

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 141

[1,514 words]

1:46 pm p p DD

Chapter 141

Chapter 141

Damien

IZ 55 vouchers

I didn't move.

My elbow rested against the arm of the chair, fingers supporting my temple, legs crossed in an almost careless posture as my crimson eyes remained fixed on that particular masked figure below. Around me, the arena roared with chaos, but none of it held my attention for more than a passing second.

My gaze did not waver from her for even the slightest moment. To anyone watching, I probably looked bored, detached, uninterested. And perhaps I was, just not in the way they thought. Slowly, my eyes drifted upward, taking in every detail with patience, until they stopped at the hairpin securing her hair in place.

My expression did not change, but something inside me darkened.

I recognized that hairpin. I knew exactly what kind it was and what it symbolized. It was not an accessory chosen at random. It carried a meaning.

The question was, did she know?

Was she truly that clueless about what she was wearing? Or had she taken it from another woman without understanding the implications?

Either way, I was not pleased.

A faint shift stirred within me, and Thane, my wolf, gave a low, satisfied rumble.

'You don't like it,' he noted, sounding far too entertained.

I ignored him.

Behind me, I could feel the stunned silence of Yara, Jason, and Kaius. They had been frozen ever since the masked figure drew that protective spell and turned the tide of the match without lifting a weapon.

Yara was the first to recover. She let out a soft laugh. "Unbelievable," she muttered, shaking her head with a grin. "He's even worse than me."

Jason nodded beside her. "Right? I never thought anyone could be more shameless and cunning than you are."

Yara chuckled, clearly amused. "I'm impressed."

Kaius, however, crossed his arms and scoffed loudly. "It's nothing impressive. There are so many powerful fighters here. That masked guy is just lazy. Why would he draw a protective spell instead of fighting? That's not what a real warrior does. He's weak."

Yara and Jason both turned to stare at him as if he had just declared the sky green. Sometimes, I truly wondered if there was anything inside Kaius's head besides battle strategies and muscle.

Without taking my eyes off her, I spoke, my voice low and unhurried. "What should a good warrior do then?"

Kaius immediately straightened, clearly happy that I had addressed him. His eyes lit up with eagerness. "A good warrior should fight until his last breath, Alpha Damien. He should risk his life. He shouldn't back away from a fight, no matter

what."

Yara muttered under her breath, "He's more insane than I thought."

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Jason nodded in agreement.

55 vouchers

I slowly removed my hand from beneath my head and sat upright. The movement was small, but it was enough to make

Kaius tense.

“Do you know why,” I asked calmly, “even with my strength, I haven’t taken over every pack in the world?”

Kaius blinked. “B-because you’re lazy?”

I tilted my head slightly and looked at him. He flinched immediately.

“Because it’s not necessary, just because you are powerful doesn’t mean you must prove it at every opportunity. Just because I go to war when provoked does not mean I am weak for choosing not to.” My gaze sharpened. “Or do you think I am weak?”

Kaius swallowed hard and bowed his head. “I wouldn’t dare.”

I looked away from him and returned my attention to her.

She sat comfortably within her drawn circle, watching others slaughter one another with almost lazy patience. She did not rush. She did not panic. And that was far more dangerous than reckless bravery. It was as though she had seen far worse.

I could not help but wonder if she was truly what they described her to be. Or if there was something I did not know, something she was hiding from everyone.

A faint, almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corner of my lips.

“She’s like a python,” I murmured to myself. “She sits still and waits. But the moment she’s hungry, she’ll strike. And by the time you realize what’s happening, she’ll already have wrapped herself around you.”

And I intended to see exactly who she planned to devour.

Selene

“Ah! No, please don’t-!”

The scream was cut short by the sickening sound of metal slicing through flesh. A body dropped heavily onto the blood- stained ground, and before the echo of it settled, another desperate voice rose above the chaos.

“Stop! You said we should work together! Why are you killing me?”

I didn’t even need to look to know how it would end.

“You’re a fool,” the companion replied with a cruel smirk, stepping forward while the other crawled backward in terror. “For believing we could work together in a competition.”

His sword rose, glinting under the arena lights, and then it fell.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

I kept my expression empty as I chewed slowly on the bread Chloe had given me earlier, the soft texture almost laughably ordinary compared to the carnage unfolding in front of us. Blood pooled across the stone floor, bodies scattered like discarded dolls, and the metallic scent in the air grew heavier by the second.

Beside me, someone whimpered.

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I turned my head and saw Chloe trembling, her fingers digging into the fabric of her dress, her face pale as she stared at the corpses. Her breathing was uneven, her eyes glossy.

I studied her for a moment before extending the remaining piece of bread toward her. “Do you want some?”

She looked at me as if I had just suggested something absurd, then glanced at the bread, her hand flying to her mouth as she gagged lightly. She shook her head. “I—I can’t eat when there’s so much blood.”

I sighed quietly.

I didn’t understand why she had come here if she couldn’t handle this. This was only the beginning. And yet, I had never once thought Chloe was weak. The sword strapped to her back wasn’t ordinary. I could feel it without even touching it. It pulsed with power. A weapon like that wouldn’t submit to someone fragile. It required immense spiritual energy and physical strength to even carry, yet Chloe wore it like it weighed nothing at all.

Which meant she was strong. She just didn’t seem to know it.

“I want some.”

The voice came from my other side.

I turned to see Miles staring at the bread with bright, hungry eyes, completely unfazed by the massacre happening a few steps away. For someone who claimed this was his first time here, he was far too relaxed.

What kind of life had he lived to look this calm while people butchered each other in front of him?

I pushed the thought away. Curiosity could wait.

I handed him half of what remained, and he devoured it immediately, chewing enthusiastically as though we were watching a festival performance instead of a slaughter.

“That’s enough killing for today.”

The voice rang clear and commanding across the arena. Everyone froze as their weapons halted mid-air.

I lifted my gaze along with the rest.

The host stood elevated above us, smiling as if she had just witnessed a beautiful dance instead of dozens of deaths. “It seems everyone has done what was required,” she said pleasantly. “The numbers have reduced significantly.”

I glanced around.

She wasn’t wrong.

Where there had once been a sea of contestants, hundreds packed tightly into the inner walls, now barely a fraction remained. Bodies lay scattered across the stone like fallen leaves, and the survivors stood among them, bloodied.

Approximately a hundred left.

They had slaughtered each other to earn the right to continue.

The host clasped her hands behind her back. “Congratulations. You have all advanced to the next stage, which will begin

tomorrow.”

Murmurs spread among the survivors.

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55 vouchers

“You should rest well,” she continued smoothly. “Eat. Recover, and gather your strength. Because tomorrow will be far more difficult.”

Her tone was light, then she turned toward the audience, spreading her arms wide. “Are we not excited for tomorrow?”

The crowd roared in approval. My lips twitched faintly. People truly were strange creatures.

The host’s eyes shifted, and landed directly on me. A slow, knowing smirk curved her lips.

“Next time,” she said deliberately, her gaze never leaving mine, “no one will be able to search for loopholes in the challenge.”

A faint ripple of tension moved through the arena.

“It will be very interesting, prepare yourselves to be properly entertained.”

Her smile widened. And I knew, without a doubt, that tomorrow was going to be troublesome.

4/4

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[1,819 words]

Chapter 142

Selene

56 vouchers

As soon as the host walked away, the shift in the atmosphere was immediate. I could feel it before I even looked up.

