



Elixir

Author: *Jennifer L. Armentrout*

Category: Young Adult

Description:

Total Pages (Source): 13

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

CHAPTER 1

ALEX CLENCHED THE TITANIUM BARS HONED BY Hephaestus and Apollo, amber-colored eyes burning with hate. But those eyes... they didn't belong to Alex.

Alex's eyes were warm and brown like good whiskey. I'd memorized those eyes the first time I saw them in that warehouse in Atlanta. This was a different creature entirely.

When we'd moved her to the safe house deep in Apple River, Illinois, we'd almost lost her. None of us, including me, had been ready for the full display of her power. If Apollo hadn't finagled Hephaestus—the only god who could build something that could withstand the Apollyon—into creating a room to keep Alex in, we wouldn't have been able to control her.

“If you don't let me out of here, I'm going to rip your brother's ribs out and wear them as a crown.”

I showed no emotion. Perhaps I'd grown used to the intimidations over the last couple of days. Threatening to kill Deacon was one of Alex's favorites. She'd grow bored with it soon enough. It hadn't been like that at first. She'd been... almost normal, except for her amber-colored eyes. She'd talked and sounded like Alex. Cracked jokes like Alex. Argued like Alex. And she'd reasoned like Alex.

She clenched the titanium bars. Each bar had been encased with an unbreakable chain-link net that Hephaestus had used on Aphrodite once. Not even the Apollyon could break through it.

Above her, several marks had been carved into the cement, neutralizing most of her newly-discovered abilities—not fully stopping her, but enough that she wasn’t a danger to herself or others.

For now.

My blood boiled at the memory of what’d happened after she’d Awakened. She’d connected with the First—Seth—and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that she’d given up her location. I’d completely understood that she needed to be moved and quickly, but I didn’t agree with how Apollo had done it.

He’d hit her with a god-bolt.

And I’d punched him.

I was still surprised that I was alive.

“Do you know how it’s going to feel when you stand there and watch me do it?” she taunted. “Just like you stood there and watched your parents get slaughtered by daimons, but this will be much, much sweeter.”

I folded my arms.

Exhaling slowly, she lowered her head and blinked back tears. “Please. Aiden please let me out of here.”

I closed my eyes. A muscle spasmed along my jaw. This... this tactic was the hardest.

“Why are you treating me like this? I don’t feel good. I hurt. Why did you let them hurt me like this?”

My eyes flew open. Every muscle in my body went rigid. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and for a moment—just a moment—I forgot that it wasn't really Alex in there, pleading and begging me.

“I thought you loved me?”

I moved so fast I startled her. My hands shot through the bars, claspings the sides of her face. My forehead pressed against the cold bars and my lips were on hers. The kiss was hard and fast. Angry. Desperate. She went still, unsure of how to respond. Several times in the past forty-eight hours it had been the only way to shut her up.

I pulled back, releasing her. “Because I love you, I won't release you.”

Frustration rolled off her and threatened to tear the skin from my bones. The teary gaze was gone in an instant. Alex screamed and threw herself to the back of the cell. Ten feet away from the bars, she leaned against the wall, back bowed. “You can't keep me in here forever.”

“I can try.”

“He's coming for me.”

“He'll never find you,” I said, sitting down in the metal chair placed before the cell. I'd made sure she had everything she needed in there—a small bathroom off the one room, a bed that she'd destroyed and had been stripped down to just a mattress, and clothing.

Alex laughed, pushing off the wall. “You can't take him.”

My gaze fell to the untouched plate of food by the barred door. “Eat, Alex. You need to eat.”

“You can never be him.”

I rubbed the growth of facial hair along my jaw as she slowly approached the plate of food, and hope sparked deep inside me. She hadn't eaten in the four days since she'd Awakened. I had no idea how she was still walking around. Picking up the plate of food, she backed away.

“Are you going to eat the food this time?” I asked wearily.

Alex smiled and then threw the plate directly at where I sat. Plastic crashed against titanium before clattering on the floor. Pieces of food—maybe mashed potatoes and some kind of meat—made it through the bars, splattering my chest and cheek. We'd stopped giving her ceramic plates after she'd tried to turn the broken shards into weapons.

Drawing on patience I was running out of, I slowly knocked the chunks of food off me. “Did that make you feel better, Alex?”

She pouted. “Not really.” Then she started pacing, her movements fluid and spellbinding in spite of the fact she'd thrown her dinner at me again. “I can't take this any longer. Let me out or, so help me, I will destroy you.”

I shook my head. “Alex, you have to be in there. I know you. My heart would not be beating if you were truly gone.”

Dropping onto the mattress, she growled. “Gods, isn't that just so sweet? My heart is all aflutter.”

“There he is.” I stood and grasped the bars, mirroring her earlier actions. “I wondered how long it would take to bring you out. Does my love for her bother you, Seth?”

She rolled onto her side, brows pinched and face pale. “Seth’s not in here, you stupid pure-blood.”

“It hurts when he’s connected to you, doesn’t it?”

“He’s not in here!” she screamed, her voice cracking.

I knew she was lying. “He’s there.” I leaned against the bars. “I can see him in your eyes.”

Alex curled, tucking her knees to her chest. A shiver rolled through her. I knew what she was doing—retreating inside herself, reaching out to Seth, making contact with him.

“Alex,” I said.

Her hands curled into fists as she lifted her head. “Go away.”

My eyes met hers. “Never.”

“I hate you,” she hissed, and she sounded like she meant it. “I hate you!”

“That’s not true. Alex loves me.”

She rolled her eyes. “I am Alex, you idiot. And I don’t love you. I need—”

“You need Seth.” Fire snapped through me as I gripped the bars until my knuckles ached. Deep down, I knew it wasn’t just Seth that was forcing her to behave like this. Yeah, some of what she said was Seth to the core, but it was the need driving her. The need to be near the First was a tangible thing—potent and real.

I could taste it.

I remembered what the oracle had told her about need over the summer. Part of me hadn't fully understood it then, but I did now. Need was destroying her, destroying me.

"Need is not love, Alex."

Before Alex could respond, the door opened. "Oh!" She unfurled her legs and clapped her hands. "More visitors for little old me? I'm just so damn lucky. I'm tired of seeing his face."

Marcus, Alex's pure-blooded uncle, glanced at me. "I see she's in good spirits."

I snorted.

She rose to her feet, swaying unnaturally to the far right. The mattress, the last item left in the room, floated several feet off the floor. We'd removed everything else. Elemental use now came easy to her. She seemed to just will it to happen and it did. And gods, did she ever love doing it.

Marcus and I stared, morbidly fascinated with the display. It was stronger than yesterday, which meant the protective magic was wearing off. Hephaestus would need to make another visit and soon.

"And where is here?" She pushed with those words, fueling them with power.

I stepped back as her words rippled through me, breathed inside me. Forcing myself to break eye contact with Alex, I turned to Marcus. His eyes were glazed over and vacant. He was seconds away from spilling our location. I placed my hand on Marcus' shoulder.

He blinked, and then swore. “Is it just me or is she getting better at that?”

Alex giggled, and it sounded off, reminding me of that creepy little boy in Pet Sematary. The one who had ran around killing people with a scalpel.

“I think so. You’d think she’d grow weaker, since she hasn’t eaten a damn thing.” I watched her move back to the mattress. She stopped, glancing over her shoulder at us. Her eyes narrowed, and I couldn’t wait to find out what she was now up to. “Anyway, we need to make sure no one comes down here.”

Marcus nodded. The house was another piece of property owned by Solos’ father, but this one had more Sentinel traffic. Some stopped in while traveling to new assignments, although we had to keep the door to the basement sealed when strangers were in the house, which was often. The place was hopping with the most recent events. Many were being moved out of the west, heading either toward what was left of Deity Island or to the Covenant in New York.

“Marcus?” Alex faced us.

“Yes, Alexandria?”

One side of her lips tipped up as her gaze slid to mine. “Does it bother you that Aiden and I have been. how do I put this? He’s seen me naked? Multiple times.”

Oh. Dear. Gods. Here we go again. Shaking my head, I scrubbed my hand over my eyes. “Alex...”

Marcus stiffened. “I’ve had time to come to terms with it. I can’t say that I’m surprised, though.” He glanced at me, scowling. “If there’s a rule, you’ll break it, Alex. But I didn’t expect Aiden to be so...”

“Irresponsible?” she supplied helpfully, and I rolled my eyes. “And such a bastard to take advantage of me—your poor niece who has been through so much? He took advantage of me. Used a compulsion on me. He forced me.”

My hand dropped to my side. Horror rolled through me, leaving me reeling. She didn’t just... she had.

“He’s a bastard,” Marcus responded coolly, “but I doubt he took advantage of you or used a compulsion.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

Alex shrugged as she drifted toward us. “He broke the rules. Shouldn’t you be more upset?”

“Honestly, out of everything that is going on, that’s the least of my worries.” Marcus smiled, and her eyes flared a heated tawny color. “And really, if we are going to make a list tallying up how many rules have been broken, I think you top it.”

“But he used compulsion on a pure.”

“And you killed one. Tit for tat, Alexandria.” Although this wasn’t the first time we’d had this conversation with Alex, it never failed to amaze me how calm Marcus remained through it.

“Then you should punish us.” She leaned into the bars, but kept her hands to her sides. “Rules are rules, Uncle. Take us to the Council.”

“We’re not letting you out,” I cut in. “Move on to something else, Alex.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

She pulled her lips back and made a very real-sounding hiss. “How about you come in here?”

I flashed my teeth at her. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Her hands flexed at her sides and she moved back from the bars, keeping her eyes trained on me. “I’d love it.”

The door opened, spilling light down the concrete stairs. Marcus turned, but I kept my gaze on Alex. There was a challenge in her stare—a dare. She wanted to fight, and even with her elemental powers lagging, she’d be a hell of an opponent. More skilled than the last time I’d goaded her into fighting me. Thinking of that, I was reminded of how that fight had ended.

Alex had kissed me.

My stomach tightened, even though I knew it wouldn’t end that way this time. If she got her hands on me, she’d try to kill me. I had to keep reminding myself of that. When connected to Seth, she wasn’t the girl I’d admired when I’d seen her around the Covenant, or the one I’d fallen in love with.

“Marcus? Aiden?” Solos called from the top of the steps. “You guys down there?”

“Don’t come down here,” I reminded him, eyeing a suddenly alert Alex. Halfs were more susceptible to compulsions, and she packed one hell of a punch.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” he replied. “You guys are needed upstairs. Apollo’s back.”

Marcus shot me a look full of meaning, and then glanced at Alex before heading up the stairs. Apollo's arrival hopefully meant he'd found something to break the connection threading Alex and Seth together.

Alex shot toward the bars, gripping them. "Don't you dare leave me."

I heard Marcus' footfalls stop at the top of the steps. "I thought you were tired of my face, Alex."

Closing her eyes, she pressed her forehead against the bars. "I hate it in here. I can't take it. The silence... I hate the silence."

And I hated the razor edge of real pain in her voice. "You didn't answer my question."

The skin around her eyes crinkled as her brows knitted together. "Fine. Leave. I don't care. I hate you anyway."

Approaching the bars, I slipped my hand through. My fingers brushed aside the tangled mess of hair. Alex was so still I wasn't sure she was breathing as I found the chain and gently tugged it up so that the crystal rose was cradled in my palm.

She sucked in a sharp breath but didn't bolt.

"If you hated me, you would've destroyed this."

"Give me time and I will."

I laughed and let go of the rose. She opened her eyes, watching me warily. "No. You won't. As long as you wear that, I know there is still a part of you in there. That there is still hope."

Alex reached for the necklace, gripping it in a fist as she backed away. Instead of ripping it off her neck, she held onto it and retreated back to her mattress. Sitting down, she leaned against the wall and pulled her knees to her chest.

Hope grew like a fragile seedling, and I guarded it carefully. I pushed off the bars. “I’ll bring you something to eat and drink later.”

There was no answer, and I knew I wasn’t going to get one. Pivoting around, I hurried up the stairs. Marcus and Solos waited in the narrow hallway.

“She still hasn’t eaten?” Solos asked, rubbing his hand along the jagged scar that cut down his face from eye to jaw.

Walking past them, I shook my head. Her not eating was a huge concern. Apollyon or not, she couldn’t last much longer like this without lasting consequences.

Solos snapped at my heels. “We could always hold her down and force-feed her temperamental butt.”

“You come within a foot of her, and she’ll have you hanging yourself from the rafters in the basement.” Marcus shot the half-blood Sentinel a dark look. “Don’t even think it.”

“Not to mention I’m sure she’d just vomit the food back up.” I thrust my fingers through my hair as I headed toward the den. There was an unnatural stirring in the air, a fissure of power.

A god-like power.

“Heads up, guys, Apollo is not in a good mood,” Solos announced, and my stomach sank. “I don’t think he was successful in finding a way to break the bond. I hate to

say it—”

I whirled so fast on the half-blood that he took an unsteady step back. “Then don’t say it.”

“Aiden,” Marcus warned.

Solos held up his hands. “Look, all I’m saying is that we have to consider the possibility that we can’t break the bond.”

“There is nothing else to consider.” I took a deep breath, searched for the patience I’d cultivated while raising my brother, and didn’t find it. “We’ll find a way.”

“And if we don’t?” Solos shot back, shaking his head. “Do we let her out of the cage so she and Seth can go all Bonnie-and-Clyde on the world? Or do we let her rot in the basement and starve to death?”

“Solos, I am warning you that it would be wise to stop,” Marcus said.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like Alex. I think she’s a pretty cool kid,” Solos went on. “But isn’t it more humane to put her out of her misery instead—”

My fist connected with his jaw before I even knew what I was doing. His head jerked back as he staggered to the side. I shot forward, grabbing him by his shirt, and slammed him into the wall, rattling several paintings.

“Aiden!” Marcus yelled.

“We are not going to harm Alex,” I snarled, lifting the Sentinel onto the tips of his boots. “We aren’t going to touch a hair on her head. Do you understand me?”

