

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 11

[1,134 words]

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Selene

Evelyn's voice rang beside me, loud with desperation. "Miss Selene, you can't go in there!"

Her hand trembled as if she wanted to grab me but didn't dare. I kept walking, step after step, ignoring her pleas.

She hurried after me, still speaking, her words tumbling out. "I'm serious, Miss Selene. This place is not safe, it's the least safe part of the temple. This is where the temple warriors train. No women, especially women of your status, should come to this dirty place. These men... they are deranged, you have no idea what they might do! If your father hears about this, he will be disappointed-"

I almost laughed at that. Women of my status? She was talking as if I were fragile porcelain, as if I hadn't lived and bled on battlefields far worse than this. I was a Luna and a warrior once. I had fought in pits and wars that would make these arrogant temple warriors crumble in fear.

I finally stopped and looked at Evelyn. "Evelyn."

She straightened instantly, voice tight. "Yes, Lady Selene?"

"Do you want to help Silas?" I asked.

Her eyes widened, her lips parting. She froze for a moment before whispering. "I do. Some part of me feels like it's my fault he is being punished."

I shook my head. "It's not your fault. Don't panic. Let me handle this. I am a moonborn, Evelyn. I won't let anyone bully the people who serve me and get away with it."

For a moment, she just stared at me, her face caught between shock and awe. The determined words must have struck her because slowly, she lowered her head and bowed. "Yes, moonborn."

I turned without another word and walked forward. My footsteps echoed as I entered the arena, where the temple warriors trained.

Evelyn and I had already gone to the prison in search of Silas. The guard at the gate told us he wasn't there, that the temple guards had taken him to the arena for his punishment.

The moment I heard it, my stomach tightened. This was trouble.

In the past, I never paid much attention to Silas. He had always been there, always lingering quietly in the shadows, so quiet that I barely noticed him. It wasn't until the day he died for me that I truly understood, he had been by my side all along. protecting me in ways I never saw.

The guilt I carried from that past was suffocating. This time, I swore, I wouldn't repeat that mistake. I wouldn't let Evelyn, Silas, or anyone truly loyal to me, suffer because of my ignorance or my blind trust in the wrong people.

My eyes narrowed as I stepped into the arena. Whatever awaited me here, I was ready. This time, no one was going to touch what was mine.

The first thing I heard was laughter echoing against the stone walls.

"You can do this! Hit him harder! Make him suffer, hahaha!"

The shouts rang in my ears. I froze at the entrance of the arena, the air thick with sweat and the stench of blood. Shirtless men sat around the edge, drinking, throwing coins into the sand as they jeered and cheered. They were so focused on the blood sport below, none of them noticed me and Evelyn slip in.

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Evelyn whispered beside me, her voice trembling.

"Huh... what is going on? Why are they so excited?"

I didn't answer her. I wasn't a fool. My gut already told me what was happening, and who was at the center of it. My steps carried me closer to the edge, my eyes narrowing as I peered into the fighting pit below.

Silas.

He looked worse than I could have imagined. His body was a wreck, covered in blood and bruises from repeated blows. A deep gash split across his stomach, and each breath came out in harsh, ragged pants. His long hair hung loose and tangled, matted with sweat and dirt. He wore nothing but torn pants, his body trembling as he fought to stay upright. He looked thinner, hollowed out by a week of torment.

Evelyn gasped beside me, stumbling forward until her hands gripped the stone edge. "Silas..." Her voice cracked, breaking into sobs. "What is happening? Why-why does he look like this?"

I didn't react. My gaze remained locked on him. It was a wonder he was still alive. No ordinary man could have taken this much and still stand. That was Silas. He had always been stronger than he looked.

Across from him stood his opponent.

Arthur.

His hair was tied back neatly, his body strong, muscles gleaming under the torchlight. He was grinning like a wolf who had already tasted blood. He, too, wore only pants, but unlike Silas, he was nearly untouched, only a few scratches marring his skin. He circled the broken figure before him, feeding off the crowd's cheers.

Arthur was Sienna's personal bodyguard. He was proud, arrogant, and cruel. In every life I had lived, he had always carried the same stench of violence, and rotten heart. He was an animal.

He had killed Silas before, and worse, he had once dared to lay his filthy hands on me. I cut him down for that. I remembered the satisfaction of spilling his blood, but also the grief that it came too late, because by then, Silas was already

gone.

And now, standing here in this filthy arena, I realized nothing had changed. History was winding itself into the same circle, threatening to claim Silas's life all over again.

Arthur wanted him dead.

Arthur smirked and lunged, sword flashing. Silas moved back, yet the blade still slashed across his chest.

Silas's expression didn't change. He simply clutched at the wound and forced himself to stay on his feet. That only made the crowd roar louder, their laughter and cheers rising as they fed on the sight of him struggling to stand.

“Kill the bastard! Cut that face! Injure those pretty eyes!” someone shouted. Others joined in, the shouts looping and growing until the whole arena thrummed with cruelty.

Evelyn’s hand closed over mine so tight I could feel the tremor in her fingers. “M-Miss, we have to do something,” she whispered, panicking.

I crossed my arms and tilted my head, watching Silas steady himself. “Hold on, Evelyn,” I said quietly. My voice was calm, almost cold. “You want to save him? First w have to bring out that dark side he is desperately trying to hide. Only then can Silas really survive his fate.”

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Selene

Evelyn glanced at me, her lips parting as if she wanted to speak, but no words came. She swallowed them back down, keeping quiet, and simply stood beside me. I could see the questions piled up inside her, she didn’t voice them. She trusted me instead.

Good girl.

There would be times when my ideas made no sense, times when even I would sound insane. But she needed to trust me anyway. Both she and Silas would have to. Because sometimes the future was chaos, and I had already lived it nine different times. I knew the patterns, even when they refused to make sense.

I turned my attention back to the arena.

Arthur and Silas were still fighting, well, Arthur was fighting. Silas only dodged, his body sluggish but his movements just sharp enough to keep himself alive. Arthur pressed forward ruthlessly, his blade cutting through the air as he tried to break

him down.

I studied them, my expression darkening. Arthur was pure offense, his movements harsh, every strike designed to draw blood, and humiliate Silas. Silas, however, kept to defense, conserving what little strength he had left.

But it wasn't just their rhythm that caught me. It was Arthur's technique.

Every pack had their own style of fighting, honed through generations of war. Warriors usually added a personal twist to the moves they were raised with. Yet Arthur's movements weren't his own. His style wasn't from Mooncrest pack at all.

I narrowed my eyes. Nightshade.

A pack with a terrible reputation, feared for their brutality and dishonesty.

Arthur was using their techniques in the temple. Nobody here noticed, why would they? The style was dangerously close to Mooncrest's own, so to untrained eyes it blended seamlessly. And the temple had no seasoned warriors to recognize the difference. Those warriors were either dead on the battlefield or serving in the palace.

My arms folded, lips curling upward in a smile. This bastard. He thinks he's clever.

Arthur's background wasn't simple, that much was clear now. In all my past lives, I had never dug deep enough to question him. But this time, the pieces didn't add up. It took years to master another pack's fighting style. I had lived lifetimes to learn what I knew.

For Arthur to wield Nightshade techniques so fluently, he must have had direct contact with them. And the temple would never knowingly hire such a man.