Dozens of stares landed on me all at once, filled with killing intent. If looks could kill, my head would have rolled across the arena floor already. The survivors weren't even trying to hide it. Beside me, Chloe subtly stepped backward until her arm brushed mine. "W-why are they looking at us like that?" she whispered, her voice small and unsteady.

Miles answered before I could. "It's understandable," he said lightly, though his gaze was observant, and calculating. "After what Noah did, we're lucky they didn't rush us the moment the host finished speaking. The only reason they didn't is because of the rule." He turned to me, eyes gleaming. "That rules the only thing keeping us safe. Right. Noah?"

I nodded. "Yes."

I had known from the moment I drew that spell that we would make enemies.

My eyes sharpened as I met the glares one by one. Not only the contestants, but the audience too. Whispers spread through the stands, fingers subtly pointing in my direction. I could read their thoughts. Cheat. Coward. Threat.

My lips curled slowly.

"But a simple rule won't stop them," I said calmly. "They'll look for any opportunity to kill us. A blind spot. A mistake. A moment when no one is watching."

I tilted my head slightly, studying the way some of them flinched when our gazes met. "So be careful."

Miles turned fully toward me now, squinting as if trying to read something behind my expression. "Why," he asked slowly, "do you look excited by that idea?"

My eyes sparkled before I could stop them, and my smile widened.

Why? Because I liked it.

I liked when people tried to kill me. The tension. The danger. The sharp edge between life and death. It made my blood move faster. It reminded me I was alive. After ten lifetimes of betrayal and execution, fear had long ago stopped living

inside me.

If anything, it thrilled me.

The contestants probably already knew who I was even with my mask on. I had been standing beside Chloe and Miles the entire time. Anyone with half a brain would connect the dots beneath the mask. I wasn't hiding from them anyway.

The only person I was hiding from was Alpha Damien.

Let the others come. Let them sharpen their blades and whisper in the shadows. It would only make things more entertaining

I held their gazes deliberately, one after another, letting the challenge show plainly in my eyes before I finally turned and walked away as if none of them mattered.

Chloe hurried after me. While Miles lingered behind, glancing around as if waiting for someone.

Once I was certain Alpha Damien's line of sight couldn't reach anymore, I slipped my mask off and tucked it beneath my shirt, exhaling quietly. The cool air brushed against my face as I stepped toward the inner arena corridor.

"Noali!"

1/4

III

O

59 vouchers

The voice was loud, and cheerful. I froze for a second before closing my eyes briefly.

Of course. I didn't even need to turn around to know who it was

I sighed, already feeling a headache forming. This was going to be annoying.

Chloe noticed my expression immediately and raised a brow. "Noah? Is something wrong?"

I shook my head lightly. I barely knew the man. We had met once, and that had been more than enough for me to understand that he would become a persistent nuisance. He was the kind who would stick to you simply because he found you interesting.

"Let's just go," I muttered.

Chloe nodded, and we stepped forward, only to have our path blocked.

Remi stood in front of us, dressed in healer's robes now stained with streaks of fresh blood, as if he had walked straight out of treatment without bothering to change. He must have been treating the injured contestants. Yet none of it dimmed his brightness. He smiled as though he had just spotted a long-lost friend in a marketplace instead of in the middle of a battlefield.

"Noah," he said warmly, his grin stretching from ear to ear. "You must not have heard me. We meet again."

I looked at him flatly. I had heard him. I had simply chosen to ignore him.

Chloe blinked between us. "Noah?"

Remi's gaze shifted to her, and for a brief second surprise flickered across his face. His brows lifted slightly, but then his lips curved into something amused, before his attention returned to me.

I noticed the brief flicker in Remi's expression when he looked at Chloe, but I didn't comment on it.

Remi's attention returned fully to me, and his smile widened as though he had just found something precious he'd misplaced. "How I've missed you. After you left that day, I was curious about you. But there were too many people in the arena. I couldn't possibly find you among them. How have you been?"

A collective gasp rippled through the surrounding contestants at his words.

"Oh my gods... what is going on? How does the greatest healer of the pack know someone like him?"

“I have no idea,” another whispered, eyes wide with disbelief. “Healer Remi doesn’t talk to people. He keeps to that small circle of his, the three strongest warriors in the pack. So why would he speak to someone who doesn’t even know how to fight?”

I listened to every word without changing my expression. My face remained bored, indifferent, as if they were discussing the weather instead of me.

To be honest, I also had no idea why this man was suddenly so interested. I had been minding my own business. I hadn’t approached him. I hadn’t even looked for him. And yet here he was, smiling at me like we shared some meaningful history.

Worse, the more he spoke to me publicly, the higher the chances Damien would notice. And that was something I absolutely did not want.

So I chose the simplest solution.

I tilted my head slightly and said, “You’ve got the wrong person

Remi froze. “Wrong person?”

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55 vouchers

I nodded, then I stepped around him as if he were nothing more than a pillar in the hallway. “Goodbye,” I added casually before turning to Chloe. “Let’s go.”

Chloe blinked, clearly flustered. “O-Okay.”

I could feel the shock radiating from the crowd as we walked away. I had just dismissed the most respected healer in the Crimson Pack without a second glance, but I didn’t care.

If I didn’t care about someone like Alpha Damien, why would I care about anyone else? Status meant nothing to me. Behind me, the murmurs only grew louder, but I didn’t bother turning around.

By the time I reached my room, the weight of the day settled over me. I stretched my arms above my head, rolling my shoulders slowly. I hadn’t even fought seriously, yet somehow it had been exhausting. I walked straight to the bed and dropped onto it without ceremony. The mattress dipped under my weight as I closed my eyes.

Chloe hovered nearby for a moment before speaking softly. “That protective spell must have taken a lot out of you.”

I didn't respond. I was just sleepy.

Even back at Damien's palace, most of my days consisted of sleeping and eating. It didn't matter if I was surrounded by luxury or trapped in a den of killers. If there was a bed and food, I would use both without shame.

I would sleep when I wanted. Eat when I wanted. Fight when I wanted.

Revenge could wait its turn.

With that final thought drifting lazily through my mind, I shifted onto my side, pulled the blanket slightly closer, and allowed myself to sink into sleep without the slightest trace of guilt.

Later that night, the room was quiet except for the faint scratching sound of metal against stone.

I heard the shift in breathing before I looked up.

Chloe stirred in her bed and slowly drifted awake, her lashes fluttering as she adjusted to the dim lantern light. The moment her eyes landed on me sitting at the table, she flinched in surprise.

"You're awake?" she asked groggily, rubbing her eyes as if to make sure she wasn't imagining it.

I nodded without looking away from what I was working on. "Yes"

The small carving tool in my hand moved with precision as I etched the final lines into the silver surface. "I might like to sleep," I added, "but I'll be awake when I have to be."

Chloe nodded quietly and pushed herself up from the bed, careful not to make too much noise. She stood there for a moment, watching me in silence, clearly curious but unwilling to interrupt.

The final line connected smoothly. And a faint pulse of energy settled into the object in my hands.

I leaned back slightly, examining it under the light before nodding in approval. "Done."

Chloe stepped closer. "What are you doing?"

I stood up slowly and turned toward her. Instead of answering immediately, I took a step forward, until I was standing directly in front of her.

I leaned in, closing the distance between us until our faces were only inches apart. Chloe's breath hitched sharply, and her body stiffened as she instinctively leaned back a fraction, her wide eyes dropping to my lips before snapping back up again,

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"N-Noah..." she whispered.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I lifted my hands and gently fastened the necklace around her neck.

86%

65 vouchers

When I stepped back, the silver amulet rested neatly against her collarbone, the faint engraved markings barely visible unless someone looked closely.

