

## The Vampire 177

### Chapter 177 177: A Rare Opportunity

Slowly, as if she was teasing the artificer, Zedya walked forward to place a long wooden box bound with leather straps on top of Erkembalt's counter. When she undid the buckles and pulled the straps aside to open the box, however, Ashlynn felt the temperature in the shop drop sharply, as though someone had just opened the front door on a cold winter's day.

Inside the box, nestled in beds of dark velvet, lay two perfectly preserved Frost Walker horns and a pair of foot-long sections of weathered ivory tusk taken from a point on the tusk close enough to the face that the ivory was uncontaminated by the lingering energies of Frost Walker horns lashed to the curled ends of the tusks as weapons.

The horns themselves had been carefully removed at the base, leaving behind smooth, polished surfaces where they had once connected to bone. A dim flickering light danced almost eagerly within each of them, as though they were strangely happy to greet the people gathered around the counter gazing upon all that remained of Paulus and Torsten.

The larger horn of the two horns, taken from Paulus, radiated an aura that reminded Ashlynn of fresh, soft, powdery snow in the morning just after a snowstorm. Looking at it for more than a few seconds conjured memories of the mountains of the High Pass, like they were slumbering under vast white blankets made of soft, fluffy snow.

Beneath that gentle, snowy energy lurked something bitter and spiteful, like the deadly fury of a mountain blizzard that would bury everyone and everything beneath that snowy blanket, never to be seen again.

Beside the horn that glowed a soft, snowy white, Torsten's horn pulsed with a different kind of wintery energy. The icy blue aura that surrounded it carried a solid, unbreakable feeling, like the thick ice of the frozen lake.

More than that, it radiated a dangerous sense of piercing sharpness, like an icicle that could puncture flesh as easily as any spear. Though it was slightly smaller than the one taken from Torsten's grandfather, the intensity of the energy from the icy blue horn was every bit as intense as the snowy white one, though its energy seemed to lack the complex subtleties at play in Paulus's horn.

"These, these are remarkable," Erkembalt said as he hovered over the box. At his sides, his paws twitched eagerly as if he could barely restrain himself from reaching out to snatch the precious horns in the box and his bushy ringed tail quivered in excitement. "Madame Zedya, you have outdone yourself in harvesting these," he whispered.

"They have forgotten that they were once people," Zedya said with a hint of pride in her voice. Her amethyst eyes flashed with a brief glow in the dim light of the artificer's shop and her lips curled into a smile that revealed a hint of her fangs.

Given the importance of these items, she'd done her best to meet Mistress Nyrielle's exacting standards and in this case, she felt she'd surpassed her previous efforts. "They are ready to be transformed into weapons."

"And these bits of tusk," the Artificer said a touch breathlessly, adjusting his spectacles as he examined them closely. So often he worked with things that were ancient, half broken and had to be repurposed into a new, more useful life. Working with such pristine, freshly harvested material was a rare treat for a man who had once been derided for digging through ancient trash to manufacture his treasures.

"They seem very pure, freshly harvested and they lack any specific energy," he said, shoving his hands into pockets already filled with tools, just to keep himself from handling the materials. He wanted to pick them up, examine them under better lights, sniff them, and... But he firmly held himself back before he did something unsightly in front of his clients in a moment of exuberance.

"If you wanted to harvest the power of Tuscan sorcery with these you should have brought me a segment taken from the ivory at the jaw," he pointed out, turning his gaze to Zedy for a moment. "Only the ivory from beneath the lips contains a trace of Tuscan words of power."

"I instructed her to avoid those sections," Nyrielle said, smiling at Erkembalt's professional critique. It was her first time meeting with the man personally rather than working through Zedy and despite his obvious excitement, his observations were very good. "It should be easier to use the ivory for knife hilts this way, shouldn't it? You won't have to marry two conflicting sources of power this way."

"I suppose you're right," the masked artificer said after a moment of careful consideration. "I don't often get specimens this pristine. Usually, when people bring me Frost Walker horn and Tuscan ivory, I'm working with a horn that has already been carved into a spike and lashed to the Tuscan's tusk. The two have become interlinked and contaminated by each other," he said, shaking his head sadly.

The hunting of any Eldritch people for the powers contained in their bodies was a near-universal taboo that only isolated savages like the Tuscans could get away with ignoring. Just because it was taboo, however, didn't stop an underground business that made use of such items from thriving.

Grave robbing was a significant problem for some Eldritch clans as some people attempted to skirt the taboos, while using the already desecrated horns that had been harvested by Tuscans was another way people tried to escape judgment.

Likewise, Artificers like Erkembalt occupied a difficult position both in his professional community and among Eldritch people in general. The things he crafted out of the remains of others were considered distasteful by some and sacrilegious by others. Still, as long as there were people with enough wealth and power to commission his services, those same people provided a shield against others who would see his craft banned and its practitioners exiled.

"This," he said slowly, casting a covetous gaze at the horns and pieces of tusk. "This is a bit different. I can work from the very beginning to create something that is unique and designed for a purpose rather than turning what was already made for use by a Tuscan hunter into a tool that can be used the same way by anyone else. This is a rare, rare opportunity."