

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 111

[1,487 words]

Chapter 111

Sienna

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The sound of the slap echoed in my ears long after it landed.

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I gasped sharply, my eyes widening as pain bloomed across my cheek, my head turning slightly from the force. For a moment, I couldn't even breathe properly. I lifted my hand to my face, fingers trembling as they pressed against my skin, my mind struggling to comprehend what had just happened.

I had been hit by Princess Avery in front of everyone.

Before I could gather myself, her glare burned into me, her face flushed red with fury as she stepped closer.

"You know," she said coldly, her voice dripping with contempt, "I've never really liked you. You always rubbed me the wrong way. That sweet, gentle act of yours? I never bought it."

My heart pounded as I stared at her, shock rooting me in place.

"But this?" she continued, her eyes narrowing. "This is worse than I thought. Your sister is missing, and you're standing here calm and collected, worrying about my brother instead of being angry at him for losing your twin." Her lip curled. "Your behavior is disgusting. Honestly, I can't help but pity anyone stupid enough to fall for your act."

The sting on my cheek was nothing compared to the humiliation crawling through my chest. My vision blurred, not from tears, but from disbelief. I turned my head instinctively, searching for familiar faces.

“Kane... Cross...” I whispered silently as my gaze landed on my brothers standing behind Ian.

Relief flickered for a second when Kane shifted forward, as if about to step in, but it died instantly when Cross’s hand shot out, gripping Kane’s arm and pulling him back. Cross shook his head firmly. Kane hesitated, then glanced at me, guilt flickering across his face before he looked away.

My breath caught in my throat.

No. Impossible. They weren’t coming.

I stared at them in disbelief, my chest tightening painfully. My brothers, who had always defended me, who had always rushed to my side no matter the situation, were just standing there not saying a word. It felt as if something vital inside me cracked.

I turned fully toward Cross, my hands clenched at my sides, desperately searching his face for something familiar but his cold eyes met mine.

They were emotionless.

My heart dropped straight into my stomach.

Why... why was he looking at me like that?

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If Kane hesitated, I had believed Cross would never turn away from me. To him, I had always been everything. I was his whole world. He never looked at anyone else the way he looked at me, never chose anyone over me. And yet now, he stood there, unmoving, staring at me as if I deserved every word Avery had

thrown at me.

My nails dug into my palms as I bit my lip hard, the taste of blood blooming in my mouth.

It must be her.

Selene.

That bitch must have done something. There was no other explanation. She had poisoned them somehow, twisted things in ways I couldn't see. First the princess, now my brothers, this couldn't be a coincidence. I had planned too much, sacrificed too much, to let everything crumble because of her.

I wouldn't let that happen.

Lowering my head slightly, I clutched my cheek tighter, letting my shoulders tremble as tears finally spilled over, trailing down my face. When I spoke, my voice wavered.

"I-I'm sorry," I said, choking on the words. "I didn't mean to sound indifferent. I really miss my sister. I'm so worried about her." I sniffed, my tears falling faster now. "But Prince Adrian was unconscious... I was just scared something might happen to him too. I don't want to lose either of them."

I looked up, eyes glossy, letting my pain show. "I'm sorry," I whispered again, as if it hurt just to breathe.

Princess Avery scoffed, clearly unconvinced, her expression sharp with distrust, but before she could say anything else, the Luna stepped forward. She wrapped her arms around me gently, pulling me into her embrace, her voice warm and soothing.

"It's alright, Sienna, I know you were worried about Adrian. Thank you for caring about him."

I leaned into her hug, hiding my face against her shoulder.

Inside, my tears dried instantly.

It doesn't matter, I thought coldly. You can doubt me all you want.

I would fix this. I always did.

No matter what Princess Avery thought, no matter how sharp her eyes were, there were still people who believed me, who chose to see me as gentle, caring, and harmless. As long as that remained true, I still had

room to move.

The tension in the room thickened until the alpha finally coughed, the sound cutting through the room. Everyone paused. He didn't address any of us, not even Adrian, instead turning his attention to the man seated calmly on the chair nearby.

Ian, my oldest brother.

The only man I had ever truly been afraid of.

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The moment my eyes landed on him, my stomach tightened. Since I was young, I had feared him, not because he was cruel, but because he saw too much. My smiles, my tears, my carefully chosen words had never worked on him. He looked through people as if peeling back layers of skin, straight into the bone. Being this close to him again after so many years made my skin prickle with unease.

I hadn't seen him in a long time, not since he became the commander of the pack's warriors and vanished into the front lines. He didn't return even for the most important events. So why was he here now?

The alpha spoke carefully. "Commander Ian, I received reports that you left the front lines and returned to the capital. I didn't believe them. You've never done something like this before." His gaze sharpened. "But now I see it's true. Is there a reason you're here?"

Ian, who had been quietly observing everything with those cold blue eyes, finally lifted his gaze to meet the alpha's. His voice was calm, and terrifyingly steady.

"A reason?" he said. "Is my sister being missing not reason enough for me to be here?"

Wait, what?

For a split second, my mind went blank. Don't tell me... don't tell me this cold-blooded man came all this way because of Selene.

That was impossible. This was the same man who hadn't returned even when Father lay sick and near death. And now he was here because she was missing?

The alpha studied him before replying, his tone firm. "You don't need to worry. I've dispatched warriors across the pack. The one who took her couldn't have left the territory yet. We will find them." He paused, then added, "No, we must find her. Selene is the moonborn. She is a priority."

I frowned despite myself.

Why was everyone acting like Selene mattered so much?

She could die for all I cared. Kidnapped, killed, it made no difference to me. It never had. I was the one who mattered. I was the one with the white hair, the one people noticed, the one destined for more. Selene was nothing but a shadow that people suddenly decided to protect.

Ian's gaze didn't waver as he replied, "The war will be won. I don't need to return to the front lines for now."

The alpha frowned. "You-"

Ian didn't let him finish. It was the first time I had ever seen someone cut the alpha off so easily. And the most unsettling part was that the alpha didn't force the issue. Ian was too powerful, and valuable. There was no getting rid of him.

Ian stood, his towering figure filling the room, his presence alone making the air feel heavier.

"I will stay here and look for my sister," he said flatly. "And I expect her to be found. If not, I will go on a killing rampage." His eyes were ice-cold. "Even if I am killed, you know it will take more than half your warriors to do it. If you don't want to lose half your pack, find Selene."

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His words echoed through the room, the threat clear.

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He inclined his head slightly to the alpha, a gesture of respect, then turned and walked out. Cross and Kane followed immediately.

I swallowed hard.

Maybe it was better if Selene came back.

If Ian truly lost control, everything I had worked for would collapse. My future with Adrian would be ruined, and I couldn't allow that. I had sacrificed too much.

So I needed that bitch back, to watch me take everything she's always wanted.

Where are you, Selene?

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[1,435 words]

Chapter 112

Selene

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I dipped the brush into the bowl of water beside me, watching the bristles darken before pressing it gently into the red paint, then brought it down onto the wide sheet of white paper laid out in front of me.

The brush glided smoothly as I stroked the line with ease, my wrist steady, my movements controlled and familiar, as if my body remembered what to do even when my mind wandered elsewhere.

I added a few more lines, shaping the form little by little, before rinsing the brush again and letting the excess water drip away. This time, I dipped it into black, layering the darker color over the red, creating contrast and depth as my eyes stayed fixed on the image taking form beneath my hand.

I was so focused that I barely noticed the room around me, my thoughts drifting instead to a pair of familiar crimson eyes that refused to leave my memory no matter how hard I tried.

The recollection made my fingers slow for just a moment before I added more detail, my brush moving almost instinctively.

From the corner of my vision, I noticed one of Yara's women pause in her own work. She raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued, before setting her brush aside and standing up. Her footsteps were quiet as she approached, stopping just behind me, and when she finally leaned forward enough to see the painting clearly, she gasped. "Oh my goddess."

The others looked up at her reaction, confused at first.