I examined it with a small smile. "Perfect."

Chloe blinked, still slightly flustered, before looking down at the necklace. She touched it carefully, her fingers brushing over the cool surface.

"W-what is this?" she asked softly.

I crossed my arms loosely and leaned back against the table. "Do you really think I'd leave my people defenseless?" I said. "I'm not that kind of person."

Her fingers paused over the amulet as she looked up at me.

"It's a protective amulet," I explained. "If you're in danger, it will activate. It won't last forever, but it'll be enough to keep you safe. Wear it at all times, especially tonight."

"Tonight?" she repeated, confusion flickering across her face. "Why tonight?"

A slow smirk spread across my lips.

"Because," I said, pushing off the table and walking toward the window,

night is going to be interesting."

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 143

[1,680 words]

Chapter 143

Selene

“Cheers!”

86%

55 vouchers

The hall exploded with loud voices overlapping and bouncing off the high ceilings as contestants celebrated for successfully advancing to the next stage. Cups were raised high in the air, laughter rang out freely, and chairs scraped noisily against the floor as people moved around in groups, clapping each other on the back as if they had not been trying to kill one another not long ago.

It was almost ironic.

Just a short while earlier, these same individuals had been drenched in blood, eyes cold and merciless as they swung their weapons with the clear intent to end lives. Yet now, they laughed together, and drank together, as if the violence had been nothing more than a passing storm.

That was the nature of warriors. In battle, they could be ruthless enemies, capable of killing without hesitation or guilt, but outside of it, they could sit side by side like comrades, sharing stories and food as if nothing had happened.

Chloe and I stepped into the Dining Hall quietly, not drawing attention to ourselves intentionally. But the moment we crossed the door, the atmosphere shifted so abruptly.

People stopped laughing, then conversations trailed off one by one, until silence spread across the hall. Dozens of eyes turned toward us at once, their previous joy replaced by disgust. The noise that had filled the room seconds earlier dissolved completely, leaving behind only the sound of faint breathing and the subtle clink of utensils being set down.

I let my gaze sweep across the room calmly, meeting their stares without the slightest hint of discomfort. If anything, they looked even angrier than I had anticipated. But I should have known this would happen. During the earlier chaos, while they had been locked in brutal combat, I had simply drawn a protective spell around myself and refused to participate in their frenzy. To them, that was not clever or strategic, it was cowardly.

Warriors might accept killing as part of their code, but they despised those who refused to fight at all. To them, avoiding direct confrontation was a stain on one's pride, as

a silent insult to their values.

Chloe shifted uneasily beside me, her shoulders tense as she lowered her voice. "They really hate our guts, don't they?" she whispered, her eyes darting nervously from one glaring face to another.

I nodded slightly, my tone unbothered. "Yes, they do, but why should we fear them when we have something that ensures our safety?"

As I spoke, my gaze drifted downward briefly toward the protective amulet resting discreetly beneath my collar.

Earlier, despite being exhausted, I had forced myself awake long enough to craft those amulets for both of us. Even if I acted nonchalant, I was not foolish. I knew very well that many here would attempt to harm Chloe, either out of spite for me or in hopes of using her as leverage to threaten me.

And I had no intention of allowing that to happen.

The amulets were not only shields for protection but also safeguards other people. I did not wish to harm anyone unnecessarily, and I would not unless provoked, but if they crossed the line, I would not hesitate either. In truth, the amulets protected them from me just as much as they protected us from them.

Chloe's hand trembled slightly at her side under the weight of so many hostile gazes. I looked at her for a brief moment, then extended my hand silently toward her.

She stared at me in confusion at first, clearly not understanding what I intended. Then realization dawned across her face, and a soft blush spread across her cheeks as she hesitantly placed her hand in mine.

1/3

85%

Chapter 143

55 vouchers

Her hand was noticeably smaller than mine. Mine would have been rougher, if not for the fact that I was only in a young body.

I tightened my grip gently and began walking forward, ignoring the oppressive stares that followed our every step.

We approached the serving area where a middle-aged woman stood behind a long wooden table filled with dishes. She looked up at us, and instead of hostility, her expression softened immediately into a smile.

"Woah," she exclaimed. "What a beautiful young man and such a beautiful young woman. You two make such a lovely couple."

Chloe's face flushed instantly, her free hand waving slightly in protest. "N-no, we're not—"

"Thank you," I interrupted smoothly before she could finish, offering the woman a polite nod.

Correcting her would only prolong the interaction and attract even more attention.

The woman beamed at my response, clearly pleased, and began serving us generous portions of food onto our trays. I picked up mine, while Chloe followed suit, still visibly flustered from the misunderstanding.

With our trays in hand, I led her toward an empty table near one of the pillars. I could still feel eyes tracking our movements, lingering with resentment and curiosity.

Chloe instinctively moved toward a seat that faced the hall, but stopped her and took that seat myself instead, positioning her so that her back faced the rest of the room while she sat opposite me.

Chloe looked at me for a long moment before her lips curved into a soft smile. "You know, you notice things, especially for a man."

I raised my eyes to meet hers without speaking, waiting for her to continue.

"Sometimes men can be completely clueless, they don't pay attention to small details, especially when it comes to women. But you do. You notice even the smallest changes in people. It's most like you're a woman."

I gave a small nod, keeping my expression neutral.

If only she knew how accurate that statement truly was.

I picked up my spoon and scooped some soup from the bowl in front of me, bringing it to my lips and swallowing. The soup was nothing special; but it was edible.

I was about to take another spoonful when the chair beside Chlo shifted and someone sat down.

I lifted my gaze

and found Miles settling comfortably into the seat next to her. He was dressed in a neat white shirt and matching pants that made him appear even younger and harmless, and yet his eyes held a maturity that did not align with his age. His hair was tied into two small ponytails that framed his face in a way that enhanced his innocent appearance.

He smiled brightly at me as if nothing in the world could trouble him. "You came for dinner today, Noah," he said cheerfully. "You didn't come yesterday, so Chloe and I ate together."

I nodded in acknowledgment before reaching into my pocket and taking something out. I placed the small bracelet in front

of him on the table.

Miles lowered his gaze to the object and raised an eyebrow in cuiosity. "What is this?" he asked.

"It is a protective amulet,"

His eyes widened instantly. "You made one for me?" he asked, clearly pleased. "I had no idea you cared about me so much."

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85%

65 vouchers

I leaned back slightly and answered in an indifferent tone. "I made some for Chloe and myself, and that one happened to be left over. You are simply an afterthought."

He stared at me for a second as if trying to decide whether to be offended, and then he suddenly burst into laughter. His laughter was genuine, drawing a few curious glances from nearby tables.

"You know," he said once he caught his breath, "you are the first person who has ever spoken to me like that, Noah."

I looked at him quietly, observing the way he smiled at me. There was something sharp beneath that innocent expression, something calculating and possessive in the way his eyes lingered as though he had discovered an interesting toy he intended to keep close to him.

I frowned faintly at that thought and waved my hand dismissively. "Just wear it and stop talking."

He nodded eagerly and lifted the bracelet, clearly about to put it on. But before he could fasten it around his wrist, a bowl of soup suddenly overturned above his head. The liquid poured down over his hair and face, dripping steadily onto his white shirt and staining the fabric as it ran downward. The bowl clattered loudly onto the table, and the entire hall fell into silence.

Chloe gasped sharply beside him.

I slowly lifted my gaze to the man standing there with an arrogant smirk on his face. He crossed his arms as if he had just accomplished something impressive.

