

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 101

[ 1,289 words ]

1011 The Slayer of Men

### 101 The Slayer of Men

Selene

“Oh my goodness, look at her. She’s so beautiful.”

“I know, right? I was so surprised when I heard the Alpha brought a woman into the pack, but I never expected her to look like this.”

“Look at her hair, black and white. I want to touch it.”

“No, don’t. You can’t just touch the Alpha’s woman whenever you want.”

The voices drifted around me, soft at first, then louder, layering over one another until they became impossible to ignore. I frowned faintly, my head throbbing as if someone had split it open and forgotten to put **it** back together properly. My body ached in a deep, unfamiliar way, and every sound felt louder than it should have been.

I turned my face to the other side of **the** bed, eyes still closed, hoping the movement would help drown them out, that this would all disappear if I ignored it long enough.

“Oh gods, she moved. I thought she’d be completely knocked out after last night with Alpha Damien. She’s really strong.”

My brow furrowed.

Last night... with Alpha Damien?

The words didn’t register at first. They floated around my mind without sinking in, as if my thoughts refused to accept them.

Why would I spend the night with him? With that demon of the West?

The confusion lingered for only a moment before my senses betrayed me. A familiar scent clung to the sheets beneath me, to my skin, to my hair. My heart dropped violently in my chest.

Even if I couldn't recognize anyone else by scent, I would always recognize his.

People never forget the scent of someone they fear.

Alpha Damien.

It was everywhere.

"Maybe we should-"

I didn't let whoever it was finish. I jolted upright, dragging the sheet with me to cover my body. The sudden movement sent a sharp jolt of pain through me, especially between my legs. I gasped, my eyes flying open as the ache brutally grounded me back to reality. And just like that, the memories crashed into me all at once.

Last night. The room. His eyes. His hands. His touches.

The realization hit me so hard it felt like cold water had been poured over my head in the dead of winter. I froze, sitting there on the bed, heart pounding so loudly I was sure everyone could hear it. My fingers tightened in the sheets as if that alone could hold me together.

I had slept with him.

I had given my first time to Alpha Damien, the cold-blooded demon everyone feared, the man I could barely look in the eye without my nerves tightening. For a moment, I couldn't even breathe properly. My thoughts spiraled, my chest feeling too tight, my skin *too* sensitive, every sensation reminding me of what I'd done.

How could I have done that?

I had been desperate, yes, my heat had pushed me to the edge, but even so, of all the men in the world, I had chosen him. I had always been the one who made the right and careful decisions, the ones that kept me alive through countless lifetimes. And yet last night, I had crossed a line that couldn't be erased.

At the time, it had felt like the only solution.

Now, sitting there with his scent still clinging to me and the whispers of strangers filling the room, it felt less like a solution and more like a sentence.

A death sentence.

I closed *my* eyes again and lifted a hand to my head praeing n fingers against my temple as if that alone could calm the chaos inside me. My entire body ached, deep, Successfully unlocked! ed me of every reckless choice I'd made the night before. It

wasn't surprising. With how ma. Show unrestrained he'd been, I would be lucky if I could even walk properly today.

So this was the consequence.

This was what I got *for* giving myself to him simply because I couldn't control my body.

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I inhaled slowly, then exhaled, forcing my racing thoughts to settle even as the dull ache between my legs throbbed in protest. My limbs felt heavy, and weak, as if they didn't fully belong *to* me yet.

'Oh, she's awake.'

The thought slipped into my mind without warning, so sudden and invasive that my body stiffened.

'And she looks even more beautiful when she's awake.'

I frowned.

My eyes snapped open, and I finally took in my surroundings. Five women sat around the bed, all of them on the floor, gazing up at me with open curiosity. No, calling them beautiful felt insufficient. Ethereal was closer. They wore white dresses that bared their shoulders and legs without shame, the fabric light and flowing, clinging to them as if it had been designed to worship their bodies.

Their style was nothing like Mooncrest.

At the Mooncrest pack, a woman dressed like this would be whispered about, judged, called desperate or indecent. Yet here, *there* was no vulgarity in the way they dressed, only confidence. They looked stunning, as if the world had *no* right to say what to do with their bodies.

I stared at them. They stared back at me.

Slowly, my confusion deepened.

Who were they?

And more importantly, where was I?

The last thing I remembered clearly was Damien opening a door one moment we were at the banquet, the next everything had shifted. At the time, I hadn't cared enough to question it, after all, his kisses felt so good. Now, lying in an unfamiliar bed surrounded by unfamiliar women, I cared very much.

I pushed myself up slightly, wincing at the protest from my muscles, and met their gazes with a sharp, calculating look.

"Where am I?" I asked.

The women exchanged glances. One of them opened her mouth, clearly about to answer, when another elbowed her sharply in the side. She winced and immediately shut her mouth lowering her head instead.

So they didn't want **to** talk.

I exhaled through my nose. **Of** course. That made things easier and harder at the same time. I had no intention of wasting time playing guessing games. **If** they wouldn't speak, I would simply read their minds. They weren't that powerful, nothing like the alphas and beasts I'd dealt with before. It would take barely any effort.

Just as I focused my senses, preparing to reach out, the door opened.

My attention snapped toward the sound, my body tensing instinctively.

A woman walked in, dressed in a fitted black shirt and black pants, her short hair framing her sharp features. In her arms was a small white cat, lazily curled as if the world held no threats worth worrying about. The woman's steps were unhurried, confident, and when her eyes landed on me, a playful smile curved her lips.

I knew her.

I knew her far too well.

My fingers curled into the sheets. In my past life, she had been one of the warriors who slaughtered my people without hesitation, and mercy. She had moved lazily through the battlefield, cutting down my warriors as if they were nothing more than obstacles in her path.

She was one of Damien's inner circle.

People called her Androphonos. The Slayer of Men.

The smile *on* her face didn't fade as she tilted her head slightly, watching me with interest, as if she were looking at something entertaining.

So this was where I was.

I was in the den of monsters.



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## **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 102**

[ 1,167 words ]

102) You are in the Crimson Pack

**102 You are in the Crimson Pack**

Selene

Alpha Damien had three inner warriors.

Each one of them was powerful enough to be considered a calamity on their own. They were all black wolves, pure black, the kind that carried death in their fur and terror in their aura.

Any one of them could wipe out more than a hundred trained warriors alone, without breaking a sweat. They were different in temperament, in fighting style, and in presence, but they all shared one terrifying similarity which was absolute loyalty. They would give their lives for their alpha without hesitation, and they would erase anyone he pointed at without a second thought.

And unfortunately for me, I had met all of them.

If you could even call it a meeting.

Watching them cut down my warriors like animals led to slaughter was not a pleasure. It was a *memory* burned *into* my soul, one that followed me across lifetimes when I was about to be killed by their Alpha.

The first was a man, huge, built like a living fortress. He didn't need a sword. I had seen warriors rush at him with blades raised, confidence blazing in their eyes, only to be crushed seconds later. He fought with his fists alone, breaking bones, shattering skulls, tearing through armor as if it were paper. In terms of raw physical strength, he was the strongest among them. A monster wearing the shape of a man.

The second was their beta, Damien's right hand. Unlike the first his weapon wasn't just his body, **it** was his mind. He was terrifying in own way. He could devise a simple plan, one that seemed harmless at first glance, but **it** will lead an entire enemy force straight into their graves without needing to lift his sword. And if a fight did break out, it only made things worse. His swordsmanship was flawless, clean, and efficient. Fighting him felt like struggling against inevitability.

