

Tower of the Forgotten

Tainted Chabal, prequel

by Mitchell Hogan, ...

Published: 2017

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



Sometime before the events of Revenant Winds...

Niklaus du Plessis squinted, his eyes swiftly adjusting to the darkness after the glare of the midday sun. Inside the building, which was dark and dingy

from boarded-up windows, the details swam into sharp relief. His keen sight was unnatural. A gift of hers, since he'd agreed to do her bidding so long ago. Slivers of light came through the gaps in the boards covering the windows, illuminating dust particles in the air. The air smelled of the sea and fish this close to the port.

He took a few steps inside, noting the floor was almost spotless—a strange fact for an apparently abandoned warehouse in the industrial district of Riem. But he knew it wasn't altogether abandoned, as he'd traded one of his last gems to meet a noted swordsman here and prevail on him for a few hours' tutelage. Niklaus's sword work was getting a little rusty, and that was one thing he couldn't allow—he could be assigned a new mission at any moment and had to be prepared for any contingency.

Timber creaked somewhere to his left. Niklaus scanned the room, the floor of which was covered with stacked crates and barrels, along with patches of dry and soaked rags, sand, and what looked to be a shiny patch of oil. All designed to make footing variable and difficult.

Another creak of wood, this time from the right. Niklaus took a step forward and loosened his swords in their sheaths. His hands clasped their sea-ray-skin-covered hilts, which ensured a secure grip even when damp.

He glided another step, this time to his left, making sure he still had room to draw. He thought for a moment, then drew both blades and unbuckled his sword belt, letting it slip to the floor with a clunk.

As he did, he glanced down. When he looked back up, steel flashed toward him. Niklaus swayed back, all he could do, and realized it wasn't a sword blade but a throwing knife—and more followed. One sliced a shallow gash along his upper arm, and another cut through his pants at the knee before thudding into the wall behind him. He threw himself to the floor, rolled behind a stack of crates, then leaped to his feet.

Silence greeted him, only broken by the sound of his own breathing and his pounding heart. An inch to the left and his knee would have been taken out. And there was no recovering from a blade or an arrow to the knee. If you were put down that way, you were down for good. He hadn't expected the thrown weapons, but he should have. The agent he'd paid to arrange this had said the swordsman's condition was there were no rules: he didn't want to waste his time playing with brats. Niklaus had been reluctant, but he needed to be tested by the best. He didn't even know who he'd be facing—only that it would be one of the finest swordsmen in Riem. The best in the Pristart Combine, if you believed the agent and the exorbitant fee.

The humming buzz of another knife sailed past his position and thumped into something wooden. Niklaus didn't spare it a glance. He gripped both swords tighter and breathed a prayer to his goddess, Sylva. She never answered, but then again he never expected her to. If he couldn't survive on his own, with the talents she'd given him, then what use was he?

Niklaus ducked low and rushed toward a patch of deep shadow next to a canvas-covered stack of crates. Another knife whistled past. He ignored it. Instead of stopping behind his new cover, he held both blades in one hand and climbed the stack, using the thick ropes that tied down the crates as foot- and handholds. Once he reached the top, he pressed himself flat and waited a few breaths before

taking his short blade in his other hand again and squirming quietly to the edge. Dust from his movements filled his nostrils, and he stifled a sneeze.

Not many warriors would give up the sure footing and stability of the ground for a higher vantage and its added restrictions. And no decent swordsman would. At least, none from these parts.

Footsteps sounded. Swift and quiet, someone who was familiar with the layout of the building and its contents. No one would move that quickly unless they were. Or unless they could see well in the shadows, as Niklaus could.

He peered over the edge of the canvas, searching for any movement.

Cloth scraped against rough wood. There, to his right. There was a hiss of indrawn breath, as if someone had expected to find Niklaus where he wasn't. Then there was silence.

Niklaus counted his breaths, five, ten, fifteen, and still there was no sound.

Across from him, at almost the same height, was another pile of crates. It was a short leap if he was standing, but he'd give himself away with the noises he'd make if he tried. Just beyond it was...

Dark-clad shapes watched from a platform set along one wall, ten feet from the ground. They were leaning forward, squinting in the darkness... and many were young. Students, then. These fools had turned the fight Niklaus had paid for into a spectator sport. And if there was one thing he didn't do, it was fight for the amusement of others.

Without another thought he rolled over the edge and fell to the ground, twisting as he did so to land on his feet. Dust followed him, filling the air, and he glided a few steps away to move out of the cloud. He bared his teeth, hands clenched tight.

He'd parted with one of his last gems for this—a sapphire from an old barrow near Atya, thousands of miles away across the Simorga Sea—and he was being played for a fool. But more importantly, he needed to keep a low profile. If his next assignment required anonymity, that advantage had been destroyed. Word of this fight would snake through the martial elements of the city, as such events always did, along with his description.

His hot rage subsided, to be replaced with a cold, hard anger.

“Come out!” Niklaus shouted. “No more hiding. Come out and face me!”

A shadow beside a pillar moved, materializing into a hulking man. “Shadows are not to everyone's taste,” he bellowed. “But I thought you wanted a test. I am Draglor, warrior without peer, breaker of men, and you *will* yield to me.”

“I was assured this would be a discreet training session.”

A sneer twisted Draglor's lips. “This is discreet. If this were a fight worth watching, there'd be a real crowd.” He shook his left hand then rolled what sounded like a rock toward Niklaus.

When it began to glow, Niklaus realized it was an alchemical globe. He let it pass and it came to rest against a wooden box. Its illumination grew until it reached the brightness of a few candles. Enough for the spectators to see the fight clearly.

Draglor was a barbarian from the far south, but totally unlike the laughing and generous men Niklaus had seen on his travels. His face was grim and scowling, as if the world had wronged him and he would forever carry a grudge. A mane of coarse black hair hung down to his shoulders, and his massive body was clad in

boots and tight-fitting pants and shirt, as if he wanted everyone to admire his physique. He could see why many thought the barbarian was one of the greatest swordsmen in Riem and sent their sons and daughters to train with him.

Draglor was overdeveloped to the point of being a grotesque parody of manhood, and he was a full head taller than Niklaus. Merely from the movements he'd seen, Niklaus knew he was also quick and deadly.

But the difference between them was that Draglor assumed he couldn't be bested, while Niklaus realized there was always someone better than you and strove to improve his skills through challenge and training.

"If it's a straight-up fight you want," rumbled Draglor, "then I will oblige you."

Niklaus glanced at the heavy blade in Draglor's right hand and the shorter one he'd just drawn in his left. He swallowed, despite his confidence. Both were wickedly sharp, and Niklaus wasn't wearing armor. Then again, neither was Draglor, and his muscles were just so much meat to be carved. One slip from either of them and it would all be over.

Niklaus felt sure Draglor would make a mistake, or at least pretend to. He'd take Niklaus's coin and carve him up as an example to his students, as a warning to rivals, and as an advertisement for his business.

Niklaus's stylized way of fighting wasn't known in these parts. Indeed, it had been lost over the centuries. But it had a clear purpose. Accuracy over strength, swiftness over brute force, and above all, a grace that took decades to master.

He needed to be at his best, to enter the flow where he did not fear death.

Cease worrying about what Draglor can and can't do, Niklaus admonished himself and closed the gap between them.

Steel rang as their blades crossed, before parting with a scrape. A tentative probing only, from them both. Niklaus's eyes narrowed. He'd expected Draglor to launch an all-out attack with that heavy blade of his. The fact he hadn't meant he wasn't just a brute, he was a thoughtful brute. The worst kind.

Draglor struck suddenly, faster than Niklaus thought he could wield the thick weapon. A slice toward his face, but Niklaus sidestepped as fast as the beat of a finch's wing, letting the blade pass through the space his head had just vacated. An elegant move, just enough to avoid the sword with disdainful ease. He kept his own blade down, not bothering to parry.

Hisses of approval at Niklaus's move rose from the onlookers. Draglor's face reddened; then he sneered. His eyes twitched, betraying his unease.

But Niklaus watched, sizing up his opponent even as he moved aside. Going for a quick victory here would be foolhardy, a way of risking his own death.

Draglor arrested his swing, jerking his blade out of its swoop, and Niklaus's question had an answer. The man's heavy blade was no impediment. Even with the extraneous weight, he was fast. Very fast.

With a grunt, Niklaus backhanded a cut at Draglor's arm and was parried, both swords ringing. They traded blows—Draglor a slash at Niklaus's thigh, Niklaus a slice toward the barbarian's groin—both deflected, sparks flying in the dim light.

Niklaus thrust and was deflected. He spun and back-slashed another cut, which was blocked. Draglor had stepped close and hammered an elbow at Niklaus. He only just managed to turn his head, but the glancing blow was enough to send

him staggering. Draglor's blade traced a line across Niklaus's side that burned like fire.

Niklaus darted away, cursing, and created space between them. Luckily, the cut to his ribs was shallow and not debilitating.

The barbarian was good. Very good, if Niklaus was honest. And his muscled bulk would cause many an opponent to be overly cautious. But his technique lacked subtlety. He'd had excellent training, of that there was no doubt. Nonetheless, his methods bore the remnants of learning from the violent struggles of experience, where failure meant death or serious injury. Draglor's style lacked precision and he reacted viciously, whereas a true master swordsman had to be dispassionate when he fought. And when your opponent let emotion into their swordplay, there were always gaps to exploit...

They circled each other in a brief pause, feet scuffing on the floor, their breath the loudest sound in the large room.

Niklaus didn't wait for Draglor to attack. Instead, he launched a flurry of blows at the giant: vicious cuts and lunges designed to make Draglor parry wildly. Their swords clashed a dozen times with blinding speed, shining arcs of steel, blurred blades with enough force to sever limbs. Niklaus pressed forward, pushing Draglor back, the giant yielding ground at every strike.

With a shift to his left, Niklaus executed another lunge, but this time he left an opening.

Which Draglor took. A desperate slash at Niklaus's shoulder.

Niklaus ducked under the wild swing, thrust low and hard, and pierced Draglor's thigh. Despite the pain, the barbarian countered by hammering the pommel of his short sword toward Niklaus's head. Niklaus jerked out of the way and sliced sideways, filleting half the muscle from the bone. Draglor screamed, dropping both blades and clutching his leg in an attempt to hold it together, while Niklaus slid a graceful turn, sweeping his sword up to rest in a high guard, the hilt at a level with his eyes, tip extended toward the ceiling. Blood splattered across the floor.