Solos' eyes bugged. "I know you love her—"

"You don't know shit. You sure as hell don't know the lengths I will go to keep her safe." I dropped him and he slumped against the wall. "And if that means killing one half-blood to make sure nothing happens to her, I won't hesitate."

"As entertaining as you going all grrr on Solos is, we need to talk," came Apollo's booming voice from inside the den. "So knock it off, Aiden."

Solos straightened, cupping his jaw. "Aiden, I didn't mean—"

"Save it." I spun around and passed Marcus, storming into the den. Upon taking one look at Apollo, my eyes narrowed. "Don't say it."

"Oh, you going to hit me again? I kind of liked it that first time."

No way was I going there. I crossed the room and brushed back a heavy curtain. Night had fallen over the tall elm and oak trees. Their branches were still bare, like skeletons—a landscape I would've once found beautiful now seemed desolate and without hope.

"Have you discovered anything?" Marcus asked.

"I have, but we have bigger problems than Alex right now."

Facing both of them, I leaned against the cool windowpane. "How so?"

"Part of me is afraid to ask," Marcus said. Solos snickered, and then winced. Moving to the leather sofa, Marcus sat. "Because I really don't know what could be worse than Alex turning on all of us."

Apollo arched a brow. “Oh, this has it beat.”

“Are you just dragging this out for dramatic effect?” My patience was seriously lacking.

The eerie whites of his eyes crackled, and the scent of burning ozone filled the room. Marcus shook his head, but I raised my brows, unfazed, because honestly, nothing really fazed me anymore.

Apollo’s lips twitched into a smirk. “There’s a war brewing.”

CHAPTER 2

OKAY, I GUESSED IT WAS KIND OF HARD TO TOP THAT. A dry, biting laugh escaped me as I pushed off the window. “A war?”

Now that he had everyone’s attention, Apollo seemed to grow in height. “A war between the gods and those following the First.”

Marcus cursed. He’d been doing that a lot lately. “The gods are going to take on Seth?”

“They’re planning to take on Seth and anyone who stands with him.” His lip curled with distaste. “That would include Lucian.”

“There is no way Lucian could amass such a following.” Solos leaned over the back of the couch. “Joining him would be insanity.”

“But Lucian has the Apollyon. That alone holds an appeal.” Marcus leaned back, looking as weary as I felt.

“You are correct,” Apollo replied. “We have gained knowledge that many are siding with him.”

“Do you have spies?” I asked, curious.

Apollo smiled, and it was just as creepy as Alex’s childish giggle had been earlier. He snapped his finger and there was a burst of raw power that rolled through the room like a shockwave. A blue light shimmered beside Apollo and a human shape began to take form.

A man—nearly seven feet tall, with a crop of spiky blond hair—appeared. He bore a striking resemblance to Apollo and shared the same, all-white eyes. Dressed in cargo shorts, flip flops, and a Jimmy Buffett shirt, he looked like a college dropout.

And he was a god.

Maybe one day I’d get used to gods popping in and out like no tomorrow, but after spending my entire life never seeing one, it was almost overwhelming to stand in the same room with some of the most powerful creatures to ever exist.

Apparently some of the most pissed off, too.

Marcus shot to his feet quickly and bowed, along with Solos and me. Not that the god noticed. He turned to Apollo with a fierce scowl. “You snap your fingers and demand I just appear? Like I have nothing better to do?”

Apollo smirked. “Isn’t that what happened?”

“I am not one of your servants, brother. Next time I will break that finger off and shove it so far up your—”

“We have an audience.” Apollo gestured toward us, and I was sure we all wore the same expression of shock and awe. “And no one wants to hear about the things you like to do in your spare time, Dionysus.”

The god of wine and nonstop partying laughed at his brother and dropped into a chair. He stretched out his long legs and rubbed the scruff along his chin. “The least you could do is make sure I have some refreshments here.”

Marcus jerked to attention. “We can get something. There’s wine—”

“Not necessary.” Apollo’s eyes narrowed. “And the least you can do is hold a conversation for five minutes without being drunk.”

“Whatever.” Dionysus turned his head toward us and chuckled. Part of me wondered if he was drunk now. “Two pure-bloods and a half, but there’s something much, much more in this house.” His eyes flared as he sniffed the air. “Ah, yes, the little female Apollyon is here.”

I stiffened at the obvious sound of interest in Dionysus’ voice.

Apollo shot me a look, one that warned that no other god would be as tolerant as he’d been when it came to throwing punches. “You know she’s here and you know that’s not why you’re here.”

“Is that why you had Ananke in a tizzy this morning?” Dionysus smiled gamely.

At the sound of Ananke’s name, a thousand violent emotions roared alive inside me. I started to move but stopped. Coiled tension locked up my muscles. Apollo wouldn’t dare. Even Solos had paled. Everyone knew who and what Ananke presided over, and it didn’t bode well for Alex. Rage rendered me speechless, and before I could recover, Marcus spoke.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

“Why are you involving Ananke?”

Apollo waved him off. “Now is not the time to discuss that. Dionysus has gained information that has all of Olympus preparing for war.”

Dionysus yawned. “As much as politics and blood bore me, I am of great use when it comes to gleaning information from those who are in the know.”

“Wine and drink,” Solos murmured.

“Loosen the tongue,” Dionysus finished, grinning. “There is an encampment of sorts surrounding the movement of Lucian and the First. Damn near the size of an army. They have moved to just outside the Tennessee Covenant. My brothers and sisters are watching them closely.”

Dammit. If Seth and Lucian went after the Council there, the gods would retaliate again, and more innocent lives would be lost.

“There are over a hundred half-blood Sentinels and Guards with them,” he added as an afterthought.

“Dear gods,” Solos muttered, rubbing his temple.

“Whatever the two are selling, those people are buying like crack addicts.” Dionysus studied his fingernails, appearing bored. “No offense, but the halves are like idiot cousins if they truly believe siding against us is wise.”

I didn't have to look at Solos to know that comment didn't sit well with him. "Lucian is probably offering them the one thing no one ever has."

"And that is?" Dionysus asked.

"Freedom." I sat on the arm of the couch. "The freedom to do as they please and to not be indebted to the pures in any form."

"But this one is free, is he not?" Dionysus gestured at Solos.

"Free?" Solos straightened. "If I may be blunt?"

"Sure," the god replied. "Why not?"

Solos took a shallow breath. "Becoming a Sentinel was the lesser of two evils. My choices were to allow myself to become indentured and have everything that I am stripped away from me, or this life, which is one that most likely ensures an early grave. How is that freedom?"

Dionysus' brows knitted. "Do you not feel that your duty is honorable enough?"

"It has nothing to do with his duty," I cut in, glancing at Apollo. "The halves who are Guards and Sentinels believe in their duties and will give their lives for them, but we haven't given them any choice—not the same kind of choice I had. And if Lucian is tempting them with the idea of choosing their own destinies, then can we really blame them?"

"I understand that desire, Aiden, and maybe there is a need for change, but we cannot allow Lucian to lead them to war against us," Apollo said. "And I know what you're thinking—that those following him are innocent in their naiveté, but that does not change the outcome if they go against us."

“Which is exactly what they’re planning,” Dionysus said, much to everyone’s dismay. “A night ago, I made sure several halves who were with Lucian were well-stocked in the whiskey department and sent in a few of my... girls. I’ve learned that they are planning to make a move on the New York Covenant, but are waiting for Seth and his little girlfriend.”

My teeth were going to break from how hard I was clenching them. Marcus leaned forward, clasping his hands together. “What I don’t understand is how none of you can take out Lucian.”

“We can’t get near him. He is always accompanied by the First,” Dionysus shrugged. “And we cannot harm him, but he can harm us.”

“A few bruises,” I said. “Without him being at full power, he can’t kill you.”

Dionysus’ brows rose. “He killed Thanatos’ furie.”

“By draining Alex of her power,” I argued. “Without her near, he can’t tap into that.”

“We won’t take the risk.” Apollo leaned against the seat. “He can put us out of commission. If one of us is weakened, so are we all.”

“The family that—”

“Anyway,” Apollo cut Dionysus off. “According to what he has learned, they’re planning a full assault on all the Covenants. We cannot allow that.”

“So what does Olympus plan?” Marcus asked, shoulders bending as if the weight of this conflict rested on them.

“See, there’s the pickle.” Hearing the word “pickle” come out of Dionysus’ mouth

just seemed wrong. “We plan to go to war, but there is dissension among the fearless leaders.”

“What kind of dissension?” I rubbed the heel of my palm over my temple, pressing against a dull ache no doubt brought on by lack of food.

“Six want to annihilate the problem,” Dionysus said casually, as if he were discussing where he got his gaudy-ass shirt from.

“Go after Lucian and those supporting him?” Solos asked. “Take as many out as possible?”

Apollo nodded. “The rest of us believe there is still hope that a full-scale war can be avoided, because if we do go to war, what happened with the Titans will have nothing on this. The body count will include mortals—possibly millions of them. There is no way that can be avoided.”

There is still hope. Those four words brought forth images of Alex cradled against my chest, talking about Seth just a few short weeks ago. She’d had hope for him—right up to the moment he’d connected with her.

“Not to mention the risk of exposure,” added Marcus. “Gods, this is...”

There were no words.

It sort of struck me then. None of us—not even the two gods—really had foreseen this a year ago. The prophecies hadn’t predicted that the world would be on the verge of a war the likes of which had never been seen before—a war that would rip this world apart.

“We believe that the war can be stopped,” Apollo continued, “but the others are

doubtful, especially with the most recent events.”

“Alex,” I whispered, now accustomed to the pang that shot across my chest.

Dionysus stood. “Many were willing to stay out of it, even after what the First did to the North Carolina Council. Only Poseidon and Hades were quick to respond, but now that she’s connected, they have no hope. And they are searching...”

Unease stirred and spread like a weed. “Searching for what?”

With a sigh, Apollo said, “A way to kill the Apollyons.”

CHAPTER 3

I WORKED AT KEEPING MY EXPRESSION BLANK AND MY temper in check, but anger was tearing through me, shredding my control. It took everything in me not to leave the room and go downstairs to keep vigil over Alex.

Solos eyed me and cleared his throat. “I was under the impression that only the Apollyons can kill one another.”

My hands balled into fists as Apollo turned to me. “You know.”

Now Marcus and Solos stared at me, and I wanted to shove my hand through a wall. “The Order of Thanatos killed Solaris and the First. Somehow they know how to do it, which means wouldn’t the gods?”

Dionysus laughed. “Thanatos gifted the Order with the ability—a code or something—but even Thanatos can’t recall what it was. There were never supposed to be two Apollyons—never the possibility of a God Killer. Thinking it wouldn’t be needed again, he didn’t write it down. Idiot.”

Should I feel bad for being relieved?

“The Order knows, but with Telly’s death, they’ve scattered. Not to mention that some of the Sentinels under Lucian aren’t hunting daimons anymore.” Apollo paused and glanced at the door. “They’ve begun hunting members of the Order.”

“Good gods.” Marcus strode to the window. Stopping, he dragged his fingers through his hair. “I don’t even know which is worse.”

There was the distinct impression that there was more. After a few more barbs directed at Apollo, Dionysus vanished, and a little bit of the pressure seeped from the room. “Is he on our side?” I asked.

Apollo laughed dryly. “Yes, but not because he feels the way we do. Only because he’s too lazy to engage in battle.”

Well, that was good for something. I sighed. “There is more, isn’t there? And it has to do with Alex.”

“Yes.” He looked toward the door again, eyes narrowing. Turning back to me, he nodded. The message was clear—the same one look we’d shared a dozen times over the years, when he’d been known as Leon. We had spies. Hands fisting at my sides, I stalked toward the door while Solos continued to gain information from Apollo about the Sentinels hunting the Order.

Two narrow shadows crept along the wall of the hallway, and I was sure the two thought they had James Bond stealth. More like two of the Three Stooges. How long had they been standing outside the room, and was I going to strangle them both? Possibly. I stepped out.

Deacon jumped back, knocking into an equally unprepared Luke. One would think,

after all Luke's training, he would've recovered a lot quicker, but things were different now. The Covenant hadn't trained their students to face what was coming.

A sheepish look crossed my brother's face as he straightened and ran a hand through the mess of blond curls. Instead of being angry over him eavesdropping, I was just relieved that he was here with me, when things seemed to be crashing down around us.

"Hey, there, brother..." he said.

I arched a brow. "Deacon, what are you doing?"

Luke's shoulders squared, and then he stepped in front of Deacon. "It was my idea, Aiden."

"Not really." Deacon rolled his eyes. "I felt the presence of another god and I told Luke—"

"But I suggested that we try to find out what's going on." Luke drew in a deep breath. "You guys have been keeping us out of the loop on everything, and this stuff involves us, too."

"Probably because it's safer that way for you," I pointed out.

Luke shook his head. "Honestly, considering how screwed-up everything is right now? With Evil Alex locked up in the basement and a war brewing, keeping us safe isn't a top priority. We should know what's going on. We could help."

My respect for the young half-blood fought to show itself in the form of a smile. "How could you two help?"

“We haven’t quite figured that part out yet,” Deacon replied, leaning against the wall. “But I’m sure there’s something. And I think Lea’s going to kick our asses if she’s forced to spend one more evening with us.”

I frowned. “Where is Lea?”

The half-blood had been through enough, and all of us had been keeping an eye on her. First, she’d lost her father and stepmother in a daimon attack orchestrated by Alex’s mother, and then Seth had killed her sister during his attack on the Council. I knew her ties to those deaths had gotten to Alex.

“Sleeping,” my brother answered, craning his neck, trying to see around me. “Which god was here?”

There was no reason to keep that a secret. “Dionysus.”

“Dude? Are you serious?” Deacon looked crestfallen. “He’s like my favorite god of all time.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Luke muttered.

And it didn’t surprise me either. Even though Deacon had substantially cut back on the drinking, he could easily be mistaken for Dionysus’ soul-twin.