So the question wasn't how he learned it.

It was who was hiding him.

Arthur laughed, his voice loud and cruel, echoing across the stone walls of the arena. "Hahaha! Just give up already, Silas," he sneered, dragging his tongue across the blood staining his lips. "You're too weak. You can't even fight back, or summon your wolf. You're nothing but a useless weakling, undeserving of the black wolf."

I tilted my head, watching them from above, my expression unreadable. Ah... so that's it.

Arthur's hatred wasn't born from strength alone. It was envy. Silas didn't just have skill, he bore the black wolf.

The world of wolves was painted in shades of power, each color defining how strong one could be,

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There were the browns, the weakest and most common of them all. But even a light-brown wolf wasn't destined to stay weak forever. With enough training, their strength could grow, and their wolf's shade could darken with it. After them came the darker browns, they were stronger, but still a step below the black.

And then there was Silas's wolf. Black.

The black wolves were feared, and respected. They carried immense strength, unmatched instincts, and limitless potential. Every Alpha had a black wolf, and most were chosen to serve the palace, guarding the royal bloodlines. Yet Silas chose me. Even when Sienna wanted him, and she begged my father to assign him to her, Silas refused. He stayed by my side.

That was why Arthur hated him. Because Arthur, with all his arrogance and skill, was always second best. And Silas himself was holding himself back.

After the black was the white wolf, the purest, strongest, and rarest of them all. The wolf of the priestesses. My wolf.

Everyone expected Sienna to inherit it, but it was me, and they hated me for it.

They said I didn't deserve Mara. That I was a curse to the goddess. I cast Mara aside, too ashamed to even transform, and afraid of the hatred that followed me everywhere. But Mara was mine.

There was one more. A wolf stronger and far rarer. The red wolf. A beast of destruction.

Only one man in history had ever borne it. Alpha Damien. The Demon of the West.

Silas didn't react to the words thrown at him. He only tried to hold what little strength he had left. He was like me, and words had become meaningless. That made Arthur angrier.

Someone in the crowd chuckled darkly, loud enough for all to hear. "He's looking down on you, Arthur boy. You just going to stand there like a fool while he dodges your attacks? You can't even land a bad cut. I mean, sure, Silas is weakened, but you're still a brown wolf after all."

Arthur's jaw twitched, his eyes narrowing. These men knew what they were doing. They were stirring him up, hungry for blood, and Arthur was the perfect fool to be manipulated.

Arthur forced a smirk and straightened, his voice mocking. "Oh, don't worry, I'm not weak. I serve a powerful priestess."

Silas's eyes snapped toward him at that, that was his first real reaction. Arthur noticed immediately and his grin widened, satisfied.

"What a waste of potential, Silas," he sneered, circling him like a predator. "You wouldn't be suffering like this if you served Lady Sienna. If it had been me who left that night to find a cure for her illness, nobody would punish me for leaving on the holy night. The holy night means nothing if the Moonborn will die." He leaned closer, his words echoing in the arena. "But everyone knows your priestess is fake. Her death wouldn't make a difference. That's why you're being punished. If I had a worthless priestess like yours, I'd kill myself."

Silas's chest rose and fell faster now, his fingers twitching, barely holding himself back.

Beside me, Evelyn's eyes burned as she glared at Arthur. "How dare he..." she whispered furiously.

I kept my eyes on Silas, studying him. Still he didn't fight back. Still he swallowed the insults. Maybe he had vowed something to himself, or he didn't want to cause trouble.

I decided to give him the push he needed.

I took a step forward and raised my voice. "Are you still trying to control yourself while your lady is being insulted?"

The arena fell silent immediately, my voice slicing through their shouts. A man near me jerked back, his head snapping in my direction. All eyes turned toward me. Even Arthur and Silas looked up, surprised.

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I locked my gaze on Silas, my expression cold. “Don’t be weak. Defend my honour. Pick up your sword and fight.”

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Selene

In this world of warriors, dominance was everything. If you wanted to prove yourself, you fought. You fought until blood spilled, until your enemies were broken before you, and you never showed mercy.

Mercy was weakness, and enemies were enemies for a reason. Show them mercy and they would wait for the perfect moment to strike you down, and when they did, you'd be left with nothing but regret.

A true warrior never held back.

If Silas didn't prove himself now, if he didn't show his dominance in front of everyone, his life in the temple would only get harder.

The arena was so quiet that the air itself seemed to freeze. Everyone stared at me as though they couldn't believe what they'd just heard. Their shock was almost amusing. For a few seconds, no one dared to speak.

"My lady..." Silas muttered, but Arthur snapped out of his daze first. His eyes dragged over my body with a slow sweep. I wore only a light garment, slightly too big, but not enough to hide my curves. Arthur didn't even bother concealing his hungry stare. His lips curled into a smirk as his gaze lingered, before sliding back up to my face.

I didn't look away. I could feel the weight of other men's stares on me, just as lustful, and degrading. They might look down on me in every other way, but not one of them could deny the truth, I was the most beautiful woman in this temple. Even more beautiful than my twin, Sienna. But beauty meant little to me.

Why should I shrink back because of a few hungry stares? In my past lives, I had endured far worse. Men always thought they saw a damsel in me, ripe for the taking, until I struck them down and made them choke on their arrogance. Stares meant nothing. What mattered was that they eventually turned to respect.

The only line I would never allow to be crossed was touch. No one laid a hand on me without my permission.

Beside me, Evelyn bristled. She suddenly stepped forward, placing herself between me and their stares, arms spread protectively. I blinked at her, surprised.

Her glare swept the arena, her voice trembling with fury as she shouted, "How dare you! Look down and show your respect, the Moonborn is in front of you!"

Her voice rang out through the hall, yet not a single man moved to kneel. Not one lowered his

gaze.

Evelyn's face hardened, and I knew she was seething. I had seen her angry before, but this was different. Evelyn hated nothing more than seeing me disrespected, especially by men who should be beneath me. She opened her mouth, ready to unleash more, but I placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

She turned to me, eyes wide. “Miss...”

“It’s okay,” I said softly, a smile tugging at my lips.

“You don’t need to force their respect.”

My gaze swept across the men. Each one who dared meet my eyes faltered, shifting uneasily, stepping back ever so slightly. My eyes narrowed.

“They will learn to show their respect eventually.”

Arthur’s laugh cut through the tense silence. Slowly, I turned my gaze to him, my expression calm.

“These men are so disrespectful,” he said, his tone light, and playful. “My lady, would you forgive us? Sometimes, men who

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fight are not good with other things. We didn’t learn manners.”

I stared at him, arching an eyebrow. Didn’t learn manners? They weren’t dumb. If Sienna walked in here, every single man would immediately kneel, and show their respect without hesitation. What a sweet mouth this man had.

Arthur went on, smiling faintly. “But what brings you here, my lady?” His eyes flicked down to Silas, beaten and bloodied on the arena floor. “Did you perhaps come here for him?”

I tilted my head slightly. “If you know, why bother asking me a stupid question?”

Arthur actually paused at that, momentarily surprised. In the past, I had always been the one who lowered my head when men spoke to me. He must be wondering what had changed.