And then there was the last one.

The woman standing in front of me now.

Out of everyone who followed Damien, aside from Damien himself, she was the one I could never forget. During the war, she had been disturbingly casual as she slaughtered my people. As if people's lives meant nothing more than an inconvenience to her. And her little pet only made it worse.

My gaze flicked to the white cat resting lazily in her arms.

That thing was no ordinary animal.

I had seen it transform on the battlefield, its small, harmless body twisting and expanding into a massive lion, crushing warriors beneath its paws, tearing through lines with terrifying ease. It had been a nightmare made flesh. Just like Lucas and the white fox, it was also a beast. Inferior to them, but still powerful, and deadly, with a frightening healing ability that made killing it nearly impossible.

Combined with the woman's own fighting skill, they were devastating. That was why she earned the title Androphonos, the Slayer of Men. She had taken down warriors twice her size in the blink of an eye, her movements so fast and precise that death came before fear could even register.

They were all dangerous.

But what made it truly horrifying was this simple truth,

Even with all their strength, all their brutality, and all their legend, Alpha Damien still surpassed them.

If all three of them turned on him at once, he would erase them within minutes.

That was the kind of monster he was.

That was why the world feared him.

And that was the man I had slept with.

But what **was** she doing here, in the Mooncrest pack?

I looked at her carefully, truly studying her for the first time. She stood relaxed. And just as I was studying her, I could tell she was doing the same to me, eyes sharp, and calculating, missing nothing.

intly on the floor earlier suddenly moved. The moment

Before either of us could speak, the women who had been el they saw her, their hesitation vanished comple Successfully unlocked! uine joy as they rushed toward her all at once,

throwing themselves into her arms.

“Master” they said almost in unison, voices warm and affectione

They hugged her tightly, clinging to her like kittens, and one of them even pressed a quick kiss to her lips. Instead of pushing them away, the woman laughed softly, indulgent, and kissed her back without hesitation. Then, as if it were the

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102) You are in the Crimson Pack

most natural thing in the world, she leaned in and kissed the other four women as well, brief, but intimate kisses that made their faces flush red with embarrassment and happiness.

I stared at the scene in front of me.

Same sex relationship?

In the Mooncrest pack, relationships like this were frowned upon, whispered about behind closed doors, treated as something shameful. Yet here they were, openly displaying affection without fear or restraint, as if such rules had never existed in the first place.

The woman finally chuckled, a lazy, amused sound, and gently held the five women.

“Girls, girls,” she said teasingly. “I know you want attention, but have something important to take care of.”

She glanced at them with a fond smile. “You’ll give your master moment alone, won’t you?”

The women hesitated for only a second. They glanced at me, before quickly turning back to her and nodding eagerly, desperate to please her.

“Yes, master.” They echoed in unison.

“Good girls,” she said approvingly.

She kissed each of them once more before they finally filed out of the room, their laughter and soft voices fading as the door closed behind them.

Silence settled in the room.

Her white cat leapt down from her arms and landed gracefully on the counter. It looked at me briefly, eyes sharp and intelligent, before stretching lazily and curling up, closing its eyes as if it sensed no hostility from me at all.

And it was right.

I felt none.

Just like I didn’t hate Damien, I didn’t hate them either. What happened in the past was not their fault. My warriors and I had invaded their territory because of Adrian’s command. We fought and we lost.

It had been a fair fight.

I was not someone who cried over defeat, nor someone who blamed others for winning honestly. I only sought revenge when people cheated, when they used deceit and betrayal to kill me.

This was not one of those cases.

My gaze returned to the woman, and for a moment, we simply watched each other.



She was the first to break the silence.

She smiled, as if this meeting had been expected all along.

“Lady Selene Bloodrose,” she said smoothly. “To answer your question...”

Her eyes gleamed slightly.

“You are in the Crimson Pack.”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 103

[ 1,111 words ]

Chapter 103

Selene

“You’re in the Crimson Pack.”

The words echoed in the room, over and over again, as if they had carved themselves into the walls and were bouncing straight back into my skull. I stared at the woman in front of me, eyes wide, my mind struggling to catch up with what she had just said.

The Crimson Pack?

Alpha Damien’s pack?

The most powerful pack in the world?

My lips parted slightly, but no words came out at first. Instead, I shook my head slowly in disbelief. No. This had to be some kind of joke. Or worse, some twisted attempt to mess with me.

That's impossible.

I had been in the Mooncrest Pack. I was certain of it. I had attended the banquet Alpha Rhydian personally invited me to. I had been dragged into the garden by Adrian. Everything up until last night had happened there.

Yes, it had been strange how Damien had opened a door and suddenly we were in a room. But that didn't mean I had crossed packs. Packs were territories. They were bound by borders, wards, and distance. The Mooncrest Pack and the Crimson Pack were nowhere near each other. You couldn't simply walk from one to the other in a heartbeat

That wasn't how the world worked.

Seeing the disbelief written plainly across my face, the woman smiled, clearly amused.

"You don't believe me?" she asked lightly.

I looked at her. "Would you believe yourself?"

For a moment, she blinked, then her lips curved wider, an actual laugh slipping out of her.

"You're right," she said, unbothered. "It is absurd to believe that someone could be in one place and then another that fast.

My eyes narrowed slightly as I tilted my head, studying her. "Then why would you say something like that?"

She didn't answer immediately. Instead, she turned away from me and began pacing the room, her boots quiet against the floor. When she reached the counter, she stopped beside her white cat and ran her fingers through its fur. The creature purred loudly, arching into her touch as if it adored her.

Only then did she speak again.

"Because it's the truth."

She said it slowly, as if she wanted every word to sink in. Then she turned her head and looked at me directly, her gaze sharp.

"Sometimes, something impossible becomes possible." Her eyes gleamed faintly. "Especially when our alpha is involved."

I paused. My brows drew together as I looked at her. "What does that mean?"

She straightened, finally facing me fully, that infuriatingly calm smile still on her face.

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15 vouchers

“Let me lay it out plainly for you, Lady Selene,” she said. “Alpha Damien can go anywhere he wants as long as he opens a door.”

“What?” The word slipped out before I could stop it. “What do you mean by that?”

”

I felt a chill crawl up my spine as realization began to form. “Are you saying that as long as he opens a door, he can appear anywhere he wants?”

She nodded without hesitation, as if she were confirming something trivial.

“Yes,” she said simply. “Well, provided he’s been there before.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Once Alpha Damien has been somewhere,” she continued, “there are no borders or wards that can stop him, no pack territory to cross, and most importantly, without anyone knowing.”

I sat frozen on the bed. I couldn’t move.

After living through countless lifetimes, after dying, being reborn, learning, adapting, I had always believed there was nothing left in this world that could truly shock me.

I was wrong.

I had met powerful people before. Some I had defeated. Some had defeated me. Each of them had shown me a different kind of strength, a different way the world could be cruel or overwhelming. But this was different.

I always knew Alpha Damien was powerful. In every lifetime, he had been the strongest man I had ever crossed blades with. That much had never changed.

But this?

This was beyond what I had imagined.

To walk into enemy territory without being detected. To cross borders as if they didn't exist. To slip into another pack like a shadow. Seeing it clearly now, I finally understood why the Alpha had never bothered with anyone before.