"Oops," he said mockingly. "Sorry. My hand slipped."

He nudged the empty bowl further onto the table and looked directly at me. "It was actually meant for the other guy," he added, his tone dripping with disdain. "But since all of you are cowards who hide behind tricks instead of fighting properly. I couldn't help myself. I poured it on the nearest one instead."

Several men at a nearby table laughed loudly in agreement.

I rolled my eyes lazily at their behavior before turning my attention back to Miles.

As expected, his gaze had darkened completely. The childish brightness in his eyes had vanished, replaced by something cold and deeply unsettling. A heavy aura began to spread from him, subtle at first but quickly growing dense enough to press down on the surrounding tables. The men who had been laughing abruptly fell silent, their faces paling as their bodies stiffened under the suffocating pressure.

The most disturbing part was that despite the soup dripping steadily from his hair and soaking into his clothes, despite the oppressive aura radiating from him, Miles was still smiling.

Slowly, my lips curved upward in response.

It seemed that dinner was about to become far more entertaining than I had anticipated.

3/3

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[1,505 words]

Chapter 144

55 vouchers

Selene

I calmly took one more spoonful of my soup, savoring the warmth as if nothing unusual was happening around me, and then I leaned back against my chair, crossing my arms

loosely over my chest while watching the unfolding scene with interest. The air in the hall had grown unbearably tense to the point where even breathing felt heavier than before.

Chloe shifted closer to me, her shoulder almost brushing mine as she leaned in and whispered nervously, “N-Noah... don’t you think we should stop this?”

I turned my head slightly toward her and smiled faintly. “Why should we stop something so interesting?” I asked. “Everyone has to face the consequences of acting the way they choose to act. If someone decides to provoke another, then they must also accept what follows.”

Chloe studied my face for a moment, clearly realizing that I had no intention of interfering. After a soft sigh, she turned her attention back to Miles, concern evident in her eyes. She parted her lips, likely about to calm him down, but before she could say anything, Miles lowered his gaze to the protective bracelet I had handed him earlier, the one he had been about to put on before the interruption.

He let out a soft sigh, and when he spoke, his voice was low and oddly restrained. “You made it dirty.”

I blinked at him, genuinely confused for a brief second. Was he talking about the bracelet? What about the soup soaking into his hair and clothes? His white shirt was stained and clinging to him, and from the look of the fabric, it was expensive. Yet his focus was entirely on the bracelet.

The man who had poured the soup over him forced a laugh, clearly trying to maintain his bravado despite the suffocating atmosphere. “W-what the hell are you talking about?” he demanded loudly. “Yeah, I ruined your clothes. What are you going to do about it?”

Miles did not look at him. His eyes remained fixed on the bracelet in his hand.

“Noah just gave me this,” he said softly, almost

self. “But

you made it dirty.

The man glanced at the bracelet and scoffed loudly, his arrogance returning as the surrounding men snickered. “Oh? That ugly little thing?” he mocked. “You should be thanking me for ruining it. It’s nothing special. But if you want a bracelet so badly, I can buy you one.” He leaned closer with a “Call me big brother and slap that guy,” He pointed directly at me, “and I might consider getting you something even

more expensive. I'm better than him in many ways. If you want to survive here, you should obey me instead."

As he spoke, I read his mind

Smirk of

His smirk deepened as his inner voice echoed clearly in my head. Since I can't touch that pretty boy because of his spells and the rules, I'll humiliate him publicly by using someone else.

I almost laughed.

What a painfully simple and idiotic plan.

I shifted my gaze back to Miles, curious to see how he would respond. He still had not moved, but I could see the change in him clearly. The innocence in his eyes had vanished completely replaced by something cold. His expression had darkened in a way that sent a faint chill down my spine, and for a brief second, I found it hard to believe that such an expression could belong to a twelve-year-old child.

When Miles remained silent, the man grew impatient.

"Hey! Why aren't you doing anything?" he snapped. "I told you to slap-"

The

rest of his sentence never left his mouth.

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Chapter 144

55 vouchers

In one swift and terrifyingly sudden motion, Miles grabbed the man by the hair and yanked him downward with brutal force, slamming his head against the table so hard that the wood cracked loudly under the impact. Before anyone could react, Miles reached for the bowl of hot soup still sitting nearby and poured it directly onto the man's face.

A scream tore through the hall as the scalding liquid made contact. But Miles did not stop there.

He lifted the now-empty metal bowl and smashed it against the man's face, once, twice, again and again, each strike ringing loudly through the stunned silence. The metal

dented and bent with the force of his blows, and fragments eventually scattered across the floor as he continued striking without hesitation.

The entire hall stood frozen, too shocked to intervene.

And through it all, Miles was still smiling.

Chloe's

eyes widened at the sight in front of her, and she was no the only one. The entire dining hall fell into silence, and the warriors who had been laughing moments ago now stared in a mixture of fear and disbelief. Miles' small hand was still pressed firmly against the man's head, forcing his face against the cracked wooden table, and although his frame was slight and youthful, there was nothing childish about the pressure he exerted. His eyes blazed with fury, yet his expression remained eerily calm, as though he were merely correcting a minor inconvenience.

"Ah! My face! My head!" the man screamed, his voice cracking with panic and pain.

Miles did not flinch at the sound. He simply tilted his head slightly, studying the man beneath him as if contemplating which punishment would be most appropriate for the offense committed. The casualness of his posture made the scene far more terrifying than the violence itself.

From somewhere within the crowd, a man gathered enough courage to speak. "You! What do you think you're-"

His voice died in his throat. Miles lifted his gaze and glanced

at im just

once.

That single look was enough.

The man stiffened instantly, his face draining of color as he took several steps back, clearly afraid that Miles' attention might shift toward him next. The tension in the hall thickened, and no one

dared to move.

Chloe turned to me, her wide eyes silently pleading for me to intervene, but I offered her no response. I simply watched.

"Someone help! Please help!" the man beneath Miles shrieked desperately. "Get this bastard away from me!"

No one stepped forward this time. No one laughed. No one mocked Miles now. The same warriors who had cheered for his humiliation earlier now avoided eye contact entirely.

Miles' attention returned to the man pinned beneath him. His smile never faded, but his eyes darkened further.

"How dare you," he said. "To think someone as filthy as you would dare dirty something Noah made for me." His grip tightened slightly. "And you compared yourself to him? You must have a death wish. You must be eager to meet your maker ahead of time."

The smile on his lips widened, though there was nothing warm about it.

"And since you seem so eager," he continued, pulling a knife from his chest pocket with smooth precision, "I might as well fulfill your wish."

He raised the blade, angling it toward the man's throat as if he were about to slaughter an animal.

I sighed quietly, already bored of the scene. Before the knife could descend, I lifted my eyes and spoke. "That is enough."

The blade stopped mere inches from the man's face. Miles froze mid-motion and turned his head toward me. "Noah?"

2/4

10:11 Sat, Feb 14

Chapter 144

m

85%

55 vouchers

"You think that little of me, little wolf."

I froze.

Before I could even turn around or draw a breath, strong arms wrapped around my waist and pushed me back against the cool stone wall behind me, pinning me in place. My eyes widened at the sudden movement, my heart leaping violently as I realized that I had not sensed him at all, and there was only one person in this world capable of hiding himself from me so completely.

I tried to look up, but my body betrayed me, locking me in place as if it had decided on its own that resistance was pointless. A firm hand caught my chin and tilted my face upward, forcing my gaze to meet his, and I found myself staring straight into those lazy, beautiful crimson eyes that had haunted me for days

He looked down at me with an unreadable expression, his gaze sharp and deep that it felt as though he could see every thought I had tried to hide from him. He tilted his head slightly studying me the way a predator studies something it has already decided belongs to it.

