

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## - Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 1

### Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 1

[ 1,202 words ]

#### 1| You wish for death?

Selene

I had died nine times. And every single time, it had been by his hand.

Alpha Damien of the Crimson Pack. The most dangerous man I had ever laid eyes **on**.

**The** scene had always begun the same way, his sword pressed to my throat, his cold blue eyes pinning me where I knelt. The final strike had always come, his blade slicing through flesh, blood spilling down my chest as I drew my last breath.

You might have wondered why, if I had gone back nine times, I couldn't stop it. Why I couldn't change the ending. The truth was cruel. I remembered nothing of my past lives until that very moment, until I saw Damien's blade at my throat. That was when it all crashed back, the nine deaths, my life flashing before my eyes, again and again.

My chest heaved. My hand clamped over the wound in my stomach, trying to hold in what was already spilling out. Around me, the battlefield was silent except for the groans of the dying. All my men were gone.

Damien towered over me, tall and merciless, his armor slick with blood. There wasn't a scratch on him. His face was blank, and emotionless as always, those cold blue eyes slicing into me without a hint of pity. He looked at me the way one looks at a wounded animal, seconds before delivering the final blow. The cold-blooded monster was about to end my life.

"Aww," someone jeered behind him, a faceless soldier who had watched me die too many times. "She is still fighting to live. How sad."

Another soldier laughed. "Hahaha. Sad indeed. The mighty Luna, leading her people into war, while her mate sits in his castle, drinking and fucking his pleasures. How dumb is she?"

A third voice chimed in. "Do we even need to kill her? Look at her. She's beautiful. We could take her back, keep her as our slave. Imagine that, the Luna of Mooncrest on her knees for us."

Dirty words were thrown at me. My fists trembled against the dirt, nails digging into my palms. My throat ached, my breath ragged, but I stayed silent. On any other day, I would have spat blood in their faces, and cursed them. I was the Luna. I would not allow anyone to insult me. But I'd learned.

Every time I rose to defend my honor, Damien cut me down. That was one of the ways I died. And Gods, I was so tired.

So I let them speak. Let them drag my name through the filth. I didn't raise my eyes, or waste my strength.

My silence enraged one of them. Boots crunched against the blood-soaked ground as he stormed closer. "Who the fuck are you to ignore me, you whore?" His hand lifted, ready to strike me across the face. But before his palm could fall, Damien turned his head and fixed his gaze on him.

The soldier froze immediately. His hand dropped at once.

Not even his own men defied him.

I lifted my gaze just enough to look at them, then lowered it again. My voice came out quiet. "Kill me."

Silence.

They all paused, eyes widening. One muttered in disbelief, "Did she just... ask us to kill her?"

Another scoffed, uneasy. "She was fighting like a demon moments ago. Why the sudden change?"

Damien's sword never moved from my throat. His head tilted, curiosity glinting in his icy stare as he studied me. "You wish for death?" His voice was calm, almost amused. "Why?"

I didn't answer. My gaze stayed fixed on the ground, the blood pooling at my knees.

"Why, Luna of the Mooncrest Pack?" he pressed again.

Why?

Because I was tired. Because every life, every struggle, every desperate fight had always led me here. I was weary of struggling against fate only to meet the same end.

I swallowed. My lips trembled, but the truth slipped out anyway.

“Because I’m tired of fighting” I whispered, my voice breaking. “You’re going to end it, no matter what I do... so just be quick

with it?

I felt his gaze burn into me. I didn’t dare look up. If I saw his eyes now, if I faced him in this state, I would despise myself for **being so weak**,

**The blade** pressed **closer to my** throat. I swallowed hard, my pulse racing. Gods, I was terrified. I didn’t want to die again. But what choice **did I** have?

1/2

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I closed my eyes. Please, let it be quick this time. Every other time had hurt too much.

The weight of the sword shifted. I braced myself for the cut, but instead, I heard the sound of the blade lowering.

My eyes flew open. I froze. Huh?

Around me, everyone was silent. Damien’s soldiers were also confused as they stared at their alpha. He stood there, blade resting at his side, his face as cold and unreadable as ever.

“W–what are you...?” My voice shook as I looked up at him in disbelief.

His eyes narrowed. “You want to die?” His lips curled, but it wasn’t a smile. “That is rather amusing. The look in your eyes... you’re terrified of death, yet you beg for it. I’ve never seen anyone like you before.”

I swallowed, my throat dry.

Damien tilted his head, studying me like a puzzle. Then, he said, “Very well. I’ll give you a chance to live. If you can survive today, you’ll keep your life.”

My heart stuttered. I wasn't sure I'd heard him right.

"Jason," Damien called.

"Yes, Alpha," replied a striking man with blonde hair, his beta:

"Hand me my bow."

Jason obeyed swiftly, placing the weapon in Damien's hands. The Alpha strung an arrow, then leveled it at me.

"I'll give you one minute to run," he said. "Then my men and I will fire. If you can escape, we won't hunt you down."

The soldiers laughed. Their eyes lit with delight. To them, I wasn't a Luna anymore. I was their prey.

My chest tightened. Every instinct screamed at me to stay down, to let it end here before they could play their cruel game. But this had never happened before. Not once in my nine lives had he ever spared me, let alone offered me a way out. My body shook. My mind told me to give up. But somewhere deep inside, I still had hope. I didn't want to die.

I wanted to live.

Damien's head tilted slightly, his blue eyes glinting. "If I were you," he said. "I'd be running."

My teeth sank into my lip. My legs felt heavy, but I forced them to move. Then I turned and ran.

Behind me, his voice counted down. When the first arrows whistled through the air, I didn't stop. Even as they tore into my **flesh**, even as pain seared through me, I kept running.

I ran because for the first time in all my lives, I had a chance.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 2

[ 1,265 words ]

I staggered forward. My legs felt like they no longer belonged to me, but I forced them to move. I couldn't stop. My breaths came fast, my vision blurring, but I pushed through the haze.

I did it.

I really did it.

I escaped death.

Even though I was still bleeding, broken, hanging by a thread, I knew if I got treatment, I could make it. I could heal, and live. The thought made a faint smile tug at my lips.

I looked up and saw the gates of the castle. My home. It was guarded by familiar men in armor. Relief flooded me so hard it nearly dropped me to my knees.

'We did it, Mira. We're almost home.'

Mira didn't answer. My wolf had been silent since the battle. She was a white wolf, one of the strongest in existence, yet when I needed her most, she had vanished just like every other time in my past lives.

Still, I knew she was there, watching, helping in her own way. If not for her, I would already be dead. I didn't understand her silence, but I told myself that once I was healed, she'd come back to me.

My body swayed as I stumbled toward the gate. One of the guards narrowed his eyes, then shouted, "Huh? Something's approaching! Raise your arrows!"

"Who are you?! State your business!"

I threw up a trembling hand, my voice hoarse. "Hold! Don't shoot. It's me, I'm Luna Selene."

The men froze, blinking at me in shock. I couldn't blame them. I must've looked nothing like myself, covered in blood, staggering like a beggar at death's door instead of the graceful Luna they were used to.

I braced my hands on my knees, gasping for air, then forced myself upright. My eyes locked on them. "What are you waiting for? Open the gates. Tell Adrian I'm back."

The guards didn't move. Instead, they exchanged looks with one another. And then, slowly, they lifted their bows and aimed them at me.

