

Elements of Vengeance

By
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Chapter Two: Commander

“Gryphon?” I called, pushing open the heavy doors of the Great Room; my voice echoing off the walls, as the wind howled in the eaves above.

A storm that had threatened for days, arrived as I left the waterfront—thick clouds covering the moon, releasing a torrential downpour—and by the time I made it to Lassiter, it had grown with intensity.

The wind whipped furiously, shaking the heavy branches of the giant oaks lining the estate; knotted limbs rapping against the thick panes of the arched windows, as rain pelted the roof. Yet the ancient manor was defiant. Built on an unnamed island off the coast of Northern Washington, the location had been chosen for its remoteness, and combined with the harsh weather of the Pacific Northwest, had enshrouded us in privacy and kept our world secret for centuries.

Breathtaking in both size and appearance, Lassiter was constructed of the finest materials and rivaled many of Europe’s great castles. The main entrance was marked by a sweeping driveway and double doors carved from Mediterranean Cypress that stood fifty feet high and twelve inches thick, while sprawling lawns of emerald green surrounded the gothic style mansion. Dozens of stone mullion windows lined the estate’s wings and an expansive roofline of pointed arches and stone chimneys indicated its many rooms.

While not as old as Excelsior in New York or Maison Beaulieu in New Orleans, the estate was magnificent and as home to Alchemists in the West and Seat of The Conscientious, it was the center of our world. As such, it was never empty, and to find it quiet, despite the late hour, was peculiar.

Heading back out to the Main Hall, I crossed the foyer and walked into the Parlor. Lined with hand-painted wallpaper from Paris and priceless paintings, it was where the Courtesans—Alchemists who desired beauty and luxury over the cruel demands of

combat—held court. Our world was different from the mortal one, however, it was similar in one important way—order. Every Alchemist had a role, and while the one I played was different than theirs, the Courtesans were essential to our existence, nonetheless.

From government officials to corporate executives, the intellect and mystique of The Courtesans had enabled them to obtain information that advanced our interests—and the Parlor was where they exchanged this currency. We had unlimited resources at our disposal because of the secrets they procured, and company kept. While I had nothing in common with the Courtesans and our paths rarely crossed, not seeing them here—cool and beautiful, drinks in hand—was unusual. But they *had* been here, and not long ago—perfume lingered, and embers glowed in the fireplace.

Continuing to the back of the estate, I followed a smaller corridor to the Circular Library and entered, filling my lungs with the familiar scent of wood and leather. The library housed an impressive collection, including rare works believed to be lost to history, and every Alchemist spent time here after ascension to align their ancestral memories with the recorded history of both worlds. Wooden bookshelves curled around the room for three floors and reading areas were scattered throughout, and no matter the time, someone was here. However, it too, like the other rooms, was quiet.

Pushing aside a collection of books on a reading table, I found an eclectic mix—atlas, collection of Renaissance art, and anthology of ancient prophecies—but nothing unusual. *Where was everyone?* I wondered, looking around again, before leaving and heading back the way I came.

Continuing down the corridor, I took the stairs at the other end down to Gryphon's study, but it was quiet. The doors were closed, and no guard stood watch.

Quick steps approaching from behind pricked my ear and I turned, finding Delia and Dane, Gryphon's beloved wolves, bounding towards me. The size and approach of the majestic creatures might be startling to one not acquainted, but their excited whines indicated our familiarity.

Dane greeted me first, standing on his hind legs to press his nose to mine—front paws spilling over my shoulders—and when he retreated, I knelt to rub Delia’s head. More reserved than the gregarious male, the shy girl relished the affection from under lowered lashes.

“There you are,” a worried voice called out.

Ronin, one of Gryphon’s guards approached, slightly flushed from following the two spirited wolves. A descendant of the guardians that ushered the children of Alchemists to safety, he too, was born into a predetermined calling that bound his ancestors to mine, for as long as we existed.

“Where’s Gryphon?” I demanded; Dane taking a seat protectively on my left, and Delia on my right.

“He left.”

“When?”

“About fifteen minutes ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“There was a matter that required his attention.”

“And that would be?”

“He will be back soon.”

“When?” I pressed, noting the lack of answer in his responses.

“When he is done tending to—”

“The matter that requires his attention,” I waved my hand, cutting him off.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered, cheeks flushing.

Like most Allegiants, Ronin was strong, with a broad chest and large arms. But unlike the others, who with the brawn, displayed great confidence, he was shy.

“Ronin,” I stepped forward, softening my voice, trying another approach. “If you could tell me where Gryphon is, I will keep it between us.”

“Is something wrong?” he asked, clearly uneasy by our closeness.

“I really need to speak with him. So, if you could let me know where he is...”

“I’m sorry,” he straightened. “I can’t say anything further.”

“Fine!” I snapped, my voice again cold.

I had to speak with Gryphon about my fight with the Venerate before the Conscientious found out. He would understand, but the others would not look favorably on my breaking the only rule they expected us to follow. Politics were politics, blood-feud be damned, but it existed for a reason.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Ronin asked.