Draglor screeched. Spectators shouted in dismay and rage. Boots stamped as the men and women rushed to ladders and descended to their teacher's aid. Niklaus paused, nostrils flaring as he breathed, then brought his blade whirring down. He stopped the edge a hair's breadth from Draglor's neck. The barbarian flinched, slumped to the floor, blood-soaked hands still holding his own thigh muscle.

It was a mistake, Niklaus realized, to have come here. But he had to keep his sword skills sharp, and the only way to do that was to face skilled warriors.

"I hope your students enjoyed the show." He turned to retrieve his sword belt, leaving Draglor writhing in a pool of his own blood.

Word would spread from this. There would be repercussions. More swordsmen would come to face him. Maybe he would be defeated. Maybe he would die. But he'd made his peace with that fact long, long ago. To remain in his goddess's service, to have a chance at joining her, he'd made a sacrifice of his life.

“So you think you need to be a skilled swordsman to outwit death?” asked the aging noble with trembling hands who was sitting across the table from Niklaus.

The man’s eyes flicked left and right. *Trying to gauge the reactions of his friends, as if he’d said something worth considering.* Niklaus hadn’t come here for the tedious banter, but to unwind after his fight with Draglor. The cut to Niklaus’s side had been stitched and dressed by a local doctor and shouldn’t bother him.

A bottle-fly crawled across the noble’s shoulder with the self-assured arrogance of an insect that wasn’t afraid of consequences. Or perhaps its brain was so tiny it had no concept of consequences. After all, it had been drawn to the sweet scent of syrupy alcohol surrounding the drinks table. It had no idea the aroma that had drawn it wasn’t its usual fare of flower nectar.

But Niklaus knew about outcomes, and he eyed the bug with no small amount of jealousy. The consequences of him losing the next few hands of cards would be disastrous. Five-hand Malice was usually one of his stronger games, but he’d already lost most of his royals, or whatever they called their bastard currency this far west, where civilization had degraded into constantly bickering independent cities. Talents, that was what they called their minted coins. And for a few moments, despite knowing the name of their currency, Niklaus couldn’t recall where he actually was.

Maybe it’s the drink, he mused, then took another swallow from his glass of Thimble Rum, an expensive brand infused with cinnamon that was apparently all the rage among the wealthy. His glass was much larger than a thimble, though, and this wasn’t his first. He’d stopped counting at five.

“I said,” Niklaus replied slowly, “that it takes a skilled person to do so. A sword helps in certain situations, especially out in the wilderness. But here, where terrors don’t assail you from every direction, perhaps the pen and coins do better.”

The Pristart Combine. That was where he was. In the city of Riem, home of the Arcanum, a prestigious university. Or so he’d been told by almost every one of the citizens he’d spoken with over the last few weeks since his arrival. They had pride in the fact, and goddess knew they had little else to be pleased about. The Combine consisted of around fifteen small countries who seemed to be constantly arguing with each other. Usually it was the good-natured yet slightly cruel bickering of siblings, though sometimes it broke out into open warfare. A few centuries ago they’d managed to agree on a common currency, otherwise living here would be a nightmare, but they’d reached agreement on little else since.

The bottle-fly disappeared behind the man’s neck, and Niklaus raised a hand to rub his own as he felt the ghost of the thing’s legs brush across his skin. Some thought the creatures brought good luck, drawn as they were to sweetness, but bugs were just bugs. People made their own luck, usually with a sword or with coins.

“There are still terrors in the cities,” the noble said primly. “Monsters of a different stripe.”

“Are you going to play or not?” someone said close by. It was the skinny noble who sounded like he spoke with a mouthful of marbles. One of the four strangers Niklaus had found himself playing Five-hand Malice against.

Niklaus stared at the cards in his hand and suppressed a sigh. His luck never seemed to change. Bad before, bad now, and surely bad in the future. He thought about drawing another two cards, but that would cost him more talents, and his fortune probably wouldn't change.

Perhaps this was the price his goddess, Sylva Kalisia, extracted for his service.

The very thought of her drove all others from his head. He examined the exquisite image of her he held in his mind. Long hair and sleek wings as black as a moonless night, penetrating violet eyes, her feral shamelessness that stopped his breath—

“I said—”

“I know what you said,” snarled Niklaus. “And I’m still thinking.”

Blood and damnation, how can I think if I’m constantly interrupted?

There was a deathly silence around the room. The other players, all wealthy merchants and nobles, likely thought he was a rude foreigner. And likely they were right.

He drained the remainder of his Thimble Rum and considered his meager pile of talents on the table in front of him. A few silvers and one gold, with a lone silver royal from the northeast of the continent that had somehow made its way into the pile. When he'd sat down, the gold talents had stacked high.

He glanced up at the other players in the smoke-filled room. He sniffed and wrinkled his nose at the scent of sweat and spirits and smoke, under which there ran an undercurrent of fishiness. That was right, this city was on the ocean, and he hadn't even gone down to the harbor district yet. One seaport was like any other, he figured.

Niklaus's eyes strayed to the merchant who'd won the most coins of the night so far: an overweight man with a pasty complexion and, judging by his clothes, obviously unmarried. No woman of repute would let her husband step out of the house wearing garishly colored silks that only emphasized the girth of his belly. A pointy-nosed merchant with dark brown hair cleared her throat, and Niklaus gave her a glare, which she returned for a moment before sniffing and looking away. Her eyes were lit with contempt. She had taken her fair share of his coins, too. Thought that made her better than him. But she didn't know what he knew: that coins were ephemeral, and the only true power was what you wielded yourself.

There was no point playing for time with a bad hand. You had to know when to cut your losses, whatever the battle.

He threw his cards on the table and stood. Someone sniggered, but Niklaus couldn't work out who it was. He leaned over and picked up his remaining coins slowly, one by one.

“We'll see you tomorrow night, then?” the woman said. “If you can lay your hands on more talents...”

What was her name? Niklaus often couldn't recall names, but faces he never forgot. Deanna? Dana? It was no matter. He'd still be alive long after she faded away. He'd watched a great deal of people age and die, while he stayed the same. Gods had their favorites, no matter what people said.

“Perhaps,” Niklaus replied. He picked up his sword belt from where it had been hanging on his chair, and buckled it about his waist. The motion seemed to calm him, to clear some of the fog in his head caused by the drink and the fumes of the

herbs some of the other players smoked. His hands rested on the pommels of his swords, the familiar feel of his long and short blades comforting.

Without making polite farewells, Niklaus turned and left the room through the heavy curtains that draped the doorway. It was only as he entered the main room of the establishment that he realized how heavy the smoke in the room had been. No wonder his head was spinning. It wasn't the Thimble Rum he'd imbibed. They probably did the same to any foreigners who came here to wager a bit of coin, leaving them befuddled and unable to make rational decisions, all in order to separate them from their hard-earned talents.

Niklaus chuckled. He bore them no ill will. It was an expensive lesson, but he now knew of a soporific herb he hadn't encountered before. A particular precise concoction. And he would be prepared next time.

A long bar stood against one wall, behind which two bare-chested men and a woman in a low-cut shirt served drinks to a raucous crowd. The clamor was loud enough to cover someone screaming murder and it grated on him more than losing at cards. Coin he didn't care about.

Niklaus weaved between tables and headed outside into the cold night. He staggered a few steps before leaning against a brick wall, breathing deeply of the slightly salty air. Down the street someone coughed and hawked, while a babe's faint crying began but was quickly soothed. He fumbled in a pocket for a vial filled with a sickly sweet brown liquid and tossed it back in one gulp. The general antidote should clear his head soon. After almost dying once from a poisoned dagger in the hands of a notorious assassin from the islands of Ak-Settur, he was never without a dose.

A pale light came from the east, and Niklaus realized dawn was almost upon the city. Another night wasted, wondering when he'd be used, praying he'd be up to the task, never knowing if his goddess would finally demand of him a thing for which he was not prepared. He hoped that with every passing day, with every sharpened skill, such a possibility grew less likely.

Early morning workers hurried along the street, paying him no mind. To them he was another drunken noble or merchant who'd been up all night and who did little to earn whatever coins he'd wasted during his revelry. A horse pulling a cart stacked high with potatoes and turnips trundled past, on its way to a market no doubt. From somewhere the scent of freshly baked bread wafted over him, causing his stomach to rumble. Niklaus decided to follow the cart. An early market meant food, and he couldn't remember if he'd eaten last night. His memory was always patchy, but if he was hungry then he needed sustenance.

The cart wheeled along the street for a few blocks before turning into a narrow lane. In the distance, a tower rose high above the city. He recalled having asked a few people about it, but they'd said it was just another temple to a failing god.

A dozen yards before the intersection, Niklaus passed a young girl sitting atop a barrel, cradling a shoddily made basket filled with small loaves topped by speckled chunks of dried fish. A typical breakfast food in the city, Niklaus thought they were horrible. Who ate dried fish so early in the morning? It was no wonder the populous was so ill-tempered.

A carriage pulled by two dappled horses approached the crossroads. It was traveling fast, as if whoever was inside was late for an appointment that their life depended on. The driver stood from his seat, knees bending as he swayed to the carriage's movements, and he flicked a long thin whip across the horses' rumps.

As it rushed past, Niklaus saw the curtains weren't drawn, and he caught a glimpse of a worried-looking pale-faced man with long brown hair tied at the nape of his neck.

The world seemed to slow, and darkness encircled Niklaus's vision until only the man in the carriage was left in his focus. A sound like the flap of great wings reached his ears, along with the scent of leather and musk and spices. His mind swam as his goddess's heady presence inflamed him. Blood pumped to Niklaus's face and groin.

Sylva Kalisia. She's here. Her lips scorched the flesh of his ear, and her hot breath brushed his skin.

"Him," she whispered.

Niklaus couldn't stop himself: he reached for her. But she was already gone, disappearing into the shadows like water soaking into parched earth.

His heart ached in his chest. He stumbled.

Time accelerated. The target's face disappeared as the carriage flashed past along the cobbled street. Niklaus glanced toward the lightening sky, saw nothing, then broke into a sprint behind the carriage. He snatched a loaf from the girl on the barrel and dropped his last remaining gold talent at her feet.

He didn't have much time, or the carriage would pull away and be lost in the streets.

Blood and damnation, I'm going to lose it.

He pumped his legs harder, and as he caught up he leaped, a hand snagging a handle on the back of the carriage, his feet scrabbling for purchase on a footrest. The toes of one boot scraped along the cobbles before he pulled himself up onto the small metal platform designed to be a coachman's stand.

