civilized ut’Kett noble, king, or the emperor.” Valkstae pulled. Much light showed through, the sinew tore the leather between holes, and the pieces came apart. “The nobility uses force to bind people together to serve them. Only their brutality remains intact as the people are torn apart. If you used your knowledge as the Eif wished, you are the holes that weaken the people.”

She handed Valkstae the last pair made with Needle. No light shone through, and even Kaytoo couldn’t rip the seam. “This is the honest bond between two people who each live Kocve’sot — true to self — and Kocve’mom, true to the nature of Vraste’. Each stitch is a brief, trivial seeming moment that firms the bond and makes the two one. Du un Zet pes Tycoum, pas’ghey? Maybe us one day.

“This is also the power of a fed — not just a common mon — but a rare, supreme provider of sex. It is the trust people place in a provider as they share the most intimate aspects of themselves. Other much more important things become less consequential to them, and they will share them casually. Since a provider interacts with many people, they become the common bond between them. A fed provider can discreetly influence many, but only so long as they never betray the trust of even one.”

Kaytoo strained against the pieces until one tore. “Once a provider betrays that trust, it destroys the person and the provider’s reputation. Neither can ever be healed. Wespa does not understand this or care. A fed provider knows otherwise and reserves that ultimate power and sacrifice for when it matters.”

Over the many days they had traveled, conifers shifted to hardwoods, and the soil turned soft and black, yet still, Kaytoo refused to

let her even go barefoot. Though cleared paths from game or people were all around, Kaytoo often insisted they parallel them unless some obstruction prevented it.

They avoided homesteads and farms, traveled far around villages, and twice adjusted their route to keep clear of certain nobles' territories. The farther they progressed southeast, developed trails widened, and the number of unavoidable travelers increased. Occasionally, they concealed themselves and waited for others to pass. Sometimes, Kaytoo made her hide as she waited by the road with varied degrees of conflict.

She wanted to work. Kaytoo insisted Valkstae wait, stating, 'A mon provider of sex does not whore along pathways.' Valkstae persisted until Kaytoo relented.

The first time, she stayed by the path with Kaytoo out of view. A pair of men had her pinned and stripped by the time Kaytoo *sauntered* up and convinced them to run. Another, four men and three women hurled rocks and shouted at her, threatening to inform the baron's guards. Kaytoo refused with others they saw for varied reasons and only once agreed.

They spotted a distant group by a fire. Kaytoo chuckled and told Valkstae she could finally remove her clothes. She walked her right into their camp and said, "Which one of you horny bastards prefers Shonaeshan girls over goats?" Valkstae was mortified. The eight dwarves laughed and debated yet kept her busy until dawn, in pairs, as Kaytoo drank with the others, her point made.

Irritated that Kaytoo had again proved her inexperience, Valkstae broached an unrelated subject. "Weren't you born just after the winter solstice, bamons'sot?" She smirked as Kaytoo grumbled, 'Ghey?' "Did Konneratt make you an outcast because you are Breed and —"

*Kortme' paxtma ur tarj'fed Vraste' —
Daf da bamons'sot da mour daf'tem sosh'sot —
Du'shem daf targje'sot targda'sot, subma, tarv'du,
un pasva ur di'fed'Kosh —*

*Kortme' vowed to destroy the world.
After the winter solstice a child will be born.
She will provide peace, love, cooperation,
and understanding to all races.*

Kaytoo wheeled round and poked her chest. “Tom tem tdok Breed. Halmace — Konneratt wanted — it does not matter. I am not the race of one. Da sorcerer Faeshtdok imprisoned un tattooed all of me with evil magic while I was — never mind. He knew da Hamr Custom of Defiance un thought it was amusing. Not so funny when I removed his head.

“Pes, how do I know you not Breed? Maybe you stripes not show yet. You da one who love Kortme' un want to hump you way across Vraste' with every ut'Kett ut'Kref un ut'Kosh you encounter to rush joy un co... co — for everyone to work together. Kortme' make her curse to end all struggle so no one grows strong to fight their way into Kolumm. No, I think you Breed un will make da child of peace, da destroyer of conflict.”

*Da un'Moragan tarv'trup uz Kortme' taum —
Da shem'mour daf'qost sosh'sot una da'sot'Kosh, Breed —
Breed tem da Kosh tem ka,
sosh'sot tem ka rush'tam'fed una di'fed'Kosh —
Breed tem criss de'un sanh'fed loff ur verta du'fed —
Breed daf'sosh tem da ut'tam, becc'fed, un targza —
Du targza daf pest'mon ur rushva'fed —*

*Breed tor'tdok tdok'fed —
Ut'pes da Breed tem rush qa'unnum un di'fedKosh,
tor Kortme' dek'septa'fed mour dafsosh'sot —
Do'Breed di'criss dafpest hete'fed tem da den'fed verta'mon —
Da mour tem koft'sot —*

The gods established conditions for Kortme's creation.

The female child must be born by a new race, Breed.

Breed is a race of one,

born of one gang rape by all races.

Breed is marked with blue stripes to warn all others.

Breed will live as an outcast, scorned, and attacked.

Their attack will turn to lust.

Breed cannot refuse.

Only once Breed has sex four times with all races,

can Kortme's prophesized child be born.

Breed's marks will turn gold as a final warning.

The child has come.

That hadn't gone as hoped, so Valkstae pressed Kaytoo on another subject she had since Nowhere. "Why do you despise the ancient races and even civilized high humans?"

"You know why. It is what we were taught." Kaytoo used her same pat answer.

"Yes, but you have lived with them. Why do you ...?" Valkstae asked her the same question once more.

Kaytoo smirked. "They are ut'Kocve'mon, unfaithful to the purpose of Vraste'."

She countered Kaytoo's response and continued to ask the same question. Kaytoo answered evasively, yet she never ended the dis-

cussion, seemingly amused as Valkstae tried to pry the truth from her. Kaytoo’s answer of unfaithful changed to they looked different, believed different things, did not respect nature, hated Hamr, and ten other shallow reasons, so Valkstae asked again.

“I fear them,” said Kaytoo, and Valkstae stopped. “Every race lives in ways I disagree with, yet each offers wonderful things as well. They entice me to embrace their way of living and lure me away from what I know is right. Pes, ut’Kett — civilized society — is a lie. They do not live in harmony, respect, or accept others. Like Jagdnict, they speak and act like they do, then prove otherwise.

“Each demands I reject my beliefs and disregard all other races, yet they would never accept me as one of them — just a savage they had enlightened. If I relented, no one else would, and then defenseless, they would tear me apart. My contempt keeps me faithful and alive.