I had a decision to make—send them away or treat them like the adults they almost were. Luke was—or had been—months shy of graduation. Soon he would’ve been out in the world hunting daimons, but part of me balked at the idea of drawing Deacon into this further than he already was.

But I couldn’t baby Deacon for the rest of his life. Perhaps I’d done too much of that already, which might explain some of his previous behavior and why he didn’t feel comfortable talking to me about his relationship with Luke.

I nodded. “Come on.”

Both of them looked like I’d just professed my love for Seth, but they shot forward as if worried I’d change my mind. Following them into the den, I rolled my eyes when Apollo arched a brow.

“Okay,” Apollo said, looking around the room. “Now that everyone who is anyone is here, we have one more thing to discuss.”

Luke grinned as he moved to stand beside Solos, and my brother went to the chair furthest away from Apollo. I couldn’t figure out his aversion to Apollo, and dear gods, if those two had something going on, I might have to hurt someone.

“Alex,” Marcus said, leaning against the desk. His right hand absently spun a nearby globe.

Apollo grimaced, and I knew this was going to be bad. “The only hope we have of preventing a full-scale war is if Alex. comes around and agrees to take out Seth.”

In the past, Alex never would’ve agreed to that, but now? If we could somehow reach her and break the bond, would she go after Seth? And did I even want her to? She could get hurt... die. As a Sentinel, I needed to accept those risks, but as a man, I couldn’t when it came to Alex.

“We have found a way to break the bond. temporarily,” Apollo continued. He blinked, and bright blue irises appeared. I had to look away, because it reminded me of how Alex hated the god eyes and how Apollo toned them down for her. “It will give us time to find a permanent solution.”

Everything centered on what Apollo had just said. A temporary break in the connection was better than nothing. The rush of anticipation couldn’t be stopped and it almost knocked me on my ass. “What temporary fix?”

“You’re not going to like it—none of you are going to like it—but it’s the only option that we have at this point.”

My hands flexed. “Just get on with it. What’s the fix?”

Apollo’s brows furrowed. I was pretty sure that if it weren’t for the friendship we’d cultivated during hunts, he would’ve blasted my ass by now. “I’ve spoken with Ananke—”

“No,” Marcus said before I could open my mouth. He pushed off the desk. “There is only one reason why you’d be speaking with Ananke, and the answer is no.”

The god folded his arms and the way his entire face hardened, I could tell he wasn't used to being told no. "I know that the thought is unsavory."

A hot rush of rage twisted my insides into raw knots. "'Unsavory' isn't a word I'm shooting for," I grated out.

"Okay, I don't get it." Deacon brushed the flop of blond curls out of his eyes and frowned. "I'm totally failing Myths and Legends. Who in the hell is Ananke?"

The fondness in Luke's voice ruined his smirk. "Besides the fact that she's the momma of the Fates and of destiny, she rules over compulsion and all forms of slavery and bondage—bondage as in imprisonment."

"Our ability to use compulsion is gifted from Ananke," Marcus explained, eyes narrowed. "She's a lesser-known goddess, practically forgotten."

"Except that she was the one to come up with the Elixir that keeps halves in servitude docile." Solos' jaw hardened.

Deacon looked at Apollo, his nose wrinkling. "Then why are you contacting a goddess that...?" His mouth dropped open. "Oh. Shit. You want to put Alex on the Elixir."

I folded my arms to keep from hitting something. "No. Apollo, absolutely not."

"I don't even see why we're discussing this." Solos headed around the couch, wisely avoiding the area around me. I was like a geyser seconds away from erupting. He stopped beside Marcus. "The Elixir won't work on the Apollyon, right?"

"Not the kind that we give half-bloods, but Alex would be receiving something different." Apollo paused. "She'd be getting something stronger. Ananke has assured

me that it would break the bond, and the effects would only be temporary. It's not the same thing that's done to the others."

"It's not? Because it sounds like it is to me." The idea of putting Alex on the Elixir turned my stomach and pissed me off. "I can't do that."

Apollo opened his mouth but seemed to be choosing what to say. "We have to break the bond, Aiden. At some point, Alex will discover where she is. Then what? Seth will come for her and transfer her power to him, and it will be all over. There will be no second chances."

"There has to be another way!" My control snapped. In that instant I was this close to finding out if I could actually take out a god. The only thing that stopped me was the fact that I knew Apollo was trying to help us—help Alex. I didn't doubt that the god cared for her. "We just haven't looked hard enough, checked every available resource."

"Where else can we look, Aiden?" Apollo faced me, eyes wide. "I have turned Olympus inside out looking for a way to break their bond. The only thing is the Elixir and—"

"No." I held my ground.

Apollo looked around the room for help. Solos stepped back, raising his hands. "Don't look at me—I'd like to keep my face in one piece, thank you."

I smirked.

Clearly struggling for patience, Apollo paced the den. "This is only a temporary solution, Aiden."

“That solution is unacceptable!” I yelled so loudly that Deacon jumped. He’d been on the receiving end of my anger time and time again, but the surprise flickering across his face told me he’d never quite seen me like this before. How I felt for Alex, if there was any doubt held by those in the room, was now painfully visible. “You’re asking us to agree to strip away everything that she is! To turn her into a mindless zombie who has no control—” I broke off, sucking in a shallow breath. It was Alex’s greatest fear. The thing that had kept her up at night, that had haunted her steps like a vengeful ghost. “She would have no control.”

“She has no control now,” insisted a soft feminine voice.

I spun around. Lea stood in the doorway, as tall and thin as her older half-sister had been. Her cinnamon-colored hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. Dark shadows spread under her eyes and her cheeks were gaunt.

“You don’t understand,” I said.

She inched into the room, glancing at Apollo and then the rest of us. “I haven’t seen her, but I’ve heard her. We’ve all heard her. And the gods know that she and I have never been friends, but Alex—she never would’ve said the things I’ve heard her yelling. That isn’t her.”

Pressing my lips together, I turned away, shaking my head. Lea had a point. What was down in the basement wasn’t really Alex—not the girl I loved with every breath I took. And she wasn’t in control of herself.

But the Elixir—that was different.

Lea sat beside Deacon, folding her small hands in her lap. “The idea of using the Elixir screams wrong on every level, but what choice do we have? We can’t keep her down there.”

“She’s not eating,” murmured Marcus. He rubbed his brow, face strained. “I’m not sure she’s even really sleeping or if... if she’s communicating with Seth, and that’s what’s keeping her up.”

I stared at him. “Marcus, you know how terrified she was of being put on the Elixir.”

Unable to hold my stare, he looked away. “I know, Aiden. Dammit, I know, but something’s got to give. As much as I hate the idea of doing this to her, it will give us more time.”

Refusing to believe that this was our last option, I searched frantically for another way and grasped at brittle, painful straws. “What about the Fates? Can you go to them and see what the outcome is? If she will break the connection herself? Or if there is some way for us to do so?”

Apollo shook his head. “The Fates are no fans of mine, and even if they were and if they knew, they wouldn’t tell me or you. You know how they work, Aiden. You—”

“You know what this will do to her!” I roared, flushing hot with fury.

“I know what this will do to you,” he said quietly. “And I know the idea of doing this is killing you—”

“Stop—just stop,” I seethed, backing up. “I will not let any of you do this to her. So help me...”

The threat hung in the air like thick smoke that choked the occupants of the room. Marcus just looked sad, almost beaten down by it all. Solos was pale, probably because he thought Apollo was seconds away from knocking me through the wall. Lea and Luke stared at the floor, faces drawn. Did the two younger halves feel the sharp bite of guilt for agreeing that Alex needed the Elixir, knowing what it would

do, what it would mean?

They were too young for this—for this shit.

So was Alex.

So was I.

Hell.

The only person in the room who now watched me was my brother. A faint, sad smile appeared on his face. “Alex would kick our asses for considering something like this, but. I think she would understand, Aiden. I think she would understand why.”

Then Marcus stepped forward, placing his hand on my shoulder. I fought the urge to shake it off. And to hit him—to hit something. But he was suffering, too. “There was another thing that Alex feared.” His voice was so low I doubted anyone besides Apollo could hear him. “And you know what that was.”

I did. Gods, did I ever know.

Alex feared losing herself to the First—to Seth. And I’d promised her, sworn that it would never happen. And it had. I’d failed her. The sting of that festered and rotted inside me, but agreeing to the Elixir was no better. It would be just another way I’d failed her.

Stepping away from Marcus, I dragged my fingers through my hair. No one really talked for a few moments. The silence was as bad as my threat. Finally, everyone started talking, tossing around more ideas. “Take out Seth” topped their list, but it wasn’t possible. “Move Alex further away”—maybe that would lessen the connection, give her breathing room, give us time to search for more runes and spells

and prayers.

The best efforts just added to the hopelessness of the situation.

Apollo finally approached me. “We need to talk in private.”

I wanted him to just leave, but I nodded, and we slipped out and headed toward the empty kitchen. My steps were quick and harsh. “There is no way you’ll be able to convince me that putting Alex on a souped-up version of the Elixir is the right thing to do.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

He closed the door with the wave of his hand before speaking. “I know you feel strongly for her.”

I met his stare. “I love her. You don’t get that.”

“No. I do. You forget that I was with you when you hunted down Eric. I saw what no one else did—how affected you were by what had happened to Alex. And I know what you did to that daimon.”

My jaw clenched and I looked away. “He deserved it.”

“I’m not contesting that.”

What I had done to Eric wasn’t something I was particularly proud of. “Torture” seemed too light of a word for what I’d done. I swallowed hard. “What are you getting at, Apollo?”

He tilted his head to the side. “The kind of love you hold for Alex is admirable, but I’ve seen this love before. It has brought down entire civilizations. Need I remind you of Troy?”

“Is this a history lesson?”

His eyes flashed. “Okay. We won’t talk about the glaring elephant in the room, Aiden.”

“Good.”

“I haven’t been entirely forthcoming with information,” he said after a few moments.

I laughed darkly. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? You’ve been a fountain of honesty.”

Apollo ignored that. “Since Zeus created the Apollyon thousands of years ago, the First has always been of my lineage.”

“What?” I wasn’t following him. “Artemis said that Alex was of your lineage.”

“She is.” He moved to the rack of wine and popped a cork. “But throughout history, the Apollyon always has been an offspring of mine. To this day, I have no knowledge of who Solaris was descended from and I don’t know who Seth hails from. This time—only this time—has been different.” Pausing, he poured himself a glass. “Seth is the First, but he is not one of mine. Somehow, another god is responsible for him. And I’d bet my laurel crown that this same god was responsible for Solaris.”

He offered me a drink and I waved him off. “Are you saying Alex was meant to be the First and Seth was the fluke?”

Apollo shrugged. “I don’t know. And none of the gods are claiming responsibility for him.”

“Well, obviously,” I said dryly.

A smirk graced his lips as he placed the wine back in the rack and then took a drink. “That’s not the kicker, Aiden. Whoever is responsible for Seth is not claiming him for their own reason—the same reason that Lucian would know spells to keep me out of his home.”

“You think a god is working with Lucian—the same god of Seth’s lineage?”

“Most likely,” he said, downing the glass of wine. “But there’s another reason why that god would not stand up. Because he or she would know that there is another way to kill the Apollyon.”

A sheet of ice slipped over me. “What are you saying, Apollo?”

“The god linked to their bloodline is able to kill them. I can kill Alex.”

CHAPTER 4

THE FLOOR SEEMED TO MOVE UNDER MY FEET AND THE walls changed from white paint to deep brown paneling. It took me a few moments to realize that I was walking—walking away from Apollo, away from the bomb he’d just dropped.

Of course he followed. “Aiden, where are you going?”

I was heading for the basement. I needed to put myself between Alex and... and whoever came for her.

Apollo appeared in front of me, blocking my route. I stepped to the side, but he followed. “Aiden, listen to me.”

“I’m done listening.”

“This is not a threat, my friend. But if she is about to connect with the First, I will put her down. I have to—” He caught my fist, pushing me back. “The entire world hinges on us not going to war.”

I stepped toward him, beyond thinking, and he pushed me back again. And again. Pain tore through me. Physical? Emotional? I didn’t know. “You’d kill her?”

“I wouldn’t want to.” The blue of his eyes glowed. “And that’s why I’m doing everything to avoid that. Putting her on the Elixir gives us time, Aiden. And we need time. I need time, because I have six family members ready to rip into the mortal world. I cannot be here, waiting for Alex to manage an escape or for Seth to figure out a way to connect with her.”

“No one is asking you to be here, Apollo. I have it covered.”

He shot me a dubious look. “You’re not getting it. The gods know they can’t kill her, but that doesn’t mean that will stop them from trying. And while they might not be able to kill her, they will harm her.”

Leaning against the wall, I pressed the heels of my hands against my temples. All I wanted was to go down there, get Alex, and take her far away from all of this. “You’re asking too much.”

Apollo sighed. “You need to take a step back from this, Aiden. Look at this from the perspective of a Sentinel—how you were trained.”

I lifted my head, pinning him with a dark look. “You’re asking me to be objective now?”

He barked a short laugh. “Yes, I know I’m not the most objective god, but you have a job to do, Aiden. A job to protect mankind—and to protect the Hematoi. That is your duty. And you know what the right thing to do is.”

“So I need to choose between my duty as a Sentinel and my duty as a man? To Alex?”

“Yes and no. You need to choose both.” Apollo leaned against the other wall, still towering over me, and I was a good six and a half feet. “Marcus is right. Apollyon or

not, she can't last much longer like this. Not eating? Not sleeping? Has she even been drinking water?"

I closed my eyes. "Twice. She drank water twice when she thought I wasn't watching."

He cursed under his breath. "She needs to rest. She needs a break from this, Aiden. And we need time to find a way to end this."

"Or what—you will kill her?"

Apollo didn't answer.

"Gods." I listened to the feet of Sentinels on the floors above for a few moments. "Who knows about what you can do?"

"Only my sister Artemis and possibly Zeus—if he's been paying attention, which is up in the air," he said. "I have gotten the six to agree that if we put Alex on the Elixir they will back down. It's not just about her, Aiden. It's about millions of people."