“No,” I knelt and ran my hand down Dane’s back, then Delia’s—standing when done, and heading to the stairs.

“There’s one more thing,” Ronin said as I pushed past. I turned around slowly, detecting the seriousness of his voice. “You are to stay inside until he returns. Not just you,” he clarified, “but everyone.”

“Why?” I asked, the command a surprise.

“It’s just a precaution.”

“Tell you what,” I countered. “Why don’t you forget that you even saw me.”

“Please,” Ronin pressed. “Gryphon would never forgive me if—”

“That way,” I continued, “you won’t have to worry about disobeying an order.”

“I have never defied an order from The Conscientious,” he straightened.

“Then don’t,” I turned back around and continued up the stairs.

“An order is an order,” he called, with more authority than I thought he was capable.

“I don’t take orders from you!” I shouted, picking up my pace, taking the Main Stairs to the second floor.

Heading down the East Wing, I hurried to my room, remembering the first time I walked this hall. The world I awakened to was as daunting as the ancestral portraits that hung from the walls, and at one point, did not know if I would ever feel like I belonged. Of course, those days were long gone. I was not intimidated by those who lived before me, but proud of our shared legacy and honored to protect our world.

Once inside my room, I shrugged out of my riding jacket and tossed it on a chair in the corner, then removed my sword and placed it on the trunk at the foot of my bed. Gryphon’s absence, the silence that had swept over Lassiter, and the order to stay on the island could only mean one thing—we were in lockdown—which meant The Conscientious knew about the Venerate.

Lockdowns were not unheard of—typically decreed when attack was imminent—and the death of a Venerate would cause the Templar to strike back with force. I had hoped to get back before they knew, but despite pushing my bike—a midnight blue Ducati—as fast as it would go, it had obviously not been fast enough for The Conscientious’ informants.

Walking to the window, I pulled open the drape and looked out. Trees bent with the weight of the storm and the lights of the pathways that ran across the grounds had grown dark. I hated to be confined—to be told what to do—and judging by the muted light beyond the trees, I now knew why it was so quiet.

When Gryphon ordered the lockdown, thought of being confined for an indefinite amount of time would have pushed the adrenaline of anyone here into overdrive. I had

just learned about the lockdown and already felt the oppression of detention. Testing weapons in the armory would be a desired way to ease the growing restlessness. I, however, preferred another way.

After changing into workout clothes, I made my way down the back stairs and exited a side door—running in the rain, knowing my way easily in the dark. Finding the old building empty, I pushed the doors open, and flipped up the row of switches along the wall—fluorescent lights overhead, flickering to life. While the others preferred Lassiter’s state-of-the-art training facility, I gravitated towards this older, more remote gym. Here, Gryphon trained me, and where I felt most comfortable. It would be the perfect place to blow off some steam.

After turning on the media center, I kicked off my shoes, crossed the mat and then kneeled—taking deep, steady breaths, with a palm on each thigh, waiting for the music to begin.

A high pitch timbre filled the speakers first, followed by a deep bass line that gave way to a heavier, more rhythmic combination of drums and synthesizer. As the tempo climbed, my synapses came to life, and once I felt the energy flowing, jumped up and went to work. I started with a couple of side-kicks—slowly at first, to get the blood flowing, then faster, rotating each leg as I moved around the mat—and in no time, my mind was free.

I could always rely on my time here to help me focus—any restlessness that plagued me gone when I stepped off the mat—and it had been just what I needed. My tension had eased, my focus strong, that I was unaware the music had ended until the sound of clapping stopped me.

“Who’s there?” I demanded, spinning around.

“Don’t stop on my account,” a masculine voice called from the shadows.

“And you are?” I asked, the voice strong and confident, yet unfamiliar.

“Is that any way to speak to a guest?”

“A guest?” I shot back, trying to see who had interrupted me.

“Yes.”

“Just *whose* guest would you be?”

A figure stepped out of the dark and into the light—stopping to lean casually against the doorway. “Who I am is not your concern.”

“Who do you think—”

“Instead of wondering who I am,” he cut me off, “how about you tell me who you are? Although,” he pushed up from the doorway and approached, kicking off his shoes before crossing the mat. “I think I already know.”

“You know nothing.”

“Sweetheart,” he grinned, pushing a strand of mid-length, dark as night hair off his face. “I know more than you think.”

“I am not your sweetheart.”

“You’re not,” he agreed, “that’s for sure. But I do know you are someone who finds it acceptable to disobey an order from The Conscientious. So, that makes you—”

“Confident?” I smirked, relishing *I* had cut *him* off.

“Not the word I had in mind.”

“Who are you?” I pressed, my grin fading.

“Now,” he crossed his arms, “is that any way to talk to one of your brethren?”

He was an Alchemist—I felt our connection, just as with all our kind—but he was different. Neither flashy or overbuilt as was common in the others, he was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and an overly confident countenance.

“Maybe I should point out that you, too, are disobeying their order.”

“The order was not meant for me.”