Niklaus glanced behind to see the girl atop the barrel staring at him. He waved and she flashed him a quick smile, one hand shoving the only gold coin she'd likely ever see into the grubby folds of her clothes.

It would do her more good than him. And now his goddess had visited him, however fleetingly, his spirits were improved a hundredfold. Niklaus took a bite of the loaf, ignoring the fishy taste.

Now all he had to do was kill someone.

The pale-faced man in the carriage was a sorcerer. That much Niklaus had been able to determine. Not because of anything he wore or anything he'd done, but from the mere fact that along their harried, bumpy journey through the gray streets of the city, a few men and women had spat and made superstitious warding signs as the carriage passed. Completely useless precautions, of course, but most people were fools.

Their pace slowed as they traveled alongside a mortared stone wall, and Niklaus risked a peek around the side of the carriage. They were headed toward a large wrought-iron gate, and he didn't think he'd escape notice if there were guards

stationed inside. His head had cleared during their journey, though it still remained slightly fuzzy and his mouth felt dry.

He let go and dropped to the ground, making sure to synchronize his gait to the speed of the carriage so he didn't topple to the stones. He slowed his course until the carriage pulled away, then swerved to the other side of the street, which consisted of freshly whitewashed wooden buildings. A number sported signs swinging above doorways, denoting a jeweler, an herbalist, and a purveyor of fine alcoholic beverages.

As he predicted, the carriage stopped at the gates, which opened, before continuing inside. Niklaus could see expansive gardens to either side of a gravel road leading to a white-walled mansion.

Three street urchins wheeling barrows filled with night soil trudged past. Each barrow dribbled a dark liquid that marked their passage and left a fetid stench.

"You there," Niklaus said to the closest, a teenage boy with a wonky eye that looked left instead of straight ahead.

"What do you want? I know a place where you can get a hot breakfast and a hot woman, if you get my—"

Niklaus flicked him a silver talent then instantly regretted it. The boy was so eager for the coin he dropped his barrow, and night soil spilled across the street. His fellows just laughed at him and kept going. The coin, which he'd managed to snatch out of the air, disappeared into a pocket. The boy scowled at Niklaus, then began using a small metal shovel, which had been attached to the side of his barrow, to begin scooping.

"Who lives over there?" Niklaus said, pointing.

"A damned sorcerer, that's who." The boy used his spare hand to help scrape up the mess, and Niklaus grimaced in distaste.

Good. There had been a chance the man was visiting someone instead of coming home, which would have meant Niklaus waiting around before following him somewhere else.

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. Ask one of the guards. All we know is he's a sorcerer. And that's enough for us."

He wouldn't get much information out of questioning commoners like this lad. The boy was right: he needed to ask people who'd know more than next to nothing.

Niklaus jerked his head down the street. "Thank you, that's all I need."

"Maybe the shopkeepers'll know more." The boy pointed out some nearby stores. "The sorcerer buys things there sometimes, so I heard." He lifted his barrow and trotted away.

A short while later and the last of his coins lighter, Niklaus had information from a couple of shopkeepers that the sorcerer's name was Rakine Johannis, a counselor to the Lord Protector Damjan, ruler of Riem. He was a master at the Arcanum University and a widower whose wife had died under suspicious circumstances a few years ago. Suspicious due to the fact that one of the servants had sworn she'd been violently killed late one night, before the servant himself had been found floating facedown in the harbor shortly afterward. The official cause of the wife's death was lung fever brought on by a damp winter.

Niklaus didn't know what Rakine was about or why he'd been chosen to die, and he didn't really care. What he *needed* to do was please his goddess. His pact with her demanded no less, though the details of what he'd agreed to had become fuzzy over the years. What he did know was that she was his life, his soul, and one day they would be together.

And woe betide anyone who had the ill fortune to come between him and that destiny.

"One sorcerer," read Niklaus, "is worth a thousand warriors. Or so General Vael repeats to his advisors. They mutter among themselves, but none of them says a word. I know he speaks true, but then it depends on the warriors, does it not? The general puts too great a faith in his sorcerers and not enough in his troops, who grow uneasy. Perhaps I am meant to assassinate him, or perhaps kill his advisors, who themselves are beginning to show signs of disquiet. The goddess will show me the way, but it has been months already, serving as bodyguard to the general, and there has been no sign from her."

Niklaus gingerly closed the worn book, taking care with the brittle pages. It was his handwriting and his thoughts, but he couldn't for the life of him remember writing the words, or living the experience. There were gaps in his memory, which he put down to how long he'd served the Lady Sylva Kalisia. There was only so much you could remember. He ran his fingers along the leather spine of the journal before sighing and placing it atop the others inside his satchel. He'd have to make a copy of this one soon. Perhaps that was why they were all in his handwriting. He'd copied them all at one time or another. The problem was, he couldn't remember doing so.

He assumed what was in his journals must be true, if he wrote them, but they had the quality of someone else's dreams.

Built from dark gray-flecked stone, the Church of Sylva Kalisia in Riem looked much like any other Niklaus had seen. Though its entrance doors were wide open, inside was dark and dingy, deliberately so. He would sooner avoid the place if he could, but he was a part of the faith, and with that came certain unavoidable responsibilities. Plus, if he ever needed anything from the priestesses, then he would be wise to keep on their good side.

If they had one.

He ascended the wide steps, and a raven flew past, pursuing an insect that twisted and turned in its flight, attempting to escape the inevitable. Niklaus paused, eyes on the raven, wondering if it signified something. He was always looking for *her* signs.

But his encounters with the goddess had so far been ephemeral. Every time she visited him in his dreams, his desire to see her in the flesh, to join with her, became stronger.

Four guards stationed on either side of the doors watched him without emotion. No doubt they saw many men hesitate before entering, or turn and scurry away. The Church of Sylva Kalisia was mainly for women, and with the goddess's dominion over the moons and pain and suffering, she wasn't exactly a mainstream

deity. But enough worshiped her that the faith hadn't yet disappeared. Perhaps it was her fierce intelligence people admired, or her ruthless cunning?

Inside, the church was a vast, open space. The only light was from the open doors and clerestory windows set just below the ceiling around the room. Each of the windows was barred by a screen of decorative wrought iron. As with all of her churches, human-sized statues lined the walls. Carved from stone and wood, or cast from bronze and other metals, they depicted naked men and women in a variety of poses. The ones that caught Niklaus's attention, as always, were the statues running nails down their bare skin, scoring themselves and drawing blood.

This church was different, though: there were cobwebs in the corners and dirt underfoot, tracked in by worshipers. A marked difference to the cleanliness he usually encountered. And the stepped offering pyramid in the center of the room was crafted from wood, not stone. At twice his height, each level was filled with various offerings to the goddess: dried fruit and meats from the poorer worshipers, coins and valuables from the wealthy. But the coins were mostly copper, and the jewelry was cheap. It seemed this church had come upon lean times.

A few novices in rough-spun woolen robes, all young girls, swept the floor and dusted the statues. Worshipers knelt and sat around the offering steps, chanting prayers and asking for the goddess knew what. Likely a curse on a neighbor for some imagined slight, or for their daughter to find a good husband.

He strolled over to a corner, intending to sit and wait, but saw it contained a pile of dusty bones as high as his knees. Niklaus had visited many of the Lady's churches, and this was the first time he had seen such a thing. Finding a less dusty spot against a wall close by, he sat between two of the statues. He adjusted his sheathed swords until he was comfortable.

No one bothered him for a while. No novice asked him his business. No priestess came to beg an offering. They knew he was there. They knew what he was, even though he'd never visited the church previously. Their matriarch would have been told, and she'd have relayed word down to her priestesses.

Eventually, an elderly priestess clad in a black dress and silver belt approached. Hawk-nosed, she wasn't as old as she at first seemed. Deep crow's-feet fanned from the corners of her eyes, which were clear and sharp. As Niklaus would expect from someone who had risen to the position of matriarch.

She stopped a few paces from Niklaus and bowed low. When she did, one of the novices gasped, and they all stopped to stare.

"I'm Matriarch Yolandi," the woman said.

As with every other matriarch or high priestess Niklaus had met, her voice was raspy, as if she'd damaged her throat and the wound had scarred. Curiously, he'd once heard a woman outside of the church who'd sounded the same. She'd been tortured for weeks and her voice had been permanently torn from her constant screams.

"I was told you were here in Riem," she continued. "A few weeks ago, in fact. Why didn't you come here sooner?"

Uncowed, Niklaus met her gaze and let her comment slide. She was the same as all the other priestesses: they were in awe of him yet hated the fact he wasn't theirs to control. He answered only to the goddess. That didn't stop them from trying to influence or intimidate him though.

Niklaus rose to his feet, shrugging his shoulders to loosen them. "I serve the Lady, not the Church."

"They are one and the same."

"Not to me."

Matriarch Yolandi's jaw worked, as if she was grinding her teeth. She stood there for a few moments glaring at him, but then her expression softened. "Maybe you're right. I haven't met her Chosen Sword before. One of my predecessors did. She wrote of it in her journal. A man whose description is remarkably similar to yours."

"I have some questions I'd like answers to," Niklaus said.

"Don't we all? I'll do my best. Is this all you're here for? There's something I'd like you to take care of. A merchant has—"

"In due time. I have a more pressing matter. *She* has spoken to me. *She* has marked a man."

A hiss came from Yolandi, a rush of indrawn breath between her teeth. "Who?"

"A sorcerer. A man named Rakine Johannis."

The matriarch's face fell. Her fingers sought the hem of a sleeve and she worried at it. Niklaus saw her hands were covered with scars, as if someone regularly cut lines into her skin with a sharp blade. "Then you have a problem. He's Tainted Cabal, and has dealings with the Twisted Rune."

"Blood and damnation," Niklaus swore under his breath. Tainted Cabal... that made his task much more complicated. But the goddess wouldn't ask this of him unless she knew he'd succeed. Would she? "I'll put him down like anyone else. I've gone up against sorcerers before."

"Not like this one you haven't. He's no low-level follower. Rakine is one of their leaders. And the rumors are their top men and women are part demon."

"Are the whispers of his dealings with the Twisted Rune true?"

"We hear things... maybe." Yolandi turned her back to him, as if the conversation were distasteful to her. She made a show of watching the novices go about their duties.