Damien never started wars, not because he was merciful, but because he never saw us as equals.

We were prey. Prey foolish enough to wander into his territory on our own, offering ourselves up for slaughter. If he'd wanted to, he could have wiped out every pack, one by one, and claimed all the land as his own.

My fingers tightened around the sheets covering my body.

This man was dangerous.

Far more dangerous than I had ever given him credit for.

And I had just given myself to him.

A bitter knot formed in my chest.

What have you gotten yourself into, Selene?

The woman was still standing in front of me, watching me with clear interest, as if my shock was entertaining her. She broke the silence with a small chuckle.

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"I have to say," she said, "this is very surprising."

I lifted my gaze to her.

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"After all," she continued, "you're the first person who has ever been brought into the Crimson Pack in more than a thousand years."

I blinked.

That was true. I had always known the Crimson Pack was closed off, isolated even from every other packs.

So why me?

Why would Damien bring me here?

The more I thought about it, the sharper the pain in my head became. I raised a hand and pressed it to my temple, trying to calm the growing ache. Nothing about this made sense anymore. Every answer only led to more questions, and none of them felt safe.

The woman tilted her head, studying me again.

“And oh, before I forget” she added casually, “I hope you’ll forgive me for what I’m about to do, Lady Selene.”

I lowered my hand slowly, my instincts flaring.

“I’m a very curious person,” she said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “And when I’m curious, I tend to act on it.”

Before I could ask what she meant, my gaze snapped to her hand.

She didn’t hesitate.

The dagger left her fingers in a flash, slicing through the air straight toward my head.

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# Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 104

[ 1,378 words ]

Chapter 104

Chapter 104

Yara

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I knew a dangerous opponent the moment I saw one. Call it instinct, awareness, or simply the sense you develop after surviving too many battles, but when I face someone truly formidable, I can see through them no matter how carefully they try to hide it.

Even though she had soft blue eyes, even though she looked harmless and almost fragile, even though she carried herself like someone who had never held a sword or tasted blood in her life, I could see right through the woman standing in front of me. There was something beneath that calm exterior, and it made my skin prickle in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

The first time I saw her, that familiar feeling settled deep in my gut, the one that warned me I was not dealing with an ordinary person.

The way she spoke was too measured, and the way she acted carried a confidence that didn't match her

appearance. While Beta Jason and Kaius were busy trying to understand why the alpha was treating this woman differently from everyone else, my attention was fixed on her, on the way someone so young could feel so threatening. She moved conversations and situations as if she were sliding pieces across a board, always turning things subtly in her favor without anyone realizing it until it was too late.

Even at the market, when everyone thought she was about to be scammed, I knew better. I could see it in her eyes, the faint glint of amusement she failed to hide. She wasn't the prey in that situation, she was the one setting the trap. And I was proven right when she scammed the scammer without raising her voice or drawing attention, as if it had all been a harmless little game to her from the start.

When I really looked into her eyes, it felt strange, like I was staring at a warrior who had survived countless hardships and carried the weight of them quietly on her shoulders.

I didn't understand it. How could someone so young, someone who appeared so inexperienced, make me feel as though I was facing another predator, one that was equal to me, if not stronger? It didn't make sense, and yet my instincts refused to back down.

And my instincts were never wrong.

Right then, they were screaming at me that this woman was far more dangerous than she appeared, that she was anything but simple. I was never the type to ignore that feeling. I liked to test things, to push until the truth revealed itself, no matter the consequences.

I wanted to know exactly who Lady Selene was beneath that calm surface.

So I slipped a small knife from my sleeve into my hand and, without hesitation, threw it across the room, straight toward her head. Lady Selene watched the blade fly toward her, and just as it was about to strike, she lazily turned her head to the side. The knife missed her by a breath and buried itself into the wall behind her. My eyes widened instantly, excitement flashing through me as my lips slowly curled upward.

To anyone else, it would have looked like luck, like she had narrowly dodged it at the last second by chance alone. But I knew better. Someone as experienced as me could see the truth clearly, she had tracked the knife the moment it left my hand and moved precisely when it was about to hit. To us, it was fast, and deadly, impossible to avoid so casually. To her, it

must have felt slow.

I smiled then, my certainty solidifying. I had been right from the start. This woman was not as simple as everyone believed. She was dangerous, far more dangerous than anyone here could imagine. And if Alpha Damien thought he had caught a cub, then he was gravely mistaken.

He hadn't caught a cub at all.

He had caught something much larger, and far more lethal.

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## Chapter 104

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Her gaze drifted first to the knife buried deep in the wall behind her, studying it, before she slowly turned her eyes back to

Her expression remained composed, but there was a dangerous flash in her eyes that made the air in the room thicken, as if an invisible pressure had settled over everything.

Alba, who had been lounging lazily on the counter with his tail flicking in idle contentment, suddenly lifted his head and opened his eyes, his body tensing as he fixed his stare on Selene. He could feel it too, the deadly aura rolling off her in waves.

She looked at me and spoke as if she were commenting on something trivial, her tone devoid of emotion. "I will advise you to explain yourself because your next answer will decide my next action. Even though I don't want to cause a scene, I'm very sensitive to people who try to kill me." Her eyes locked onto mine. "So tell me, was your blade aiming for my life?"

Her words were simple, but the threat beneath them was unmistakable. She wasn't bluffing. She was weighing my life with cold precision, and if I chose my words wrong, I was certain she would end me without hesitation.

My blood spiked instantly at her question. A reckless part of me wanted to say yes, just to see what would happen, just to find out how strong she truly was in a real fight, to see who would walk away alive. But I stopped myself.

I might be unhinged, but I wasn't stupid. I knew my limits, and I knew when to back down. If Alpha Damien found out that I had thrown a knife at her, I would be lucky if I survived the night. And beyond that, there was Selene herself, my instincts were screaming at me, louder than they ever had before, warning me not to offend her. Every instinct I trusted told me that crossing her would be a fatal mistake.

So I smiled, carefully schooling my expression into something respectful, and bowed my head slightly. "Of course not, Lady Selene," I said. "I apologize for my rude behavior. I would never try to kill the alpha woman."

She paused at those words.

Her eyes blinked once, and just like that, the murderous pressure vanished from the room as if it had never been there. Selene shook her head slowly, her voice calm but firm. "You're mistaken. I'm not your alpha woman. Last night was just a one-time thing, and I'll be leaving right now."



I looked at her for a long moment, studying her face, and then I couldn't help myself, I chuckled softly. She raised an eyebrow at me, clearly unimpressed by my reaction.

"I apologize, Lady Selene," I said, amused, "but it seems you don't quite understand your situation."

"Situation?" she repeated.

"Yes, your situation," I replied, nodding. "Before last night, did Alpha Damien say something to you? Did he ask for your permission, perhaps? Maybe mention that there would be consequences?"

She frowned slightly, confusion flickering across her face, and then something shifted in her expression as if a memory surfaced. She licked her lips unconsciously, and that alone told me everything I needed to know.

I nodded to myself. "You should have thought more carefully before agreeing. Our alpha may be cold-blooded, but he never does anything without consent. And once you agree, there are always consequences. My lady, right now, you are one of those consequences."

"What?"

I bent down, lifted Alba into my arms, and turned toward the door. Before leaving, I glanced back at her one last time.

