

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 151

[1,355 words]

Chapter 131

93%

55 vouchers

Chapter 151

Adrian

Steam curled through the air as I leaned back against the smooth edge of the tub exhausted, warm water lapping against my

skin.

“My prince

The familiar voice of my personal guard reached me from a few feet away, his head bowed even though I had not bothered

to open my eye

“Speak” I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

“It is the same as the previous reports” he answered. “No one has crossed the borders of the Mooncrest pack. No suspicious movement was detected, and anyone attempting to leave would have been reported immediately. The borders are sealed and fully guarded.”

I slowly opened my eyes, staring at the pale marble wall in front of me, already knowing what he was going to say before the words even left his mouth.

The same news again.

For days now it had been like this. There was no lead, or clues about Selene.

I had personally gone to the borders, combed through the pack territory, questioned everyone who might have known something, and searched places no one else would

even think to look, all because I was convinced that whoever had taken her had to be hiding somewhere within the pack. And yet, nothing.

It was as if she had vanished into thin air, leaving behind not even a shadow to follow.

I dragged a hand through my wet hair, water dripping down my arm as I exhaled slowly. My body ached from days of restless travel and sleepless nights, but it was nothing compared to the weight pressing on my chest.

I should have believed she was dead by now. And yet I could not

The mate bond was still there, faint but unbroken, a constant reminder that Selene was still alive somewhere out there. If she had died, I would have felt it, would have been ripped apart by the backlash of the bond's collapse, but that pain never

came.

Which meant she was alive somewhere.

What confused me most was not just how she had disappeared, or who that man was who had knocked me out that night, but what had been happening inside me ever since.

At first, I told myself I was searching because it was my duty, because she was my mate and I was the prince of the Mooncrest pack, and I was responsible for her safety. But now, it was no longer that simple.

I was worried.

I found myself wondering where she was, whether she was cold or hungry, whether she was hurt, whether anyone had dared to lay their hands on her, and every time that thought crossed my mind, something dark and violent stirred inside my chest.

I frowned slightly, annoyed with myself.

I was not the type of man who let emotions cloud his judgment and yet lately I kept zoning out, my thoughts drifting back to her far too often for comfort.

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No matter how hard I tried, I could not push Selene out of my mind.

“Prince Adrian?” my guard called carefully.

I blinked, realizing I had gone quiet.

“Leave,” I said, waving my hand in dismissal without looking at him.

“Yes, my prince,” he replied immediately before turning and stepping out of the room, leaving me alone.

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I closed my eyes for a brief moment, forcing myself to breathe slowly, to gather what little composure I still had, and then I stood up from the tub.

Water streamed down my body as I reached for a towel from the table beside me and wrapped it around my waist, the fabric dampening as it soaked up the moisture.

Normally, female servants would be waiting nearby to assist me, but I had dismissed them all after far too many of them tried to use the opportunity to get close to me in ways I had no interest in. And right now, I wanted nothing more than silence, and answers.

The moment I stepped into my darkened chamber, something felt wrong.

The air was thick with a strange, unfamiliar scent, curling into my lungs in a way that made my instincts stir uneasily, and I stopped just inside the doorway.

Someone was here.

My mood was already foul from days of exhaustion and unanswered questions, and the last thing I needed was an intruder bold enough to step into my private quarters. I reached for the sword resting on the table beside the door, my fingers wrapping around its hilt as I drew it free in one smooth motion

“Whoever you are,” I said lazily, though my voice carried a dangerous edge, “you have one second to show yourself, or the guards will be carrying your body out of this room.”

For a brief moment, there was nothing but silence.

My eyes flashed, and I was already preparing to strike when a soft, hurried voice broke through the darkness.

“Wait... it’s me.”

A figure stepped forward into the moonlight spilling through the window, and the world seemed to tilt beneath my feet.

My sword lowered on its own. Standing there, framed by silver light, was Selene.

Her black-and-white hair glimmered softly, her blue eyes lifted to me with a familiar mixture of nervousness and tenderness, and she was dressed in a thin, delicate garment that clung to her figure as if she had walked straight out of my

memories.

I was not imagining her. She was really here.

“Prince Adrian, I-” she began, but I did not let her finish.

In a few long strides I was in front of her, my arms wrapping around her waist as I pulled her into me and claimed her lips with mine, all the restraint I had been holding onto for days finally snapping. She gasped in surprise, clearly not expecting it, but I did not stop, the scent in the room growing stronger as I kissed her as if I was afraid she would disappear again

Her hands slid around my waist, a soft, excited sound escaping her lips, and when I finally pulled back I stared down at her searching her face as if I needed to convince myself that she was real

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She was.

“Selene,” I growled, her name leaving my lips.

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Her expression shifted for a brief second when she heard it, and she went unnaturally still before forcing a small smile.

“What is wrong?” I asked, my eyes narrowing slightly.

“N-nothing,” she said quickly. “Yes, I’m Selene.”

“Where were you all this time?” I demanded.

She shook her head and brushed it aside as if it meant nothing, lifting her hands to cup my face as she smiled at me. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m here now. I

missed you, Adrian. You have no idea how happy I am to finally be by your side. Now you will be mine. I want you, Adrian. I really want you.”

I studied her, unease stirring deep inside me, because this warmth and eagerness were so different from the guarded, distant way she had treated me before. And yet, when she looked at me like that and spoke those words, my control slipped.

My hands tightened around her waist as I leaned into her, pressing a kiss to her neck, the urge to claim her roaring through me even as a quiet instinct warned me to wait. She made a small sound as if she wanted to protest, but I silenced her with another deep kiss, lifting her into my arms and carrying her toward the bed.

Something felt off.

I knew it did, but in that moment, with Selene in my arms, I did not care.

Even if this was nothing more than a dream, I was willing to lose myself in it, because for the first time since she vanished, she was finally here with me.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 152

[1,989 words]

Chapter 152

Sienna

The morning sun spilled gently through the tall windows, its warm light brushing across my face as I slowly drifted awake, and for the first time since yesterday my mood felt strangely light, and giddy, as if something wonderful had happened to wash away all that anger.

A soft, excited smile curved my lips as I opened my eyes and turned my head toward the other side of the bed, where Prince Adrian lay sleeping beside me, his handsome features relaxed as the golden light traced the sharp lines of his face.

He looked breathtaking like this, far softer than he ever did when he was awake and distant, and the sight of him there, so close to me, made my smile widen.

I still could not quite believe it.

Last night, Adrian and I had finally been together in the way I had dreamed about for so long, and unlike all the other men who had eagerly tried to touch me, he had always kept me at arm's length, cold and uninterested, until now. But last night he had given me more than I had ever dared to hope for, and the memory of it made my chest feel warm and fluttery, because it had been better than anything I had imagined. And yet...my smile faded as quickly as it had come. Because beneath the warmth, beneath the sweetness of it all, there was one detail I couldn't ignore.

The woman Adrian loved was Selene.

I still did not understand how it had happened, how he had gone from barely noticing her to looking at her as if she were everything, especially after that incident when she almost drowned and he suddenly refused to push her away, but I refused

to dwell on it.

Whatever feelings he once had, they were irrelevant now.

From this moment on, Prince Adrian belonged to me.

I was sure of it now, Selene would never experience something like that, because I was going to make Adrian mine and mine alone. Even though the bitterness of yesterday still lingered somewhere deep inside me, I could not deny the overwhelming sense of victory curling in my heart

Selene had lost, and I had won.

Smiling to myself, I leaned closer to him, my heart fluttering as I lifted my face, about to press a soft kiss to his lips. But just as I moved, his eyes snapped open.

Those sharp green eyes immediately locked onto me, so alert and intense that it made my breath hitch.

I smiled at him instinctively, warmth flooding my chest as I whispered, "Good morning, my prince—"

I never got to finish.

In the next instant, his expression turned terrifyingly cold, and his hand shot out, wrapping around my throat as a suffocating pressure cut off my breath and my eyes flew wide with shock and fear.

A deadly aura came out of him as he leaned over me, his gaze filled with fury rather than affection.

"A-Adrian—" I tried to say, but the word barely escaped my lips.

He stared down at me as if I were something disgusting beneath his hand, then tilted his head slightly, his voice sharp and cruel as he spoke.

"You dare," he said quietly. "How dare you come into my chambers. Do you have a death wish?"

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My heart pounded wildly as he continued, his grip tightening just enough to make it clear he was not joking.

"And where is your twin sister, Selene?"

At the sound of her name, I flinched.

That was when I realized it, the illusion was gone. The potion must have worn off, and I no longer looked like her.

When I did not answer him right away, his eyes darkened, and his fingers closed even tighter around my neck.

“If you do not answer me,” he said coldly, “you will lose your life. Where is my mate?”

The word hit me harder than his grip ever could.

Mate.

My chest ached painfully as I stared up at him, because in that moment, I understood something I never wanted to accept: he was not looking for me at all.

He was looking for Selene. And for the first time in my life, I found myself wishing, just for a moment, that I really were her.

Adrian’s hand tightened even more around my throat, and the world began to blur at the edges as panic and pain crashed through me, because I truly felt how close death was.

My chest burned as I tried to drag in air that would not come, and with what little strength I had left I clawed weakly at his wrist, forcing out broken words through my closing throat.

“P-Prince... A-Adrian... Adrian...”

My vision swam, dark spots dancing in front of my eyes, and just when I was certain I was about to die right there in his bed, the door burst open.