I blinked, disbelieving. My heart stumbled in my chest. "W—what are you doing?"

I stared at the men, my body swaying, my chest burning with every ragged breath. One of them stepped forward, his voice hard.

"On your knees. You've been ordered to be taken into custody."

into custody?

My eyes widened. "W—what do you mean, taken into custody? What are you doing? Can't you see I'm injured?" My voice cracked. "I'll die if I'm not treated. Call Adrian this instant! If Adrian knew what you were doing, he would never tolerate this disrespect!"

A guard scoffed, his lips curling into a mocking smile. "Yeah, right. On your knees, Selene Bloodrose."

The full name hit me like a slap. No one dared call the Luna by her full name. I frowned, confused. This was wrong. They knew who I was. They knew my title. And yet, they dared point arrows at me?

I opened my mouth to demand answers, but the gates creaked open.

I turned, relieved to see Adrian stepping out.

He looked as breathtaking as always, long black hair tied back neatly, his red robes flowing, a golden crown glinting atop his head. My Alpha, my mate. The reason I fought this war to begin with.

At his side walked my twin sister, Sienna. She was one of the few people who had always stood by me, supported me, and **loved** me no matter what. Walking behind them were more guards.

**Adrian's** steps were slow. He stopped in front of me. My knees nearly buckled, but I exhaled in relief.

Thank **god**.

I smiled. "**A-Adrian...** thank **god** you're here. These men are talking nonsense. They won't let me in, they say I'm to be taken **into custody**. **I know** it must be a mistake." I clutched at **my** bleeding side. "But I don't mind, I'm just so tired, Adrian. I need treatment. Please, just-"

I stopped when **something caught my eye**.

**08:13 Tue, Dec 23**

<2| **Alpha Damien doesn't spare anyone**

"W-what... what is this?" My voice was no more than a whisper. I forced my gaze to Adrian, searching for reassurance. "Why is she wearing that?"

He didn't move, didn't even react to the state I was in. He only stood there, eyes unreadable.

My lips trembled as I licked them, tasting blood. "Adrian... what's going on?"

Adrian's eyes met mine. "How did you manage to survive?"

I blinked. My breath caught in my throat. "W-what?"

"How did you survive, Selene? And where are the troops that were sent with you?"

My mouth went dry. I swallowed hard, my body swaying on my feet. I didn't know what to say. My thoughts were muddled, spinning with exhaustion and blood loss.

Sienna's voice rang out beside him. "Sister, the Alpha asked you a question. Why are you so quiet? Do you not have an answer?" She tapped her chin as if in thought, her lips curving. "Or... could it be that you used your troops as a distraction and escaped by yourself?"

My eyes widened. I stared at her in disbelief. “W–what are you saying, Sienna?” A distraction? I would never do that.”

One of the guards sneered. “What? You mean she abandoned them? Used her own soldiers to cover her retreat?” He spat at the ground. “Coward.”

I shook my head desperately. “No! I said that’s not true! I didn’t use anybody to escape!”

Adrian’s voice was merciless. “Then how did you escape? Why would that cold–hearted demon let you live?”

I wanted to scream at him that I was dying, that he could at least let me rest before forcing me to answer, but I bit the words back. All I could do was force out the truth through trembling lips.

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“I... I don’t know,” I whispered. “He just let me go. Everyone else is dead, but he didn’t kill me.

Sienna laughed. A mocking chuckle that didn’t sound like my sister at all.

さす

“But why would he let you go, sister? From what I’ve heard, Alpha Damien doesn’t spare anyone. He kills everyone who stands in his way. Oh, unless...” She gasped dramatically, her hand flying to her mouth in shock. “Unless you let him and his men inside you. Is that why he let you go?”

My blood boiled at her vile remark.

“Enough!” I snapped, *my* voice thundering with my Luna command. Sienna stumbled back, her smug smile faltering. Even in my state, I could still put her in her place.

“Don’t make such disgusting assumptions!” I roared, my chest heaving. “I would rather die than let them touch me!”

I turned toward Adrian, my gaze desperate, and pleading. “You have to believe me, Adrian. That’s what happened.” For a moment, he only stared. His cold green eyes searched mine, but there was no warmth there.

**It doesn’t matter.”**

My breath hitched. “W–what?”

“It doesn’t matter what happened out there. What matters is that you weren’t supposed to make it out alive, Selene.” **The** ground tited beneath me. “What are you saying...?”

“I **thought** I was sparing you, he continued, “I thought it would be kinder to let you die in battle than to reject you before the entire pack and bury you in shame. But you didn’t die in battle. So I have no choice but to do this.”

1, **Adrian** Blackthorn, Alpha of the Mooncrest Pack, reject you, Selene Bloodrose, as my mate.”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 3

[ 1,080 words ]

Selene

Everything felt like a dream. A terrible nightmare I couldn’t wake from.

I didn’t know what was worse, dying at the hands of a monster, or hearing my mate say that.

Adrian was my mate, the Alpha of the Mooncrest Pack.

I was a daughter of the priestess family, a family that served the Moon Goddess directly. I had always been different. My hair was proof of **it**, half black, half white. A curse, they said. The priestesses were supposed to bear only white hair, the mark of purity. But I was an outcast before I had even learned to walk.

It didn’t matter to me. All I had wanted was happiness. I wanted a bond with my mate.

When I found out my mate was the Alpha himself, I was overjoyed. I felt our bond. Even when Adrian barely noticed me, even when he was cold, distant, and indifferent, I was still happy. Because he was mine. And I believed that *one* day he might love me back.

So I gave him everything.

I worked, I bled, I devoted myself to being the perfect Luna. I did my duty so well I lost myself in it, and the few people who truly cared for me. I went to war for him against Alpha Damien, the demon who killed me life after life.

And not once, did I ever blame Adrian. Even knowing it was always his orders, that led me to my death. Even then, I was happy that he was safe.

How foolish.

All my sacrifices, my love was all for nothing.

I escaped death, only to suffer this.

My breaths came shallow. And then I felt our little bond shattering. My knees buckled, my body shaking. A tear slipped down my cheek, then another, until I couldn't stop them anymore.

"Say it, Selene," Adrian growled.

I lifted my head, trembling, my lips parting, but what came out was a broken whisper. "D-Damien..."

"Say it," he repeated, harder this time. "After you say it, you'll be treated. Then you'll be exiled from this pack. That is all I can do for you."

I stared at the man I had loved for so many years. My vision blurred with tears, my heart screaming as I looked down at my hand, still clutching the wound that refused to stop bleeding.

My voice cracked as I whispered, "After everything I've done for you... after all the love I've given you, how could you do this to me?" My body shook. "I went to war for you. I gave my life, my soul, my dedication to you."

"Why would you do **this** to me... when all I've ever given you is love?"

For a moment, something flickered in Adrian's gaze. But as quickly as it came, it vanished. His expression hardened again. He opened his mouth, as if to speak, but Sienna stepped forward first. "Adrian didn't mean it, Selene."

My brow furrowed. Adrian. The way she said his name was too intimate. My stomach twisted. Why was she saying it like

that?

The truth struck me.

I turned my eyes on them both, my heart pounding so loud I could hear nothing else. When Sienna caught my stare, she smirked, lips curving in triumph, as if she was happy I'd finally pieced it together.

