

Elements of Vengeance

By
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Chapter 1: Hunter

I straightened my back and stood tall, staring down the alley. Months of tracking my enemy had brought me here -- the bowels of the city-- where crumbling buildings and abandoned streets provided safe haven to the downtrodden and forgotten. It was a hell of a place to die, but I couldn't think of a more fitting end for a Templar.

He was bigger than me, and no doubt possessed great strength, but when the time came to do what needed to be done, size would bear no consequence. As an Alchemist, I was smarter and faster, and regardless of his brawn, protected by the very gift that made us adversaries.

I was immortal, and for centuries his kind had thirst for our blood. The feud, which began more than eight hundred years ago on the battlefields of the Holy War, now spilled into the streets of the modern world. And like hunters before me, was the reason for my existence.

Like every Alchemist, I was bound by a covenant of revenge -- a promise passed down from generation to generation, to rid the world of those who tried to eliminate our kind. But, while at first, I was driven by the revenge in my blood, my need to hunt turned visceral. I craved it. When I hunted, I was fulfilled.

Removing a dagger from my hip holster, I began my approach, running its blade against the crumbling brick wall of the alley.

My target turned and sneered, brandishing a weapon of his own. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Stepping under the light from a broken streetlamp overhead, I watched with bemusement as his expression changed from anger to interest. Like most mortals he was intrigued by appearance -- the very nature of his DNA making it impossible to deny a response.

Alchemist's became immortal through ascension. On the eve of our twenty-first birthday, we claimed the birthright in our blood and joined the fight to which we were bound. From that moment on, all signs of aging stopped, advancing only when injured. Having been trained by one of the greatest hunters of our kind, I looked no older than I did the night I ascended.

Ten years had passed, yet my appearance remained frozen in time. My porcelain skin was flawless, and my physique, coltish. However, looks could be deceiving. The girl with violet eyes and long, blue-black hair, staring down the enemy at the other end of the alley, was no girl at all but a lethal hunter -- a viable adversary capable of death. Judging this book by its cover would be the last thing my target ever did.

"We can do this the easy way, or the hard way," I shot back, spinning the dagger in my hand; glass crunching underfoot as I resumed my approach.

"Sweetheart, we can do it any way you want," he shot back, eyeing me lasciviously.

"Wrong answer," I reached into my other hip holster, removing a second dagger.

"Bring it, bitch!" he snarled, any trace of appreciation vanishing from his eyes.

I laughed, turning my head from side to side, stretching the muscles in my neck, and then flicked one of the daggers in his direction. It traveled down the alley, blade catching the moon's light on rotation, and as it was about to reach him, followed it up with the other. The Templar caught both easily and flicked them back in my direction. Anticipating the move, I jumped up and extended my legs to the side, kicking the first dagger with the toe of one boot and the second, the heel of the other.

While I once resented the endless training I had to endure, it had been necessary. Unlike other Alchemists who, upon ascension, received the memories of their ancestors, I did not. I had no knowledge of the line from which I descended, nor how they had fought our enemy.

I also did not know anything about my mortal life. No knowledge of family or where I came from. The world I left behind was as unfamiliar to me as the one I had awakened in, and it put me at a disadvantage. The only thing I did know was my name - Anna -- which had been etched into the medallion that hung around my neck.

Gryphon, however, Head of the Conscientious, the governing body of Alchemist elders, was adamant I belonged -- my ascension proof -- and took it upon himself to train me. It was he who helped me understand the violent need for retribution in our blood and passed on all he knew about our enemy.

Under his guidance my lithe frame, which initially appeared better suited for couture than combat, grew strong, and my mind, sharp and cunning. Not having the memories of my ancestors became a forgotten detriment and I evolved into the hunter I was today.

"Tell me Templar," I stopped mid-way down the alley. "What do you prefer it to say?"

"What do I prefer *what* says?" he shot back irritated.

"Your headstone."

"The only one that will be dying tonight, is you."

"Is that so?"

He nodded and reached under his coat, but I did not flinch. Whatever his weapon, it was no threat.

"It's a shame I have to use this on you," he grinned, removing a sword. It looked like the others favored by his kind: black blade, leather hilt, and blood red cross etched into the pommel. "We could have had some fun."

If there was one thing that I hated more than a Templar, it was the cross flashing brightly back at me. Their devout piety had started this feud, and the symbol they had fought and killed under, filled me with contempt.

"Funny," I lifted my hand over my head, reaching for the wrapped handle of the sword lying flat against my back. "I was just thinking about how much fun I am going to have with you."