“Adrian, drop her this instant,” a deep, commanding Alpha voice thundered through the room.

The crushing grip on my throat loosened just enough for me to suck in a desperate breath, though his hand was still there, reminding me that my life was only being spared because his father had ordered him to stop.

Gasping and trembling, I turned my head as much as I could and saw them standing in the doorway, Alpha Rhydian, the Luna, my father, my stepmother, and fan, all staring at us with expressions ranging from shock to cold calculation.

“Sienna!” my stepmother cried out dramatically, her hand flying to her chest. “Oh my goddess, Sienna!”

Relief flooded through me so hard my body nearly gave out, because I knew that if they had not come when they did, Prince Adrian would truly have killed me.

“M-Mother... Father... Brother... please help me,” I pleaded hoarsely, tears pricking my eyes as I clung to the only thing that could save me.

My stepmother rushed forward, her voice sharp with panic as she cried, "Let her go, Prince Adrian, you are going to kill her!"

My father turned to the Alpha, his face pale as he said, "Alpha Rhydian, please, what is the meaning of this? Stop your son from killing my daughter."

The Alpha's brows furrowed as he looked at Adrian. "Adrian, I told you to let her go. Do you want to disobey me?"

The Luna nodded urgently beside him. "Yes, Adrian, listen to your father. Let Sienna go."

But Adrian did not look at any of them. His eyes were dark, cold and utterly indifferent to their presence, as if nothing

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anyone said carried any weight at all.

Was he really that furious about last night? I did not understand what I had done to deserve this.

Seeing that Adrian was not moving, my stepmother turned sharply toward Ian. "Ian, help your sister. The prince will kill

her."

fan did not even spare her a glance.

He leaned lazily against the doorframe, arms crossed, his expression bored as if this were nothing more than a tedious interruption.

"I only came here to talk to the Alpha about Selene," he said slowly, his tone unhurried and dry. "You two barged in saying Sienna was missing and that the last place she said she was going was to the prince, so that is why we are here now, catching

them like this."

He shifted slightly, eyes half-lidded with disinterest,

"Why should I intervene when I was not planning on looking for her in the first place? I am not the type to do something I do not want to do."

His words stung worse than any slap.

I clenched my fists weakly, rage boiling beneath my fear, because I knew that if it were Selene in my place, Adrian would already be dead for daring to touch her.

My parents clearly hated Ian's words, but they did not dare argue with him.

A low growl rumbled from Adrian's chest as his gaze finally shifted, burning with something dark and dangerous.

"What did you do to me last night?" he demanded.

I looked up at him with terror burning in my eyes, my whole body still shaking as I forced the words past my bruised throat.

"L-last night... I came to visit you when I heard you came back," said in a trembling voice, every syllable carefully chosen. "I really wanted to see you, so I sneaked into your chambers, but I didn't expect you to grab me and take my first time. That is what happened, my prince. I promise."

My heart pounded so loudly in my ears that I was sure everyone could hear it, because if he knew about the potion, if he realized what I had really done, then this would not end with me merely being humiliated.

Adrian stared at me, his green eyes sharp and suspicious, as if he were trying to peel apart my words to see what lay beneath them, and for a terrifying moment I thought he already knew everything.

He took a slow, controlled breath, his free hand running through his hair as if he were trying to steady himself, and then, without warning, he released me and threw me back onto the bed beside him.

I landed hard against the mattress, hurriedly pulling the sheets up to cover my naked body, my hands trembling as tears spilled down my cheeks. My stepmother rushed to my side at once, wrapping an arm around me, while I shook in her embrace, still tasting fear on my tongue.

Adrian sat up, completely ignoring us, the blanket hanging low around his waist as he spoke in a cold, flat voice.

"Get lost. I never want to see your face again."

"That is not possible," my stepmother said sharply, stepping forward despite the danger in his eyes.

Adrian turned his head toward her, and she flinched and took a step back, but the Luna moved beside her, lifting her chin.

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“Yes, Adrian, that is not possible,” the Luna said as she pointed at the red stain on the sheets. “Look. You took her first time. It is now your duty to make her your mate. Those are the rules, or else the royal family will face criticism from the people”

My father nodded in agreement. “Yes. You have to take responsibility for taking my daughter’s first time. It is already a disgrace. If you do not do this, the temple will not sit by and watch.”

Alpha Rhydian remained silent, standing there like a looming shadow as he observed everything with unreadable eyes.

I glanced toward the door and realized Ian was no longer there; he must have left the moment he grew bored, that irritating, cold brother of mine who never cared what happened to me. But it did not matter, because Adrian had no choice now, and that thought made something dark and satisfied coil inside my chest.

Adrian slowly stood, pulling another blanket around his waist, his posture rigid and unyielding as his gaze swept across the

room.

“Selene is my mate,” he said. “I will not mark anyone except her and no one can tell me otherwise.”

Without sparing anyone another glance, he turned away from leaving his words hanging in the room.

My hands clenched in the sheets, nails digging into the fabric as age and desperation twisted inside me, but my stepmother leaned close and whispered softly into my ear, her voice smooth and reassuring.

“Do not worry, Sienna. Even if he says no, there is nothing he can do. He will still marry you, and you will become the Luna of the pack.”

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[1,935 words]

Chapter 153

Selene

“Noah!”

Miles’ voice rang across the inner arena, loud and far too energetic for this ungodly hour. I slowly lifted my head and saw him in the distance, waving both arms at me as if I might somehow miss him.

I sighed and shook my head.

How could someone possibly be in such a good mood this early in the morning?

When they woke me up at dawn, I genuinely felt like I was being dragged back from the dead. I hated being woken up early. It messed with my head, soured my temper, and left me in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Even in my past lives, I remembered how my warriors used to tiptoe into my chambers to wake me before sunrise. As punishment, I would make them run drills all night until they collapsed onto their beds, only to wake them up at dawn again so they could understand exactly how it felt.

It was only fair, and I was a crazy commander back in the days.

To make matters worse, I had barely slept at all last night.

Usually, the moment my body touched a bed, I would fall asleep instantly. I loved sleeping. It was one of my few uncomplicated pleasures. But last night my mind had been far too restless, crowded with thoughts I could not quiet, most of them circling back to one infuriating, dangerous man.

Alpha Damien.

What happened between us yesterday replayed in my mind again and again, every glance, every touch, every word. I kept asking myself what I was supposed to do about him, and the more I thought about it, the more tangled everything became. He occupied my thoughts so completely that sleep never truly stood a chance.

I pressed a hand to my forehead and then sat down unceremoniously on the floor, leaning my back against one of the cold stone pillars. I closed my eyes, ignoring the curious stares from other contestants and the distant roar of the crowd already gathering in the outer arena.

Footsteps approached.

A moment later, Miles plopped down beside me on the floor without hesitation.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, tilting his head as he studied my face. “You look tired.”

“That’s because I am tired,” I replied flatly without opening my eyes. “I am so tired and so bored of fighting that I sincerely hope today’s tournament is something simple.”

He chuckled softly. “Let me guess. You don’t want to lift a single finger like yesterday, right?”

“Exactly,” I said without shame.

“Well,” he continued, clearly amused, “I’m sorry to inform you that you won’t be that lucky today. I heard that in today’s challenge everyone has to participate directly, and they banned the use of protective spells in the tournament. You’ll have to remove any protective charms before entering the arena.”

I opened one eye and glanced at him before nodding slowly. “I figured they would do something like that eventually.”

“And,” he added casually, “where is Chloe?”

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“She said she had somewhere to go on our way here,” I answered “She’ll be back.”

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“And you just let her go alone?” Miles asked, raising an eyebrow. Aren’t you worried someone might ambush her?”

I tapped the necklace resting against my collarbone. “That’s what this is for.”

Understanding dawned on his face, and he smiled. “Ah, yes. The famous protective charm. I almost forgot who I’m talking

to.”

I leaned my head back against the pillar again, but then something from last night resurfaced in my mind.

My eyes opened fully this time.

“Miles,” I said slowly, turning my head to look at him, “what does it mean when someone gives another person their hairpin?”

Miles smirked the moment my question left my lips, and instead of answering immediately, his gaze drifted upward to my hair.

“Another one?” he asked lightly, leaning closer as if inspecting it. And a golden one too. That’s rare and expensive. I wonder which powerful man gave you that. Was it the one you were with yesterday?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief.

“You’re really popular with both men and women, Noah.”

I stared at him for a long moment before lifting my hand and lightly knocking my knuckles against his head.

“Stop saying stupid things and answer the question,”

He chuckled, rubbing the spot dramatically. “Fine, fine. No need to get violent this early in the morning.”

He straightened slightly, though the teasing smile never left his face.

“In the Crimson Pack,” he began, “giving someone your hairpin a way of showing interest. It means you want that person to become yours. And if the other person accepts it, that means they agree to belong to you.”

I closed my eyes slowly.

I had suspected as much. But I had hoped I was wrong.

A low groan escaped my lips as I pressed my fingers against my temple. What exactly had I done?

Strangely, I was not even as worried about Damien as I probably should have been. I was more worried about Chloe.

How had I not noticed?

How had I failed to see the way she looked at me, the slight flush in her cheeks, the softness in her voice whenever she said my name? Maybe it was because I never once considered that she would fall for someone like me. I was lazy, detached, and rarely put effort into pleasing anyone. Most women admired men who were passionate about fighting, men who radiated strength and ambition.