"What is it?" one of them asked, already rising to her feet. The woman only pointed at the paper, her mouth still open in disbelief.

That was enough to draw the rest of them over. One by one, they gathered around me, their beautiful bodies pressing close as they tried to get a better look, and soon the quiet room filled with soft gasps and murmurs of awe. Even Maeve, who had been standing at a respectful distance the entire time, couldn't help herself when she finally saw the artwork, her hand lifting to her mouth as she inhaled sharply.

"This is incredible, Lady Selene," one of them said, her voice full of admiration. "How are you able to draw this well? This is even better than the pack artist."

I didn't look up. I simply dipped my brush back into the water, then into white paint, letting the lighter color soften parts of the image as I continued to work.

Another voice chimed in, still astonished. "It's like you've been painting for your entire life."

If only they knew that I had been painting for many years, many lifetimes, to be exact.

In my past lives, I was a Luna, and it was expected of a Luna to excel in many things. Painting, embroidery, music, and cooking, these skills had been drilled into me until they became second nature. This was nothing new to me, even if it was new to them.

One of the women leaned closer, squinting slightly at the unfinished painting.

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"Wait," she said slowly, "is it just me, or does the person in this painting look familiar?"

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Another woman lightly bumped her shoulder, rolling her eyes. "Isn't it obvious?" she replied with a grin. "Look at the eyes. That alone gives it away. It's Alpha Damien."

She turned to me then, smiling knowingly. "Lady Selene must be very much in love with the alpha to paint him like this. Right, Lady Selene?"

A different woman laughed softly, clasping her hands together. "Aww, Lady Selene. That's so cute. You're painting your beloved."

I didn't say anything to them, but I couldn't help thinking about how completely wrong they were. Their judgment couldn't have been farther from my true intentions.

Yes, I was painting Alpha Damien, and yes, the resemblance was there, but it had nothing to do with love or affection or him being some beloved figure in my heart. I wasn't that foolish, and I certainly wasn't naive enough to draw the Demon of the West for something as shallow as romance.

I was painting him because it was the only thing stopping me from snapping.

If I could capture him perfectly, every sharp line, every cold expression, every infuriating detail, then I could tear the paper apart afterward, rip it to shreds as if I were tearing into him instead.

It wouldn't harm him physically, but at least it would drain some of the anger burning in my chest, because I was angry, far angrier than I had been in a long time.

That man was testing my patience in ways very few ever had. He had kept me in this place for days, refused to meet me even once, and ignored every single message I sent requesting an audience, as if I didn't exist at all.

It felt deliberate, like he was doing it on purpose, and that only made it worse.

Now I had been confined to this room for an entire week.

Even though Yara's women visited often and tried to keep me company, even though they talked and laughed and filled the space with noise, it wasn't enough. I wasn't someone meant to be caged, dressed up, and tucked away out of sight. I had things to do, people to deal with, lives to ruin, and being forced to sit still while others made decisions around me was driving me insane.

My fingers tightened slowly around the brush, my grip firm.

I was not a princess to be locked in a tower. I was getting out of here, no matter the cost.

I set the brush down at last and leaned back slightly, studying the painting before me as if seeing it for the first time.

“What do you think?” I asked calmly, my tone casual. “It’s not complete yet, but does it look a lot like your Alpha?”

The women, completely unaware of the storm brewing behind my composed expression, nodded eagerly.

“Yes,” one of them said without hesitation. “It really does. It looks just like him.”

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Another smiled brightly. “Alpha Damien would be very happy if you gave this to him.”

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I didn’t respond. Instead, my lips curved into a faint, mischievous smile as my mind began to race, already planning how quickly I could finish the painting, and how satisfying it would feel to destroy it afterward.

Just then, one of the women reached forward as if to touch the artwork, but something clattered softly to the floor before she could. A dagger had slipped from her side, landing near my feet. I glanced down and noticed immediately that it was damaged, the blade fractured as if it had been snapped in half.

I raised an eyebrow, curious.

“Oh,” she said quickly, following my gaze. “I broke it during training. I should throw it away, but I’ve already gotten used to it. I just can’t part with it.” She laughed a little, almost embarrassed. “I know it sounds strange.”

I bent down and picked the dagger up, carefully running my fingers along the worn edge. It didn’t take much to see that the weapon had been through countless battles, repaired and reused far beyond what most people would consider reasonable.

“No,” I said quietly, almost absentmindedly, “it doesn’t sound strange at all. A warrior’s heart is their weapon, and it’s never easy to part with one’s heart.”

The room fell silent.

When I looked up, all of them were staring at me, their expressions caught somewhere between surprise and disbelief, as if they hadn't expected words like that to come from me.

One of the women finally spoke. "You sound... like a warrior yourself, lady Selene."

I met her gaze for a moment, then shrugged lightly, as if it meant nothing. "Who knows," I replied, handing the dagger back to its owner. "Are you getting another one?"

She nodded, gripping the weapon firmly. "Yes. I plan to win a new dagger."

"Win one?" I echoed. "And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

Her eyes

lit up. "Today is the Crimson Warrior Rite" she said.

I frowned slightly. "Crimson Warrior Rite?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes. It's when warriors from all over the pack gather to fight. The winner earns weaponry of their choosing."

At that, interest sparked instantly, my earlier irritation momentarily forgotten as a far more dangerous curiosity took its place.

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[1,780 words]

Chapter 113

Selene

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I had never owned a weapon that truly resonated with me in any of my past lives. No matter how powerful the blade or how rare the material, it always ended the same way, cracked, shattered, and dulled beyond repair by the end of a battle.

The stronger I became and the more formidable my opponents grew, the faster my weapons met their demise. I would replace them again and again, each one promising strength, each one failing me when it mattered most. It was almost cruel how predictable it became, like a curse following me from one lifetime to the next.

In every life, I wanted a weapon that could stand beside me as I grew stronger, something that could endure the same battles I did and come out whole. Not because I needed it to define my power, I had never lacked strength, but because I wanted something that could match it.

A weapon that wouldn't break no matter how brutal the fight became, something that felt like an extension of my own will rather than a fragile tool destined to fail. Yet no matter where I went or how far I searched, I never found such a thing. Eventually, I had accepted that perhaps it simply didn't exist for someone like me. But this lifetime was different.

I had travelled in almost every pack across countless lifetimes, yet never had I been in the Crimson Pack. This place felt different from the others, not just in strength, but everything around it was different. Even the energy around her was strong and clean, as if there were many opportunities to get stronger.

Everything about it carried a dangerous feeling, from the people to the air itself, and for the first time in a very long while, I felt something close to anticipation stir inside my chest.

So maybe, this would be the place where I finally found a weapon that suited me.

The thought alone made my heart pound faster, excitement curling through my veins as I licked my lips without even realizing it. Before I could second-guess myself, I reached out and caught the woman's soft hand, leaning forward until my face was only inches from hers. Her eyes widened instantly, her breath hitching as her face flushed a deep red at the sudden closeness.

"Y-you-" she started, clearly flustered.

I smiled, my expression bright and curious, my eyes twinkling with genuine interest as I spoke. "About the Crimson Warrior Rite," I asked. "Tell me about it. What exactly is it? Can anyone participate?"

She stared at me for a moment, clearly trying to gather her thoughts, before swallowing and nodding.

“Y-yes,” she said slowly. “Anyone can participate, as long as they can fight. But it’s very dangerous. The battles are gruesome, and if someone is weak or careless, they can be killed.”

I barely reacted to that part. The danger meant nothing to me; it never had. I wasn’t weak, and I didn’t intend to be careless. That information was irrelevant.

“What about the winner?” I asked instead. “What kind of weapon do they receive?”

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She hesitated, thinking. “It depends on the winner’s choice. There are usually three main winners, first, second, and third place. All the weapons are of the highest quality. The first-place winner chooses any weapon they want, then the second, then the third. The remaining warriors who participated can choose from what’s left.”