We had definitely never met, but his commanding presence and intense, deep set, cobalt eyes were oddly familiar. Then it hit me—a name etched in gold, under a portrait on the wall outside my room. *Lucian Beaumont*...this Alchemist was his ancestor, and their resemblance was remarkable.

“Tell me,” he continued. “Why exactly do you feel the lockdown doesn’t apply to you?”

“Funny...I was about to ask you the same question.”

“I wouldn’t worry about matters that don’t concern you.”

“Everything that happens at Lassiter is my concern.”

“Is that so?” he questioned, clearly amused.

“Yes, so let’s try this again. Who are you?”

“Felt like getting a workout in,” he shrugged.

“Why are you here?” I snapped, my annoyance growing.

“Business,” he shrugged, rolling his head from side to side.

I crossed my arms, growing more irritated with his presence.

“Look...I’m here, you’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Deal with it?” I repeated, shocked by his nerve.

He laughed and shook his head, then lifted the shirt he was wearing overhead and dropped it to the mat.

“What are you doing?” I held out my hand as he began stretching his long arms.

“Working out.”

“This gym is taken.”

He scanned the room, then turned his attention back me. “I like this one.”

“Use another one.”

“What’s your pleasure?” he continued, ignoring my protest.

His upper body and arms were cut, while his torso—no less muscular—was narrow and well-defined.

“Excuse me?”

“Fighting style...what’s your preference?”

“I am not interested—”

“Earlier it looked like you were kickboxing,” he continued. “But there was some Judo in there, too. So, what will it be? Judo, Tae Kwon Do...take your pick.”

“I’m not fighting you.”

“Oh, yes,” he smiled, “you are.”

“No,” I straightened, “I’m not.”

“Afraid?” he stepped forward; the wall of his chest hitting my palm.

“Not at all.”

“Then?”

“What do you want?” I answered his question, with my own.

“Listen,” his smile began to fade. “Not that I owe you an explanation, but I already told you...I’m here on business.”

“So, you decided to come down here to a gym no one uses?”

“You’re using it.”

“I don’t have time for this,” I began to leave.

“Man, you’re a piece of work.”

“Excuse me?” I stopped and turned.

“What’s one fight?”

“No thanks.”

“Scared?”

“Of what?”

“Losing.”

I laughed.

“Hit a nerve?”

“Contrary to what you think you know about me, it’s wrong.”

“Is that so?”

“If you knew anything about me, then you’d know there are two things about me everyone knows.”

“And that would be?”

“I am never scared.”

“And the second?”

“I never lose.”

“Well you’re in for a treat.”

“Really?” I replied dryly. “Why is that?”

“Because you just reached never.”

We stared at each other, neither yielding, and then without saying a word, I uncrossed my arms and stormed over to the weapon wall. My irritation had grown into anger, and suddenly I could think of nothing I wanted more, than to teach this haughty descendant of Lucian Beaumont a lesson.

Reaching for one of two long canes, I tossed it at him. “Are you serious?” he smiled, catching it easily with one hand.

“You’re so anxious to go, then let’s go,” I challenged with confidence.

Gryphon had made sure I was versatile in many forms of combat, including those not seen in the modern world for centuries. My favorite was Tahtib—a kind of fighting from ancient Egypt that used a long cane, polished smooth to perfection, as the weapon. The style required balance and strength and I found it to be powerful.

Looking at the cane in his hand and then back up, his expression changed from surprise to curiosity as he considered my challenge.

I stepped back with one foot, motioning for him to approach with my outstretched hand. “Bring it.”

His lips pulled into a grin and without hesitation he began circling me, studying me like a wolf would prey. While assessing me, he carved circles in the air, and from the way he held the cane, I knew Tahtib was a style he too, was familiar.

I remained focus and in turn, evaluated him. He would move differently than one whose frame was supported by bulk—moving more fluidly, as opposed to quick surges of power—and would make an interesting opponent.

He inhaled, chest filling with air, but it did not intimidate me. I began my defense, moving the cane lithely, and when ready to make a move, raised it high and delivered my first strike. He blocked it with expert precision and my cane vibrated in response.

Gripping it tight with both hands, I lifted the cane overhead and stepped back, assuming a defensive stance, preparing for his counterattack. His cane sliced the air smoothly, delivering a strike to my left, followed by one to my right. I blocked the assault and pushed him back on the mat.

We continued that way for a few minutes—a loud crack reverberating throughout the gym each time our canes met—and as his attack grew in skill and movement, so too, did my defense and determination. My steps were swift as I changed my assault, using a variety of techniques, and he alternated between leg kicks and hand combat.

Seeing an opportunity to strike an unexpected blow, I lunged at him quickly, but anticipating my move, he leaned and grabbed my cane with his free hand, tossing it aside. Shifting my defense to hand combat, I blocked his assault, but he grabbed my wrist and spun me around, slamming me hard against his chest.

“I thought I said bring it?” he taunted, pulling my chin up with his cane.