I did not hate fighting.

I simply did not care for it enough to make it my entire personality. Since the beginning of this tournament, I had been doing the bare minimum, choosing convenience over glory whenever possible.

Now I had no idea how to stop this situation from growing more complicated.

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Chloe believed I was a man.

I did not want to lead her on, especially under false pretenses. And I certainly did not want to hurt her. Whether I liked it or not, I had begun to grow fond of her. She felt less like a romantic interest and more like a younger sister who had somehow attached herself to me.

Miles glanced at me from the side. "You look like someone carrying the weight of the world. Hate to be you."

I opened one eye lazily. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

“Not really,” he replied cheerfully.

Before I could respond, a loud voice echoed through the inner arena from the overhead speakers.

“Good morning, everyone! Today is the second day of the Rite Tournament. I hope you all had a wonderful sleep.”

The host’s voice was bright and theatrical, and the crowd in the outer arena erupted into cheers.

“Thank the Goddess,” she continued smoothly, “because today will be just as fun as yesterday. Let us welcome our warriors!”

The cheers grew louder, almost deafening.

Contestants began moving toward the outer arena, some running with excitement, others walking with confidence. I sighed for what felt like the third time that morning and pushed myself to my feet. Miles rose immediately after me, stretching as if he had just woken from a pleasant nap rather than witnessing bloodshed yesterday.

When we stepped into the outer arena, the noise intensified. The crowd was much larger than before, filling nearly every seat, their eyes glittering with anticipation as they stared down at the battleground.

I scanned the elevated seats reserved for the important figures.

Yara was there.

Kaius was there. But the seat Damien had occupied yesterday was empty.

My gaze lingered on it longer than necessary.

I should have felt relieved. His absence should have allowed me to breathe easier, to focus without worrying about crimson eyes tracking my every move. And yet, a faint displeasure stirred within me.

I frowned at myself, annoyed by the unexpected disappointment curling in my chest.

Why did it matter whether he was here or not?

The host’s voice rang out again.

“Before we begin today’s matches, we will be doing things a little differently.”

The crowd gradually quieted, leaning forward in anticipation.

“After we pair the contestants,” she continued, “the audience will be allowed to place bets with money on who will last in each match. The total amount wagered will be given to the winning contestant. You may also choose to sponsor your preferred warrior, and if they perform well, you will earn a portion in return.”

For a brief second there was silence, then the entire arena exploded into cheers.

The spectators loved it. Even many of the contestants looked pleased at the idea of earning money along with survival. Gold had a way of dulling fear, even in a place like this.

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Wiltes glinsed as we to the wade “What are you thinking about?” he asked. “Are you nervous?”

Ranking down how many people will bet on me,” I replied Buntly.

The you stand fi cadent amount after what happened yesterday?” I continued thoughtfully. “Or do you think they I pand the rising nan ane lexause I dada i Eight properly?”

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bebere,” Milles ered under his breath

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Of course cared about surviving that I also cared about money

If I was going to risk my life in this ridiculous spectacle, I might well profit from it. When I returned home. I intended to spoil Evelyn and Salas properly. They had always indulged me without question. It was only fair that I returned the favor.

Gold had many uses. And I planned to leave this place with as much of it as possible.

Miles leaned slightly toward me. “For someone who wants to ear money,” he said softly, “you don’t seem worried about what mamber you’ll get”

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“Why worry?” I murmured.

Whatever number I drew, they would have to deal with me.

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[1,563 words]

Chapter 154

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Selene

“Ugh! Why am I number two?” a man groaned loudly after pulling a wooden token from the box, his shoulders slumping as though he had just been sentenced to death.

Another contestant standing beside him glanced at the number in his hand and let out a low whistle before sighing sympathetically. “I feel bad for you, bro. The people in number two are monsters. From what I’ve seen, at least three of them are ridiculously strong.”

“Don’t remind me,” the first man muttered miserably, dragging hand down his face as he looked around at the others. “How am I supposed to survive that? Does anyone want to switch numbers with me?”

A few contestants instinctively stepped back as if afraid misfortune might cling to them if they stood too close to him, and some exchanged awkward looks without saying anything.

“Oh, another thing,” a soft, melodic voice interrupted smoothly cutting through the murmurs without the need for a loudspeaker. “You cannot change numbers with another person

Every single contestant turned at once.

The host was walking toward us with a small, knowing smile on her lips, her long dress swaying elegantly with each step, her beauty almost blinding under the bright lights of the arena. Even without raising her voice, she commanded everyone’s attention effortlessly. This time she was not addressing the audience in the stands, only us, the contestants standing on the

arena floor.

The men stared openly, their faces flushing as their gazes trailed over her curves before snapping back to her face, as though they were afraid of being caught.

She stopped in front of the man who had tried to negotiate his fate and tilted her head slightly. “Is that clear?” she asked sweetly.

The man swallowed and nodded quickly. “Y-Yes, ma’am. Very clear.”

“Good,” she replied, her smile widening just enough to make the men around her straighten unconsciously. “You are all strong warriors. Surely something as small as a number will not frighten you.”

Her voice carried a subtle seduction that wrapped around their pride and squeezed it gently.

The same man who had looked terrified just moments ago suddenly puffed out his chest and clutched his token proudly. “She’s right. I’m a strong warrior. There’s no reason for me to be scared.”

I watched the entire exchange with an amused smile playing on my lips, because it was almost laughable how easily they were swayed. These men had no idea they were being guided step by step toward possible death by a woman who understood exactly how to twist pride and desire to her advantage. Even I had to admit she was skilled.

As if sensing my gaze lingering on her, she turned her head slightly and met my eyes across the space between us.

“Excuse me,” she said lightly to the group before pivoting gracefully and walking in my direction.

Behind me, Miles leaned closer and whispered, "It looks like she coming toward us." Then, without lowering his voice nearly enough, he added with open admiration, "But seriously, have you seen her chest? It's huge. I've never seen anything like that before."

I turned and knocked him on the head without hesitation.

He yelped softly and rubbed the spot, looking at me with an exaggerated wounded expression. "What? I'm just telling the truth."

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55 vouchers

I waved him off dismissively. "Go pick your number," I said flatly "And if you see Chloe, explain everything to her."

He huffed like a scolded child but nodded obediently. "Fine."

Once he walked away, the host stopped in front of me, her smile softer now, almost intimate.

"We finally meet privately," she said, her eyes studying my face carefully.

I looked at her calmly and replied without bothering to sugarcoat my words. "Are you trying to seduce me into giving up my life like the others?"

For a brief second, she paused.

It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but I saw the flicker of surprise in her eyes at being called out so directly, especially in front of someone who did not seem even slightly affected by her charm.

The surprise in her eyes did not last more than a moment before her expression smoothed out again, and that practiced, captivating smile returned to her lips as though it had never left

"You are not afraid, are you?" she asked softly, tilting her head as she studied me with curiosity. "I have power in this tournament. Aren't you afraid I might make things very difficult for you?" Her tone did not carry a direct threat, and instead it sounded almost intrigued, as though she were testing my confidence rather than trying to intimidate me.

From the way she had watched me yesterday, I already knew that I had captured her interest.

I shrugged lightly and met her gaze without hesitation. "Just because you want to make things hard for me does not mean I will let you." I replied calmly, making sure my voice carried neither arrogance nor fear.

Her smile widened at my response, and something sharp flickered in her eyes as she said, "Interesting. You are really interesting. I can understand why he likes you."

I raised an eyebrow at her words, confusion flashing briefly through my mind, but before I could ask her what she meant, I heard footsteps approaching from behind me.

Miles returned with Chloe walking beside him, and the moment my eyes landed on Chloe, my attention sharpened. The brightness that usually filled her gaze was gone, replaced by something hollow and distant, and the cheerful smile that was almost always present on her lips had completely disappeared.

A faint crease formed between my brows as I looked at her carefully. "Chloe, what is wrong? Did something happen?" I

asked.

She looked at me and forced a small smile that did not reach her eyes before shaking her head quickly. "N-Nothing. I am just tired," she said, but the way her fingers curled slightly at her sides told me she was not telling the truth.

I did not believe her because she had been perfectly fine earlier, and now her entire demeanor had shifted. The thought that someone might have said or done something to her made my jaw tighten slightly, and I was about to press her further when Miles glanced around and asked, "Has the host gone?"

I turned my head to look behind me and realized that the woman had indeed disappeared without me noticing.

"What did she want?" Miles asked curiously.

I shrugged faintly because I truly had no clear answer. "I am not sure," I replied honestly.

Miles did not dwell on it and instead continued speaking. "Anyway, Chloe and I have chosen our numbers. I am number two, and Chloe is eighteen. I heard there are two hundred contestants this year, which means there are twenty groups."

I nodded slowly as I processed the information, and just then someone in the crowd suddenly said, "Look at him. He is about to pick."

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Chapter 154

86%

55 vouchers

The murmurs spread quickly through the arena, and everyone attention shifted toward the wooden box placed at the center of the stage. I turned as well and saw the prince walking toward it with a calm and unbothered posture that made the surrounding tension feel almost laughable.

People instinctively moved aside to give him space, their fear evident in the way they avoided direct eye contact with him. He reached the box, slipped his hand inside, and pulled out a numbered token, but he did not even bother to look at it before turning around and walking away as though the result did not matter to him at all.

