

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 171

[1,493 words]

Chapter 171

Selene

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In my previous lives there had been a terrible famine and drought that spread across the lands of many packs. Normally the world would experience droughts from time to time, and although they were difficult, people eventually recovered from them. However, that particular disaster had been far worse than anything anyone expected, and it caused suffering across the entire lands

Even though I did not remember the future in that life the way I did now, I had still received a vision of the catastrophe because I was the Moonborn. The moment the vision came to me I knew how serious it was, so I did not waste any time. I immediately went to the Alpha, Prince Adrian, and to several important people in the pack to warn them about what was coming

I told them that the land would dry up and that food would disappear quickly if they did not prepare in advance. I begged them to begin storing water and grain before it was too late.

No one believed me.

Even though I was the Moonborn, even though I had been chosen by the Moon Goddess herself, they still looked at me like

was nothing more than a foolish girl telling ridiculous stories.

in their minds I was the cursed child of the pack, the unwanted Luna who brought misfortune everywhere she went. Why would someone like that be able to foresee a disaster that would affect the entire world?

Adrian did not even bother to listen properly when I spoke to him. He dismissed me with a single cold glance as though I were wasting his time. The Alpha barely paid attention to my words either, and the elders simply told me not to spread unnecessary panic among the people.

Even the temple refused to prepare for it.

They were supposed to listen to me because I was the Moonborn, yet they ignored my warnings as if they meant nothing.

To make it worse, Sienna stepped forward. She smiled gently in front of everyone and asked why I was trying so hard to righten the people with such ridiculous claims. She questioned whether I was simply doing it to attract Adrian's attention.

After she said that, everything changed.

People began whispering that I was lying for attention. Some of them said I wanted to force Adrian to notice me because he had never loved me. Others claimed I was making up prophecies so that the pack would finally respect me.

The bullying that followed was worse than anything I had ever experienced

When I walked through the streets as the Luna of the pack, people threw stones at me like I was some kind of stray animal They shouted insults and called me cursed, and the guards pretended not to see it happen.

My own family made an excuse to Adrian that they wanted to take me home so they could "tram me better"

Adrian did not even hesitate. He agreed immediately and sent me away without blinking

When I returned home, they locked me inside a room and told everyone I was undergoing special training. The shoot remained closed day after day, and no one allowed me to leave Because of that. I could not prepare for the disaster myself

When the farmine finally arrived, it swept across the lands like a merciless storm. Crops died, water sources deed up and people began starving everywhere.

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I remained locked inside that room the entire time.

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Days passed with barely any food or water, and my body slowly withered until I became nothing more than skin and bones. Every breath felt heavier than the last, and sometimes I wondered if the world outside still existed at all.

Evelyn and Silas had it even worse.

Evelyn became sick during the famine, but even with her weak body she still forced herself to go outside to search for food for me. She staggered through the streets while people pushed her away, and she returned empty-handed most of the time.

Silas entered underground fights and competitions just to win scraps of food. His body was already thin and exhausted, yet he continued fighting stronger opponents because it was the only way he could bring something back.

One day he returned with a single loaf of bread. His knuckles were bruised and bleeding, and his clothes were torn, but he smiled as he placed the bread in my hands. He told me to eat it because I needed it more than he did. By that point I was already so weak that even holding the bread felt difficult.

I remember thinking that I was going to die soon. Then the door finally opened.

My so-called family walked into the room looking perfectly healthy. Their skin was full of color, their bodies were strong, and not a single sign of hunger could be seen on their faces. Behind them stood elders and even some temple officials.

They all looked well fed.

That was when I learned the truth. While I had been locked in that room, Sienna had suddenly come forward claiming that he received a vision from the Moon Goddess about the upcoming famine.

The same vision that I had tried to warn everyone about.

She presented it as her own prophecy. And this time everyone believed it.

Although the warning came later than it should have, the royal family, the temple, and the noble households still managed to store large amounts of food and water for themselves. They protected their own people and left the rest of the pack to struggle for whatever scraps remained.

Meanwhile I had been starving inside that room like a dog.

I was not someone who became angry easily.

Most of the time I could remain calm no matter what happened around me, and I had learned through many lifetimes that anger often made people careless. But there were certain memories that still burned quietly beneath my skin, memories that refused to fade no matter how many times I died and lived again.