I nodded, pushing off the wall, pulling myself back together. Duty and love had never really mixed well before, but there'd always been an in-between. "I need time."

"Aiden, we don't have time."

"I'm not asking for days. I'm just asking for tonight." I started toward the basement door and paused. "I need to try one more time."

"I can't fault you for that." He grinned. "I'll give you tonight. Then I'll be back tomorrow morning."

Nodding again, I opened the door. Apollo was gone when I glanced over my shoulder, and I was alone. Alone with a decision I knew I could never live with if I made it.

Alex was lying on the mattress, curled on her side, back to the door. She didn't start demanding that I let her out or start cussing me like she'd done the last three days or so. She didn't even acknowledge I was there.

Maybe she was sleeping, but my heart rate picked up as I reached into my pocket, pulling out one of the three keys to the door. "Alex?"

Nothing. Not even a flicker of a muscle.

Hopefully, she was sleeping, but my hands shook as I turned the lock and slipped inside, quickly closing and locking the door behind me. I called her name again as I slid the key back into my pocket. There was no answer, and by now, Alex would've been all over me like a daimon after aether.

Something was wrong.

I rushed to her side and knelt on the edge of the mattress. A mess of hair hid her face. Pulse pounding, I placed my hand on her still shoulder. "Alex, are—"

Flipping onto her back, she slammed her bare feet into my stomach. Air rushed out of my lungs in a grunt. I fell back, catching myself as she popped up on her feet.

Dammit. I should've known she was like a daimon playing possum.

With a near-feral sound, she came down on me, knees first. I flipped to the side, and I could've taken out her legs, but hurting her wasn't something I would do. Hitting the floor beside me, she threw her leg over mine, locking it between her thighs.

My brows shot up. “What are you doing?”

“Shut up,” she hissed, grabbing my hand closest to her.

“Really, if you wanted to hold my hand and snuggle, all you had to do was ask.”

Anger flushed her cheeks as she rolled on top of me, straddling my legs. Silent and scowling, she went for my pocket.

I grabbed her wrist. “Geez, Alex, normally I’d love you being all grabby, but knock it off.”

She sneered as she tried to pull her arm free. “Didn’t know you were such a pervert.”

Smiling tightly, I twisted my other arm free and caught her hand when she tried to slam it into my throat. “You know exactly what I am.”

“Don’t remind me.” Using her weight and what strength she still had, she tore herself free. Scrambling to her feet, she balled her hands into fists. “Let me out of here, Aiden.”

I stood. “That’s not going to happen.”

Alex shot forward, shoving me back a step. “Give me the key. I have to go. I need to go to him.”

Hearing her say that pricked at my skin. “What you need to do is listen to me.”

Her chest rose quickly and her eyes darted to the locked doors. She moved her left foot back an inch, and just like I’d taught her, she braced her weight on that leg and spun.

The kick was freaking perfect—knee bent at a ninety-degree angle to get the most oomph behind the extension—but I expected it. Using my forearm, I blocked the kick instead, using the momentum to send her crashing to the hard floor, hissing as hot pain jarred my bones.

Alex was incredibly fast when she wanted to be, even more as the Apollyon. Spinning around, she jabbed with her elbow and then the heel of her palm. Then she dipped, going for my legs—all maneuvers we'd played out hundreds of times. Fighting each other truly was like fighting ourselves.

Anticipating a butterfly kick, I darted behind her. She pivoted around, swinging her arm. Air rushed over my jaw as I ducked around her and wrapped my arm around her waist. I drew her back against my chest, jerking my head back to avoid hers.

“Let me go!” she screeched, wiggling like crazy. Her voice was pitched high, as if I was hurting her, but I knew I wasn't. “Let go of me!”

“Alex, you need to listen to me.” Reasoning with her probably ranked right up there with insanity, but I had to give her a chance to pull out of this. “If you don't break this connection with Seth, you're not going to like what happens.”

“You're not going to like what happens!” She threw her weight back, lifting her legs to her chest, but I held her easily. “Because I'm going to seriously hurt you when I get out of here. My first visit is going to be to your brother!”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

“Stop it! Listen to me.” I cocked my head to the right, avoiding hers again. “The gods are going to war because of what Seth is doing.”

“Good! Let them bring it.” She laughed, lowering her feet to the floor. “We will destroy each of them. Starting with that idiot Apollo.”

I sighed, running out of patience. Yeah, I wasn’t as saintly as Seth claimed. “You can’t continue like th—”

Her elbow thrust into my stomach and she broke free. I sprang forward, catching her around the waist, and flipped her onto the mattress when I should’ve just dropped her on her head. It wasn’t like she’d repay me the same kindness.

Alex reared up, trying to hook her legs around my waist to roll me. I pressed down, using my weight to trap her lower body. Her hands flew at my face, fingers curved into claws. Snatching her wrists, I pinned them down above her head.

“Look at me,” I said, leaning down so that only a few inches separated our faces. “Look at me and listen.”

She started to turn her head, but I pressed my forehead against hers, trapping her. Her eyes squeezed shut and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about that.

Taking a deep breath, I willed for her to understand me. Just this once... “This isn’t you, Alex. You would never act like this. This isn’t you.”

“Yes, it is!” Pain broke her voice as she arched again, almost throwing me off.

“You’re just pissed because I don’t want you anymore. You’re jealous and obsessive.”

I ignored her words. “You’re letting Seth control you. Do you remember how afraid of that you were? How terrified that you’d lose yourself to him? What happened to that?”

She stilled except for the ragged fall and rise of her chest.

My eyes traced the contours of her face. “I swore to you that I wouldn’t let that happen, and I know I’ve failed you, but I’m not going to just give up, Alex. I’ll never give up on you.”

Her lips formed a tight line and a shudder rolled through her.

“You’ve always been so strong—unique. Only you controlled your life. No one made decisions for you. But this—not even questioning or fighting what’s happening—is weak”

Alex’s eyes flew open. “I am not weak.”

“Then prove it!” Dammit, I wanted to shake her. “Shut him out, just for a few minutes. I know you can. I know you worked for months on blocking him. Shut him out, Alex, and talk to me. Prove to me you’re not weak.”

Amber eyes churned, luminous and powerful. They were beautiful, like a god had placed two topaz jewels in her face, but I hated them. Hated what they meant and stood for. Hated that no matter what Alex had done—no matter what we’d done—she’d connected with Seth anyway and lost herself within seconds.

“I know you can do it,” I said. “I know you have that strength in you, because that’s

what I love about you most. Your strength is admirable—beautiful. It is who you are. And what you’ve become is not you.”

“Love?” she repeated the word as if it were foreign to her tongue.

My chest tightened and the words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them. And dammit, I begged—something I’d never done before. “Please come back to me, Alex. Please. I love you too much to lose you. And I love you too much to allow what’s about to happen, but you’re leaving me no choice.”

Her lashes fluttered down and a heartbeat passed, then they reopened. I sucked in a breath, too astonished to feel or think anything other than the fact that her eyes were brown—warm, whiskey brown.

Her eyes were brown.

“Alex...”

Face pale and lips trembling, her brows puckered. “I’m so sorry. Aiden, I lo—” A scream tore from her, and she arched clear off the mattress, eyes widening.

My heart stopped. “Alex?”

“I can’t... it’s everywhere. It... hurts. Aiden, please... make it stop... please...” She slumped back, whimpering and twisting, thrashing her head back and forth.

With my heart in my throat, I started to let up, but then her eyes opened again and I wanted to rage. Golden eyes stared back into mine. I’d almost had her—almost.

Alex went wild underneath me.

The erratic mix of emotions funneling inside me made it hard to wait this out. Hope crashed and burned into barb-tipped disappointment that eventually gave way to anger. Alex was in there and she was hurting. Five seconds of catching a glimpse of her and she'd been sucked right back into Seth. I didn't know if I should be happy or sick to my soul.

Even with the lack of food and sleep, it still took a godsawful amount of time for her to tire herself out. She thrashed, screamed, kicked and even tried to bite me.

But finally, she grew weary and was panting. "Does this make you happy? Hurting me like this? Make you feel all big and bad?"

"I'm not hurting you." I opened my eyes, weary.

"You're killing me!" She tried to rise up, but fell back. The damn girl was going to hurt herself.

"Dear gods, Alex, can you stop fighting me for a damn second?" She opened her mouth, but I placed my other hand over her lips. "Don't say something smartass. You have no idea what kind of shitty night I've had."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I mean it. Not one smartass comment."

She grew very still, and I removed my hand. The tip of her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. I could tell she had something entirely infuriating to say but was holding back.

"I need you to try again, Alex. Block him. Cut the cord, and I'll help you through it this time. I swear. I'll get you through it."

Alex stared at me for so long that I feared she'd lost the ability to speak. "You don't get it. I don't want to. I need him, Aiden. Not you. A half and a pure can't love each other. Just let me go."

Someone must have punched a hole right through my chest. The pain was that real—just as real as the pain I'd witnessed moments ago.

Aiden, please make it stop.

I focused on that instead of what she'd said. Alex was in pain when she fought him, and who knew if there were periods of times when she was fighting him and we just didn't see. All I did know was that when she'd been herself—her real self—she'd asked me to make it stop, begged me. And there was only one way I could make it stop.

I knew right then, as much as it tore me apart, there was no other choice.

Leaning down, I placed a kiss against her damp temple and closed my eyes. A second—only a second—passed, and I soaked up her warmth and the moment of closeness without her fighting me. Then she jerked her head to the side and said something too horrible to really even acknowledge. Lifting myself off her, I rose to my feet and backed off, leaving the cell.

Alex remained on the mattress, not bothering to rush the door as I locked it. I stood there, watching her, knowing that what I was about to do had nothing to do with my duty to humanity or to my own kind. It really didn't have anything to do with Apollo and his warnings.

Aiden, please make it stop.

There was only one way I could make it stop.

CHAPTER 5

THE NEXT MORNING, APOLLO, MARCUS, AND I STOOD IN the small sunroom that overflowed with plants and flowers. The sweet tangy scent reminded me of Alex. Hell, everything reminded me of Alex.

She was right about one thing last night. I was obsessed.

Apollo cut to the chase. “Have you agreed?”

I glanced at Marcus, knowing that he’d finally made up his mind sometime last night. So had I. Weary and bone-tired, I scrubbed my hand over my rough cheek. Man, I needed to shave.

“Aiden,” Marcus said.

Exhaling roughly, my eyes narrowed. They didn’t know that Alex had snapped out of it for a few seconds last night. The tiny glimpse of her was something I held close to my heart, but in the harsh glare of the sunlight, I wasn’t sure if it had really happened, or if it had been wishful thinking.

I cleared my suddenly dry throat. The words were hard to get my tongue to form. “Give her the Elixir.”

And that was it—all it took.

What sounded like a series of champagne corks shattered the silence. The air was sucked out of the room as I spun toward the crackling sound. A shimmery blue dust formed in the rays of sunlight. Each particle shined like a sapphire. They came together quickly, as if drawn to become whole. Within seconds, a woman stood before us.

Swathed in blue silk robes that clung to her curves, the goddess tipped her golden head back. Long, thick curls fell to her waist as she drifted toward Apollo with a twitch in her hips.

Marcus sucked in a breath, obviously affected by the goddess' beauty, and I felt nothing but chilled numbness as we both bowed.

There was something seriously wrong with me.

Or perhaps I was just too focused on what she held in her delicate-looking hands—an ancient-looking porcelain pitcher engraved with a hateful symbol. A circle with a slash through it—the mark of servitude.

“Ananke,” Apollo said, bowing before the older goddess.

My brows shot up. That was quick. It was eerie seeing how in-the-know the gods could be when they wanted. Immediately I disliked her, but I forced my expression blank.

She handed Apollo the pitcher and then turned toward me, her lip tipping up at one corner before facing Apollo again. “You will only need to use a... shot of this. You will need to finish with the compulsion.”

Hands clenching, I started to turn but stopped. I'd heard the compulsion time and time again over the years. Already it was flowing through my thoughts. My stomach rolled.

The goddess moved away from Apollo, returning to the center of the room. “It will take a few minutes to take effect. It will shut down all of her Apollyon powers, therefore breaking the bond. She will be... different.”

Not liking the sound of this, I asked, “What do you mean by ‘different’?”

Her lip tipped up again. “She will be more pliable to deal with—compliant in nature. The... girl will know who she is on the most basic level, but no more.”

“What?” I glanced at Apollo. “I didn’t agree to that.”

Apollo shot me a look that said shut the hell up and then some. Taking in a deep breath, I clasped my hands behind my back. “I apologize.”

The goddess arched a brow and nodded. “I have added Ma-Huang, which affects the memory. Her memories link her to the First. Without them, he simply does not exist. It is not perfect, but the best we can do given the situation.”

A chill crept up my spine. If Seth didn’t exist, then neither did anyone she cared about or trusted. Neither did I.

“She will tire easily,” Ananke continued. “And will be very easy to handle while we search for a more permanent fix.”

The permanent fix was in the room—Apollo—but thankfully the bulk of the gods didn’t know that he could take her out.

“How long will it last?” Apollo asked.

Ananke shook her head. “There is no telling. Maybe a few days if you’re lucky, but you will know when it’s wearing off. She will grow restless, may start to remember things. When this happens, she will need a new dose.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

“Will this harm her in any way?” Concern colored Marcus’ voice.

“No.” She started to shimmer out, but her voice still carried with its cold indifference. “But I would not give her more than six doses. The effects may become permanent at that point.”

And then she was gone, leaving all of us open-mouthed. Marcus exhaled loudly. “Nice of her to throw that in.”

“It could become permanent?” I raised a brow, daring Apollo to look away. “Did you know this?”

His eyes narrowed. “I know the same amount as you do. At least we know not to exceed six doses. If it lasts at least four days, then that gives us nearly a month.”

“If it lasts four days each time,” I pointed out.

Apollo glanced down at the pitcher. “Well, we’re about to find out.”