“Tem’Kref’mon are not a new race. Our ancestors were like mourkra — barbarians with wild spirits, the blind ferocity of beasts, and at one with nature. You are proof that Hamr are of many races, not just Kref, but also ut’Kosh non-human races. Shona pitied the small band of *mixed races* —and bore Moragan on the glacier to guide us. He made us Hamr.

*Kosh tar’tdok seppa —
Feps’mon tem’tam di’pux’sot un tarv’trupda ut’tem’tam —
Race does not matter.
Embrace common beliefs and celebrate differences.*

“Moragan created faith and intelligence to temper our love of natural things. He taught us balance. That Vraste’ is a place of learning in preparation to battle our way into Kolumm — to use everything upon it frugally and with respect — to make us strong and eliminate our fear.

Yet strength has nothing to do with force or might. It is the heart and will to use the knowledge we acquire righteously.

“It is not race; our beliefs and way of living set us apart. Moragan made us better than the gods and ut’Kett civilized races; they lie, have fear, and no respect. The gods put all races here for sport, but since we embrace balance, honor, and resolve, we can even kill the gods.

“Hamr beliefs are muddied now. The gods, ut’Kett nobility, and even Tem’Kref chiefs want every race hating all others to keep everyone in conflict and distracted from their transgressions. So they keep their power.

*Daf’pest ka Kref, ka Hamr,
un targva’fed tem’Moragan un un’Moragan —
Become one people, one Hamr,
and overpower kings and gods.*

“It is why Hamr fears Breed.” Kaytoo sneered at her. “Breed’s offspring will teach races and clans to work together — not falsely, like ut’Kett — so Hamr have nothing to fight against to grow strong and demand their place in Koluumn. But the gods told the Hamr this lie. Hamr are already stronger than gods, yet without the struggle, you need no gods.

“Pas, Chipmunk, why do you continue to agitate me over this nothing?” Kaytoo’s nostrils flared, and she reached for her.

Valkstae slapped her hand away. As Kaytoo tried to grab her a second time, she hooked Kaytoo’s heel and shoved her backward, bolting into a field of high grasses. She ran as fast as she could, abruptly skidded to a stop, dropped, and listened. Kaytoo ran past to her left, and Valkstae kept low and scrambled right. It was quiet — too quiet. The sounds of every creature had stilled from their intrusion.

In a silent charge, Kaytoo slammed into her, and they tumbled. Before she could gather her wits, Kaytoo was on her. Valkstae kicked, and her hands shoved against her shoulders. Kaytoo gripped one wrist, wrapped a leg between hers, wrenched her head back by her hair, and kissed Valkstae so hard that it hurt.

As they lay there after, gasping and naked, slick with sweat, spit, and their mutual flow, Kaytoo laughed between ragged breaths. “Wes— Wespia could learn from you. Gods, you have become — an intuitive provider. If you ever become even — a little beautiful, no one could resist you.”

Again, with the beautiful nonsense. Valkstae rolled atop her, pinning Kaytoo’s shoulders with her shins. She grabbed her hair and jerked Kaytoo’s mouth to her furrow. “Ut’varta. Be useful instead.”

They held hands up to a hilltop spring as Lus set. The uncountable Lut revealed themselves, and Lur and Lum began their rise. She leaned against Kaytoo’s chest between her legs after they bathed, waiting for something.

She wondered if Kaytoo had lived in the South too long. Vigorous sex was common among Hamr, but forced sex for her, instead of passion, seemed habitual. It concerned her. Everything Kaytoo said or did was part of a lesson. Sex was no exception, and she seemed especially pleased with the day’s test. Not once since Nowhere had Kaytoo just made love with her. Kaytoo waited until Valkstae seduced her, yet her desires changed each time, which she had to determine.

Kaytoo raised her forearm to shield Valkstae’s eyes from Lur and Lum’s bright glow. “Do you see the black horizon below the violet sky?” Valkstae nodded, and Kaytoo raised her arm slightly to block half of each moon. “Do you see how Lur and Lum’s centers are the same above the horizon?” Valkstae nodded again. “Follow my arm

to midway between them and fix on that spot.” Kaytoo gave her a moment, moved her arm, and obscured each moon with her hands.

“Do you see the three bright Lut?” said Kaytoo. Valkstae answered, ‘Ghey.’ “Now, look close at the center of them. Do you see a cluster of three dimmer Lut?” Again, Valkstae nodded, and Kaytoo removed her hands, blocking the two moons’ view. “The two sets of Lut are aligned with Lur and Lum, parallel to the horizon. Dawn will bring a glorious last day of the third-ninth. Thank you for your birthday blessing, Chipmunk.”

Valkstae joyfully cried from the romantic sentiments as Kaytoo rocked her until she could stand it no more. She turned and kissed her and, for the first time, felt they finally made love together. It was a wonderful night asleep in each other’s arms, and Kaytoo awakened her to a magnificent sunrise.

Kortme’s gift on her special day, Kaytoo claimed, and she told her of another surprise. “Today, you meet Brumbgawg, to maybe become a little beautiful.”

“Wha — I ... I know I’m not strong like you or have any marks of life, but I’m not ugly. Even the dwarves, Vorka, and elves said I was beautiful. They said my — well, everything.”

Kaytoo burst out laughing and chuckled throughout. “You are not beautiful. Brumbgawg will make you a little beautiful because she is a supreme, not just a common, provider of sex. I make you a paxt. I have secured more vaht than most nobles — I never use it. After your time with Brumbgawg, if you decide you are even half as beautiful as her, I will give it all to you.”

“Fine!” Valkstae snapped. “Bind your promise then.”

All of Kaytoo’s laughter ebbed as her jovial expression softened to disappointment. In the distance, Valkstae heard a deep, resonant

humming. Kaytoo withdrew a knife and cut off a lock of her dark hair, knotting it close to Valkstae’s scalp. Once she picked up her things, Kaytoo seemed torn between sadness and joy as she started down the hill but stopped and looked back at her.

“No need to dress. I already packed your belongings. I wonder, though, why you wanted just part of my soul and all the responsibility that goes with it — instead of what I offered from my heart?” Kaytoo looked to the tree line past the field below and grinned. “Brumbgawg comes.”

Da pax’fed sauda da sot de’sot tem do dourve’ —
Da paxt’fed targje’sot di’fed tem du —
A bound-promise shares a small part of your soul.
A promise from the heart gives all of you.

Four extremely long, two-axle, gypsy-styled wagons were linked in a line. Two trolls in yokes pulled the lead wagon from each side, but what led the procession and bore the bulk of the work was something horrific.

Clearly an ogress by its features, it must have been the spawn of long-extinct giants. The grotesque’s hairy bare feet, each half a wagon’s length, shuffled along with the creature’s legs bent in a squat, its rump barely clearing the ground. Two gargantuan breasts rested atop a massive belly that hung between its shins with a thick rope around it, pulling the wagons.

