

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 121

[1,200 words]

Chapter 121

Chapter 121

Selene

A woman?

A woman dressed like a man?

And not only that, she was heading straight for the Crimson Warrior Rite.

How interesting.

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55 vouchers

A lazy smile curved on my lips as I watched her walk beside me, her steps steady, her posture relaxed in a way that didn't scream caution but didn't invite familiarity either. I'd seen women disguise themselves as servants, as merchants, even as nobles fleeing their families, but disguising herself as a man, and doing it this well, was

new.

Most women overcompensated when they tried to act masculine, roughening their movements, forcing their voices lower, exaggerating confidence. She didn't do any of that. Her appearance was still refined, her build lean rather than bulky, yet the way she carried herself fit seamlessly among men, as if she'd worn this role for

years.

Almost as if she could become whatever she wanted and make it convincing.

Anyone else would have missed it. Most warriors certainly would have. But I wasn't anyone else. I was the best doctor in the world. No matter how carefully someone hid themselves, the difference between male and female was obvious to me. There was

bone structure, muscle distribution, and subtle balance shifts. That was why I noticed her immediately. And that was only one of the reasons she intrigued me.

The other reason?

My gaze slid, almost unconsciously, to Damien.

He was walking ahead of us, tall and unhurried, every step exuding the kind of authority that didn't need to announce itself. His eyes, however, were locked onto one person alone, the woman beside me. He was not scanning the surroundings, not watching the warriors gathering in the distance, but her. As if nothing else mattered.

At first, I didn't understand it. Damien wasn't the type to allow outsiders close, especially not someone unknown. Talent alone wouldn't sway him. Strength didn't impress him either. To the strongest man in the world, fighting was just fighting. Meaningless unless it served a purpose.

So there could only be one explanation.

My lips twitched upward, amused as the pieces slid together in my mind.

Oh.

So that was it.

I looked at her again, more carefully this time. She'd already moved a few steps ahead, putting distance

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between herself and me.

Interesting.

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I lengthened my stride and caught up easily, falling into step beside her. She flicked a glance my way before looking forward again, clearly uninterested in conversation.

That only made me more interested.

“Noah,” I said casually, my tone lazy, “is there a reason you’re going to the Warrior Rite?”

She raised an eyebrow slightly, as if weighing whether the question deserved an answer. “A reason?”

I nodded. “Everyone has one. Some of us are expected to go. Some just want to watch people beat each other half to death.” I smiled faintly. “And some want to do the beating themselves. Which one are you?”

This time, she turned fully toward me. For a split second, I thought she might refuse to answer altogether. Her eyes were sharp, and calculating, like she was measuring how much to reveal and how much to keep buried. Then, as if deciding it wasn’t worth the trouble of evasion, she smiled.

“The third,” she said calmly. “I’m joining the Crimson Warrior Rite to beat people up.”

I raised an eyebrow at her answer, slowing my steps just enough to look at her properly. “Why?” I asked, genuinely curious this time.

She shrugged as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Just like everyone else, I want to get my hands on a weapon.”

The moment the word weapon left her lips, her eyes lit up, sparkling with excitement, like someone thinking about something they had wanted for a very long time and could finally reach.

I studied her quietly. There was absolutely nothing normal about her. From the way she carried herself to the way

her emotions flickered just beneath the surface, everything about her felt layered, as if she knew far more than she let on. Then again, I hadn’t expected the first woman Damien would ever show interest in to be normal. Still, she exceeded even that expectation.

Behind me, I heard Kaius mutter under his breath to Jason, his voice filled with annoyance. “That bastard... he’s stealing Noah’s attention from me.”

“Stealing?” Jason echoed, clearly confused.

“Yes, stealing,” Kaius snapped quietly. “I’m the one who was supposed to talk to Noah, to test his strength, to see what he’s made of. I approached him because he’s special. And now that cunning bastard is hogging all his attention.”

I heard every word, but I ignored him completely. My focus had already shifted elsewhere. My gaze flicked forward to Damien, who was still walking ahead of us, his posture relaxed, his presence overwhelming even when he did nothing at all. And then there was her, walking just a few steps behind him, occasionally glancing his way as if she couldn't help herself, and her attention was drawn to him no matter how much she tried to control it.

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My lips curled upward slowly.

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"If I may, Noah," I said, my voice smooth as I broke the silence again, "can I ask another question?"

She nodded absently, clearly distracted by her thoughts.

I stopped walking, and slipped my hands into my pockets. "Have you ever met the alpha before?"

She froze immediately, and her eyes widened. Her foot caught on a loose stone, her balance faltering as her body tipped forward. Before anyone else could even react, a strong hand shot out and caught her wrist, steadying her instantly.

Everyone stopped.

Kaius and Jason both stared in shock at the scene in front of us.

The cold-blooded alpha, the same man who rarely touched anyone, who avoided unnecessary contact, who wouldn't spare a glance for people bleeding at his feet, was holding the young man's wrist gently, his grip firm but careful, as if he couldn't stand the thought of her getting hurt.

She looked up at Damien, surprise written plainly across her face, her gaze locked onto his as if the rest of the world had faded away.

Behind me, Kaius whispered in disbelief. "Jason... am I seeing things? Did the alpha just save the boy from tripping?"

Jason swallowed hard. "Y-you're not imagining it."

Kaius frowned even deeper. “Then... are the rumors true? Is the alpha really interested in men?”

Jason hesitated before muttering, “I don’t know. But this situation feels familiar. The alpha was attentive like this before to that woman from the Mooncrest pack. I didn’t think he’d do the same for a man.”

I smiled to myself, tilting my head slightly as I watched the scene unfold.

If only they knew.

If only they realized that the woman they were whispering about and the man standing right in front of them were one and the same. Damien wasn’t paying attention to just anyone. He never had been.

It was her.

It had always been her.

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Goosebumps raced across my skin the moment his fingers closed around my wrist, my breath catching before I could stop it. My heart slammed hard against my ribs, loud enough that I was sure he could hear it, and a strange, unfamiliar warmth spread through my body, curling low in my stomach as I stared at the man holding me in place.

His grip was firm but not rough, and steady in a way that made my knees feel weak, and for some stupid, incomprehensible reason, my body reacted as if it had been waiting for this exact touch.

It made no sense.

Every part of me yearned toward him, an instinctive pull that was strong. I wanted to step closer, to lean into him, to feel that solid presence surrounding me, and the longer I stared at him, the harder it became to suppress the urge. There was a deep, unsettling familiarity there, a feeling that I knew this man somehow, that my body recognized him even if my mind refused to. And with that realization came an even more dangerous thought, that this stranger could be the very alpha I had been wanting to tear into for days now.

The most frustrating part was that if he truly was him, I should have known immediately. All it would take was one breath, one pull of his scent into my lungs, and I would have my answer. But because I had taken that damned scent-masking plant earlier to hide my scent, my senses were dulled, and useless at the worst possible moment. I couldn't smell him or confirm anything.

There was another option, of course. A simple one. I could just reach up and pull the hood from his head, reveal his face, and put an end to this uncertainty. Yet something inside me resisted the idea.

A part of me didn't want to know. Maybe I was afraid that my worst suspicion would be confirmed, that the man standing in front of me really was the demon of the West. Or maybe, for the first time in a very long time, I lacked the courage to face the truth.

The thought made me want to laugh.

Courage? Me? I was the type of person who never hesitated, who did whatever she wanted without fear of consequences, and yet here I was, unable to lift a piece of fabric because the man beneath it might be Damien.

Just what kind of person had I become because of him?

I met his gaze once more, my pulse racing, before forcibly tearing my eyes away. I pulled my hand from his grip, the loss of contact making my fingers feel cold, and muttered, "Hmm... thank you."