He recovered quickly. “I know you must be worried, but we are just doing what we are supposed to do. Warrior Silas is being punished for leaving the temple during the holy night. No one is allowed to leave the temple, according to the rules.”

“The rules?” I raised an eyebrow. “The rules still matter when I’m on the verge of death?”

Arthur hesitated, his lips parting as if to speak.

I stepped closer, cutting him off. "Oh, what was it you said again? That everyone knows I'm fake, and my death wouldn't make a difference?" My eyes sharpened. "How insolent."

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"I should punish you for your words. Even if you serve Sienna, you have no right to speak to me like that. I Moonborn, no matter what you think, and someone like you shouldn't dare challenge me."

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Arthur's face darkened, his jaw tightening, his fists clenching at his sides. He said nothing because he knew I was right. They all did.

If this situation spiraled out of control, my father would punish them, not because they disrespected me, but because I was still his blood. And no one in the temple, no matter how bold, could disrespect his/authority without consequence.

"You are right, my lady," Authur said smoothly. "I apologise. I will release Silas now."

I smiled back. "Release? I think you are wrong about something."

His brows furrowed slightly. "What?"

"I never told you to release my bodyguard," I said. "This fight shall continue. Except this time, it will be fair."

I turned my eyes to Silas. "Silas."

He looked up at me from where he knelt, and then bowed his head. "Yes, my lady."

"Are you going to let him embarrass me?" I asked.

Silas flinched, then quickly shook his head.

"If you're not going to shame me," I said, my voice echoing across the arena, "then don't stand there and let anyone strike you. You're mine, your life, your existence, your body. Striking you is the same as striking me. As my loyal guard, you are not to be touched. I give you permission, no, the order, to put down the animal who dared lay a hand on you."

The crowd's eyes widened; whispers rippled through the dark arena, but no one dared speak aloud.

Arthur turned to me, looking down at me like I was a child throwing a tantrum. “Lady Selene,” he said, his voice edged with mockery, “you might not know a thing because you are a woman, but your bodyguard is already weak, he can’t—”

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Before he could finish, a blur of movement cut him off.

A loud crack split the air as Arthur’s body was hurled across the arena and slammed into the far wall. Gasps echoed from every corner of the stands. Heads snapped toward the fighting ground.

Silas was no longer kneeling. He stood now, straight-backed, his body radiating power. His eyes flashed a deep, ominous black as he reached down, picked up the sword from the floor, and raised it.

He growled, dangerously. “Your wish is my command, my lady.”

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Chapter 14

Selene

When I told Silas to fight and defend my honour, I didn't expect this.

I thought he would end the fight with two or three strikes. But no, Silas was deliberately making it longer, dragging it out like a predator toying with prey.

At this point, it wasn't even a duel between two men. It was a one-sided slaughter.

Arthur was bloodied, barely able to stand, his body swaying like a broken doll. Every time he tried to lift himself, or raised his arm in pitiful defense, Silas knocked him right back down.

Silas grabbed him by the neck, leaned his body over him, and began hitting him, over and over again. His fists slammed into Arthur's face brutally. The sound was sickening. Evelyn gasped beside me, covering her mouth with trembling hands, but I only stood still, indifferent and proud. Because this was what I wanted. A guard who would not bend. A man who would fight until there was no fight left.

Around us, the arena had gone silent. Not a single warrior shouted now. Their faces were dark, displeased with what they were seeing, but none of them spoke up. They couldn't. This was the law of the arena. No third party was allowed to interfere. To do so would mean disgrace.

Even I did not stop it, though I could have. But I knew better than anyone, warriors only understood one language. The language of fists and swords.

"Ahhh... ahhhh..." Arthur groaned, trying desperately to push Silas away. "S-stop it.. please... stop it!"

Silas didn't let go. His grip tightened, his strikes grew fiercer. His eyes were no longer his own, they were his wolf's.

The black wolf was a force of destruction once provoked.

Finally, one of the men broke. He turned to me, his face drained of all color. "You have to stop this, Lady Selene! Your guard will kill Arthur. Lady Sienna will be devastated if you kill her man!"

I didn't even glance at him. My voice came out cold. "When my bodyguard was being beaten bloody by him, did any of you say a word?"

The man paused, lips clamped shut, shame written all over his face.

"Exactly," I said, my gaze never leaving Silas as he continued his brutal assault. "If none of you cared when my guard was bleeding, why should I care when it's someone else's turn?"

The fight stretched on, minutes that felt like hours.

Arthur's screams tore through the arena, echoing against the stone walls. He begged, and pleaded. But no one moved to help him. And the cruelest part? Werewolf bodies healed too quickly to let him lose consciousness, yet too slowly to save him from the agony. Silas's fists kept falling, each strike shattering, bone and pride alike, until all that remained of the once-proud warrior was a trembling, bloodied mess.

It was cruel, endless, and perfect.

Even Evelyn could no longer bear to watch. She turned her face away, trembling beside me, yet I stood still, and they all saw it. The warriors around us, the men who only moments ago mocked me, they stared at me now in shock. Shocked that I stood there, watching a bloody scene without so much as a tremor.

Finally, Arthur's screams were cut off. His body went limp, his eyes rolling back as he collapsed in a bloody heap. He was unconscious, but alive.

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Silas stood above him, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. His face was smeared with blood, but none of it was

his.

He stooped slowly, scooped his sword from the dirt, and without a second thought drove the blade down toward Arthur's

face.

Gasps ripped through the arena.

“He’s going to kill him!” someone yelled.

“Quick-you, redhead! Stop him!” another cried.

The redhead snapped back, panic raw in his voice. “What? Stop a black wolf on a rampage? Do you think I’m insane? I’m not risking my life for this!”

Evelyn’s fingers tightened around mine. “Please, Miss Selene, do something,” she begged, her voice breaking. “If Silas kills him, his life will be over.”

Just before the blade could connect, I finally spoke.

“That is enough.”

The sword froze, just inches from Arthur’s face.

Silas turned his head toward me, his eyes still dark. His wolf’s dominance pressed down, but I didn’t flinch. Even without my white wolf, I could withstand it.

“Killing him would be too troublesome to deal with. You’ve already defended me well. That is enough.”

Silas’s breathing slowed. The darkness faded from his gaze, and his eyes slowly bled back into brown. He straightened, turned his back on Arthur’s broken body, and walked out of the arena.

The men instinctively parted for him, fear flashing in their eyes as if he carried death itself on his shoulders.

When he reached me, Silas stopped. He slowly sank down on one knee, bent his head, and took my hand. His lips brushed the back. It was a knight’s vow, and a guard’s loyalty to his owner.

“It is an honour to fight for you, my lady,” he said.

I looked down at him, at the blood on his face, the devotion in his voice. My lips curved ever so slightly.

I was pleased.

“You did good.”

Silas looked up at me in relief. Before he could answer, his knees gave out and he collapsed, passing out.

“Silas!” Evelyn cried, lunging forward. She touched his forehead, and his chest. “Silas! He’s burning hot, my lady.”

I nodded. “Let’s take him back to the chambers and treat his wounds.”

I scanned the crowd, about to ask one of the men to help carry him, but Evelyn didn’t wait. She wrapped one arm around his shoulders and hooked his hand over her neck, then hauled him up as if he weighed nothing. Every head in the arena turned. Even I felt the surprise, Evelyn dragging a grown man like that was not something anyone expected.