My breath hitched. My head shook violently. "I—Impossible," I whispered. "Impossible, you wouldn't do this to me. You wouldn't...."

Neither of them spoke, or denied it.

Sienna placed her hand on Adrian's arm, claiming him.

"Yes," she said. "Whatever you're thinking is correct, sister." She leaned closer to him. "Adrian and I are together. We have been for a long time. We only kept it hidden to spare you, and avoid hurting you, but we couldn't hide anymore. We love each other *too* much. I know you'll understand, Selene. You've always been the understanding type."

Her voice was sweet, but I could hear the venom beneath it. And just like that, whatever fragile pieces of hope or humanity I **had left** shattered **into** dust.

31 Reject me already, Selene

My mate, and my sister. The two people I had loved, trusted were together all along. And instead of facing me, they had thrown me to Damien's claws, hoping he would tear me apart in their stead.

Adrian sighed, his face bored, as though everything was nothing more than an inconvenience. "Don't waste my time. Reject me already, Selene."

Before I could respond, Sienna turned her gaze to him, her hand still resting on his arm.

"Wait," she said softly. "Let me talk to my sister first. She might listen to me."

Adrian's jaw tightened, as if he disliked the delay, but finally he gave a short nod. "Make it quick."

She walked towards me and took my hand in hers, her fingers cool against my blood stained skin. She leaned closer, tilting her head as though she was comforting me. My stomach churned. I wanted to yank my hand away, and shove her back, but I was too weak.

"Sister, you shouldn't be so down, after all, it's not like you could've kept him forever." She whispered.

My body flinched. Her breath was warm against my skin as she continued. “Finally, I can get rid of trash like you. Do you know how annoying you’ve always been to me? How could someone like you, a cursed wolf, end up with Adrian as a mate,. when I should’ve been the one?”

“Sienna...”

“That’s why I did everything to seduce him and make him mine. And it wasn’t hard, you know. He already hated the sight of you. He only kept you because you were useful. But now, you’re not useful anymore. So you should just die. It will be better for everyone. Besides... your wolf is already poisoned.”

My eyes snapped to hers in shock.

She smirked. “Yes, Selene. I poisoned Mira. That’s why your precious wolf has been silent all day. She’s slowly dying. And once she’s gone, you’ll be nothing. You’ll never rise again or fight. You’ll be worthless.”

I couldn’t breathe. I just stared at her, my world crumbling piece by piece.

Even if I survived today, even if I somehow escaped this humiliation, Mira would still die. And with her, I would too.

My sister’s poison had already decided my fate.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 4

[ 1,758 words ]

**4| I was no longer the same** Selene

Selene

“Hahahaha.”

The sound came out of me before I could stop it, echoing across the courtyard. The guards and Adrian froze. Even Sienna's

eyes

widened as she stiffened.

She tried to move away, but I moved faster, my hand shooting up, clamping around her throat. I dragged her back into me, my blade pressing against her pale neck.

"Ah! What are you doing?! Let go!" she shrieked, clawing at my wrist.

I didn't answer. Instead, I pressed the blade harder until a thin red line slid across her throat.

"Selene!" Adrian barked. "Let her go this instant!"

I only laughed again. His Alpha voice was powerless over me. At this point, nothing was more dangerous than a woman who had lost everything.

"Keep your mouth shut!" I screamed back.

His eyes widened, shock flashing across his face. He hadn't expected me to fight his command, and dare defy him so openly.

Sienna trembled in my grip, her voice trembling as she stammered, "W—what is wrong with you, Selene? You're scaring me. Stop this."

Her fear should've softened me. But now, I only laughed again, my eyes wide as the blade dug deeper into her skin.

"I'm scaring you?" My voice broke. "I'm scaring you?! When all this time, I've been the one terrified, terrified of dying, terrified of failing. I've faced death more times than you can count, and when I finally escaped fate itself, here you are. My sister, my mate. The people I trusted most are trying to kill me too."

I leaned closer, my voice low and venomous. "So tell me, Sienna, between the two of us, which one is more frightening? The two-faced bitch who smiles while stabbing me in the back, or the crazy bitch with nothing left to lose?"

I slid the blade just enough to cut.

"Ah!" she screamed, thrashing. "Adrian! Help me! She's really going to kill me, do something!"

Adrian's voice softened. "Relax, stop moving, or you'll only make it worse. She won't hurt you, Sienna. I know her."

"O-okay..." she stammered, but his words did nothing to calm her. She could see this was my final breaking point. We were twins, after all.

He turned his gaze to me, trying to reason. "That's enough, Selene. I know you're angry. But you're rational. You're not the type to do something this foolish. I never said I'd kill you. You can still be forgiven. Just let her go."

"All my *men* have their arrows trained on you. I could order them to shoot without touching Sienna. So end this yourself. Put the blade down."

I stared at him, my chest heaving, my hand trembling against Sienna's throat.

I scoffed. "You think I'm scared of death? No, Adrian. I have died so many times already. Death and I are old friends. Your men can shoot if they want, I just survived a deadly game of arrows. None of this scares me anymore. I'm not afraid of dying, but I swear to *you*, I will take someone down to hell with me."

My grip tightened *on* the blade. I was ready to end at least one life before mine was taken.

"No!" Adrian's voice tore through the air.

In that split second of hesitation, Sienna's elbow rammed into my open wound. Pain exploded through me. I groaned as my knees buckled beneath me.

She tore herself from my hold and stumbled into Adrian's arms.

"Are you okay, Sienna?" Adrian's voice was full of concern, his hands running over her as if she were made of glass.

She panted dramatically, clutching at him. "I—I'm fine. That was close... she was really going to kill me."

Adrian's face darkened as he looked at me, disgust burning in his eyes. "You're insane, Selene. I'll have you punished for this. If Sienna had lost her child because of you, I would have made sure you regretted it."

I blinked. Her child?

*My* gaze dropped to where Sienna's hands clutched her stomach. Slowly, my eyes lifted again, meeting both of theirs. They

4 was no longer the same Selene

didn't even flinch. They just stared back at me.

A hollow laugh bubbled in my throat, but I swallowed it. Instead, I forced myself upright, ignoring the agony tearing through my body. My blood dripped onto the stone beneath my feet, but I stood tall.

"You know what?" My voice came out calm. "I don't even blame you. I blame myself for being so blind, and stupid. For wasting my love and loyalty on the two of you."

They looked at me confused, as if they didn't understand where I was going with this.

I gave them a broken smile. "If I were ever given another chance, Adrian, and Sienna, I would make sure to become your worst nightmare. I'd take everything from you. I'd make your lives as miserable as you've made mine. I'd strip you bare **until** you had nothing left. And most of all, I'd make sure you never have the one thing you truly crave."

"I, Selene Bloodrose, promise you this, if I must make a deal with the devil himself, I will haunt you for the rest of your lives." The sky rumbled, and then thunder split the air with a violent crack, making the guards flinch, making even Adrian's face twitch as the sky darkened above us.

The goddess had heard me. And so had the devil.

"And to answer your rejection, Adrian..." I whispered, my eyes locking on his. "I hope this answer is to your satisfaction."

Before he could understand, I lifted the blade high.

His eyes widened, as if, for the first time, he realized what about to do. "Selene-!" He moved fast, but I was faster. My

hand drove the blade into myself, piercing through flesh.

I gasped, and the world went silent.