"You belong to our alpha now, Lady Selene. Alpha Damien doesn't allow outsiders into the pack. The moment he brought you here, he had already decided that you were his."

I smiled as I took in her stunned expression. "It seems that things are about to get far more interesting around here."

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# Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 105

[ 1,239 words ]

Chapter 105

Chapter 105

Selene

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I let out a soft, shaky breath as I stepped into the warm water, a quiet moan slipping past my lips when the warm water wrapped around my aching body. The bath was deep and wide, the steam curling in the air as I lowered myself in and leaned back against the cool stone wall.

My eyes fluttered shut on instinct, a faint frown settling on my face as I pressed one hand to my temple, because no matter how soothing the water felt, my mind was anything but calm.

Too many thoughts were swirling inside my head after that conversation with that crazy woman in the bedroom, and instead of settling, they only seemed to grow louder. My heart kept pounding in my chest in an uneven rhythm, and there was a tight, uncomfortable knot twisting in my stomach that refused to go away.

“You belong to our alpha now.”

Her words echoed in my mind, making my brow furrow even deeper.

What the hell was she talking about? How could I belong to their alpha just because we slept together? That made no sense. Agreeing to let him help me through my heat didn't mean I had signed my life away to him.

“The moment he brought you here, he had already decided that you were his.”

That sentence followed right after, repeating itself like a curse, and my head began to ache from thinking about it. The more I turned it over in my mind, the stranger everything felt.

No wonder I had found it so odd that Alpha Damien had brought me into his pack. If what that woman said was true, then maybe he had never intended to let me go at all. But why would he do that over something like last night?

If this was about recognition or some twisted sense of claiming, it still didn't add up.

We had only truly met face to face last night. The other two times, I had been in disguise. There was no way he could have recognized me back then, so why me out of all the women in the world? What had made him choose me?

The questions made me sigh, and I sank a little deeper into the water, letting it rise around my shoulders as if it could drown out my thoughts.

A soft voice suddenly spoke beside me, gentle and respectful. "My lady, shall I bathe you?"

I opened my eyes slowly, finally becoming aware of my surroundings again.

I had almost forgotten there was someone else in the room. The woman standing there was the servant assigned to me, Maeve, a beautiful blonde with sharp, observant eyes that made it obvious she wasn't just here to help. She was here to watch me too.

I looked at her for a moment before shaking my head.

"No need," I said quietly.

The last thing I wanted was another pair of hands on me right now. Besides, Evelyn would probably be sad if she knew I let another maid do her job.

I missed her. By now she would have been chatting nonstop, trying to distract me from my worries. I wondered what was happening back in Mooncrest. I didn't care about most of the people there, but Evelyn and Silas were different. They had to be worried, probably searching for me already.

And aside from my revenge, that was another reason I needed to go back to Mooncrest, no matter what it took.

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Chapter 105

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I glanced at Maeve again and found that she was still watching me, her posture polite but her attention sharp, as if every small movement I made was being quietly recorded.

I scooped a handful of warm water from the bath and poured it slowly over my arm, rubbing my skin to wash away the lingering scent of last night.

My body still ached faintly from what had happened, and when I looked down, I could see the marks scattered along my skin, the bruises and dark hickeys that made it painfully clear just how rough Alpha Damien had been with me. I didn't linger on them, though. What was done was done, and staring at them wouldn't change anything.

My attention shifted fully back to Maeve.

First things first. When you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, especially territory that might belong to someone dangerous, you gather information. As much as you can, as quietly as you can. Only then do you decide your next move.

I couldn't exactly call this enemy territory, not when they had given me a private bathhouse large enough to rival a palace, but knowing how dangerous Alpha Damien was, I wasn't foolish enough to let my guard down.

I scooped more water and let it cascade over my shoulder, keeping my tone casual, light, as if I were merely making conversation. "That woman who visited me earlier," I said, "she's strong. I could feel it."

I felt Maeve's gaze sharpen slightly, but she said nothing.

I smiled faintly to myself and continued, unfazed. "For some reason, I think I've heard of her before. I'm not sure if it's really her, though. They call her Androphonos, the Slayer of Men, don't they?" I tilted my head, feigning curiosity. "If that really is her, that's so cool. Or am I mistaken?"

There was a brief silence before Maeve finally spoke, her voice measured. "You're very curious, my lady. I apologize, but I'm not allowed to give out information."

I turned my head slightly to look at her, my expression soft and understanding. "Ah, I see. That makes sense, I was just

curious."

I let out a small, almost excited laugh and continued, careful to keep any sharpness out of my words. "I really think the Crimson Pack is unique. I've heard stories about it since I was little. Everyone seems terrified of your pack, but honestly, I've always found it interesting." My eyes brightened. "Now that I'm here, I can't even hide my excitement. Everyone I've met is so beautiful... including you. Your skin is flawless. I'm so jealous."

Maeve stiffened slightly, then flushed, clearly not expecting that. When she looked at me again, it was with a different expression, one mixed with surprise and uncertainty, as if she were seeing me in a new light.

I shook my head lightly and added, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't get carried away like that. I won't ask anymore."

“N-no, my lady,” Maeve interrupted quickly, taking a small step forward. “You can ask. I apologize for being cold earlier. I didn’t realize you were this excited about the pack.” She hesitated, then continued, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you some things about the Crimson Pack.”

I smiled. “Really? Thank you, dear. Not only are you beautiful, you’re very kind too.”

Maeve’s face flushed even harder, and I had to stop myself from smiling too widely.

There were many ways to gather information, and brute force was only one of them. Sometimes, the easiest way was to make the other person lower their guard, to make them believe you were harmless, curious, and non-threatening.

And that was exactly what I was doing.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 106

[ 1,244 words ]

Chapter 106

Chapter 106

Selene

10 vouchers

“The woman is Yara,” Maeve continued, her voice lowering slightly, as if even speaking the name required a certain level of respect. “She is a female warrior. I don’t know what people outside the pack call her, but here, everyone knows how strong she is. She is the third strongest person in the Crimson Pack.”

I raised an eyebrow subtly, listening carefully as I scooped water over my shoulder, pretending to be casually interested.

“She leads a group of female warriors,” Maeve went on. “They are all very beautiful, and highly trained. Seduction, poison, close combat, they excel in all of it. The women call her master, and they are extremely loyal to her.” Maeve hesitated for a second, then added, almost awkwardly, “They all wish to be her wives.”

That caught my attention.

I paused for half a moment.

So those were the women staring at me when I woke up. Even though I didn’t want to admit it, Yara was lucky. Many men and women would kill to inspire that level of devotion. Power always attracted obsession, and Yara clearly wielded hers effortlessly.

Maeve glanced at me, as if gauging my reaction, perhaps expecting shock or disgust. Instead, I smiled brightly. “Wow, that’s incredible. She’s really strong.”

Maeve nodded. “Yes, my lady. She truly is. I have never seen her lose a fight.”

Yara, I repeated the name silently in my mind.

That woman was dangerous, not just because of her strength, but because of her mind. She was sharp, observant, and bold enough to test me without hesitation.

The way she had acted earlier made one thing clear, she already knew I wasn’t as harmless as I appeared to be. I didn’t mind revealing my strength when necessary, but I had no intention of becoming her source of entertainment.

Maeve continued before I could speak again. “Then there is Kaius. He is the gamma of the pack and he is also very strong. He commands thousands of warriors, and he can break almost anything with his bare fists.” She smiled. “He enjoys drinking and fighting, usually just for fun. Last year, he even made a deal, if anyone could beat him in combat, he would give them his position.”