Whispers followed him, and I could hear the unease in the crowd. Miles leaned closer to me and said quietly, "People are really scared that he will be in their group, and honestly, I understand their fear because the prince is truly dangerous."

I glanced at him briefly before shifting my gaze to Chloe, whose eyes were locked onto the prince's retreating figure while her hand tightened around the hilt of her sword in a way that did not escape my notice.

away

Her reaction confused me because it was too intense to be simple fear or admiration, and I stored that observation in my mind for later.

Miles nudged me lightly and said. "Noah, you should go and choose your number too." I nodded and walked toward the stage while feeling the weight of countless gazes following me. I approached the box, I could clearly hear people whispering among themselves that they hoped I would end up their group because they considered me weak and easy to defeat. I ignored their comments completely, slipped my hand to the box, and let my fingers brush over the smooth wooden tokens until I chose one and pulled it out.

I looked down at the number carved into the surface and let out quiet breath before muttering under my breath, "I guess I am the final show of the day."

Ball twenty

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AD

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 155

[1,974 words]

Chapter 155

Selene

5

There were about twenty groups in the overall challenge, and each group consisted of ten warriors, which meant that two hundred contestants would be thrown into chaos one round at time. In order for the challenge to be considered fair, each person had to choose a number on their own without interference, and once that number was chosen, there was no exchanging it with anyone from another group, no matter how much you regretted your luck.

If you were number one, then you were number one, and there was no escaping it. You could not bring any protective amulet into the fight, you could not use spiritual power of any kind, and you could not even shift into your wolf form to gain the advantage of heightened strength and speed, because in this found you had to rely purely on your physical skills and instincts if you wanted to survive and move forward.

Those were the rules of the challenge, and the host had made sure every single one of us understood them clearly.

I stood with my arms crossed as I stared at the warriors of the first round, the contestants who had drawn number one and were now being led into a massive arena that resembled a boxing ring, only far larger and far more brutal. The walls of the enclosure were high and reinforced, and while the rest of us we allowed to watch from a distance, it was strictly forbidden for any contestant whose number had not been called to approach the fighting grounds.

The separation was intentional, both to prevent interference and to build tension among those waiting for their turn.

A sharp whistle cut through the air from a distance where the officials stood, far enough that their words could not be heard, and the moment that sound echoed across the arena, the first match began. The warriors inside shouted as they charged at one another, steel clashing against steel almost instantly as blade met with violent force.

Within seconds, the first cries of pain rang out, and I could already see blood staining the ground as several contestants. stumbled back with fresh wounds.

I leaned back against a stone pillar nearby, my posture relaxed even as chaos unfolded before me. Beside me, Miles watched with curiosity and said, "This seems easy, right, Noah?"

I tilted my head slightly without taking my eyes off the fight. "Its not as easy as you think," I replied calmly. "It is harder. than what most people realize."

He glanced at me. "Is it hard for you?"

"No," I answered bluntly, because that was the truth.

However, I shifted my gaze slightly as I continued speaking. "But there are many consequences in this type of match that people fail to consider. One of the biggest consequences is that everyone in your group can turn on you at any moment. If you have enemies in your round, or if the others decide that you are the strongest among them, they can silently agree to eliminate you first. And if all nine of them turn on you at once, en even a skilled fighter will struggle to survive."

Almost as if the arena itself wanted to prove my point, the flow battle suddenly shifted. Several warriors who had been fighting individually began to reposition, their attention locking onto a single figure in the ring. One by one, they redirected their blades toward a lone woman standing near the center.

Their swords were raised as they advanced on her together.

I recognized her immediately.

She was the same woman who had shot an arrow at me earlier in the competition, back when I had been sitting calmly behind my protective barrier while the others slaughtered one another. She must have proven herself formidable in the first few exchanges of this round, because the others clearly saw her the greatest threat and had chosen to deal with her collectively.

Steel flashed in the air as they lunged at her from multiple angle, and despite being surrounded, she moved with precision.

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Chapter 155

80%

555 vouchers

deflecting one strike while narrowly avoiding another. A faint smile touched my lips as I watched her hold her ground against overwhelming odds.

She was strong.

The woman in the arena did not look afraid even when nine blades were pointed in her direction, and instead of retreating, she calmly lifted her bow with steady hands and released an arrow straight into the throat of the first man who lunged at her. He collapsed almost instantly, choking on his own blood, and before his body even touched the ground, she had already drawn another arrow and shot it cleanly through the eye of the second attacker. There was no hesitation in her movements and no wasted motion in her stance, and it was clear that she had long accepted the brutality of battles like this.

“It is always smart to take the strongest out first.” I said as I watched her eliminate yet another opponent. “That way the weaker ones can fight without constantly looking over their shoulders in fear.”

Miles glanced at me, listening carefully, and I continued without taking my eyes off the arena. “Another reason why this fight is difficult is because if you are placed in a group filled with highly skilled fighters, your chance of surviving drops dramatically. You cannot even rely on running, because if they are faster and more coordinated than you, they will corner you before you take three steps.”

Inside the ring, the weak were not spared either, because once the stronger warriors noticed an easy target, they struck without mercy. One man tried to crawl away after being slashed across the leg, but a sword pierced straight through his back before he

could escape, and his scream of agony echoed loudly before it was abruptly silenced. Blood stained the ground in thick streaks, and the metallic scent of it lingered in the air.

“A lot of people will die in this round,” I said plainly.

I finally turned to look at Miles and Chloe, wanting to measure their reactions, but neither of them looked horrified or shaken by the scene unfolding in front of us. Instead, they stood here with the same composed expressions I wore, their gazes sharp and focused.

“I know it will be easy for the two of you to defeat most of the people here,” I began calmly, and they both looked at me in surprise, “but do not forget the most important thing.”

They waited for my next words.

“If you cannot beat them, that is fine,” I continued. “Losing also means learning. I have lost many things in my life, yet I still pushed myself forward each time. What truly matters is your life. When you are about to be killed, when you know without a doubt that death is one strike away, give up.”

They both blinked at me.

“Giving up in a match does not mean giving up on life,” I added firmly. “It means protecting your life so you can grow stronger and return another day.”

I understood warriors far too well, because in my past life I had been a general who commanded countless battles, and I knew the pride that burned inside fighters. They hated surrender because the world branded it as shameful, weakness, and as something unforgivable. But why should they care what the world thought? The world would not mourn them if they died foolishly trying to prove a point.

The world could go and condemn itself for all I cared.

Chloe and Miles stared at me with widened eyes, and I could see deep respect settling in their expressions. Miles was the first to speak. “I have never met anyone like you, Noah,” he said thoughtfully. “Sometimes it feels like I am talking to someone who has lived for a very long time.”

Chloe nodded in agreement, her earlier gloom momentarily forgotten.

Normally, I would have ignored everyone and found a quiet corner to nap until my own round was called, but somewhere along the

way I had grown

attached to the two of them, and I did not want to see either of them die in this arena.

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Chapter 155

65 vouchers

Just then, the whistle blew sharply, cutting through the heavy air and the crowd erupted into loud cheers that shook the very pillars of the arena. I turned back toward the ring, and what I saw made the outcome clear.

All nine contestants lay dead on the blood-soaked ground.

Only one person remained standing.

The archer.

She was drenched in blood from head to toe, some of it hers, but not as if she had simply finished a routine task rather than slaughtered nine opponents. Her breathing was steady, and her eyes held no remorse.

I studied her carefully.

She had fought exactly the way a true warrior should, doing what was necessary without hesitation.

And I could not deny it.

She had earned her victory.

The host stepped forward gracefully, her heels clicking lightly against the stone as she raised her hand to quiet the roaring crowd, and a radiant smile spread across her face as though she had just witnessed a performance rather than a massacre.

“Congratulations, the winner is this stunning woman here.”

The crowd erupted into thunderous applause and cheers, their tension dissolving into excitement as if bloodshed were nothing more than theater. The archer gave a small, composed nod in acknowledgment of her victory before bending her knees and leaping out of the fighting enclosure with ease.

The host clasped her hands together and laughed softly. "That was an amazing match," she purred, her eyes glimmering with satisfaction. "Truly interesting. Well, it should be interesting for some people, especially those who were wise enough to place their bets on her."

A cunning smile curved her lips at that last sentence.

"Do not forget, if you bet on the winner, your return will be significantly higher."

At those words, parts of the crowd cheered loudly in triumph, clearly having gambled correctly, while others groaned in frustration and disappointment, cursing their poor judgment. The host chuckled at the mixture of reactions, clearly entertained by both joy and despair alike.

"Now," she continued, turning her gaze back toward the contestants, "it is time to move to the next fight. The next number entering the arena will be number two."

Excited murmurs rippled through the audience before swelling to cheers once again.

Beside me, Miles rose to his feet and stretched his arms above his head as if preparing for nothing more than a casual spar. "I guess it is my turn now,"

Chloe forced a smile onto her face, and although it did not quite reach her eyes, I could see that her concern for him was genuine. "Good luck, Miles," she said softly.

I glanced at her briefly before shifting my attention back to him

Miles nodded reassuringly. "Do not worry about me," he said, his voice carrying that same innocent cheerfulness he always wore like a mask,

He turned his gaze toward the massive fighting enclosure and staked faintly. "I just need a little exercise before coming

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back."