Angered by his advance, I slammed my heel onto the instep of his foot and jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow. He inhaled sharply, easing his hold, and I broke free, sprinting to my cane. Grabbing it, I turned to face him, my adrenaline pumping.

“I’ll bring it when you do.”

He straightened, then took a step back, mimicking my earlier signal to approach. “Show me what you got.”

Seething with anger, I ran at the wall, then up the side—pushing off with force. Hurtling myself to where he awaited, I struck a blow to his shoulder—his eyes widening in response—and using the same energy channeled for the jump, continued my attack, delivering a series of blows with each advance.

He defended himself easily, feet moving deftly as we shifted from the mat to the wood floor, and I raised my arms up, pushing off the floor to front-flip over him and attack from behind. But as I rotated overhead, he grabbed hold of my ankle and slammed me down; the impact shaking the walls.

My cane flew from my hands and I reached for it, but before I could pull it back into my grasp, he stepped down and cracked it in two. I crawled backwards to put space between us, and as I retreated, he continued to attack—each strike of his cane, missing me by a hair.

Frustrated, he lifted his cane to deliver another blow, but as he brought it down, instead of hitting me, I stopped it with my hands. With a firm hold I stood up and channeling all of my power, brought the cane down hard over my knee—breaking it in half, just as he had done to mine.

“Now we’re even,” I grinned in triumph, holding a piece in each hand.

He stared at me, fire in his eyes, then picked up my broken cane pieces and came at me.

Our dance resumed—both of our canes broken into smaller, more primitive weapons—and in response, our fighting styles changed. As we battled, power switched between us—his brow furrowing in frustration that he was not able to maintain the upper hand, mine in response to his stamina and ability.

“I told you,” I hit back, trying to disrupt his focus. “I...never ...lose.”

“I could do this all night,” he grinned.

“Me too,” I struck back faster.

“Give up,” he dared.

“You,” I countered, fighting harder.

“Why?” he scoffed. “I’m not losing.”

“You’re not winning... either.”

“I’m warning you,” he growled.

“Consider me warned.”

“Have it your way,” he spun the pieces like a drumstick and the speed in which he delivered each strike, increased.

I kept up my defense, but it wasn’t long before he had forced both pieces from my hand. Yet, despite the disadvantage, my determination grew stronger and I blocked each with my forearms—the cane ripping tears in my flesh.

Each strike made a sickening slap, and as they grew harder and louder, my defense, instead of weakening, became mechanical. With the monotony I was able to quiet my mind and find a deeper, inner strength, and once ready, delivered a powerful punch to his chest. He flew backwards but remained on his feet, then threw both sticks down and approached with fury. I prepared to defend myself, planting my feet firmly, but he swept my leg, and I landed on my back.

“Did you think this would be easy?”

“I didn’t think about it at all,” I used a kick up and once back on my feet, launched into a new attack, with a punch, kick combo.

“You should quit now,” he blocked my kick, then delivered one of his own.

“Never,” I did the same.

“Yes,” he kicked again, following it up with a front left jab.

“No,” I blocked it, then delivered a right jab, kick combo.

“You sure about that?”

“Never!” I said again, delivering a jump kick, but he moved, and struck my ribs with his fist.

"I'm warning you."

"Consider me...warned," I continued, delivering a roundhouse kick to his side, but he appeared unaffected.

"This fight is over!" he demanded, delivering a counter-kick that was stronger than all others, knocking me to the ground.

I jumped back up, taking a few quick breaths, but to my surprise, instead of launching into a fresh attack, he simply stopped and walked away.

"Giving up?" I sneered.

"I'm doing you a favor."

"I don't need you to do me any favors."

"Then consider it a lesson."

"You're not my teacher."

"First piece of advice," he scooped up his shirt and threw it over a shoulder.
"Lose the bravado."

"You're just angry."

"Oh?" he questioned.

"You heard me."

"Really?"

"Something tells me this fight wasn't as easy as you thought."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yeah," I nodded, pulse thrumming wildly in my ears.

“Look,” he said irritably, “I didn’t give you or this fight any thought.”

The superiority in his tone and dominance in his demeanor was infuriating. I wished he would leave and never come back.

“Are you done?” I asked, disinterested in anything else he had to say.

“Were you expecting something else?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” he turned around and left.

“Great!” I bent down and grabbed a small piece of cane, hurling it at the doors as they closed behind him.

A loud clap of thunder shook the sky as I exited the gym and ran back to the estate. My restlessness was back, thanks to Beaumont’s ancestor, and I needed to get off the island—even if that meant breaking the lockdown.

Guards were no doubt standing watch at every point of entry—enforcing the lockdown a top priority—and I knew only one way to leave without being seen. A secret passage—accessible behind a bookshelf in an unused sitting room—that exited in a cave along the island’s rocky cliffs. I discovered it while exploring the estate shortly after arrival and used it countless times over the years.

I descended the aged stone steps, hurrying down the darkened corridor—swatting aside the spiderwebs that moved airily—and was almost to the end, when voices coming from the other side of the wall stopped me.