"Are they true?" pressed Niklaus. Sorcerers were hard to kill, and he couldn't afford to be blindsided by a lack of information. The Twisted Rune sorcerers were bad enough—powerful men and women who prolonged their lives through arcane practices—but the Tainted Cabal were another level of malevolence, fanatics who knew no rules, brooked no dissent.

Yolandi sighed. "Yes. Though they steer clear of each other for the most part. In our histories, we have had a few encounters with the leaders of the Tainted Cabal. And some of them definitely had powers different to sorcery. It has been surmised that the descendants of demons often have talents that normal humans do not."

"Such as?" He recalled a few passages in his journals that covered the talents of the Tainted Cabal sorcerers. Glamours and preternatural senses, the skill to reflect sorcery back onto its creator, the ability to remain unnoticed, even in a crowd.

"One priestess tells of how a Tainted Cabal sorcerer could sense when danger was close by. Another of enigmatic sorcery a woman could use to enchant others."

"I'll just have to be extra careful, then."

Yolandi shook her head and brought a finger to her cheek. “We have some sorcerous devices we’ll give you. They should help in getting past sorcerous wards; we have one that will conceal you from detection. I’ll authorize their release to you.”

“Good.”

The matriarch turned and met Niklaus’s gaze. “And I’ll assign a high priestess to assist you. The goddess gives us great power to use as we see fit.”

Niklaus stood slowly then rubbed the back of his neck. “I work alone. I find others only hinder my progress.”

Yolandi glared at him, and Niklaus realized she’d probably not been denied in quite a few years. The other priestesses would adhere to her every word. After all, the goddess spoke directly to her.

A pang of jealousy surged through Niklaus at the thought. He quashed it ruthlessly, as he always did. Why the goddess spoke to her priestesses and hardly ever to him was a sore point. She had chosen him above all others. There were many matriarchs but only one Chosen Sword.

“Are you well?” Yolandi asked.

Niklaus realized his hands were clenched into fists and he was breathing hard. With a conscious effort, he spread his fingers and slowed his breaths. “Do not concern yourself with me.”

“We are all of the one faith,” Yolandi said, concern on her face. “If there’s anything I can do to—”

“There’s nothing!” Niklaus snarled. He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I’ll kill Rakine tonight, then leave this city immediately.”

A gasp escaped Yolandi’s lips. “No! You must stay. We—I—have so many questions. Any knowledge of—”

“If Rakine is Tainted Cabal, my returning here will endanger you. Leave a message for me at the Gray Shield Inn, with the name of the favor you require. If I survive and if I’m able, I’ll complete it on my way out.” Niklaus rolled his shoulders and adjusted his sword belt. “I also need some coin.”

“I’ll see to it. And we have a master alchemist in our employ. He might be able to furnish you with a trick or two, in case something goes wrong.”

Niklaus gave Yolandi a respectful nod and made his way across the church to the exit.

He could feel the woman’s eyes on his back as he left, an itch between his shoulder blades, and the feeling followed him for a good few city blocks.

Niklaus made his way to the roof of a building across the street from Rakine Johannis’s mansion. It was an old town hall topped with a bell tower, which had been abandoned. The bell was missing, and the access hole had been boarded up long ago. Now, the timber boards were covered with a mess of birds’ nests and droppings. Sleeping pigeons didn’t stir as Niklaus crept past them and nestled in close to the edge of the roof, with his back resting on the bell tower.

Already the two moons, white Chandra and red Jagonath, were high in the darkening sky, although the edge of the sun had only just touched the horizon. Ideally when hunting sorcerers, you wanted to strike just before sunup or sundown, before they’d been able to replenish their arcane reserves from either

the dawn-tide or dusk-tide—the two forces sorcerers used to power their cants. Even more ideally, you imprisoned them underground where the tides couldn't reach them, until their hoarded power leaked away to nothing. Then you slit their throat.

Three stories below him, Niklaus could see a tall, lean man clad in supple leathers and carrying a longer than usual sword across his back, muttering to himself and scanning the street. He'd followed Niklaus for a few blocks, until Niklaus had ducked into a narrow alley and swiftly clambered up a rickety staircase behind the building and then onto the roof. Smoke poured from two terracotta caps on a nearby chimney, though luckily there was hardly any breeze and it drifted almost straight up.

Another glance toward the street below confirmed the man had given up his chase and was hurrying back the way he'd come. There was a slight chance he'd been sent by Matriarch Yolandi, but it was far more likely he was either a swordsman hired to avenge Draglor, or someone who'd decided to pit his skills against Niklaus's. Word would have spread of Draglor's defeat, and the city's finest warriors would be curious. Some would desire only to meet Niklaus and take his measure, but others wouldn't be satisfied until they'd crossed swords.

Hard leather scuffed against tile, and Niklaus turned his head. A small dark form scampered lightly across the roof, heading toward him. A thief, probably.

The interloper stopped, sensing something was amiss. A thin hood sewn onto a dark gray shirt concealed the thief's features. Niklaus shifted his weight and cleared his throat, making his presence known.

The thief stood still for a few moments before continuing. He perched on the roof's ridge.

"I don't know you," the man said. His voice was high-pitched, as if his balls hadn't yet dropped. He was short and skinny. A youth, then.

"Keep moving," Niklaus said, "or you'll regret getting to know me better."

"That's my spot."

"Not tonight it isn't." If this was the thief's spot, then he'd been casing Rakine Johannis's mansion... Was this good fortune or the goddess's hand? "Wait. I have a few questions."

"Move somewhere else and I'll answer."

"How about a gold talent instead?"

A few moments' hesitation, but when the thief settled into a more comfortable position, Niklaus knew he'd made up his mind.

"Gold first."

Yolandi had been good to her word, and Niklaus had picked up a full purse from her earlier. He fished out a coin and tossed it in the thief's direction, where it was snatched out of the air and then disappeared.

"How long have you been casing the mansion across the street?"

"A few weeks."

Interesting. That was a fair amount of time. Either this young thief had a good deal of patience, or he was part of a team. "Are you going to do the job, or is there a group of you?"

"Not telling."

“Fair enough. Does the good Rakine Johannis have any set appointments? A set time and day he’s always out, or in?”

“What are you planning on doing? I’ve spent a lot of time on this job, and I don’t want it screwed up.”

“You do know Rakine is a sorcerer, don’t you? Also, he’s Tainted Cabal.”

The youth gave an amused chuckle. “You’re kidding me. Tainted Cabal are a myth.”

“If Rakine is robbed, he’ll be able to track down who did it. And that situation won’t have a happy ending. You’ll be feeding the fish in the ocean or worms in someone’s garden. Or maybe you’ll just be used for sorcerous experiments. I hear the Tainted Cabal are always looking for warm bodies to violate.”

“I... no. I didn’t know. Maybe you’re lying so you can steal his valuables yourself.” The young man cursed fervently under his breath. Niklaus could almost feel his frustration. He’d lost weeks of time in an instant, and he was obviously working alone.

“Cut your losses and find another target,” Niklaus warned. “This one will get you killed.”

“Then why are you here, watching? You’re going to kill him, aren’t you? You’re an assassin.”

Niklaus shook his head. “I’m not a simple assassin. And my business is none of yours. I’ve a few more questions, and then you can go home and hug your mother, or your lover if you have one. And you can thank whatever god or goddess you pray to that you met me tonight. If you hadn’t, you’d have met an untimely end.”

“I know more about the mansion and Rakine’s movements than you do,” the thief said. “I could save you a great deal of time if you’ve the coin.”

A smart move. He knew when to quit and worked the angles. “All right. I have another three gold talents with your name on them. But first, do you have any contacts down at the harbor? I’m leaving soon and I need to book passage.”

The thief nodded. “Where to?”

Niklaus thought for a moment. “Anywhere will do. Surprise me.”

In an alley, narrower, darker, and more silent than many others, Niklaus worked his way toward the end, where he could see the wall surrounding the estate of Rakine Johannis. Storied tenements so old they leaned out of true over the alley blocked most of the moonlight, and a thick mist hung upon the city. There was barely a whiff of breeze, ensuring the chilly blanket would remain until morning. At least it would keep most people inside.

He didn’t particularly like dark and dank alleys, but the thief he’d encountered insisted on meeting him here. Niklaus’s boot skidded on something squishy and slick. No, he really didn’t like alleys.

“Psst,” came a whisper.

Niklaus could see the boy clearly, though he was in the deep shadow of a doorway’s recess. In addition to his hood, he now had a cloth covering his face, only leaving his eyes exposed. A sensible precaution.

All this skullduggery didn’t sit well with Niklaus. He preferred direct action, but you always had to be careful when dealing with sorcerers, and especially the Tainted Cabal. Some, the most powerful, were able to breach the veil to the abyss

and bring forth demonic minions to serve them. The only drawback was that demons were sadistic creatures who delighted in inflicting pain and misery upon people in order to sate their inhuman lusts. Only the higher order demons exhibited more complex thought processes, with the demon lords perhaps surpassing even the brightest of scholars.

“All right,” Niklaus said. “Unlock this gate for me, then you can go.”

“I’m coming inside with you,” the thief said.

Niklaus still didn’t know the boy’s name, wasn’t sure he wanted to. It was probably a made-up street moniker anyway. “No, you’re not.”

“I am. I’ve spent far too long on this job to come up empty-handed. I have expenses, you know.”

“Three children and a wife who has a fondness for silks and gaudy jewelry?”

“Something like that.”

The youth was barely old enough to shave, but what did Niklaus care what he spent his coin on? He was stealthy enough and looked to have a decent head on his shoulders. Time wasted arguing was time Rakine had to replenish his powers, or grow suspicious of strange whisperings outside. Eliminating a member of the Tainted Cabal was surely a feat worthy of a visit from his Lady.

“You stay behind me,” Niklaus said. “Remain hidden until I’m done. Then you can take whatever you like, but not before. Got it?”

The thief nodded eagerly. He held out a hand for Niklaus to shake. “We have a deal. I’m Sly Diamond.”

Niklaus couldn’t help himself; he laughed as he shook the boy’s hand. “Did you make that up yourself?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. If you enjoy being laughed at.”

“I like it.”

“It certainly stands out. Well, let’s go.”

Sly stared daggers at Niklaus for a moment then pursed his lips. “There are men looking for you,” he said cautiously. “A green-eyed man with black hair and dusky skin. Wearing two swords, who maimed Draglor in a fight. They say you’re a great swordsman, and many want to test their blades against yours.”

“Fools,” Niklaus said. “Most of them haven’t drawn their swords outside of a training yard. And you can only fight the way you practice.”