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With that, he began walking toward the arena, his posture relaxed and unhurried, as though he were strolling into a garden rather than stepping into a battlefield where nine others would be trying to end his life.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 156

[2,040 words]

Chapter 156

Miles

46%

10 vouchers

“Look at him. He is a devil. All of our family are important scholars in the pack, so why is he always playing around with a sword?”

“He is very strange. He is still so young and yet he is already this killed with blades. No one else in our generation is good with weapons, but he moves like he was born holding one. Do you think he is really part of the Lee family?”

“Who knows? He is the youngest son of the Lee head after all. His father and his eldest brother let him do whatever he wants, and he never follows the Lee family rules anyway. That boy is just strange.”

Those were the words I grew up hearing, whispered behind my back in corridors lined with ancient books, murmured by relatives during family gatherings, and sometimes spoken boldly enough that I could hear them.

In the Crimson Pack, there are five prominent families, each carrying a responsibility that keeps the pack strong and balanced, and the Lee family stands among them as the pillar of knowledge and strategy. We are known as the scholars, the thinkers, the problem-solvers who sit behind polished wooden desks and draft solutions while others execute them. When a crisis arises, when politics grow complicated, or when alliances begin to crack, it is the Lee family that the pack calls upon. Even the current Beta, Jason, my eldest brother, comes from our bloodline, and he is praised as one of the most intelligent men in the entire territory, second only to the Alpha himself.

Our family is supposed to be perfect in its own refined way, using intellect rather than brute force to protect the pack and help it prosper.

That is how it was meant to be. That is how it remained, until I was born.

Unlike the rest of the Lees, I was never brilliant with books, and no matter how many tutors were hired or how many late nights I was forced to spend in the library, I simply could not bring myself to care about theories, history scrolls, or strategic manuscripts. No, that is not entirely honest.

It was not that I could not understand them; it was that I hated being trapped by them. I hated the suffocating silence of the study halls and the way everyone expected me to nod thoughtfully at discussions that made my head throb with boredom.

While the others were praised for their analytical skills and near-perfect academic achievements, I was the disappointment who slipped out of the estate to train with swordsmen at the edge of the pack territory.

My eldest brother was different from me in many ways, but in one way we were the same: neither of us wanted to be chained by the expectations of our lineage. The difference was that he possessed a mind sharp enough to cut through any political problem with ease, and he used that brilliance to carve his own path. Instead of remaining a scholar hidden in the background, he fought fiercely to become the Alpha's Beta.

For the most powerful man in the West to personally appoint you as his Beta is a dream countless people chase their entire lives, yet my brother achieved it through his capability.

I have always respected him for that.

Watching him stand at the Alpha's right hand was the first time truly wanted something for myself. I did not want to inherit a title simply because of my surname, and I did not want to be introduced as "another Lee scholar." I wanted to be recognized for who I was, not for the family that birthed me.

That was when my obsession with becoming a warrior truly began.

To others, it might have looked like rebellion or a desperate attempt to gain attention, but to me it was neither of those things. When I held a sword in my hand and felt its weight settle into my palm, something inside me felt free. I felt free in a way I never did while staring at ink-stained pages.

I was not fighting to become famous or to outshine anyone.

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Chapter 156

I was fighting because, in battle, I did not have to pretend to be the scholar I was never meant to be.

In battle, I could simply be Miles.

46%

10 vouchers

These past few days, I have felt freer than I have ever felt in my tire life, and fighting has become even more interesting to me, not because of the structure of the challenges or the number of warriors gathered here, but because of one particular person who has completely changed the way I see everything.

Noah.

I have met countless warriors throughout my life, prodigies from noble families, and even seasoned veterans who have survived more battles than I can count, yet I always believed that none of them truly embodied everything a warrior should be until I met him.

He is different.

It is in the way he looks at people, as if he can peel back their skin the way he speaks, saying things others are too afraid to admit. I surface, yet sharp when it truly matters.

and see the truth underneath with a single glance. It is in the way he carries himself, lazy and indifferent on the

Sometimes, when I stand beside him, I feel as though I am standing before something ancient and sacred, like the presence of the Moon Goddess herself wrapped in the body of a young man. There are moments when his aura feels less human and more like that of a seasoned general who has walked through countless battlefields.

To me, Noah is not ordinary.

He is far from ordinary.

While others see a lazy fighter who draws protective spells and avoids unnecessary effort, I see the terrifying strength hidden beneath that calm exterior. I see the confidence of someone who knows exactly how powerful he is and simply chooses not to display it unless he feels like it.

And strangely enough, I trust him.

I am not someone who trusts easily. Growing up in the Lee family taught me to analyze everyone and everything, to assume that people always have ulterior motives. Yet lately, I have found myself following Noah's words without hesitation, almost instinctively aligning myself with him as if it is the most natural thing in the world.

At this point, if Noah were to casually tell me to kill everyone in his arena, I am certain that I would not even question him.

I run a hand through my hair and let out a quiet scoff under my breath.

"I cannot believe I have become such a simp," I mutter. "And not just for anyone, but for a man."

My gaze drifts toward him again.

He is sitting down with his eyes closed, looking as though he might fall asleep at any moment despite the tension in the arena. Warriors around us are shifting nervously, gripping their weapons tightly as they wait for their turn, yet Noah has the audacity to yawn.

I have met many people who pretend not to care because they want to appear cool or unbothered, but Noah is not pretending.

He genuinely does not care.

There is something slightly insane about that level of indifference. No, not slightly. He is truly crazy when he wants to be, and when he gets angry, there is something deeply dangerous about him that even I cannot fully comprehend.

The thought makes my lips curl upward.

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13:06 Mon, Feb 23 A

Chapter 156

I am actually excited about the future for the first time in my life

Just as I am lost in those thoughts, a shadow falls over me.

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I blink and look up to find a man standing directly in front of me, his sword pointed toward my chest, his expression twisted with determination and fear.

Only then do I notice the chaos around me.

The whistle has already blown.

The fight has begun.

All around us, warriors are clashing, and the scent of blood thickens the air, yet I had not even realized it because I was too busy staring at Noah like an idiot.

I frown slightly at the man in front of me, annoyed that he has interrupted my thoughts.

How troublesome.

I guess it is time to get this little exercise over with so I can return to watching the only person here who truly interests me.

I tilted my head slightly and looked at the man in front of me with mild irritation. "Get out of my sight," I told him calmly, as if he were nothing more than a servant blocking my path rather than someone pointing a sword at my chest.

He smirked at my words. "Remember me?" he asked mockingly. I am the man you almost killed yesterday. Since this is an official challenge, I can finally get rid of you without consequences. Boys, surround him. Let us take care of this worm first."

At his command, the remaining seven men in our group moved in smoothly, forming a tight circle around me as they raised their weapons with cruel smiles spreading across their faces. Their confidence was amusing, as if they truly believed that numbers alone could bridge the gap between us.

I let out a quiet sigh and glanced over their shoulders toward Noah one more time.

"Ten seconds," I said lightly, returning my gaze to the men around me. "That is all I will need before I go back to him."

The men frowned, clearly confused by my words, and one of them even opened his mouth as if to ask what I meant. They never got the chance.

In one smooth motion, I pulled out the small knife concealed against my chest. The blade was shorter than their swords, almost laughably small in comparison, and I could see the ridicule forming in their eyes as they prepared to mock me.

The laughter never came.

Before the sound could leave their throats, I flicked my wrist and swung the blade in a single arc.

For a split second, nothing happened, and the men continued to stand there, their expressions still twisted with arrogance. Then, almost simultaneously, all seven of them dropped to the ground.

Their bodies hit the floor with dull thuds, their eyes wide open in disbelief, as though even in their final moments they did not understand what had occurred. A thin cut marked each of their necks, so clean that there was barely any blood at first glance.

The arena fell into complete silence.

Even the other contestants froze as they stared at the scene before them in horror.

"gods..." someone in the crowd whispered. "Just one swing"

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Chapter 156

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“What terrifying power,” another voice muttered, and more murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowds.

I ignored them all. None of it mattered.

Before the host could even recover enough to announce the result, I hopped down from the fighting stage and began walking back toward Noah as though I had simply finished a brief errand.

“Woah,” Chloe smiled as I approached. “That was so cool, Miles!

I gave her a small smile. “Thank you.” But my attention was already on Noah.

He did not look surprised, or particularly interested. It was almost as if he had expected nothing less from me, as if my victory had been the most natural outcome in the world.

He gave a small nod. “Not bad.”

That was all he said.

Not bad.

Yet my heart began to pound wildly against my ribs, a strange warmth spreading through my chest at those simple words. I felt absurdly satisfied, and ridiculously happy, as though I had just been awarded the highest honor imaginable.

Noah complimented me. And somehow, that mattered more than the stunned silence of the entire arena.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 157

[1,547 words]

Chapter 157

Chloe

It all felt like a flash.

46%

10 vouchers

One moment the whistle blew, and the next moment bodies were already hitting the ground, swords clashing, and blood spraying across the arena floor as if it were nothing more than spilled water. People screamed in pain as blades cut into their flesh, and others roared in triumph as they struck their opponents down. The metallic scent of blood filled the air that it became hard to breathe, yet the crowd surrounding the arena continued to cheer loudly, their excitement rising with every death.

They enjoyed it.

They enjoyed watching people fight for their lives.

My fingers tightened unconsciously around the hilt of my sword as I forced myself not to look away. All my life, I had been known as something delicate, and fragile, a young lady meant to sit quietly in the background and receive the kind of training deemed appropriate for someone of my status. I was never supposed to stand in an arena like this, never supposed to raise a weapon against another living person.