“You didn’t tell me she would be so—”

“Strong?”

The second voice was unmistakably Gryphon’s, but the first was harder to identify.

“I was going to say challenge,” the first voice responded.

I pulled back, a rush of heat shooting up my spine as I realized who it belonged to. *Challenge*...the word used to criticize, was the same used to provoke me earlier, and belonged to none other than Lucian Beaumont’s arrogant descendant.

What was he doing talking to Gryphon? And, where were they?

“You’ll do it?” Gryphon asked.

“I would do anything you command.”

“You have been an incredible leader, Luke. The League is lucky to have you.”

The League, I clenched my fists; his arrogance now making sense.

Creating and transforming matter was the heart of alchemy, the four cardinal elements—Fire, Air, Earth, and Water—core to the practice. They were considered the greatest sources of power in the universe, as it was them, which in the beginning, evolved from chaos and enabled creation.

Once common among Alchemist, element command had grown rare over the centuries, and to have it, was to be gifted the most desired of powers. The Commanders—four in whom the ability was strongest—made up The League, and they were held in high regard.

But while they may have been revered, little was known about the four Commanders. They kept a low profile—names even a mystery—but knowing Beaumont’s descendant was not just one, but The League’s leader, filled me with hot jealousy. I craved that kind of power and could not believe he was one of the few chosen to wield such a gift.

Luke, I seethed—from his appearance to his name, he was connected with his ancestor in a way I never would be, and it only made me loathe him more.

“I have never questioned your judgment,” Luke continued, “but respectfully, I have concerns.”

“We have no choice, Luke.”

“Are you sure she’s capable?”

“She is more than capable; I can assure you.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because I trained her.”

Me...they are talking about me, I thought, my anger growing.

“And her loyalty?”

“The same birthright that flows in our veins, is also in hers.”

“But what happens on The League,” Luke paused. “Our battles...the way we fight. It is not the same as hunting Templar.”

“She killed a venerate,” Gryphon countered. “Do you understand how rare that is?”

“I know it’s not sanctioned.”

“Things have changed. You more than anyone, know this.”

Despite the thick rock between us, I could feel the tension.

“When will you let her know?” Luke asked finally.

“Shortly,” Gryphon confirmed. “And the others...they are ready?”

“Sophie and Liam are on board.”

“Good. I trust everyone will do their part to help her.”

“Of course,” Luke answered crisply, his resentment easy to detect.

Help me? What were they talking about? I pressed my back against the rock and leaned in closer.

“She is an excellent fighter.”

“I would expect nothing less with you as her teacher.”

“You will be sure to let me know if she’s experiencing any difficulties?”

“You can count on it.”

My anger flared with the eagerness of Luke’s reply.

“She’s smart and quick,” Gryphon continued. “I trust she will be fine. Still, working with others will be new to her.

“If you’re worried, perhaps with more time...”

“No,” Gryphon insisted, “the time is now.”

“What if she is not interested? Our earlier meeting didn’t exactly go well.”

Meeting? I kicked the stone wall with my heel, small pebbles breaking free. *Worked up?* I did it again, a large stone cracking. *I will show you worked up!* On the third kick, the stone gave way, and I fell through.

“Anna?” Gryphon asked with surprise, as I stumbled into the room. Wiping dust from my shoulders I looked around, taking note of the cavernous space.

The room was not that at all, but a chamber—large stone columns erected in a circle, with three fire columns, arranged at distinct points, illuminating the space. A round table made of stone marked the center, and around it, a square had been carved into the floor—the symbol for each element stamped at the corners.

The Squared Circle—created by Alchemists to honor the elements and the coveted philosopher’s stone—the symbol was to our kind, what the cross was to Templar. The chamber had been built in the image—a circle, within a square, within a triangle, within a circle.

“Were you eavesdropping?” Luke questioned.

I whipped my head in his direction, staring at him coldly. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“Like I said,” he looked over at Gryphon, “earlier meeting...not so great.”

“You call *that* a meeting?”

“What do you call it?”

“You interrupted me while—”

“I challenged you,” he corrected.

“It was hardly a challenge.”

“I guess you’re right,” he smirked. “It’s not much of a fight when your opponent is flat on their back.”

“Oh, you’re—”

“Accurate?”

“Infuriating!”

“As I was saying,” he turned to Gryphon, holding out his hand for emphasis.

“Anna?” Gryphon asked again. “What are you doing here?”

“Where exactly am I?”

“This,” Gryphon looked around with pride, “is the headquarters for The League.”

“And I believe,” Luke added, “your Bastion asked what you are doing here?”

“Like I said earlier, I don’t answer to—”

“I see you two have met already,” Gryphon smiled, cutting off round two between me and Luke.

“I wouldn’t call it a meeting,” I replied flatly.

“Good,” he clasped his hands together, holding them low. “That will make things easier.”

“That will make *what* easier?”

“Do you want to tell her or shall I?” Luke interjected.

“Tell me *what*?” I asked Gryphon, yet Luke answered.

“About your new assignment.”