I nodded slowly, my expression thoughtful as I finally stepped back, releasing her hand. My mind was already racing, calculating possibilities, imagining rows of weapons forged.

The woman took a deep breath, clearly relieved by the distance, when another voice chimed in. One of the women tilted her head at me. “Why are you asking all this, Lady Selene?” she said cautiously. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about participating?”

I looked at her and let a harmless smile curve my lips, the kind that made people lower their guard without even realizing it. “Participating?” I said lightly, as if the idea itself amused me. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Why would I participate in something as crude as that? I’m a lady. Things like that are dangerous.”

The woman immediately nodded in agreement, clearly relieved by my answer. “Yes, you’re right,” she said earnestly. “Even as a warrior myself, I don’t want to participate. There are many powerful people there, and I know my limits. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

I studied her quietly, my smile still in place, though my thoughts had already drifted far from the room.

There was truth in her words, sometimes it was wiser to know one's limits instead of charging blindly into something that could get you killed. But then again, how did anyone ever truly know their limits if they never tested them? If you kept telling yourself there was a line you couldn't cross, you would never move beyond it.

That was something I understood better than most. No matter how painful things had become in my past lives, no matter how many times death had taken me, I never gave up. I refused to accept that dying and being reborn without memories was my limit. And because I refused, I finally broke through it. In this lifetime, I remembered everything. That alone was proof that limits were meant to be challenged, not obeyed.

Another woman spoke up casually. "And you also need an entry payment to participate," she added. "Most warriors don't join because it's expensive."

Expensive?

The word echoed in my head, and my fingers twitched slightly at my side. I didn't have money with me, and asking for it outright would raise too many questions. That was something I couldn't afford right now. I was still weighing my options when a sharp knock sounded at the door, cutting through my thoughts.

I turned toward it just as the door opened, and Yara walked in with that familiar lazy grin resting on her lips, as if she owned the place.

"Master!" The women immediately brightened, excitement flashing across their faces as they rushed toward her, but Yara barely spared them a glance.

Her attention snapped to me instead, her grin widening as she bowed her head slightly. "Lady Selene," she said smoothly. "I see you're still as radiant as always."

I looked back at her with an unimpressed gaze, my expression cool and unreadable. After what happened the last time we met, after she had casually thrown a dagger at my head, I found her friendliness more irritating

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than charming. I wasn't exactly angry, anger wasted too much energy, but I was certainly not fooled. At the moment, my thoughts were focused on something far more important, how to get my hands on money.

When I didn't respond, Yara's amusement only seemed to deepen. She clicked her tongue softly and turned to the women. "Come on, ladies," she said. "The Crimson Warrior Rite will be starting soon."

The women nodded eagerly, already moving to follow her, when something sharp flashed through my mind. My eyes narrowed slightly, and before I could stop myself, I stood up.

"Wait."

The single word cut through the room, and everyone froze. All eyes turned toward me. Yara paused mid-step, then slowly looked back over her shoulder, one eyebrow lifting with interest.

"Is something wrong, Lady Selene?" she asked, her tone calm, though her eyes were anything but.

I smiled and shook my head slowly, as if whatever was about to happen was perfectly casual. I walked toward her without another word, my steps unhurried. Yara watched me, her brows knitting together in confusion, clearly trying to read my intentions.

Before she could open her mouth, I moved.

In one smooth motion, I leaned forward, my hand pressing flat against the wall beside her head while my other arm slipped around her waist and pulled her firmly against me. Her back hit the wall, my body effectively caging her in place.

Yara's eyes widened in shock. For a moment, she froze. And so did everyone else in the room.

Gasps rippled through the women behind us. Their hands flew to their mouths, eyes darting between Yara and me in disbelief. None of them must have never seen anyone act this boldly or dominantly toward their

master.

Yara snapped out of it first, her brows drawing together sharply. "What are you doing, my lady?"

I tilted my head, lips curling in a lazy, nonchalant smile. I leaned in just enough that only she could hear me, my voice soft.

“What else?” I murmured. “I’m getting paid for the emotional distress you caused by throwing a dagger at

me.”

Her gaze flickered down instantly. I felt her stiffen as she realized something was missing from her belt. When her eyes snapped back to mine, instead of anger, a wide grin spread across her face. She let out a loud chuckle.

“Crazy,” she laughed. “I was right, you’re really crazy.”

Behind us, whispers broke out.

“What is going on?” one woman hissed. “Do you think our master is... interested in the Alpha woman?”

Another whispered back in panic, “I hope not. I don’t want our master to lose her life.”

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I leaned back, releasing Yara, and turned toward them calmly. “It’s fine, she and I were just having a conversation. We’re done now. You can leave.”

They hesitated, glancing between me and Yara.

Yara rolled her shoulders, still grinning, and waved them off. “Hahaha, yes, we can leave now.”

She walked to the door and held it open as her women filed out with confusion, and curiosity written across their faces. Before stepping out herself, she turned back to me, inclining her head.

“Goodbye, Lady Selene, I hope I’ll be fortunate enough to fight you today.” She paused at the doorway, then added casually, “Oh, and before I leave, be careful. Alpha Damien will be there.”

With that, she disappeared, the door closing behind her.

I stood alone in the room, staring at the door for a moment. Then my lips curled upward. My fingers tightened around the small pouch of coins now resting discreetly in my palm, the one I had lifted from her belt without her even realizing it in the moment.

I won't hesitate, or second-guess myself.

I was going to the Crimson Warrior Rite. And not even that demon of the West was going to stop me.

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[1,258 words]

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Chapter 114

Chapter 114

Selene

A knock sounded against the door, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Enter, Maeve,” I called calmly.

The door opened, and Maeve stepped inside, only to freeze mid-step. Her eyes widened instantly, her lips parting as if her mind had momentarily stopped working, a soft flush spreading across her cheeks without restraint. She stared at me as though she were seeing a ghost, or perhaps something far more dangerous to her composure.

I turned toward her, amused. "You're back."

She nodded slowly, her gaze still locked on me, as if looking away would take tremendous effort. She swallowed, licking her lips unconsciously before speaking. "Lady Selene, is that... is that really you?"

I was about to ask why she sounded so uncertain when my eyes dropped briefly to myself, and realization dawned on me. I was dressed in the male outfit I had asked her to bring earlier.

The loose shirt hung comfortably over my frame, concealing my chest thanks to the tight bindings beneath, while the fitted trousers sat perfectly at my waist. A cap shadowed my face, hiding my white-and-black hair entirely. Anyone looking at me now would see nothing more than a slim, sharp-featured young man.

I looked back up at her and nodded. "Yes. It's me. I'm just wearing the outfit you brought." Tilting my head slightly, I added, "Do I really look that different?"

Maeve shook her head quickly, though her eyes still roamed over me with fascination. "No... not different. You just-" She hesitated, then continued honestly, "You look like the male version of yourself."

Her gaze traveled over me again, lingering far too long. "And the male version of you is really... good-looking, and pretty."

I raised an eyebrow, then let a slow smirk curl my lips.

Ah. So that was it.

Maeve wasn't flustered because of the disguise itself, she was flustered because she this.

"I see," I said lightly, stepping closer.

was attracted to it. Or rather, to me like

Maeve reacted instantly, taking a step back, her face flushing even deeper. When I took another step forward, she retreated again, until her back hit the wall with a soft thud. Before she could escape, I leaned in, bracing one hand against the wall beside her head, closing the distance until our faces were only inches apart.

Her breath hitched. Her eyes fluttered shut, her heartbeat pounding so loudly I could almost hear it.

Amused, I lifted my hand and gently tilted her chin upward with two fingers, forcing her to look at me. Maeve swallowed hard when our eyes met.

“M-Miss Selene...” she whispered, her voice trembling.

I smiled faintly. “Did you get it?”

She blinked, confusion flickering across her face as her flustered mind tried to catch

“You know,” I said calmly. “The scent-masking plant. Did you get it?”

1. “G-Get... get what?”