Unlike my smaller daggers, which were meant to deter and weaken, this weapon was different. Anachronistic in appearance, it was well-suited for battle -- the sword's lethality masked by its sleek, simple beauty. Gryphon bequeathed it to me before my first fight and I vowed to honor it and make him proud.

Adjusting my grip, I lifted the sword high over my head and held it out in front of me; the covenant etched into the blade -- *ad vitam aeternam* -- filling me with strength. *To eternal life* -- the words that connected every Alchemist -- was our one and only vow.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, eyes skimming over me.

"Something tells me," I rolled my wrist, carving small circles in the air, "not quite what you're thinking."

"It's a shame," he paused, shaking his head. "I could have found a good use for that mouth of yours."

The sound of movement shifted his attention from me to the shadows. He appeared surprised, but I was not. I could feel the presence of another, all along.

"You're confident," a new voice joined our exchange.

"But young," my target added, turning his attention back to me. "I got this."

"I'm sure you do," the new Templar said, stepping into the light. "Just the same," he added, "I'm intrigued by this one."

The Templar I had been hunting was young, but this one was different. Now clearly visible, I took note of his appearance. He wore a black suit and red tie; hair slicked back, polished to perfection. Speaking with authority -- lines from age carved deep in his skin -- I knew without hesitation what he was.

“A Venerate,” I said matter of fact, raising an eyebrow.

The oldest of their kind, the life of a Venerate was, like our Elders, protected at all cost. The only Alchemist they would fight was a Bastion -- the oldest of my kind. It was the only code that existed between us, and not once in nearly a millennia had it been broken.

“Your Bastion has taught you well,” he smiled. “Tell me child—”

“I am no child.”

“No?”

“No,” I straightened, holding my sword firmly at my side.

“So,” he eyed me curiously, “the deception of youth hides the heart of a tiger.”

I lifted my jaw and said nothing.

He looked to the younger Templar and nodded. “She will be a worthy adversary.”

My target’s smile returned with the approval of his Elder. “It really is a shame we have to vanquish you.”

“You will be vanquishing nothing,” I said dryly.

“Is that so?” he scoffed.

I ignored him, turning my attention back to the Venerate. The younger Templar was at the moment, of little interest. He would meet his fate, there was no doubt. The Elder on the other hand...

“Is there something you’d like to say?” he asked, sensing my curiosity.

I narrowed my eyes and considered his demeanor. He was calm and tranquil, yet his eyes never left me. It was almost as if he were searching for something.

“He was talking to you,” the younger Templar said angrily when I did not respond, his grin fading.

The Venerate held up his hand and my target silenced.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but now that we’ve reached this point...”

“What point would that be?” he asked.

“Where I eliminate him,” I pointed at the younger Templar with my sword, “while you watch.”

My target curled his free hand into a fist. “Shut your mouth, witch!”

Pulling my sword upright in front of me, I examined it carefully, before bringing it down onto my palm.

“Despite your bravado, you are no match for me. I can do this,” I pulled the blade across my skin, “but you cannot. You will always be what you are. Mortal...and liars.”

“Liars?” the Venerate asked incredulously.

“The pious always have been the greatest deceivers.”

“We didn’t deceive you,” my target lurched forward, easily provoked by my words.

“No?” I questioned, mocking his self-righteousness.

“What was done was necessary.”

“For whom?”

“Mankind.”

“Your kind delivered the world from evil, is that it?”

“That’s right.”

“And you had no help, whatsoever?”

“Only the guidance of The Lord.”

While he was trying hard to be strong, I knew he was weakening. There was nothing a Templar wanted more than our blood, and my target, no matter how hard he tried, was unable to pull his attention from it. Once upon a time they possessed the gift that coursed through my veins -- and it had been my kind that had both given and taken it away.

In the 12th century, Malevolents, an ancient evil fueled by a thirst for souls, ravaged the battlefields of the Holy Wars -- turning the wounded into the damned and the dead into the undead. The Church, believing it was their job to protect the world from darkness, ordered its private army, the Knights Templar, to eliminate Malevolents from existence.

Having witnessed the ancient evil’s carnage, the Knights Templar turned to Alchemists for help. It had been rumored they had created the philosopher’s stone -- a highly coveted panacea that granted eternal life -- and the Knights Templar believed its power, alongside their faith, would give them the strength needed to rid the world of Malevolents.