I swallowed, trying to contain my anger. I was being punished for killing a Venerate.

“I will accept whatever sentence The Conscientious has decided, but I do not regret my actions,” I held my head high.

“Sentence?” he asked, removing his hand.

“The rule...I know I broke it. But the Venerate came after me, and in that moment, it was him or me... them or us...and I will always choose us.”

“I know,” he nodded.

“Wait...you know?”

“I am aware of what happened tonight.”

“Then you know it ended with the death of a Venerate.”

“I do.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I am.”

“I’m not being punished?”

“No Anna,” he paused. “You are not being punished.”

“Then what is he talking about?” I glared at Luke.

“Your next assignment will require a new kind of training.”

“Training?” I straightened, my shoulder blades pinching. “I do not need any more training. I am the best hunter out there.”

“It is already decided.”

“There is nothing he can teach me—”

“My decision,” Gryphon cut off my protest, “is final.”

I lowered my head, defeated and livid.

“Tonight, you will go with Luke and start training with The League.”

“The League?” I looked up; not sure I had heard him correctly.

He nodded.

“I do not have element affinity,” I replied tersely, the deficiency hard to admit.

“Your battle with the Venerate should have been more difficult, but you have nary a mark, Anna.”

“Being a good hunter is not element command.”

“Finally, something we agree on,” Luke said snidely.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Well I’m talking to you,” he shot back.

“This conversation doesn’t concern you.”

“Now see,” he challenged, “that’s where you are wrong. When it comes to The League, everything concerns me.”

Gryphon held up a hand and Luke stopped, clearly frustrated. “Anna...I believe in you lies the ability of element command and like your memories, it is buried.”

“Buried? Gryphon...wait,” I closed my eyes, trying to process what was happening.

“I believe the strength that has made you the hunter you are, is the same that will make you a Commander.”

“You taught me to be the hunter I am. All I know is because of you.”

“No,” he leaned in, “it is because of *you*.”

“But hunting...and fighting. They are not abilities.”

“Another point in which we agree,” Luke muttered.

“Look—”

“No, you look,” he demanded. “This isn’t a game.”

“What’s your problem?”

“My problem?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, *your* problem.”

“My problem,” he inhaled deeply, “is that instead of being out there where I am needed, I am here, dealing with you and this notion you have element affinity.”

“How do you know I don’t?”

“Ever used it?”

I said nothing.

“Feel it?”

I turned my head.

“Ever felt an energy in your bones that was so powerful it felt as if it would split you in two?”

The intensity of his words was hard to ignore. My desire for revenge was strong—it drove me all these years and compelled me to fight—but I always felt in control of that need for vengeance that coursed through all of us.

“Being confident is not an ability,” he continued when I failed to respond. “It is a liability.”

“I am no one’s liability.”

He started to walk away, but I turned and grabbed his arm. He looked down at my hand, eyes flashing with anger.

“Do not dismiss me.”

“If only it were that easy,” he yanked his arm from my grip.

“If I do not have element affinity, then I go on and do what I have always done. It will be like we never met.”

“Music to my—”

“But if I do,” I continued, “and I am meant to be on The League, there isn’t anything, or anyone, that will keep me from that destiny.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning...you will be stuck with me.”

He looked at me, eyes hard, then grinned. “We’ll see.”

“No, I will see,” the fire in me flared.

“That is where you’re wrong,” his eyes again hardened. “When it comes to The League, you will listen to me.”

“Says who?”

“It is my job.”

“I am not your job!”

“I wish you weren’t, but unfortunately...”

“Oh, get over yourself.”

“Enough!” Gryphon commanded.

Recoiling at the scorn in Gryphon’s voice, I looked down, angry Luke made me lose my cool, yet again. He, too, appeared ashamed by Gryphon’s reproach—focusing his attention forward, saying nothing.

“Anna,” Gryphon resumed speaking once he had our attention. “Things have changed. Templar numbers are increasing in a way we have never before seen.”

“Perhaps they’re making a play for the region?” I suggested, recalling how much hunting I had done in recent months.

Alchemist and Templar territories aligned with The Church’s influence. In the United States, Alchemist outnumbered Templar in the East and West, while they were stronger than us in the Southwest. New Orleans, however, belonged to Alchemists and the Mid-West was neutral, pending the city.

Around the world, Templar outnumbered us in Rome and Latin America, and we them in Paris and the United Kingdom. The Middle East was contentious, with each laying claim throughout the region, and the rest of the world, divided throughout.

“They are building an army,” he corrected.

“Not possible,” I rejected the idea, knowing the value our enemy placed on lineage. “Foregoing bloodline for numbers is counter to everything they believe.”

Luke and Gryphon looked at one another, a silent conversation passing between the two.

“What?” I demanded.

“Darkness is brewing,” Gryphon said gravely. “The kind that will bring everything to an end if we do not act.”

“We have defended our existence for nearly a millennia, and we will for another if needed.”

“It’s not that simple,” Luke dismissed my rebuttal.