Its oversized right arm and hand made the proportional left seem smaller. The monster’s pointed head with a wisp of hair was fused low between its shoulders. Still, it was a warrior’s height taller than the trolls. Gigantic ears with long lobes framed tiny eyes on either side of an enormous, bulbous nose above fat lips that spanned almost ear to

ear. To make it even more hideous, they had dressed it in a pink, fine fabric frock that its colossal bulk strained the seams to contain.

It was disturbing to see the normally agile and controlled Kaytoo scamper down the hill toward two parallel paths in the clearing, and Valkstae shouted, “What is that thing?”

“Tom dek’verta du. Sem tem Brumbgawg da un’Manna’fed!”

What? Brumbgawg the Beautiful? This had to be another of Kaytoo’s cruel tests.

The creature noticed Kaytoo, and its humming stopped. It dropped the rope and extended its uneven arms. Kaytoo threw down her things and launched herself up onto its hip, climbing a humongous breast to grasp its wide chin and press her face to its lips. The beast began to heave. From the moans, Valkstae could tell it was crying.

She hesitantly walked down the hill and across the field yet stopped as the wagons emptied. She couldn’t believe it. Races northern people thought were extinct made up half the contingent. Along with high-humans, barbarians, plains people, dwarves, and halflings were elves of every sort; spirit, nymph, nature, and goblin-akin races; and from their subtle features, mannerisms, or customs, so-called beast species such as satyrs, lupine, and the cat people that Kaytoo loved to deride.

*Def — Kosh tar’tdok seppa —
Feps’mom tem’tam di’pux’sot un tarv’trupda ut’tem’tam —*

Again: Race does not matter.

Embrace common beliefs and celebrate differences.

Kaytoo pointed her out to the monster as she walked off, shouting at Valkstae over the din. “The salmon are running, and it is time for bear. I will find you in two or three ninths. Oh! And stay away from da ut’Kocdda’sot sluts. They spread disease, I think.”

Valkstae wanted to run, but the grinning people and creatures surrounded her. Each praised her beauty and joyfully welcomed her to Brumbgawg's rolling brothel.

BEAUTY'S TOLL

“Mouse, she’s here,” was shouted throughout the caravan. Everyone’s hugs lingered; they wanted her to stay. Valkstae sensed her path led elsewhere. She burst from the third wagon naked and froze.

Kortme’s autumn miracle was more striking here than in Touloukk. The contrast of Kaytoo’s dark tan and blue tattoos against the painted leaves and grasses took her breath away. She waved yet raced to Brumbgawg, who lay on her side as close to the ground as her bulk permitted.

She scaled Brumbgawg’s breast, hugged her chin, and pressed her face to her lips. Brumbgawg was crying. Between deep moans, her voice sounded like a songbird as a tiny portion of her lips parted, whispering, “We’re always near and miss you already. Please, my little Mouse, come back and visit us soon. We all so love you.”

Valkstae kissed her once, then again, and a third time because it was faithful. She jumped down, holding back her heartache, and slowly walked to Kaytoo, who gestured for her to turn around. Brumbgawg’s large hand reached out, claspng at the air as her diminutive hand blew kisses while she sobbed in deep tones.

“Koft’sot, come,” said Kaytoo. “She cannot stop weeping until long after we are gone.”

Kaytoo led them into the woods on a magnificent autumn day as she waved at Brumbgawg and the others. Valkstae expected her to say something, but Kaytoo did not even look at her until she stopped. Her lips trembled, and she collapsed to the ground, weeping.

“Ah, I see.” Kaytoo smirked. “So tell me, Chipmunk, am I a pauper now?”

She couldn’t stop crying and briskly shook her head. “Not — no, not even half as beautiful. I never could ... I didn’t ... I —”

“I know, Chipmunk. Pes, now you are more beautiful than you know.”

Once she composed herself, Kaytoo wanted to hear everything. Valkstae did not discuss Brumbgawg, unable to contain her sorrow. She spoke about the others and their discussions regarding patrons and work, which each insisted upon demonstrating since they had never rushed with a Shonaesh.

Since she was new, previous patrons requested her most often, so she worked more than other providers over the first ninth. The work entailed every type of sex Valkstae knew of and countless others she didn’t; different races, cultures, and people had diverse customs and tastes, she discovered.

One man Valkstae interacted with, who was not a patron, touched Brumbgawg and changed everything. They stopped at a farm for water. Valkstae requested the older man show her his homestead: his tiny home built between two massive trees used as walls and his overgrown, languishing orchards and gardens. He spoke of his hope for a family, which never bore fruit, of how lonely he was, and he now saw no point in maintaining his legacy.

Valkstae returned to the wagons and emerged with a pair of dryad twins, each as despondent as the man. They missed life bonded to a tree, forest, or orchard. The sisters chattered about how magnificent the farm would be with a little love and protection, and being twins, the two trees with his home between them would be perfect. She could

see it in their eyes. All three were too shy to ask, so she did, and they joyfully agreed.

From that day, Brumbgawg saved her for specific people. Whether nobility or peasants, though they preferred Valkstae nude and enjoyed her seductive touches and coos, most wanted to talk. She guessed someone intently listening to their most private thoughts without judgment meant more to them than a brief physical interlude.

Kaytoo noted she did not have a purse with her clothing, whip, and knife, and asked where were the vahts from all the work. Valkstae blushed, afraid her answer might sound foolish. “I ... there is nothing I want that I can’t make or find out here.”

An intense smile spread up into Kaytoo’s eyes. “Ghey, much more beautiful than you realize.”

Many begged Brumbgawg to sell her; she loathed slavery. It was the only time Valkstae saw her scold someone. Forty-two were so enamored with her that they insisted Valkstae accept their patronage and protection. Twenty-nine requested she tattoo their insignias or coats of arms on herself. She wanted to ask Kaytoo first, though she had already agreed with one. Valkstae hesitantly showed the mark a woman implored her to bear — BB in Crown script on the inside of her wrist.

“Oh my. You know what that means, yes?” Kaytoo smiled. Valkstae answered it just meant Brumbgawg liked her, and Kaytoo beamed. “No, Chipmunk. She loves you, but that needs no mark of life. It means she sees that you are beautiful, like her. Few southern nobles will risk harming you. Also, that you are a *fed* tarv’rush’mom shem’mom, a supreme provider of sex, which, as you have discovered, has little to do with sex.

“*Uh*, you have a ... pas, what is de word for da rushva unCrisa

tem'vut du crib'sot?" Kaytoo chuckled. Valkstae felt around her neck for a suckled love bruise, yet Kaytoo smirked and shook her head. "Tdok, from your neck down. My last one took half a ninth to go away."