“Will you teach me? The streets in Riem are tough to grow up in, and—”

“No.”

“But—”

“I said no.”

Sly glared at him for a few heartbeats, then with exaggerated care slipped from the doorway. “I’ll persuade you,” he said firmly. “I know a place where you can give me lessons. It’s a room off the main sewer, close to the harbor.” He slunk along the wall of the alley.

Niklaus suppressed a sigh but followed. They stopped at the main street and waited until it was clear. Across the cobbles, Niklaus could see a gate set into an opening in the wall, half covered with ivy. It looked like no one used it anymore.

Sly darted across the street with Niklaus hot on his heels. Both of them were able to fit into the door's recess. Sly took a large bottle out of a pocket and poured oil on the hinges and into a padlock.

"Are you sure you have enough?" Niklaus asked dryly.

Sly gave him a blank look. "It's useful for many things."

The gate was secured with a heavy chain. From the stains already on the ground and the gate's iron, he'd obviously done this a few times before in preparation. He then took out a set of lock picks and set to work.

In the street, a cart rumbled past, and from somewhere close by came the sound of a woman's laugh. With the fog, it was difficult to determine the direction of the noise.

"There," Sly said. He jerked the padlock and it clicked open. Both hands on the gate, he moved it slowly back and forth so the oil worked into the hinges. The gate's squeaks quickly diminished.

The boy's thorough and well prepared. I'll give him that. "Tell me, Sly, why are you a thief? A man needs a greater goal than just coin."

"I can tell you didn't grow up poor," the thief said. "There's nothing greater than food when you're starving. What's your purpose, then? Since you obviously don't have to worry about coin."

"I... follow my goddess, the Lady Sylva Kalisia."

"She looks after you?"

"In a fashion. At least I don't want for food or a place to sleep."

"Maybe you can tell me more about her."

"Maybe." Her church didn't often take in boys, or men, but Sly's skills were useful. "Let's go," Niklaus said. He patted his shirt and pockets, checking over his inventory: the amulet and pouch of dust Yolandi had given him, along with two vials of a volatile alchemical mixture.

They entered the estate, and Sly looped the chain through the gate and hooked the padlock through two links. To anyone who happened to examine the gate from outside, it looked locked and secure.

They brushed through leafy plants and raced across a manicured lawn. A peacock cawed, followed by another. The birds were rare in these parts, imported from the jungles in the south at great expense.

"I'm going to own a few of them one day," whispered Sly. "I heard they taste better than chicken."

"A noble goal. Now, show me where the basement entrance is, and then make yourself scarce."

Sly approached the mansion and slunk along the side of the building. He reached a short stone stairway leading down to a green-painted door, and quickly picked the sizable lock. Inside, the basement was empty of servants. A mouse scurried across the floor before disappearing under a table. Ropes of sausages and legs of ham dangled from hooks set into the ceiling. Crates of foodstuffs and barrels of wine lay stacked in orderly piles. Rakine must host a fine party, if the labels on the wine were anything to go by. Along one wall stood a bottle-filled rack, and Niklaus brushed dust off one. Alchemical spirits. Expensive and usually hard to procure.

“They’ll fetch a good price,” said Sly. He took out a sash of bottle sleeves, which he slung around his chest and began filling with a precise selection of small bottles of high-quality and expensive alchemical spirits.

“You’re well prepared. Don’t sell them all. Keep one for yourself. You should partake of the finer things in life when you can.”

“I’ll settle for just surviving,” Sly said softly. “I think you’re lying about the Tainted Cabal. You tried to scare me away. But I don’t scare easily. I was raised in the Shallows. That’s the baddest of the slums here in—”

“Spare me your life story, Sly.”

There were three openings from the basement. One, a narrow passageway, had to lead to the servants’ quarters, and the larger corridor with ascending stairs at the end would lead to the kitchen and dining rooms. A small wooden door with a shiny lock was set into the wall beside the alchemical wines. Niklaus grunted at the sight of the obviously sorcerous lock, and one of Yolandi’s amulets around his neck began to give off warmth, confirming the matriarch’s assertion the sorcerer was Tainted Cabal.

Only Rakine would have a key and be able to breach the sorcerous ward, and he’d visit only when he was sure he’d be undisturbed.

“If we’re in business together, then—”

Niklaus rounded on the thief and poked a finger into his chest. “This is the first and only time we’ll work together, got that? This isn’t a normal break and enter, where you can brag to your friends about your rich score. You keep your mouth shut about this, or you’ll end up dead.”

“I’m not scared.”

“You should be.”

“Why don’t you worry about your own business,” Sly said curtly. “I’ll go about mine and leave when I want to.”

Niklaus grabbed Sly by the arm and dragged him across the room to the small door. The thief struggled but couldn’t break his grip. Niklaus shoved him to the side.

“Watch,” he said, and drew out the wooden amulet. He held it by its chain and dangled it close to the lock. There was a crack like a log splitting in a fire and a flash of red light. The lock then glowed green for an instant, and the amulet crumbled to ash, leaving Niklaus holding an empty chain.

“Sorcery,” whispered Sly.

“If you’d tried to pick the lock, you’d be dead. It’s disarmed now, so go ahead.”

“I’m not touching it.”

“Do it. It’s harmless.” Niklaus poked his finger into the keyhole in demonstration. “Pick the lock.”

Rubbing his arm, Sly frowned then set to the task. In moments, the door opened onto darkness.

“Go inside,” Niklaus said.

“So you can lock me in? No, I won’t do it.”

“You don’t believe me about the Tainted Cabal, that you’ll be in danger. This will change your mind.”

Sly gave him an incredulous look, glanced at the door, then shrugged. "You first." He brought out an alchemical globe and shook it. Its dim light spread across his face.

Niklaus rolled his shoulders and considered grabbing Sly and shoving him inside. But the youth would then be too focused on him and not what was inside. He pushed the door open and strode in, then waited. Sly didn't move for a few moments; then with a frown he entered. When his alchemical globe illuminated the interior, his eyes widened.

A burly man hung upside down from iron hooks set into the ceiling. Rusty iron stuck through his ankles, and his limp hands dangled just above a large porcelain bowl filled with congealed blood. His throat had been cut, and his insides removed through a long incision that ran from his groin to his ribs. In the pale light of the globe, his skin sparkled from a salt rub.

A retching sound came from Sly.

"Don't you puke," Niklaus said. "This is what we're dealing with. The Tainted Cabal eat human flesh, and that's not the worst of their atrocities."

Sly rushed from the room, breathing heavily. He leaned both hands on a table, body trembling. "Why?" he said shakily. "Why would anyone do this?" He grabbed a bottle of the alchemical spirits with trembling hands and broke the wax seal. Sly gulped a mouthful, coughed, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Those that are seduced by the lure of infernal power mimic their masters, the demons. But some, the leaders of the Tainted Cabal, have demon blood themselves. And eventually their demonic desires overcome their human sensibilities. To them, we are only meat."

"We shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here."

"Then go," Niklaus whispered. "I warned you, but you wouldn't listen." Most people never did, until evidence was rammed down their throats. There was so little trust these days.

With the back of his hand, Sly wiped spit from his mouth. He hadn't thrown up, but it had been a close thing. With a horrified glance at the small door, he strode over and clicked it shut. But he was made of sterner stuff than Niklaus had given him credit for, as he squared his shoulders and set his mouth in a determined grimace.

"I'll show you Rakine, as agreed," Sly said. He left the bottle atop a crate.

Niklaus nodded, then followed Sly down the servants' corridor. They soon came to a flight of stairs leading up and ascended as quietly as they could. Even so, one tread creaked under Niklaus's foot and he froze, listening for any sign someone had heard and was coming to investigate. Sly kept moving, as silent as a mouse. The thief scurried along, one shadow among many. He motioned for Niklaus to continue when they reached the ground floor. At the first-floor landing, Sly pointed down the carpeted hallway at the top of the stairs and mouthed, "*This way.*"

Niklaus followed until they reached a set of double doors, which Sly set to picking. When the thief was done, he nodded to Niklaus then moved to another door across the hallway and disappeared inside. Niklaus caught a glimpse of stuffed bookshelves and a large desk piled with papers. Rakine's study, then, and a likely place to find some valuables. Niklaus left Sly to his business and set about his own.

He slipped through the double doors and clicked them shut behind him. Inside, a small room contained two chairs with a round table between them, upon which sat a crystal decanter half-filled with an amber liquid. Two glasses rested next to it, along with a bowl of dried fruit and nuts. Drapes covered an opening, and Niklaus slipped through into the bedroom proper.

An enormous four-poster bed dominated the space, carved with hundreds of human figures in all manner of compromising positions. Chains and whips hung on one wall, along with a number of shiny, sharp instruments.

It seemed Rakine's demonic lusts informed his taste in furnishings and decorations.

Alchemical globes were set into the walls, ensconced in metal clockwork devices that periodically shook them to reactivate their contents.

Rakine himself was fast asleep, snoring like a drunk. And alone, which was a surprise to Niklaus. Perhaps he'd been too exhausted from casting sorceries to sate his lusts tonight. It was then he noticed a brass incense burner on a bedside table, and a familiar scent in the room: the soporific herb he'd been subjected to at the card game. Niklaus backed up a step, found his replenished antidote, and dosed himself, grimacing at the overly sweet taste.

Someone coughed. Not Rakine. *Blood and damnation.*

Niklaus slipped into a shadowy corner just as a curtain moved aside and a naked woman emerged from the privy room. Long blonde hair fell down to the small of her back, while her white skin glistened with oils. She was probably Rakine's latest diversion, but when he tired of her, she'd end up hanging upside down next to the man in his larder.

Niklaus might be able to leave her alive... If she'd been glamoured, though, she'd be a handful to deal with. Humans with a taint of demon blood had diverse powers that came with it, if they learned to control them. The more attractive demons were able to take their natural beauty and spin it into an arcane enchantment that could be used to incite fascination and attraction in their chosen victims. Once, Niklaus himself had almost been killed by one. It was one of the few experiences that had stuck in his memory, though he had no idea when or where it had happened.

She padded across the room, and when she glanced at Rakine, her expression twisted into a sneer. She quickly hid it, though, smoothing her face to an emotionless blank slate.

That answers that...