The sound of my own voice made me cringe.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I sounded shy, and awkward. Like some delicate young lady caught alone with her crush. The realization was humiliating. I almost wanted to slap myself just to snap out of it.

“Are you okay, Noah?” Remi’s voice came from behind me, light and amused, dragging me out of the storm in my head.

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I turned to look at him, finding that easygoing smile still plastered on his handsome face, his eyes glistening with barely concealed interest, as though he were thoroughly enjoying every second of this. My brows furrowed, irritation bubbling up unexpectedly. For some reason, I had the overwhelming urge to punch him and wipe that expression right off his face.

I knew how people played games. I had played them myself. And I knew, without a doubt, that Remi was doing exactly that now.

I forced myself to calm down. First things first, I needed to understand why he had asked that question in the first place.

“Have I ever met the alpha before?” I repeated slowly. “That question seems a little strange to me, Doctor Remi. Is there a reason you’re asking that?”

Remi looked at me then, his gaze openly teasing, as if he could see straight through the thoughts I was trying so hard to keep buried.

A slow smile spread across his lips. “Of course not. There’s no reason for asking that. I was just curious.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets, continuing as though he were merely making casual conversation. “You see, a lot of young men come to the Crimson Warrior Rite because of the alpha. They’ll do anything just to be noticed by him, to earn even a glance of recognition. I thought you might be one of them.”

I studied him carefully. His words flowed smoothly. Too smoothly. On the surface, everything he said made sense, and anyone else might have believed him without question. But I knew better. There was something he wasn’t saying, and the way his eyes lingered on me told me he was far more aware than he let on.

I was just about to press him further when Remi suddenly glanced past me, his expression shifting to one of surprise. "Oh, would you look at that? We're already here."

I frowned slightly before turning around, and the moment I did, my breath caught in my throat.

A massive arena stretched out before us, so vast it seemed impossible to fill even with thousands of people. The ground was packed tight, the air filled with noise and anticipation. Warriors streamed in from every direction, bulky men with muscles, lean fighters whose light steps spoke of speed and agility, women with sharp eyes and confident strides, even older figures whose calm presence spoke of experience. Gender, age, background, it didn't matter here. Strength was the only currency.

My eyes lit up as I took it all in.

I could feel it, some of them were strong. Truly strong. Stronger than most of the opponents I had faced in my past lives, and that realization sent a thrill through my veins. At first, I came here for the weapon. But now, standing before this place, my reasons shifted. If I fought these people, I would grow. Even if I didn't reach the heights of my past lives, I would still become stronger than I was now. I could test my skills, sharpen my instincts, and push myself again.

And strength meant freedom. Strength meant revenge.

A slow smile spread across my lips, the last traces of my earlier wariness fading away.

Behind me, Remi spoke again. "Let's go. I'll make sure you're registered quickly-"

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I turned to him and cut him off. "Oh, it's okay," I said calmly. "Thank you for bringing me here. I can take care of the rest myself. Let's part ways here."

He looked like he wanted to argue, lips parting as if to say something else, but I didn't give him the chance. I turned away, already stepping toward the arena, when my gaze caught on one last thing.

The man with blue eyes.

He was standing a short distance away, simply watching me. He hadn't spoken once during the entire journey. Something about that calm, unwavering attention made my chest feel strangely tight. But I shook off the thought.

It was weird, but it wasn't my problem.

It couldn't be Alpha Damien. If it were him, he wouldn't have let me walk this far, he would have captured me back to the palace. I nodded to myself, satisfied with that reasoning, and headed toward the arena without looking back.

In my mind, Mira's voice echoed softly. 'For someone who conquered so many packs in your past lives,' she murmured, 'you're far slower than I thought.'

I raised an eyebrow, confused, but the voice faded before I could respond, leaving behind only the unsettling feeling that she was eagerly waiting for something to unfold.

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[1,187 words]

Chapter 123

Damien

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I watched her walk away, my expression calm and unreadable. She didn't look back, moving forward with confidence that made it seem as though the world ahead of her belonged to her already. Her steps were light, and I could see the way her eyes took

everything in, the way excitement flickered through her movements as she headed straight for the arena, as if danger itself were an invitation rather than a warning.

Just as her figure blended into the crowd, Yara stepped forward with several guards at her side. The moment they noticed me, they all dropped to one knee and bowed without hesitation.

Conversations around us died down, and people nearby slowed, confusion and curiosity rippling through the area.

“Huh? What’s going on?” someone whispered not far away.

“Who is that?” another murmured, eyes wide.

“Do you think that’s Alpha Damien?” a third voice said cautiously. “That’s Yara bowing, and she doesn’t bow to anyone except the alpha.”

“I don’t know,” someone else replied nervously, already stepping back. “But let’s keep our distance. If that really is Alpha Damien, you know he hates people crowding him. Making him angry is basically a death sentence.”

One of the men looked at me with respect. “Alpha,” he said smoothly, “you’re here. Your tent is ready. Since the Crimson Warrior Rite will last three days, everything has been prepared for your stay.”

I didn’t respond, or even look at him.

My gaze was still fixed on the direction she had gone, on the place where she had disappeared into the mass of warriors. She was already far ahead now, practically glowing with anticipation, as though she couldn’t wait to throw herself into chaos and see what would come of it.

I tilted my head slightly and murmured under my breath, “How interesting.”

For a while, Thane had been silent, his anger simmering beneath the surface ever since I refused to mark her. He hadn’t said a word for days, sulking like a beast denied what it believed was rightfully his. But now, finally, his voice cut through my thoughts.

‘Interesting?’ he echoed. ‘Aren’t you far too relaxed, Damien?’

‘Relaxed?’

Yes, Thane snapped. 'Relaxed. Aren't you worried that our mate is about to get injured, or killed? You know how brutal the rite can be. And if anyone dares lay a hand on my mate, I won't hesitate to take control, and tear them apart.'

I raised an eyebrow slightly at his fury. I had always known my wolf was possessive, just as I was, but when it came to her, his instincts abandoned all reason.

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Keeping my expression indifferent, I finally answered him back. "Tell me something, Thane. What exactly is your opinion of her?"

'My opinion?' Thane repeated, his voice low and instinctive. 'My opinion of her is simple. She is my mate, and naturally my mate needs my protection.'

I didn't bother arguing with him over the word mate. Thane had already decided it the moment he sensed her, and once my wolf claimed something, trying to reason with him was a waste of breath. Still, that didn't mean he was right about everything.

"That is exactly where you are wrong,' I replied calmly.

Thane went quiet at once, clearly caught off guard.

'She is not as weak as you think she is,' I continued. 'And she definitely doesn't need our protection. She's like a fox, cunning, clever, and adaptable. She may look harmless, but the moment you let your guard down, she'll strike when you least expect it. Even when there's no way out, she won't give up. She'll claw her way forward until she gets what she wants. Someone like her is anything but weak.'

For a moment, there was only silence between us. Then Thane let out a low, amused chuckle.

'I see,' he said slowly. 'You seem to know quite a lot about her. And that can only mean one thing, you've been watching her yourself.'

This time, I didn't answer.

Because he was right.

I had been watching her, far more than I cared to admit. From the palace corridors to the quiet rooms, I'd observed how she spoke with grace, smiling easily while her eyes

remained sharp and calculating. Even when she appeared relaxed, her attention never wavered. She was always gathering information, always planning several steps ahead.

I'd seen how her gaze casually swept a room, noting escape routes, guard positions, blind spots, details most people never noticed. She was intelligent, far more intelligent than any woman I had ever encountered, and that alone was dangerous.