“Did you have fun playing cat and mouse with me?” he asked. “Because now that I’ve finally caught you, tell me, how do you think I should punish you?”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Alpha Damien...” I whispered, the name slipping out before I could stop it.

AD

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 145

[1,347 words]

Chapter 145

70%

\$5 vouchers

Selene

There are moments in life when you find yourself standing in a place where you just know that no matter what you do you are already dead, because there is no escape left to think about and no miracle left to hope for, and I realized in this instant that I was standing right inside one of those moments.

Alpha Damien, the demon of the West, the very man I'd spent a day at the Crimson Warrior Rite trying to avoid, stood before me now, close enough that I could feel the heat of his body and the full weight of his presence pressing down on me. and he was holding me in place as if I were nothing more than something he had already claimed.

My heart pounded so hard in my chest that it hurt, and a cold shiver slid down my spine as I stared into those lazy, dangerous crimson eyes that were calmly looking down at me as though I were a puzzle he had already solved.

I did not even fully understand what was happening yet, but judging by the way he was looking at me and the way he had spoken, it was obvious that he had known who I was from the very beginning, and that meant he had been watching me this entire time as I sneaked around in disguise, hiding my scent and my gender, playing my little games like a foolish rat in a maze, while he observed me in silence to see how far I would go

The realization made something bitter twist in my chest, because I was not anyone's entertainment, and I refused to be treated like some amusing little creature he could toy with just because he was powerful.

Damien's gaze dropped to my lips, catching the small frown there, and a faint glimmer of amusement passed through his eyes before he spoke in that bored, dangerous tone of his.

"Are you disappointed?"

I lifted my eyes to meet his and answered without hesitation, my voice steady even though everything inside me was screaming. "Disappointed that you caught me? Who wouldn't be I really thought I was smart enough to fool the demon of the West."

He tilted his head slightly at my words and stepped closer, so close that there was no space left for me to retreat even if I wanted to, especially with his hold on me keeping me right where he wanted me. His presence felt overwhelming, like standing too close to a storm that could tear everything apart with a single move.

"Do you really think," he said calmly, "that hiding your scent and disguising your gender would ever work on me? You cannot fool me, Selene."

A shiver ran through me again, but this time it had nothing to do with fear. It was the first time he had ever said my name out loud, and the sound of it in his voice sent something

dangerously warm through my veins, something that made my breath hitch despite myself, even though I immediately told myself to stop thinking such stupid, traitorous thoughts about a man like him.

I started to lift my hands to push him away, knowing full well it was probably pointless but refusing to stay still and obedient in front of him, when voices suddenly drifted toward us from down the corridor.

“Where is Noah?” Miles’ voice called out. “I’m sure he came this way.”

“I don’t know,” Chloe answered, sounding worried. “Let’s check around, we’ll see him.”

My eyes widened in alarm when I recognized them. There was no way I could let them see me like this, pinned against a wall by their own Alpha, because that would only complicate things.

I looked up at Damien and flicked my hand in a sharp, irritated motion, as if I were shooing away an annoying insect. “Leave,” I whispered fiercely.

He glanced at my hand and then back at my face, but he did not move even a single step, and if anything, it felt like he drew even closer, as though my command had amused him rather than deterred him.

1/3

1:53 Mon, Feb

Chapter 145

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70%

55 vouchers

I glared at him, my frustration burning hot, because this infuriating, terrifying man clearly had no intention of doing anything I wanted.

What in the world was he trying to do now?

Chloe’s voice drifted closer through the corridor. “Huh... there are two people standing there. Who are they?” she asked, and I could hear both her and Miles moving nearer with every step.

I bit my lip, panic and calculation crashing together in my mind because the last thing I wanted was for Chloe or Miles to see Alpha Damien standing this close to me, and if

that happened then everything I had been carefully hiding would shatter. in a single moment.

I lifted my eyes to Damien, then, without meaning to, my gaze slipped to his lips, and a treacherous memory rose up of how it had felt when I had kissed him before, it was far too intoxicating for my own good.

Damien watched me closely, clearly curious about what I was about to do, as if he already sensed that I was about to do something reckless.

I let out a slow breath. "Alpha Damien," I murmured, and when he met my eyes I continued in a low, urgent voice, "lend me your body again."

Before either of us could overthink it, I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned forward, pressing my lips to his.

I hated how much I liked it.

The kiss was not deep at first, but the instant our lips touched, a rush of warmth spread through my body and a soft shudder slipped through me, and for a brief second I forgot about everything else, about how terrifying he was, about how complicated this was going to become, and about all the consequences waiting for me. I only knew that I was pressed against him, kissing him, and that it felt far too right.

His hands tightened around my waist, steady and possessive, and his other hand came up to my cheek, guiding my face gently but firmly as he kissed me back, catching me completely off guard. The soft contact turned intense in a heartbeat, and my back was pressed against the wall as though he meant to hold me there.

My breath hitched, but I did not pull away, and instead I found myself gripping him even tighter, as if my body had decided for me that this was where I belonged.

Somewhere in the distance I heard Chloe gasp. "Oh my goddess there are people making out there. Let's go, Miles, we shouldn't bother them."

"Wait," Miles said sharply. "Doesn't that look like Noah?"

For a moment, everything seemed to stop.

I wanted to turn my head, to see if they were really looking at me, but Damien's hand on my face was firm, holding me in place. Before I could react, he nipped lightly at my lower lip, stealing my breath and forcing a small, startled sound from me. When he had the chance, his tongue slipped into my mouth deepening the kiss.

The world around us fell silent as I kissed him back, careful to keep his face hidden, shielding him from their view.

“Chloe,” Miles said quietly but urgently, “let’s go.”

I felt movement, heard their footsteps retreating, and then their voices faded until I could no longer hear them at all.

They were gone.

I should have pulled away then, I knew I should have, because that had been the whole point of this reckless act, but instead I realized with a mix of frustration and disbelief that my hands were tightening around him even more, as if my body was stubbornly refusing to let him go.

2/3

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 146

[1,939 words]

Chapter 146

70%

95 vouchers

Damien

I had once come across a particular flower many years ago, a flower that only appeared once every hundred years, blooming quietly in the palace garden as if it had no idea how rare and coveted it was.

What drew me to it was not its rarity, nor its beauty, but its scent.

It was nothing like anything I had ever smelled before, a fragrance so subtle and intoxicating that the more I breathed it in. the more I wanted it, until I found myself

returning to the garden again and again, a cold-blooded man standing among petals and leaves, unable to walk away because I was already hopelessly addicted to that scent. I did not understand why a simple flower could make me feel that way, but I knew one thing with certainty, I wanted to keep it, claim it, to make sure it never disappeared from my reach.

And now, standing here with Selene pressed against the wall, I realized with clarity that she was that flower.

The more I looked at her, the more I touched her, the more my obsession deepened, growing quietly but relentlessly, until the thought of letting her go felt unbearable.

From the very beginning I had known she was different from the other women who had crossed my path. She was not afraid of me, and when she looked into my eyes there was no trembling reverence there, only sharp awareness and defiance. Instead of trying to get closer, she had run from me, and if any other woman had been given the chance she had, they would have used it to gain power, to boast about being by my side, but Selene did the opposite and hid it as if it were a dangerous

secret.