I rolled my eyes before I could stop myself.

Men and their obsession with fighting. I understood combat, and I occasionally enjoyed it when I needed to release tension, but obsession? That was another thing entirely. Most men treated fighting like it was the meaning of life itself. My mind briefly flashed to Alpha Tristain and his relentless need to test his blade and strength every waking day.

Maeve chuckled softly. “The funny thing is, everyone who challenged him lost. Every single one. He really is that strong.”

“I see,” I murmured, uninterested in brute strength alone.

“What about your beta?” I asked instead, steering the conversation where I wanted it to go.

Maeve’s expression softened. “Beta Jason? He’s very intelligent. Calm, calculating, and skilled in combat as well. Most of the time, he’s by Alpha Damien’s side.” She spoke with clear respect. “He is extremely loyal. Whenever there’s a problem in the pack, the beta handles it. No one dares go against him, except the alpha, of course. Everyone knows how valuable he is.”

I nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

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Chapter 106

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Damien truly was a capable leader. He didn’t surround himself with empty titles or blind loyalty, he chose people with strength, intelligence, and purpose, placing each of them exactly where they would thrive. That explained why the Crimson Pack had flourished for so long without internal collapse. He knew how to manage power, both within and outside his pack.

I already knew of them from my past life, but hearing their names, their exact roles, and how they were viewed within the pack painted a much clearer picture.

And information, I knew well, was power.

“And then there is the alpha.”

I lifted my gaze to her, immediately noticing the way her expression changed. Her cheeks had turned red, and her eyes shone with a kind of dreamy admiration that was impossible to miss,

I raised an eyebrow slightly. She was completely lost in her own thoughts now.

“Alpha Damien is our leader,” Maeve said with a small, shy smile. “He is.... perfect, strong, respected, feared, and admired, everything an alpha should be. So many women chase after him. They throw themselves at him because of how attractive he is.” She pressed a hand to her warm cheek and sighed. “Oh goddess, that man is a work of art. The goddess must have taken her time when she created him.”

I couldn't help the faint amusement that flickered across my face at her obvious infatuation, and when Maeve noticed it, she immediately stiffened. Her face paled slightly as she swallowed and bowed her head.

"I-I'm sorry, my lady. I shouldn't have spoken so freely. Especially now that you are the alpha woman. I should have watched my tongue."

I sighed quietly. Why does everyone keep calling me that? Just because I slept with him once didn't make me his woman. By their logic, every woman who had ever shared his bed would have been his. It was absurd.

Seeing the frustration on my face, Maeve hesitated before adding, "My lady... the alpha is not interested in women."

I blinked, genuinely caught off guard. My mind immediately went back to the hot spring, to when I had been disguised as a man and he had kissed me without hesitation.

If he was only interested in men, that would explain it, but then why had he slept with me? Or was he interested in both?

Before I could stop myself, I leaned a little closer and lowered my voice. "Is he... gay?"

Maeve smiled, her eyes flicking over me. "I doubt that, my lady. If he were, I'm quite sure your body wouldn't be reacting the way it is now. A man who is only interested in men wouldn't ravish a woman the way he did to you last night."

My fingers brushed against my neck as I listened to her words. As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. The way Damien had touched me, the way he had kissed me, had been far too intense, and focused.

"I don't know the alpha's preferences," Maeve continued, "but everyone in the pack thought he was uninterested in women because he never pays them any attention. No matter how beautiful they are, no matter how hard they try to seduce him, he always ignores them. You are the first woman I've ever heard of whom he spent the night with."

She looked at me as if expecting me to blush or smile proudly, but I simply nodded. That only made everything more confusing. Him choosing me, out of everyone, didn't make me feel special, it made things more complicated.

I had no time to indulge in fantasies or confusion.

I rose from the bath, water sliding down my skin as I stepped out. Maeve quickly draped a robe around me, covering me with care. Without hesitation, I walked toward the door.

Right now, there was only one thing that mattered to me.



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[ 1,175 words ]

Chapter 107

Chapter 107

Damien

10 youths

I held the red bow steady in my hands, my posture relaxed and unhurried as I drew the string back and leveled the arrow straight ahead. My eyes narrowed slightly, locking onto the distant target, focusing on the small dot at the very center of the bullseye as if the rest of the world had faded

away.

With a casual flick of my fingers, I released the string, and the arrow cut through the air with a sharp whistle before embedding itself perfectly in the center of the target.

A wave of gasps rippled through the warriors gathered behind me, their voices filled with excitement and awe as they stared at the target and then back at me.

They always reacted like this, no matter how many times they had seen me shoot. You would think they would have grown used to it by now, but they never did.

Beside me, a lazy, amused voice broke the moment.

“Woah, straight in the bullseye again,” he drawled. “What are you, a demon? I still can’t get used to how good you are at everything. At this point, I’m wondering why I even bother competing with you when you win every single time.”

He paused, his lips curling into a playful smirk before continuing, "But then again, it's always fun trying to keep up with your pace."

As he spoke, he lifted his own bow with ease, drawing and releasing in one smooth motion. His arrow flew true, striking my arrow dead-on and splitting it cleanly in half.

He glanced at me with a satisfied grin. "Not bad, right, Damien?"

I lowered my hand and briefly studied the shattered arrow before turning my gaze toward him.

Remi, the pack doctor, stood there casually, his long black hair falling freely down his back, hazel eyes bright beneath long lashes that gave him a soft look. His appearance balanced somewhere between *féminine* and masculine, but I knew better than to be fooled by that harmless look.

Remi was far more powerful and cunning than he ever let on. Unlike most people in the pack, he never acted timid around me, treating me as if we were old friends rather than alpha and subordinate.

Normally, I would have shut that down long ago, but by now, I had grown accustomed to his presence, and I could still

handle him.

I ran a hand through my hair and raised the bow again, only for one of the servants to step forward, clearly intending to take it. Before they could, Jason moved ahead and took the bow from my hand, bowing his head respectfully. Remi didn't hesitate for a second; he grinned and casually placed his own bow into Jason's hands as well.

Jason shot him a glare. "Hey-"

"Thank you, Jason," Remi said with a wink.

Jason rolled his eyes but took it anyway.

I turned and began walking away without a word, my expression indifferent as always. Jason and Remi fell into step behind me, their footsteps echoing softly against the training grounds.

After a moment, Remi spoke again, his tone light but curious. "You know, rumors have been spreading through the pack since this morning. Everyone's saying you brought a woman back with you."

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## Chapter 107

He glanced at me from the corner of his eye, clearly enjoying himself.

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“So?” he added, grinning. “Is it true? Did you really bring a woman into the pack? And more importantly, did you spend the night with her?”

Behind me, I heard Jason’s footsteps slow before he frowned deeply, his irritation clear in his voice as he spoke. “Watch your mouth, Remi,” he said sharply. “Why would you even ask something like that?”

Remi only shrugged, completely unbothered, his expression lazy and amused as ever. “You’re too rigid, beta, I’m just asking questions. Besides, you know him. He won’t answer unless he wants to, so it doesn’t matter what I ask.”

He turned his head toward me then, his smile widening. “Still, I can’t help but wonder what made you do it. You barely look at women, Damien. Why would you bring a woman from another pack into the Crimson Pack of all places? What makes her so different from every other woman you’ve ever met?”