I was a man who rarely left his study unless it was absolutely necessary, and yet, over the past few days, I found myself lingering where she was, watching her from the shadows.

I was drawn to her. And perhaps that was exactly why she fascinated me.

I didn't even know whether I should find it amusing or concerning.

Either way, I wasn't the type to overthink things. If I wanted something, I took it. Simple as that. And whatever this pull toward her was, I had no intention of rejecting it.

Still, I hadn't expected to see her dressed like a boy and walking straight into the Crimson Warrior Rite of all places. That alone should have worried me. Instead, it stirred something else, interest, and curiosity. If she was here, then perhaps this rite wouldn't be as dull as it always was.

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'I doubt she'll get hurt,' I told Thane. 'And if she does, anyone who harms even a single hair on her head won't live to see another day.'

Thane let out a satisfied, approving groan, his agreement vibrating through my chest.

I turned away from the arena then, only to catch Remi's gaze lingering on me. He was smiling as if he could see straight through my thoughts, and already understood everything I hadn't said out loud.

I ignored him and shifted my attention to the man.

"What about Remi's tent," I asked. "Is it prepared?"

The man blinked, clearly caught off guard by the question, before bowing his head. “Yes, Alpha. I can show him the way immediately if you’re worried about his health.”

“Awwn, thank you for worrying about me, Damien-”

“No need,” I replied without pause. “Remi will stay in the contestants’ tent, since he’s the doctor in charge of the arena.”

Everyone was shocked. A few guards exchanged glances. Even Yara, Kauis, and Jason stiffened slightly. Remi’s smile vanished in an instant, his mouth falling open as if he’d been struck.

“Wait, Damien-” he started, but I was already walking away.

Behind me, I heard laughter break out, directed at him. I didn’t slow my steps or look back.

Let him suffer for once. Next time, he wouldn’t touch what belonged to me.

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[1,460 words]

Chapter 124

Selene

So Vouchers

I walked straight toward the arena, my steps unhurried as I took in the sight before me. At the entrance, a long line of people had already formed, stretching wide and restless, with officials stationed at the front collecting the entry fee for the rite.

I joined the line and waited my turn, quietly observing those around me. Some spoke excitedly, voices loud with anticipation, while others stood apart with arms crossed and expressions cold, as if speaking to anyone weaker than them would stain their pride. I couldn't help the faint smile that curved my lips as I watched it all unfold, it was strangely familiar.

It reminded me of my days as a general, when my warriors used to behave the same way, some loud and confident, others silent and aloof, convinced of their superiority.

A few of them truly were strong, but many weren't nearly as powerful as they believed. Even so, the sight stirred something in my chest.

I didn't want to walk that path again, didn't want to lead armies or shoulder the weight of countless lives, yet I still missed them. I missed my right hand, Ares most of all. He had been loyal to me beyond reason, standing by my side even at the edge of death, as did the others. And I had led them straight into it, challenging the demon of the west and dragging them into a battle they could never win.

I hoped that in this lifetime, wherever they might be, they were living fulfilled lives far away from war and bloodshed.

Warriors often believed that fighting and dying for their pack was the most righteous thing in the world, but it wasn't. Valuing your own life, that was what truly mattered, and it had taken me ten lifetimes to understand something so simple.

I wasn't here to prove my worth to anyone, nor to seek glory. I was here for a weapon, and to sharpen my skills so I could protect myself and the people I cared about. This time, I wouldn't place my safety, or my fate, in anyone else's hands.

"P-please... stop. You can't do this. Stop."

The soft, trembling voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I frowned and turned toward the back of the line, where a scene was quietly unfolding. A very beautiful young girl, no older than sixteen, stood there in a long white dress that looked painfully out of place in a crowd like this. A large sword was strapped to her back, almost too big for her slender frame. Surrounding her were three good-for-nothing men circling her like wolves who had already decided their prey wouldn't

escape.

One of them reached out, fingers brushing a strand of her hair as he grinned.

“Don’t be scared, sweetheart,” he said smoothly. “We won’t hurt you. In fact, we’ll protect you in the arena. You know how scary this place is, right? How can a small, delicate girl like you come here alone, hmm?”

Her eyes flashed with fear and anger as she slapped his hand away and took a step back, her voice shaking but

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firm. “Let go. I don’t want protection from you. Please, stop bothering me.”

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The men only chuckled at her protest, their smiles widening instead of fading, and rather than stepping back, they moved even closer, boxing her in.

I watched the scene unfold, my gaze flicking around the arena entrance. No one stepped in. No one even raised their voice. People glanced over, then quickly looked away, pretending they hadn’t seen a thing.

From somewhere nearby, a hushed voice muttered, “Shouldn’t we do something? They don’t even look that strong. I could beat them up myself.”

Another person scoffed softly. “Nah, I’ll pass. You’re right, they’re not that strong, but their leader is.”

“Their leader?” the first voice asked, clearly confused.

“Yeah,” the second person replied in a low, wary tone. “Their leader is really strong. I heard even Alpha Damien’s right hand, Kaius, fought him once. Kaius obviously won, but that guy still lasted thirty minutes. Thirty minutes against that monster. Do you know how insane that is? Since then, everyone’s been scared of him.”

“Everyone?” the first person whispered. “Even if he lasted thirty minutes, that doesn’t mean he can beat everyone here. There are way stronger people around.”

“You’re right,” the second person said with a sigh. “There are definitely stronger people. It’s just... troublesome. That leader and his group are known for making things difficult. If you help someone they’re targeting, they’ll make your life hell the entire time you’re

here. Some people don't want that kind of trouble. Others just don't care. Either way, helping that girl is basically inviting problems."

I listened to every word without reacting, my expression calm as I took it all in. When I looked around again, the sight didn't change, people were still ignoring the girl, turning their backs, focusing on anything else that wasn't happening right in front of them.

With a small shrug, I turned back around and faced forward, returning my attention to the line as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

In my mind, Mira's voice chimed in, unimpressed. 'Are you not going to help?'

I crossed my arms and raised an eyebrow. 'Help? And why would I do that?'

'Because you can,' Mira replied. 'Don't tell me you're scared of those people.'

A faint, almost amused smile tugged at my lips. 'Scared? Why would I be scared of little insects? I'm not scared. I paused, then continued coldly, 'But I'm neither a saint nor a hero. There's no reason for me to do something I'm not obligated to do.'

Mira went quiet for a moment before saying, 'So you're choosing to be selfish. You're thinking only about yourself.'

I nodded slightly, my gaze fixed ahead. 'Exactly. I'm going to be selfish in this lifetime.'

One of the men's gaze suddenly dropped to the sword strapped to the girl's back, his eyes lighting up with

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interest. A slow, greedy smile spread across his face as he leaned closer.

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"Woah," he whistled, "that sword looks like it weighs a ton. And damn, it looks expensive too." His eyes gleamed. "Girl, how about you hand it over to us? You don't deserve something like that. You're too weak. A sword like this would suit our leader much better."

The girl's eyes widened in horror. She immediately reached back, gripping the hilt tightly as if afraid it would disappear the moment she loosened her hold. "No!" she cried, shaking her head violently.

The man scoffed. "No?" His smile twisted into something ugly. "Are you crazy? Do you even know who our leader is to say no like that?"

"I don't care, I can't give it to you. This sword belonged to my grandfather. Before he died, I promised him I would take care of it. I can't lose it, please, don't take it from me." Her eyes shone with desperation. "I'll give you everything else I have. Just... not this."

The men looked at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter, it was loud and mocking, as if she had just told the best joke of the day.

"Hey," one of them sneered, "we don't care who it belonged to. We want it." His gaze hardened. "And there's nothing you can do about that."

