

She wasn't sure whether the nature of their laughter became just a tiny bit forced...or whether one of them looked up at her with a hair too much lucidity...but just as they came within arm's reach of her, Nysska realized she had made a terrible error in judgement, and the six men charged against her as one and shoved her through a narrow opening between two buildings—

And out into empty air.

No—it only felt empty for the half a heartbeat before the back of Nysska's head cracked into stone, forcing her chin down to her chest, and in the second half of that heartbeat she landed on her back with an impact that drove the air from her lungs. The sound of metal slamming onto stone rang out from above as a hatch closed off the shaft down which she had just plummeted.

Gasping, chest heaving, Nysska rolled and got up to her hands and knees. She clawed the face scarf and the hood away with one hand and reached for her sword with the other—and grasped nothing. One of the men who'd ambushed her had dragged her sword from its scabbard in the confusion.

Nysska's teeth ground. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* More tears started, burning hotter now that her watersight lids had retracted. How could she have had her head that far up her own ass? Sucking air into her lungs, she got to her feet and turned in a circle, staring hard at everything around her.

She'd landed in some sort of subterranean storage area. From the scuff marks and bolt holes on the stone floor, she guessed it had once housed huge barrels of beer or wine. Now it was simply a large room broken up by stacked-stone support columns every five

meters or so. The thin light from a few sconce-mounted torches didn't reach far enough to show her any of the walls.

"This is what you might call a two-birds-one-stone situation," a deep voice said from somewhere off to her right. Nysska turned to face it, and a tall, thickly muscled man with black skin and black eyes stepped out from behind a column. He wore the same kind of Imperial-surplus leather armor that Hector had in the mine lair. "Decree or not, I'm sure you can guess how the good people of Taurus Hill feel about being asked to tolerate a demon in their presence."

"I don't think I'm in the presence of the *good people* of Taurus Hill," Nysska said. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The tall man made a gesture with one hand, and four more men emerged from the shadows, two to Nysska's left and right, one in front of her, one behind. All of them carried either swords or daggers.

"We want to be left in peace," the tall man said with a smile full of brilliant white teeth. "And we won't be, as long as you're still breathing, isn't that right?"

The man behind Nysska rushed her, coming in with a dagger strike aimed at her kidney, and Nysska pivoted and struck him on the back of the knife hand so that the blade thrust harmlessly past her ribs. The hook-bladed knife had found its way into her hand again, and she dragged it through the skin and tendons and blood vessels of the man's throat and took his dagger away as he collapsed in a gurgling heap.

All three of the remaining men lunged for her at once. No time to assign nicknames—the flood of fire in her veins made Nysska see them not as individual humans, but as an incoming barrage of weapons and targets, of dangers and opportunities. She had

trained for this, just as every sethyd had. But training for situations like these could only take one so far, and though she twisted out of the way of another dagger and ducked under the arc of a sword, the tip of a third blade punched through the bronze-inlaid armor over her thigh and dug into the muscle. Nysska pivoted again, the motion pulling the knife in her thigh out of its wielder's grip, and in a series of fluid movements she buried the dagger she'd taken in the back of one man's neck, hooked the curved blade of her knife into another's guts and sliced up until the blade met his breastbone, and grabbed a sword out of suddenly nerveless fingers. She heard motion, leather on stone, from over her shoulder, and she slipped to the right as another dagger flashed past her ear.

Nysska brought the sword around with both hands. The blade severed the remaining man's forearm and sank into his neck just under his jawbone. She held onto the sword as the man's body dropped to its knees, put a foot on the chest, and pulled the blade free.

The tall man in the leather armor hadn't moved. His grin had grown wider, and to Nysska's pained annoyance, he *applauded*. "That was...that was something else," he said. "Impressive. Truly. Aren't you going to pull that blade out of your leg?"

"No," Nysska said, and started toward him. She liked the weight of the sword she'd taken. She wanted to see how sturdy Imperial armor was without the inlaid bronze strips and thought the sword would make an excellent tool for finding out.

"Ah-ah," the tall man said. "Boys, if you will?"

Shadows writhed around the edges of the room as they disgorged more blade-wielding men. Like the first four she'd killed, they wore simple laborer's clothes typical for Taurus Hill townfolk. Everywhere she looked, another lackey of the tall man stepped out

from behind a column or emerged from some dark corner. They advanced on her from all sides. She counted fifteen, not including their leader.

Nysska let a growl start, down deep inside her. Let it build as it worked its way up from her diaphragm, build as it occupied all the air in her lungs, build as it came up into her windpipe like lava spewing from a volcano. Nysska bared her teeth and let the whites show all the way around the flaring yellow of her irises, and when the breath in her body had reached a crescendo, she *roared*.

The sound exploded through the air like a cataclysmic earthquake, and the men closest to her flinched and staggered back, hands flying to suddenly bleeding ears.

Nysska charged.

She knew the most vulnerable points of the human body. Every sethyd knew, thanks to the same instructors who'd taught them reading and mathematics.

Nysska abandoned any pretense of defending herself, any scant thought of blocking or parrying the blade strikes that came her way. This was about attack. Pure, swift, uncompromising. The sound of her thunderous, crashing footsteps on the basement's stone floor mixed with the dying echoes of her battle cry as her sword found its way to human throats. Stabbed through human eyes. Sought out and opened human arteries in upper arms and upper thighs. She tore a circle through the men, lavishing her attentions on those closest to her first—the ones most dazed by the roar—and along that path of screams and spattering blood, daggers and swords reached out and found her as well.