As quietly as he could, Niklaus moved from the shadows and into the dim light. The woman's breath caught in her throat, and she put one hand to her throat in fright. Niklaus placed a finger against his lips then pointed to a silk robe lying on the floor. She edged toward it, eyes constantly flicking to Rakine and back to Niklaus. Bending over, she slowly picked the robe up and slipped it on, tying the sash around her waist. She stared at him the entire time she covered her nakedness, probably wondering if she'd make it through this night alive. When she finished, she crossed her arms tightly around her, teeth worrying her bottom lip.

Niklaus drew his short sword then pointed the blade toward a large window consisting of tiny panes in a diamond crisscross pattern. She jerked her head in a nod, then moved across the room to the window.

Satisfied she was out of the way and he'd have time if she suddenly decided to attack him, Niklaus padded over to the enormous bed. It sat on a thin rug, which looked cheap compared to the rest of the furnishings in the house.

Rakine snored softly, his chest rising and falling regularly. Niklaus was beginning to think this was all too easy. But sometimes everything just fell into place without hard work or surprises. It happened.

The woman cleared her throat, and when Niklaus glanced at her, she pointed to a spot between him and the bed. A trap, was it? He nodded his thanks, then brought out another artifact Yolandi had given him: a small bag of arcane-infused dust. He tipped the open bag and poured the sparkling yellow powder into his hand. Then with a flick of his wrist he scattered it out over the floor.

It drifted in the air as if swirled around by an unseen wind. Then it sprinkled downward slowly until it revealed a sorcerous emanation, settling into the outline of a square filled with runes. At the base of the bed, right where Niklaus would have to tread to approach Rakine.

Niklaus skirted the glowing dust, sparing the woman a brief smile. She jerked her head in a nod, arms held tight across her chest.

Mouthing a prayer to his goddess, Niklaus climbed onto the bed. His knees sank into the soft mattress. In only a few heartbeats he was poised next to Rakine, blade raised high.

Niklaus plunged it deep into Rakine's chest, piercing his heart.

The sorcerer's eyes opened instantly. One hand twitched. But he died, a soft exhalation leaving his lips before he even recognized what was happening. Niklaus grabbed a handful of silk sheet and wiped his sword clean.

The woman darted for the door, mouthing the word *sorry* just before a metallic click told Niklaus that he was trapped inside. She was either running scared or attempting to alert any guards. No matter, he was confident he'd be able to fight his way through to the street, and from there he'd be able to lose himself in the darkness.

A tingle passed over him, and Niklaus froze in place. Marked. He'd been marked with sorcery somehow. But the sorcerer was dead...

It was then he realized the room had grown perceptibly brighter. Niklaus looked around and saw a glow coming from under the rug.

He sheathed his sword and leaped off the bed, then pulled a section of rug up by a corner. A circle had been carved into the wooden floor, with an inner and outer layer of Skanuric writing.

Blood and damnation. A summoning circle. But he'd checked!

The fact that the summoning circle had been masked by sorcery stronger than what his own senses and Yolandi's artifacts could detect suggested Rakine had access to powers far greater than Niklaus had previously encountered.

Rakine's death had triggered it. No wonder the woman fled from whatever infernal creature was being dragged from the depths of the hells.

The air crackled as the temperature plummeted. Ice crystals formed on the bedposts and atop the carpet covering the summoning circle. A sulfurous stench underlaid with rot invaded Niklaus's nostrils, so strong he almost gagged.

He'd been careless. Too confident in his own abilities to take the proper precautions. Now he'd been marked, and a demon had been set upon him.

He'd probably pay for his cavalier attitude with his own life. Lower level demons weren't hard to kill, but if this was a higher order creature, and it likely was, then he was in deep, deep trouble.

Quickly, Niklaus examined his options. Door or window? Through the door he might have to fight his way past guards and overzealous servants. And although he could, his progress would be delayed and the demon would easily catch him. That wouldn't do. He needed time to think, to assess its abilities, and come up with a plan to defeat it.

Window, then.

He rushed over to it, boots crunching across ice. Unlatched and ajar, it opened onto a fifteen-foot drop down to a flat tiled roof. Beyond that was another drop, the ground obscured by the mist. Niklaus grimaced. It was a good distance to fall without injury, but then it was all in how you landed.

As swiftly as he could, Niklaus rebuckled his sword belt across his back. He couldn't afford for both blades to get in the way, not with a demon after him. As he did, his shadow was thrown into sharp relief when the glow from the circle exploded into brilliance.

With a final quick glance behind him, Niklaus leaped onto the windowsill and jumped.

His stomach rose into his throat—he hated the sensation of falling—then he landed heavily, tiles cracking under his feet. He rolled as best he could with his swords strapped to his back, twisting to his left to avoid breaking the two vials of alchemicals in his pocket that Yolandi had given him. If one broke and its contents reacted with the air, he'd be burned to a crisp.

The slope of the roof was greater than he'd anticipated, and he began sliding toward the edge. He scrambled for purchase, pressing his boots and hands down as hard as he could. One foot jammed against something just over the edge, twisting him to the side. His legs drifted out over open space. He grabbed for something, anything, and his fingers latched onto a section of gutter. Niklaus held on for dear life as first his stomach and then his chest slid off the roof.

With an audible creak, the gutter held.

A crack split the air as the window above him exploded outward. Shards of glass rained down on him, and he averted his eyes. Below, another fifteen-foot drop beckoned. Something keened from inside Rakine's bedroom, a screeching wail that pierced his eardrums.

Without another thought, Niklaus let go. He landed better this time, executing another roll, then sprinted across a courtyard in the blink of an eye.

The sound of breaking tiles came from behind him as something large landed on the roof.

Niklaus ran. He didn't look back; he just ran. He leaped over a low hedge, trampled through a flower bed, and then dashed across manicured lawn toward the estate wall.

Blood and damnation, guards. He zigged to his left just as three arrows flew through the fog and struck the ground around him. One more buzzed past Niklaus's head, and he changed direction again. He hoped they would lose sight of him in the darkness. There was no sign of Sly, and he assumed the boy had already run for his life.

The estate wall loomed large, and Niklaus didn't pause. He jumped at the wall and used one foot upon it and his momentum to leap upward. He clutched the brickwork at the top, and jagged spikes set into it pierced his flesh, sending burning pain through his hands. Ignoring the agony, he hauled himself up and threw himself over the other side.

The cobblestones hammered into him, forcing the breath from his body. Niklaus lay there, gasping for a few moments, blood dribbling from his fingers, sweat trickling down his brow. The ground underneath him vibrated in a thudding rhythm... the demon.

Niklaus struggled to his feet, wiped his bloody hands on his pants, and took off running.

Judging from the exploding window and the mass of the fell creature as it ran, it was obviously a greater demon.

A low roar sounded behind him, followed by the crash of falling masonry. A moment later a woman's terrified scream pierced the night. A man shouted something and was abruptly cut off by a wet tearing sound.

Niklaus ducked down a narrow alley, hoping the demon's bulk would force it to take another route, which would slow it down. With the sorcerous tingle he'd felt, the marking, it would always know where he was, so he had no hope of losing the creature in the dark streets.

Water. He needed to find water, and a lot of it. Or a cliff. Demons couldn't swim, as there was no water in their infernal realm, and the impact from a big enough drop would kill all but the greatest of demons.

The harbor was a long way off, and Niklaus wasn't sure he'd make it there before the demon caught him. Yet there was no other choice.

He careened off a wall as he took a corner too fast. His boots splashed through muddy puddles. Rats scampered out of his way. He passed an old man sitting on a step, smoking a pipe, but there was no time or breath to utter a warning.

Sounds of shouting reached him. Then the clang of steel and cries of pain and anguish.

Niklaus drove himself to greater speed, lungs burning in his chest. He abandoned any attempt at stealth, trusting the mental map he'd built up of the city since he'd arrived, choosing the least populated streets and those most difficult for a large creature.

As he did, he ran through his options. All demons were vulnerable to star-metal, but he didn't have a weapon made from it. They could be poisoned, cut, crushed, burned, decapitated... but this one seemed different. He didn't like his chances if he confronted it head-on. He desperately hoped he'd be able to escape the demon's foul lusts, but his prospects weren't good.

Moments after hearing thick timbers cracking like twigs and a rumble from a throat too big to be anything but the demon, Niklaus tripped over an abandoned broken crate in the street. He threw his hands out and a sharp jolt coursed through him as he landed heavily. Dirt and street slime soiled his pants and shirt and left a trail on one side of his face. It stank appallingly, as if the night-soil bearers had dribbled their load onto the cobblestones. If any got into the wounds on his hands, he'd be in trouble. If he survived.

Another shadow in the night joined him: Sly Diamond. "This way!" he hissed.

“Stay away from me!” Niklaus stumbled to his feet and kept running. Sly scurried alongside him.

“What in the hells is that?” said Sly.

“Just run!” Niklaus shouted. “And get away from me. It’s after me alone.” He shoved Sly’s shoulder, sending the thief stumbling to the side.

“Tell that to the people it’s already mashed! I saw it! The thing’s covered with gray scales and has orange eyes, and you should see its fangs! As long as daggers! How do we stop it?”

Niklaus gasped for breath, mouth dry and chest burning. He took a left turn at a red-brick building. “Where were its horns?”

“What?”

“Its horns. How many and where?” Niklaus struggled to remember what he’d read from his journals on the hierarchy of demons. The problem was, there were many layers to the abyss and the hells, and no one had cataloged all the types. Maybe the Tainted Cabal had.

“Some coming from its back and shoulders,” said Sly.

He wasn’t out of breath. *Bastard*. “Any others?”

“Two twisted ones on its head.”

Damnation. “How long were they? What shape?” The road they were on ended at a T-junction. Niklaus took the street on the right.

“About my arm’s length,” replied Sly. “Twisted, but not like a ram’s, more like an antelope’s. They were thin.”

Niklaus slowed to a brisk walk to try to catch his breath. He glanced behind him. There was no sign of the demon, but he wasn’t fooled. There was no way he’d lost it. Maybe it had tired of barging through houses on either side of narrow streets and alleys and was circling around.

Thin horns, only slightly twisted. “How tall was it?”

Sly’s brow furrowed. “Eleven feet.”

Bloody hells. “How far are we from the harbor?”

“Two and a half miles. We can try to catch a carriage, which would be quickest.” His eyes took in the state of Niklaus’s clothes. “But you’re not looking presentable, so we mightn’t—”

“I get it.” It was too far to run. “What about any cliffs? Are there any close by?”