I fell to my knees, my head dropping forward as warm blood dripped onto the stone below. My vision blurred, the red pooling beneath me.

I saw Adrian and Sienna, both frozen, their faces pale with shock, but I couldn't hear them. Their lips moved, but the sound was gone, swallowed by the roaring in my ears.

'Mira...' I whispered inwardly, searching for my wolf. 'Are you here?'

For a long moment, there was only silence until she answered.

'Yes, Selene. I'm here. I've always been here. Every time you die, I die with you. I'm here with you on your final day.'

A shaky smile curved my lips as tears slid down my cheeks, mixing with the blood,

'I'm sorry, I told her, my heart aching with guilt. 'I'm sorry for being so stupid, and not protecting us. For not protecting you.'

Her voice was warm, though I could feel her fading too.

'It's okay, Selene.'

My strength was leaving me. I could feel it draining. My body was numb, my breaths shallow. But I forced the words out one last time, my plea to the heavens.

Moon goddess, I don't know if you can hear me, but if you are, please, give me one more chance. I don't want to die unfairly. I don't want to die betrayed again.

Tears blurred my sight as I gasped for breath.

Give me a chance to be reborn. Give me a chance for revenge. But this time, let me remember early. Don't let me stumble in the dark again. Don't let me die without knowing who my enemies truly are. Please, give me a tenth life.

Thunder rolled above, rattling the heavens before everything went dark.

I couldn't breathe.

It was as if something heavy was pulling me down, dragging me deeper and deeper into endless water. My chest burned. I tried to open my eyes, but the water forced them wide on its own, blurring everything around me.

So was this it?

I was dead.

My grandmother's words came to me.

"When people die, child, their sins follow them. Everyone has their own hell waiting for them."

This was mine? Was this suffocating abyss my punishment? Had the Moon Goddess ignored me after all? I wasn't given **my** tenth **life**. **How** ironic. **Maybe** the ninth really was the last.

I was no longer the same Selene

A bitter laugh bubbled in my throat, swallowed immediately by the water. My limbs ached, so I stopped moving. I had wanted to give those traitors a taste of their own medicine, and make them pay. But it seemed fate wasn't on my side.

Still, if this was hell, why did it feel like I could really die here? Why was my brain urging me to swim?

"Miss Selene!"

The voice was muffled.

"Miss Selene!"

What was going on? Was this really hell?

I jerked my eyes open. Someone was calling my name from the shore. I looked around, my body sluggish, and froze.

I wasn't in some endless void. I was in a river.

My breath caught in my throat as I came to a realization.

I knew this scene. Eight years ago, Sienna had fallen into the water with me. We were both drowning.

My heart pounded as I turned, and there she was, Sienna was thrashing in the water.

"Help!" she mouthed.

The surface rippled, then, someone jumped in. My older brother, Cross. He brushed me aside, his strong arms reaching for Sienna, carrying her back up, and ignoring me.

I blinked. It was exactly the same.

Eight years ago, I nearly died here.

And if I remembered correctly, a few moments after Sienna was safe, another splash echoed. My second brother, Kane, jumped in after me. He couldn't let me die, not when they still had use for me. He would pull me out only after ensuring Sienna was safe.

After a while, someone finally dove into the water.

Kane.

A smile curled my lips.

I had actually come back! And this time, I remembered everything.

Kane swam toward me, frowning, but when he tried to carry me, I pushed him away. Forcing strength into my limbs, I swam up on my own.

I saw the shock on his face, but I ignored him.

This time, I would not be the helpless girl waiting for scraps of affection.

This time, I would not let anyone **use** me.

I was no longer the same Selene. I would make **the** world bow before me.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 5

[ 1,140 words ]

### 5 Let's see how long she can keep it up

Selene

The moment my head rose above the surface, air hit my lungs. I gasped, pulling it in greedily, trembling as the cold bit into my skin. My wet hair clung to my face, strands sticking to my lips, but none of it mattered.

I was alive.

Oh gods, I was alive.

I was not only alive, but I remembered.

I remembered every scream, every life, every betrayal, every time I'd died. Even the moment I drove my own knife into my chest because of my mate and my sister. All of it flashed through my mind, but instead of breaking me, it made me smile.

A wild smile stretched across my face as I ran a trembling hand over my wet hair, pushing it back. My chest hurt from breathing, but I laughed like a madwoman.

I finally had a chance.

"Oh my god! Miss Selene!"

The voice cut through my laughter. My heart dropped at the familiar sound.

Impossible.

I turned to the shore, and there they were, faces I hadn't seen in years. The servants, my brothers, Sienna: Kane was already crouched beside her, Cross holding her as she coughed while they fussed over her, but none of it mattered. All I could see was the woman staring at me.

Evelyn.

My personal maid. Her face was exactly as I remembered. She was crying harder now, her hands trembling as she called to

1. me.

"Miss Selene, what are you still doing **in** the water? Come out before you get sick. Please,

come out!"

I stared at her, my lips parting. "Evelyn..." I whispered. Her name felt strange in my mouth after all these years.

For a moment, I couldn't move.

"Miss Selene, please come here."

I snapped out of it before finally swimming toward the shore. The water was heavy, but my limbs moved. I pulled myself out, drenched and shivering.

Evelyn rushed to me immediately, wrapping a thick blanket around my shoulders. Her arms came around me in a desperate hug.

“Thank god you’re okay,” she breathed, voice trembling. “I was so worried about you. Are you okay, Miss?”

Her warmth made me smile. I wanted to hug her back. But before I could, she pulled away abruptly, her eyes lowering to the

ground.

“I-1 apologize for hugging you,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to touch a Moonborn.”

She looked terrified, as if I might strike her.

My heart dropped when Evelyn stepped away from me. The blanket she had wrapped around me suddenly felt cold, as if her warmth had been snatched back with her retreat. I couldn’t even blame her. How could I? This was my fault.

In my past lives, I had never cherished the ones who truly cared. My sweet, loyal Evelyn, I pushed her aside, ignored her kindness, and clung to snakes like Sienna, mistaking that for love. And yet, despite everything I did, despite all the times I wounded her with my selfishness, Evelyn never abandoned me. She stayed, and loved me. And in every lifetime, she died for me.

Now, I remembered everything. I knew who my real enemies were. I swore I would never make the same mistake again. Evelyn deserved better. And I would make sure she got it.

“Moonborn?” A voice sneered from behind me, shattering the moment. “What is this bitch saying? How is a curse a Moonborn? Miss Sienna is the true Moonborn. She is the true descendant of the priestess.”

I **slowly turned**. The servants stood there, smug, their lips curled in disdain. They didn’t even bother to hide it.

“Look at her, staring **at us**. Every time I see that cursed hair, I feel sick. She should have drowned.”

**blinked**. What **was going on**? How could I hear what they were saying when their mouths weren’t even moving? My eyes

5 Let’s see how long she can keep it up

darted between them, my heart hammering.

This wasn’t mindlink. Only the Alpha and Luna had the right to grant that bond. These were just servants. Then how-

“Huh, why is she looking at me like she can hear what I’m thinking?” one woman muttered, smirking. “Imagine if she could read minds. Hah... that would be dangerous for everyone.”

I gasped before I could stop myself. “Is that it? Can I really read people’s minds?”

The maid’s face drained of color. She stumbled back, stammering, “H–how-?”