If she had wanted a weapon or protection, she could have asked me, or tried to charm it out of me, yet she went through the trouble of disguising herself and fighting for what she wanted with her own hands, making it clear that she did not need anyone to give her anything.

Different and beautiful, strange and endlessly intriguing.

Damn it.

It was becoming impossible to think straight with her this close to me.

She gasped softly as I kissed her, her heart pounding so loudly against her chest that even I could hear it.

At first I meant to let her continue her little game, to watch her slip through my grasp until I decided I was bored, but the longer I waited, the more unbearable it became.

I had always been a patient man, but with her, patience felt like torture.

I wanted her.

My hand slid from her waist and tightened against her ass, holding her closer as I continued to kiss her, until her breathing grew uneven and she was forced to pull back just enough to gasp for air. I looked down at her, and her face was flushed, her lips

parted, her body still trembling from the kiss, and it struck me that this was the first time since that night that I had seen her so openly affected.

Usually she was calm and distant, hiding everything behind that lazy composure, but right now she was bare and real in front of me.

She met my eyes, as if she wanted to say something, her lips parting.

“I-”

I did not let her finish.

1/3

1

370%

Chapter 146

55 vouchers

My hand slid up to her neck, firm enough to keep her close as I tilted her head to the side and lowered my mouth to her skin, pressing a kiss there, and I felt her shiver beneath me as her breath caught, and for a moment it felt as though the world beyond the two of us no longer existed.

I felt her nails dig into my shoulder as if she could not quite handle what I was doing to her, and the small, helpless reaction sent a sharp thrill through me because after that night it had become obvious that her neck was her softest place, the one part of her that betrayed every emotion she tried so hard to hide

She was sensitive there.

I held her more firmly and kissed her again, letting my lips trail along her skin in slow, lingering touches, sometimes brushing, sometimes nibbling just enough to make her shiver, while her scent wrapped itself around my senses and made it difficult to think of anything else. Each small sound she made only pulled me deeper, until it felt as though her very body was calling out to mine.

“D-Damien,” she breathed, her voice unsteady.

I did not answer, because words felt unnecessary when every instinct in me was focused on her, and I continued to press kisses along her neck, letting the moment stretch far longer than it should have.

The way she reacted to me, the way her breath hitched and her body leaned closer without her meaning to, made it nearly impossible to stop, and before I could rein myself in my teeth sharpened, instinct taking over. A wild, reckless thought crossed my mind, one that I had never allowed myself to entertain before.

I wanted to mark her.

I had never intended to take a mate, never planned to bind myself to anyone, yet every drop of blood in my body was screaming that this woman should be mine, and Thane stirred inside me in excited agreement, eager in a way I had not felt in a very long time.

A low growl escaped me before I could stop it.

That was when she snapped out of it and looked up at me, her eyes widening when she saw my fangs, and the sudden fear in her gaze cut through the haze instantly. She leaned back and pushed against my chest, and then, in a move that surprised us both, she raised her hand and slapped me across the face.

It did not hurt, but the shock of it was something else entirely, because no one had ever dared to do that to me before.

I stared at her, and she stared back, just as stunned by her own action, her eyes flicking to her hand and then back to me as if she could not quite believe what she had just done.

“Selene, you must really have a death wish,” she muttered under her breath, more to herself than to me, before swallowing and lifting her gaze again.

“It was... a slip of the hand,” she said carefully. “Is there any chance you’ll let me live, or if you’re angry you can hit me back. I won’t complain, but could you please be gentle, because I might faint if you hit me too hard.”

The way she said it, half serious and half nervous, was so unlike the fearless woman I knew that it made something in me soften despite myself.

I took a step closer, just enough to make her instinctively lean back, and she turned her face towards me and closed her eyes, bracing herself, and I could not help the faint, amused curve of my lips at how unexpectedly cute she looked like that.

Instead of hurting her, I reached up and gently slid the hairpin from her hair, and when it fell free, her black-and-white strands spilled over her shoulders, framing her face and making her look even more alluring than before.

For a moment, I simply looked at her like that.

She opened her eyes slowly and blinked when she noticed the harpin in my hand, her gaze shifting from my face to the small ornament between my fingers with a faint look of confusion.

2/3

11.53 Mon, Feb 16

Chapter 145

70%

55 vouchers

I glared at him, my frustration burning hot, because this infuriating, terrifying man clearly had no intention of doing anything I wanted.

What in the world was he trying to do now?

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 147

[1,237 words]

11:04 Tue, Feb 17 G.

Chapter 147

Chapter 147

373%

Vouchers

Selene

His scent washed over me as he leaned closer, wrapping around my senses so suddenly that for a brief, dangerous moment my heart actually skipped a beat, and I hated how easily he could still do that to me even when I knew better.

In my tenth life, I had promised myself I would never fall for a man again and let him betray me the way Adrian once did. because I would never again give my heart so freely only to have it shattered, and yet ever since I met the Alpha of the West. my actions had been the complete opposite of that promise. Whenever he was near me my heart would beat too fast and my body would react in ways it never did around anyone else, as if it recognized him even when my mind tried to stay guarded.

It had never been like this with Adrian, not even in my past lives, because back then what I felt for him had been closer to infatuation than anything real, a desperate kind of love born from the fact that he was the first person who ever noticed me and the fact that he was my mate, which made me give him everything until there was nothing left for myself.

In this life I felt nothing for him at all, and I thought that meant was finally free of needing anyone, but the man in front of me was making that belief feel fragile in a way I did not like.

What made it worse was that this was already the third time we had kissed, and even though I had reasons for the three times, I could not deny that I kept letting it happen because my body refused to pull away.

I felt him carefully adjust my hair and slide the hairpin back into place, his touch surprisingly gentle, and when he was done I looked up and met his gaze, those crimson eyes studying me with an intensity that made it feel as though he could see straight through every wall I had built around myself. He glanced at my lips again, clearly about to lean down and kiss me, but this time I pressed a hand flat against his chest and stopped him before he could move any closer.

My heart might have been traitorous, and my body might have been far too willing to betray me, but I was not about to let myself get carried away by a dangerous, perfectly composed alpha who could ruin everything with a single word.

“Alpha Damien,” I said, a small smile on my lips, “don’t you think it would cause quite a stir if people saw you with me like this, because they would think you are trying to sleep with a man

I held his gaze, my smile never quite reaching my eyes. “You already have rumors going around that you’re gay, so I’m sure you wouldn’t want anyone actually seeing you like this, especially since I’m still in a male disguise.”

The amused gleam in his eyes never faded as he watched me, as though he were entertained by my attempt to create distance between us, and what unsettled me most was that he did not move away at all, standing there with the calm of someone who was in no hurry, as if he were simply waiting to see what I would do next.

I let out a quiet sigh. Of course a man like him would not care about rumors, not when his very existence was enough to bend the will of everyone around him.

I lifted my eyes to his and asked, as calmly as I could manage, “Are you going to take me back?”

He raised an eyebrow at the question, and it was not confusion that crossed his face but a brief flicker of surprise, which only made me frown, because why would he be surprised when this was the most obvious reason for him to appear in front of

me now.

He wanted to take me back to the palace.

“If I wanted to take you back,” he said slowly, leaning back as if this was nothing more than an interesting thought, “would you go with me willingly?”

I shook my head without hesitation and answered honestly, “No because I am the type of person who finishes what she starts, and if I walk away now then everything I came here to do will be meaningless, but if you decide to take me by force then there is nothing I can do about it, since you are stronger than me, and fighting you would only waste both of our time because you would have me pinned to the floor within a minute,

1/2

2/2

11:04 Tue, Feb 17 G.