She lost count of the wounds after the first few seconds. Five? Eight? A dozen? The armor helped, but it couldn't stop an assault from so many, and Nysska felt the lines of agony as they traced across the skin and into the flesh of her calves and shoulders, her back

and her abdomen, but she knew the only way out was through. She knew she had to kill them all as fast as she could if she ever wanted to see the light of day again.

If she ever wanted to see...

A dim, primitive part of Nysska's brain slapped the image front and center.

Survive...for what?

*For Cam.*

Nysska roared again.

It didn't have as great an effect this time, as only the two men closest to her winced and jerked back, but she used those two to carve a hole through the line of bronze blades, getting her feet on dry stone and off the blood-slick killing floor. She had no idea how many men she had gutted, or how many were left, but the fiery agony in her arms and legs and chest and belly poured together and coalesced into a fueling anger. Three men in front of her. A sword thrust—too slow—Nysska's blade whipped down and severed the man's arm at the wrist. Slip to the left, so that the thrust meant to spear her skull only sliced through the skin of her cheek, bring the pommel up into the man's jaw and hear the crunching fracture—drop beneath the stroke of a longsword, roll inside its range, drive the point of her blade up into a groin.

A blow that felt as if it came from the hoof of a bull caught Nysska between the shoulder blades and drove her face-first into the floor.

She rolled, blinking blood out of her eyes, and the massive head of the bronze war hammer that had struck her clanged against the stones. Nysska looked up into the raging black eyes of the tall man, the leader of this band of assassins or thieves or whatever they were, and she thrust out a booted foot and turned his ankle sideways.

He screamed, still upright somehow, and Nysska surged up and took the hammer away from him, but the tall man grabbed a sword from the twitching hand of one of his men. He swung it up and over his head and down, straight at Nysska's skull—

The impact as the blade came to a punishing halt jarred the tall man's hand so badly that he almost let go of the hilt. He staggered, barely stayed upright, and she saw his eyes go wide as he stared at what should have been a head split in half.

The sword had come to rest in the crook of Nysska's left horn.

With a toss of her head, she took the sword out of his grip and sent it clattering into the shadows. Nysska choked up on the war hammer's shaft and brought the heavy bronze head straight up into the tall man's chin. He fell in a heap, silent and motionless.

Nysska tottered, trembling, and when she saw that there were no men left, she slid down to the floor, her back against one of the rough stone columns.

Sometime later—seconds, minutes, there was no way to tell—she heard a metallic bang and the creak of rusty hinges, followed by the patter of quick, light footsteps. “Nysska! Nysska, how badly are you hurt? How can I help?”

She dragged her eyelids open. Cam knelt beside her, her eyes shining silver, and Nysska's heart tripped and stumbled. After a couple of hard swallows, she said, “I don't think they hit...anything important. It's just flesh wounds...a *lot* of flesh wounds...”

Cam scampered over to where Nysska had dropped her cloak and came back, ripping strips off of it. “Let me get your armor off.” Working together, with Nysska moving very slowly, they unbuckled and peeled off the blood-soaked Imperial armor. Cam slid the cut-to-ribbons shirt and camisole off Nysska's torso and wrapped makeshift bandages

around as many lacerations as she could. When she finished, she said, “Come on, we need to get you back to the College.”

Nysska put a hand on her arm. “Just...give me a moment...please.”

“We don’t have any time to waste! I don’t know how many more of them there might be!”

“And I’m not...arguing that. Just let me...catch my breath.” She peered up at Cam’s worried face. “Why are you...using your runes?”

Cam frowned. The silver radiance wasn’t as overwhelming now as when she had used them in Olkoff’s laboratory. “I followed you. Heard you get ambushed, and—heard that—that *sound* you made. I tried to reach you, but when I got to the door it was jammed shut, and the only way I could know what was happening was to *look...*”

Nysska blinked. “You saw me fight.”

The tall man, still laid out nearby, groaned and moved one arm.

Nysska and Cam both looked over at him.

Silent, Cam stood. She picked a blade off the ground, walked over to the tall man, knelt beside him, and cut his throat.

Nysska’s eyes almost left their sockets. “Cam—what—why? Why did you do that?” When Cam didn’t answer, just wiped the knife on the tall man’s armor and dropped it, Nysska said, “We could’ve questioned him!”

Cam came back and crouched down and looked into Nysska’s yellow eyes with her silver ones, and Nysska had to work to keep breathing.

“Yes. He would have known things. He would have talked about those things. That’s why he had to die.” Nysska shook her head, no words coming to her, so Cam went on.

“Nysska, I *did* see you fight. I saw you kill nineteen men. *By yourself*. I didn’t know you could do that. I didn’t know anyone anywhere could do that. But now I do know, and so did he.”

When Nysska still didn’t speak, Cam went on. “Can all sethyds fight like that? No no, don’t try to tell me, because it doesn’t matter. The *second* word of what you did here got out to the public, my people would rise up and *kill you*. You can take out nineteen men, yes, but can you beat a hundred? A thousand? Because that’s what they’d send. However many it took. And once you’re dead, they’ll bring together an army of soldiers with argonium runes in their muscles, and they’ll go to the Crag, and it’ll be genocide.” She paused. “The way you fought, Nysska...the way you moved...you killed all these men, and it’s left you with nothing more than a bunch of bad scratches. I’ve never seen anything like it. *No one else can know*. Do you understand? Say it.”

Nysska’s head had tilted back until it rested against the column. With her eyes closed, she said, “I understand.”