"If you won't hand it over nicely," another added, "we'll just take it by force."

The first man reached out, his hand stretching toward the sword. The girl stumbled back, clutching it tighter against her body, her movement only fueling his anger. His brows furrowed, and he reached out again, more aggressively this time.

Before his fingers could touch the hilt, I caught his wrist.

The moment my hand closed around him, the world seemed to freeze. The chatter around the arena died instantly, replaced by stunned silence. Every head turned in our direction. The men, and the girl froze. Even I could feel the sudden weight of countless gazes pressing down on me.

The man stared at my hand on his wrist as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, then slowly lifted his eyes to my face. The girl looked at me too, shock written plainly across her features.

I could almost hear Mira smiling. 'I knew you were going to intervene.'

I let out a quiet sigh. 'Sometimes, I really can't help myself.'

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Chapter 125

Selene

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MoVouchers

Everyone stared at me as if they couldn't quite process what they had just seen. Surprise rippled through every pair of eyes that had turned our way. Even the girl behind me looked stunned, her fingers still frozen around her sword, as though she had never truly believed anyone would step in for her.

I let out a quiet sigh. Of course they were shocked. No one expected me to move, and honestly, neither did I. One moment I had been standing there patiently, minding my own business, waiting for my turn like everyone else. The next, my body had already acted before my thoughts could catch up.

I didn't see myself as a hero, and I certainly wasn't some main character who existed to save helpless maidens. That wasn't who I was. And yet, I couldn't stand it.

I had seen people like these men in every lifetime I lived. Different faces, but the same rotten core. They always preyed on those they thought were weaker, convinced that strength gave them the right to trample others. But weakness was temporary, and strength was fleeting. In the end, death claimed everyone equally. Whether you could split mountains or couldn't lift a spoon, you all met the same end. Knowing that, how could I just stand by and watch?

Even if I didn't want to be a warrior in this life, my heart hadn't forgotten what it was made for. Protecting others was carved into me too deeply to erase.

The man whose wrist I was holding finally snapped out of his shock and glared at me, hatred burning in his

eyes.

“Hey,” he growled, “what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I tilted my head slightly, meeting his glare without the slightest hint of fear. “That’s enough, don’t you think?”

He let out a cold smirk, devoid of any humor. “Do you have a death wish?” he asked. “Do you even understand what you’re doing right now? You’re asking for trouble.”

I smiled at him, almost amused, and waved my free hand dismissively. “Trouble? Oh, I don’t care about that. I’m a troublemaker. Trouble naturally comes to me.”

The other men exchanged looks, clearly unsettled, as if they were trying to decide whether I was brave or completely insane. The man in my grip frowned harder, his patience snapping.

“I’ll give you five seconds,” he said through clenched teeth. “Let go of me, walk away, and maybe we won’t ruin your pretty face.”

The others nodded in agreement, their eyes filled with threat.

“Five,” he started.

“Four.”

“Three.”

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I didn’t loosen my grip. I just looked at him like he was some poorly performed joke.

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50 vouchers

His face flushed red with rage. “Two... one!” he shouted. “You bastard! Let go of me, or I swear you’ll regret

this!”

One of the men barked impatiently, “Hey, stop wasting time with him. If he won’t let go, just yank your hand back and let’s teach him a lesson.”

The man tried.

His face darkened further as realization hit him. No matter how hard he struggled, his wrist wouldn't budge, because he couldn't pull away. My grip was too strong.

'Damn it, why the hell is she so strong with such a small body? I have to get out of this before they notice I'm struggling. I read the man's thoughts, and his fear amused me more than it should have.

"You bastard!" he suddenly shouted, trying to salvage what little pride he had left. "I'm going to teach you a lesson today!"

He swung his free hand at me in a wide, clumsy arc. I released his wrist at the exact moment his momentum peaked and stepped back calmly. His fist cut through empty air, his balance completely thrown off. He staggered forward, tried to regain his footing, failed spectacularly, and landed hard on his ass.

For a second, there was silence, and before they could stop it, people burst out laughing, the sound echoing across the arena entrance.

"Oh my goddess, what the hell was that?"

"Hahaha, did you see that? I've never seen someone humiliate themselves like this. The pretty guy didn't even fight back. He just let go at the right time."

"Exactly. Those idiots are so weak. If they think they can survive in this arena with skills like that, they're in for a rude awakening."

The whispers overlapped, growing louder, each word another knife digging into the men's pride. The man on the ground burned red with humiliation, his face twisting in fury as laughter continued to rain down on him from every direction.

I tilted my head and looked down at him with wide, innocent eyes, my tone gentle to the point of mockery. "Oh... are you okay?" I asked softly. "You told me to let you go."

That broke him.

He shot to his feet and pointed straight at me, shaking with rage. "I'm going to fucking teach you a lesson!" he yelled. "Guys, make her regret it!"

The other men surged forward without hesitation, their expressions ugly and eager. Before I could move, the girl I had helped stepped in front of me, her eyes wide but determined, arms stretched out as if her fragile body alone could shield me.

"Quick, run. I will stop them."

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Chapter 125

58

95 vouchers

For a moment, I simply stared at her back.

Honestly, I didn't want to beat anyone up again today. I was already tired, and irritated, and I had more important things to do. But if they insisted on throwing themselves at me, then I supposed I had no choice.

I took a step forward-

“Nuisance.”

The single word cut through the chaos like a blade.

Everything froze. The men, the crowd, even me.

The voice was deep, lazy, and smooth, carrying an elegance that felt completely out of place in a place like this. It was strange, soft enough to make you lower your guard, yet heavy enough to make your instincts scream danger. It reminded me of a flower blooming in spring, beautiful, effortless, and deadly if touched carelessly.

The men turned around first.

The moment they saw who stood behind them, all the color drained from their faces. Their bravado evaporated instantly, replaced by terror, as if they had come face to face with a devil.

I frowned and turned around as well.

A man leaned casually against the wall, arms crossed, posture relaxed to the point of indifference. His eyes were closed, as though he were sleeping, but something deep in my bones told me he was more alert than anyone present. Behind him stood a woman at a respectful distance, her stance disciplined.

“T-the prince...” someone beside me whispered, voice trembling.

I raised an eyebrow. “The prince?”

As if responding to my voice alone, the man opened his eyes.

His blue gaze locked onto me instantly, piercing straight through my disguise, and my skin, as if he were staring directly at my soul. My breath hitched before I could stop it.

“You,” he said calmly, eyes never leaving mine, “are a nuisance.”

AD

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 126

[1,293 words]

Chapter 126

Selene

↻

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55 Vouchers

My eyes widened. I blinked, and blinked again. I even had to blink a third time as I stared at the man in front of me before the truth finally sank in, this wasn't my imagination.

He was real.

A soft gasp slipped from my lips. “What the hell am I seeing...?” I murmured under my breath.

How could two people look so much alike?

I stared at him again, completely ignoring the way everyone around me had gone stiff with fear at the sight of him. My gaze locked onto his face, onto those sharp, lazy, unreadable eyes that felt far too familiar. They were just like the alpha's, bored on the surface, but lethal underneath.

Who was this man? And why did he look so much like Alpha Damien?

If Damien were younger, this is exactly what he would look like. The same build, the same aura, the same presence that made the air feel heavier just by standing there. If Damien had a son... this would be him.

My breath hitched.

Wait.

Someone had called him prince.

My heart skipped violently. If this man was a prince, then that meant only one thing.

He was Alpha Damien's son.

I gasped again, this time loud enough for people nearby to flinch. "You've got to be kidding me," I muttered.

Several heads snapped in my direction.

"Is he crazy?" someone whispered.

"Does he want to die?" another hissed.

"Some people really do have a death wish..."