“You!” Her panic was cut short by Kane’s voice.

The servants instantly lowered their heads as he strode forward, but his gaze never left me. His eyes blazed with fury, and I found myself straightening instinctively under the weight of it.

Before I could speak, his hand lashed out. The crack echoed through the courtyard. My head snapped to the side, cheek burning hot.

Kane’s fist clenched in the fabric of my drenched dress, dragging me closer until his breath was hot against my face. His growl vibrated in my bones.

“How dare you harm Sienna?!”

The slap burned. He struck me with everything he had, never mind that I was young and dripping wet.

**A**

In my past life, he had done the same. My face had swollen so badly I spent a week in the hospital before it healed. He wanted to break me, but I didn’t cry or even flinch.

Pain had been my tutor across lifetimes. Compared to what I’d endured, this was nothing more than a bruise I could swallow. I turned my head slowly and met his gaze as if nothing had happened.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked, my voice low.

Kane’s face went blank for a moment. He looked surprised at how calm I was.

‘What is this? Why is she so calm?’ he thought, his lips unmoving.

When my silence continued, he exploded. “What am I even doing? What are you, stupid? Are you blind? Can’t you see what you did to Sienna? You’re not even scared or ashamed. Why would you push her in the river? Are you jealous that she’s better than you? If anything happens to my sister, I will fucking kill you.”

He ranted while I watched with indifference. My eyes dropped to Sienna, who was still unconscious as Cross tried to wake her.

'Ha. She deserved that slap. This will prove no one loves a cursed girl like her. I'll stay unconscious long enough for big brother Kane to kill her. She should just die.' Sienna's thought echoed in my head.

I almost laughed. A smirk tugged at my lips. My sweet sister, playing the victim while scheming in silence.

Let's see how long she can keep it up.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 6

[ 1,051 words ]

### 6 Your remains will be fed to the dogs

Selene

The Moonborn. We were the daughters of the priestess, daughters who served and were beloved by the Moon Goddess

herself.

In the old texts, it was written that Moonborns were even more important than Alphas. If there was a war and the Moonborn called upon the Moon Goddess for help, and she answered, the entire battle could be ended in minutes. That was the power we carried. That was why the Moonborns were feared and revered.

In every generation of the priestess family, there had always been one Moonborn. But this time was different. This time there were twins. The day Sienna and I were born, the elders sang about blessings. They believed two Moonborns meant unstoppable power, and an age of glory for our people. But the moment they saw me, that hope died.

My black—and—white hair was called a curse. I became their disappointment and their warning. What had once been a blessing turned into a mark of shame. I was only a child, yet they blamed me for everything, treating me like a disease they couldn't sweep away.

And still, after all of it, I tried to be loved. I gave everything, bent myself in half, played the part they wanted. But no matter what I did, they never saw me as family. So now? I'm done. I'd rather die than call these people my family again, or care one damn bit what anyone thinks of me.

I turned my gaze on Kane. "Get your hands off me, Kane,"

He stared at me for a moment but didn't move his hand from my shirt. My voice dropped lower. "I won't repeat myself again."

Something flickered in his eyes. And, without even thinking, he let go and stepped back. The onlookers gasped. Even Kane looked down at his hand in shock, as though it didn't belong to him.

'Fuck, did I just react in fear? It's like my body moved before my mind could.' His words echoed in my head.

Of course it did. Even though I was younger, even though they all thought of me as weak, I was still a Luna and a warrior in my past lives, I was a soul that had survived more battles than any of them could imagine. Their wolves could sense it even if their minds couldn't, some instinct warning them to step back.

Beside me, Evelyn's worried eyes flicked to mine. I gave her a small smile, my silent way of saying it's okay, before turning my gaze back to Sienna lying on the floor.

I crossed my arms together and stared down at Sienna. "Hmm, I see she's unconscious," I said flatly. Then I raised my eyes to Kane, one brow lifting. "But why are you blaming me though? Did anyone tell you I pushed her?"

Kane frowned at me, glaring as if he wanted to kill me.

I only shrugged, my expression indifferent. "Nobody saw her. Then why would you accuse me all of a sudden that I pushed her? I even fell in the water. If I pushed her, as you said, why would I fall in the river too?"

Kane scoffed. "Nobody saw you?" He turned his head sharply. "Emma. Come here."

The crowd parted as a plump woman shuffled forward, a smug smile curling her lips as if she'd been waiting for this moment all along. I recognized her instantly, Sienna's personal maid, the same one who always hovered at her side and ran her errands. She looked down at me as though I were filth.

Oh, we had a lot of history together.

“Tell her, Emma, Kane commanded, his tone cold. “You said you saw her push your mistress into the river, right?” Emma’s smugness grew. She nodded quickly, eager to please him. “Yes. I saw her push Lady Sienna in the pool because she was jealous that everyone was paying attention to her.”

Evelyn stepped forward slightly. “B—but we can’t be too sure-”

“Shut the hell up, Kane snapped without looking at her. “Who tongue?”

nitted you to speak? Do you want me to cut off your

Evelyn froze instantly, her face paling. Her lips trembled, but she pressed them tightly together and lowered her head. My chest warmed. Here she was again, standing by me. No Who it was, Evelyn would never let anyone bully me. **Kane turned to me**, eyes sharp. “See? What do you have to say for yourself? You’ve been exposed!”

I **chuckled softly**, tilting my head. “I’m confused. What? Why are you so sure? Are you going to believe the words of a lowly **servant** over mine?”

“**You** Emma started, but I tilted my head further, my gaze sharp.

“**Did I say anything wrong?**” I asked. “**No** one saw anything **except** you. Why would I believe you? You said you saw me

61 Your remains will be fed to the dogs

push her, right? How did I push her? And how did fall into the river afterwards?”

Emma’s face faltered, but she clenched her fists and stood her ground. “I saw it! I saw you push Lady Sienna into the river and then jump in yourself. I’m not blind!”

I took a step closer to her. “Since you’re so certain you saw the right thing, we’re going to investigate this. Do you know what happens to servants who lie, especially against a Moonborn? It’s a crime.”

I leaned forward slightly, my voice dropping just enough that the servants strained to hear. “You will be skinned alive, and your remains will be fed to the dogs.”

Emma’s eyes widened. Her lips parted, but no sound came. Her smugness melted instantly into panic. She stumbled one step back.

I grinned wider, enjoying the way fear began to creep into her face. I stepped forward again, closing the distance she had tried to create.

“So, you’d better say the truth. Did you really see me push your precious mistress into the river?”

I had their time today. Since they really wanted to frame me, I would show them exactly who they were trying to mess with..

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 7

[ 1,236 words ]

**71 I’d forgotten just how weak a young body can be**

Selene

“So, you’d better say the truth. Did you really see me push your precious mistress into the river?” I asked, leaving no room

for escape.

Emma didn’t answer right away. She just stood there, trembling, her hands clenched into tight fists.

‘Oh my god, what should I do? This bitch obviously didn’t push Lady Sienna into the river, but if they find out I’m lying, I’ll be skinned alive, and be killed.’

Her panicked thoughts slipped into me as clearly as if she had spoken them aloud but like others her lips didn’t move. My lips curled slightly, and I arched an eyebrow.

“Why are you suddenly silent?” I pressed. “I thought you had so much to say. *Or* is your lie finally catching up to you?”