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Her eyes widened in realization, as if she had just snapped out of a dangerous daydream. She nodded rapidly, fumbling inside her dress before pulling out a carefully wrapped bundle and holding it out to me. “Y-Yes, I did. I found it.”

I looked down at the item in her trembling hands and felt a genuine smile form this time. Carefully unwrapping it, I confirmed what I already hoped to see.

It was the plant.

Perfect.

I lifted my gaze back to Maeve, my smile deepening. Things were finally moving exactly the way I wanted.

I stepped back, taking the plant gently from Maeve’s trembling hand, and turned toward her with a small, satisfied smile. “Thank you,” I said sincerely. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I added, “Anytime you want me to dress like a man, just tell me. I’ll make myself pleasing to your eyes.” I finished with a deliberate wink.

If it were possible for Maeve’s face to turn any redder, it did. She let out a small, mortified sound, quickly covering her face with both hands as she mumbled to herself, “Oh, my lady... you really shouldn’t say things like that.”

I merely shrugged, completely indifferent, as I adjusted my belt and secured it properly around my waist, already mentally preparing for what came next.

When I looked back at her, Maeve had lowered her hands, though her face was still flushed, her expression a mixture of worry and hesitation. She bowed her head slightly before speaking again, her voice careful. "I apologise for asking, my lady, but is there a reason you're dressed as a man? And why do you need a scent-masking plant?"

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I turned to face her fully, studying her for a brief moment before finally answering. "Because I'm going in disguise. I'm going to the Crimson Warrior Rite. I can't go as myself, so I'll go as someone else."

Maeve stared at me as if I had just said something completely absurd.

"What?" she blurted out, blinking rapidly. For a moment, she looked at me as though she were waiting for me to laugh and admit it was a joke, but when I didn't, her eyes widened in pure shock.

"Oh my goddess," she whispered. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

She immediately shook her head, panic clear in her voice.

"That's not possible, my lady. There are so many reasons why this doesn't make sense. First, the Crimson Warrior Rite isn't a place anyone can just attend. It's extremely dangerous, people can die there if they aren't careful. You might not even be able to handle the sight of it. Second, the road itself is dangerous. Someone could try to steal from you or take advantage of you. And third, the palace security is extremely tight. You won't even be able to leave without getting caught. My lady, you cannot leave the palace."

"You don't need to worry about any of that," I replied. "I've watched people kill each other my entire life, so the sight won't bother me. I'm also very street-smart, no one is going to take advantage of me. As for leaving the palace, that's not an obstacle."

"My lady-" Maeve tried again, her voice trembling.

By then, I had finished fixing my belt. I picked up the dark cape from the bed and walked toward her, stopping just in front

of her.

“You really don’t need to worry,” I said. “I can handle myself, and even if I get caught, I won’t put you in danger.”

She opened her mouth to protest again, but I moved faster. I lifted my hand and placed it gently against her neck, pressing a precise point without hesitation.

76

11:52 Thu, Jan 22 pp.

Chapter 114

“So just sleep.” I murmured.

N

Before she could utter another word, her body went limp. I caught her immediately, careful not to let her fall, and gently laid her on the bed. I pulled the blanket over her, tucking it around her as she slept peacefully.

I looked at her for a moment. “I’m sorry, I’ll make it up to you when I’m back.” Pulling on the cape, I drew the hood over my head and walked toward the window without another glance back. “But for now, I was going to get myself a weapon, one good enough to kill Sienna and Adrian with.

Without hesitating, I stepped onto the ledge and jumped from the high window.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 115

[1,435 words]

Chapter 115

Selene

:

55 vouchers,

I swung myself over the high stone wall and dropped to the ground below, landing lightly despite the height. A cloud of dust rose around my boots, and I straightened slowly, brushing my palms over my pants as I exhaled a long breath.

For a moment, I simply stood there, rolling my shoulders and stretching my neck from side to side until it let out a satisfying crack. Maeve had not exaggerated in the slightest, leaving the palace had been far more difficult than slipping out of the temple.

The guards here were sharper, and alert. Their patrol patterns were better, their eyes more observant, and their reactions faster. I had spent the last hour weaving through shadows, slipping behind pillars, ducking behind hedges, and timing my movements carefully. Every step had required calculation.

If I had been anyone less experienced, I would have been caught within minutes.

In my past life, I had trained on far harsher battlefields than this, sneaking through enemy territory. Compared to that, this was child's play, but that didn't mean it wasn't frustrating. I couldn't even incapacitate a single guard without risking an alarm, so I had no choice but to play an exhausting game of cat and mouse.

Still, as I glanced back up at the towering palace walls behind me, a slow smile tugged at my lips.

I had made it out.

That alone sent a spark of excitement through my veins. I was free, at least for now, and one step closer to what I truly wanted.

I lifted my gaze and took in the city beyond the wall.

My mouth parted in awe before I could stop myself.

“Oh my goddess...” I whispered under my breath.

This place was nothing like any pack city I had ever seen before.

Wide, clean streets stretched out before me, lined with elegant stone buildings that looked more like works of art than mere homes or shops. People walked casually along the paths, chatting, laughing, and moving with an air of ease that felt almost surreal.

Their clothes were beautiful, intricate designs that screamed wealth without being gaudy. Even ordinary citizens looked as if they lived comfortably, without a trace of hardship weighing on their shoulders.

Market stalls were arranged neatly in organized rows rather than chaotic clusters. Merchants did not shout or beg for customers like in other cities. Instead, they stood calmly behind their wares, only speaking when someone approached them first.

Everything was orderly, and refined.

It was as if war, famine, and suffering had affected this land.

10:23 Fri, Jan 23

Chapter 115

A slow grin spread across my face as I rubbed my hands together almost greedily.

65 vouchers

If a pack could build a city like this, then their weaponry had to be extraordinary. My chances of finding a weapon that truly resonated with me felt higher than ever.

I could almost feel it in my bones, something powerful was waiting for me here. And when I find it, I would make sure Sienna regretted every breath she had ever taken.

At that thought, I felt Mira stir inside my mind.

Your thoughts are disturbingly twisted, Selene, my wolf sighed dryly. ‘How can you be so certain you’ll even get what you want?’

I didn’t hesitate before answering her.

‘I’m not certain,’ I admitted. ‘But I can feel it. My instincts are screaming that today is important. Something is going to happen, and whatever it is, it will lead me to what I’ve always been searching for.’

There was a brief pause in my mind before Mira spoke again, her tone more serious.

'I understand that you were a battle-crazed warrior in your past lives, but shouldn't you be thinking about something more important right now?'

I frowned slightly. 'More important? Like what?'

Mira didn't miss a beat. 'Isn't it obvious? There is something far more urgent than weapons.'

I raised an eyebrow. "And that is?"

'Getting our mate to mark us.'

I froze. My breath hitched, and for a moment my mind went completely blank. Slowly, I blinked, processing what Mira had just said. Then my brow rose sharply.

'Wait... you want that asshole of a prince to mark us?' I asked. 'I thought you hated Adrian. You were his number one hater in all our past lives.'

Mira scoffed the moment his name echoed in my thoughts, her disdain obvious.

'Not him,' she snapped. 'I would rather take the annoying Phoenix as your mate than that bastard.'

A faint curl of amusement tugged at my lips despite myself.

The annoying Phoenix she was talking about was Lucas

The way Mira said it made him sound like an inconvenience she tolerated rather than a threat, and that alone told me how deep her hatred for Adrian truly ran. Lucas might be loud, reckless, and infuriating at times, but even I had to admit, he was far better than Adrian had ever been. At least Lucas had never betrayed me when it mattered.

I exhaled softly. Then who are you talking about? Isn't Adrian my mate?'

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Chapter 115

For a moment, Mira was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was firmer than I had ever heard before. No. and that is the problem. Just like the last time you kissed him, I felt the mating bond when you two made love."

My fingers curled slightly at my side at her words.

