

The Vampire 176

Chapter 176 176: Artificer Erkembalt

The carriage clattered through the night, carrying Ashlynn, Nyrielle, Zedya and Heila across the city into a district that was less brightly lit and well maintained than others. While there were no signs of public disorder, no trash in the streets or buildings in disrepair that Ashlynn might have expected in less prosperous districts of human cities, the lack of care could be seen in other ways.

Far fewer lamps illuminated the night here, not because any had been neglected, but because there simply weren't as many. The boats that moved about the district's canals were smaller and showed signs of being repaired several times and the facades of many buildings looked like they could benefit from a good scrub.

"Where are we going?" Ashlynn asked, peering outside the carriage windows. Several people stopped to stare as they passed by but, seeing the glyph of High Lady Erna emblazoned on the side of the carriage, no one dared to make any threatening movements in their direction.

"Artificer Erkembalt," Zedya answered smoothly. "I sent him a message last night and received a favorable reply this evening. He's well known for bridging many disciplines in the pursuit of his craft."

"And artificers are different from sorcerers?" Ashlynn asked, wanting to make sure she understood. The books Nyrielle had provided her translations of mentioned artifacts of great power but said little about their construction.

"In a way they straddle the line between sorcery and witchcraft while producing wonders all their own," Nyrielle explained. "A sorcerer uses power from their own body and life force. A witch can draw upon the power of the natural world. An artificer works with the power imbued in unique and special items. Zedya can likely tell you more."

"I don't have any deep insight to offer," the amethyst eyed vampire said. "I've worked with Artificer Erkembalt before to secure weapons or specialty tools. Some items, like Frost Walker horns, are difficult to harvest safely. I've lent him my services in obtaining those materials in exchange for his services in crafting armaments."

"What kind of person is he?" Heila asked, forcing herself to participate in the conversation instead of remaining a passive observer. It was hard to put herself forward when Lady Nyrielle was present but seeing Zedya invited to speak gave her a boost of courage to join in herself.

"Hard to say," Zedya said. "People change over time. It's been twenty years since I've last done business with him. At the time, he was eager for business and showing off his pack of brats. Triplets if I remember correctly," she added with a slight smile. "He seemed very concerned about having enough money to place so many children in school."

"Is he part of the Scaled Clan?" Ashlynn asked. From what Nyrielle made it sound like, large clusters of children were normal for families like Erna's but Zedya made it sound like the artificer had been caught off guard by so many children.

"The Clan of Painted Masks," Zedya said with a smile. "Triplets aren't unheard of but they're not common either. Our destination is right around the corner," she said, changing the topic slightly and pointing out the window. "You'll see what he's like in just a moment."

The storefront itself was plain and unassuming with small windows made of several round pieces of glass that looked like they'd been taken from an assortment of bottles and fused together. During the day, such windows might do a good job of letting in some amount of light, but seeing the contents of the shop through them would be difficult at best.

The sign that hung over the shop depicted a pair of iron tongs trailing several sparks and a heavy-handed script beneath the tongs read 'Things Made, Curses Broken.' Other than the sign, there was nothing to mark the shop as different or more extraordinary than the barber across the street or the saddlemaker next door.

Entering the shop, a bell rang softly, disturbing a stillness that, from the amount of dust collected on the various shelves, persisted most days without interruption. Despite the dusty, faintly mildew-scented air in the place, once Ashlynn stepped inside, she felt a prickle of energy wash over her skin as though she'd walked through a beaded curtain of magical energy. Even after the wave of energy passed, the shop held a lingering charge, like the air just after a thunderstorm had passed.

A normal human entering the shop would likely mistake it for a place that traded in odds and ends or curiosities, but each item Ashlynn looked at was more unnerving than the one before it. On one shelf, a pair of flat black scissors had been secured with a leather strap that wound around the blades several times before ending in a locking buckle, as though the shears needed to be restrained in a way a simple tool holster couldn't accomplish.

Next to the scissors sat a polished bronze mirror that reflected the shop accurately, but none of the people inside the shop. Behind them, a basket woven from dried grass looked like it had recently been pulled from a river and a faint fishy odor clung to it even though, from the dust on the shelf, it hadn't been moved in some time.

On another shelf, delicate saws and tweezers had been carefully arranged around a cluster of gemstones and small ingots of precious metals. It would have been easy enough to mistake them for simple jeweler's tools were it not for the dark, angular glyphs burned into the wooden handles of the tools which gave off a feeling of... emptiness.

Perhaps the most disconcerting item Ashlynn spotted on the shelves was a small collection of straw dolls flanking a pincushion filled with pins that shimmered in the dim light with a dozen different colored

pinheads. Crude faces had been stitched onto the dolls with mouths and eyes made of neat Xs as though their mouths and eyes had been stitched closed.

"Madame Zedya, I'd almost given up on you," a voice called from behind a stack of leather-bound books on an aged wooden counter, startling Ashlynn out of her thoughts as she inspected the strange items in the shop. "Let me guess, you haven't aged a day," the voice said as its owner emerged from behind the counter.

Artificer Erkembalt wasn't as short as Heila or other members of the Horned Clan but he was still several inches shorter than Ashlynn herself, not quite managing to reach five feet in height. His face was round and furry, shaped like an oval set on its side with a button nose and a small mouth.

Erkembalt's most striking feature, like most members of the Clan of Painted Masks, was the band of black fur that ran across the otherwise silvery-gray fur of his face. One could be forgiven for thinking that an artist had spent hours with a fine detailed brush, painting elegant loops and whorls of dark black that ran all the way across his face.

An elegant swirl of dark fur arced up from his left eye, extending half way up his forehead and a matching swirl arced down from his right eye until it nearly reached his chin. On his nose, a small pair of spectacles perched with delicate chains that ran around behind his neck.

Though Zedya had last seen him twenty years ago and time had turned some of the dark hairs in his mask silver, he still moved with the spry steps of a much younger man and the pockets of his elegant vest bulged with a number of tools used in his trade, as if he couldn't bear to be unable to get to work the moment he had something interesting in his paws.

"You haven't changed either, Master Erkembalt," Zedya said warmly. "I've brought important guests, Mistress Nyrielle and Seneschal Ashlynn, along with Lady Heila who serves the Seneschal as I serve Mistress Nyrielle."

"I would have come to the palace if you'd asked, Lady Nyrielle," Erkembalt said, offering a brief bow. "My bones aren't so old yet that I can't be bothered to visit an important customer."

"But then my Ashlynn wouldn't have been able to see your shop," Nyrielle said, wrapping an arm possessively around Ashlynn's waist. "I think it's well worth the trip, just to introduce her to you and see your shop. Soon enough, she'll be visiting the Mother of Thorns and the more she learns before she arrives, the better."

"Well, I suppose I can understand that," the artificer said. "Don't mind the dust, don't touch things you don't understand the use of, and don't go through the door to the back and you're welcome to take a look around if you like."

"I'm afraid that time is a bit too short to browse," Nyrielle said, gesturing for Zedya to bring forward the items they'd come here to discuss. "Take a look at these," she said, a predatory smile forming on her lips as she watched the artificer's eyes light up in excitement. "Zedya worked hard to harvest them from a pair of Frost Walkers and a Tuscan hunter. I'd like to know what you think of them..."