Thinking about how my people suffered during that famine made me angry.

Thinking about Evelyn made it worse.

Even now I could still remember the day she returned to me with blood on her clothes and a small piece of meat clutched in her trembling hands. Sienna's people had caught her while she was searching for food and they had beaten her mercilessly. They mocked her, called her a dog serving a cursed Luna, and when they were finished they left her lying in the dirt with one of her eyes destroyed. And yet she still dragged herself back to me

She smiled through the pain and told me she had found something for me to eat.

The memory made something dark stir inside my chest.

For a moment the thought of destroying them all flashed through my mind so vividly that I could almost see their terrified

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faces. But I slowly exhaled.

No.

Like I said, destroying them quickly would be mercy.

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When I said I would take my time with my revenge, I meant moments like this. I meant the long wait, the slow unraveling of everything they believed belonged to them. When this competition ended and I returned to the Mooncrest Pack, things would be very different.

This time I would not warn anyone, especially not the Mooncrest Pack.

Those ungrateful animals had destroyed me when I tried to save them, so this time I would not lift a single finger even if they were on the verge of death. I would simply stand there and watch.

The royal family.

My so-called family.

The temple.

And the people who threw stones at me.

I wondered how long they would last when the disaster arrived again.

Let's see if their precious Sienna would save them this time.

The thought made a faint smile appear on my lips.

I had almost forgotten that someone was still standing in front of me until I suddenly felt a warm, firm hand resting on my thigh. The touch pulled me back to the present, and I lifted my eyes to meet the pair of beautiful crimson eyes staring down

at me.

Alpha Damien.

I had never really thought about it before, but his eyes were an unusual color. Deep crimson, dark and intense like blood under moonlight. I had never seen anyone else with eyes like that. Then again, I was not exactly normal either. Very few people in this world had hair like mine, white and black strands intertwined like night and snow. I had long since stopped questioning strange things about myself.

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While my mind wandered through those thoughts, Damien's fingers slowly brushed against my clit. I shivered at the touch, almost letting out a moan.

After coming in his mouth a while ago, I was so sensitive that even the slightest touch sent waves through my body. And he knew it. I could see it in the gleam in his eyes.

I still wanted more. I wanted him inside me. But for now, I had to control my urges.

He leaned closer, his gaze lowering toward my lips as though he intended to capture them again. I was already trying to think of another way to distract him when a sudden knock echoed through the room.

My eyes shifted toward the door immediately.

Damien did not even glance at it.

From outside I heard Jason's voice. His tone was low and respectful, the way a Beta always spoke to his Alpha.

Alpha," Jason called from the other side of the door. "There is something you should know."

I felt a small spark of relief at the interruption. Finally, an opportunity to escape this situation.

I turned my head slightly toward Damien and opened my mouth to say something, but before I could speak, his hand suddenly moved. His fingers wrapped firmly around the back of my neck, pulling me forward, and his lips crashed against mine in a sudden kiss.

I gasped softly in surprise.

For a moment I simply stared at him, stunned by how completely he ignored the Beta waiting outside the door. My eyes licked briefly toward the door again.

Was this man insane? What if Jason was bringing urgent news? What if it was something important for the pack?

I placed my hand against Damien's chest, trying to push him away like I had done several times before. But instead of letting me create distance, he only pulled me closer.

His arm tightened around my waist, holding me firmly against him as though he had absolutely no intention of letting me

Another knock echoed against the door, louder this time, the sound cutting through the heavy silence that had filled the

room.

“Alpha Damien?” Jason’s voice came again from the other side of the door.

My eyes shifted toward the door immediately, irritation rising inside me because Damien still had not let go of me. His arm remained firmly wrapped around my waist, his grip unyielding as though he had completely forgotten there was another person waiting just a few steps away outside the room.

Jason was still standing there, and yet this man did not seem to care in the slightest.

I could feel Damien pulling me closer again, his hand tightening slightly at the back of my neck as he lowered his face toward mine, clearly intending to continue what he had started earlier, as though the interruption meant absolutely nothing to him.

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For a brief moment my mind went blank, then instinct took over. Before he could close the distance again, I did the one thing that came to my mind without thinking about the consequences.