I didn't hear any of it. My thoughts were spiraling too fast. The alpha has a son? A grown son? One that looks around my age?

To make it worse, another thought struck me so hard it felt like a blow to the chest.

What if he has a mate?

My heart dropped.

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Chapter 126

Bb voucher

What if Alpha Damien already had a mate? What if the man who had touched me, who had held me, who had slept with me belonged to someone else?

A strange, bitter feeling twisted in my chest. I didn't even know what emotion it was, anger at him, or anger at myself. I had never been a homewrecker in any of my past lives. I refused to become one now.

If Damien truly had a mate, then I would never let him near me again.

I didn't know if I was saying that for myself or for Mira, but the words rang just as firm in my mind. Mira, for once, stayed silent.

I lifted my gaze back to the man. He was still watching me, his eyes never leaving mine, as if he were dissecting me piece by piece. His posture was far too relaxed for someone with that kind of authority, as if the world simply moved at his pace. Then, without a word, he looked away.

He glanced at the men beside me once, then turned and walked toward the arena wall. People parted for him instantly, stepping aside as if guided by instinct. The officials didn't even dare ask him for an entry fee. The woman following him trailed behind obediently.

I watched him disappear into the arena.

"Why is everything always so complicated," I sighed quietly to myself.

I shook my head again, more firmly this time, as if I could physically force those thoughts out of my mind. Thinking about that annoying demon, and the equally annoying man who reminded me so much of him, was a waste of time. I had far more important things to focus on right now, things that actually mattered.

I rolled my neck slowly, feeling the tension ease from my shoulders, then let out a long breath. "Alright, alright," I said lazily, my voice calm as I looked at the men standing in front of me. "Let's get this over with. All of you should come at me at once. It'll be much easier that way, I won't have to waste time beating you one by one,"

For a brief moment, no one spoke.

They stared at me. Then they glanced at each other, clearly unsure of what to do, their confidence wavering as doubt crept into their expressions.

One of them coughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck as if suddenly uncomfortable. "L-let's... let's just go and wait in line," he said, his voice lacking the bravado he had earlier.

I tilted my head slightly, genuinely confused. "Huh?"

Another man quickly stepped in, nodding as if this was the most reasonable decision in the world. "Y-yeah... if we don't enter soon, our leader will get angry. We shouldn't waste time here like this."

The others immediately agreed, murmuring under their breaths as they turned away, clearly eager to put as much distance between themselves and me as possible.

As they passed, the man whose wrist I had been holding earlier slowed his steps. He leaned closer, his mouth hovering near my ear as his voice dropped into a venomous whisper. "This isn't over," he said darkly. "You'll pay for humiliating us like this. You might make it into the arena, but you're not getting out alive."

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He pulled back with a smug smirk, clearly pleased with himself, before walking away.

35 Voucher

I watched his retreating figure with unreadable eyes. His threat didn't stir anything inside me. The on' thing that truly lingered in my mind was that prince.

Even without seeing him fight, I knew it with certainty, he was strong. Strong in the same way as the opponents who had once pushed me to my limits in past lives. He was young now; I wondered how strong he would become in the future.

The fact that everyone immediately backed off the moment he found them troublesome, without him needing to raise his voice or lift a finger, only confirmed it.

That man was dangerous.

Normally, someone like that would have excited me. I would have wanted to test myself against him, to clash and see who would stand at the end. But suspecting that he might be Damien's son made my instincts scream

at me to stay away.

I shook my head once more.

Focus, Selene.

Turning away, I returned to my original place in line. The man behind me frowned slightly, clearly displeased at the delay, but he didn't say anything.

Just as I stepped forward, someone suddenly squeezed into the space in front of me.

I looked down, and paused.

It was the girl I had helped earlier.

I raised an eyebrow slowly. Instead of facing the front like everyone else, she was facing me, clutching that oversized sword tightly to her chest as if it were the only thing anchoring her in place.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my tone flat.

She gave me a nervous smile. "Lining up."

"I know that," I replied lazily. "But why are you standing in front of me, staring at me like a lost kitten that just

found its mother?"

Her face immediately turned bright red, and she hugged the sword even tighter. "I-it's not like that..." she stammered. "I just want to hire you."

I paused, genuinely caught off guard. "What?"

She nodded quickly, determination flickering behind her nerves. "Yes. I want to hire you as my bodyguard. Even though you didn't really fight, I can tell you're strong. And once we're inside, those men will definitely bother me again, and you too, since you helped me." She looked at me hopefully. "So... we might as well stick together."

12:28 Tue, Feb 3

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 127

[1,567 words]

Chapter 127

Selene

86 vouchere

I touched my head and let out another long sigh, dragging my fingers through my hair as if that might somehow clear the mess I had walked into.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

I honestly didn't care about those punks or their empty threats, I could deal with a few annoying flies whenever I felt like it. That part wasn't a problem at all.

The real problem was the girl standing in front of me.

I had no interest in babysitting anyone, especially not someone who looked like they might trip over their own feet if the wind blew too hard.

"I'm sorry," I said, meeting her eyes, "but I'm not interested."

Her face went pale instantly, as if I had just delivered a death sentence rather than a simple refusal.

"W-what...?" she stammered, her voice trembling. "Why? Is it money? I have a lot of money, you know."

Her tone softened at the end, almost childlike, as if she truly believed money could solve anything. Before I could even respond, she shoved her hand inside her dress and pulled out a large pouch, it was heavy enough that I could hear the clink of coins.

"If this isn't enough," she rushed on, panicked, "I can give you another one." And just like that, she produced a second pouch, just as full, and heavy. "They're all gold. Is it enough?"

I froze. Even the people around us froze. Their eyes widened. Greedy gazes snapped toward the pouches as whispers rippled through the line. Anyone with half a brain could see how much trouble she was inviting by flashing that kind of wealth in public.

I closed my eyes slowly. What the hell is this girl doing?

From somewhere behind us, someone barked impatiently, "Hey, move it. The line's moving."

"O-okay!" the girl replied quickly. She turned to move forward, but her foot caught awkwardly, and she stumbled. Just before she could fall, I reached out, gripping her waist and pulling her back toward me.

Her face ended up inches from mine.

Her eyes went impossibly wide, her hands instinctively grabbing my shoulders as her cheeks flushed a deep, vivid red. "I-I..." she tried to speak, but no words came out.

"Fine," I said, cutting her off.

She blinked. "F-fine?"

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"I'll be your bodyguard," I repeated calmly.

66 youther

Her eyes immediately sparkled, lighting up like stars as a bright smile spread across her face. "R-really?"

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I looked at her for a moment longer than necessary. If I were a man, I was sure I would have already fallen for that expression, that instinctive urge to protect rising without permission. Even as a woman, I could feel it, this girl was the perfect definition of delicate, the kind of person the world would chew up if left alone.

I nodded and released her, letting her stand properly on her own feet. "But," I added, "there are conditions."

She nodded so eagerly. "Tell me! I promise I'll do everything properly."

"First," I said, "give me all your money."

I expected anger, or at least hesitation. Instead, she immediately reached into her dress again and pulled out three more pouches, each one heavy with coins, and placed them into my hands without a second thought. "This is everything I have," she said seriously. "If five pouches aren't enough, I can get more after the rite."

I stared at the pile of gold in stunned silence.

How rich is this girl...? And more importantly, how could someone be this trusting?

If I were truly a bad person, I could have taken everything she owned and disappeared without a trace.

As tempting as it was, I wasn't particularly fond of taking money from good people. There was no satisfaction in it, and spending it later wouldn't feel nearly as enjoyable if it came from someone so naïve.