All my life, my role had already been decided for me by the people around me.

I was not given the right to speak freely, nor was I given the right to choose the path I truly wanted. My future had been arranged like a carefully written script, and I was expected to follow it without question, smiling sweetly while doing so.

There were only two people who ever saw me differently.

My grandfather and my uncle.

My grandfather was stern with everyone else in the pack, his presence alone enough to silence a room, yet when it came to me, his voice always softened. He saw something in me that others refused to acknowledge. He saw potential. He told me that I should follow my own path and become whoever I wanted to be, even if the world disapproved.

It was because of him that I found the courage to come here. But the truth is, I was never obsessed with becoming a warrior the way many of the contestants here are. Unlike the spectators who shout excitedly at every strike, I do not enjoy watching people bleed. I do not feel thrilled when someone falls to the ground and never rises again.

I hate killing.

I hate seeing others die.

The only reason I am here is because I am searching for an answer. I thought that if I stood in this arena and fought with my own hands, I would finally understand whether this path truly belonged to me.

Even now, as another match ends and the lone survivor stands drenched in blood, I still do not know the answer.

I do not know whether I like being a warrior. But something good did come out of this.

My gaze shifts instinctively to Noah, who is leaning back with his eyes closed as if he were merely resting under a tree instead of standing beside a battlefield. A small, unconscious smile forms on my lips at the sight of him,

Because of my position in the pack, I have met countless people throughout my life. I have seen men with charming smiles and hidden agendas, allies who approached me and suitors who saw me as nothing more than a valuable connection.

Noah is different.

He is mysterious, and sometimes I cannot read what he is thinking, but I have never once felt that he wanted something from me. He does not hover around me with ulterior motives, nor does he try to manipulate me with sweet words.

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Chapter 157

He treats me differently from everyone else.

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He does not treat me like a fragile flower that must be protected from the wind. He looks at me as though he sees strength in me, as though he believes in my potential even when I doubt it myself.

Somewhere along the way, without me even realizing when it began, I started to fall in love with him.

Noah means more to me than he probably knows. And this time I will protect him.

Even if I have to lose my life, I will do it.

“Number eighteen!”

The loud announcement slices through my thoughts, making my heart jump violently in my chest.

That is me.

I lift my head, and at the same time, Noah opens his eyes. For someone who looked like he had been asleep this entire time, his gaze is sharp and clear as it lands on me.

He does not say anything. He does not need to.

The way he looks at me is enough. It is as if he is silently telling me that I can do this, that I am stronger than I think, that I do not have to be afraid.

My grip on my sword steadies. Whatever answer I am searching for, perhaps I will find it in that arena.

I nodded at Noah and gave him a small smile, trying to show him that I was not afraid, even though my heart was beating so loudly that I could hear it in my ears.

“Go and beat their asses, Chloe,” Miles said with a grin, his confidence in me so natural that it almost made me laugh.

I smiled at him too, warmth spreading through my chest despite the cold tension in the arena. I was lucky. For the first time in my life, I had two people standing beside me who genuinely cared about me, not because of my status, and my family name, but because I was simply Chloe.

“Do not worry,” I said softly. “I will.”

Before stepping forward, I reached up and removed the protective amulet Noah had given me yesterday. The small charm felt warm in my palm, almost as if it carried his presence within it.

“Hold this for me, please,” I said.

Noah looked at the amulet for a brief second before taking it back without a word. His fingers brushed mine for the shortest

moment.

I took a deep breath and turned away, forcing my legs to move toward the arena. Each step felt heavier than the last, but I did not stop until I crossed into the fighting match.

Eight people were already inside.

The moment they noticed me, most of them smirked.

“Aww, would you look at that,” one of them mocked loudly. “Little Miss Delicate is here, about to die. Nobody will be here to protect you this time.”

They all burst into laughter.

Another man tilted his head and added, “If you want to keep your life, you can still run away now. Once the match starts and

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13:06 Mon, Feb 23 AA.

Chapter 157

the real warriors begin fighting, we might not feel merciful enough to let you escape.”

More laughter followed, this time joined by the crowd.

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“Why are they letting weak people fight when they will surely die” someone shouted from the stands. “What is the meaning of this?”

“At least we know who we should not sponsor,” another voice replied, and the laughter grew louder.

I did not react or look at them.

I simply tightened my grip on my sword, holding it close to my chest. Their words stung, but I had heard worse my entire life. Being underestimated was nothing new to me.

One of the men glanced around and frowned. “We are nine. Who is the tenth?”

As soon as he finished speaking, the sound of steady footsteps echoed toward us.

The atmosphere changed instantly. Every single person turned toward the entrance of the arena, and the color drained from their faces as they saw him.

The prince.

He walked toward us with an unhurried pace, his presence alone enough to suffocate the air. There was no visible aggression in his expression, no dramatic display of power, yet it felt as though a demon had stepped into the ring, one capable of bringing everyone here to their knees within a minute.

He entered the match with a bored look on his face, his gaze sweeping over the warriors as though they were insignificant insects. For a brief second, his eyes lingered on me for a second. Then he looked away, as if I were not interesting enough to

hold his attention.

The eight warriors who had been laughing moments ago now looked as though they were about to collapse.

“I-I can not do this,” one of them stammered. “I am going to die.”

“Yes,” another added desperately. “This is not fair. He will kill us

The crowd erupted into laughter again, but this time it was directed at them.

“Look at them trembling. Are they really warriors?”

“They are a disgrace!”

Their faces turned red with shame. Warriors hated nothing more than being called cowards.

I ignored them. I only stared at the one man I had been watching this entire time.

The whistle blew sharply, cutting through the noise. I raised my word, my grip firm.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 158

[1,437 words]

12:21 Tue, Feb 24

Chapter 158

Chapter 158

Selene

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of almoonde

As soon as a certain person stepped forward and began walking wand the age him. I did not need an announcement or whispers from the vet to tell me who he was 1 behind i vratit processed it. There was always a distinct sensation whenever I came actos votre poul, as had things web fear. It was not dread, nor was it caution. It was something for me instuctive

It was as if my body and mind, which rarely agreed on anything uddenly aligned for a single purpo

Fight.

Every nerve in me sharpened. My blood felt warmer, my senses earer, and an energy coiled beneath my dh wate same feeling a predator experienced when locking eyes with and her predator

That was how I felt when the Prince's presence brushed againsty awareness as he approached the arena

I tilted my head slightly, studying him from a distance, and beside me Miles let out a soft sigh of happoiment Wha looking at him, I lazily opened my mouth, and he obediently pled another grape between my hope one he had somehow managed to sneak into the arena despite the rules. He shook his head dramatically and mitered. And I was hoping he would not be part of Chloe's competition."

I chewed on a grape with an indifferent expression, and kept my yes on the prince as he walked with calm stepe After a moment, I asked, "What do you know about the prince

Miles immediately turned to look at me, his lips forming an exaggerated pout "gods, do not tell me you are interested in him," he complained.

I paused mid-chew and glanced at him. "Huh?"

He placed a hand over his head as if I had wounded him deeply Noah, I know you are special and everyone seems to be drawn to you, but that does not mean you have to be interested all of them." he said seriously, then he pointed dramatically at himself. "If you keep looking at powerful people ke that, when exactly are you going to be interested in me? I can fight for your attention like the others, but I am afraid I wlose terribly since I am to tiny

I stared at him for a long second before flicking my fingers again his forehead again. "Stop speaking monense, I want Baity "I am serious. Tell me everything you know about the prince."

He nodded, but the look in his eyes told me he had not been ergely joking earlier Still, he shifted his mention hack his the arena and lowered his voice slightly. "His name is Prince Caspian he began. "He is related to Alpha Damien

When I first heard the title prince, a suspicion had formed in the back of my mind that he might be Damien's The thought had unsettled me more than I cared to admit. The truth was that I knew almost nothing about Alpha Damien personal life. During my time in the palace. I had learned counts things about politics alliances, and internal disputes, but whenever the topic drifted toward the alpha himself, conversations would abruptly die.

It was as though speaking too deeply about him was a taboo. Everyone avoided it

I could have dug for answers back then if I truly wanted to, but had not bothered. I planned to leave once I verived what t needed. I convinced myself that learning more about him would only complicate things

Now, however, things were different.

The prince was part of Chloe's competition, and from the way loe's grip had tightened around her wood care w he was not someone she liked.

I shifted my gaze back to Miles. "How is he related?"

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Chapter 158

51%

55 vouchers

Miles popped another grape into my mouth before answering. his tone almost casual. "The prince is the alpha's nephew."

I looked at him slowly and raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Miles nodded without hesitation. "Really."

For a brief second, I simply stared at him, and then, without meaning to, my lips curled upward on their own. It was subtle, but it was there. An instinctive reaction.

Miles narrowed his eyes at me immediately. "You have a weird smile on your face, Noah," he said suspiciously. "And you only smile like that when you are about to earn a lot of money or when you are about to cheat someone. Which one is it this time?"

I dropped the smile at once and shot him a flat look.

He smirked instead of backing down. "No... this one is different. he continued, tilting his head as he studied me more carefully. "This is not your 'profit' smile or your 'I am about to ruin someone's life' smile. It almost looks... relieved." His smile widened. "Why are you relieved, Noah?"