'I don't know what is wrong, but it is clear that things are not as simple as you think. Fate is tangled, Selene. Your past, your future, your bond, and your power, it's all

shifting. But no matter how complicated this is, I know one thing without doubt. She paused.

‘Alpha Damien is the right man for you.

My breath caught in my throat.

‘Mira-‘

‘He is our mate,’ she cut in. ‘And you have to mark him. If you do, you will become even more powerful than you are now. Powerful enough to make the Mooncrest bow to you. Powerful enough that no one will ever dare to touch you again. Have you forgotten? In your past life, you prayed to the Moon Goddess for help. You also prayed to the devil’

I nodded.

That time, when I took my own life in my past existence. I had begged both the Moon Goddess and the devil for a second chance. I didn’t care who answered me then. All I wanted was to remember my next life. After my mate and my twin sister betrayed me, I refused to go through that same nightmare again.

‘Perhaps,’ she continued, ‘the devil you called upon was the Demon of the West, Alpha Damien. Maybe what you truly needed was never the goddess’s mercy, but a demon who wouldn’t hesitate to burn the world for you.’

I didn’t react to her words.

Mira had never been like this before.

In every lifetime, she had been cold, quiet, and observant, never interfering, never pushing, never demanding. She let me choose, let me fall, and let me rise.

This was the first time she had stepped forward so decisively.

What kind of man was Damien that even Mira, my ruthless wolf, was reacting like this?

I was to respond when suddenly, a voice cut through my thoughts

“Hey... pretty boy.”

I paused and looked up.

Two men stood in front of me, smirks plastered across their faces as their eyes slid over me from head to toe.

I tilted my head slightly, studying them.

10.25 Fri, Jan 23

Chapter 115

One of them chuckled. "You look lost. Where are you going? We'll take you there."

The other nodded eagerly. "Yes, follow us. We're good people. We know the way."

My lips twitched at their words.

Without them knowing, I read against their minds.

88

55 vouchere:

Immediately, one of them sneered inwardly, 'Heh, what a nice catch. He looks rich. Let's take every coin he has, give him a proper beating, and ruin that pretty face of his.

A slow, dangerous smile curled across my lips.

Another foolish pair trying to cheat me.

Let them all try.

Mira's words echoed in my mind again, but I dismissed them with an inward shake of my head.

I didn't need a demon to burn the world for me. I was perfectly capable of doing that myself.

I met their gaze calmly, my expression serene, though something dangerous glinted in my eyes.

"Lead the way, big brothers," I said, my tone gentle and innocent.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 116

[1,168 words]

Chapter 116

Damien

E55 vouchers

Remi let out an exaggerated sigh behind me, so loud and dramatic that it echoed through the open path we were walking on.

“You know,” he began, his voice already loud with complaint, “I truly don’t understand why we have to walk on foot when horses exist, or better yet, a carriage. You are literally the most powerful alpha in the world, and yet here we are, strolling through the pack like common villagers.”

He paused, then added bitterly, “Do you have any idea how much heat my skin is absorbing from the sun right now? I’m the pack physician. I cannot afford damaged skin. I have a reputation to maintain with both the ladies and the men.”

Around him, Jason, Kaius, and Yara all rolled their eyes almost in perfect synchronization, clearly used to Remi’s endless complaints. Their reactions were automatic, as if their bodies had learned long ago how to respond whenever Remi opened his mouth for more than three seconds.

I continued walking forward without acknowledging him, my steps steady and unhurried, my gaze fixed ahead. Sometimes, I truly wondered why I had ever decided to keep Remi so close to me. He was intelligent, yes, but he was also the complete opposite of me in every possible way. He was loud where I was quiet, dramatic where I was indifferent, and endlessly talkative where I preferred silence.

Beside him, Kaius finally spoke, his tone rough and unimpressed.

“You know,” he said, glancing sideways at Remi, “no one forced you to come with us. When you saw us leaving the castle, you just followed like a lost puppy because you didn’t want to be left behind.”

Remi stopped for a second, then nodded enthusiastically, as if that somehow proved his point.

“That’s true,” he admitted shamelessly. “But really, how could you even think of leaving me behind? I’m a very important asset to this group.” He straightened slightly and gestured at himself. “You’re all cold-blooded, ugly warriors. Without me, the kind, brilliant, devastatingly handsome doctor, you’d all be dead by now.”

Kaius scoffed loudly, clearly offended but too tired to argue.

Yara, on the other hand, smiled lazily, her eyes glinting with amusement as she leaned closer to Remi.

“Don’t be delusional, pretty boy. You’re good-looking, I’ll give you that. But you’re not the most attractive person here.” She tilted her head slightly and pointed at me with a smirk. “Look at our alpha. Broad shoulders. Lean but powerful build. Tall. And let’s not even start on that face.”

Remi followed her finger, his gaze landing on me for a brief moment before he looked back at her, one perfectly shaped eyebrow lifting. “Sometimes, I genuinely wonder if you’re really into women. The way you talk makes me question things.”

Yara shrugged easily, entirely unbothered. “Of course I’m into women. Why wouldn’t I be?” she replied. “Women are beautiful creatures. They are soft, deadly, and fascinating. They have everything you’d ever want to touch and squeeze. But just because I love women doesn’t mean I’m blind. I can appreciate a breathtaking man when I see one.”

Chapter 116

56 vouchers.

Remi stared at her for a moment, then nodded as if conceding the point. He lifted both hands to his face, pressing his palms against his cheeks dramatically.

“That still doesn’t change the fact that my beautiful skin is suffering,” he muttered. Then he turned his attention back to me, quickening his steps to walk at my side. “Seriously, Damien, why didn’t we take horses? At this rate, we’ll be late.”

I didn’t bother looking at him as we walked.

“It will be troublesome,” I said calmly.

Remi immediately raised an eyebrow, clearly unsatisfied.

“Troublesome?” he repeated.

Before I could say anything else, Jason spoke instead, his expression serious as he nodded in agreement.

“Yes, troublesome. If we don’t move in disguise, it will be far more problematic. If we show our real faces, or if this many people suddenly move through the pack on horses, everyone will immediately know it’s the Alpha. They will rush forward to speak to him, and that will slow us down.”

Jason paused briefly before adding casually, “And the alpha doesn’t like people.”

Remi frowned even more deeply, genuinely confused now.

“Huh?” he said. “Why would anyone dare go near him? Aren’t they afraid? Every time I see people standing close to him, they look like they’re standing next to the devil himself. Why would anyone willingly approach him?” He tilted his head, studying me from the side. “And even if they did, why tolerate it? You could tell them to leave, and they’d disappear immediately.”

Yara, Kaius, and Jason all glanced at one another, their expressions twitching as if they were holding something back. They looked dangerously close to laughing, but none of them dared, at least not openly.

Jason cleared his throat, breaking the tension.

“Well,” he began carefully, “you see... even though everyone is afraid of him, there is one particular group of people who are completely obsessed with the alpha whenever they see him.”

Remi blinked. “What group?”

Jason’s lips twitched before he finally smiled, clearly unable to stop himself anymore. “The elderly.”

“What?” Remi said flatly, convinced he’d heard wrong.

“The elderly,” Jason repeated, now openly amused. “They lose all restraint when they see him. They treat him like some kind of living god and rush toward him without fear. They grab his hands, touch his shoulders, talk endlessly, bless him, pray over him.” Jason shrugged. “And for some reason, the alpha can’t shake them off. He listens to them patiently.”

Remi stared at him for a full second, then slowly turned to look at me. And then, without warning, he burst out laughing.

Chapter 116

He bent forward, clutching his stomach as loud laughter tore out of him.

55 vouchers

“No way,” he said between breaths. “Are you fucking serious? You’re telling me the cold-blooded demon who kills without mercy can’t say no to old people? Oh my goddess, this is priceless.”

Jason shot him a warning look, clearly telling him to stop, but Remi either didn’t care or found the situation far too funny to control himself. Even Yara and Kaius looked away, shoulders subtly shaking as they tried not to laugh.