“Yes, it is,” I pushed back. “So, they are welcoming anyone who wants to join them. That doesn’t exactly create a super army.”

“That’s not what they’re doing.”

“Then what are they doing? Because so far, I don’t hear anything—”

“Tell her,” Luke commanded.

Gryphon held his hand over the fire pedestal closest to him. The flame twisted under the weight—turning from red to blue—then returned to normal as he removed it.

“Malevolents,” he said somberly.

“What about them?” I asked, loathing for the evil that set our war in motion, tugging at my core.

“They are working with the Templar.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Is it?” he asked, his hand already healed.

“They were eliminated,” I grabbed my wrists, the broken skin nearly mended as well.

“History is written by the victors and what happened between the Malevolents and the Knights Templar was written by The Church. The world knew what they wanted it to know.”

“We exist because of what happened. To suggest it was a lie...”

“The Church did betray our kind,” he agreed. “That which is core to our existence is still true, but the eradication of Malevolents and the excommunication of their beloved Templar knights was just another deception.”

I thought of the barbs exchanged with Templar during the heat of battle; righteous piety and desire for our blood driving many an insult. Their faith in The Church had not waned in more than eight centuries, despite having been removed from both favor, and history.

“What are you saying?” I asked, my spine tingling.

“The Knights Templar killed thousands in the name of The Church. Did you ever ask why they would renounce their most devout soldiers for doing exactly what they were created to do?”

“If they were working together, we would know. We would have seen them together.”

Gryphon looked to Luke, who nodded with encouragement, then crossed the chamber and disappeared—emerging seconds later, carrying something in his hands. Setting it gently on the table, he motioned for me to join him. Doing as he commanded, I walked over and inhaled with surprise when I realized what it was.

The Diary—the most precious of Alchemist artifacts—was inches from me; brown leather cover worn soft over time. The pages sticking out at the edges were different shades and textures—thickness indicating the wealth of knowledge inside—and the stretching of the bindings as Gryphon lifted the cover, acknowledged the book’s fragility.

“This Diary,” he began, “does not just hold the secrets of our ancestors and the past, but those of the universe and the future.”

Small dust particles rose into the air as Gryphon began turning the pages, a hint of spice tickling my nose. The air around me grew warm and it felt as if I were traveling through time.

Luke walked over to where we stood—eyes focused on The Diary—and I could see by his stance, he had protected both it and Gryphon for a long, long time.

“From the beginning, Alchemists were fascinated by the universe...a perfect disunion from the sun to the stars, born out of chaos. It was their desire to know how it came to be and functioned, which became the focus of their work.”

As he turned the pages, the penmanship changed—growing from simple strokes to long, elegant script—and I grew curious of what entries, if any, had been written by one of my ancestors.

“It was through their research they uncovered this,” Gryphon paused, stopping on what appeared to be a drawing of the solar system. “It is a sketch of a carving uncovered in the Mesopotamian ruins of Dara. And this,” he turned the page, revealing another of similar design, “one of an etching from the Temple of Amun in Thebes.”

While primitive, the strokes were precise—the sketch reflecting an exactness of knowledge that was thousands of years ahead of the time for both civilizations.

“But this,” he flipped the page, stopping on a third image, “was drawn by an Alchemist during the time of Ptolemy II.”

I reached out and touched the parchment, running my finger down the fragile page’s edge. It was drawn with care, the attention to detail reflecting the artist’s consideration for the subject, and I wondered if in our feud with the Templar, had we strayed so far from our original purpose, that who we had been, was no longer part of who we were.

“An Alchemist sketched this after witnessing a rare cosmic event, where all planets were visible in the sky. It was not until Alchemists stumbled upon the discoveries in Thebes and Dara years later, did they realize each was evidence of similar occurrences that had happened during those civilizations.”

As he again turned the pages, I saw when combined, the sketches created a flipbook that showed the planets moving closer together.

“When combined in the right order of the time in which they occurred, you can see a steady progression of the planets moving closer together.”

“What is that?” I asked, as he stopped on the last page. The planets had been drawn in a line, starting at the sun.

“The end.”

“Of?”

“Everything.”

The line of an elegy I read once came to mind—*From chaos, came creation...and order, the end.*

“Our ancestors believed just as the universe was born from chaos, it would one day return to order,” he explained. “And when this happens, a second schism will occur.”

Evidence of past cosmic events is proof of the universe's gradual progression towards that moment. Of this moment," he pointed at the drawing.

"What will happen when they align?"

"The universe as we know it will end, and a new one will begin."

Realizing why The Church hated our kind all those centuries ago, slammed into me. "We believed the divination they preached was false."

"For years Alchemists studied the universe, without persecution, but then The Church's influence grew and demanded their beliefs as preeminent. The more who believed their gospel, the fewer there would be to pursue the truth. So," he paused, taking a deep breath, "to make sure the truth was not discovered, any evidence of these cosmic events that The Church could find they destroyed."

"That's why they want The Diary."

"The Diary is the last known item in existence that challenges the universe, not their god, is in charge," he nodded. "And it, which both gives, and takes life, away."