“The only reason your kind is here is because of mine.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s the truth and you know it. Had they only trusted their intuition...”

At first the Alchemists refused -- hesitant to aid those who had condemned alchemy as witchcraft, and those who practiced it as the devil’s soldiers. But eventually

they agreed, countering the Knight Templar's ask, with one of their own. In exchange for the panacea, they demanded a decree from The Church that would give them the freedom to practice alchemy, without denunciation.

The Knights Templar agreed, but had no intention of ever honoring the deal. Once the Malevolents had been eliminated, Alchemist's became their next target. Fueled by the power of immortality, the Knights Templar tried to bury the secret of the gift they possessed and executed every Alchemist.

Looking at the Templar in front of me -- knowing it had been their ancestors that deceived mine -- filled me with rage. But along with the anger was the strength of thousands, reminding me it was our kind that in the end, had the last word.

Knowing the lengths to which the Knights Templar would go in their quest for revenge, Alchemists reversed the gift in their blood, and in turn, bound it to their children. By the time the Knights Templar arrived to carry out the executions, the children of Alchemists were across the sea, starting a new life, free from persecution.

It is in the blood of their descendants the gift has been passed, and the progeny of the Knights Templar that have pursued it. I could feel them now -- every Alchemist that had come before -- begging me to avenge the deaths of our ancestors.

"Incredible," I wrapped my bloody hand around the one gripping the handle of my sword. "More than eight centuries, and yet, you still can't admit your treachery. No wonder your God abandoned you," I paused, looking from my target to the Venerate. "Doesn't it bother you...to know the God you lied for...the God you killed for, forsake you in the end?"

"Do not presume to understand the will of God," he responded stoically.

"Well," I smiled wryly. "I think we both know who received the short end of the will stick."

My target pushed past the Venerate, ready to fight. "It's time to meet the same fate as your ancestors!"

I tossed my head back and laughed. “Natura nihil frustra facit.” Latin, the language they considered theirs, rolled effortlessly off my tongue, stoking their anger. “Nature does nothing in vain,” I translated pointedly.

“Nature made a mistake allowing any of your kind to live, while mine—”

“Your kind what?” I cut off the hollow rebuke. “Let me tell you something about *your kind*. Your kind were hypocrites...worshipping at a golden altar, preaching righteousness, all the while coveting a gift your beloved Church condemned.”

“God was with us when we defeated the Malevolents. It was his will that allowed our victory.”

“We gave you the power! My kind. We gave you your success. Not your God!”

A car horn blasted on the street, as a cat howled behind the trash cans at the mouth of the alley. It, too, seemed ready to fight.

“Well,” I smiled, the adrenaline coursing through me fueling my focus. “The joke was on you. Where are they?” I asked, looking around for emphasis. “Where is your beloved Church now?”

Upon learning of the Knight Templar’s actions, The Church excommunicated their beloved soldiers and in the blink of an eye, the mercenaries who carried their banner and fought under allegiance of the cross, all but disappeared from history -- stories of their existence relegated to fables and folklore.

“Irony, isn’t it?” I cut him off. “All those years you killed in their name...believed in *them*, yet they no longer believed in *you*.”

“Honor comes at a price,” the Venerate said simply.

“Was it worth it?”

“One day the glory of the Knights Templar will be restored.”

“That will never happen. You will never get your hands on The Diary.”

The only thing the Templar craved more than our blood was The Diary -- a sacred relic of alchemical research dating back thousands of years.

Pursued by countless explorers throughout history, it included the Alchemist's most coveted secrets, including the invocation used to take away the power of immortality from the Knights Templar all those years ago. But only The Conscientious knew its whereabouts and not once since our war began, had the Templar come close to finding it.

“Who cares about some old book?” the younger Templar shrugged.

“Silence!” the Venerate commanded.

“But she thinks—”

“I do not care what she thinks. In another minute, it will not matter.”

“Is there something you know that I don't?”

“The Templar you're about to fight is one of my best students,” the Venerate looked at my target with pride.

Electricity shot down my spine; fingers tingling with anticipation. “And your point?”

“It will take him no more than a minute to snap that lovely neck of yours.”

“Is that so?”

“Mmmm,” he nodded, “Unless of course, you are willing to submit to whatever he desires, in exchange for a swift, and painless vanquishing.”

“Oh, I promise you,” I said with confidence, the time for words coming to an end. “Death is coming. But not for me.”