A ripple went through the crowd. All eyes turned toward Emma now. Even Kane, who had been so sure of her words, frowned in confusion.

“Why is your mouth shut?” Kane demanded, his voice sharp. “You were the one who called me and Cross here, shouting that Selene pushed Sienna into the river. Or was that a lie?”

Emma’s eyes darted toward him. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard, unable to form words.

The whispers began immediately, spreading through the gathered servants.

“Wait... is Emma reall

lying?” someone murmured.

“I mean, even if we all hate Miss Selene, how could she go so far as to frame her like this?”

“I know, right? It makes me wonder how many times she’s lied about the lady.”

“Maybe we should investigate this...”

The murmurs grew louder, suspicion shifting toward Emma, and for once, it wasn’t aimed solely at me. I stayed silent, watching it all unravel, my smile slowly curving wider. I’d never been one for drama, but if they insisted on starting it, why not let myself enjoy the show? One thing was certain, I wasn’t going to stand here like a fool again, taking their accusations without a fight.

Emma’s face glistened with sweat now. She looked like a rat trapped in a corner, searching desperately for a way out.

Kane stepped closer. “I’m talking to you, Emma! Did you lie? Did you make it up that Selene pushed Sienna into the river?”

Emma flinched violently, her eyes wide, her mouth opening as if she were about to confess. I leaned forward, waiting for the truth to spill out of her mouth. I knew people like Emma, they can’t handle pressure. **If** a war broke out, they were always the first to say anything to get out of it. But then, miraculously, and perfectly timed, Sienna’s body stirred. She coughed weakly, her eyes fluttering open.

The entire crowd gasped, rushing toward her in a frenzy. Kane immediately dropped everything, dropping down at her side with Cross. “Sienna! Are you alright? Can **you** hear me?”

The whispers stopped. The accusations faded as though they had never existed. All attention shifted to the precious golden child lying on the ground.

I stood there, watching them fuss over her. Emma scrambled away from me instantly, glaring daggers before scurrying to Sienna's side like the loyal dog she was.

Sienna blinked, her lashes trembling as she looked around, her face twisted with confusion. "W-what is going on...?" she murmured weakly

Cross let out a heavy sigh of relief and patted her back. "We thought something happened to you. We were so worried about you.

**Kane immediately** took her hand in his. "Emma came to us and said Selene pushed you into the river. Is that true?" Her gaze shifted to me then. Normally, whenever Sienna's eyes landed on me, my face softened without even thinking. **because no** matter what, she was my twin. Even though we were equals by birth, I always felt that protective urge everyone else seemed **to** feel toward her. She was the delicate one, the one I thought I had to shield. But not anymore.

This **time**, when her **eyes** met **mine**, I **didn't** feel softness, or tenderness towards her. I only felt the bile rise in my throat, the disgust **that surged** whenever I remembered her smirk as she stole everything from me. I couldn't even pretend to **tolerate** her

Sienna faltered under **my gaze**, her eyes darting away. **She** actually flinched.

7) I'd forgotten just how weak a young body can be

Cross leaned closer, his voice gentle. "Are you okay?"

Sienna nodded quickly. "Y-yes... and I apologise. Selene didn't push me. Emma must have mistaken it. Since Selene and I were so close, we both fell into the river together, but it was just a mistake. The ground was slippery, that's all."

Cross studied her face for a long moment. "It's okay. You don't need to say anything more. Let me take you inside. You

need to rest."

She gave a weak nod, then turned her head toward me. "I'm sorry, Selene."

I didn't answer her.

Kane's jaw ticked. I could see the words forming on his tongue, the urge to snap at me for not playing along, for not comforting her like always. But before he could open his mouth, Cross cut in firmly.

“That’s enough,” he said, his attention locked on Sienna as if I didn’t even exist.

He didn’t look at me once. Well, not that I cared.

Cross carried Sienna in his arms, Kane trailing protectively behind him, while the servants scattered one by one to follow them. Their footsteps and whispers faded, leaving behind only the emptiness of the courtyard.

Only Evelyn remained at my side, her eyes on me, filled with worry.

After they all left, she stepped forward. “Miss Selene, are you okay?”

I smiled. “Of course I’m okay. I’ve dealt with so much worse.”

Evelyn shook her head stubbornly, her eyes glistening. “But you’re shaking, miss. You’re trembling all over.”

\*

I wanted to wave her off, and tell her she was imagining things, but before I could say anything, a strange dizziness washed over me. My vision blurred.

A sharp pain shot through my skull, followed by a deafening ringing in my ears. My knees buckled, and before I could steady myself, my body gave way and I crashed toward the cold stone floor.

“Miss Selene!!” Evelyn’s scream cut through the haze.

My back hit the ground with a heavy thud, but just before my head struck the floor, a strong hand caught me.

I blinked through the blur, forcing my eyes to focus. Above me loomed a figure cloaked in black, the hood shadowing most of his face, the fabric hiding everything but his piercing brown eyes

Silas, my personal bodyguard. One of the rare few who had truly stood by me. Even in the moments I believed myself utterly alone, he was there. I never deserved his loyalty, not with how blind I had been, yet still, he never once abandoned me. He bowed his head slightly. “I apologise, Lady Selene. Something happened, I came as soon as I heard.”

“It’s okay, I murmured. “It’s good to see you again, Silas,”

My eyes drifted upward, past him, to the endless sky. I’d forgotten just how weak a young body can be... I closed my eyes, and everything went dark

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 8

[ 1,096 words ]

### 8| Death came for everyone eventually

Adrian

I crossed my arms over my chest, unmoving as the chaos unfolded around me. Not even when Selene crumpled to the floor, her maid crying out and her bodyguard lunging to catch her, did I flinch.

“That girl,” I said at last, my voice flat, my eyes still locked on her limp form being carried away. “She’s different.”

Beside me, Ethan, my beta-in-training, gave a low chuckle. His smirk was as careless as ever as he leaned back on his heels. “Is she? I don’t see it. She’s still the same cursed girl who keeps clinging to you, calling you her mate, and causing trouble for Lady Sienna every chance she gets.” He shrugged, as if the matter was simple, and not worth discussing.

I didn’t answer him, or glance his way. My gaze fixed on the courtyard.

This wasn’t the Selene I knew.

The Selene I knew never fought back. She never raised her head when others hurled insults, never defended herself even when she was telling the truth. She bowed, and shrank, like someone grateful just to be allowed a place in the *room*.

She stood her ground against Kane, eyes locked on his without a single tremor. She turned the maid’s accusation back with ease, a smirk curving her lips as though she’d been in control from the start.

When we were children, she had always been there, smiling, encouraging me whenever I stumbled in my alpha training. She was the one voice that cheered me on, the one person who tried to make the weight on my shoulders lighter. That was until my father found out.

He made it clear, Selene was off-limits. She was a cursed child, unworthy of the future Alpha's time. My duties came first, so I obeyed. I pulled

away and kept my distance. But Selene never did. She trailed after me, clung to me, and loudly proclaimed to everyone that I would be her mate when she turned eighteen. It was suffocating, and humiliating. She looked like a fool, obsessed with a man who wouldn't even spare her a glance.

**At** least, that's what I'd always told myself.

And yet, right now, I couldn't shake the thought gnawing at me. The girl I saw today wasn't the fool everyone whispered about. It was almost as if she had become a different person entirely.