Still, I took the pouches and deliberately tucked them inside my own chest pocket, making sure my movements were slow and obvious so everyone around could see clearly. If anyone was going to be targeted now, it would be me, not her. At the very least, that would keep greedy eyes off her back for a while.

I looked at her again and said, "Secondly, if you want to stay with me, you listen to me, even if what I'm saying sounds stupid." I held her gaze to make sure she understood. "I'm not saying you can't do what you want. You're a free person, and I won't cage you. But when I tell you something, you make sure you listen. No questions asked."

She nodded immediately, as if she was afraid I might change my mind if she didn't agree fast enough.

"And third-" I leaned toward her without warning. As expected, her face flushed red all over again, her body stiffening as she instinctively held her breath. I lowered my head and whispered something directly into her ear, my voice low and firm, making sure only she could hear.

Her eyes widened slightly at my words.

I leaned back and studied her expression. "Is that clear?"

She stared at me for a long moment, as if weighing something in her mind, before finally nodding.

"Y-yes." she said.

Satisfied. I smiled. "Good. What's your name?"

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"Oh, my name is Chloe,"

I nodded. "Alright then. Let's go, Chloe. It's our turn."

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1765 vouchers,

I stepped forward toward the officials collecting the entrance fees, with Chloe following closely behind me. One of the officials looked us both up and down, his gaze sharp and assessing, before saying flatly, "Twenty gold coins each to enter."

I reached into one of the pouches, pulled out the coins, and handed him forty. "I'm paying for both of us."

He counted the coins carefully, then nodded. "Alright, you may go in." He paused, then added, "Oh, before you enter, you'll need to write down the name of someone we can contact if you die."

I looked at him.

He continued calmly, as if reciting a daily routine. "A lot of people die in the arena. We need to know who to contact to claim the body. If there's no one, you'll still be buried properly."

I stared at him for a brief moment, mildly surprised by how casually he spoke about death. Just how many people have died here for this to sound so normal?

In the end, I shrugged. I wasn't planning on dying anyway. "I don't have anyone to write."

He nodded and turned to Chloe.

Chloe looked at me, then at the official, then down at the list in front of her. She swallowed hard before shaking her head. "I-I don't have anyone either."

The official let out a tired sigh. "Alright. You may go in."

I walked into the arena with Chloe at my side, not before catching the officials' voices drifting behind us, as if they were already discussing corpses instead of living people.

"Oh goddess," one of them muttered with a tired scoff, "some people never learn, do they?"

The second official let out a dry laugh. "Tell me about it. They always rush to their deaths like this. I don't know why they're so obsessed with getting a weapon. No weapon is worth risking your life for."

The first man nodded slowly, lowering his voice. "It's not just about the weapon. The rite isn't only about that. It's about impressing the alpha. A lot of them want to be noticed, and chosen. I heard Yara, Jason, and Kaius will be selecting people from the rite to train under their command. That's why so many are desperate."

"I see," the other man replied. "Still, I pity those two. They look weak. I doubt they'll even pass the first round. And they don't even have anyone to claim their bodies. How sad."

I ignored them and walked forward. As we moved deeper into the arena, the noise grew louder. It was then that Mira, who had been unusually silent this whole time, suddenly spoke in my mind.

'I've been curious about something, Selene.

I raised an eyebrow slightly, my gaze fixed ahead, 'Curious about what?'

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555 vouchers

You don't seem worried about the people back at the Mooncrest pack,' she said. 'Aren't you worried about Evelyn and Silas? You know how things are there. Without you, they could be bullied.'

My lips curved upward faintly at her concern.

'Mira, I replied slowly, 'you do know that with my pact with the phoenix, I can bring him here whenever I want, right?'

'Yes,' she answered.

'Wherever I am, if I call for him, he will appear. That's the blood pact we made. Distance means nothing to him.'

There was a brief pause before she asked, "Then why didn't you bring him here?'

A smile formed on my lips as I walked forward, the arena stretching endlessly ahead of me. 'Because that crazy phoenix needs to stay exactly where he is, at the Mooncrest pack, if someone that powerful is guarding my people, let's see who dares lay a hand on them.'

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 128

[1,432 words]

Chapter 128

Meanwhile At The Mooncrest Pack

Evelyn

“Did you hear the Moonborn was kidnapped?”

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58

65 vouchers

My hands froze mid-motion, fingers tightening around the damp fabric I had been scrubbing. Water dripped slowly back into the basin, each drop loud in my ears as my heart stuttered painfully in my chest.

The first servant continued hanging clothes on the line.

“I did,” another servant replied, nodding with a dramatic sigh. “Such a pity. Even though people say she’s a curse, she’s still the Moonborn. Who would dare kidnap someone like her?”

Around them, a few other servants murmured in agreement, shaking their heads as if they were discussing bad weather instead of my lady’s fate.

My grip tightened even more.

The first servant scoffed. "That's the thing. I heard a rumor that she wasn't kidnapped at all. They say she ran away with a man because she didn't want to mate with the prince."

My heart dropped so hard it felt like it hit the bottom of my stomach. I looked up slowly in disbelief, my lips parting on instinct. For a split second, I wanted to scream at them, to tell them to shut their filthy mouths, and defend Lady Selene with everything I had. But then her voice echoed clearly in my mind.

'Don't pay attention to people who talk badly about me. I don't care what they say. Don't get yourself into trouble for my sake.

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to stay silent. Defending her here would only give them more reasons to spread more rumors about her. I swallowed hard and lowered my gaze back to the clothes, my hands trembling as I resumed washing, pretending I hadn't heard a word.

Another servant gasped dramatically. "Really? She ran away with a man? Are you sure? That rumor sounds strange. Why would Lady Selene run away just because she didn't want to marry the prince?"

A girl shook her head, clearly unconvinced. "Prince Adrian is perfect. He's handsome, he's the next alpha of the Mooncrest pack, and he's calm and gentle. Who wouldn't want to marry a man like that? Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

The first servant clicked her tongue, clearly enjoying herself. "It's not impossible. Lady Selene is a strange one. And it's obvious Prince Adrian doesn't even like her, he prefers Lady Sienna."

She crossed her arms and then looked straight at me, a smirk tugging at her lips, her eyes filled with mockery.

"What if Lady Selene got jealous?" she continued, her voice dripping with scorn. "What if she ran away with another man just to get attention? I wouldn't put it past her. She's always been problematic."

My hands shook violently now.

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Chapter 128

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11 56 vouchers

“Thank the goddess she finally ran away,” the servant went on, almost cheerfully. “Now everything will belong to Lady Sienna, just as it should. Lady Selene was everyone’s problem in the temple. Maybe this is the Moon Goddess’s will, to have her gone once and for all.”

Something inside me snapped.

I didn’t even realize I had moved until my arms plunged the soaked clothes violently into the basin. Water splashed everywhere, sloshing over the edges and spraying onto the servants nearby.

“Ah!” someone screamed, jumping back.

“What the-!” another cried, shielding herself from the water.

The courtyard fell into silence as everyone turned to stare at me.

The servant who had started it all glared at me, her eyes burning with anger. “You-what is the meaning of this?” she shouted. “Are you crazy?!”

I straightened slowly, water dripping from my sleeves, my chest heaving as rage burned through every vein in my body.

My face was dark, my hands clenched so tightly they hurt.

I would never allow anyone to trample on my lady’s name while I still drew breath.

“Crazy?” I said, my voice rising as I stood fully upright and faced them. “Am I crazy?” I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. “I should be the one asking you that. Are you all fucking crazy?!”

“How dare you talk about the Moonborn, my lady like that. Do you all have a death wish? Mere servants like you shouldn’t even dare to speak her name so casually, let alone drag it through the mud with your filthy mouths.”