I went down the stairs, detached as I could be. Knowing what I was about to take part in darkened my soul. Something like that might sound dramatic, and before, I really didn’t think it was possible, but now I understood.

“It’s for the best,” Apollo said.

Glaring at him, I slid past him and stopped in front of the cell. Alex was sitting on the mattress, back against the wall and knees tucked close to her chest. She stared behind

me, to where I knew Apollo waited in the shadows. For some reason, Alex reacted like a crazed hydra when Apollo went near her.

“Did you finally come to your senses and decide to let me out?” A smirk twisted her once beautiful lips. They were now chapped from lack of water. The bottle sat untouched by the wall.

I unlocked the door. “You know the answer to that.”

Alex rose to her feet, swaying as she stepped off the mattress. Her face was as pale as the walls surrounding her. “I should’ve known none of you would be smart enough.”

We slipped into the cell, locking it behind us. I watched Alex wearily. She was growing weaker by the day, but the girl was a fighter to her core. Marcus moved back, letting me deal with her as we’d planned.

It seemed fitting that I’d be the one who did this.

Her eerie amber gaze slid past me to what Marcus held in his hands. The liquid inside the glass was deep blue and thick. Recognition flared, and she took a step back. I moved to her side, holding my breath.

As expected, she went wild.

Shooting forward, I wrapped my arms around her, clamping her arms to her sides. Using my weight, I brought her to the floor as carefully as I could, but she thrashed and struggled. From behind her, I got my legs around her waist and locked them down over hers.

Alex was trapped.

“No! No!” she screamed over and over, each word a punch straight to my heart. “No! No!”

Pressing my cheek against hers, I forced her head back. “I’m sorry, Alex, I’m so sorry.”

“You can’t do this to me!” She tried to wiggle her head down but failed. Her voice was laced with hatred and power, an edge that didn’t belong to her. “You’ll regret this. All of you, it will be the last thing you do. I promise you.”

“Do it,” I urged, wanting this over with. Over Marcus’ shoulder, my eyes met Apollo’s. He stood just outside the cell now. Even the god looked disgusted with what we were doing.

With a pained expression, Marcus crouched in front of us and grabbed Alex’s chin. His hand shook as he lifted the glass of Elixir, and he squared his shoulders. “Sorry, Alexandria. It’ll be over in seconds.”

Like a switch being thrown, the voice that came out of the trembling girl was one I recognized and feared. “Please don’t do this,” she begged. Seconds later, my cheeks were wet from her tears. “Please, Marcus, please don’t do this to me.”

Marcus hesitated. “Alex?”

Her body shuddered against mine. “I’ll behave. I promise. I’ll do whatever you ask, but please don’t give me the Elixir.”

I drew in a shallow breath. “What color are her eyes?”

“Gold,” he grunted.

Moving both of her slender wrists to one hand, I knocked Marcus' hand away and grasped her chin. "It's not her, not really. Do it. Gods dammit, just do it!"

Alex wailed, and a part of me turned cold—forever. I forced her mouth open, bruising her jaw as her struggles renewed. Energy hummed through me, shocking me every couple of seconds. Marcus tipped the glass to her lips, and the sickeningly sweet aroma of the Elixir filled the cell.

Even after the contents of the glass were gone, Alex still fought. Screaming, rolling her hips, throwing her head back and forth until I felt her breaths turning deeper, slower.

Marcus moved back, setting the glass aside. He wiped his hands along his pants as if he could somehow wipe away what he'd just done to his niece, but it had left a mark on my soul.

I'd never be able to wipe it away, no matter how hard I tried.

I watched Marcus and Apollo as her muscles loosened and her body relaxed against mine. Her head fell back against my shoulder and to the side as she drew in a deep, long breath that sounded like a sigh.

Gazing down at her, I saw the marks again. Intricate designs bled through her skin, swirling over her cheeks and down her neck. Inked in blue, they brightened until the whole room was awash in sapphire, and then they faded out. Alex stilled.

"You have to finish this," Apollo said.

One of these days I was going to hit Apollo again. I probably wouldn't survive, but it was going to happen. Turning Alex in my arms, I cradled her against my chest and cupped her cheek. "Alexandria, open your eyes."

Her lashes fluttered against her pale cheeks, and then finally, they lifted. I sucked in a sharp breath. Her eyes were shattered—dull brown with gold shredded through them. The connection had been broken, but it wasn't Alex staring back at me blankly. It wasn't Seth either.

She was a stranger—a young, scared girl who didn't recognize me, an empty slate perfect for compulsion.

I clamped down on the anger rising in my throat and kept my eyes locked with hers. “To ó???? ??? ????? Alexandria.”

Your name is Alexandria.

She blinked slowly.

Pain sliced through my chest. “To ó???? ??? ????? Aiden...” I choked as the back of my throat burned. Wetness gathered in my eyes, clouding Alex's face. I can't do this. I have to do this. The words burst out of me. “To ó???? ??? ????? Aiden ??? ????? ? ??????ó? ???.”

My name is Aiden, and I am your Master.

“?? ?????????? ??? ????, ??? ?????????, ??? ??? ?????? ?? ??????”

You will obey my every wish, desire, and command to death.

Or until the Elixir wore off.

She breathed in the words, relaxed a little more, and became them. And I watched the shattered eyes dull even more. I let go of her hands and they fell to her lap.

“What is your name?” I asked, voice hoarse.

“Alexandria,” she repeated in a soft voice I’d never heard Alex use in real life.

“And who am I?”

“Aiden.” She smiled, and I flinched. “You are my Master.”

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST THING WE DID WAS TO GET HER TO EAT, BUT it wasn’t a simple process. I took Alex upstairs and sat her at the table. The entire time she kept her eyes glued to her hands, which were folded in her lap.

Alex didn’t speak unless she was directly spoken to, and even then, she didn’t raise her eyes. I set a plate of cold cuts and a bowl of fruit in front of her, along with a can of grape soda—her favorite.

She didn’t move.

I glanced at Marcus, who remained by the door, making sure no one entered. Apollo had disappeared the instant I’d brought her out of the cell. Bastard. “You have to be hungry, Alex. You haven’t eaten a thing in days.”

“My name is Alexandria,” came the soft whisper.

I blinked several times and then pushed the plate toward her. “Aren’t you hungry, Alexandria?”

“Am I?”

It clicked then. Like most indentured half-bloods, they had to be ordered—ordered to do everything. Sitting back, I dragged my fingers through my hair. “Please eat, Alexandria.”

Her lashes lifted. Those strange eyes met mine for a brief second, and then went to the plate of food. She was slow to eat at first, but once she grew comfortable—or confident in what she was doing—she finished the plate and most of the bowl. Two cans of soda later, she tugged at a limp lock of hair.

Marcus shook his head and turned, leaving us. Did he regret all those times that he’d wished Alex was more amenable? Funny thing was, even when I’d demanded that she not do something in the past, I’d secretly loved that she rarely listened.

I stood, surprised when she automatically came to her feet. “I’ll show you to your room and you can shower if you want.” I bit the inside of my cheek as her lashes swept down. Try this again. “You will clean up and then rest.”

“Okay.” She looked up, her eyes drifting over my face. “I...”

“What?” I stepped forward.

Alex moved back behind the chair as if it were some kind of shield. She shook her head. I gave her a few moments to speak again, but she’d gone mute. I wanted to reach out and touch her, comfort her, but I had a feeling it would upset her.

I led her to the bedroom I’d been staying in. A smaller room was linked with mine through a shared bathroom. Placing her in that room would enable me to keep an eye on her.

At least that’s what I told myself as I showed her the shower and placed two towels and a robe on the bathroom sink. It had nothing to do with the fact I just wanted her

close to me.

Yeah, I wasn't kidding anyone.

At first I thought I was going to have to undress her, and dear gods, there was no way I could do that and not, well, think and feel the things I would. Then she grabbed the hem of her sweater and started to lift. I had to force myself from the bathroom. Saint Delphi my ass.

Shutting the door behind me, I leaned against it and closed my eyes. The water turned on, and I pushed off, crossing the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed. Weariness seeped into my bones. Maybe I could sleep now, at least longer than a few hours.

A very small, minuscule amount of relief pinged through me. Alex was moving around, not trying to kill anyone, and no longer connected to Seth. Something to celebrate, right? No. What was walking around wasn't really Alex. She couldn't be that meek if she tried.

Fifteen minutes passed and the door slowly cracked open. A much cleaner Alex peeked out, clutching the robe's collar, eyes downcast. She stepped into the bedroom, shifting from one foot to the next.

"I'm finished."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

I stood, staring at her—transported back to the day I’d brought her back to the Covenant and seen what lay beneath the grime and muck—the same maddening rush of feelings sucker-punched me.

Alex was beautiful—flawless—to me.

Her lashes lifted. Our eyes locked, and a sweet flush crept across her cheeks. My gaze dipped to her parted lips and a very different kind of hunger stirred. Before I knew what I was doing, I crossed the room, hands outstretched, reaching for her.

Alex darted back, her knuckles bleaching white. Confusion shot across her face as she sucked her lower lip between her teeth. Anxiety rolled off her as she stared back at me.

I stopped short, pulling my hands back. What was I thinking? She was... afraid of me—afraid of her Master. I cursed.

She jumped, eyes widening.

I’d never hated myself more. Clamping down on my emotions, I gave her space. “Stay here. I’ll find you some clothes.”

“Yes, Ma—”

“Don’t call me that.” My tone was harsher than I intended and I worked to soften it. “Call me Aiden. Okay?”

Alex nodded.

Tearing myself away from her, I headed to the door and glanced over my shoulder. My brows furrowed. She stood in the same spot, hands clenching the robe and eyes on the floor as if it was some sort of beacon. What the hell was she doing?

Then it struck me. I'd told her to stay. And she was staying. "Alex..."

"My name is Alexandria."

"Okay." I sighed, approaching her carefully. When I was sure she knew I was beside her, I cupped her elbow. "You don't have to stand here. You can do whatever you want, Alex—Alexandria. Sleep. Or watch TV." I nodded at the flat screen in the corner as I led her to the bed. "You can do as you wish. Okay?"

Sitting down, Alex nodded and watched me. "You're coming back, right?"

"Of course," I assured her. She kept glancing around the room, growing more and more agitated. "I won't be gone long at all. I promise." Alex nodded again. "Okay, Ma..." She flinched. "Okay, Aiden."

It didn't take me long to find clothes for her. All of her things were still in the room next to mine. Marcus had already checked in, then disappeared back downstairs, and now Deacon hovered by the door.

Gathering up Alex's clothes, I faced my brother. "What's up?"

He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms. "How'd it go?"

“She fought it, as expected, but it worked.” I sat on the arm of a chair, yawning.
“She’s... she’s not like she was.”

“As in she’s not Evil Alex...?”

I shook my head. “She’s... just not—it’s only temporary.”

Deacon pressed his lips together. “That bad, huh?”

“I didn’t say it was bad.”

He arched a brow. “I know you, Aiden. Your disappointment—in yourself, not Alex—is written all over you. It’s practically dripping from your grubby face.”

My brows rose. “I’m grubby?”

“You’re kind of gross. Might want to think about shaving, too, unless you’re going for the homeless look with no chance of getting laid.”

I laughed and stood. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

A genuine smile, one that was so rare on my brother, parted his lips, though it quickly faded. “She’s going to be okay, right? I mean, someone will find a way to break the connection and she’ll be snarky-but-not-homicidal Alex in no time? They have to.”

My good humor vanished. A crack broke my control, shattered the weakened wall around me. “Gods, I hope so, Deacon. I can’t...”

“Live without her?”

Turning away, I didn’t answer because there was no need. “Has it always been that

obvious?”

“Honestly?” Deacon laughed. “I knew you had a thing for her and her for you from the moment you came back from Atlanta and bitched me out. To me, it was obvious, but only because I know you. It’s funny, because she’s a half, but in a weird way she’s perfect for you, don’t you think?”

I smiled weakly. “Yeah, I think so.”

There was a pause and then he asked, “Even if all of us make it out of this alive and the gods don’t go all god-zilla on the world and she goes back to Team Aiden, how are you two going to get your happily ever after?”

“We’d leave. That was our plan. It would work. Apollo owes us.”

“No shit?” He sounded incredulous, not upset. “You’d give up being a Sentinel? Run off and try to live as mortals?”

Nodding, I faced him. Sadness congealed in my chest. “Yeah, that was our plan. I was going to tell you. We’d work something out so that you and—”

“Dude, I know you’d make sure I knew where to find you,” he said, blinking several times. “Damn, Aiden...”

“What?”

“It’s just... wow, I’m happy for you. I think this is great. It’s love—the real kind you make sacrifices for. The kind where you scream ‘screw it’ to everyone else. That’s envy-worthy.”

I arched a brow. “Not quite sure any part of my life is envy-worthy right now,

considering that Alex thinks I'm her Master"

"Hey, you know, that could be—"

"Don't even go there."

"Okay. Okay. But it will get better." His familiar gaze flicked up, meeting mine.

"You're doing okay, Aiden. Better than most would do in this... situation."

"Thank you." I smiled, shifting my bundle. "So are you."

"I know." Deacon grinned. "I'm just awesome."

"And modest." I stopped in front of him, lowering my chin. "Seriously, how are you holding up?"

He shrugged. "Been through worse, so don't worry about me. You have enough on your plate."

Not worrying about Deacon was going against nature. I'd spent the last decade of my life worrying about him—maybe a little too much. Smothering him instead of supporting him.

Deacon tipped his head back, suddenly looking much older than seventeen. "Go get some rest—shower first, though." A quick flash of a grin appeared. "We've got the watch for now."

I nodded, handing over the proverbial reins. Stopping at the bathroom door, I turned back to him. "Deacon?"

He brushed a curl out of his eyes. "Yeah?"

“I know about you and Luke, and I don’t care as long as you’re happy. Just do right by him, and you know what I mean.”

His mouth dropped open, and for once, it was me surprising my brother and not the other way around.