Ethan raised an eyebrow at me. "Woah, you look serious. You're thinking too much, prince. You know that girl, she always finds new ways to draw attention to herself. Maybe she already knew you were coming today and decided to put on a show. Look at you, thinking about her differently now. I wouldn't even put it past her to be the one who pushed Lady Sienna into the water. Sienna probably lied to protect her. She is an angel after all."

Ethan continued, "Instead of wasting your thoughts on that girl, you should be thinking about Lady Sienna. Everyone is waiting for her coming-of-age ceremony. If she turns out to be your mate, the pack will be blessed by the Moon Goddess. Since you haven't found your mate yet, many are hoping it's Sienna, and not that cursed twin."

His words echoed what I'd heard a hundred times before. Sienna. The golden child of the Bloodrose family. The one my father, Alpha of this pack, praised endlessly with hope in his voice.

She was beautiful, calm, and composed, everything a Luna was supposed to be. She had tried countless times to draw close to me, and my father, the elders, and the entire pack wanted her as my mate.

Selene, on the other hand...

I tilted my head, my gaze unfocused, staring at nothing **in** particular.

None of it mattered to me.

I straightened to my full height, turning away from the courtyard. It didn't matter who the moon goddess marked for me. I didn't want a mate.

**What I** wanted was the perfect Luna.

Damien

I never understood the point of living. People clung to it, laughed, celebrated, yet to me it all felt pointless. What was the **purpose of** waking, eating, loving, pretending it mattered, when everything ended the same way? Death came for everyone **eventually**. **So** why make such a fuss about the time in between?

**Living** was **nothing but** a slow surrender **to** a meaningless end,

**From** the **ridge**, I **watched the** Mooncrest Pack below.

8 Death came for everyone eventually

"Jason," I said without taking my eyes off them.

Jason, my beta, bowed his head and spoke, "Yes, Alpha."

I turned slowly to him. "I thought I told you not to call me that."

"I apologise, alpha," he muttered, uneasy.

I looked past him to the three standing behind, Jason in front, Yara and Kaius just behind. Their heads were bowed, fixed on the ground. My men had long since learned to keep their faces down around me.

"Call me by name," I said.

Jason swallowed. "We wouldn't dare,"

eyes

"If they learn I'm an alpha," I told him, "it would be stressful. Especially if they learn my identity. I don't want to destroy an entire pack because of your mistake."

Jason hesitated. Yara and Kaius exchanged a fleeting glance. At last, Jason forced the words out. "Yes, Damien."

I nodded and turned my gaze back to the pack. After a moment, Jason's voice echoed behind me. "Do you think we'll find the Red Sworn here, my lord? Rumor has it that it would appear in the Mooncrest Pack, but I doubt we'll find what you're looking for. Nothing good ever comes from Mooncrest."

I didn't respond. Everyone knew my pack despised the Mooncrest wolves, dismissing them as nothing but pests. They couldn't even be considered an enemy, they lacked the strength to wage a true war against us. And yet, time after time, they attacked. Time after time, they failed, only to rise and try again.

To me, they weren't worth the effort of my attention. But my people hated them all the same.

I drew the hood over my head, concealing my face.

"Rumors or not, I have to find my sword." The words left no room for argument.

Jason opened his mouth, then closed it. I tilted my head just enough for him to meet my gaze. "And don't be too sure about that, Jason. You never know what good might come from the Mooncrest Pack."

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 9

[ 1,072 words ]

### 91 I will accept any punishment you give

Selene

"Hahaha..." Sienna's laugh echoed right in my face. "How sad, Selene. Do you think you can escape this fate? You can't. And just like before, I will make sure to steal and take everything from you, your place, your mate, your life! Just you wait. Your third life won't be any different."

I jolted awake, heart hammering in my chest, my skin clammy with sweat. Her words still echoed in my head like a curse that refused to fade. My breathing was shallow, my fingers clutching the sheets as my eyes darted around the room looking for Sienna, but she wasn't there.

I let out a shaky breath and pressed a hand against my chest, feeling the frantic beat of my heart. Gods... it was just a nightmare. But even knowing that didn't stop the trembling in my body. The thought of going through the same pain again, and the same end terrified me so much I could barely control the way my hands shook.

"No..." I whispered under my breath, shaking my head hard. "No. I won't let it happen again."

I forced myself to sit up, closing my eyes. My hair stuck to my damp face as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I wasn't going to waste my tenth life like the others. I wasn't going to crawl at their feet again, blind to the knives at my back. This time, I would live differently, and peacefully, if I could. And if peace wasn't an option, I would burn everything in my

way.

I promised myself, I would make them feel the pain they had given me. I would make them choke on it.

I finally opened my eyes fully and looked around me. My heart stopped for a second as I looked at my old room. The room I had when I was still a teenager living back at the temple quarters. The simple wooden furniture, the small window that only let in a slice of moonlight, the faint scent of herbs in the air. It was all here.

It wasn't grand like my brothers' and sister's rooms. No one had ever cared enough to give me the best things. But it didn't matter, I wasn't the girl who craved them anymore. I'd learned the hard way that luxury meant nothing. I once had

everything as a Luna, and none of it had eased the ache in my heart.

"Miss Selene..." The voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Miss Selene, please be careful. You have to take care of yourself..."

I looked down and saw Evelyn, sitting on a chair by my bed. Her head rested on the edge of the mattress, one of her hands wrapped tightly around mine as though she couldn't bear to let go.

I smiled faintly and reached out, my fingers brushing a loose strand of hair away from Evelyn's face. Her skin was warm beneath my touch. "I wonder," I muttered softly, "how many times I've scared you with my stupid actions. Don't worry. I won't be reckless again."

Evelyn shifted slightly at my actions. Her eyelids fluttered, blinking open as she slowly woke up. When her eyes met mine and saw me smiling down at her, confusion flickered

across her face. She blinked again, almost as if she was trying to convince herself she was awake, and then her whole body stiffened.

She pulled back immediately, dropping down to her knees on the floor. “F—forgive me for touching you while you slept,” she stammered, her voice trembling. “The doctor wouldn’t come, so I had to watch over you and take care of you...”

Her head bowed low, her hands clenching into the fabric of her dress. “I know it’s not an excuse for daring to touch your body, she whispered, biting her lip hard. “I will accept any punishment you give.”

I watched her in silence, and sighed. Gods, how stupid I had been.

If I’d had so many past lives, if I’d been through so much, how could I have been so slow to grow some sense? Evelyn had always been there for me. She was my closest friend, the only one who stayed when no one else did. She comforted me when nobody would even look my way.

And yet, I had let Sienna poison everything between us. At first, I hadn’t thought much of it, I knew Evelyn’s heart. But with Sienna’s constant interference, her endless schemes, and the way she framed Evelyn again and again, my view twisted until I treated Evelyn like a servant instead of a friend. I even punished her for the smallest things, for daring to touch me. I let Sienna’s maid, Emma, whip her, and she had no mercy.

“I’m sorry, Evelyn.”

**Evelyn’s** head shot **up**, her eyes wide in shock. Her lips parted but no words came out.

“**Did you just apologize?**” Evelyn asked.

I leaned forward **and held** Evelyn’s hand, **my** fingers wrapping around hers as I said, “I apologise for all the things I’ve done **to you shouldn’t have listened to other** people. And you don’t need to worry, because from this moment, I won’t let

91 will accept any punishment you give

anyone get between us. I will cherish our friendship this time around.”