I coughed lightly and waved a dismissive hand as if brushing away his words. "You are speaking nonsense again. Continue. What else do you know about the prince?"

Miles did not look convinced, but he let it go for now. He placed another grape between my lips, and I chewed thoughtfully as he spoke.

"The prince is a prodigy," he said, his voice lowering slightly. "To us, if the alpha is a god, then the prince is a king. He is incredibly capable. He is stronger than any of the three elite warriors who stand beside Alpha Damien, and if he wanted to, he could destroy two packs on his own. That is how powerful he is."

"And he is still young. Imagine how terrifying he will become once he fully matures. Obviously, he will never surpass the alpha. No one can. Alpha Damien is... different. He is not measured by the same scale as the rest of us. But the prince will still be monstrously strong." he went on. "And he is obsessed with the alpha. Everyone has seen the way he looks at him, as if he were a god walking among mortals. It is only the alpha who can control someone like him."

I frowned slightly.

One thing I knew about Miles was that he did not exaggerate. He could joke about many things, but when it came to strength and survival, he was precise. If he said Prince Caspian was powerful, then the prince was truly powerful.

My gaze shifted to Chloe.

She stood not far from us, her sword already drawn and angled forward in preparation for the match. Her posture was firm, but her hand trembled ever so slightly around the hilt. It was almost invisible to anyone who was not paying attention, but I noticed it.

What are you planning to do, Chloe?

Miles followed my gaze and then looked back at me. "What do you think?" he asked. "Do you think Chloe is going to win?"

I crossed my arms loosely over my chest. "Why are you asking me that?"

"Because you always seem to know everything," he replied without hesitation.

I turned my eyes from Chloe to Miles and held his gaze. "I do not know everything, Miles."

He blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I am not a god," I said calmly. "I am just a person like you who wants to survive. I do not know the future."

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At least not this one. After all, this is my first time living this version of it.

8.51%

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Even though I had been reborn version times, my life had not followed the same path as before. I had not clung to the original flow of events or used my rebirth to manipulate every situation to my advantage. I had walked a different road entirely, and because of that, many things were unknown to me now. Strangely enough, I did not dislike that uncertainty. It made everything more fun.

And when I finally decided to fully use what I knew from before I wondered just how much I could bend this world.

I looked back at Chloe, who still stood ready, her trembling hand slowly steadying.

"If you are worried about her, do not be," I said.

Miles frowned. "Why?"

"Because she is strong, not just with a sword. She is her own person. I do not get to decide her fate." I paused before adding, my voice firm. "Not even the Moon Goddess gets to decide her fate."

3/3

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 159

[1,824 words]

1200 Wed, Feb 25 B.

Chapter 152

Chapter 159

The moment the whine pierced through the air every single gem is the rang stated a sture expose were taxed at senison, but not toward one another. They were all pinned at one person

The prince

Prince Caspian mood only a short distance away and inmead of preparing to defend tief te duply washed them w black, and bored expression His gaze swept over the group a dough he were chewing duster of intrauthing wer crumbs, amoying, perhaps, bar altarely muguiaau. There is no tension in his shoulder to pay in his ware anything he looked mildly inoueniented

It was obrious that he believed fighting us would be a complete rate of his fie

I shook my head lighdy and muttered wader my breath, Concertame Chice. Do not pay attention to him.”

I forced myself to look away from the prince and raised my sword box mite the ofen, 1 did notato ita fim I pored at the contesans standing around me instead

A few of them noticed immediately, and their brows furrowed in confusion

'Hey, Mim Delicate" one of them called out mockingly, "You arepointing your sword at the wrong person. Pam Late prince. Even if you look meles, if we work together, we might be able to make him step down on his can"

Another man nodded eagerly. Exanly. He is stronger than all ofits invidually. You had better listen if your was no last more than two seconds in here."

I looked at them quietly as they spoke, their voices filled with confidence and poorly hidden fear. The truth was my mind had always been simple. I was not someone who excelled a complex strategies or long discussions about matin. I ddaet enjoy debating plans or calculating probabilities. I simply did what I wanted to do.

And right now, I wanted them out of my way.

If they were gone, then I could focus entirely on the fight I actually cared about

I lifted my chin slightly and spoke clearly toward the host outside the ring. "If I push them all our of the ring would that stil count as them loving?"

A ripple of surprise moved through the group, and the host turned her mention to me. She tied her head, her eyes gleaming with mischief as a slow smile curved her Eps.

"Oh my," she said sweetly. "Did I forget to mention that? Yes, if you push any contestant cut of the ring day. lose

I gave a small nod in response, but I knew she was lying

She was not the type to forget details, especially not details that could heighten the excitement of a match. She thrived entertainment, chaos, and unexpected turns. I had handed her at interesting possibility, and she had accepted because she wanted to see how this would unfold. She wanted to see whether a girl who looked like me could actual grown men out of the ring.

The men stared at me for a moment before bursting into laughter, completely forgetting about the prince, who was now leaning casually against the inner boundary of the ring as though he were watching a street performance.

"Girls these days are too confident," one of them scoffed. Just because they are allowed to hold a sword, they think there equal

12:00 Wed, Feb 25 MB.

Chapter 139

69%

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Another smirked. "Everyone knows inen are biologically superi. They are stronger, faster, and better at everything. especially fighting"

Their words did not anger me. They simply confirmed what I alady knew about them.

One of the men stepped forward, lifting his sword lazily in my direction. "Enough talking," he said. "It is better to show her than explain it."

The others nodded in agreement as he swung his blade toward he without any real intention of finishing the strike. He did not take me seriously. He thought this was already decided.

I looked at him calmly and said, "Take this seriously, or you might die."

The man looked at me mockingly, his lips curling as he prepared to throw another insult my way, but before he could say anything further, I lifted my sword and struck his blade directly le reacted on instinct, raising his weapon to block mine, and the sharp clash of metal echoed across the ring. A wave of laughter erupted from both the remaining contestants and parts of the audience, because from the outside it must have looked unimpressive, like a weak and meaningless strike from a girl who did not know her own limits.

The man snorted as he held his sword steady against mine and said, "gods, this is so stupid. I did not even feel that. You are so weak-

He never finished that sentence.

A strange vibration rippled through the air between our blades, and I felt it travel from my sword straight into his. His smirk faltered instantly as his weapon began to tremble violently in his hands. The vibration intensified in a split second, no longer confined to the metal but spreading up his arms and into his entire body. His eyes widened in alarm as the trembling grew so fierce that the contestants nearest to him instinctively stepped back to avoid being caught in whatever was happening.

"What is happening" he began, but his voice was swallowed by the force that erupted from the point where our swords.

met.

With a single push from me, the built-up force released all at once. His body was launched backward as though he had been struck by a battering ram. He flew clean out of the ring and slammed into the arena wall with such intensity that the structure cracked and shattered on impact. Stone fragments scattered everywhere, and to make it worse, it was the exact same section of wall that Noah had destroyed the previous day with his protective spell, the part that workers had only just begun repairing.

Silence fell over the arena.

Many people froze, their eyes wide as they stared at the destruction and the man lying unconscious amidst broken stone. The laughter from moments ago vanished completely. The remaining contestants inside the ring immediately distanced themselves from me, looking at me not with mockery anymore, but with something closer to fear. It was as if they were staring at a demon disguised as a delicate girl.

I bit my lower lip, a flicker of worry crossing my mind. I had not meant to hurt him that badly. That was why I had warned him to take it seriously.

That was the problem with my sword. Even the smallest strike could become lethal if the opponent underestimated it. I did not need to use my full strength in battle, because if I ever did, people would die. The force released by this blade was not something ordinary warriors could withstand.

This sword was one of the most precious heirlooms in my family. It was not a weapon that could simply be picked up and wielded. It had to acknowledge you as its master before it would truly submit, and in generations of my bloodline, it had only recognized one person before me. Not even my grandfather, who was revered as one of the strongest warriors of his time, had been accepted by it. Yet he treated the blade with utmost respect and, despite the objections of many elders in our family, he placed it in my hands.

“The sword has chosen and it would not bow to a weak person,” my grandfather told me once, his voice firm but patient. “If it has chosen you as its master, then you are not weak. You are strong, even if you do not see it yet.”

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Back then, I had only nodded because I wanted to believe him.

69%

23 55 vouchers

And now, standing in the broken silence of the arena with shattered stone behind me and fear in the eyes of the men around me, I was reminded once again of what that truly meant.

I straightened my back and inhaled slowly.

“I am not weak,” I said under my breath, not to them, but to myself. Then I lifted my sword and pointed it directly at the remaining contestants.

“Get lost.”

My voice was calm, but it carried across the ring with authority.

The men stiffened. Their gazes were no longer mocking or dismissive. The arrogance that had filled their expressions earlier had completely vanished. Now, there was calculation in their eyes, fear, and uncertainty.

One of them opened his mouth as if to say something bold, perhaps something about honor or pride or how he would rather die than retreat. But before he could speak, the man beside him grabbed his arm and shook his head.

“No,” he muttered urgently. “I cannot die. The prince is already terrifying, but this girl is just as dangerous. Staying here is like standing still and waiting to be slaughtered.”

His throat bobbed before he shouted loudly, “I forfeit!”

Without waiting for permission, he turned and ran toward the edge of the ring.

The others stared at him in disbelief for half a second, but survival instinct quickly overpowered pride. One by one, they echoed the same word.