Chapter 147

73%

69 vouchers

I had always known my strengths and my weaknesses, even in past lives, it was my feelings for Adrian that clouded my senses. And I knew just as clearly now that Alpha Damien stood far above me in raw power, which was why I refused to lie to myself about it.

“So then?” he prompted.

“Everything is not about strength,” I said, meeting his gaze steady. “Just because I cannot beat you in a fight does not mean I cannot look for other ways to convince you to let me stay, because there is always a solution to everything if you are willing to look closely enough.”

Something flickered in his eyes at my words, and for a moment he looked genuinely taken aback, before, to my complete surprise, his lips curved into a faint smile.

“How interesting,” he murmured to himself.

I froze at the sight, because this was the first time I had ever seen him smile like that, and gods, it was unfair how good he looked with it, since I had always thought he was someone who only suited a cold, expressionless face, and yet that small, perfect curve of his lips made him look even more dangerous and even more beautiful.

Before I could finish thinking of all the ways I might convince him to let me stay, he spoke again.

“You can do whatever you want to do,” Damien said casually.

“Really?” I asked, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice. “I can?”

“Yes,” he replied, and then he took a slow step closer, his presence filling my space as he added, “but you will spend every night in my chambers.”

My surprise barely had time to register before he hooked a finger under my chin and lifted my face so I had no choice but to look at him.

“And be careful not to get hurt,” he said, his voice suddenly sharp with something possessive and dangerous, “because I will not take kindly to you being harmed, and for their sake you had better make sure you win, because even if they do and lay even a single finger on you, I will take their heads, since I will not let anyone live after hurting what is mine.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words.

What was his?

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 148

[1,210 words]

Chapter 148

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thoughts

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feel any more at ease.

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2.2

2.2

12:03 Wed, Feb 18

Chapter 148

lightly, "If you're angry at me, we can talk about it instead of trying to take my life right away."

55 vouchers

When Chloe finally focused on my face, her eyes widened in recognition and the sword slipped from her hands to the floor with a loud clatter as she took a hurried step toward me, her voice trembling when she said, "Noah," before adding in a rush, "I'm sorry for pointing my sword at you, I really didn't mean it, was just scared."

I looked at her for a long moment, taking in how nervous she seemed, as if she truly thought I might be angry enough to hurt her, and without thinking too much about it I reached out and placed my hand on her head, ruffling her hair gently in a way that made her freeze, her cheeks instantly turning a soft, embarrassed red.

"It's okay," I said with a small smile that was meant to reassure her, even if part of me was still tired and distracted, "let's call it a truce, because after all I also once pointed a dagger at your throat, so we're even, right."

She nodded quickly, a relieved smile spreading across her face, but it vanished almost immediately as her gaze dropped from my eyes to my neck, her expression darkening in a way that made me follow her line of sight without even meaning

Of course, she was staring at the marks, the bright hickeys Damien had left behind when he kissed and bit me earlier, and the realization made a knot twist in my stomach, because Chloe and Miles had already seen us together, and now this would only make things worse.

I had completely forgotten to cover them, and there was no way she would not draw the wrong conclusions.

I decided the only sensible thing to do was to change the subject as fast as I could, so I cleared my throat and said, "Oh right, before I forget," while reaching into my pocket and pulling out Chloe's hairpin.

Her eyes went to it immediately, and then to my hair, and when she noticed the second hairpin that Damien had just put back for me, her face darkened even more, which only confused me further.

“I wanted to give this back to you,” I said, holding it out to her, “because it’s really expensive and I don’t think I should be keeping it, especially since you already paid me enough for being your bodyguard.”

She did not answer right away and simply stared at the hairpin with a strange, unreadable look in her eyes, which made me frown slightly as I asked, “Chloe, what’s wrong.”

She looked up at me then and smiled so widely that it felt forced almost brittle, before she said, “Okay,” and took the hairpin from my hand.

Normally I avoided using my mind-reading on people like Chloe and Miles, because I had promised myself to mind my own business in this life, but something about her reaction was so off that I could not stop myself this time, and when I brushed against her thoughts, her voice echoed clearly in my head.

“If that man thinks he can steal Noah from me, he’s wrong. I won’t let him. This is a competition now, and I will make Noah my husband. I’ll let my love overcome every trial.”

I stared at Chloe in stunned silence, because I could hardly process what I had just heard.

What did she just say?

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 149

[1,054 words]

Chapter 149

Sienna

65 vouchers

I smashed the mirror in front of me with all the strength I had, and the sharp crack of shattering glass echoed through the room as the surface fractured into a hundred jagged pieces before collapsing to the floor.

The servants around me gasped in unison and immediately stumbled backward, their faces pale with fear as shards scattered across the marble tiles.

I did not care.

I stared at my broken reflection in the fragments at my feet, my chest rising and falling rapidly as rage burned through me so violently that it felt as if it might tear me apart from the inside. My hands were trembling at my sides, fingers curling into fists so tightly that my nails dug into my palms. A sharp sting flared across my skin, and only then did I notice that I had cut myself when I struck the mirror. Thin lines of red slid down my fingers, droplets of blood falling onto the floor, but even that pain felt insignificant compared to the fury boiling inside me.

“Lady Sienna, your hand!” one of the maids cried out in alarm as she rushed forward, reaching toward me with a cloth.

Before she could touch me, I turned and slapped her hard across the face.

The sound was loud, and cruel.

“Don’t fucking touch me with your dirty hands, you lowborn servant!” I spat, my voice shaking with rage.

The entire room went silent in shock.

Of course they were shocked. To them, I was the gentle lady of the house, the perfect image of grace and kindness, the woman who smiled sweetly and spoke softly and would not even harm a fly. They adored that version of me, believed in it so completely that they never once questioned whether it was real.

It was never real.

Normally, I would have sighed afterward and pretended to regret my outburst, maybe even offered the maid a small apology so that no rumors would spread and my carefully crafted image would remain intact. But today I was far too angry to pretend.

“Out!” I screamed, my voice sharp enough to cut. “All of you, get out!”

Behind me, Evelyn stiffened before quickly lowering her gaze. She glanced at the other servants and subtly gestured toward the door. They did not need to be told twice. One by one, they hurried out of the room, including the maid still sitting on the floor clutching her cheek, too terrified to even look at me as she scrambled to her feet and fled.

Soon the room was empty except for Evelyn.

She swallowed nervously, her hands clasped tightly in front of her as if bracing herself. “M-my lady... did something happen. again? Why are you so angry-”

I spun around sharply, and she immediately flinched, shrinking back as though expecting another slap.

I ignored her fear and began pacing the room instead, stepping over shards of glass without care, my mind spiraling.

“What happened?” I repeated bitterly. “What else would happen It’s that bitch. That stupid bitch!”

My voice rose with every word.

“Even if she is dead somewhere, she still manages to make my life miserable. Everything was supposed to be mine. The

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12:03 Wed, Feb 18

Chapter 149

B

Moonborn title. My family's full attention. Adrian's love. All of t

My breathing grew heavier as the memories flooded back

"When she ran away, I thought it was finally over. I thought she'd handed everything to me. But she hid everything even in her absence. She did it on purpose. She ran away on purpose so everyone would worry about her, so everyone would care about her more than me?"

My hands trembled again as I clenched them at my sides.

After Selene disappeared, I truly believed I would finally have the position of Moonborn within reach, that Father and Mother would move forward with their plans and secure it for me, that Adrian would eventually look at me the way he once looked at her. But it never happened.