Evelyn blinked at me, her eyes wide, as if she didn’t even recognise the woman in front of her. Her lips trembled and tears started to stream down her face as she held my hand tighter. “Don’t apologise, Miss Selene. It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have given them the chance to use me against you.”

“I am so useless, and I don’t deserve to be by your side. Even if you hated me, I would understand. I’m sorry for not doing much for you.”

I looked at her and then pulled her into my arms, hugging her tightly. She trembled in my embrace but I refused to let go.” Useless? Not doing much? No, Evelyn. You have done so much more than anyone has ever done *for me.*”

I wrapped my arms even tighter around her and whispered firmly, “So this time, just leave it to me. Don’t lift a finger, and let me do all the work.”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 10

[ 1,385 words ]

Chapter 10

Selene

I passed her the small cloth and said, “Here you go.”

05

Evelyn stared at my hand for a long moment. Even after we’d made up, she still couldn’t quite believe I was being kind to her. She looked down at the little square of fabric, her fingers trembling, then lifted her eyes to mine. There was no hatred there, and when she saw that, she accepted the cloth. “Thank you, Miss Selene,” she whispered, wiping at her cheeks.

Nearly thirty minutes had passed since we’d reconciled, and she hadn’t stopped crying once. She was overwhelmed, but I didn’t try to silence her, I let her wail as long as she needed, holding her close whenever she shuddered. Eventually, the sobs began to fade, and she grew quiet.

I studied her face. Evelyn was young and beautiful. There was no long scar across her cheek yet, which meant the accident hadn’t happened. I sighed in relief, a smile tugging at my lips.

Evelyn dabbed at her face one last time and noticed me watching. She flushed and quickly looked away, embarrassed. “I—I apologise for crying and making a scene, Miss Selene.” she murmured.

I chuckled softly. “It’s fine, Evelyn.” Then I tapped my chin, as if weighing something important. “But I think we need a few rules.”

Her brows lifted. “Rules?” she echoed, puzzled.

“Yes, rules. Just a few, to make things easier.” When I caught the flicker of worry in her expression, I waved it off. “Don’t fret, it’s nothing difficult.”

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I held up one finger. “Rule number one, you don’t have to apologise every time. I won’t be offended if you slip up. If something’s wrong, I’ll simply correct you, nothing more.”

She nodded, uncertain.

I held up a second finger. “Second rule, fight.”

“Fight?” she repeated, bewildered.

“Yes. Fight. If someone bullies you, you don’t swallow it. If they try to frame you, don’t stand there and take it. If they get physical, hit hard enough that they remember who they messed with and won’t do it again.”

Her eyes widened. “W-won’t that implicate you?” she whispered. “I don’t want to cause trouble for you. Rumors spread fast in the pack.”

I let out a short, scornful laugh. “I don’t have a good reputation to begin with, why should I care what those tiny insects think? They can all go to hell. I’ll do whatever I want.”

Evelyn glanced around as if afraid someone might overhear, eyes flicking to the doors and the servants moving about. Then she looked back at me, panting slightly from the effort of calming down, and nodded as if committing the rules to memory.

“O-okay, I understand, Miss Selene.”

I nodded, satisfied “Good. Now that we’ve taken care of that, we focus on the issues at hand.”

She nodded again, waiting for me to continue.

Think about something.” I said.

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## Chapter 10

Her head tilted. "My lady?"

"Anything," I urged, waving my hand lightly to coax her. "Especially something that has to do with me. I want to confirm something."

Her brows furrowed, but when I gestured again, she gave a hesitant nod.

'Hmmm, Miss Selene is so kind and beautiful. Why did Lord Kane slap her beautiful face? I felt like slapping him back.'

I froze, lips parting slightly as the thought slipped into my head as clear as spoken words. I stared at her, my heart quickening. I could hear her. The corners of my mouth curved upward despite my confusion. Gods, was this real? Did I really have the gift to hear what other people were thinking?

Before, I hadn't paid it much mind; there was too much chaos and too many accusations thrown my way. But this was different. This wasn't the mind-link, that had limits and was meant for communication, not for prying into thoughts. In all my lives, nothing like this had ever happened.

I bit my bottom lip. Did the Moon Goddess give me a gift? If so, I need to learn its limits, what it could do and what it couldn't. I couldn't afford to misuse it, especially against the wrong people. But damn it, it would be an amazing weapon against my enemies.

'Is Miss Selene okay? I hope the fever doesn't make her weak again.'

I heard her worried thought and looked up at her, offering a soft smile.

"How many hours did I sleep for?" I asked, changing the subject.

Evelyn blinked. "Hours? You are wrong, my lady. You slept for a week, not an hour.

I paused, staring at her in disbelief. "A week?"

She nodded quickly, worry flashing across her face. "Yes, my lady. You were so sick, you even had a huge fever. I was so worried about you. At some point, you even stopped breathing."

My brow arched. "I stopped breathing...?"

She looked down, wringing her hands. "It was only for a minute, but after a while, you got better."

A week. In all my past lives, I had never been unconscious for so long. My rebirth must have taken a toll on my body this time, draining it so much that it forced me into that deep sleep.

I leaned back against the pillows. A week? What else had changed with this life?

“You mentioned that time that the doctor wouldn’t come. Why is that?”

Evelyn bit her lip so hard it almost bled. I knew her too well. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to answer, it was that she feared it would hurt me. But what else could hurt me now, after everything I had lived through?

“Speak, Evelyn,” I told her gently, though my tone left no room for argument. “Don’t worry about me.”

She looked at me, hesitant, then finally lowered her eyes.

“The temple doctor wouldn’t come. He stayed with Lady Sienna almost every day. When I cried and begged him to come, he said...” Evelyn’s voice broke before she forced the words out, “he said you didn’t matter, and he wouldn’t let the real moonborn die. I even begged your brothers, but Lord Kane said you were pretending just to get attention, and Lord Cross... he didn’t even pay me any attention at all.”

“I see.”

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Evelyn’s eyes flickered up, searching my face for emotion. I could see the concern etched there, but I couldn’t blame her. The old me would have shattered into pieces upon hearing such words, crying that noborly loved me, and begging for affection I would never get.

“That is better.” I said, my voice calm, and detached. “I wouldn’t want to owe anyone like them for saving my life. Thank you for saving my life, Evelyn.”

Her body froze, as if she didn’t believe I was thanking her. She slowly looked down, her voice small. “I didn’t do much, Miss Selene.”

“What do you mean? You saved my life.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want you to be worried about anyone else when you were sick yourself. But... I can’t take the credit.”

I waited silently, watching her until she forced herself to continue.

“When you fell sick, and I begged the doctor, no one answered me. Except for a young boy working in the temple as an apprentice for the doctor. He said you could get better if we found a plant, they called it Silverpetal. It’s a highly rare plant, but I couldn’t leave your side to look for it. Silas went instead.”

“When he returned with it, he was wounded. Before I could even tend to him, the temple guards stormed in and arrested him for leaving without permission on the holy night. He’s still detained, and still being punished. They won’t even let me see him.”

For a moment I just stared at her, my face blank. A slow, cruel smile curved my lips, but my eyes remained sharp and

merciless.

So while I slept, those bastards dared to bully my people? They’re about to pay for that.

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