I didn’t even go into my bedroom, opting to place Alex’s clothes on a shelf and clean up first. After a long and hard look at myself in the mirror, I acknowledged I did look... grubby. Digging out a razor, I showered and then shaved quickly. A pair of clean pajama bottoms was tucked back away in the shelving, but no shirt. Hoping Alex didn’t freak out when she saw my bare chest, I opened the bathroom door.

And I came to a complete standstill.

Alex was curled on her side on top of the bedspread, her hands folded under her chin as if she was praying. Her lips were parted and rosy. Two curvy legs peeked out from under the robe, immediately drawing my attention. I’d always loved Alex’s legs.

She was fast asleep.

Setting her clothing on a nearby chair, I went to her side and called her name. She murmured something, and I felt a damn flutter—an actual flutter—in my chest. Very carefully, I placed another blanket over her legs. Either exhaustion or the Elixir had taken its toll on her. I pulled the cover up, tucking it around her.

Backing away from the bed, I left the room and stalked through the quiet house. Downstairs, off of the basement, was a small room that was nothing but four cinderblock walls. Someone had strung a punching bag from the ceiling.

Pent-up frustration and helpless anger reared its head, and a second later, my bare knuckles crashed into the worn, tough leather. I went crazy, and while each punch

brought a spike of pain across my hand, I welcomed it.

Hours passed as I jabbed and kicked. Sweat poured off me, stinging my eyes and the torn skin along my knuckles. Physical pain did nothing to dampen the torment building inside me.

In a flash, I was taken back to the past summer, when I'd seen Alex doing the very same thing, after she'd discovered the truth about her mother. She had been a fierce, beautiful creature as she'd whirled around the practice dummy. A cyclone of raw emotions had reached out across the training room, tapping into my own mixed-up feelings. When she had sensed my presence and our gazes locked, as crazy as it sounded, I'd felt what she had.

Dragging in a ragged breath, I stopped and looked over my shoulder toward the door. Why I'd been expecting to find her standing there I'll never know. Of course, the doorway was empty.

Alex was empty.

I went back upstairs, grabbed a towel from the dark bathroom and cleaned myself up. Back in the bedroom, I glanced at the oversized couch pushed up against the wall, and then grabbed a thin quilt off the end of the bed. Every cell in my body demanded to be close to her, but it seemed wrong. If she woke with me beside her, I was afraid it would upset and confuse her. That was the last thing I wanted. Easing down on my side, I spread the quilt out and watched her sleep until exhaustion pulled me under.

CHAPTER 7

ALEX SLEPT FOR NEARLY TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, WAKing up minutes before I caved to my growing concern. Late in the night, we went downstairs and, between the two of us, we just about cleaned out the fridge. She was still fidgety and

would only do something if I told her to, but by the time morning came around, she'd loosened up enough that it was almost like being around a very calm and sedated Alex.

We moved from the kitchen to the sunroom and stayed there. She didn't talk to me unless I asked her a question. After investigating every flower and plant in the room, she sat on one of the window seats and remained there, gazing at the thick woods that surrounded the safe house.

I sat beside her, on the other end of the window seat, surprisingly content to just be there with her. I wanted to know what she was thinking and each time I asked, the answer was the same.

"Nothing," she said, not taking her gaze off the glass walls.

That was like a cut to the chest, but not as bad as when there'd be footsteps in the hallway or voices nearing and Alex would lock up. She'd look away from the woods then, staring at the closed door. Panic would fill the brown and amber eyes. Solos came into the sunroom at one point, checking to see if we needed anything from the nearby town.

The only person she didn't freak over was her uncle. Was it some kind of leftover familial bond? But even then, she treated him the same way she treated me. Marcus had the same amount of luck that I did drawing her into a conversation. After that, I decided it would be best to keep her away from the rest of the household.

Finally, after hours of being together, her eyes focused on me. I pretended not to notice, but I was aware of her gaze traveling down.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

Alex moved suddenly, slower than she normally would, and grasped my hands in hers. “Your hands...”

Stunned that she was even touching me, I couldn’t respond. Like an idiot, I sat there as her thumbs smoothed over the bones in my hand, stopping short of the raw knuckles.

“You’re hurt,” she said. “Why are you hurt?”

As gently as I could, I pulled my hands free. “I’m not hurt. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Her lashes swept up as she searched my face. Then she nodded and settled back, staring down at her own hands with a frown.

She tired quickly after that, becoming lethargic before it was nine. I managed to get her to eat before I took her back upstairs. She was out the minute her head hit the pillow, and I retreated to the couch. We repeated the same action the next day, and it was like there was a giant clock over our heads, counting down the minutes until I’d need to give her another dose.

We spent the morning in the sunroom, but I coaxed her out of that room, mainly because I was going to lose my ever-loving mind if I had to look at another plant again. The den was always occupied by my brother, Lea, and Luke, but there was another sitting room upstairs that was full of books. I took her up there after grabbing a bag of chips and a grape soda for her to snack on.

I watched her move around the room, looking for signs that she was growing antsy. She stopped in front of a desk, picked up a pen and then placed it down. Her fingers roamed over the top of a notepad, and then she made her way to a bookcase. She stood there, brow pinched as she placed a finger on the spine of each book.

“Do you want to read something?” I asked.

She jumped at the sound of my voice, and then lowered her chin obediently.

I started toward her but stopped. Any unexpected movement seemed to send her fleeing. “It’s okay, Alex. If you want to read something you can.”

“My name is not Alex,” she whispered. “It is Alexandria.”

A dull burn started in my chest, under my heart. “But you like to be called Alex.”

Shaking her head, she backed away from the books and slowly headed toward the TV, eyes downcast. She stopped in front of the blank screen. I picked up a small statue of Athena, and then placed it back down. I wanted to go to her, to hold her, but I wasn’t sure how she’d respond. Everything between us was stilted and awkward.

“Want to watch something?”

Her chin shot up, but she didn’t look at me. At her sides, her hands opened and closed. “May I?”

May I? Gods, when Alex was better, she was going to flip out. “You can do what you want.”

A small, tentative smile pulled at her lips and her lashes swept up, revealing those shattered eyes. I breathed out slowly, but it did nothing to ease the pressure clamping

down on my chest. Her gaze flickered away from mine. “Will you—”

The door opened and Apollo strolled in. “There you two are.”

Alex froze in front of the TV, like a wild animal that had just been encroached upon. Then she dashed across the room, ducking behind me. She huddled there, clenching the back of my shirt.

Apollo stopped short, blond eyebrows shooting up. “Did she just hide behind you?”

I glared at the god. “She’s not the same. You know that.”

He blinked all-white eyes. “I know. It’s just unexpected. She’s like a little nymph or something.”

Hearing the word “nymph” come out of Apollo’s mouth grated at my self-control. “What do you want?”

Apollo cocked his head to the side and spoke low. “Testy, testy, Aiden.”

Her fingers dug into my back. I moved to the side, shielding her completely. If Apollo had had normal eyes, I was sure they would’ve rolled at that point. Ignoring him, I smiled down at her. “It’s okay. Apollo won’t hurt you.”

Or at least I hoped so.

Alex peered up at me through her lashes. For the first time since she’d Awakened, I saw trust in her expression. Warmth poured into the cold cavern where my heart rested. I’d never seen an indentured half-blood look upon their Master that way. It had to mean something.

Apollo cleared his throat. “And I see some things never change.”

I frowned. “What’s that mean?”

“Oh, you know, the googly-eyed looks of love. Even when someone—ahem, like me, a god—is standing right in front of you two.”

I rolled my eyes, prepared to ignore that comment, but Alex tugged on my shirt. “What does he mean by that?” she whispered.

How was I supposed to answer? The fact that Alex didn’t remember a lot was key to keeping her away from Seth, but I wasn’t sure how much information to share with her. And she was actually asking a question, which was huge. “I’ll explain it later.”

Apollo chuckled. “I’d love to hear that conversation.” My eyes narrowed, and he grinned. Sometimes I think his sole purpose was to get under my skin. “There’s been a development I believe you should be aware of.”

I doubted it was good news. I started to respond, but Alex tugged on my shirt once more and whispered, “My head hurts.”

“I’ll get you something for that in a few moments. Okay?”

Casting her eyes down, she nodded.

I wanted this to hurry up. Shifting to the side, I shielded Alex. “Does it have to do with the other one?”

Catching that I meant Seth, he nodded. “He’s not happy about not being able to make contact. Dionysus’ spies have said that both he and the Minister are growing agitated.”

“I bet.” No one really knew how Seth would react once the bond was broken. I felt Alex peek around me. She was watching Apollo with large eyes. He grinned at her, and she gave him a hesitant smile. “Has he done something?” I asked.

“Hmm, if you count obliterating two Sentinels who refused to join their cause? Then yes.”

“Gods,” I murmured, shifting again when Alex moved behind me.

Apollo craned his neck to the side, following Alex’s nervous movements. “They haven’t moved against the Tennessee Covenant yet, but about fifty of their Sentinels have broken away and appear to be heading toward the New York one. He’s with the Minister still.”

“And if they make it to New York, what will happen?”

His expression turned grim. “I’ve let a few things out of Olympus, just in case those Sentinels are up to no good.”

Dread blossomed. “What few things?”

“A few of Hephaestus’ most interesting creations—namely the Khalkotauroi.”

I choked on my breath. I had to have heard him wrong. The Khalkotauroi were automations—bronze bulls that breathed fire—but they weren’t what were known in the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece. First off, there weren’t just two of them. There were hundreds of them, and they walked on two legs. Like all the creatures that belong to the gods, they had been rounded up and sent to Olympus when the gods had retreated from the mortal world.

“And what happens if a mortal sees them?”

Apollo arched a brow. “The Khalkotauroi know how to stay hidden, but if New York—or any of the other Covenants—goes under siege, it will be a moot point. The mortal world will become well aware that some myths are true.”

There really wasn’t anything else to say to that, and my mind was already occupied with too many concerns to dedicate time to this latest development. Apollo left, but not before trying to talk to an edgy Alex who wanted nothing to do with him, much to his amusement. It amazed me that the whole world was on the brink of war and Apollo was laughing.

Granted, this probably wasn’t his first time at the rodeo.

When Apollo left, she stared up at me, expression pinched. “My head... it hurts.”

“I’ll get you something now.”

As I left to find her some aspirin, she followed, never straying too far from my side. Taking the two pills without question, I realized then how such trust could be abused—and was with many other halves—in the wrong hands. A sick and twisted kind of fear rose with that realization.

The aspirin didn’t seem to work. Alex withdrew further into herself, eyes squeezed shut through most of the movie I’d put on. A dark voice picked up in the back of my head, remaining constant even after she’d fallen asleep and I carried her to bed, her weight seeming nonexistent. Her headache was a sign.

The Elixir was wearing off. Tomorrow would be the fourth day.

The thought of giving her another dose chipped away at me. Hours passed as I lay on the couch, staring at the ceiling, watching the thin slips of moonlight reach across the darkness. The quilt twisted with my legs as I flipped onto my side. Could I do it

again? Hand her something that destroyed her very core and watch her take it with that innate trust in her eyes?

I squeezed my eyes shut, folding my arms beneath my head. There was no other choice. Apollo needed to find a way, because she couldn't do it on her own. Sleep finally claimed me, but it didn't last long.

I was jolted awake later. Darkness cloaked the room and the couch felt infinitely smaller than before. The scent of... peaches surrounded me. Something warm and soft pressed against my side, wiggling closer. Hands clenched the old t-shirt I'd dug up the day before.

My eyes flew open.

The top of Alex's head came into view as she placed her cheek on my chest and let out a little sigh. Every muscle in my body locked up. Was I dreaming? I think I stopped breathing. What was she doing over here, on the couch. with me?

"Alex?" My voice sounded gruff. "What are you doing?"

She lifted her head enough that I could see the shreds of amber peeking out from behind her lashes. The shattered eyes were the damndest thing to see at night. "My head hurts."

I started to sit up, but Alex shifted, throwing a leg over mine as if she was asking me not to move without saying a word.

"Uh..." I'd never been more unsure in my life, or unable to read a person. "Do you want me to get you some more aspirin?"

"No." She placed her head on my chest again, snuggling down. "It feels better now."

Empty.”

I swallowed. Hard. “Empty?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she murmured, shivering. “It’s quieter when I’m near you.”

My heart stuttered. “Quieter? Are you hearing things? A person?”

“I don’t know. It’s like...” She yawned, splaying her hand across my chest. “It’s like someone talking to me far, far away. Does that make me.?”

Seth. Anger surged through me and I fought to keep it out of my voice. “What?”

“Crazy? Does that make me crazy?”

“Not at all, agapi” I lowered one arm and reached down, tugging the quilt up so it covered most of her. “Can you make out what the voice is saying?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to know. I don’t have to, do I?”

“No.” I ached for her.

“Good,” she said, and I wondered if she smiled. “Can I stay with you?”

“Always.” Good gods, I didn’t want her to be anywhere else.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

Silence fell between us, and her breathing became steady and deep. So the headaches were a sign of Seth trying to contact her, which explained the brief flashes of pain I'd seen before the Elixir and confirmed my suspicions all along. The connection hurt somehow. And now the bond was muted, but it meant she definitely needed another dose tomorrow.

A new wave of fury rolled through me, but I kept my body relaxed, not wanting to frighten her. I'd truly believed that Seth had grown to care for Alex, perhaps even love her in his own way—whatever way that was. Especially after Caleb died, he'd cared for her, protected her when I hadn't. In New York, he watched over her and would've killed without a thought to make sure no one learned that she'd killed a pure in self-defense. Had it all been a ruse? An act to ensure that Alex would live so that she could Awaken, giving him the power of a god-killer?

Yeah, I'd never fully trusted the punk, moments when I'd seen something I could never name in his cold eyes—eyes that had belonged to Alex for a period of time. Something about him set off my warning system and pissed me off like nothing else. That could've just been his interest in Alex, but still.

I'd never expected him to hurt her.

If I ever got my hands on that little bastard, I was going to kill him or die trying.