I pointed at them, my hands clenched so tightly my nails dug into my palms. “If anyone with authority heard what you were saying just now, you would lose your lives without question. She is the Moonborn whether you like it or not. Who do you think you are to judge her? To twist her name for your own amusement?”

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest, my laughter bitter as I shook my head. “And what did you say again? She ran away with another man?” I snorted. “My lady would never do that. She’s not as foolish as you people, running after men as if they’re the center of the world. She doesn’t even think about men. They are the least of her concerns. And let me make this very clear, my lady rejected the prince because she

didn't want him. So why, in all the gods' names, would she run away with another man after that? Are you all stupid, or is your brain truly that small?"

I was breathing hard now, my chest rising and falling rapidly as the words poured out of me. "With minds like yours, how do you even serve your masters properly?"

The servants stared at me, wide-eyed and shocked, exchanging uneasy glances. The one who had started it all opened her mouth, clearly not expecting me to speak back so fiercely.

"Y-you-" she stammered, but no words came out.

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Before she could recover, a mocking laugh echoed behind me.

The sound made my skin crawl.

A

58

£ 56 vouchers

I turned around slowly and saw Emily, standing there with that smug, self-satisfied smile, and beside her, Arthur.

My frown deepened instantly. Just seeing their faces filled me with disgust. Of course it was them. I didn't need proof to know they were the ones spreading those rumors about Lady Selene running away with another man. They always were.

I looked away from them, refusing to give them the satisfaction, and went back to the basin. I gathered the clothes I had been washing, lifting them into my arms, ready to leave.

That was when Emily stepped directly into my path.

"Where do you think you're running to, Evelyn?" she asked sweetly, though there was nothing sweet in her eyes. "You were speaking quite a lot earlier. What's wrong now? Are you suddenly afraid?"

I glared at her, my anger flaring all over again. "Afraid?" I snapped. "Why would I ever be afraid of the two of you? You're both idiots, and I have no desire to associate myself with stupidity."

I tried to step around her, but this time Arthur moved, blocking my way.

He smirked, his eyes roaming over me in a way that made my stomach churn. “Oh, before you leave,” he said slowly, “you need to be checked.”

I blinked, confused. “Checked? What are you talking about?”

Emily’s smile widened, her confidence clear now that Lady Selene wasn’t here. “Yes, checked. You heard him correctly. Lady Sienna’s necklace was stolen, and we need to search you.”

My brows knitted together. “What? Why would you check me? I’ve never even been near Lady Sienna or her room. I don’t know anything about any necklace.”

Emily shrugged casually, as if she were discussing the weather. “You never know. You might have stolen it. So let us check. What do you have to lose?”

Her eyes gleamed as she leaned closer. “If you didn’t take it, you’ll be proven innocent and we’ll leave you alone. But if you did... well, you don’t want to know what will happen then. Let’s just say that if your precious Lady Selene ever comes back, she won’t find your body.”

My heart dropped violently into my stomach.

I hadn’t stolen anything. I knew that. I was innocent. And yet, as I stood there between them, their smiles sharp and predatory, a terrible realization settled over me.

It didn’t matter whether I was innocent or not.

It felt like my fate had already been decided.

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- Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 129

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[1,261 words]

Chapter 129

Evelyn

58

55 vouchers

I clenched my fists until my knuckles blanched, my heart slamming so violently against my ribs it felt ready to break free. I stared at the two cunning foxes before me, every instinct screaming that I should accept my fate and endure whatever they intended for me. But something deep inside me refused to yield.

If it were my lady, she wouldn't back down.

Lady Selene would never give her enemies what they wanted. She would stay calm, and turn the situation around until they were the ones regretting everything.

I took a steady breath and lifted my head, forcing myself to meet their eyes. When I spoke again, my voice was far calmer than before.

"You want to search me?" I said, letting a faint smile touch my lips. "Fine. Go ahead. I'll let you."

Emily blinked, Arthur's smirk faltered at my words, and even the servants nearby froze, staring at me as if I had lost my mind. Emily studied me closely, suspicion flickering in

her eyes before her lips curved into a cold smile. "Are you sure about that?" she asked. "You know what happens if we search you and find Lady Sienna's necklace. A servant caught stealing doesn't get mercy."

"I know," I replied evenly, raising my voice so everyone could hear. "And I'm not afraid, because you won't find anything, neither on me nor in my room."

Emily scoffed. "We'll see about that." She turned sharply to the others. "Girls, search her."

A few servants stepped forward, but before any of them could touch me, Arthur laughed softly.

"Why bother them, Emily?" he said, his gaze sliding over me in a way that made my skin crawl. "I can do it myself."

I didn't flinch. I met his eyes directly. "There's no need for that."

Before anyone could react, I reached for the ties of my simple outer dress and loosened them, letting the fabric slip down. Gasps rippled through the small crowd. Some of the women turned their faces away in embarrassment, and even Emily looked momentarily stunned, clearly not expecting me to take such a bold

step.

"Is she crazy?" someone whispered loudly. "Does she really want to undress in front of everyone, especially when a man is here?"

Another voice followed, dripping with disdain. "What a disgrace. How does she expect any man to want her after this?"

I ignored them all.

In this pack, women were expected to keep themselves covered, wrapped in layers of cloth. To show skin was to invite shame, and mark yourself as unworthy of a mate, respect, and protection. But one thing my lady had taught me, one thing I would never forget, was that none of that mattered.

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Chapter 129

Who cared if they saw me? Who cared if no one ever wanted me?

20

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265 vouchers

At the end of the day, my life belonged to Lady Selene. My loyalty, my future, my very breath were hers. I couldn't afford to die here, framed and humiliated, because people like Emily wanted to feel powerful.

So I slowly tugged my outer dress down, leaving myself in only my thin inner layer. It was modest enough, but there was nowhere to hide anything beneath it.

"Is this enough for you now?"

Emily stared at me for a long moment, then burst out laughing. "Hahaha! gods, you really are just as crazy as your mistress. I didn't think you'd actually do it."

I didn't respond to her mockery.

"Is it enough?" I asked again.

She tilted her head, her smile widening. "Oh, it's fine."

I pulled my dress back on slowly, deliberately ignoring the way Arthur's gaze lingered on me. When I was properly dressed again, I turned to leave.

"I'll be taking my leave now."

"Oh, not so fast," Emily said. "We still need to search your chamber. I never said the necklace had to be on you."

My hand tightened around the basin I had been holding, but I didn't let my face change. I turned to her and said evenly, "Search however you want."

I led the way to my room.

When I opened the door, a wave of awe and envy echoed around the servants behind me. Compared to most servant quarters, mine was larger, cleaner, and more comfortable. I even had a bed. It was expected for them to be jealous. My lady didn't treat me like a servant but her sister. Even Emily's expression flickered for a brief second before she masked it again. "On Lady Sienna's orders, this servant's room is to be thoroughly searched," she announced. "Check every corner."

The other women nodded eagerly, rushing in, clearly more than happy to tear through my small sanctuary if it meant earning favor.

Drawers were yanked open and dumped onto the floor, their contents scattered without a second thought. The small table by my bed was overturned, the items on it crashing down with a sharp clatter. My blankets were ripped away, my pillow thrown aside, and even the little corner where I kept my things neatly stacked was torn apart.

They didn't spare anything.

I stood there and watched it all without a word, my face still calm. There was no point reacting. Anger would only give them what they wanted.

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Chapter 129

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65 vouchers

Arthur seemed entertained by my silence. He leaned lazily against the wall, crossing his arms as his eyes flicked over me. "She's calmer than I expected," he said to Emily, a smirk playing on his lips.