Remi finally straightened and casually placed a hand on my shoulder, still grinning. “We really should’ve taken a horse, Damien. I would’ve loved to see you being kind for once.”

I didn’t respond. I never did when they crossed that line. I was about to take another step forward when something shifted in the air, something so faint that anyone else would have missed it entirely.

I froze.

The scent drifted toward me, and I knew it instantly, down to my bones, down to the part of me that refused to forget her. Even if the scent was barely there, I would recognize it anywhere.

Selene.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 117

[1,216 words]

12:12 Sat, Jan 24 G

Chapter 117

Chapter 117

Damien

70%

The moment I paused, the others stopped as well, caught off guard by the sudden shift. The air seemed to tighten around us, and before anyone could fully process it, Jason let out a long sigh and dragged a hand down his face as if he had already accepted the inevitable.

“Ah,” he said, shaking his head, “you’ve finally done it, Remi. You’ve dug your grave early. How many times have I told you not to tease the alpha? Now he’s angry.”

Yara, on the other hand, looked far too amused. That familiar lazy smile curved her lips as she turned toward Remi, her eyes glinting with delight.

“It was truly nice knowing you, Remi,” she said lightly, as if speaking about the weather. Then she glanced at me. “If you don’t mind, Alpha, I’ll be the one to kill him.”

She smoothly pulled a dagger from her belt, twirling it between her fingers. “I’ve always wondered what it feels like to kill a doctor,” she added thoughtfully, “especially one as talented and noying as him.”

Remi stared at both of them with a flat, unimpressed expression not even flinching at the blade. “You two really aren’t that smart, are you?” he said lazily.

Jason frowned, clearly offended. “What did you just—”

“I mean your EQ,” Remi cut in smoothly, waving a hand. “Your Q is lacking. Because if either of you had any sense, you’d realize the alpha isn’t angry about what I said.” He tilted his head slightly, studying me with curiosity. “In fact, something interesting just happened.”

He turned fully toward me then, one eyebrow lifting.

“So,” he asked calmly, “what was that, Damien? What just caught your interest when nothing ever does?”

My attention had already drifted past them, my eyes scanning the street ahead, taking in every shadow, movement, and every part of the city. At first, I thought it was nothing, but then my gaze caught on something, and I stopped again, my eyes narrowing instinctively.

Down the alley to the right, partially concealed by the narrow walls and dim light, was a young man standing with his back to us, his movements unhurried as he struck two men again and again. There was nothing frantic or sloppy about his actions. He moved as if he had all the time in the world, as if this was nothing more than a mild distraction. Each punch landed cleanly, and even from this distance, I could sense control in every motion. If I looked closely enough, I could almost make out the hint of a smirk on his face.

I stood there, silent, my head tilting slightly as I observed him.

Remi noticed my stillness and followed my line of sight.

“Huh?” he murmured. “What is it? You’re making me really curious.”

When he finally saw the scene in the alley, he paused, and then smiled.

“Oh,” he said softly, eyes lighting up. “Oh, shit. What’s going on here?”

Naturally, the others turned to look as well. The moment they saw it, surprise crossed their faces.

Kalus was the first to react, a wide grin spreading across his face his attention locked onto the fight like a child watching an entertaining spectacle.

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12:13 Sat, Jan 24 G

Chapter 117

“Woah,” he said, clearly impressed. “Who is that man? He’s talented.”

Jason frowned. “Talented? How can you tell? He just looks like a huge beating people up.”

Kaius shook his head immediately, his grin never fading.

3 70%

“No,” he said firmly, cracking his knuckles absentmindedly “That’s not it. As someone who loves using my fists, I know a good technique when I see it.” His eyes gleamed with excitement as he watched the fight unfold. “He’s not throwing his punches randomly. Every strike is calculated, and controlled. He knows the human body, exactly where it hurts, and he’s landing every hit perfectly.”

Kaius let out a low chuckle, clearly entertained. “That man isn’t just some thug,” he concluded. “He’s strong. And I love strong people. I want that man.”

My eyes flashed possessively at Kaius’s words, a sharp, instinctive reaction that stirred before I could fully suppress it. The thought of him saying those words didn’t sit right with me. Kaius, however, didn’t notice the shift in my gaze. He was still focused on the alley, excitement written plainly across his face as he turned to me.

“Alpha, if I may be so bold, can I bring that person with us?”

Jason immediately shook his head, already anticipating my response. “You know you can’t. The alpha wouldn’t—”

“You may.”

The words left my mouth calmly, cutting Jason off mid-sentence. Everyone froze at my words. Jason stared at me as if he had misheard. Kaius blinked, clearly confused, as though he hadn’t even considered the possibility that I would agree. The only one who didn’t react was Remi, who had gone silent, his sharp eyes studying my expression with focus.

“R-really?” Kaius asked, still unsure, as if he needed to hear it again to believe it.

“Yes,” I replied calmly, my eyes never leaving the figure in the alley.

“Yara,” I said without turning.

She immediately bowed her head. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Go ahead of us with your warriors.”

The order made little sense to the others, confusion flickering across their faces, but Yara’s smile sharpened, as if she understood something the rest of them didn’t. She nodded once respectfully.

“Yes, Alpha. We’ll be waiting for you at the Crimson Warrior Rite

She turned, signaling to her women, and without hesitation they followed her, disappearing down the street with swift movements. When they were gone, I finally shifted my attention

“When you bring him here,” I said, “no matter what happens, do not let him know our identities.”

Kaius frowned, clearly not fully understanding my intentions, but he didn’t question me. “Yes, Alpha,” he replied, before heading toward the alley without another word.

Remi lingered beside me, his expression thoughtful.

“What are you up to, Damien?”

I finally looked at him, my crimson eyes cold. “Have you ever caught a prey, Remi?”

He hesitated, then shook his head slowly.

2/3

12:13 Sat, Jan 24 GD

Chapter 117

70%

“When you catch a prey,” I continued, my voice low, “and that prey refuses to stay still in the trap you laid for it, you don’t rush.” I paused, watching the alley from the corner of my eye. “You play with it.”

Remi swallowed. “Play... with it?”

“Yes,” I replied, finally turning my head just enough for him to see the curve of my lips, an expression devoid of warmth. “You play until the prey realizes that no matter how fast it runs, no matter how clever it thinks it is, escape was never an option. You play until it understands that this was never its game to begin with.”

My gaze drifted back to the alley, and my smile deepened by a fraction. “Since she wants to play cat and mouse,” I murmured, more to myself than anyone else, “I’ll make sure the game is entertaining, and that she learns the rules and the consequences of getting caught again.”

3/3

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 118

[1,108 words]

Chapter 118

Selene

389%

10 vouchers

I held the man by his shirt and lifted him off the ground with ease, his weight hanging uselessly from my grip. His face was swollen beyond recognition, red and bruised, one eye nearly shut, blood trailing from the corner of his mouth where a few teeth were already missing.

To put it plainly, he looked absolutely terrible.

My lips quirked upward when I took in the sight of him. Slowly, raised my fist toward his face.

The moment he realized what I was about to do, all the fight drained from him. His face turned pale, terror flashing in his eyes as his head shook frantically.

“N-no, please-please don’t,” he begged, his voice cracked and hoarse. “Spare me. I’ve taken enough hits already. Please, just let me go.”

I didn’t react, or hesitate. I didn’t even feel a single shred of pity.

My fist connected with his face again, the sound sickeningly dull and I felt the impact travel cleanly through my knuckles. Another tooth flew free as he let out a broken, pained groan.

“Ah, my face! My teeth!” he cried, clutching at his mouth.

I smiled, genuinely satisfied. For a brief moment, I had wondered if returning to this body would dull my strength, if I would lose the sharp precision I once had. It wasn't as refined as it had been after years of cultivation and training in my past lives, but it was more than enough to hurt someone badly.

I stared at him for a second longer before tossing him aside like discarded trash. He hit the ground and curled in on himself, sobbing and groaning in pain. Then I turned my attention to the second man.