“Come on, my lady,” she said, breathless but determined.

“Right. After you.” I stepped aside and let her go first. She half-dragged Silas toward the exit while I watched them go with at

smile.

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Before I f, I turned once more to the arena Arther will lay where Sales had let him. The men around the ring w shifting, uneasy. I men their eyes one by one

“I believe warriors won’t lie about what happened in a fight.” I said, my voice flat. “If this gets out, sell them exactly whe happened. And if any of you dare lay a hand on what’s rare again, I will take your lives in return”

Third person por

The far end of the arena was drowned in shadows, but a man stood there, leaning against the stone wall as if the chaos and bloodshed before him was nothing but entertainment. His arms were crossed, a sword resting loosely in one hand Golden eyes gleamed in the dark following the woman who had just walked out of the arena with her head high. His lips curved into a lazy, dangerous wrik

Beside him, another figure stepped forward from the shadows Axel, his beta, bowed his head respectfully. “Alpha Tristan,” Axel said quietly.

“Interesting, Tristan murmured, eyes never leaving the trail of the moonbom. I came here because I heard there would be an interesting fight in the Mooncrest temple, who would have expected something this amusing

Axel followed his gaze for a moment, then nodded Yes. The black wolf has some potential, if he trains.”

A chuckle rumbled from Trivan's chest, low and amused. "Who says I'm interested in the dude?"

Axel's head snapped toward him, his eyes widening slightly before he quickly marked it. His alpha's gaze wasn't on Silas, it was fixed on her. Axel almost wanted to groan aloud. Of all people, why her?

Everyone knew Alpha Tristan of the Rivercian pack wasn't like other Alphas. He was a man obsessed with fights, wars, and challenges. Power was the only thing he respected. That was why the moment he arrived in Mooncrest for pack relations, instead of greeting the alpha, he had gone straight to the temple when he overheard warriors whispering about a fight

Tristan wasn't polite, or diplomatic. He didn't care about bloodlines, titles, or the delicate dance of power among packs. If you weren't strong enough to face him, you were beneath his notice. He was one of the most dangerous alphas alive. Feared even by other Alphas, and yet he had never shown interest in women

Until now

Axel's stomach twisted when he saw the golden eyes lingering on the moonborn, the cursed woman that everyone whispered about. This is going to be stressful, he thought grimly.

Tristan tilted his head, smirk widening as though he had just discovered a rare weapon in a sea of dull blades. He muttered under his breath, voice low.

"Who cares about a black wolf when this woman's aura is far more powerful.*"

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Chapter 15

Selene

I sat cross-legged on the bed, my palms resting on my thighs, eyes closed. My breathing came out shallow and controlled.

Sweat ran down my back in slow trails, clinging to the thin white garment that now pressed tightly against my skin. It was uncomfortable, but I couldn't allow myself to care. If I broke focus now, or faltered even once, I would cough blood again, and tear something vital inside me, or worse, I would die.

This technique was never meant for the weak. Many had died trying to master it. It would've been easy in my older body. but now I had no choice but to tread carefully. This was the only way to strengthen this frail body.

I steadied my breath again, circulating the energy through my body in the correct rhythm, feeling the way it moved like waves under my skin.

The air in the room shifted. I could sense the good energy, brushing against me. I slowly drew it in, letting it flow into my veins, and nourishing me. It filled every aching muscle, every fragile bone, spreading warmth until I felt the heaviness of my body begin to fade.

Minutes... or hours, I didn't know how long had passed. My body felt lighter, more agile, the stiffness replaced by a strange serenity. When I felt the energy settle inside me, I began to slow my breathing, letting it return to its natural rhythm.

Finally, I opened my eyes.

The darkness of the room greeted me first. My pupils adjusted slowly, catching the faint flicker of sun that seeped through the cracks in the curtains. I flexed my fingers, clenching and unclenching them. There was a difference, I could feel it. My body was more powerful than before.

The breathing technique was part of many techniques out there. A werewolf could only learn a technique, because it took years to perfect one, and learning more than one could lead to death because techniques could clash against each other.

The result of the breathing technique wasn't that remarkable, but every art, no matter how powerful, begins with understanding one's own body. And this one helped me do just that. By drawing in the energy around me and calming my spirit, I could relearn myself piece by piece. Besides, I knew every technique; I had mastered one in every lifetime and learned how to bend them all to my will.

That was why I had spent an entire week locked inside this dark room with no food, rest, or distractions. Evelyn had stood guard outside the whole time, never letting anyone through. She took her duty so seriously that even when the temple servants tried to intervene, she drove them away in anger. I heard it all from the other side of the door, even in the depths of my meditation.

And even now, I caught a familiar scent drifting from behind the door.

A small smile tugged at my lips.

I could almost picture her now, pacing impatiently outside, her hands fidgeting, dying to open the door and make sure I was

still alive.

"You can come in, Evelyn," I said softly, stretching my neck and rolling my shoulders. "I'm done—"

The door burst open before I even finished speaking. Evelyn stood at the threshold, panting as though she had been running laps around the temple. Her eyes widened when she saw me.

"My lady!" she gasped, rushing to my side. "What happened? Why are you sweating so much? Are you sick?"

I shook my head, flexing my fingers and stretching out my legs as I leaned back slightly. "Not at all, in fact, I doubt I'll fall sick easily now."

12:40 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 15

She blinked at me, confusion clear in her wide eyes. Of course, she wouldn't understand what I meant. I didn't bother explaining either. Some things were better shown than told.

"Look at me properly, Evelyn, do I look sick to you?"

She hesitated, then really looked at me, her gaze scanning from my face to my posture, to my hands and back again. Her brows lifted slowly in surprise.

“No, you don’t,” she said, smiling. “In fact, you look slightly more... grown. Your cheeks are fuller, your skin is glowing. Oh, goodness, my lady, you look amazing! You are already so stunning, how could you look even more stunning!”

I chuckled, the sound low. “Thank you.”

She grinned, clearly proud of herself for noticing, but then something changed in her demeanor. Her smile faltered, and she bit her lip nervously, clutching something in her hand.

I raised an eyebrow, amused. “Do you have something for me?”

Evelyn froze. Her eyes darted away from mine before she awkwardly scratched the back of her head. “I- yes, I do.”

I tilted my head, curiosity piqued. “Can I see it?”

Her grip tightened around whatever she was holding, as if she were embarrassed, but after a few seconds she finally opened her palm.

A small jade pendant lay there.

I stared at it, surprised. The stone was simple, smooth, and oval-shaped, with faint carvings around the edges. It wasn’t anything luxurious, but the delicate craftsmanship and the soft shade of blue made it oddly beautiful.

Evelyn’s shy voice broke the silence. “I know it’s not worth anything,” she said quickly. “The pendant isn’t really suited for your status, but when I saw it, I couldn’t help it. The color reminded me of the blue in your eyes, so I carved it into a necklace for you.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. My eyes stayed on the jade pendant.

Evelyn’s nervousness grew. She fidgeted, her fingers trembling. “I-I apologize, my lady,” she blurted, her voice almost cracking. “I shouldn’t have given you something like this. Please forgive-”

Before she could finish, I reached out and gently took her hand, closing her fingers back around the pendant.