His gaze lingered on me, sharp despite the playful tone, before he tilted his head slightly to my chest and added, “Don’t tell me that cold, empty heart of yours is finally beating.”

I stopped walking.

The sudden halt made both Remi and Jason freeze behind me. I could hear Jason swallow, tension thick in his voice as he muttered, “This is exactly why I told you to stop, Remi. Are you planning on getting us killed?”

I didn’t respond to either of them.

Remi’s question echoed in my mind, circling endlessly as I searched for an answer and found nothing that truly made

sense.

Why her? Why was I drawn to that woman so strongly that I broke my own rules and brought her into my territory? Why did her presence linger in my thoughts even now, hours later, refusing to fade no matter how much I tried to ignore it? I had never struggled to understand my actions before, never hesitated or questioned my decisions, yet this time, there was no clear explanation, only a pull I couldn’t define.

The image of her from last night surfaced, along with the unsettling urge to go back to that room and claim her again, to make sure she was wet and ruined just for me. The thought alone confused me.

Inside my mind, my wolf stirred.

‘Does it matter?’ Thane’s voice rumbled, low and possessive. ‘All that matters is that she is ours now. And I won’t let you treat her like something disposable, Damien. Even without a mark, she belongs to us. The next time you see her, you will mark her, or I will take control and do it myself. No one is keeping her away from me. Not even you’

I raised an eyebrow slightly at his blatant possessiveness but said nothing, resuming my walk as if nothing had happened.

Remi quickly caught up to my side, unfazed, clearly not done yet. “One more question,” he said, his tone more serious this time. “You took her from her pack without anyone knowing. Once they realize she’s gone, won’t that start a war?”

Jason nodded in agreement. “I was thinking the same thing, Alpha. The Mooncrest Pack won’t stay quiet once they realize their moonborn is missing. Even though they would lose if they went to war against us, you usually avoid wars unless someone comes into our territory,”

My eyes flashed. And when I spoke, my voice came out deep and husky.

“Let them come,” I said coldly. “Anyone who dares try to take her from

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## **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 108**

[ 1,419 words ]

Chapter 108

Adrian

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

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55 vouchers

The words echoed endlessly in my mind, over and over again, as if they had been carved into my soul long before I ever spoke them. They felt painfully familiar, like something I had already done once in a life I didn't fully understand, a life I couldn't remember no matter how hard I tried to grasp it.

I knew this wasn't real, that it was only a dream, but no matter how desperately I fought against it, I couldn't stop myself. My body moved on its own, my voice delivering the rejection without my consent. I stood there, hollow and detached, holding Sienna at my side as if she belonged there.

My wolf was screaming inside me, furious, and desperate, clawing at my consciousness like it wanted to rip me apart from the inside. It hated every word that left my mouth, hated the way I was hurting her, hated me for allowing it to happen. But I ignored it. I ignored everything, even the way Selene looked at me, confused, wounded, and betrayed, like she couldn't understand why I was doing this to her, like she was silently begging

me to stop.

I wanted to stop. gods, I wanted to stop so badly. Yet my lips kept moving, urging her to reject me back, urging her to accept the pain I was forcing onto her.

She looked like she had already been through a war, and I was the final blade twisting deeper into her chest. When I thought it was finally over, when I thought the damage had already been done and nothing more could hurt her, she lifted her gaze to mine. Her eyes were no longer pleading. They were empty, cold, and frighteningly determined.

“If I were ever given another chance, Adrian, and Sienna,” she said calmly, her voice steady in a way that made my blood run cold, “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.”

A chill crawled down my spine, dread blooming violently in my chest as she continued, her gaze never leaving mine.

“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.”

Before I could react, she raised the sword to herself. Time slowed, and my heart lurched painfully in my chest.

“No!” I screamed, my voice tearing from my throat as she struck herself down before I could reach her.

Blood soaked into the ground beneath her, and my knees nearly gave out. I watched helplessly as life left her eyes, my chest burning as if something essential had been torn out of me forever.

“Prince Adrian.”

Someone called my name.

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Chapter 108

911

55 vouchers

I jolted awake violently, my eyes snapping open as I sucked in a sharp breath. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might burst out of my chest, my breaths coming fast and uneven while sweat drenched my body. For a moment, I didn't know where I was.

I tried to move, but a sharp, searing pain tore through my body and I let out a strained groan. My limbs refused to obey me, my chest aching unbearably as if several of my ribs were broken. My head throbbed painfully, each pulse sending a wave of nausea through me. I lifted a trembling hand to my temple, frowning deeply.

What the hell happened? Why was I like this?

I searched my memory, trying to piece together what led me here, when a deep, lazy voice cut through my thoughts.

“You're finally awake, Your Highness,” the voice said calmly. “I was starting to think about waking you myself, but I'm glad you did it on your own. I wouldn't want to hurt you any more than you already are.”

I froze the moment the words registered in my mind, my snapped to the side of the room.

Sitting there, as if he had always belonged, was a man I never expected to see. He was seated on a chair, leaning forward slightly, one gloved hand resting on the hilt of his

sword, the tip planted firmly on the floor as if it were an extension of his body rather than a weapon.

His black hair was disheveled, strands falling loosely around a sharp face, and his black armor, once pristine, was stained with dried blood. A heavy black cape draped over his shoulders, and when his piercing, calculating blue eyes lifted to meet mine, I felt as though he was already predicting every move I might make before I even thought of it.

My gaze dropped unwillingly to the golden crest of a wolf emblazoned on his chest plate. There was no mistaking who he was. No one else in this world carried that crest with such authority.

Ian Bloodrose.

Commander of the Mooncrest army. The most powerful man in the pack. And Selene's eldest brother.

If people spoke of monsters they feared, aside from the Demon of the West and Alpha Tristain, then this man was always mentioned in the same way.

Warriors feared him. Enemies dreaded him. Even allies tread carefully around him. He was the kind of man who didn't need to raise his voice to command a battlefield, the kind who once stood with barely a hundred soldiers against two thousand enemies and emerged victorious, not through brute force alone, but through strategy and an unyielding mind that turned the battlefield itself into a weapon.

He was rarely in the capital, always stationed on the front lines as the commander of the army, which made his presence here even more unsettling. I had not expected to wake up injured, disoriented, and certainly not to find Ian Bloodrose watching me as though he was only one wrong word away from striking me down.

I frowned deeply.

Why was he here? And why did it feel like I was standing on the edge of something dangerous?

Ian observed me in silence for a moment, his gaze steady and devoid of emotion, before he finally spoke, his

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voice calm in a way that was far more threatening than anger.

“Prince Adrian,” he said evenly, “what was the last thing you remember?”

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I raised an eyebrow despite the pain coursing through my body, irritation flickering beneath my confusion.

“The last thing I remember?” I repeated. “Is there a reason I must answer that question, Commander Ian?”

His eyes didn’t change. There was no anger, or impatience, just a cold, assessing stare that made the air in the room feel heavier, as if his aura alone was pressing down on my chest and making it harder to breathe.

“If you want a reason,” he replied slowly, “then know this, the answer to that question will decide what becomes of you, and what becomes of this pack.”

My frown deepened. “What?”

“I may be loyal to the pack and to the alpha,” Ian continued, his voice unwavering, “but my loyalty to the Bloodrose Temple and my family comes first. I protect those who share my blood above all else.”