He was sprawled on the floor, no better than the first, his face brised, lips split, eyes wide with panic. When I started walking toward him, he scrambled backward in pure terror until his back hit the wall, leaving him nowhere else to go. He looked at me like a man who had finally realized the worst mistake of his life was mistaking me for easy prey.

When escape became impossible, fear twisted into something uglier. He glared at me, though it was clear there was more terror than anger behind it. He raised a trembling hand.

“You-what do you think you're doing?” he snapped. “You can't do this! This is a crime! If anyone finds out what you've done, you'll be imprisoned. Beating people like this is a serious offense. Even the alpha, the most powerful man in the world, wouldn't tolerate this. He'll have you executed!”

I stopped in front of him and stared for a moment before smiling mockingly.

“Ohhh,” I drawled, tilting my head. “Scary. I'd really hate to run to the alpha.”

Relief flooded his face. He smiled, thinking he had found my weakness. “Good. Then release us right now if you don't want

trouble.”

“Sure, sure, I'll release you.”

Hope flickered in his eyes, his smile widening, until I tapped my finger against my chin thoughtfully. “But then again,” I continued, “I don't think I'll be the only one getting in trouble.”

“What?” he asked, confused.

I lifted my leg and brought it down hard against his neck, pinning him to the floor and cutting off his airway completely. His breath hatched violently as he clawed at my leg, trying desperate to push it away.

173

09:17 Mon, Jan 26 GBB.

Chapter 118

It didn't move an inch.

89%

10 vouchers

I tilted my head lightly, pressing my foot down harder to remind him that his life was still resting beneath it. "I won't be the only one to get in trouble, a lot of people saw you dragging me into this alley. So if I say you tried to take advantage of me and I defended myself, people will believe me, even if you end up dead. Don't you think so?"

I paused, watching the panic bloom in his eyes, then continued as if I were merely offering another option. "Or I could say you started fighting each other over my money and injured yourselves in the process. I mean, look at me." I glanced down at myself briefly before meeting his gaze again. "I look harmless. You look like bandits. From my experience, people judge based on appearances long before they care about the truth."

His eyes widened in horror. His mouth opened, as if he wanted argue, and threaten me again, but before he could make a sound, his gaze snapped past me.

"You fucking bastard!"

The shout came from behind. I sensed it before I heard the rush of movement. It was the sharp spike of killing intent. My instincts reacted instantly. Without turning around, I reached out and caught the dagger midair, my hand closing firmly around the blade before it could strike me.

The alley fell into silence.

Both men froze, staring at my hand in disbelief, their faces draining of color. I smiled slowly and even had the decency to wink.

"So," I said, holding the dagger as if it were a toy, "what do you think? Should we call everyone over and let them enjoy a little show?"

That did it.

They swallowed hard, then dropped to their knees almost in union, hands pressed together in frantic pleading.

“No-no, big brother, please forgive us!” one of them cried. “Please don’t get angry. It’s our fault. We shouldn’t have offended you. Please let it go. We’ll do anything. Anything you want.”

I studied them for a moment, then stepped back and removed my foot from his neck. “Anything?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

They nodded so quickly I thought their heads might fall off.

A wide smile spread across my face. “You should’ve said that in the beginning. Get up. Get up, don’t ruin your clothes.”

They hesitated, glancing at each other, unsure if this was another trick.

I kept smiling. “I don’t like repeating myself.”

They scrambled to their feet immediately.

Satisfied, I nodded and stretched out my hand toward them. They stared at it blankly, clearly confused. I sighed, shaking my head. “Brothers, why are you so slow? You’re the ones who dragged me here. I wasted my time, my energy, and I even dirtied my clothes beating you up. Shouldn’t you compensate for all that?”

It was shameless. Absolutely shameless.

But since they had tried to scam me first, I didn’t feel bad in the lightest. Scamming the scammers felt perfectly fair to me. After all, that was just how the world worked, or at least, how I worked.

2/3

111

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 119

[1,332 words]

Chapter 119

Selene

89%[

E 10 vouchers

Without wasting any more time, the two men moved frantically as if afraid I might change my mind. They dug into their pockets with trembling hands and poured a handful of coins into my palm, their movements rushed and clumsy. I glanced down at the coins, then slowly raised an eyebrow, letting silence to the talking.

They flinched immediately. Panic crossed their faces as they hurriedly emptied their pockets again, turning them inside out to show me there was nothing left, before adding every last coin to the pile in my hand. Only then did I look down properly, weighing the amount with my eyes.

It wasn't much, certainly nowhere near the gold pouch I had lifted from Yara, but it was acceptable. More than acceptable, actually. The Crimson Pack truly was wealthy; even men like these carried more money than most so-called nobles in other packs.

I slipped the coins into my pouch, the familiar weight settling comfortably against my side. Satisfied, I smiled. "Alright, this will do. I'll forget this ever happened." I turned slightly, already preparing to leave, then paused and added casually, "Be good. You don't have to be bad people. Life is shorter than you think. You should listen to your elders."

They stared at me, clearly stunned, as if they couldn't reconcile my words with my appearance. I could tell what they were thinking, why did an eighteen-year-old sound like someone who had already lived an entire lifetime.

I didn't bother explaining. Some things didn't need to be said.

I had just taken a step toward the mouth of the alley when one of them spoke again, his voice hesitant. "Wait... please. What's your name?"

I stopped. My name. There was no chance I would give them that. But when I glanced back at them, I sensed no malice, or lingering intent to harm me, only awe and a little fear. After a brief pause, I gave them a name people had given me in my past lives.

"Just call me Big brother Conqueror," I said calmly.

One of them blinked. "Big brother... Conqueror?"

I nodded, then I turned away again. "I have to go now. I hope I don't see you again."

They bowed deeply behind me. "Goodbye, big brother Conqueror."

I ignored them and walked out of the alley, the noise of the city welcoming me back as if nothing had happened. I took a deep breath, the tension finally leaving my shoulders, and bounced the pouch of coins in my hand playfully. Taking money from people like them was undeniably satisfying.

I realized then just how much I loved money in this lifetime. After I finished my revenge, after everyone who had played a role in my suffering paid their due, I wanted a quiet, indulgent life. I wanted a huge mansion far away from all of this, where no one could bother me. I would live there with Evelyn and Sila surrounded by comfort, and more wealth than I could ever spend. I would eat, sleep, paint, and exist on my own terms free from schemes, wars, and fate itself.

The smile on my face widened at the thought. But then, without warning, it vanished, and a vision came into my mind.

I saw myself holding a child in my arms, small and warm against my chest, while strong arms wrapped around me from behind. Crimson eyes looked down at me.

My heart skipped violently.

That man.

I clenched my hand around the pouch, my fingers tightening as nausea crept into my chest, and without warning, I snapped

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out of it instantly, my breath catching in my throat as my body froze in place.

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My eyes widened, heart pounding violently against my ribs, and before I could even think, I lifted both hands and slapped them hard against my cheeks. The sharp sting bloomed across my face, it was enough to remind me that I was awake. I

mind. shook my head forcefully, as if I could shake the image right out of my

What the hell was that vision?

Why was I being held by that demon, and worse, why was I carrying a child? A child that looked like the result of the two of us? The thought alone made my stomach twist. I shook my head again, harder this time, refusing to let it settle in my head.

No. That couldn't possibly be a vision. I must have been imagining things.

Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me because I'd been thinking about tearing into Alpha Damien one too many times lately, because his presence had lodged itself into my thoughts like a curse. But if that were the case, then shouldn't I have seen myself killing him? Torturing him? Ruining him? Not... that

I waved my hand in front of my face as if physically chasing the lingering image away, irritation flaring in my chest. Mira's voice was starting to echo too loudly in my head, muddling my thoughts until I could barely focus. This was pointless. I had more important things to worry about. Like getting to the Crimson Warrior Rite before it started.

...But where was it again?