“What is rule number one?” I asked, meeting her startled gaze.

Evelyn stared at me, her lips moving before her voice came out in a soft/murmur. “Don’t... apologize,”

“Exactly,”

Taking the pendant from her trembling hand, I held it up to the faint light. The jade shimmered faintly. Without hesitation, I tied it around my neck, the cool stone pressing gently against my pale skin.

My fingers brushed the pendant once, lingering on its smooth surface. "Thank you, Evelyn, I love it."

Her face brightened instantly, a wave of relief washing over her features. "Thank the goddess," she exhaled, clutching her chest dramatically. "I was so nervous. I wanted to give you something for your coming-of-age ceremony, but I was terrified you wouldn't like it."

I blinked. "My what?"

Evelyn blinked back at me. "Your birthday, my lady," she said, tilting her head slightly. "Today is your eighteenth birthday."

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Tonight, under the full moon, you'll finally receive your wolf. The whole pack is talking about it."

For a moment, I froze. Her words echoed in my ears. Eighteen. My wolf.

I could feel my heartbeat quickening from the anticipation that burned through my veins. My hand instinctively moved to the pendant, clutching it as a slow smirk curved my lips.

So... it's finally time. Mira, It seems we're going to finally meet.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 16

[1,165 words]

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Selene

Steam curled lazily from the bathwater, the soft scents of jasmine and rose drifted in the air. My hair clung damp to my cheeks, as the water glistened against my skin. Evelyn's hands were gentle as she poured warm water over my shoulders, her fingers brushing down my back.

"Today is still your birthday, my lady," she said softly, "Where would you like to go?"

I tilted my head, leaning against the cool edge of the tub. Droplets slid down my arm and disappeared into the water below. Birthdays. Once upon a time, I might have been excited by them. But after so many lives, and so many meaningless celebrations that faded into nothing, I'd grown bored. All I truly wanted now was the coming-of-age ceremony tonight, and finally meeting Mira. That was the only gift I cared about.

"What do you want us to do?" I asked, opening my eyes to look at her.

Her face lit up instantly. She dipped her hand into the water, washing my legs gently. "I don't know what to choose, my lady. There's so much we could do today! We could find something nice for you to eat, walk through the stalls, and buy you something beautiful, and expensive...." Her words faltered. She glanced at me quickly, her excitement dimming, and I almost laughed.

I knew that look. It was obvious. How could we buy expensive things when we were flat out broke?

Moonborn or not, I was, in reality, a broke woman. Unlike Sienna, who was showered with gifts, dresses, and coins by our family, I had been left with scraps.

I remembered in my past lives how I once dared to ask for coins to buy a dress I'd seen, only for my stepmother to roll her eyes and tell me not to be greedy, and then Sienna received that exact dress the next day.

Evelyn caught herself quickly, her smile bright but strained as she tried not to ruin the mood. "I still have my salary, my lady, I know it's not a lot, but we can buy things with it."

I stared at her for a moment, the way her eyes shone with determination despite the embarrassment, and I couldn't help but smile. She really was adorable sometimes.

I parted my lips to say something, but before I could, voices drifted in from outside the bathhouse door.

"Oh my god, Lady Sienna is so lucky! Did you see what her brothers and stepmother brought for her? It was so much that five servants had to carry it!"

Evelyn's hands froze mid-motion. Her eyes flickered toward the door, then to me.

I simply crossed my arms against my chest, indifferent. The servants always had something to say.

"I know, right?" another voice chimed in. "Lady Sienna was so happy. They must have spent thousands of coins! And I heard they still plan to get her more. She deserves it, after all, the true Moonborn will finally awaken her white wolf today."

Their voices grew louder, and deliberate. They wanted me to hear every word.

"Unlike someone," one of them added, laughing. "Hahaha, everyone will see who's the real Moonborn and who's the fake one tonight."

Evelyn stiffened beside me, her gentle expression melting into fury. "Those bitches," she muttered under her breath, standing abruptly. "How dare they-"

I caught her wrist before she could move. My tone was calm, and lazy. "Don't pay attention to them."

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"But, my lady-"

I turned my head and met her gaze. "Why bother when they're going to eat their words later?"

Her anger faltered for a second, replaced by confusion. She sighed, sitting back down.

Outside, the servants kept talking, their laughter echoing against the walls.

“Oh, I heard the masters are taking Lady Sienna to the auction house today to get some rare items for her! Apparently, there’ll be unique artifacts there tonight, especially ones that can help with cultivation, like the Moonstone Amulet.”

“I heard about that too!” another said eagerly. “The Moonstone Amulet can help a wolf grow stronger. Everyone will be after it.”

Their voices slowly faded down the hall.

Evelyn sighed. “The Moonstone Amulet? I wish we could get something like that for you too, my lady.”

I didn’t respond. My fingers tapped lightly against the edge of the tub as my thoughts drifted. The Moonstone Amulet. Sure, it strengthened a wolf temporarily, but its effects barely lasted a few hours. A trinket like that wouldn’t help me, it was child’s play compared to what I’d seen in my past lives.

No, something else happened at that auction. Something... important.

I frowned, trying to remember. My mind ran through fragments of memory until suddenly, it hit me. My eyes widened, and a slow, delighted smile stretched across my lips.

“Yes,” I whispered, leaning forward slightly. “That’s it.”

Evelyn blinked, startled. “My lady?”

I grinned, my reflection rippling in the water. “That thing will also be auctioned today.”

Evelyn’s brows knit in confusion. “The... thing?”

“Evelyn, I have an idea of what we can do today.”

She blinked, tilting her head slightly. “What is it, my lady?”

“We’re going to the auction.”

For a moment, she just stared. Then, as if she wasn’t sure she’d heard right, she said, “We are?!” Her eyes went wide with disbelief. “But, my lady, we don’t have any coins. You need a lot if you want to compete with the others there.”

I chuckled softly, rising from the tub as water dripped down my body. Evelyn quickly wrapped a robe around me. “No need for that. No one’s going after what we’re going for, so it won’t be expensive.”

Evelyn still looked lost. “But... even then, we’ll still need something.”

“Don’t worry about the money, I’ll handle it. I know exactly where I can get some.”

Her brows furrowed, and I could almost see the questions forming behind her eyes.

“Where, my lady?”

I didn’t answer immediately. Instead, I stepped closer to her, close enough for her to see the glint of amusement dancing in my gaze. “You just have to handle the disguise.”

“Disguise?”

“Yes. Anything that will hide our appearance, and my hair.” I ran a hand through the damp white strands, watching them

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shimmer faintly in the candlelight. “I don’t want any drama there. And besides, if anyone finds out what that item truly is, half the room will try to snatch it before I do. Better we hide our faces and fool everyone.”

Evelyn straightened. “Y-Yes, my lady! I’ll handle it right away. But seriously... how are you going to get the money?”

I turned away from her, the corner of my lips curving upward.

“Oh, I’m just going to take something I’m owed.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 17

[1,238 words]

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Selene

I landed softly on the grass, the edges of my dress fluttering in the night breeze as my boots touched the ground with barely a sound. The air was cool, scented faintly with the sweet fragrance of moonflowers blooming along the temple walls.

A startled gasp echoed beside me.