Closing the space between us quickly, I pushed off of the ground and flipped over my target's head, landing behind him. He turned and smiled, holding his sword at an angle, and then launched into his counterattack -- coming at me quickly, lifting his arm to strike. But just as he was about to bring it down, he stopped abruptly; a look of confusion sweeping across his face.

While jumping overhead -- a move the Templar did not anticipate -- I sliced clean through his neck; my sword's blade cutting so quickly he had not felt it. Only when he looked at my sword's blade did he realize what happened.

Dropping his sword to the ground, he reached up and grabbed his throat with both hands -- confusion changing to fear as the blood began to flow. But the harder he gripped, the faster it gushed through his fingers, and down onto his chest.

Knowing he was seconds from death filled me with satisfaction, and I locked my eyes onto his, waiting for the moment to come. No matter their death, it always did -- when they prayed to their God for salvation. I enjoyed knowing in those seconds, when their faith was at its strongest, our retribution was at its greatest -- our eyes those that followed them into death.

After he fell to the ground, lifeless, I turned to the Venerable -- not sure what he would say. But in a surprise move he did not say anything and instead, lifted his hand and brought it down hard against my cheek.

"Too bad you couldn't teach that to your student," I smiled wickedly, reaching up to my cheek.

I waited for a response -- some sort of acknowledgement of matched wit. But instead of responding with words, he reached for my neck and lifted me off the ground, slamming me against the brick wall.

Gripping my sword tight, I prepared to defend myself -- arching my back to open the space between us. But the Venerable wrapped his hand around the blade and yanked it out of my hand, throwing it to the ground.

His hold was stronger than any Templar I had ever fought. Yet as amazed as I was by his strength, I was even more so by his actions. I was not a Bastion and his willingness to attack me was unprecedented.

“My son was right,” he turned my face from side to side, examining me. “We could have found a use for you.”

“Your...son,” I choked, his grip beginning to cut off my air. “Must be...proud.”

“His brothers will be looking for you once I tell them what you have done.”

The group of Templars I had seen my target with over the last few days flashed in mind. Their builds may have been different, but they shared the same sickening, entitled smile; the one that stared back at me.

“Can't...wait,” I reached for his hand and tried to pry it from my throat. But the Venerate lifted me higher.

“Oh, I don't know about that,” he smiled. “They can be...a little rough. I can only imagine what they will do to you.”

I grit my teeth and stared back, defiant.

“Where's that pretty little tongue of yours now?” he asked.

“You're...a Venerate.”

“And?”

“Why ...fight...me?”

“Maybe it's time.”

“For?”

He looked at me intently before responding. “To end his war, once and for all.”

I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with as much air as I could summon, and upon my exhale, slammed my forehead against his. The Venerate stumbled backwards and I followed up with a kick to his chest to widen the distance between us.

He stared at me, collecting himself; eyes filled with neither defiance, nor defeat, but something else entirely. "You know what will happen if you do this," he ran a hand over his head, pushing back an errant lock of hair.

If the Venerate decided to challenge me I would have to defend myself, no matter the consequence.

"I know *exactly* what will happen," I said and reached for my sword, wrapping both hands around the handle.

He may be strong, but strength was no match for my sword's blade. Every battle would always boil down to survival -- ours over theirs -- and no matter what happened, I knew Gryphon would support me, code be damned.

"Good," he nodded, and then lunged at me.

But there was no battle. No dance of skill. The blade of my sword penetrated his chest sliding through easily like a knife would butter. And the Venerate, instead of trying to pull free, wrapped his hand around mine and leaned in, pushing the blade straight through his back.

Our eyes locked -- centuries of hatred passing between us -- and just as soon as it began, it ended. Without a prayer, without protest, he slumped down onto my shoulder and using his last breath whispered, "sic infit."

The words were unfamiliar; perhaps a prayer of the Templar Elders. Having never battled one, I did not know. But whatever it meant, the words appeared to grant him a strange sense of peace, and it only irritated me more.

Like his duplicitous ancestors, he tricked me into a battle he never planned to fight. He forced my hand to break the code.

“Mors tua vita mea,” I said angrily, removing the sword, then pushing him to the ground.

Your death, my life I thought ironically, as I wiped my blade clean. Never had it been truer than tonight. Gryphon had to know of the Venerate’s provocation.

Sliding my sword back into its holster, I turned on my heel and headed back down the alley. The death of a Venerate would be felt among all Templars. Tonight, it would be quiet; they would be in mourning. But when the sun came up, they would arrive in legions, hungry to vanquish the Alchemist that broke the code, and killed a Templar elder.