His gaze sharpened, locking onto mine. “So I will ask you again, Prince Adrian. What happened last night? Why were you found unconscious, and where is Selene, the Moonborn?”

The words hit me like a blade to the chest.

I was about to demand what he meant about Selene, about why he was speaking as if she were missing, when memories came crashing back into my mind all at once.

The dance with Alpha Tristain. My anger. Dragging Selene away from the hall.....

Shit.

Someone had thrown me, not shoved, or struck. Thrown. As if my body weighed nothing at all. I had flown across the garden and hit the ground hard enough to knock the air from my lungs.

My heart dropped as the realization settled in. If Ian was asking where Selene was, then she wasn’t here.

Which meant whoever attacked me, whoever possessed that terrifying strength, had taken her.



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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 109

[ 1,811 words ]

Chapter 109

Ian

Ten years ago

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I moved without hesitation, my body reacting before my mind could slow it down. The moment my opponent shifted his weight, I stepped in, driving my sword forward in a clean motion that forced him to stumble back. He barely had time to recover before he tried to swing at me in panic, his grip sloppy, and his stance unstable.

I didn't give him the chance to finish the movement. I kicked him hard in the stomach, the impact knocking the air out of his lungs and tearing his guard wide open, and before he could even register the mistake, my blade was already moving.

I swung my sword up to his neck and stopped.

The sharp edge hovered just inches from his skin.

The man froze instantly. I felt his entire body go rigid beneath the threat of the blade, his hands trembling as his eyes widened in pure fear. His face drained of color, sweat breaking out across his forehead as he stared at the sword poised to end him if I so much as twitched my wrist. He swallowed hard, breath uneven, clearly realizing how close he had come to death.

Around us, the murmurs began almost immediately.

“Woah... not again,” someone in the crowd muttered in disbelief. “It didn’t even last a minute. How many times is he going to win?”

“I know, right?” another voice chimed in. “He’s so good it’s almost annoying. Nobody even wants to compete with him anymore because they already know how it’ll end.”

“He’s only eighteen, and he’s already beating warriors twice his age.”

There was a pause before another voice followed. “Strength aside, there’s something scary about him. People don’t want to get close. Even though he’s the first young master of the Bloodrose family, if everyone keeps fearing him like this, he’s going to grow up alone.”

More whispers followed, growing bolder as they fed off each other.

I didn’t look at any of them.

Their words meant nothing to me. Praise, fear, resentment, it all sounded the same in the end. Slowly, I lowered my sword and pulled it away from the man’s neck, stepping back without a change in my expression. The fight was over the moment it began.

The man took a shaky breath, swallowed again, then bowed deeply in respect before turning and running from the field as if the ground itself were burning beneath his feet.

That was when my father and the fighting instructor approached.

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My father smiled as he reached me, placing a hand on my back with clear pride in his eyes. “You did it again, Ian,” he said warmly, as if this were something to be celebrated.

The instructor nodded enthusiastically beside him. "As expected of the pack's prodigy," he added. "You're very lucky, sir. Your son is improving at a rate that's almost unreal. I've never seen anything like it."

My father laughed at the praise, clearly pleased. "Don't exaggerate, I'm not the only lucky one. The entire pack is. After all, my son will protect this pack, even if it costs him his own life."

The instructor nodded in agreement.

I looked at both of them with indifference, then brushed my father's hand off my back. He froze in surprise, but I didn't wait to hear what he might say. I turned and walked away from the training field, my footsteps quiet as the crowd instinctively parted for me, eyes lowering as I passed.

When I reached my usual spot near the edge of the field, I paused.

In the distance, I saw my younger siblings, Kane and Sienna, playing together in the grass. They were laughing, chasing each other freely. For a brief moment, I watched them in silence. Then they noticed me.

Both of them froze instantly, their smiles vanishing as if they had never existed.

Without a word, Sienna let out a cry when she saw my face and turned, running away. Kane nodded his head in greeting before going after her.

I stood there for a moment longer, watching their retreating figures, before turning my back on the field and continuing on alone.

The large tree stood where it always had, its thick trunk casting a wide shadow over the grass beneath it. This was my place, it was quiet, and far away from whispers and stares. I was already loosening my sword, preparing to lie down in the cool grass, when something caught my eye.

Someone was already there.

I paused.

A small figure lay beneath the tree, sprawled across the grass, fast asleep. For a brief second, I considered turning away without looking closer, but then I noticed her white and black hair.

Selene,

I raised an eyebrow. This was only the second time I had seen her. I was rarely around the temple, always training or stationed elsewhere, so I knew little about the daily lives

of the children there. But even I had heard the murmurs. The way people avoided her. The way they looked at her with discomfort, sometimes even disdain, because of her hair.

She was an outcast. So it wasn't surprising to find her alone, sleeping here instead of playing with the others.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I looked down at her sleeping form.

"I guess I'll have to find another peaceful place," I muttered to myself.

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I liked quiet places. This tree had always been that place for me, but she was here first. I turned around, already planning where to go next.

"Brother?"

The soft voice stopped me.

I paused mid-step and turned back. Her eyes were open now, still heavy with sleep, her expression drowsy but calm as she looked at me. There was no fear in her gaze.

She glanced around, then slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Oh, I-I'm sorry, brother," she said quietly. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep in your spot."

My spot?

She smiled faintly, almost shy. "I've always wondered why you like staying here all the time. But now I understand." She looked around at the shade. "It's really comfortable."

I blinked.

She was talking to me normally.

I didn't say anything, still trying to understand why this felt so strange. Cross, Kane and Sienna avoided me. Warriors twice my age trembled when I looked their way. And yet

this small girl spoke as if I were no different from anyone else. As if she'd been watching me for a while.

Seeing my silence, she stood quickly, dusting off her clothes. "Sorry," she said, a little flustered. "I talk too much. That's what people say. I'll leave right now."

She turned to go, then paused.

Slowly, she looked back at me and reached into her waist, pulling out a small bundle wrapped in cloth. She held it out toward me with both hands.

"Brother," she said, "I know you like training, but sometimes you have to eat."

I stared at the bundle.

"I hardly ever see you eat," she continued earnestly. "You should eat and get stronger, so you can protect yourself, and our siblings." Her eyes shone with determination. "Don't worry. You won't have to work hard alone. I'll get stronger too, so I can protect them with you."

"You don't have to carry everything on your shoulders."

I froze.

For a moment, I couldn't move, or speak. I simply stood there, watching as she bowed her head slightly and then turned and walked away, her small figure disappearing just like the others had earlier. Only this time, it felt different.

I lowered my gaze to the bundle in my hands, the cloth warm from her touch. Then, slowly, I looked in the

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direction she had gone.

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For the first time in eighteen years, something unfamiliar tugged at my chest.

My lips curled upward, just barely, in a smile I hadn't known I was capable of.

"What an interesting child," I murmured.

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55 vouchers

Present Time

Since I was young, I have always been strong. It was not the kind of strength people grow into slowly, but the kind you are born with, the kind that makes others uneasy when they look at you. I could do things no one else my age could do. I could defeat grown men in combat, read the battlefield before the fight even began, twist any situation until it bent in my favor. Strength, intelligence, calculation, it all came naturally to me.

They called me a prodigy.

With that title came expectations. Especially from my father. To him, I was not just his son; I was a weapon meant to protect the pack and elevate the Bloodrose name. I trained harder than anyone else. While others played, I bled. While others laughed, I learned how to kill.