“I forfeit!”

“I forfeit!”

“I forfeit!”

“I forfeit!”

“I forfeit!”

“I forfeit!”

They scrambled out of the ring in a chaotic rush, nearly tripping over one another in their desperation to escape. Within moments, the once crowded arena floor was empty.

Except for two people.

I lowered my sword slightly and let out a slow breath I did not realize I had been holding. Relief washed through me. I did not want to kill them.

“You are too nice.”

The deep voice cut through the silence like a blade.

I frowned and turned around.

Prince Caspian stood a few steps away, arms crossed over his chest, his posture relaxed as if he had been watching a mildly entertaining performance rather than a battle. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes were sharp.

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Chapter 159

“Maybe that is one of the reasons I have always hated you,” he continued calmly.

My fingers tightened around the hilt of my sword.

I raised it again, this time pointing it directly at him.

“Let us fight.”

There was no hesitation in my voice now.

69%

55 Vouchers

He uncrossed his arms and stood up straight, rolling his shoulders once as though preparing for something inevitable.

“You are right,” he said indifferently, his gaze locking with mine. Let us fight, twin sister.”

The words settled heavily between us.

This was no longer about the tournament. This was about us.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 160

[1,871 words]

10:37 Thu, Feb 26 M M

Chapter 160

Chapter 160

Caspian

I have always hated weak people.

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Since the moment I learned how to walk and speak, I could not stand being near anyone who lacked strength. Their presence irritated me in a way I could never properly explain. It was as if weakness were a disease, something contagious that could seep into my skin if I stood too close for too long. The mere thought of becoming weak made my stomach twist. I would rather lose everything, than allow myself to become that

To me, weak people were nothing more than pests in society. They could not protect themselves, yet they constantly expected others to shield them. They did not strive to grow stronger; they preferred to remain helpless and blame fate for it. It was like a curse they willingly embraced. And I despised it.

My uncle, the Alpha, was the embodiment of strength. Ever since I was a child, I have admired him. There were no weaklings at his side. Every warrior he kept close was powerful, capable, and worthy. That was the kind of existence I wanted. If I was to stand where he stood one day, then I could not allow weakness to linger around me. I had to cut it away without hesitation.

And one of the roots of that weakness stood directly in front of me.

My twin sister.

Chloe.

I remember overhearing the elders whisper when we were children. They said she almost died during childbirth because she was too weak to even come into this world properly. Even at birth, she struggled.

When we were younger, she cried over the smallest cuts. She would run to me whenever someone bullied her. She always acted as though she were incapable of defending herself, as though she did not even want to try becoming stronger. I could tolerate her being weak, but what I could not tolerate was her pretending otherwise.

Even now, I believed the only reason she had gained a fraction of strength was because of the Light Blade. That sword had once been given to my grandfather by my uncle, and it was said to submit only to those it acknowledged. I never understood why it would accept someone like Chloe. A blade like that should have belonged to someone worthy.

A weak person should understand their place. They should know when to step back, when to bow their head, when to survive quietly behind stronger shadows. But Chloe refused to remain in that place. She insisted on standing in the light, on acting as though she belonged among warriors.

It was irritating.

No, it was more than that.

It was offensive.

I decided then that I would end this annoyance once and for all.

With a slow motion, I reached into the inner lining of my coat and pulled out my weapon. The arena lights caught on the dark surface of the whip as it unraveled in my hand. It

was black and simple at first glance, but along its length were sharpened edges, thin and deadly like the sides of a blade. It was long enough to strike from one end of the arena to the other without difficulty.

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“Woah, I have heard of that weapon before,” someone whispered in awe. “What is it called?”

“It is the Dragon Fang,” another answered reverently. “It was forged from the fang of one of the most powerful dragons and

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gifted to the prince by Alpha Damien himself.”

“And it is nearly impossible to block,” a third voice added. “From what I have seen, no one can withstand it except the Alpha. That girl might have some skill, but she is finished.”

Nods of agreement followed.

Public opinion has never concerned me.

The gasps, the whispers, the predictions of victory or defeat, they were all background noise to me. I did not fight for applause, nor did I care for doubt. The crowd could believe whatever they wished. Their expectations would not change the

outcome.

I let the whip extend fully, the sharp edges glinting as I flexed my wrist. The Dragon Fang hummed faintly in response, eager for blood.

It was almost amusing that we were born at the same time, from the same womb, and yet looked nothing alike. Her hair was brown, warm like autumn leaves, while mine was black as a moonless night. Her eyes were green, bright and expressive, whereas mine were blue and often described as cold. Even our temperaments were opposites. She wore her emotions openly, while I buried mine so deep that even I sometimes forgot they were there.

To the outside world, she was barely more than a rumor. People knew the royal family had a princess, but she had not appeared publicly since childhood. Most would not recognize her now. In this arena, she was simply another contestant.

Chloe looked at me steadily, her grip firm on her sword. "Will you keep your promise?"

I did not answer immediately. I simply watched her.

"Answer me," she insisted. "Will you keep your promise never to harm Noah and Miles if I win?"

I frowned slightly. "What makes them so special?"

She hesitated, and this time she did not respond.

I tilted my head. "I still do not understand why you care about them, especially that strange boy. I have been asking you for a real fight for years, one where you would stop holding back, and you always refused. Yet the moment I threaten two people you just met, you agree without hesitation."

I studied her eyes carefully. "Look at yourself. You even have killing intent in your gaze right now. If I dared touch what you consider yours, you would try to kill me without thinking twice

Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her sword.

"You let people in too easily, Chloe," I continued calmly. "One day, you are going to regret that."

She did not argue. Instead, she raised her blade and pointed it directly at me.

"You are talking too much, brother."

I shrugged faintly. She was right. I disliked excessive conversation. It was inefficient.

"I will give you three strikes," I said evenly. "If you cannot land a single hit on me, then it will be my turn."

Her gaze flickered past me briefly, and I did not need to turn to know who she was looking at. The boy. The one she trusted so completely. That blind faith in someone she barely knew irritated me more than I expected.

Without another word, she inhaled deeply and focused entirely on me, her posture lowering slightly as she prepared to

move.

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The entire arena fell silent.

Even the wind seemed to pause, then she charged.

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55 vouchers

Her movements were swift, far swifter than when we were children. She aimed for what appeared to be an opening near my left side, her blade slicing through the air with precision.

Before her sword could reach me, my wrist flicked instinctively. The Dragon Fang lashed out, the sharpened edge striking the exact spot where she had been standing a fraction of a second earlier. The ground split with a sharp crack.

She had already retreated.

She did not relax, however. The moment her feet touched the ground, she surged forward again, this time faster, her strike aimed higher, toward my shoulder.

My whip moved before conscious thought formed. It snapped through the air with lethal speed, forcing her to leap backward once more as the sharp edge cut across the space she had just occupied.

She landed lightly, her breathing controlled, her eyes still locked on mine.

Two strikes. And she had yet to touch me.

She was breathing hard.

I watched her chest rise and fall unevenly as she stood a few steps away from me. Her face had flushed red from exertion, and the hand gripping the Light Blade trembled despite her obvious effort to steady it. Sweat traced down the side of her temple, yet her eyes remained fixed on mine.

That was the flaw of the Light Blade.

Once its wielder formed the true intent to fight, the blade demanded contact. If it failed to strike its target, it would drain the wielder instead, weakening them with every missed attempt. It was a weapon that rewarded resolve but punished inadequacy.

And I wanted Chloe to feel that punishment.

Even if we fought head-on without tricks, I would still win. I knew that. She probably knew it too. But victory was not enough for me. I wanted her to understand the gap between us. I wanted her to feel how vast it was.

I looked at her without emotion. "One more strike, Chloe."

Her fingers tightened.

"Do you not want to protect your people anymore? Once you lose, they die. I will have two of them executed."

A murmur rippled faintly through the arena, but I ignored it.

"And it will be on your conscience, you will lose them just like you lost our parents. And it will be

your

fault."

Her stare sharpened instantly. The softness that used to define her was gone. Her eyes darkened with something dangerous.

Anger.

Good.

Chloe flicked her blade, and the Light Blade shimmered faintly in response to her surging intent.

"Anyone who dares touch Noah or Miles..." she began, her voice low and shaking with fury.

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She suddenly leapt onto the thin ropes lining the arena, her movements light and precise. Instead of charging directly at me, she ran along the ropes with surprising agility, closing the distance from above with quick steps.

When she was close enough, she pushed off.

Her body cut through the air, and she swung her blade toward my neck with determination.

“I will kill them!”

For a fraction of a second, the blade gleamed inches from my throat.

My lips curled.

I struck the Dragon Fang against the ground.

“How unamusing,” I said flatly. “You are still so weak. You disgust me.”

With a sharp twist of my wrist, the whip lashed upward and coiled around her midair form with terrifying precision. The serrated edges did not cut; they restrained. In less than a moment, the Dragon Fang wrapped tightly around her arms and torso, binding her before her blade could descend fully.

Her eyes widened.

A gasp escaped her lips as her momentum was forcibly halted.

I stepped forward and closed the remaining distance between us. Before she could struggle free, I reached out and wrapped my hand around her neck, lifting her slightly so that her feet barely touched the ground.

She clawed at the whip instinctively, but it tightened in response.

I leaned closer, my voice low enough that only she could hear.

“Weak people like you deserve to die, Chloe.”

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