Brumbgawg never had sex. She did, however, enjoy sucking on her babies — to keep them clean, her claim. Some believed it was how she satisfied an ogre's desire to eat children. Others, how the myth started since she was over a thousand years old. Valkstae reserved her reason for why she was so spotless with a blush.

It was enough that she could finally speak about her. Brumbgawg was the most sincere, understanding, and loving being she could imagine. She had never met anyone close and wondered if Brumbgawg was the sole racial creation of Kortme' other than her curse of Breed. Like a grandmother, Brumbgawg deeply loved everyone who cared for others. It crushed her with joy when they returned and broke her heart with sorrow each time they left.

She spoke with Valkstae every day as they traveled. Valkstae would climb up, wedging herself between Brumbgawg's warm, soft breasts under her frock, with just her head out, gazing up at her. Brumbgawg would ask her about her life, hopes, and dreams — yet never about sex — and continue to ask questions, though never offered an opinion or advice.

Her questions led Valkstae to answers that she would have never discovered on her own. In rare instances, the revelation was ugly. After speaking with Brumbgawg, she recognized empathy, though there was no word for it in Crown and definitely not in Hamr. With it came an understanding of disappointment and heartache.

Hasgroth's explanation of remorse finally struck home. She had failed others countless times in her life: Shanee, the Hamr, Tycoum,

the Ten Thousand, Kaytoo, and vowed never to harm others again, yet she failed within days.

Perhaps forty raiders attacked the caravan for money, riches, rape, and slaves. The others screamed as men attacked each wagon. Outside, Brumbgawg loosed a mighty roar. Valkstae popped through the roof to help her. Eight raiders distracted Brumbgawg while the trolls cowered.

Valkstae whipped back the men along the wagons. Brumbgawg raised to standing and stomped, kicked, and swept away attackers with her mighty root burl club. Each Valkstae whipped crumpled; every one Brumbgawg struck was smashed. Three men dragged a girl from a wagon. She jumped down, lashing them bloody, and kept back five others who came to help.

“Mouse!” Brumbgawg’s bellow paled the forge troll’s call. She stormed toward her, sent two men sailing, stomped three, and flattened two with her club as Valkstae whipped the last to the ground. Finally, the trolls helped. They grabbed the man’s arms, stretching him out, and Brumbgawg asked Valkstae to help her. Valkstae was so enraged that she could barely restrain herself to do as told.

She carved a mark of shame into the man’s chest — a B. Valkstae slashed it with her whip three times, and Brumbgawg groaned, “Tell him, as I said.”

“Brumbgawg shuns you” — Brumbgawg told her to continue — “And I am Mouse. Tell everyone, the Northern Mouse did this to you.” The trolls let the man go. Powerful Brumbgawg had done it all, yet she thanked Valkstae for saving them. It worried Valkstae, though it still enraged her.

“*Rahh!* Well done, Chipmunk.” Kaytoo was elated. Her stripes swirled wildly, excited by the tale of battle. “Everyone will learn the Northern Mouse is Brumbgawg’s wrath. Your name will make the

unfaithful tremble, shem's thighs slick, and warriors stare in awe. Brumbgawg has ensured your safe travels. You are a mighty Hamr."

Valkstae wasn't so sure. Only four times since Toulouk had she seen her reflection; once, in a northern Dachvst's puddle, and in reflecting plates in Margrouln's chambers, her first day at the brothel, and her last. She could still see each image. In the first, she looked like a child. At Margrouln's, healthy and youthful, and the first time in the wagon, a happy young adult.

After her talks with Brumbgawg and once she understood remorse, in just a couple of ninths, she looked much older. Her eyes had lost their brightness, replaced by a depth she did not like. Her face looked harder, as though compassion compounded with sorrow made her distant like many older people she knew, the Ten Thousand and Kaytoo.

Kaytoo's hands swept over her life's alterations: scars, old wounds blued by antiseptic stainberries, numerous tattoos, brands, and carvings. "Hamr call them marks of life, yet they are ... surface-ficial, yes? Self-added marks mean nothing. No tattoo is blacker or fixed deeper than the marks in our eyes and face, revealing the scars on our heart.

"Da ut'Kref call it character. It is the pain of this remorse, as you call it, that we must carry our lifetimes and grows heavier each day. Pes, you know this from de forge, yet now they are not just words." Kaytoo silenced and stared at her for a moment. Valkstae's heart broke, able to see how very much of it Kaytoo bore.

"Do not concern yourself with this," Kaytoo continued. "It means you are Kocve'mon, faithful to the purpose of Vraste', and makes you stronger, wiser, un a better Kref. It is important to remember these things — in your heart to help guide you — yet do not dwell on them.

Di tem da unCrisim de du kefa'sosh. They are the marks of your path of life.”



Valkstae awakened to a distant scream, yet the sight of Kaytoo made her rise. Already dressed in most of Herte’s dragon lace armor — the tall choker, gloves, and crotch-high boots — Kaytoo applied the pieces that covered her nipples and the lower outer third of each breast. Each gripped as they shrank, extruding her skin between their black leather veins.

“Where are we going?” Valkstae hurriedly started to dress.

“We are going nowhere until I fulfill a promise. Stay here until I return. This will not take long.”

Kaytoo added the nasty spiked spurs to her boots and lashed a knife to her thigh. She covered the palm-swelled grip of Herte’s knife with spit, grimacing as she worked it into her core with a grunt.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“Down there.” Kaytoo’s thumb pointed behind her. “I was very clear and warned them three times — faithful, yes? They did not do as I told them, so.”

Valkstae looked down the hillside at a substantial farm, larger than any she had seen. It was harvest time. The couple hundred or so nude and collared slaves working were not surprising, yet they were so emaciated that many crawled. Healthy, dressed men and women drove and beat them with rigid staffs. Another scream drew her gaze toward the large cabin as three men dragged a young woman into it.

“But there are thirty of them at least. We’re just shem’mon, common women. We can find some warriors. I’m sure I can convince some to —”

“Tdok — my promise, my battle. You forget. Warrior or common, we are Hamr and do what is right. The slaves need to learn what is Kocve’mon un find strength. Their ut’Kett masters will make fine examples. You tell me now. What would Tycoom do?”

*Ut’Kett ut’varta’fed ut’seppe verta’fed —
Hamr un’varta paxtma’fed verta’mon —
Civilized people shout casual threats.
Hamr issue irrevocable warnings.*

She knew what Tycoom would do from his tales of Perpetuating the Faith, yet this would tax his well-honed skills. Kaytoo pulled up the suspended thong, carefully working Herte’s blade through the lace. The armor in this state was lewd and pointless, and Kaytoo refused to speak the words to make it grow or shrink.