But right now, Alex was lying beside me, and hell if I was going to think about Seth. Very carefully, I lowered my left arm and wrapped it around her too-slender waist. There was another soft sigh from her. She seemed incredibly small beside me. How could I've not noticed that in the past? Maybe because all I ever saw was her

strength.

I could've suggested that she go back to the bed or that both of us move there, but I didn't have the heart or desire to move her. Not when she was close to me like this, pulling loose bittersweet and tender memories. I flicked through the days spent in my parents' house and the brief time in Ohio.

Alex murmured something and tipped her head back, brushing the tip of her nose along my chin and jaw. A wealth of warmth spread through me and before I knew what I was doing, I turned my head. My lips brushed her forehead.

"G'night, Aiden..."

My pulse sped up and a smile pulled at my lips—a real one. "Good night, agapi"

CHAPTER 8

ALEX TOOK THE ELIXIR AND THE COMPULSION WITHOUT protest the following morning. Four days later, she did so again. Each time, I was more affected by the process than she was. Alex didn't really understand what I was giving her, only that afterward I spoke to her in Greek and she was generally tired.

But with each passing day, a little of her old self shone through while we were alone. Her typical sharp tongue was still absent, much to my dismay. Who could've known how badly I'd miss her smartass responses? She did smile more often and even though she rarely left my side, she didn't freak out too badly when Lea and Luke popped in on us one day. They were good with Alex, if not a little shocked by how different she was. They didn't stay too long.

I think it scared them—seeing how very real the Elixir was, what it could do to them. How it stripped Alex down to nothing more than a shell. I caught Lea staring at her

once, and it was clear what she was thinking. This could be me. She was seeing herself in Alex's dull, shattered eyes.

By the third day, the headaches started, and each time she looked at me and mentioned the pain, I wanted to break each of Seth's ribs individually.

A sort of routine developed between us while we waited for Apollo to show, hopefully with good news. We spent the day together and at night she eventually made her way over to the couch. Admittedly it was my favorite part of the day. The bed was still off-limits. There was an intimacy to that, one I desired and had a hell of a time refusing, but with her like this, it would've crossed the line.

Alex pulled out the chessboard and placed it on the coffee table while I watched her. Gods, I loved just watching her. Sounded creepy as hell, I know, but my eyes just sought her out. There was a gracefulness about her that she'd retained, even after three doses.

"Play?" She plopped down on the floor on the other side of the coffee table.

I'd been teaching her how to play chess. When I nodded and moved to sit on the floor, she grabbed one of the pawns and placed it in the row closest to her.

Teaching her how to play wasn't really going well.

When she looked away, I reached over, replacing the pawn with a knight. Clasping her hands under her chin, she listened while I went over the rules again. Once I was finished, she went first, moving a pawn forward one space.

I tried picturing playing chess with Alex in a different time, like a month ago. Imagining her sitting still long enough and having the patience for a game like chess was impossible. Knowing her, she'd have thrown a chess piece by now. I laughed.

Alex's chin jerked up and she grinned. "What?"

"Nothing," I told her.

Still smiling, she crawled over and sat beside me, then reached across the board, moving another pawn right into position to be taken by mine. I laughed again. "You can't sit next to me and play chess, agapi"

Her shoulders lifted. "I like sitting beside you."

And I liked it, too. I moved a pawn forward, not taking hers.

"I like when you laugh, too." She placed a finger to her lips, her brows furrowing as she studied the board. "I think I just like you."

My mouth opened but nothing came out.

"Sometimes I feel... I feel like I should be doing more," she picked up a rook, "than this. With my life." She placed it back and looked up, searching my face. "With you, too."

I knew I needed to say something, but there was too much I wanted to say.

She scooted closer and rested her head on my shoulder. A heartbeat passed. "I have these memories. They are like dreams. Some are really good and others are dark and red." She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder. "I know there is more... to all of this."

"There is," I whispered, watching her lashes fan her cheeks, her lips part.

"I like this. I like when you hold me at night. That feels right... real." She paused,

lashes lifting. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” My voice sounded, felt heavy.

Alex raised her head, lips puckered. “I have a feeling you do not say that often.”

My breath caught. A ball of emotion formed in my chest. “I don’t.”

“Do you like it?” She gazed at the board, her fingers now hovering over the wrong pieces.

“Of course I do, agapi” I slid an arm around her shoulders and leaned over, pressing my lips against her temple, then her forehead. Her cheeks rose with her smile and so did my chest, and that ball tightened and tightened. I pressed my face into the mass of wavy hair and inhaled.

Apollo had said he knew what this kind of love was capable of. And I finally understood why Paris had risked his country and his blood for Helen. Selfish, yes, but I understood. I would burn down the world if that meant Alex would be safe.

“Knock, knock,” came Deacon’s voice.

Alex stiffened.

Pulling away from her, I looked up. He stood in the door, a slight smile on his face. Withdrawing my arm, I stood, surprised to find my legs weak.

Alex’s eyes bounced from my brother to me and she must’ve read something in my eyes, because she relaxed and went back to the chessboard.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He sauntered into the room. “What’s up with you?”

My lips twitched. “Playing chess with Alex.”

“Stimulating.” Deacon watched Alex move her chess pieces around the board in no particular order. “Luke’s been in contact with Olivia.

She’s with her mom and they’ve hooked up with Laadan. They want to come here.”

“If they are with Laadan, then I trust them. Clear it with Marcus, though.”

“I like Marcus.” Alex stood and drifted over to me.

Deacon arched a brow. “Now, that’s odd...”

“Deacon,” I warned.

Alex smiled up at me, holding a bishop in her hand. “Checkmate?”

He chortled. “Good gods, she’s like Rain Man.”

Anger whipped through me so fast I saw red, and then Alex frowned. “Is this ‘Rain Man’ a good thing?” she asked.

Taking a step toward my idiot brother, I exploded. “Get the hell out of here before I strangle you within an inch of your life.”

Eyes wide, Deacon’s hands flew up. “Whoa, I was just kidding. I mean, come on, she’s pretty random now.”

Rage swept through me. He was my brother. I loved him, but dammit, he never

thought before he spoke. Voice low, I said, “Do you even know how insulting that is to Alex?”

He blinked, his cheeks flushing. “I wasn’t thinking—”

“No shit.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Aiden. I’m sorry.” His gaze went behind me and he frowned. “I really am.”

Taking a deep breath, I let the red-hot anger slip off my brittle skin. “I know. It’s just that...” There was no need to finish. Deacon knew. “I didn’t mean to... yell at you. Just let Marcus know about Laadan and Olivia. Okay?”

Deacon looked like he wanted to say more, but wisely nodded and backed out of the room.

Sighing, I turned around. “Alex—”

The spot she’d stood in was empty. Dammit. I should’ve known better. Yelling and threatening to choke the ever-loving crap out of Deacon in front of her hadn’t been wise. I kept forgetting that this wasn’t Alex.

This was a frightened girl.

My eyes scanned the room, stopping on the linen closet door. It was ajar, revealing a thin strip of darkness. She wouldn’t...

To think of Alex—my strong, beautiful and resilient Alex—hiding in a closet killed me. For a heartbeat, I couldn’t move or breathe. I’d done this to her—given her the Elixir, changed her into something that ran when voices were raised. And I wanted to

blame Seth for his influence, the bond he'd forged with her that'd led us to this choice, but I'd been the one who'd forced the Elixir down her throat.

There wasn't forgiveness for me.

Stamping down the whirling mix of grief and rage, I made my way to the closet and slowly opened the double doors. It was a deep closet, with several shelves on the top stocked with quilts. A few garment bags hung from a rail. My gaze dropped. Five tiny toes peeked out from behind a bag.

I closed my eyes and swore under my breath, and then I eased the bags apart. Alex's foot jerked back, and I could hear her moving deeper into the recesses. Kneeling down, I found her pressed against the wall, knees tucked against her chest and eyes wide.

"Oh, Alex."

She watched me warily. "My name is Alexandria."

And just like that, all those days of drawing her out of the Elixir-induced shell were lost.

"Okay." I sat down cross-legged and dragged my fingers through my hair, debating on how to proceed with this. Deacon used to get nightmares when he was a kid. He hadn't hidden in the closet, but he had screamed like a furie. I used to read to him. Somehow I doubted that would work now. "Are you all right?"

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

A moment passed. “I do not like yelling.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” And I was. “But I would never hurt Deacon. He’s my brother.”

Confusion flickered over her face. “You said you were going to strangle him.”

I really wanted to strangle him now. “I didn’t mean it. Sometimes we say things we don’t mean when we’re upset.”

She appeared to consider that. “When you yelled, I saw something.”

“What?” I inched forward, careful not to startle her. “What did you see?”

Opening her hands, she stared down at them. The bishop was in her hand, leaving behind angry red marks from how tightly she’d been holding it. “Blood—there was blood on my hands, but it was not there. Not really.”

I had no idea what she meant by that, but I’d moved to her side while she’d been talking, and she hadn’t seemed to notice. I sat next to her, stretching out my legs in the cramped space. My shoulder brushed hers, and her eyes shot to my face, questioning and indecisive but not scared.

“Is there still blood on your hands now?”

Alex shook her head. “I heard something, too. It was a voice,” she continued softly. “It was important.”

My stomach sank. I didn't like where this was going, what it would lead to. If she was starting to remember things, it meant she'd need another dose, another compulsion. And I'd just given the last dose two days ago. I sighed. "What is it?"

Her fingers twisted along the edges of the bishop. "You'll kill the ones you love." She lifted her gaze. Tears glistened in her eyes. "Have I?"

"Alex..." There weren't words for this. Her lower lip started to tremble, and my heart squeezed. My mind was made up. "No. You've never killed anyone."

She blinked and her voice was just a hushed whisper. "I haven't?"

"No, agapi mou, you haven't."

Wiping under her eyes with her sleeves, she sighed. Pain brimmed underneath the surface, as did confusion. "I dream that I have, over and over again."

I smiled for her even as I felt my chest constricting. "They're just dreams. That's all."

Several moments passed, and then she pressed against me, wiggling until she wedged her body under my arm. She curled up, her head resting against my chest and my arms folded across hers. "You are very nice, even if you say mean things you do not mean."

I shook my head, but I wrapped my arms around her. "Did I ever tell you about the first time I saw you?"

She shivered. "No."

Closing my eyes, I felt her snuggle closer. My hand curled into the thick material of her sweater. I rested my chin on her head. "I was sixteen and you were probably

fourteen.”

“I can’t remember fourteen.”

“That’s okay. I remember for both of us.” I counted to ten before I continued, making sure my voice didn’t give. “It was toward the end of the day and I was heading into the training rooms with a friend. Classes were still going on, and I was walking by the door—it was open—and I heard laughter. Something you don’t usually hear during training. I had to stop and see what was going on.”

It was the first time I’d seen her. No one could miss her. She was the smallest in the room, shorter and skinnier than all of her opponents, but that wasn’t why she stuck out. There’d been this impish grin on her face, an energy that was infectious as she’d bounced around the mats, circling a tall, blond-haired boy. The Instructor had been irritated, no doubt by her and the attention she was drawing from a pure and an entire class riveted on her. But once I’d seen her, I couldn’t look away. It was like being hit by lightning.

“You were training with Cal—with a friend—going through takedown moves. He kept trying to get the upper hand, but you kept laying him out, laughing the entire time. Both of you were laughing. That’s why I looked.”

“Did you know me then?” she asked sleepily.

“No.” I held her closer, as if I could somehow pull her inside me and keep her safe.

“But I knew, in that moment, you were amazing.”

CHAPTER 9

APOLLO SHOWED UP JUST AFTER ALEX’S FOURTH DOS-age with no news. The Sentinels hadn’t reached New York. They’d stopped in Pennsylvania and

scattered. The Khalkotauroi followed. Seth and Lucian were still outside of Nashville. From the look of it, their army had nearly doubled.

Having so many Sentinels willing to side with them wasn't that surprising to me. They'd been offered something none of us had ever provided, and they were willing to die for freedom.

And there was a good chance they would, according to Apollo.

"Hades, Poseidon, and Demeter," Apollo ticked the names off on his fingers, his eyes a vibrant blue. "And Ares, who is thrilled by the way, and Hermes, and Hera have all pledged war."

"Hera?" I rubbed my chin. "At least we have Zeus."

Apollo rolled his eyes. "That doesn't mean much. He's probably only siding with us to upset Hera, but we do have Athena and Artemis. That's something."

"So, they are willing to wait and see? To give us time?"

He nodded. "They do not want to see another war. Not after what happened with the Titans. So many mortals were lost during that time, and with the population now, the loss would be several times larger."

And our only hope was that Alex could somehow break the connection with Seth and defeat him. I looked at the sleeping girl curled beside me on the couch. The outlook was bleak.

"And no one's found anything to break the connection?"

Apollo sighed. "There's nothing that any of us can find, Aiden. Not in the old myths

or scrolls. And if one of the other six know, they aren't telling." He glanced at Alex and fondness crept into the coldness of his voice. As did a great sadness that caused dread to explode in my gut. "I've run through all the prophecies. They haven't changed. One to destroy. One to save. Only one can live during any generation."

He leaned back, shaking his head. "I can't let my brethren go to war."

I placed my hand on Alex's shoulder. "Are you giving up on her?"

"I'm preparing for the worst." Apollo stood. "And don't hit me, Aiden, but I think you need to start preparing for it, too."

My skin burned and I said in a tight voice, "You've asked me to put her on the Elixir, and I told you then that you asked too much, but I did it. Asking me to give up is unacceptable."

"It's not giving up." He crouched, meeting my stare. "I would make sure she was taken care of, even allow her to visit you. We could do a Persephone thing."

I sucked in a shrill breath that came back out sounding like a growl. "You're asking me to let you kill her."

"I would make sure there was no pain," he said, standing again. He turned his back—daring considering I was close to shoving a dagger into it. "This isn't easy for me. I care for her. She is basically a child of mine. And I've watched over her for years, far longer than you've known her." He faced me, hands on his hips. "This would not just be your loss, but only one of them can live and I can't do a thing about Seth. Nor do I know who he's linked to."