Emily shot me a sharp glare, her expression darkening. "Calm?" she scoffed. "Let's see how long she can keep that up."

Suddenly, one of the servants froze, holding something up in her hand. "I-is this the necklace?"

The room went quiet. Everyone turned to look at the item glinting in her palm.

My brows knitted together instantly. I stepped forward and snatched it from her hand without hesitation. "Don't touch that."

"Where did you get this?" Emily demanded.

"I don't know why any of you think it's your business, but my lady gave this to me."

A murmur spread through the room.

“Lady Selene bought it for her?” someone whispered.

“That necklace is extremely expensive,” another added. “Why would a noble lady buy something like that for a servant?”

I didn’t bother responding. They wouldn’t understand. None of them ever would.

My lady wasn’t like the others. She didn’t see us as tools or disposable hands. She treated her people as family, people she intended to protect, no matter the cost.

Emily’s frown deepened. “Enough talking!” she snapped. “Search properly. Find what I told you to find!”

The servants hurriedly nodded and resumed tearing through my already ruined room, their movements frantic now, as if afraid of what it would mean if they failed.

Time passed, and one by one, they stopped.

“There’s nothing here,” one of them said hesitantly.

Emily stiffened. “What?” She spun toward them. “What do you mean there’s nothing here? I told her to put it

She cut herself off abruptly, and her gaze snapped to me.

I was smiling.

“You-” she started, her face twisting with anger.

“If you think you can frame me, you’re deadly wrong. I crossed my arms, meeting her glare without flinching. “After all, my lady is Selene Bloodrose, the Moonborn.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 130

[1,337 words]

Chapter 130

Chapter 130

Evelyn

“Evelyn, do you know how to trap a wild animal?”

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Lady Selene had asked that casually back then, her tone light as she chewed on the nuts I had brought earlier, looking far too relaxed for such a strange question.

I remember turning to look at her, confused, and answering honestly, “A wild animal?”

“Yes, a wild animal.” She nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I frowned slightly and shook my head. “Isn’t it dangerous? I’ve heard many people have lost their lives trying to catch one.) The wild animals in the Mooncrest pack aren’t like ordinary ones, they’re stronger, and more vicious.”

Lady Selene had only shaken her head, popping another nut into her mouth before replying calmly, “It’s actually quite easy. You just have to learn and follow a few steps.”

I laughed, unable to take it seriously. “My lady, I don’t need to learn something like that. I’ll never come into contact with a wild animal.”

“Everyone comes into-contact with a wild animal at least once in their life, Evelyn. Sometimes it’s in the forest. Sometimes it’s at home. You can never be too careful, and I won’t always be there to help you deal with it. You have to learn how to protect yourself.”

At the time, I hadn’t understood what she meant. How could a wild animal exist inside a home? But now, standing here and looking at Arthur and Emily, I finally understood.

Wild animals didn’t always have fur or claws. Sometimes, they wore human faces.

If I hadn’t been careful, I would have fallen straight into their trap.

The necklace Emily kept was in my room, but they wouldn’t find it now, because it was no longer there.

I glanced to the side and met Maya’s gaze. Lady Selene’s new servant stood quietly by the door, watching everything unfold. She gave a subtle nod, and I returned it, a faint smirk curling on my lips.

Earlier, the moment I saw the look on Emily’s face, I had known she was planning something. She must have deliberately placed the necklace in my room, intending to frame me. I was still thinking of how to deal with it, because I couldn’t simply leave and remove it myself, when I noticed Maya among the crowd. That was when I deliberately mentioned my room, loud enough for her to hear.

She understood immediately.

Maya went ahead of us and removed the necklace before we arrived.

Lady Selene had been wise to accept her as a servant. It was almost as if she had foreseen that a day like this would come, and that we would need someone else we could trust completely.

Emily's face darkened instantly, like a child whose toy had been snatched away. Her cheeks flushed red with fury as she spat, "You bitch! How dare you!"

I smiled calmly, shrugging as if this were nothing more than a minor inconvenience. "You don't need to look so disappointed, Emily. Did you really think that just because Lady Selene isn't here, you could do whatever you wanted?" I took a small step forward. "Well, you're wrong. I won't let you tarnish her image. And when she comes back, we'll see if you still dare to act so high and mighty."

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Emily's face drained of color at my words. Fear flickered in her eyes, she was terrified of Lady Selene. She took a step back instinctively, but Arthur stepped forward instead, placing himself in front of her.

He looked at me and smiled, "You're really as cunning as your master, you know."

I looked at him, and no matter how much time passed, I knew I would never forget the way his fists had come down on Silas that day. Even though Arthur had later been beaten within an inch of his life, that memory was carved too deeply into me. Every time I saw his face, the urge to claw it apart rose in my chest, especially knowing how he always looked at Lady Selene with that disgusting, hungry gaze, as if she were something he could one day claim.

I forced myself to breathe and swallow that rage down and said. "Look who's talking."

Arthur didn't get angry. Instead, he smiled. "But you're still a thief," he said lightly. "And thieves need to be punished."

My brows furrowed in frustration. "A thief?" I shot back. "How many times do I have to tell you that I didn't steal anything? You didn't even see me steal anything."

He tilted his head slightly, his eyes dropping to my hands, and then he sneered. "Didn't see you?" he said mockingly. "Then what am I seeing right now? You're holding Lady Sienna's necklace in your hand."

My heart lurched violently in my chest. "What?"

I looked down instinctively, and froze.

The necklace that lady Selene had given me was still in my palm. My lips parted as I tried to speak. "This is-"

Arthur didn't let me finish. "Lady Selene brought it for you? You keep saying that, but how are we supposed to be sure she really did?" He turned his head slightly. "Emily, isn't that Lady Sienna's missing necklace?"

Emily hesitated for just a second. She looked at the necklace, confusion flickering across her face as if she wanted to correct him, but then she saw Arthur's expression. She understood what he was getting at. Her lips curved upward, and she looked at me as though she were already attending my funeral.

"Yes," she said sweetly. "You're right. That's the missing necklace Lady Sienna has been searching for."

My heart dropped straight into my stomach.

Emily folded her arms and tilted her head. "Evelyn, what do you have to say for yourself? You've been caught stealing from a noblewoman. Do you really think you'll survive this?"

I took a step back, dread spreading through my veins. I had miscalculated badly. I had underestimated them. They weren't just wild animals playing petty tricks. They were bloodthirsty predators, the kind that wouldn't stop until their prey was completely destroyed.

I looked around desperately. No one spoke, or moved. The other servants avoided my eyes, their faces stiff with fear. Even though they knew this was a trap, not a single one stepped forward to defend me. No one wanted to offend Arthur, Emily, or Lady Sienna.

I clenched my fists.

I was trapped.

There was no way out of this.

The only thing that truly hurt, the only regret tightening my chest, was that I wouldn't be able to see my lady one last time. I was just a servant. I knew that. I didn't deserve to think of Lady Selene as family, and yet to me, she had always been like an older sister. I wanted to see her again.

Emily turned to Arthur and said, "You know what to do."

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Arthur's lips curled into a vicious smirk as he licked them slowly. "Of course," he replied "This will be fun

He stepped toward me, his hand reaching back as he unsheathed the sword strapped to his back. The sound of metal scraping against leather echoed in the room.

I moved instinctively just as he took another step, but then, suddenly, a tall figure stepped between us

The room froze, everyone froze including me.

My breath caught in my throat as my eyes lifted to the familiar broad back now blocking Arthur's path. My heart skipperf violently Arthur's expression darkened the instant he recognized who it was.

"What do you think you're doing?" Silas said, his voice deep, and dangerously low as it echoed through the room. "How many lives do you have to dare touch my mate?"

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