“Wait! Let me talk to them. Maybe they will listen to reason. They could kill you, there has to be a better —”

“Tdok’fed. They would rape and enslave you or kill you if you threatened them with protectors. This is not a battle for Kortme’s love or Wespa’s seduction, but Lorn, the god of war. What better way to rise to Kolumm than this? Pray if it soothes you or enjoy the combat, but stay here.”

Kaytoo took up her spear and ax and confidently strode toward the fields. Slaves submissively cowered as she passed, and a man and woman confronted her. She thrust her spear into the man, jerked it out, and deflected the woman’s staff, hacking at her with the ax. Another

master raced to her as she resumed her march; dispatched as deftly, Kaytoo paused and glanced back up the hill.

She shook her head and shouted at the slaves, though Valkstae was not sure what. Kaytoo continued to yell as six masters charged her front, and while distracted, two more approached her rear. Valkstae grabbed her knife and whip and raced down the hill. Four men rushed Kaytoo simultaneously. Her armor spontaneously grew, covering her completely.

As she vanquished two, a third tackled Kaytoo onto her back. He raised to swing his ax. She jammed her spurred heels into his flanks, pulled him tight, and raised her hips, gutting him from crotch to sternum. Valkstae viciously whipped the pair behind Kaytoo to the ground, and Kaytoo bellowed, yanking at her armor.

“Tarkd’fed bitch’s” — Kaytoo chopped at a man with her ax — “bitch’s folm! Du mung-ditch” — she thrust her spear into a woman and wheeled round to face others — “Herte’!”

The moment she called out only the goddess’ name in the midst of battle, a single thunderclap resounded, and a ring-like wave raced out through the overcast above. The clouds brightened as a mass of orange fire trailing coal-black smoke fell with a forest inferno’s roar. There was no crash of impact — just a tempest’s gust that shoved everyone back and a single deep tone as though the Bell of Creation had rung.

The fire extinguished, and Herte’ stood in its place: dark-haired, well-muscled, and nude, a head or more taller than the largest Vorka. She crouched as her arms raised, prepared to grapple.

“Tdok! De’tem da tom targda’mom.” Kaytoo pointed her spear at Herte’. “My battle. Du have no right!”

Herte’ harrumphed and sneered at Kaytoo, then panned over the scene with a contemptuous gaze until it locked on Valkstae, and Herte’

spat. Her knees turned out, and Herte' lewdly swiped a hand through her furrow and slung its vile flow at Valkstae. "Puny whore." She turned back round with manic wild eyes, muscles flexed, anxious for combat.

"I warned you, not her!" Kaytoo cocked to thrust her spear into Herte'. "And this is my — tdok. This is their battle." She pointed toward the slaves. "We have no right to take this from them. You have no right. Go back to Shalmour, unfaithful bitch or —"

The goddess looked up at the clouds from whence she fell, and in a breath, she fractured into shards of blue light that streaked skyward, and upon the last, a single perfect high note was sung.

Everyone stood there stunned except Kaytoo. "You are slaves and suffer because you deserve it — fearing freedom more than a lifetime of anguish. If you are no more than that, lie down and beg for mercy. If you have suffered enough, kill your cruel masters now and take this farm which you have earned!"

No one moved except the battered young woman who emerged from the cabin. She shuffled up behind the masters, stabbing one in his back as she shrieked until he fell. The other masters killed her, yet as they turned back around, the slaves had surrounded them with tools in their hands and eyes filled with hatred.

Valkstae supposed Kaytoo decided they needed to reclaim their humanity instead of giving it to them. After Kaytoo finished the masters Valkstae had whipped while tugging at her armor, she asked if that was how Tycoum would have done it.

"I think — Tycoum would be proud of the bitch barbarian semen-bucket."

Kaytoo laughed and clasped Valkstae's hand. "Well said, puny whore."



Valkstae looked forward to a wilderness autumn alone with Kaytoo. A hundred strides east, the forest surrendered to fields of ripe crops below Kortme's painted ut'luma as Vaste' brightened at dawn.

They both agreed each should dress. It was one thing to instill Hamr values in ut'Kref adults, yet ut'Kett taught their offspring that nudity meant shame; they would respect their choice. Kaytoo refused to cast Herte's armor; trapped once within it for three days, Wespa's blessing upon it also did unsavory things.

Distant cabins and outbuildings increased as packed earth pathways gradually mixed with pebbles and stones. The air thickened from countless morning cookfires' smoke. Farmers shouted insults regarding Kaytoo's state of undress. By mid-morning, they neared a large village Kaytoo called a town. Cultivated roots of hundreds of winter's old trees formed chest-high fence lines along the road that shifted to flagstone with grass in its gaps.

Stone and plank structures flanked the road and progressively condensed until only separated by modest gaps. The people of every race increased in number and either cursed at Kaytoo, turned their backs, or scurried inside. They approached a well-constructed stone bridge over a river. People crossing hurried off it or turned back, yet four imperial guards remained at its apex. "Hey! You can't —" the youngest guard began to shout until another turned him away by his neck.

All the guards faced the river as they reached the top. Kaytoo strode

to the armored youngster and nudged him with her chest. “Pas, du quostva di'mon de? What you want? Say it, un —”

“Kaytoo, not this morning,” said the oldest guard as another tightened his grip on the young man’s collar. “It’s too early, and he doesn’t — the inn has fresh ale, very dark — if the dwarves don’t get it first —”

“Ow!” Valkstae yelped when Kaytoo pinched her waist. The old guard and another looked, and their stares locked on her. Kaytoo’s hands ran down her arms and turned out her wrist with Brumbgawg’s tattoo. She could feel Kaytoo’s grin grow against her ear. The second guard nudged the one, gripping the youngster. Their gaze panned between her face and tattoo as their grins widened and brows rose.

“Brumbgawg?” asked the oldest guard. Kaytoo nodded, and the three guards beamed.

Valkstae noticed Kaytoo’s children’s Hamr had returned, grown thicker, and her Crown was worse. They passed through the town and cut through woods, emerging near a large lone building. Kaytoo immediately stripped but told her to stay dressed. Once naked, Kaytoo slipped in three vragga stingers along the bridge of her nose and metal, three-quarter rings through a nostril, her nipples, and an odd set that splayed her folds. They looked obscene, and she asked why.

“It scares some,” said Kaytoo. “Barbarian, pas’ghey? Un they look like da sex-slaves, so I get more fights to prove I’m Hamr. Pretty, yes?” Her impish expression and stripes’ brief red shimmer said otherwise; she loved antagonizing ut’Kett.