“My lady!” Evelyn yelped, and when I turned, she was standing there, wide-eyed, one hand clutching the strap of the bag across her chest as she stared up at the towering temple wall I had just jumped from.

I dusted my hands against my dress, straightening. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s not that tall.”

Her mouth fell open slightly, her gaze flickering between the twenty-foot wall and me as if comparing the two. “Not that tall?” she repeated in disbelief. “My lady, what if you had injured yourself?”

I smiled, brushing a stray lock of black hair from my face. “Then it would’ve been a quick way to test my recovery speed.”

Evelyn made a strangled sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a groan. “You’re unbelievable, my lady.”

I chuckled and stepped closer. “I can’t go through the entrance. If anyone sees me leaving the temple, there’ll be endless questions. Jumping was simply faster.”

She shook her head in disbelief, still clutching the bag.

“Did you get the clothes?” I asked.

“Yes, my lady,” she said quickly, brightening. She opened the bag and pulled it down slightly to show me what was inside. Two long, beautifully patterned dresses, one in deep blue, the other in rich red, peeked from within.

I raised a brow. “These are...?”

Evelyn smiled shyly. “Sarees, my lady. My pack wears them often. Since people from different tribes will be at the auction, we can blend in with them.”

Ah, Evelyn wasn’t born in the Mooncrest Pack; she was from the Bengal Pack, known for their exotic silks, strength, and enigmatic ways. I didn’t know much about her past, only that a woman from her pack had brought her to the temple before she disappeared. From that day on, Evelyn had served quietly by my side.

A small smile tugged at my lips. “Perfect choice,” I said. “No one will suspect a thing.”

Evelyn nodded eagerly. And, as if remembering something, she straightened. “What about the coins, my lady? I brought some of my salary, just in case you couldn’t find any.”

Her words made me chuckle. I reached into the folds of my dress and pulled out a small, velvet pouch. The golden embroidery caught the sunlight, glittering faintly. I held it up between two fingers, grinning. “Oh, I got it.”

Evelyn leaned closer, squinting. When she recognized the delicate crest stitched into the fabric, her eyes widened so fast I almost laughed.

“My lady,” she breathed, her voice hushed but filled with shock. “That’s... that’s Lady Sienna’s pouch!”

I tilted my head innocently, tucking it back into my dress. “Is it?”

“My lady!” she whispered urgently. “You stole from Lady Sienna?”

“Stole? Evelyn, I simply took what’s mine. Consider it... reclaimed interest for years of unpaid debt.”

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Chapter 17

Evelyn pressed a hand to her. “You’re serious...”

SCE

I smirked, turning toward the forest path that led away from the temple. “Completely. Now, come along. We have an auton

to attend.”

Damien

The streets were loud and crowded. Vendors shouted to get attention, and children laughed as they ran between the stalls.

I walked forward with my hood pulled low, blending into the noise and chaos. Behind me, Jason, Yara, and Kaius followed quietly. Even with our faces hidden, people still turned to stare.

I ignored the stares and kept walking.

We hadn’t gone far before two guards stepped into our path, blocking the way.

“Show us your identity,” one of them ordered.

I stopped, tilting my head slightly.

They couldn’t see my face beneath the hood, but the moment my gaze lifted to meet theirs, both men stiffened. Their hands twitched toward their weapons, trembling slightly.

“I didn’t realize walking down a public street required an identity check,” Jason said calmly, his voice firm.

The guards exchanged a look. The bigger one, a man with a jagged scar running across his cheek, stepped forward, puffing out his chest.

“You don’t need an identity to walk, but you people look suspicious. It’s our duty to keep the pack safe. So be smart, show us your identity, and you can leave quietly...” His gaze locked on me, narrowing. “Or are you planning to obstruct our duty, rogue?”

Behind me, the air shifted. My warriors were already on edge. Jason’s low growl rumbled through the air. I didn’t need to look back to know his hand was already on the hilt of his sword.

“If you can’t control your tongue, I’ll gladly tear it out myself,” he snarled.

Before his sword could even clear its sheath, my voice cut through the tension.

“Enough.”

Jason stilled at once, muscles tense beneath his cloak.

The guards laughed, mistaking restraint for fear.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue? We didn’t say anything wrong, did we? You people look out of place, no pack

dresses like that. So what does that make you?” He

leaned eyes gleaming with mockery,

He drew his sword, pointing it directly at me. “Rogues, hiding in disguise. And rogues aren’t welcome in Mooncrest territory.”

I didn’t flinch. “The last man who pointed a sword at me never got the chance to lower it,” I said, my tone calm but laced with warning. My eyes flashed red for a moment, and the guard’s smirk faltered. Instinctively, he took a step back, his grip on the blade tightening.

“Oh, goddess, did you see that?”

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“I saw it, look at them, they’re actually scared of him.”

“Scared? Of one man? Tch, guards these days are pathetic.”

The murmurs spread quickly, voices overlapping as the crowd leaned closer.

His jaw clenched. He planted his feet, drove the blade toward my throat and hissed, “Refuse to do what I say, and I’ll cut you down within minutes.”

I sighed. I’d hoped to pass through Mooncrest without bloodshed, but it seemed I’d have to change my plans.

“You failed to comply with my orders. For that, you and your people will die.” The guard sliced the air with his sword.

“Should I handle this, my lord?” Kaius murmured behind me.

The blade fell in a blur. I was still weighing my next move when a woman’s voice cut across the street.

“Isn’t it a little early to start killing people?”

Everyone turned toward the voice. I almost ignored it, until Thane growled low in my head, a sound that rumbled with approval.

'I like her scent, Damien.'

My brow lifted. He liked her scent?

Thane rarely spoke unless I summoned him. He preferred silence, retreating deep inside me until I needed him. But now, out of nowhere, he was speaking, and about a scent?

My curiosity stirred. I turned toward the source of his interest.

A woman stood there, arms crossed, her face mostly hidden, only her piercing blue eyes visible. There was something about them, something that made my wolf shift restlessly inside me.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 18

[1,070 words]

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Selene

I was not a kind person. I never thought of myself as one.

When you've been betrayed enough times, by the ones you trusted, kindness becomes a luxury you can't afford. I learned that long ago. To show kindness was to show weakness, and offer a blade to your own throat and smile while they twisted it.

So no, what I did next wasn't out of kindness.

It was instinct.

The moment I heard the raised voices near the entrance of the marketplace, I felt a heavy bloodlust. It slithered through the crowd like smoke, pressing against my chest. It wasn't coming from the guards, it was from the ones they were stupid enough to confront.

Even before I saw them, I knew these people weren't ordinary.

When I finally laid eyes on them, I understood why my instincts had reacted that way. There were four of them, each cloaked, their presence so heavy it seemed to bend the very air around them, especially the one standing at the front.

He didn't even move, or speak, but I could feel that restrained power lurking around him. His bloodlust wasn't wild like the others. It was refined, tamed, and more dangerous than anything I'd ever sensed. A man who could kill without blinking and sleep soundly after.

Even standing several feet away, I could feel the threat rolling off him. My skin prickled. My instincts whispered one thing –

run.

Who the hell was he?