My hand curled into a fist as I moved to stand between Alex and Apollo. "Get out."

“Aiden—”

“I mean it. Get out.”

His eyes flashed to all-white. No pupils. No irises. “I only allow you to speak to me like this because I know your love and pain, because I have felt it myself. Hyacinth wasn’t turned into a flower by my brethren. It was I who did it. It was the only way I could save him from them. So I know what love does and the pain that comes from that kind of sacrifice. But make no mistake, I do not regret what I had to do. And I will do it again.”

I stayed in place between them, my legs widespread, so ready for battle I could taste it. “And make no mistake, Apollo, I will not make that same sacrifice.”

I couldn’t stand to be in the house any longer. My nerves were stretched taut, my body ready to fight. Bloodlust had invaded my system.

I needed fresh air.

So did Alex. Once she’d woken up, she’d been all over the place, not able to sit still for longer than five minutes.

For the first time since she’d Awakened, I led her outside. Seeing the joy light up her eyes and the cool breeze brushing the hair off her cheeks lessened the darkness growing inside me. The almost-hyper bounce in her step as she made her way around fallen branches and shrubs reminded me of the old Alex.

Especially when she stopped suddenly, spying a small stream up ahead. She spun around quickly and threw her arms around me.

Surprised by the sudden affection, I froze, then wrapped my arms around her waist

and leaned back. “What’s that for?”

Alex shrugged. “I wanted to.”

I caught her hand as she shimmied loose. “I liked that.”

She smiled. “Maybe I’ll do it again.” Glancing over her shoulder, excitement hummed through her. She tugged me forward.

Letting go of her hand, I stopped. She looked over her shoulder again, brows knitted. “You can go,” I urged.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, and then leaned against an old oak. Her gaze darted over my face and she seemed to find whatever she was looking for. She turned, slowly starting toward the creek bed. Her footsteps were quick but not jerky. The antsy energy she’d been feeling all day would eventually grow. Crippling pain would assault her again soon as her tolerance to the Elixir grew and Seth started pecking away at her.

And if I didn’t give her a larger dose along with a booster compulsion, the bond between them would form again.

Closing my eyes, I tipped my head back. There had to be another way. We couldn’t keep doing this to her. Sooner or later, the effects of the Elixir wouldn’t wear off. She’d be like this forever—forever stuck between the tenacious and strong-willed Alex and this naïve, watered-down Alexandria. To do this to her wasn’t right. The wrongness of it coated my mouth and throat like bile. It was acid churning in my stomach, burning a hole through my soul.

And Apollo... he was giving up, even if he didn’t want to admit it—giving up and

preparing to kill Alex.

Clenching my jaw, I opened my eyes. Alex sat on a fallen log near the slow-moving creek. She held something in her hands—flowers? Her face was turned to the side and her lips were pulled down at the corners. Sadness had crept into her features.

I pushed off the tree but stopped as she picked off a petal and placed it on the log. Then another and another, until ten or so petals formed a loose circle beside her. She placed two more, completing the circle, and then two more inside the circle.

My chest tightened and, without any warning, a fissure of energy skittered over my skin. I turned, expecting to find Apollo—or worse yet, an unfriendly god. I sucked in a sharp breath.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:44 am

An ethereal glow surrounded the feminine form and slowly faded, revealing a slender woman who stood taller than me. Lilies adorned the brown hair that had been piled atop her head in an intricate maze of braids. A sheer white dress covered her body and left very little to the imagination. I felt I should look away but couldn't. She was almost painfully beautiful—unreal.

A faint smile appeared. "Hello, Aiden." Her voice was a symphony, and I started to bow, but she stopped me with a raised hand. "That is not necessary. Unlike my brothers and sisters, I do not have a taste for formalities."

It took me a few moments to find my voice. "You're one of the Moirae... one of the Fates."

"I am Clotho."

Fear formed a cold, hard ball in the center of my chest. Clotho was responsible for spinning the thread of human life, but she also decided when gods could be saved or put to death. I glanced over my shoulder at Alex. Did her powers extend to god-like creatures, too? I moved to block Alex from her view.

Clotho's laugh was soft and melodious. "I am not here to harm her, and even if I were, I cannot cut her thread. Neither can Atropos."

Relieved by that piece of information, I faced the goddess. "Why are you here?"

"I've been watching you and her." She stepped to the side. Sunlight broke through the branches, cutting across her bare shoulder and over her dress. The material

shimmered. “It pains you to see her like this, I know. You love her so.”

I saw no reason, no point, in lying to a goddess of Fate. “More than anything in this world, and without her.” Clearing my throat, I looked away. I couldn’t finish the sentence, let alone the thought.

“Going on would be like existing with a piece of you missing?” She nodded when I looked at her again. “Your threads are intertwined. Not by my doing, you see?”

I didn’t see a damn thing. Now I understood Alex’s frustration when she’d spoken to the oracle. I opened my mouth but closed it. Understanding slid over my skin like thick oil. “She was Fated to be with Seth, wasn’t she?”

She looked at me and her smile faded. “She was, but Fate has many plans for her.”

“What will happen to her?” I asked before I could stop myself. Somehow I knew that asking a Fate that kind of question equaled poor social skills.

“You do not ask for yourself?”

Sure, curiosity was there, but my fate didn’t matter. I shook my head.

Her brows rose. “Most would not pass up a chance to learn their fate, but I cannot tell you what lies in wait for your Alexandria. Some things are even unknown to us.”

Disappointment seeped into me, wrapping its way around my bones like a too-tight binding. I turned back to Alex. She was watching us, eyes wide and hands stilled over the petals.

“It’s okay,” I called out to her.

Alex didn't move for a full minute, and then she gathered all her torn petals, tossing them one by one into the creek.

Clotho watched Alex too. "Their threads are intertwined closely—the First's and hers."

My hands clenched. "And there's no way that can be undone?"

She tilted her head. "No. Just like yours cannot be undone. Fate is fate, you see, but there is one thing we do not take into consideration when we spin the threads of life, not even when we cut it."

Part of me didn't expect an answer, but I asked, "What is that?"

"Love. We do not take love into consideration."

I looked at her. "Seriously?"

She laughed and it carried on the breeze. "Love is such a wild and reckless creature. It cannot be planned or threaded. It cannot be controlled. Love can coexist with Fate, or it can undo it. Love is the only thing more powerful than Fate."

The words were slow to sink in as I stared at the goddess. Was this why the goddess had made such a surprise visit?

Her white eyes burned and hummed with electricity. "You want to know how to break the connection?"

My breath caught. "Yes."

Sympathy creased Clotho's brow. Stepping forward, she placed a small hand against

my chest, above my heart. “There is no god or person who can break their connection, but there is still hope.” She dropped her hand and stepped back, nodding. “There is the heart, Aiden. There is love, which means there is always hope.”

Then Clotho shimmered out of focus and disappeared. Feeling as if my nerves were exposed, I stalked around the fallen branches and overturned trees. Reaching Alex’s side, I realized I was holding my breath.

Something was building inside me, clicking together.

Alex turned to me, her shattered eyes meeting mine. The mix of brown and gold was as beautiful as it was heartbreaking. I really looked into them, seeing the trust that had always been there, devotion and love buried deep inside her. No bond—no connection—could fully extinguish that. It was why she’d hadn’t destroyed the necklace I’d made her.

There was still hope.

Clotho had said that love was stronger than Fate. Was that really the answer we’d been searching for? Love—our love for one another?

Then I remembered what Alex had said to me. “I won’t lose myself, because... well, how I feel about you, it would never let me forget who I am”

Somehow I’d forgotten that. I’d believed that she’d forgotten who she was, but in reality none of us, especially me, had had hope once she’d Awakened—not that kind of undying hope that saw people through the tough stuff. Granted, this wasn’t the ordinary tough stuff that most couples faced.

And what had I told her then? “I’d never let you forget who you are.”

Lowering her lashes, she opened her hand and the rest of the petals fell from her grasp, fluttering to the ground like thin, torn pieces of paper. “It’s beautiful here... and quiet. Can we stay for a little while longer?”

I wasn’t sure what I was doing when I placed my hands on her cheeks, tilting her head back. “Alex...”

Instead of correcting her name, she let it slide. Her eyes searched mine. “Aiden?”

My lips curved into a smile for her—always for her. “Do you believe in love?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Do you?”

“I do.” My hands slid to her shoulders and she shivered. “I believe in love.”

Thick lashes fanned her cheeks again and a grin tipped her lips. “I think I am in love.”

Six words stopped my heart when facing down a horde of daimons couldn’t.

She bit her lip and a faint blush stained her cheeks. “I feel it in here,” she said, placing her hand against her chest and then against her stomach, “and here. It’s like there’s not enough air or room inside me. That I may... burst out of my skin or drown in it, and that wouldn’t be a bad thing. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I always have... and will.” She tipped her chin up and her entire face was a rosy color. “It’s you. I... I love you.”

Heart pounding, I swept her against me in a fierce hug, lifting her off her feet. Her giggle was smothered but light. I buried my face in her hair. “I love you, Alex, always you.”

CHAPTER 10

DETERMINATION BURNED THROUGH ME LIKE A RIGHTeous fire. I had a plan—I had hope—and nothing was going to stop what I was about to do.

After depositing a worn-out Alex in the bedroom, I quickly changed into my Sentinel uniform. A sense of rightfulness filled me as I strapped on the daggers and laced up what Alex referred to as my “ass-kicking” boots. I smiled.

I hadn’t worn the uniform since we’d left Deity Island.

Straightening, I glanced at myself in the mirror. Freshly shaven and hair brushed back, I looked and felt like a different person. The heavy weight that’d settled on my shoulders had lifted the moment I’d made up my mind.

I left the bathroom, stopped by and checked on Alex, and pressed a kiss to her temple before going downstairs. It took me a few minutes to round up the group of Sentinels who’d stopped in on their way east. I sent them packing.

Solos snapped at my heels. “What are you doing, Aiden?”

“They don’t belong here.”

He stared at me as I closed the door behind the last one and stepped back. “They would come in handy if Seth finds his way here, you know.”

“No, they wouldn’t. No one would stop him if he finds his way here.” I knelt, pulling out a Covenant dagger. “Only Alex would be able to stop him.”

“And is Alex in the frame of mind to stop him?”

“Not yet.”

Marcus came into the hallway behind us. “What’s going on?”

“Go get Lea, Luke, and my brother. We need to talk.” I cut my palm, hissing at the flash of pain. Blood welled quickly. I placed my palm on the floor and started to draw the symbol I’d seen in Lucian’s house.

Marcus sucked in a breath. “Aiden, what is—?”

“Get them.” I finished with the snake symbol. An instant later, a flash of bright white light filled the hallway. The walls were luminous, sealing off the property, preventing Apollo from entering the home. I stood, wrapping a rag around my hand. “I’ll explain.”

“Dear gods, I hope so.”

Solos still stared. “Aiden has gone Rambo on us.”

Everyone gathered in the den. Nervous energy surrounded Lea and Luke. Only my brother seemed relaxed. Perhaps he’d seen this version of me before and knew that nothing could change my mind once it was made up.

Nothing except Alex, and this was about Alex—this was for Alex.

I stood before them. “The only way for Alex to break the connection is for her to do so herself. No one—no god, no magic—can do it. She has to. And I believe she can if given the chance.”

“Didn’t we give her the chance?” Solos asked.

“Not enough,” I told him, prepared to send his ass flying out the window if he didn’t agree. “But I believe in her—I have hope. And hope is what we need. I’m taking her off the Elixir.”

Marcus stared at me, then nodded. “What does Apollo have to say about this?”

And here’s the kicker. “He’s giving up, and he’s preparing himself to kill her. Only one of them can live and she’s the one he can do something about.”

They didn’t question what that meant, but I think they had a good idea.

Lea’s eyes narrowed. “He wouldn’t.”

“He would. And I understand why.” My jaw ached saying those words. “He has to protect humanity. That’s what he does. But I’m not giving up on her. And if any of you have, I suggest you leave now.”

No one moved, but I waited, giving them ample opportunity to choose. “There’s no doubt in my mind Apollo’s going to be pissed when he realizes what I’ve done and what I plan to do. If you stay here...”

The unspoken words hung in the room. They knew. On top of everything else, they’d face Apollo’s wrath.

Luke glanced at Deacon and smiled. “Apollo kind of freaks me out, anyway.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:45 am

“No doubt,” Deacon replied, shaking his shoulders. “And hey, if you believe in Alex, so do I. You know her better than any of us.”

“That is true.” Marcus smiled, leaning against the couch. “I’m in.”

Solos sighed. “This is crazy, but what the hell? I came here to protect Alex. Not to hand her over to be put down like a dog.”

I turned to Lea, and for the first time in a long time, she smirked. “I want to see Alex kick Seth’s ass. Someone’s got to do it. It wouldn’t be fair that she dies for him to live.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “You guys know this could get bad, really bad.”

No one moved for a while, and then Marcus strolled forward, clapping a hand down on my shoulder. “We’ve got your back, Aiden. We’ve also got Alex’s.”

And that was what I needed to hear. “She can do this. I know she can.”

I left them then, retreating to the bedroom. I crossed the room to the bed and sat. Alex stirred, aware enough that she didn’t resist when I pulled her into my arms, cradling her to my chest. I’d prepared myself, but not in the way Apollo meant.

Alex would get no more doses, and when the Elixir wore off, I would do what I felt was the worst thing possible. I’d place her back in the cell, and then I’d wait.

I’d fight.

Alex. Seth. A whole slew of gods if necessary. No one was going to take Alex. No one was going to give up on her or hurt her—not even Alex.

Apollo had changed Hyacinth into a flower to protect him. I would give Alex back control so she could protect herself instead of making the decision for her. That's how we were different from the gods.

I lowered my lips to her cheek and kept them there, holding her tighter and tighter. The gods wanted war?

They were about to get it.