*Taub du'tom jesh ur
baht'sot du un'targ, vamta du'tom,
un pasva du'mon —*

Make yourself vulnerable to
demonstrate your courage, restrain yourself,
and understand others.

They crossed a creek to a well-worn dirt clearing surrounding the old structure. Expanded over centuries, laid atop substantial river stones, stacked ancient tree trunks transitioned to thick planks of newer construction the higher it rose. Every aspect was heavily constructed, able to accommodate even trolls.

The great hall stood perhaps eight or nine warriors at its apex. Antlers of every species graced its front above the deep, building-wide porch that nine thick steps led up to. Every race milled about; most seemed to recognize Kaytoo. Some turned away, elves sneered, and dwarves raised their tankards. Three barbarians raised their kilts and shook their roots while laughing.

A pair of large lupines descended the steps as they went up. “Become a lady yet, Kaytoo? You Hammer slut.”

Kaytoo stepped on his foot, yanking him forward by his belt, and he tumbled to the bottom. “Tom tem always da lady. You sister even say as she lap da goblin mung from my rump.”

They entered chaos through the large doors into a crowded, vast hall. Everyone drank and shouted over others. Two fights were in progress among the people engaged in varied degrees of sex as ribald bouts of laughter and arguments pierced the thrum. Squeals erupted as human, nymph, and cat girls raced to Kaytoo. She kept saying, ‘Tdok,’ yet groped their breasts or bottom and otherwise ignored them.

A table of rangers grasped their tankards as they neared. Kaytoo shoved one off his chair with her foot and snatched a wooden bucket off the table. Spilling most of the black ale over herself, she guzzled

until it was empty and heaved the heavy bucket into an alcove with a crash. “Get out of my booth!”

Kaytoo grabbed her hair and bent Valkstae back upon the rangers’ table, lustily kissing her. She languidly rose and shouted, “*Mmm*, it smells like wildflowers after a mid-summer rain. Be nice with this, Shonaesh. I had to promise Brumbgawg da Beautiful to return her favorite whore undamaged — to borrow it. Brumbgawg called it da Northern Mouse.”

At Kaytoo’s mention of her association with Brumbgawg, the gals around them groaned and moved off. The room grew quieter. Many in the inn leered at her; some even stood for a better look. She turned to ask why Kaytoo had said that, but Kaytoo was gone. At least she had not called her Chipmunk.

“The Northern Mouse?” said a High Elf standing near. “What do you answer to — girl?”

“I — I don’t answer to anyone. I’m not a slave. I’m a provider of comfort. Call me Mouse.”

“Mouse means she sucks cock!” a man balled.

“I do that too,” said Valkstae as she stared at him. “If that’s all it takes.”

A man fell over a table stacked with dirty plates and tankards, shoved by Kaytoo as she strode behind a low wall with a table’s top upon it. She took two bottles and headed to the stairs. Halfway up, Kaytoo stopped and turned back. “Mouse, would you come with me to my room? Please?”

The room silenced as dumbfounded patrons looked back and forth between the pair. Valkstae smiled and joined her. Seemingly vulgar, brutish, and unyielding, with a few simple phrases, Kaytoo had not tested her to watch her fail yet provided her an opportunity to succeed.

To take a stand, show her strength, and prove that Kaytoo, who most believed feared no one, humbled for her and yet was unconcerned with how she might be judged for it.

It struck her as they walked to her quarters; Kaytoo was like the Hamr gods she hated. She was a mother's fury and protection like Holos, Nachtrow's uncompromising defense, and Grothmer standing his lonely watch. Kaytoo possessed Kron and Shona's insightful wisdom, Jacknow's free spirit, and Rottem's hedonistic lust. Creative and constructive like Nicci, she was defiant and resolute as Lorn in battle, yet callously cruel as Barth when something threatened someone she cared for.

Most of all, she was the unassuming teacher like Moragan, filled with Kortme's compassion and love of nature, and though her influence mimicked Wespa's calculated seduction, Kaytoo was the unapologetic manifestation of Herte's wild, incorrigible spirit. There was no room in her soul for Jagdnict.

No, that's wrong. Kaytoo was Kocve' and beautiful. Projecting confidence, as though at ease in all places and situations, around all peoples, yet understanding and balanced. She was Hamr. Valkstae touched her hip. *Always remember — you're Hamr, too.*

In her unconventional way, Kaytoo helped her learn about southern culture over the next ninth. Life in the civilized empire was different. Unlike the bonded community of Toulokk, the forge's indifferent order, or the absolute freedom of the Dachvst's wilderness, nothing here was as it seemed. Scheming dishonesty and the desire for power, wealth, and inconsequential things dominated ut'Kett society.

Money did matter here. No one offered anything she wanted, but whether clothing or an apple, it all required imperial vahts. Kaytoo told her not to worry and revealed what she had secured. Since Valkstae

was more than half as beautiful, in Kaytoo's opinion, it was hers to use as she wished.

Whether her ill manners or immodest lack of clothing, Kaytoo intentionally provoked others' scorn. She would argue and storm out, yet leave her there to explore as the shopkeepers confided in her, now secure and unlikely to be cheated. Only at the inn would Kaytoo let her roam naked, and those times were rare. Though ribald, only a few people were disrespectful.

Brumbgawg had suggested she get a tattoo for others to recognize. Kaytoo refused her request regarding patrons' crests and insignias; one never knew who their enemies were. For her new mark of life, Valkstae chose something Hamr, a trillium bloom like their brands. Spanning from each shoulder and down two-thirds of her back, the three-petaled flower was difficult to miss.

The day finally came when Kaytoo could tolerate civilization no more. She warned her not to defiantly press the imperial ban on prostitution. Never go to the city of Vashte' or other places she named. She had taught what she knew of ut'Kett society, and it was time for Valkstae to find her path. "Take the risk, or there is no reward — and always be Chipmunk."

There was no long goodbye, though Valkstae had one nagging question. "Did Herte' send you to save me that first day?"

"No, Chipmunk, she sent me for you to save me. I'm her favorite." Kaytoo smiled, took another step, and turned back. "Have faith in yourself, not in the Hamr gods. You saw her. They help no one but themselves. Pes, they do fear Kocve' Hamr and obey them. Someone sent her, maybe Shanee.

"Try not to become bow-legged, Chipmunk, the Northern Mouse of Toulukk, the Dachvst, and Kregdach. Taskmaster of souls, mother

of ten thousand, supreme provider of comfort, and Brumbgawg's avenger." Kaytoo paused and smirked as she walked out.

"Mouse, the half as beautiful; Brumbgawg's favorite, three humps for a vaht. Milker of cows, tree licker, rider of whips, un faerie mung gobbler. Chipmunk the impatient; line them up un push them through; volume whore. Deep forest bumbler who never gets lost, just confused where she is ...," Kaytoo yammered down to the inn as her voice faded.