I frowned, glancing around the streets. Maybe I should have asked those two idiots before leaving them groveling in the alley. Just as that thought crossed my mind, someone stepped directly into my path, forcing me to stop short.

I looked up.

The man standing in front of me was tall and broad. His face was partially hidden, shadowed enough that I couldn't make out his features clearly, but I could feel his gaze moving over me. It felt more like he was assessing me, and weighing something.

I raised an eyebrow.

"What are you doing?" I asked flatly.

He seemed to realize he'd been staring too long, because he smiled apologetically and straightened. "Ah, sorry about that. I didn't mean to be rude. Actually, I have a group. We're heading to the Crimson Warrior Rite, and I was wondering if you wanted to follow us."

I tilted my head slightly, unimpressed. “Why?” I asked. “Do you usually go around asking strangers to follow you?”

He shook his head quickly. “Of course not. It’s just that I saw what you did back there in the alley. As a warrior myself, I can tell how strong you are. It would be a waste if you didn’t go.”

I studied him for a moment, then quietly slipped into his mind. His thoughts surfaced easily. ‘I wonder if he’d show me more of those fist techniques...’

I sighed internally. He wasn’t a bad person, just another battle-obsessed man who lived for strength and sparring. There was no malice, or hidden scheme in his mind, and more importantly I still didn’t know the way to the rite. Following him might actually save me time.

I nodded. “Fine. But don’t misunderstand. We’re not together. Once we get there, we go our separate ways.

I wasn’t about to let my guard down for anyone.

Instead of getting offended, he simply smiled. “Of course. That fair. Please, follow me.”

I walked after him, my senses alert, and soon spotted three other people waiting nearby. All of them turned the moment I

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approached, their gazes locking onto me with the same sharp scrutiny. I returned the look without hesitation, silently evaluating them one by one, checking for threats. And then my eyes landed on one man among them.

My heart stuttered, no, it didn’t just stutter, it dropped violently, as if someone had ripped it from my chest for a split second.

My breath caught in my throat.

What the hell...?

Why did he look so familiar?

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Selene

I looked at him, and he looked at me.

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For a moment, the world around us seemed to dull, as if everything else had faded into the background. We studied each other in silence, neither of us speaking, neither of us looking away. His gaze was calm and unreadable, while mine was sharp and calculating, like a fox circling unfamiliar ground, testing the waters before deciding whether to bite or retreat.

He stood tall and broad, his posture relaxed yet imposing. His face was hidden, but even without seeing his features, I knew that he was attractive in that dangerous manner that made people instinctively pay attention. He looked casual, almost indifferent, as if everything happening around him was beneath his notice, and yet his eyes were locked onto me with unsettling focus.

Out of everyone there, he was the one who caught my interest the most.

Maybe it was because no matter how I looked at him, no matter how much I tried to rationalize it, he reminded me of that demon, Alpha Damien. The thought alone made me frown.

I met his gaze fully, refusing to back down. Unlike Damien's crimson eyes, this man's were blue, piercing, and sharp enough that it felt like he was looking straight through my skin and into my soul.

I tilted my head slightly, suspicion stirring. Damien had crimson eyes, and as far as I knew, there was no method to change a person's eye color so completely. At least, I didn't know of one. Anyone capable of such a thing would have to be a doctor. A very talented one.

As I continued studying him, another man suddenly stepped forward, deliberately cutting off my line of

sight.

This one didn't bother hiding his face.

He smiled the moment he looked at me, his eyes roaming over me openly, as if I were some fascinating object he'd just discovered. He placed a finger against his chin, tapping it thoughtfully while humming to

himself.

"Hmm, I see," he murmured, his gaze still moving over me. Then, without any shame, he circled behind me, eyes never leaving my body, before stepping back into my line of vision again.

I raised an eyebrow, irritation flickering across my face.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked flatly. "Is he okay in the head?"

The bulky man who had brought me here let out a tired sigh and shook his head.

"Well... I wouldn't say he's perfectly okay in the head."

I sighed quietly to myself.

Was it really a good idea to get involved with people like this? Back in the Mooncrest Pack, I'd crossed paths with strange individuals too, and they'd turned out to be the most feared warriors in the Crimson Pack, along

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with their terrifying alpha. Somehow, I doubted these people were going to be any better.

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The man who had been openly inspecting me seemed to notice the look on my face. He smiled playfully, and he raised his hands slightly in mock surrender.

"Oh, don't worry," he said lightly. "I'm not a strange person."

Yeah, right.

He extended his hand toward me. "I'm Remi. The pack doctor."

I blinked.

The pack doctor?

I stared at him again, this time with a different kind of scrutiny.

Remi, the Crimson Pack's doctor. I had heard of him, everyone outside the Crimson Pack had. Rumors said he was the best doctor in the world, a man capable of pulling someone back from death.

In my mind, I'd always imagined an elderly man with a long white beard and tired eyes. Instead, standing in front of me, was this beautiful, strange, sharp-eyed man who looked far too young and far too odd to match the legends.

It seemed I'd been wrong.

I looked at him, nodded, and said calmly, "I see."

My gaze drifted past Remi and landed on the other men standing with him, most of them with their faces covered. I lingered especially on the one who had reminded me so strongly of the alpha, my eyes narrowing slightly as I studied his silent presence.

“And who are they?” I asked, my tone neutral.

The man I hadn't paid much attention to earlier seemed ready to speak, but Remi beat them to it. He smirked lazily and said, “They're my bodyguards.”

He stiffened instantly, his eyes widening beneath his hood. “You-! How dare you call the-”

Remi cut him off without even looking at him. “The what?”

The man froze mid-sentence. His mouth snapped shut as he glanced toward the man with blue eyes, and then he lowered his head slightly, saying nothing more.

Remi's smile widened, clearly amused. “Don't mind him,” he said. “Bodyguards these days are far too proud for my liking. They really don't know their places.”

The two men beside him, everyone except the blue-eyed one, looked visibly offended by his words, their shoulders stiffening, but none of them dared to respond. They simply stayed silent.

I glanced between them, unimpressed.

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Yeah... these people were definitely strange.

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Remi turned his attention back to me. “What about you?” he asked smoothly. “What's your name?”

I looked at him for a second longer than necessary. His smile looked harmless enough, but I knew better. There was nothing harmless about that expression. Still, I returned the smile.

“Noah,” I said. “Call me Noah.”

Remi nodded in amusement.

“What a nice name. Well then, Noah,” he continued, “since you're heading to the Crimson Warrior Rite, you might as well follow us. It'll be an easy journey.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could say anything, Remi suddenly swung an arm around my neck, pulling me closer to his side as if we were old friends. I let out a small huff and shot him a glare, but he didn't even acknowledge it. He acted as though this kind of familiarity was completely normal.

I scoffed and shook my head, debating whether I should shove him away when the air shifted.

It turned cold in an instant, and a deadly aura pressed down on us like an invisible weight.

I turned around immediately, my eyes snapping to the man with blue eyes.

Everyone else did the same.

He was staring straight at Remi, more specifically at the arm still draped around my neck. His gaze was still calm, but there was something terrifying beneath it, something restrained yet furious. The aura rolling off him was far too powerful to belong to an ordinary guard.

My heart skipped.

Why was he looking at Remi like that? And what kind of bodyguard possessed an aura like this? It wasn't just strong, it felt like the presence of an alpha. A very powerful one.

Remi, on the other hand, looked amused rather than threatened, a lazy grin still on his face. But for some reason, I wasn't amused at all. Instead, an odd, uncomfortable feeling settled in my chest, like I'd done something wrong without knowing why.

Why did it suddenly feel like I shouldn't be close to any man?

I licked my lips and almost wanted to slap myself for that thought. I had every right to be close to whoever I wanted. I was very much single.

Still... I pulled away from Remi.

I cleared my throat awkwardly and said, "L-let's just go."

Without waiting for a response, I turned and started walking, giving none of them the chance to say anything

else.

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God. What was wrong with me? Why was I still thinking of that annoying demon of the west?

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