And honestly, I didn't mind.

It wasn't because I cared about the pack, or because I felt any pride in the Bloodrose power. I could care less about their politics, their praise, or their fear. Compassion and sentiment were things I cut out of myself a long time ago. I became a man who could cut someone down without blinking, a man whose heart had gone cold enough to survive anything.

But there was one thing, I would never allow anyone to take from me.

My siblings.

They were the only reason I kept moving forward. The only reason I endured the training, the wars, the blood on my hands. When I destroyed an entire pack, it was never for glory or loyalty. It was to make sure no threat ever reached them. Every battle I fought, every enemy I crushed, was done with one thought in mind.

Protect them.

Protect Selene,

Even when everyone called her a curse. Even when they whispered that she should never have been born. Even when the world seemed determined to push her into the dirt and grind her down.

I never believed any of it.

She was the only one who ever looked at me and saw a human being instead of a machine forged for violence. She spoke to me without fear, and expectation. And that alone made her irreplaceable.

I would burn the world before I let anyone lay a hand on her,

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Slowly, I lifted my gaze.

91

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My blue eyes locked onto the prince before me. I didn't need to raise my voice or rely on theatrics. When I spoke, my voice was low, and deadly calm.

"I will ask you one more time, Prince Adrian," I growled. "Where is my sister?"

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## Chapter 110

Adrian

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My hand clenched on its own, fingers curling so tightly that my nails bit into my palm. I barely felt the pain. My heart was pounding too fast, each beat loud in my ears, drowning out every other sound as my mind spiraled out of control. I couldn't react or answer. All I could do was stare at the formidable man in front of me, my shock so deep it rooted me in place.

Memories of the garden surged forward.

I had been thrown across the wall like I weighed nothing, my body crashing into the wall before I could even understand what had happened. I didn't see the person until the moment I was torn away from Selene. One moment I was there, the next I was flying. That alone told me everything I needed to know about how terrifyingly powerful that person was.

I had never felt anything like it.

Not even Ian's aura compared to that moment. That presence had been overwhelming. For a split second, it had felt as though I was standing before a god, something ancient and untouchable. Someone who didn't need to acknowledge me to erase me. The fact that I was still alive felt less like mercy and more like indifference.

My gaze dropped to my hands, still trembling slightly.

What I couldn't understand was why that person would dare to attack me knowing exactly who I was. I was the prince of the Mooncrest Pack. And yet, that person had thrown me aside without hesitation or concern for consequence.

Did he not value his life? And worse, why take Selene?

She was Moonborn, my mate. What could anyone possibly want with her? The thought spiraled darker when another realization struck me.

Her heat.

My jaw tightened, irritation flaring hot in my chest. The idea of another man anywhere near Selene made something ugly twist inside me. It didn't matter how irrational it was,



it didn't sit right. It angered me. No, it infuriated me. Selene wasn't someone anyone could just touch.

She would never allow it.

At least, that was what I told myself, clinging to the thought like a lifeline. Selene was in love with me. She would never let another man lay hands on her.

Nothing happened. Nothing could have happened. I repeated it in my head, forcing the thought down even as doubt tried to claw its way up.

This wasn't what I should be thinking.

What mattered was finding her.

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I had to find her. No matter the cost. No matter who stood in my way. Selene was my mate, and I would not allow her to disappear without tearing the world apart to get her back.

"Prince Adrian."

Ian's voice cut through my thoughts.

I snapped out of it, my head lifting sharply as I finally remembered I wasn't alone. My eyes met his, those cold, piercing blue eyes that looked less like a man's and more like a war god's. My frown deepened instinctively. Selene being taken was only one problem.

The other stood right in front of me.

Ian Bloodrose.

Few people knew this, but Ian cared deeply for Selene. More than anyone. Before he left for the front lines, he had made me promise that nothing would ever happen to her. And now she was gone. Judging by his presence alone, it was obvious he had come here the moment he heard. He might have halted an entire war to sit in this room.

There was no universe where he would take this lightly.

His gaze bore into me as he spoke again, his voice calm. "From what I heard, my sister rejected you. Don't tell me her disappearance was some kind of revenge, your highness?"

My chest tightened.

I didn't like that question. I didn't like the implication behind it. No matter how strong he was, Ian had no right to accuse me of something like that. Anger sparked, my mouth opening as I prepared to defend myself, when the door suddenly opened.

My head turned instinctively.

My father stepped in first, followed by my mother, and then Avery. Behind them came Cross, Kane, and Sienna.

When my mother noticed I was awake, she froze for a second before rushing toward me, looking relieved. She wrapped her arms around me tightly, holding me as if I might disappear if she let go.

"Oh, thank the Moon Goddess you're awake," she said, her voice trembling despite her attempt to sound composed.

Before I could even process her words, Sienna was there too, stepping close on my other side. She reached for my hand and clasped it between both of hers. "Prince Adrian, are you okay?" she asked softly. "I was so worried. I thought something terrible had happened to you."

I looked at them, but I didn't respond. My thoughts were still tangled with the remnants of that dream. The image of Sienna standing beside me as I rejected Selene flashed through my mind. Without a word, I slowly pulled my hand away from hers.

The movement was subtle, but not unnoticed.

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For a brief moment, I caught the flicker of annoyance that crossed Sienna's face, her brows drawing together almost imperceptibly. It vanished just as quickly, replaced by

the same gentle expression she always wore so well, but the damage was already done. The unease in my chest deepened.

Avery stepped forward. I assumed she was coming to hug me as well, maybe to scold me lightly for worrying everyone. I barely had time to register her expression before her hand came up and struck my face with a sharp crack.

The sound echoed through the room.

Everyone froze.

My head snapped slightly to the side from the force, my cheek stinging. My mother stared at Avery in shock, her eyes wide.

“Avery!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

Avery didn’t answer. She raised her hand again, fury blazing in her eyes, clearly intending to strike me a second time. Instinct finally kicked in. I caught her wrist mid-air, my fingers closing around it firmly.

“Stop it, Avery,” I said, my voice low.

She struggled against my grip, trying to yank her hand free. “Let me go, you asshole,” she snapped, her voice shaking with anger.

My mother stepped closer, clearly panicked now. “Avery, enough! Why are you doing this?”

Avery turned her head sharply toward her, her eyes burning. “Why am I doing this?” she repeated, her voice rising. “Because Adrian is a scumbag. I know he doesn’t care about anything but the pack, but how could he be so careless? How could he let Selene disappear from his sight?”

Her words hit harder than the slap.

“If he can’t even protect his mate,” she continued, her voice cracking despite her anger, “how is he supposed to protect anything? All of this is his fault. Why didn’t you protect Selene?”

I couldn’t answer.

My grip loosened slightly, my mind going blank as her accusation echoed in my mind. I didn’t know Avery cared about Selene this much. I didn’t expect this kind of reaction from her. And even though I wanted to deny it, and defend myself, there was a part of me that knew that her words weren’t entirely wrong.

If I couldn't protect Selene, then what right did I have to call myself the future Alpha of the pack?

"Princess Avery, please," Sienna said quickly, stepping forward, her voice urgent. "Don't blame Prince Adrian for this. It wasn't his fault that he-"

She didn't get to finish.

Avery's free hand came up without hesitation and struck Sienna across the face, the sound just as sharp as before.

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