On her way to the window, Valkstae noticed a diversion Kaytoo had made upon their bed of lush furs. Three leather thongs were bound together — a knot followed by three braids, another knot — twenty-seven braids and nine knots all told. Along with the scent of leather, it smelled like Kaytoo.

Valkstae imagined a story the longer she gripped it. The thongs were Kaytoo and Tycoum with her in the center. Their knots of firm lessons had secured her future, and as they weaved in and out of each other's thoughts and lives, none were ever parted.

Kaytoo was still spewing her list into the clearing. She stopped and looked back. "Ceepe's nemesis, taxer of trolls, smug Eif's humility, Vorka's lament, un anointed by goddesses. Daughter of Shanee un all the Hamr; beloved kin of Tycoum un Kaytoo. Mouse of the Moragan Hamr."

She watched her stride toward the forest, yet Kaytoo slowed, staring at the ground as she followed something. Up on a hill inside the woods, Kaytoo stopped. A large deer tried to rise but faltered. Kaytoo eased toward it and sat. The doe thrashed yet lay its head in her lap as she rocked and stroked it. After a while, Kaytoo's head lowered, and she slid out from under the deer.

An elk's lonesome bugle sounded. It stood on a nearby hill, a

mighty crown of antlers atop its coal-black head and muscled body; Shoustvar, the spirit black elk, sentinel and protector of those who dwelled in harmony within the ancient forests. He nodded toward something in the distance. A buck deer deep in the rut inattentively sniffed the air. Young, healthy, and well-sized, his tender meat would be sweet, and his antlers make a magnificent trophy.

Kaytoo glared at Shoustvar and spat. She thrust her crooked fingers into the air, turned back around, and sank her knife into the doe's chest. Shoustvar dipped his rack toward the leaves, held his bow, and vanished. The inn, Valkstae guessed, would serve old doe for supper.



Over fifteen winters, Valkstae traveled across the face of Vraste', north and south of Nicci's Wall. She visited every people whose language or culture she had learned of and, along the way, met countless more.

She just visited with people. How it went was determined by what they needed most. Sometimes, it was sex. Barbarians and tribal chiefs enjoyed ribald orgies; they roared as they bragged and, amid the chaos, whispered to her. Nobles preferred the solitude of chambers or gardens away from their court. Common peoples sought intimate moments to forget life's hardships.

The work most often entailed helping someone harvest crops, dig a ditch, or tan leather and the like as they spoke. Valkstae had rarely worn clothes for years; she was a barbarian, after all. There were conflicts, yet like Gwefolda, her good intentions and an explanation of Hamr customs put people at ease, and most joined her. With the

facade of ut’Kett propriety stripped away, everyone naked as they worked, their interaction’s intimacy was genuine.

Perhaps she was doing it wrong, but vahts were not an issue. It felt crass stating a price — Valkstae never knew ahead of time what help someone really needed — and she never asked for anything after. The wealth still came; patrons felt they had to thank her in the ut’Kett way, and her fortune grew. Like Kaytoo, she had no use for it, though others did, and she was always glad to help as a Kocve’ shem’mon.

Once she became known, violence, slavery, and rape were never a problem. She never threatened anyone with protectors, who she viewed only as patrons — customers in Crown. Peasants to nobles feared Valkstae might no longer work or help others. They all ensured her safety, though she had never asked.

She was most proud of the relationships she improved or mended: between spouses, families, within a community — the interaction of different races and cultures, villages and clans. Even amongst the nobility itself, their battles for territory only harmed the people they ruled over. Whether because of differences in language or culture, helping others to understand one another healed many old wounds.

Patrons always thanked her for her blessing. Women and men experienced renewed vitality, and because of her guidance, they raised their children healthy and strong. She had brought honor to the Hamr, struck fear into their enemies, strengthened alliances, and helped others understand them. Valkstae had become a wealthy, powerful, and influential shem’mon who had helped many people and the Hamr.

It all meant nothing; the world remained the same as it always had. A little gentler or compassionate perhaps, but the ut’Kett never changed. The nobility would never relinquish their power or alter the

means by which they kept it. Valkstae hoped she had made a difference, but she was only one person and the smallest Hamr.

Valkstae and Kaytoo encountered one another here or there, sometimes at the inn. Serious conflicts in her life miraculously resolved themselves, and they crossed paths so often that Valkstae wondered if Kaytoo watched over her from afar. Perhaps in her times of need, someone prayed for Herte' to send Kaytoo, though she never had. Kaytoo only said, "That mung-ditch vexes me," yet otherwise, never answered.

Maybe Kaytoo had infused the braided leather with magic, or perhaps just love and hope. Valkstae had always kept it. In times of indecision, conflict, or joy she had to share, she worked her fingers over every knot and braid. She would note the Kocve' count of three and nine and twenty-seven, think about what weighed on her, and either find her answer or let fate decide, unafraid.

Whenever they met, Kaytoo insisted that Valkstae regale her with her adventures. She would laugh or grow angry, intently considering each tale. Her stripes reddened or swirled if the story excited her, though their magic must have faded recently. The marks ceased moving and faded to amber like a bruise, all but vanishing against her bronzed skin.

While she spoke, Kaytoo would add the new tattoos or piercings Valkstae requested. Kaytoo used to require sex for payment. As the years advanced, Kaytoo's idea of ecstasy was to have her hands or feet rubbed, which she claimed was better than sex.

Kaytoo always demanded to hear her dour'Vraste'. She would try to state a short list, yet Kaytoo wanted it all and remembered everything from the last. Valkstae had three now, though Kaytoo only knew of two. Her secret trials of life, which Kaytoo wanted to hear,

embarrassed her. A long and storied list that far exceeded Kaytoo and Tycoum's combined.

Her introduction, for most people, was reserved. "I am Valkstae, the Northern Mouse. A provider of comfort. Daughter of Shanee. Mouse of the Moragan Hamr."

The most secret one Kaytoo had never heard, she liked best. "I am Mouse. Born of the Ice Dragon, smelted and shaped by Hamr, hardened in the forge, quenched by the glacier, and tempered by Vraste'. A common whore by choice, nothing more. Grateful to Kortme' for all her blessings, peace, love, and beauty. Loving daughter of Kaytoo and Tycoum, born of Shanee. Valkstae, Kocve' and Hamr."

Valkstae had heard the tales from others. Kaytoo had killed the plague-maddened Tomarack Bear, led the Ulunkan clan to end their oppression, drove off the Jardinnian raiders single-handed, and many other adventures she refused to speak of. She never expanded her dour'Vraste' and only added three things since Valkstae had first heard it.