“There’s the sea cliffs down by the harbor, but they’re—”

“Too far,” cursed Niklaus. He couldn’t fail. He wouldn’t let himself. Sylva Kalisia had given him a mission, which he’d fulfilled, but he needed to stay alive. How else would he find a way to join her... to partake of her promise to him? He had no desire to become a dead suitor, and he wanted so much more than that. He desired to both serve and to be her equal.

He dimly became aware of Sly shouting at him, tugging at his sleeve.

“What?” snarled Niklaus.

“You drifted off. There’s the Tower of the Forgotten. It’s an old place of worship and ritual, and it’s not far from here, but—”

“How high is it? As high as Shadow-Wraith Tower? We need something at least that tall.”

Sly’s eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “Where are you from? Shadow-Wraith Tower is a myth; no one’s seen it.”

“Is it?” Niklaus’s memory might have been fuzzy and full of holes, but he did remember seeing the tower, and only a few years ago. “Well, how high is the Tower of the Forgotten?”

“Three hundred and forty-seven feet. A scholar measured it once, but I’ve never climbed it myself.”

“Then we go there. Which way?”

“Follow me. It’s—”

Bricks exploded over them both as the wall beside them blasted outward. A force slammed into Niklaus, sending him tumbling across the cobblestones. Sharp pain erupted from his side as he rolled; then he hammered into the wall on the other side of the street.

He coughed as he breathed in dust, then blinked furiously, trying to clear his eyes. A deep thrum sounded from elephantine lungs, not unlike a beast’s growl. A dust-covered form beside him stirred, and fragments of brick tumbled to the ground from the body: Sly.

A massive shape moved in the cloud of dust eddying in the street. Niklaus caught a glimpse of boulder-like shoulders and spiked horns. Then an immense roar split the night, so loud it shook his eardrums. The air swirled, and the demon’s putrid breath almost made him gag.

Niklaus grabbed Sly by the arm and hauled him upright. The boy’s eyes had a dazed look, and a gash along one cheek leaked crimson.

A group of drunken revelers rushed onto the scene, looking askance at them and their bedraggled appearance.

“You two!” one man shouted, then to his fellows, “Call the City Guard! We’re under attack . . . or something!” He approached Niklaus and Sly, one hand moving to a gaudy-hilted dagger at his belt. He licked his lips, then glanced back toward his friends.

As he turned back to Niklaus and Sly, an immense head emerged from the dust-laden mist. The reveler froze, mouth open, eyes fixed on the demon before him. Before he could move, the demon struck—the slash of a taloned hand. Flesh ripped. Bone cracked. Blood sprayed across the street and over Niklaus and Sly.

An entrance to a narrow alley was ten feet away. It would have to do. He had to put as much distance as possible between him and the city center. The demon would follow him. Niklaus threw one of Sly’s arms around his neck, shoved his shoulder into the thief’s armpit, then half-carried him into the alley. Sly stumbled, but he shook his head and steadied after a few moments.

“Shit, shit,” Sly said. “Are we dead?”

“No, we’re not bloody dead. Keep your feet moving!” The sound of the demon breaking walls and people’s pained screams and shouts of alarm faded gradually as they stumbled along the alley. “We have to keep to narrow streets,” Niklaus told Sly. “It’s the only way we can keep out of its reach until we reach the Tower of the Forgotten.”

“What in the bloody hells are we going to do at the tower?” shouted Sly. “Drop it on the thing?”

Niklaus shouldered Sly off him. If he was well enough to complain, he was well enough to walk by himself. “No, we’re going to push it off. Somehow. Come on, pick up the pace.” He broke into a jog.

“Push it off? Do you realize how stupid that sounds? It’s breaking through brick walls to get to you. Unless...” His eyes narrowed.

Niklaus got the feeling Sly was wondering how to use Niklaus as bait.

They crossed a wider street and were almost trampled by a horse-drawn carriage. The driver hauled on the reins, shouting curses at them.

Niklaus ignored him and ducked into another alley. “Which way?” he hissed.

The thief mumbled something under his breath. Whether a plea or a prayer, Niklaus didn’t know. Sly had wiped at the drops of blood splatter on his face, but only succeeded in streaking red lines across his skin.

Buildings and streets passed in a blurred frenzy. The chill mist swirled constantly around them, and mercifully the roads were relatively empty because of the fog. Sly stumbled and fell to the ground. His chest heaved as he struggled back to his feet. Niklaus urged him to keep moving.

“It’s not far now, is it?” Niklaus asked.

Sly shook his head, too winded to talk. They emerged from another narrow street and Sly stopped. “Here,” he managed to gasp.

Niklaus looked up, but couldn’t see a tower through the dense mist. Ahead of them, though, were large iron-reinforced doors set into a wall of gigantic black stones. At least the demon might not be able to fit through; that was something Niklaus hadn’t thought of.

“They’re locked at night,” said Sly. “The wardens don’t let anyone inside until daybreak.”

Niklaus unbuckled his sword belt and secured it around his hips. He drew his short sword and banged on the doors with the pommel, wincing in pain at his damaged hands. He could hear his hammering echo around a chamber inside.

“What wardens?” he said. “What are they warding? I thought this was a holy place.” He flicked a quick glance behind him. “There’s no sign of the demon... yet, but the mist could hide a herd of elephants.”

“What’s an elephant?”

“Never mind.” Niklaus continued hammering on the doors. “Is there another way in?”

“Only the sewers, if you fancy a dip.”

There was a clunk and the sound of grinding gears. The doors opened a crack, revealing an elderly man with a straggly beard, garbed in a linen smock. He held a candle in one hand and squinted rheumy eyes at them.

“What is the meaning of this?” he sputtered. “This is the Tower of the Forgotten, and—”

As soon as the doors were ajar enough, Niklaus squeezed through them and ushered the old man aside. “Evacuate the tower if you can. There’s a demon on our trail, and it won’t be long until it gets here. Make yourself scarce; otherwise it will kill you.”

Ahead, at the far end of a chamber lined with stone statues, stood a wide staircase. It wound counterclockwise up the base of a cylindrical tower. Niklaus ran toward it, sword still in hand, boots clattering over the marble floor. He didn’t check if Sly followed. From now on, it was up to him to lure the demon to the highest point of the tower and throw it off. An eleven-foot-high horror baying for his blood.

Niklaus heard hurried steps behind him as he ascended the stairs and he gave a wry smile. Sly was brave enough to see this through. Or stupid enough.

Niklaus felt a dark sorcery growing outside the building. He frowned, not sure of what he was sensing through the gifts Sylva had bestowed upon him; then his eyes widened as he realized he'd made a possibly fatal mistake. What he felt was dark, deep, and primal: demon sorcery. The creature wasn't just of a higher order, it was a rarity among its own kind.

If he had his journals, he might be able to... but he didn't, and there was no time anyway.

"Run!" Niklaus shouted to Sly.

Before they'd even raced up half a spiral, a huge crash came from behind them as the sorcery unleashed and the solid wooden door shattered into matchsticks. Splinters and chunks flew through the air, some slamming into the old warden, who cried out in pain and crumpled to the floor.

An immense horned head jutted through the doorway, and massive shoulders slammed into the walls on either side, sending cracks shooting through the stonework. One more heave and blocks tumbled to the ground. The demon was inside. Its orange eyes looked straight at Niklaus, and it bellowed. Scarlet smeared its arms and torso, and blood and viscera dribbled from its mouth. It wiped crimson smears across the floor, and its long gray tongue lapped at the blood.

The warden cried out in fear and disappeared down a side corridor.

Shaking its head as if to clear it of the distraction, the demon whimpered, then turned to regard Niklaus. A faint violet glow covered its skin, which Niklaus recognized as a sorcerous shield.

"I see you," it trumpeted, words malformed by its fanged mouth, but recognizable. "Come here."

"Shit, shit," said Sly.

"Run, you weasel," Niklaus said. "And don't look back." Their blades would be useless against its shield.

As he spoke, the demon leaped. Graceful and lithe as a cat, it bounded across the chamber toward them, blocking any chance they could slip back outside. The only way was up.

Niklaus put on a burst of speed, pumping his legs as fast as he could. Sly caught up and overtook him. The thief's face was pale and sweating, his mouth open in horror.

A quick glance behind confirmed the demon followed, fast, but not as quickly as it had rushed to the base of the stairs. It knew they were trapped. Its giant feet and hands left red smears on the floor and banister—the remains of its unfortunate victims.

"Follow my steps exactly," said Sly as he continued his mad rush upward. The thief sprinted up the shadowy path, avoiding broken stairs, puddles, uneven cracks, reading the terrain at breathtaking speed. Obviously no stranger to fleeing in the dark in fear of his life.

Niklaus's thighs began to burn, along with his lungs and throat. How high had they come? How much farther until they reached the top? It was their only chance to lure the demon over the side of the tower to its death, but it was lightning quick, and he couldn't see a way to—

“Niklaus!” yelled Sly.

A whuff of fetid air gushed over them, stinking of sulfur and decayed meat. Niklaus reached for one of the vials in his pocket—and to his dismay found only one. He cursed. The other must have dropped out earlier. He had asked Matriarch Yolandi for more, but stable formulations were rare and expensive, and she’d already given him the last of her personal stash.

Niklaus turned just as the demon’s burst of speed brought it within striking distance. He flung the vial and it shattered on the step at the creature’s feet. Niklaus squeezed his eyes shut and covered his face with his arm.

The demon roared with pain as the stairwell filled with blinding light and intense heat. Niklaus jerked his head away from the alchemical reaction, stumbled and slammed his knee against the edge of a step. A sharp agony erupted in the joint, and he staggered away from the heat. Sly grabbed his arm and dragged him up, away from the bellowing demon.

Niklaus ran as best he could, his injured knee sending shooting pain through his leg. A few breaths later he couldn’t feel the heat from the alchemicals anymore, but his knee felt as if it were on fire. Only a faint light filtered up from below now, and they were shrouded in shadow.

“It’s not far,” Sly gasped. “One more flight.”

“I thought you’d never been here before.”

“I’ve been counting the steps and the windows. As agreed, I got you to the top. Now keep your side up and get rid of the demon. Think you can?”

“This isn’t my first demon, boy.”

“That wasn’t a yes.”

Niklaus’s plan required the second, now missing, vial. Maybe if he could anger the demon, force it not to think clearly, he might be able to goad it into charging. “I’ll think of something.”

“Shit.”

“Save your breath.”

Very quickly they heard the demon’s thudding strides and felt the stairs vibrating underfoot as it resumed its chase.

“There!” Sly said.