"And Malevolents...where do they fit in?"

Gryphon again skipped forward a few pages, coming to a stop on the drawing of a hooded figure in a long robe.

"Stories of their arrival with each cosmic event were also found in Thebes and Dara, but this was drawn by Alchemists after their first encounter with a Malevolent...and the pages that follow, detail those that have arrived since, and the four that will come before the end."

"Sounds like The Four Horsemen," I replied with disdain, well aware of the apocalyptic harbingers prophesied by The Church.

"That is who they are," he looked to me. "Only, we call them the Quattro Praenuntia—Death, Famine, War, and Conquest. The vilest of the Malevolents."

“Unbelievable...The Church fabricated their own creation story and folded the Malevolents into their scripture.”

“Remember what I said about history,” Gryphon raised an eyebrow.

“The Church would have said anything to gain followers.”

“And they did,” he nodded.

“Why do they exist?” I stared into the dark pools of black where eyes should be.

“Everything in the universe is about balance,” Gryphon explained. “For good, there is evil—and for dark, there is light. Malevolents,” he paused, “are the dark. Just as there was light at the beginning, so too, will there be darkness at the end.”

“And The Church has been working with them all this time?” I asked, looking back up.

“The Church established their alliance the day our ancestors were deceived.”

“Was that when the last cosmic event occurred?”

“It was,” he confirmed.

“Then how have the Malevolents been here all this time? If they arrive with each cosmic event...”

“The Church invited their existence in the mortal world, in exchange for their service. And, their agreement has suited their needs. With every evil they dispel, they push followers to their faith.”

“The growth of Templar,” I nodded, the puzzle pieces now coming together.

He nodded. “They have been recruiting followers and the Templar army.”

“So, the end has begun.”

“It has.”

“Can the Quattro be stopped?”

“They can.”

“How?”

“The League...this is the reason for its existence. Fire, Air, Earth, and Water created the universe and it is they which can protect it from destruction. This sketch,” he looked down at the page, “was drawn by the first Commander.”

I gripped the table and looked down—rocked by everything I had learned. “How could you have kept this a secret? I should have known. We all, should have known.”

“Oh, come on,” Luke threw up his hands in exasperation. “You know exactly what would have happened had you known.”

My head whipped up and I stared at him. He was right. I did know. I would have hunted The Church until neither followers, nor altars, remained.

“This changes nothing. We still hate Templar, and they us,” he continued.

“Anna,” Gryphon added, “this is bigger than any blood-feud.”

“What happens if we stop the Quattro?”

“The end does not come, and we continue hunting Templar as we have done.”

“And if we don’t?”

“It will be the end.”

“And The Church and Templar?”

“Nothing will exist, including Alchemists. Not even immortality can endure the end.”

I thought about the idea of nothing left in existence—not The Church, nor Templar. “Maybe this is how it is supposed to be.”

Luke looked at me, an expression of shock and confusion on his face. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Were you not listening to everything Gryphon just said?”

“Anna,” Gryphon reasoned. “Our existence has a greater purpose. You must see this now. If the Quattro is not stopped, everything our ancestors believed in will have been for nothing. This world...the universe. All of it, will cease to exist.”

I had no empathy for the mortal world. Perhaps it was because I could not remember having ever been part of it. Despite the affinity our ancestors had for it, I knew the answer to my earlier question—we had not been who they were for hundreds of years. Everything changed when the Templar declared war on our kind, and my desire was for revenge—not to save the universe.

“Why me? Why not one who already has element affinity?”

“There is no one else.”

“What do you mean?”

“No Alchemist has ascended with element affinity for decades.”

“How is that possible?”

“The ability has faded over time, with fewer and fewer possessing the gift each generation.”

“But you tested me. I was not able to command any of the elements.”

“Your ability to hunt was natural and where you were needed, so it was there I focused your training. But we no longer have a choice, Anna. We must try harder. A Commander can stop a Malevolent, but only the power of all four can stop the Quattro.”

Silence filled the chamber.

“Who did we lose?” I asked finally.

“*You* didn’t lose anything,” Luke answered bitterly.

“Which ability is missing?” I asked, ignoring his response.

“Water,” Gryphon replied.

“Water?”

“Those who command water are fierce—its power, absolute.”

I wanted to believe somewhere in me was the ability of element command—even if it was water, and not fire, as I assumed was the strongest and more destructive of the elements. But even in war, alternatives needed to be considered.

“What happens if I’m not the one?”

“Instead of asking that question, perhaps consider another—what if you are?”

Gryphon believed I had an ability that only three Alchemists possessed—a power that once the Quattro were eliminated, could be used to hunt The Church and Templar to extinction. Maybe I was thinking about this all wrong. Maybe it was worth it—to fight a battle I cared little about, to win a war that was my reason for existence?

As if reading my mind, Gryphon closed The Diary and pulled it close, smiling. “You go now,” he nodded, then turned and disappeared again into the shadows, leaving Luke and me in silence.