"Faerie loves longing, un I made a god bleed. Maker of whores; Chipmunk's first work. Daughter of Kervesh un Hesme'. Submitted of Tycoum un Valkstae. Kaytoo tem da Moragan Hamr."

After a blissful night asleep in each other's arms, Valkstae told Kaytoo of a new, potential patron.

Six-ninths ago, the new emperor had commanded Valkstae attend to him; she never answered. Without her knowledge, patrons' forces in three locations repelled imperial soldiers sent to forcibly fetch her. He sent a Vorkan detachment the next ninth; Valkstae chuckled — *so many tears*. Threats had reduced to rare gifts, a chest of gems and vahts, and offers of lands and titles.

The emperor finally sent a lone messenger. *The empire has*

fractured, and my kingdom weighs heavily upon me. I seek your counsel. Please visit so I know I am not alone. He had never been so sincere and humble — because he wasn't.

“Tdok —” Kaytoo stifled her objection. Since their first time at the inn, Kaytoo refused to tell Valkstae what to do, even suggesting it. It was Valkstae's path, and she was the expert.

“*Bahh*, do what you want, Chipmunk.” Kaytoo continued. “Da Emperor Korgewrath has grown more cruel and indifferent than when he led the army. He just wants to shove his root — which is no doubt deformed, mushy, un very small — up you backside. Be glad he has no mourkra to torture you with.” Kaytoo paused and smirked. “You will not change da emperor — pes I fear for him. You are a Kocve' Hamr.”

*Pox da do'Hamr þuxva,
un daf tarj'fed una do targza —
Betray a Hamr's trust,
and be shattered by it's assault.*

Valkstae knew Kaytoo was right; all his gifts and words were only enticements to tempt her there. If she could help him understand others and their suffering, perhaps he would recognize empathy, feel remorse, and change the empire for the better. It would be her kefa'sosh'fed, the pinnacle of her life's accomplishments. There was no race of Breed or child of love, peace, and understanding to save Vraste'. How could she resist?

She looked down from the window and chuckled. Kaytoo shoved her way through the detachment of mounted imperial guards, and three fell. Even in summer, Kaytoo wore furs now claiming, ‘De glacier's melt-water runs in my veins.’

Kaytoo had long struggled to walk; her heavy footsteps left deep imprints of her heels and walking staff. Her left arm was rigid, her right foot dragged, and Kaytoo's path had made her old, stretching out her life from one day to the next because her spirit refused to allow Kaytoo to perish.

“*Ahem, Northern Mouse, the emperor —*”

Valkstae silenced the guard's captain with a gesture and looked back at Kaytoo. Shoustvar closely paralleled her, and Valkstae's gaze turned north toward Korvath's cool breath. *Herte', help Tycoum find Kaytoo so they may live out their days together. Wespa fears that I will take her place. Allay her concern. If I am displeased, I will bring peace to Vraste', and all the gods will be forgotten.*

With only Margrouln's knife strapped to her thigh — in case she needed to warm it — and braided thongs in her hand, Valkstae walked out from the inn, naked and unafraid. “Captain, we may go now.”

Submitted and Transcribed by Serranous Flekk
Imperial Ambassador to the Moragan Hammer Barbarian Clan
and scribe in service to:

His Exalted Magnificence, Korgewrath; Divine Emperor Most High
of the Third Continent's Northern & Western Realms;

Northern Wilderness;

Tre Land Bridges & Titled Second Continent Northern Regions;
Elven, Dwarf, & Barbarian Palatinates; Shonaesh Tribal Lands.

Lord Protector of the Imperium; Banisher of Lesser Gods;
Slayer of Dragons; Cleansing Wrath upon mourkra, goblin, & sect;
Most Humble, Sole Chosen Vessel of the civilized
godly hierarchy's will;

All Generous, Life, Mind, & Spirit Patron of the common people.

Hammer insights and proverbs transliterated from
Moragan's Pillar, the teachings of:
Moragan of the North, Moragan of Kvertosh.
Warrior, teacher, and seed of the Hamr;
Founder and builder of Toulokk; Slayer of the ice dragon.
Son of Kron and Shona.
First tier god of Kolumn.



KNOW YOUR HAMMER

“How much farther?”

“We’re passing through Toulokk’s gate now, sire,” someone outside the enclosed carriage responded.

Korgewrath closed the leather-bound folder and noticed an introductory letter he had missed.

Your Majesty;

as requested by Duke Venerrot, Imperial Governor of the Northern Regions, enclosed is the only background information we were able to collect regarding the estimated thirty-nine-year-old courtesan, the Northern Mouse, you have chosen to accompany you.

Her clansmen refer to her as ‘da ut’sot Hamr,’ or the gentlest Hammer, which also translates as the smallest, weakest, and so on. This is the same woman your advisors — in her presence — referred to as, “Nothing more than an ignorant barbarian trollop who can barely speak. Just another inconsequential northern slut,” while discussing the annexation of barbarian regions north of the Dragon’s Spine mountain range and the subjugation of its peoples.

The spine is what her people call Nicci's Wall. She knows it as both. From my experience among her clansmen, I respectfully relay the Moragan Hammer only speak to non-Hammer when they have something of importance to say. They never lie and will never be enslaved. Ask her to state her name and trials of life. She will do so proudly. I beg you to consider the information provided before your journey.

Humbly submitted,

your servant, Serranous Flekk.

Korgewrath's eyes panned across the carriage floor to the lithe bare foot upon it. He traced his gaze up her shin to heavily tattooed thighs and her pierced, coral-pink flower between them. His stare continued over her rose-blushed amber-hued belly, up to her dark pierced nipples, capping modest breasts framed by ornate tattoos that covered her torso, arms, and neck. She swept back her snow-white hair, gazing out the carriage window as the gate's descending portcullis pierced the ground.

Over the last two years, she had filled his thoughts and dreams. Her insights had rapidly expanded and strengthened his kingdom into a flourishing empire. Recently, she convinced him to visit her people since power, strength, and courage impressed them most. She had consumed his every moment in unfettered, libidinous abandon over the two-month journey, and only today did he read the tale.

“Val, tell me your trials of life.”

Her head turned toward him. She spat upon the floor and raised her glacier-blue eyes' gaze until it locked with his own. “Most are inconsequential except the last one, my kefa'sosh'fed. Tom tem da mon tarv'rush-shem'mon, tarjda'fed di tem'moragan'fed'kochtraam.”

Valkstae's seductive pout softened to a modest smile that spread to her eyes. Warriors of a hundred languages revealed themselves and loosed their battle cries roar.

“I am a common whore, destroyer of empires.”

Valkstae had found her true calling.