I bit him, hard.

My teeth sank into his lower lip with enough force that I immediately tasted blood, the sharp metallic flavor spreading across my tongue as the warmth of it lingered between us.

For a moment I expected him to pull away.

He did not.

Damien did not even flinch.

It was as if he barely felt the pain, as if something like that could not even register to him as an inconvenience.

My lungs began to burn from the lack of air, and my breathing grew uneven as I struggled slightly against him, but he still did not move. Only when it became obvious that I could not breathe properly did he finally pull back.

The moment his lips left mine, I gasped for air, my chest rising and falling quickly as oxygen rushed back into my lungs while my heart pounded heavily against my ribs.

For a few seconds I simply stood there trying to steady myself before slowly lifting my gaze toward him.

Damien was looking at me calmly.

A thin line of blood ran from the corner of his lower lip, slowly sliding downward, yet his expression remained completely indifferent as though the injury meant absolutely nothing to him. Without any urgency, he lifted his tongue and slowly licked the blood away, the casual gesture somehow making the situation feel even more sexual.

I stared at him for a moment before letting out a quiet scoff.

‘Crazy bastard,’ I muttered under my breath.

Damien did not seem offended by the insult at all.

If anything, the faint curve that appeared on the corner of his lips suggested he might even find my reaction amusing.

He leaned closer again, his crimson eyes locking onto mine with that same calm intensity that made it feel as though he could see straight through every thought inside my head.

“You can stay with her tonight,” he said finally, his voice low and steady.

“But tomorrow,” he continued while lifting his hand to grip my chin between his fingers and tilting my face upward so I had no choice but to look directly into his eyes, “you will sleep in my chambers.”

My brows furrowed slightly at his words, but before I could say anything, he tilted his head faintly while studying my face like he had all the time in the world.

“Be good, little wolf,” he murmured quietly. His thumb brushed lightly against my chin before he added. “Because once a wolf bites, I might be tempted to tame it.”

With that, he finally released me.

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He stepped back as though nothing significant had just happened, then turned around and walked toward the door with the same calm, unhurried steps he always carried.

I remained where I was, silently watching his broad back as he opened the door.

For a brief moment I saw Jason standing outside in the hallway, looking slightly confused, before Damien stepped past him without saying a word and continued walking down the corridor.

The door closed again. The room fell quiet once more. I stared at the closed door for several seconds before a slow smile spread across my lips. However, the expression in my eyes was anything but gentle.

A spark of challenge burned there.

“Tame me, Alpha Damien?” I murmured softly to myself.

My smile widened slightly.

“I would love to see you try.”

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[1,612 words]

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Selene

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It was already late when I began walking back toward my room. The long corridor that led to the contestants' quarters was dimly lit by torches mounted along the stone walls, and the quiet sound of my footsteps echoed softly in the hallway. The moment I entered the corridor, I immediately felt eyes were on me from every direction.

Many people were watching.

Some contestants stayed inside their rooms and peeked through the windows, carefully pulling the curtains aside just enough to observe me without exposing themselves. Others stood in their doorways, leaning against the frames as they watched me pass by. None of them dared to approach me. Instead, they whispered quietly to each other, their voices low and filled with disbelief.

Their gazes were filled with awe.

It was almost ironic.

Not long ago, those same people had looked at me with mockery and open hostility. They had whispered about how weak I was, how cowardly it was to hide behind a protective spell, and how someone like me had no place among real warriors. Their eyes had been filled with disdain, and some of them had even looked at me as though they wanted to kill me.

Now those expressions were completely gone.

There was no mockery anymore, or hatred either.

Instead, they looked at me with fear and respect, as if I were some kind of monster walking calmly in a small human body. Their eyes followed me carefully, and cautiously, as though they were afraid that making the wrong move might attract my

attention.

I ignored them.

I truly did not care what they thought about me. Their opinions had never mattered to me before, and they certainly did not matter now. When they called me weak and

worthless earlier, I did not bother correcting them. Now that they looked at me with admiration and fear, I still had no interest in acknowledging them.

That was simply the nature of people.