Jan.

That cursed, dangerous brother of ours.

He guarded Selene's position like a mad dog protecting treasure, shutting down every attempt before it could even begin. He would not allow anyone to speak of replacing her. He would not even allow the idea to breathe.

It was as if he believed she would return. As if he was waiting for her. And every day that passed without her shadow looming over me should have felt like freedom, but instead it felt like I was trapped in a cage built by a ghost

My parents obviously never wanted Selene to become the Moonborn, but there was nothing they could do about it no matter how much they schemed behind closed doors. Ian held too much power within the pack, so much that even the Alpha had to measure his words carefully around him, and no one in their right mind would dare stand openly against him. Getting on Ian's bad side was the fastest way to ruin yourself, and everyone knew it.

I stopped pacing and stared at my reflection in the remaining shard hanging crookedly on the wall.

"I should have everything by now," I whispered, my voice trembling with fury and humiliation. "Everything was supposed to be mine."

"To make it worse," I muttered darkly, my fingers digging into my palms, "my two brothers have been acting strangely."

I began pacing again, my steps uneven against the marble floor littered with broken glass.

“Cross was already acting differently before Selene disappeared but now he has become even worse. He barely even looks at me anymore. Instead, he spends his time helping Ian search for her as if she is some priceless treasure that must be recovered at all costs.”

My breathing grew heavier as I continued.

“And Kane...” My voice trembled with disbelief. “Kane, who used to treat me as if I were his entire world, is also helping Ian look for her. Didn’t he hate her? Didn’t he want me to shine in the temple? Didn’t he want me to be the center of attention?”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 150

[1,306 words]

Chapter 150

Sienna

A₃, 75%

EI 65 vouchers

Evelyn stood a few steps away, silent and trembling. She did not dare interrupt me. She knew exactly what kind of person I was beneath the mask, and she knew better than to speak when my temper reached this point.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to steady myself, though the fury inside me refused to settle down.

“I can tolerate my brothers’ betrayal,” I said through clenched teeth. “I can even tolerate Ian guarding her position like a loyal dog. But what I cannot tolerate is Adrian treating me like I am nothing.”

“I am the better twin. I am better than Selene in every way. So why won’t he choose me? What does he see in her that I don’t have?”

I lifted a trembling hand to my face, tracing my cheek as if searching for flaws.

That was the real reason I was this angry today.

For the past few days, I had been doing everything I could to get Adrian’s attention. I visited the palace often, pretending to be concerned about my missing sister, acting gentle and pitiful so the royal family would grow fond of me. The Luna adored me and often praised my kindness, but Princess Avery could barely hide her disgust whenever she looked at me.

And Adrian?

He barely acknowledged my existence.

He was always too busy organizing searches, too busy riding out to the borders to look for Selene, too busy worrying about someone who didn’t even care about him.

Today, I heard that he had returned from another trip to the border. I rushed to the palace to welcome him back, rehearsing my soft smile and worried expression, only for him to walk past me as if I were air.

As if I were nothing!

That humiliation burned more than anything else.

Prince Adrian was supposed to be mine. I was supposed to stand beside him. I was supposed to be the main character in this story.

That was how things were meant to be.

The more I thought about it, the more unbearable the rage became, rising in my chest until I felt like I might explode.

Just as my emotions were spiraling out of control, the door opened.

My stepmother stepped inside.

When she saw the shattered mirror and the blood on my hand, she froze in shock before quickly hurrying toward me, worry written all over her face.

“Sienna, what happened to you?” she asked anxiously.

The moment she reached me, the anger inside me twisted into something else. My knees gave out, and I sank to the floor, tears spilling from my eyes.

“I hate Selene,” I sobbed, my voice breaking. “I hate her so much. I want everything. Why can’t I have everything? I deserved every good things this world has to offer.”

1/3

12:03 Wed, Feb 18 DB

Chapter 150

75%

55 Vouchers

My stepmother’s expression softened instantly, and she knelt beside me, pulling me into her arms. She held me tightly, stroking my hair as if I were still a child.

“It’s okay, my dear,” she whispered gently. “Don’t cry. Everything will be fine. This mother of yours has already planned everything carefully.”

Her voice lowered, turning cold beneath its softness. “That curse will not take what belongs to you.”

I pulled back slightly, my tears slowing as hope flickered in my chest.

“Really?” I asked, searching her face. “How?”

She did not answer immediately. Instead, her eyes shifted toward Evelyn.

Evelyn stiffened, immediately understanding the silent command. She bowed her head and hurried out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her, leaving only the two of us inside.

My stepmother slowly released me from her embrace, and after glancing once more toward the closed door to ensure we were alone, she slipped her hand into the inner fold of her robes and pulled out a small glass bottle.

The liquid inside shimmered faintly under the light, a strange silver-blue color that seemed almost alive as it swirled within the glass.

I blinked at it. "What is that?"

She smiled, the corners of her lips curling in a way that was far too calm for my racing heart. "This," she said softly, "is a potion I acquired from a witch."

My breath caught in my throat. "A witch?" I whispered sharply. "Witchcraft is banned in the pack. If the Alpha finds out, our entire family will be ruined. And Ian would never let something like that go unpunished. He will kill us."

She let out a quiet chuckle, completely unbothered by my panic. Do not worry about that, Sienna. I am not foolish. I am always careful, and no one will trace this back to us. The witch is far beyond our borders, and the exchange was handled discreetly."

She lifted the bottle slightly, studying it with satisfaction. "This potion is powerful."

Hope flared inside me again. "Will it make the prince fall in love with me?" I asked eagerly, moving closer.

She shook her head slowly. "No potion in existence can force true love. Even witches cannot command the heart in that way."

My excitement faltered slightly.

"But," she continued smoothly, "this is just as useful. Once inhaled, this potion will cloud the mind. For a few hours, the person who breathes it in will see you as the one they love most. They will believe you are that person."

I stared at her, trying to process her words. "Meaning...?"

Her eyes gleamed.

"You will sneak into the prince's chambers at night," she said in a low voice. "You will make the prince inhale this potion. Under its influence, he will believe you are his love."

My heart began pounding violently in my chest.

"You will spend the night with him," she continued without hesitation. "And once morning comes, I will ensure that the palace staff 'accidentally' discover you in his chambers. The news will spread before noon."

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Chapter 150

She leaned closer to me, her voice turning almost sweet.

75%

55 vouchers

“A Moonborn is expected to be pure for her destined mate. If it comes known that Prince Adrian took your first time, he will have no choice but to take responsibility. The royal family will demand it. The pack will demand it. He will be forced to mate you.”

For a moment, everything inside me froze. Then my smile faltered.

“There’s a problem,” I said quietly. “I’m not a virgin.”

Her expression did not change at all. Instead, she smiled again, calm and calculating.

“I know.”

I stared at her.

“But that does not matter,” she went on. “What matters is what people believe. I will give you red dye. After you are done, place a few drops upon the sheets. No one will question it. No one will dare.”

She brushed her fingers lightly over my cheek.

“Once the bond is announced, once the prince is tied to you, everything else will fall into place. The Moonborn title will be within reach. The palace will be yours. And Selene... will return to nothing.”

Slowly, my earlier hesitation melted away, replaced by rising excitement. A smile spread across my lips, wider and brighter than before.

I could already imagine it, the whispers, the shock, the acceptance in Adrian’s eyes when he realized he had no choice but to claim me publicly.

And if Selene was still alive somewhere, if she dared to return one day, I could not wait to see her face when she discovered that the most handsome and powerful man in the world belonged to me.

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