When his head turned slightly and his gaze brushed over me, my breath caught in my throat. It was just a glance, yet my pulse quickened before I could stop it. Maybe it was because I was more attuned than the others, that I could feel his presence, brushing against my senses like a warning.

I shifted my stance, forcing my body to relax.

The guard dragged his attention from the man's sword to the two of us standing nearby. His eyes raked over me and Evelyn, who stood close, clutching her bag. Our disguises were perfect, Bengal-style sarees with our faces and hair wrapped carefully. Only our eyes were visible. If he could see my hair, he would've recognised me immediately.

“Who are you?” the guard demanded, his voice rough. “And how dare you interfere with an official investigation?”

I tilted my head slightly, crossing my arms.

Investigation? That was a generous word for what this was, they were a couple of fools poking a beast with sticks.

I definitely didn't feel bad for them. The men they were facing could kill them without effort, and part of me wanted to watch them be torn apart for their stupidity. But if that happened, it'd cause a commotion, and the auction house would go on alert. And if that happened, I wouldn't get my item.

That was unacceptable.

“I suggest,” I said, meeting the guard's eyes through my veil, “that you lower your weapon before you lose more than your pride.”

The guard's jaw ticked at my words.

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For a moment, the street went utterly silent, the kind of silence that only comes when everyone knows something

dangerous is about to happen. Every eye turned toward me. Even the group stopped moving. I could feel their attention on

The guard's lips curled into a smirk, though his eyes darkened with irritation. “It seems a few of you have a death wish, have you forgotten who stands before you? I am a guard of the Mooncrest Royal Army.”

He straightened his shoulders, puffing up his chest as though his words carried divine weight.

“I have the right to punish anyone for insolence. Even death, if I find any of you suspicious.” His smirk widened, his tone dripping with arrogance. “And yet, here you are, running your mouth instead of minding your business. Don't you fear for your life?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, unable to help it.

This man was really full of it.

Of all the guards in the royal army, the lowest rank was him, a glorified watch dog pretending to be a lion. And he dared to brag about that in front of me?

If he only knew.

In another lifetime, I'd commanded men stronger than him by the thousands. Generals, strategists, and assassins, all of them had bowed to my orders. Compared to that, this loud fool was nothing more than a barking mutt. One flick of my wrist, and he'd be on his knees choking on his own pride.

Beside me, Evelyn tugged at my arm nervously.

"We shouldn't cause a scene, my lady," she whispered, her voice trembling.

The guard snorted. "You heard your maid," he said mockingly. "You shouldn't cause a scene. Get out of here immediately before I lose my patience. I have more pressing matters to attend to."

He turned back toward the group.

I followed his gaze, my eyes landing once again on the man in front of them. He hadn't moved an inch. Still, calm, hands at his sides, eyes locked on me. Yet the air around him was different.

That gaze.

It wasn't as simple as being seen. It felt as though his eyes peeled away every layer of disguise and composure I'd so carefully wrapped myself in. His gaze was steady, studying me, and assessing me, as if I were a puzzle piece that no longer fit where it once belonged.

Goosebumps prickled along my arms.

I quickly turned away, heart skipping a beat. What in the world was that? Why was his stare affecting me like this?

I shook my head sharply, snapping out of it, and faced the guard again.

"You see, I'm afraid I can't do that."

The guard blinked, thrown off. "What?"

I smiled under the veil. "Leave, I mean. I can't do that."

His expression hardened, anger flashing across his face, but I continued smoothly, my tone almost bored.

"And besides," I added, "you're inconveniencing everyone here. These people aren't dangerous."

18

Lie.

“They’re people I know.”

Another lie, one I delivered without a flinch.

If this arrogant fool thought I’d step aside and let him ruin my day, and risk the auction, then he was wrong.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 19

[1,275 words]

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Damien

Those confident eyes. That effortless, lazy grace. I had never seen a woman like her. She spoke as if the world were nothing more than pieces on a board, and everyone around her was a pawn, disposable at her whim. Every word was a calculation, and everyone else was already struggling to keep up.

I prided myself on reading people. It was both a craft and a tool. But with her, I was powerless. I couldn't tell what she thought, couldn't guess what she wanted. She was a knot I couldn't untangle, and knots fascinated me.

The more I watched, the more curious I became.

'You're curious, Damien. She intrigues you too,' Thane rumbled in my mind, amused as always.

I raised an eyebrow. 'You're awfully chatty today. One more word and I will cut you off,'

'Hmm, and you're awfully easy to rile today. I'll listen for now. But don't let her slip away. Her scent calms me. I want her, Damien.' Thane replied, voice laced with hunger.

I ignored my wolf and kept my focus on her. Who was this woman to make Thane bare his teeth in interest? He looked ready to pounce the moment I gave him the chance.

The guard stepped forward, face twisted with fury. "You damned woman," he spat. "If you won't follow orders, I won't waste my breath. I'll be the first to destroy you." He closed the distance, blade angled in his hand.

Jason moved, his hand going to his sword. "My lord?" he asked, as if seeking permission to finish it quickly.

"Stand back," I said flatly. Jason went still immediately.

I wanted to see what she would do. Some people broke under pressure; others burned brighter. The guard's arrogance was dull, but the woman's calm composure intrigued me.

The guard raised his sword toward her, the blade glinting. For a moment, I expected something predictable. Instead, she glanced to the side. My attention snapped there too. I caught movement at the edge of my vision, there was a shadow between the trees, half hidden, someone about to step forward.

Was she really planning to let someone handle it? I narrowed my eyes, but then she did something that caught me off guard. She shook her head, signaling for the person to stand down.

Interesting.

I tilted my head, watching the scene unfold with curiosity. What was she thinking?

The guard's sword gleamed as he raised it higher, sunlight flashing along the blade. Her maid moved instinctively, stepping in front of her like a shield, arms spread wide, eyes squeezed shut.

"No!" she cried.

Brave, but foolish.

The guard didn't stop. His blade came down in a vicious arc, but before it could land, a blur of movement cut through the air. A pale, delicate hand snapped up and caught his wrist mid-swing.

The sound of steel halted in midair.

The street went deathly still. Every breath seemed to vanish at once. Even Yara, ever composed, muttered under her breath, "What the hell..."

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Chapter 19

My brows lifted slightly. The rest of my face remained calm, but my eyes betrayed a flicker of surprise. That fragile-looking woman, small enough for the guard to break with one hand, was holding him in place with effortless strength. His sword trembled midair, frozen, while she stood still, unbothered.

The maid blinked, her eyes wide with disbelief, staring at her mistress as if she'd never truly seen her before.

The guard's face drained of color. His mouth opened, voice shaking as he stammered, "You-how...?"

Her eyes had shifted. The indifference from before was gone, replaced by pure, searing anger. Her fingers clenched around his wrist, and a crack echoed, the sound of bone yielding under impossible force.

"AHH!" The guard's scream ripped through the air as his sword fell to the ground.

The crowd froze at the sight.

"Did she just-break his hand?!" someone yelled.

"Yes... she really did," another stammered, voice trembling with disbelief.

Even the second guard flinched, unable to look away as his comrade was held fast by a woman.

She ignored them all. Her grip didn't falter, her blue eyes glowed faintly, a lighter shade creeping in. I recognized the tension radiating from her, she was teetering on the edge of losing control.