Up ahead, the stairs ended at a dark square. Pale light from the moon Chandra limned the opening, as if beckoning them toward it. Now all they had to do was reach it alive.

Niklaus continued to climb, his senses attuned to what was behind him as the demon closed the gap between them with alarming swiftness. If he didn’t come up with another plan, the demon would slaughter him. His name and dream would be gone. The irony wasn’t lost on him: he was going to die in the Tower of the Forgotten.

Sly drew a dagger and waved it in front of him. “Maybe we can delay it.”

“No chance of that,” Niklaus said. He took the last steps two at a time, ignoring the pain in his knee. He rushed through the doorway and the night sky opened up around him. Stars twinkled in the darkness. A sliver of Chandra looked down upon him, and thoughts of Sylva rushed into his mind... Niklaus pushed them aside, hoping she would forgive him.

“It’s right behind us!” said Sly.

Blood and damnation.

A low parapet surrounded a circular space. Niklaus grabbed Sly by the arm and pushed him away. The thief slipped into the shadows and became invisible. Niklaus hoped he'd stay out of harm's way.

Niklaus ducked around the structure the stairs exited from. He limped to the far edge just as the demon burst from the stairwell. Its massive horned head swayed as it searched for Niklaus, making deep whuffing sounds like a furnace bellows.

The demon turned and caught sight of Niklaus. It was his first clear view of the infernal creature. It looked like the demons he'd previously encountered, but bigger and with more horns protruding from its head and back. A hard scaled skin covered it, and its taloned hands were knob-knuckled. They looked like they could draw blood from a stone.

The demon reared with feline grace, its mammoth head low to the ground, talons scraping across the stone. It *bayed*, a savage noise torn from its throat. Niklaus clapped his hands over his ears. His shoulders bunched; his neck hair stood on end. From this high, the demon's cry would have been heard across the city. Around the tower, dogs began to bark and howl, and cats' yowling joined the chorus.

Niklaus took a step back, but his heel hit the parapet. It was hundreds of feet down, and there was a demon focused on tearing him limb from limb. All his training, all his experience, hadn't prepared him for a creature such as this. The sheer strength and savageness of the creature was like nothing he'd ever faced before.

There was no time left to him. It was now or death.

He drew both swords. They hissed eagerly from their sheaths. Niklaus ran at the demon, swords licking out, striking the demon's shield—and bouncing off. Niklaus grunted, attacked again, searching for a weak spot. Its head was out of reach.

The demon roared and slashed at him. Niklaus ducked under the talons and pressed forward, his blades struck the shield and were rebuffed.

Then the demon's hand smashed into his side. Niklaus flew through the air, then tumbled across the roof. His whole right side and arm went numb and useless. With a clang, his long sword slipped from nerveless fingers.

Groaning in pain, Niklaus dragged himself a few feet to the parapet. He struggled to his feet and turned. Bellowing like an enraged bull, the demon lashed out, talons whistling through the air. Niklaus ducked, crying out as agony from his injured side flowed through him.

A bottle smashed against the demon's hide, splashing it with liquid. The strong scent caused the demon to snort, distracted for an instant. More bottles followed, shattering and dousing the demon with spirits, which trickled off and formed a puddle on the ground. It turned, and Sly vanished back into the shadows.

"No!" Niklaus shouted.

Immediately, the demon turned to face him, orange eyes squinting. Its sinuous neck twisted its horned head back and forth, as if it expected attack from another side. But sensing nothing, it fixed its attention on Niklaus.

"Come on, you ugly bastard!" Niklaus dropped his short sword and waved his arms frantically while lifting one foot and placing it on the parapet behind him.

Letting out a rumbling huff, the demon took a tentative step toward him. Niklaus put his other foot on the parapet and balanced there, still waving like a madman.

Without warning, the demon leaped straight for Niklaus, letting out a roar that shook him to his bones. Its form grew larger in Niklaus's vision.

Just before it hammered into him, Niklaus took a step backward into thin air. He dropped like a stone over the side of the tower, clutching at the parapet with both hands. Niklaus's fingers found purchase on the edge and brought his fall to an abrupt halt. He cried out as his injured hands bore the brunt of his weight and twinged with pain in protest.

The demon skidded to a stop, arresting its momentum before it tumbled over the edge.

"Blood and damnation!" cursed Niklaus.

He had failed.

Roaring with rage, the demon loomed above him. Its rotten breath washed over Niklaus. It stank like days'-old putrefying corpses.

Another bottle of alchemical spirits struck the demon in the side and shattered. The demon ignored it, fixing its baleful eyes on Niklaus.

My goddess, where are you?

The demon reached both taloned hands toward him . . .

Sly's bottle of oil shattered against its leg, drenching the limb and the ground beneath it. Niklaus caught a glimpse of another projectile... recognized it as his other vial in time to clench his eyes shut.

An inferno erupted.

Niklaus cried out as the world became a white blindness and a roar filled his ears. An intense flame lashed his hands and face. The demon bellowed a pained shriek.

"Goddess!" Niklaus cried, blinking through tears. He squinted against the whiteness of his vision. A vague shape appeared above him, a few shades darker than the surrounding space. Tears streamed down Niklaus's cheeks.

The parapet shook as the demon slipped and crashed to its knees. Its head swayed back and forth. The demon was blinded too, but for how long? If he could just pull himself up . . .

With a mighty heave Niklaus dragged himself back atop the tower. His hand grasped for his sword hilt as the demon rose unsteadily to its feet. Niklaus saw the conflagration had disrupted its sorcerous shield, and its hide was now unprotected. It took a tentative step toward Niklaus and teetered on the edge of the parapet. It might be blinded, but it could still sense him.

Maybe—

Niklaus took a desperate chance and leaped, using the demon's knee as a springboard. He rammed his short blade into its armpit, where it sank to half its length. Giving the sword a quick twist, he yanked it free with a sucking noise. The creature bellowed and stumbled.

Sly slammed boots-first into the demon. Its clawed feet slipped, losing the tentative purchase they had. And the demon overbalanced. Its arms flailed, searching for an anchor as it toppled. Niklaus rammed into it with his shoulder, his momentum finally tipping it over the edge.

The dark, blurry shape of the demon screeched as it plummeted. Blood pounded in Niklaus's ears. He counted his hammering heartbeats. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—a massive reverberation sounded from below. The demon's cries ceased.

Niklaus risked a glance down. Far below, a black form lay in a shallow crater of cracked cobblestones. Wind sprang up around it, swirling dust and leaves, then coalescing into a fiery tornado. After a few moments it dispersed, leaving behind only ash and cinders.

Sly appeared beside Niklaus. "I killed a demon," the thief said, grinning from ear to ear. "Your plan was terrible."

Niklaus lay back on the cold stone for a few moments, coming to terms with nearly losing his life.

Thank you, Sylva Kalisia, for my survival.

But the truth was, his goddess had little or nothing to do with it.

"You stole my vial," Niklaus said.

"Yes... but it all worked out in the end. Because my plan was better."

The ship rolled in the swell as it departed Riem's harbor. Niklaus remained in his cabin, preferring the darkness and comparative solitude it afforded to the deck with sailors racing about and shouting at each other. It was muggy below deck, so he'd opened the tiny cabin window, though it offered little relief. There was only a gentle breeze tonight, which made their departure agonizingly slow. He lay in his bunk, watching the sliver of Chandra appear briefly in his window as the ship rocked back and forth.

And then she was there, somehow, as if she'd materialized out of the shadows.

His heart hammered in his chest. His eyes traced the outlines of sensuous curves, lingering on silken black-feathered wings and her lustrous hair. A diaphanous cloth draped her body. Her not-quite-naked curves sent a delicious shiver through him. He couldn't think straight.

"You almost didn't survive," she whispered, voice like warm honey.

A cold rage overcame him, and he suppressed a twinge of bitter resentment. "Barely. Why didn't you intervene?"

A tremor coursed through him. Blood surged to his face and groin.

"But I did," she said.

Niklaus's thoughts scattered as the force of her presence overwhelmed him. He wanted to say more, to tell her how he worshipped her, admired her intelligence and unforgiving insight, but knew she'd heard it from many men before. Actions spoke far louder than words, and they were the key to catching his goddess's attention and regard. He was, despite his goal of becoming like her, no more than her slave.

She stood still for a long moment, piercing him to his soul with her violet eyes. Judging him, oblivious to the powerful emotions surging throughout his body.

"Another chance, then," she said. Her tinkling laugh sounded in his ears, close, yet far away, filled with promises and lust and power. "Demons are problematic. I'll see what I can do for next time. For now, come, follow me." Sylva dematerialized into shadows, which flowed under the door and out of his cabin.

He cursed, struggling to his feet. In the passageway outside, the shadows flowed like water, leading him onto the deck lit by the gray light of impending dawn.

Where is she? Blood and damnation, she's gone.

There wasn't much activity, only a few sailors climbing in the rigging as they prepared for any freshening breeze daylight brought. Over by the great wooden wheel, the captain and first mate took readings using brass instruments and made markings on a map. They had a short exchange, and the first mate left and went below.

One of the crewmen, a lean man with a gray beard that could have hidden a bird's nest, passed close by.

"What's your cargo?" Niklaus asked the sailor.

"Slaves for the port of Sohrah in Kharas, mostly children from the streets of Riem. They fetch a good price down there, let me tell you. The southerners like 'em. Think they're exotic."

When Niklaus didn't reply, the old man grunted and walked away, busying himself coiling rope near the prow.

Slaves... now there's a story as old as time that never ceases.

The captain was obviously a man of few scruples. Niklaus stared at him, taking in the fine gold chains around his neck and a ring of orange metal—*orichalcum*, if he didn't miss his guess. He wore a burgundy shirt with silver buttons and dark gray pants. A man of expensive tastes, though judging by his scraggly goatee and ear hair, he could use a good barber.

A sound like the flap of great wings reached Niklaus's ears, along with the scent of leather and musk and spices. His mind swam as her heady presence inflamed him.

"Him," she whispered hotly in his ear.

Niklaus nodded, unable to speak, his throat tight with emotion. Her breath on his skin burned like fire, sending a shiver from his head to his toes. He turned his head to see her, to catch a glimpse... but she had vanished.

He looked back over the city, eyes drawn to the Tower of the Forgotten. It was a symbol of failed faith and human caprice. What did ordinary folk care of the fate of the fallen gods? But not Niklaus. His faith would burn eternal, and he would rule beside his goddess one day.