Her maid stepped forward hesitantly, touching her hand. "M-My lady... you can't hurt him."

The woman blinked, as if shaking off a trance. Her gaze dropped to the guard's wrist, then to his twisted, pained expression, before letting go.

"Ah," she said, dusting her hand lightly, "it seems I got carried away again."

My lips curled up before I could stop them.

Got carried away?

That wasn't the look of someone who got carried away. That was the look of a mad warrior, someone who'd seen blood, lived through it, and didn't hesitate to draw it again. All because a guard almost struck her maid.

She sighed softly. "Let's not make this into a big deal," she said, like she hadn't just broken a man's wrist in front of a crowd.

The guard, clutching his mangled hand, glared up at her. "You little bitch-" he started, but she ignored him.

Instead, she turned to her maid, took the bag from her hands, and reached inside. Her fingers emerged clutching a white pendant, and the atmosphere shifted instantly.

Gasps spread through the crowd. The maid's eyes widened in shock. The guard froze mid-sentence, his face paling

"W-Where did you get the Temple pendant?" he stammered, stumbling back.

The woman only tilted her head and shrugged. "You don't need to know. But since I have this, that means my identity, and theirs, are confirmed. I'm associated with the Temple. You wouldn't dare treat us like criminals, right?"

Silence.

The guard stared at her, clearly fighting between fear and humiliation. Finally, he bowed stiffly. "You're right. I apologize for the trouble, my lady. We'll... take our leave."

He turned sharply to the other guard. "Let's go."

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Chapter 19

The man nodded fast. They both hurried off, not daring to look back.

When they were gone, she let out a quiet sigh. Her maid hurried to her side, inspecting her arm, worry etched across her face. For a brief moment, the woman's smile was soft, and she didn't seem dangerous at all.

"I can't believe you actually took Lady Sienna's Temple pendant, my lady," her maid whispered.

"What? I don't have one, I thought taking it would make the journey easier, people are just as scared of the temple as they are of the palace," she replied, then paused.

She turned her head; our eyes locked, and she lingered for a moment, studying me as intently as I had studied her. Then, without a word, she started walking toward me.

Jason took a half-step forward, instinctively ready to intervene. One look from me, and he froze in place.

She stopped before me, her presence oddly serene. I looked down at her as she lifted a hand toward me.

I didn't move. Neither did my men.

Even her maid looked perplexed, eyes flicking nervously between us.

The woman's smile turned sly as she twisted her fingers into the familiar gesture for coins.

"I saved your lives," she said, her tone casual, but a mischievous sparkle danced in her eyes. "Don't you think I deserve a reward for that?"

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 20

[1,038 words]

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Selene

As I said, I wasn't a kind person.

And if I ever did something good, I expected something in return.

The crowd turned toward me, murmuring in disbelief, apparently, gratitude without payment was still the moral standard here. Beside me, Evelyn gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. I didn't need to look to know what that meant; she was probably horrified.

The moonborn, asking strangers for money? She must have been wondering if I'd gone mad.

But I didn't care. I wasn't one of those people obsessed with the title Moonborn like it was some divine badge. Titles didn't feed you. Respect didn't buy clothes.

I was the unwanted daughter of the Bloodrose family, and right now, we were just broke people trying to survive. If that meant charging strangers for a little help, then so be it. I was still young, and might as well start earning early.

And besides, these men didn't look poor.

Even with their faces hidden beneath cloaks and scarves, I could tell they were wealthy. The fabric alone gave them away, fine stitching, rare textures, the faint scent of something expensive and foreign. Whoever they were, they were important.

Curious as I was about their identities, I wasn't about to pry. All I needed was coins for my service. After that, they could go back to wherever they came from.

I looked up at the man in front, the one who had spoken the least. He stood there in complete silence, staring at my hand that was still stretched toward him.

For a while, he didn't move. His silence made me pay closer attention.

What was he thinking? Was he insulted? Amused?

I couldn't tell, and that only made me more curious.

I tried to read his thoughts. I had no idea how to do it, but I knew I could if I focused enough. So I concentrated on his energy, his expression, the faint shift in the air around him, waiting for that familiar buzz in my mind that usually came when someone's thoughts slipped through, but nothing happened.

My brow creased.

That was strange.

Usually, if I looked long enough, people's thoughts would slip into my mind like a door quietly opening. I tilted my head, staring at him harder, but still nothing.

'Huh? Why is this woman staring at the lord like that? Has she gone mad?'

I turned slightly toward the voice and saw one of the men behind him watching me, his thoughts echoing clearly in my

head.

Another voice joined in, calm and feminine. 'She's a strange woman, but I won't deny she's strong.' My eyes flicked toward the woman in the group.

'She might be a threat. Should I just kill her now and be done with it? But... would he allow it? This is hard, I have no idea what he is thinking about and I don't want to offend him.' A third voice followed.

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Chapter 90

My gaze slid to the last man, the one whose fingers twitched near his blade

Their thoughts came to me easily, clear as spoken words. Yet when I turned back to the man in front, the one they called lord, and everything went silent

I was like my ability had slammed into a wall. I frowned, my curiosity sparking Why couldn't I read him when the others thoughts flowed so easily into my mind? Did my ability not work on him or was he somehow blocking me?

I crossed my arms, studying the man in front of me. This man was a mystery, cold, silent, unreadable. Even now, standing this close, I couldn't sense a single emotion from him. It was unsettling. Most men fidgeted or averted their eyes when I stared too long, but not him. He just stood there, steady as a wall, as if nothing in the world could move him.

Just when I thought he wasn't going to answer me, his low voice echoed.

"Give it to her."

My eyebrows shot up. What?

I blinked at him, unsure if I'd heard correctly. Even his own men seemed stunned. They looked at him as if he'd just ordered them to hand over their heads.

He's really giving me coins? I thought, almost laughing at the absurdity of it. Did he actually take me seriously? I peeked at him again, trying to gauge his expression, but he was calm.

The man standing just behind him hesitated, as though waiting for the order to be withdrawn. But when nothing changed, he turned to another man at his side.

"Kaius."

The one called Kaius looked up, startled, then quickly bowed his head. "Yes, my lord."

He reached into his cloak and brought out a pouch. He walked toward me with the posture of someone who would rather be facing an executioner, not a girl demanding payment.

He stopped in front of Evelyn and handed her the pouch.

Evelyn's eyes widened. She looked from the pouch to me, her lips parting in disbelief.

"M-my lady," she whispered. "It's... it's heavy."

I arched a brow, taking a step closer. Heavy? What was that supposed to mean? Rocks? Were they mocking me?

Evelyn hesitated before loosening the strings. The sound of coins clinking filled the air, and when she opened it, we both froze.

Our eyes widened in unison. The pouch wasn't filled with bronze or even silver. It was filled with gold. Pure, shining gold

coins.

Evelyn's jaw dropped. "I-is this fake?" she stammered, staring at the glowing pieces. "How is the pouch filled with gold

coins?!"

I shook my head slowly, unable to tear my eyes away. "It's not fake," I murmured. The faintly metallic scent of real gold proved that. These were genuine.

Even Alphas never carried more than a few gold coins at a time. Gold was rare, difficult to earn even for nobles, and yet these strangers, they had just handed me a pouch full of it like it was spare change.

Who were these people?

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