No matter what you did, people would always find something to talk about. If you refused to act the way they expected, they would gossip about you endlessly. If you behaved exactly the way they wanted, they would still gossip. At the end of the day, people loved to talk more than they loved to think.

So I made a decision a long time ago.

I would simply do whatever I wanted.

If they wished to talk, they could talk until their throats went dry. In the end, they were only wasting their time and breath. Their words had nothing to do with me. My skin was far too thick to be wounded by something as meaningless as gossip.

Eventually, I reached the door to my room.

However, the moment I arrived, I noticed that I was not alone,

Miles was standing directly in front of my door, waiting quietly as if he had been there for a while. Behind him stood another man, and the moment my eyes landed on him, I immediately recognized him, He was the same man from the

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arena entrance, the one who had bullied Chloe and tried to take her sword.

I looked at him for a moment.

The instant he realized I was staring at him, his body stiffened, and he did not dare to meet my gaze.

My lips curled slightly, but there was no amusement in my eyes.

“Well,” I said calmly, “we meet again.”

The man flinched as though my words had struck him physically, and he instinctively took a step backward.

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“Did you come to settle your score?” I asked, raising an eyebrow as I continued to study him. “Last time you said you were going to make my life miserable. Are you planning to do that now?”

The man slowly lifted his head to look at me. He looked at me the way someone would look at a demon standing right in front of them.

Without warning, he suddenly dropped to his knees.

His head bent forward deeply as he spoke in a trembling voice. “Forgive me! Please forgive me! I must have lost my that day to start a fight with someone like you. Please do not kill me!”

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Tears streamed down his face as his shoulders shook violently. He then turned desperately toward Miles and grabbed at his sleeve as if clinging to the last thread of hope. “Boss, please beg him for me! Please ask him to forgive me! I do not want to die!”

I stared at him silently.

Was he really that terrified?

Yes, I had shown some strength in the arena, but I had not revealed even a fraction of my true abilities. All I had done was stop the prince’s whip.

Slowly, I shifted my gaze toward Miles. He was already looking at me.

I raised an eyebrow as I looked at Miles.

His lips slowly curled upward, not in his usual cheerful way, “You knew, didn’t you?”

I tilted my head slightly. “Knew what?”

“You knew I was their boss.”

I did not answer him.

Yes, I knew

The so-called boss those men were trying to take Chloe’s sword for had been Miles all along. The man who had supposedly fought Kauis and lasted thirty minutes against him was Miles. The dangerous leader those people whispered about was none other than the same boy who followed me around with two ponytails and an innocent smile.

The first time I suspected it was when he made one of those men give me his mask without hesitation. Men like that did not listen to strangers, especially not children, yet they obeyed him immediately. My suspicion only grew stronger when Chloe fainted in the arena and Miles ordered those same men to carry her to the doctor. They moved instantly, without questioning him.

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There was no reason for grown men to obey a boy like that unless he was their leader.

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Still, I could not deny that it surprised me. To lead bandits meant you had to be stronger than them, crueller than them, and more capable than them. Miles was barely more than a child, yet grown men bowed their heads to him.

As if he had read the question forming in my mind, Miles scratched the back of his head awkwardly and looked away.

“Well... it was not really something I planned,” he said quietly. “One day I saw a group of them bullying someone on the road, so I told them to stop. They ignored me, so I beat them until they were barely breathing.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

The next day they came back and told me they wanted to serve me. I did not take them seriously at first, but they did. They started spreading rumors about how dangerous I was and how no one should mess with me. I would have stayed away from them completely, but... they were easy to use whenever I needed help.”

Miles finished speaking without looking at me. His shoulders were slightly tense, as though he were waiting for my reaction.

I understood why.

Among warriors, bandits were the lowest of the low. Warriors despised them. They saw them as parasites who lived off the suffering of others.

Miles was probably afraid that I would look at him the same way.

Instead, I lifted my hand and gave him a thumbs-up.

To be able to command thousands of people at such a young age,” I said calmly, “that is actually really cool.”

Miles froze. Even the man kneeling on the floor lifted his head slightly, staring at me with wide eyes. They both looked completely shocked, as though my reaction had not been part of any possible outcome they had imagined.

Seeing their expressions, I let out a quiet sigh. I reached forward and gently placed my hand on Miles’s head, ruffling his hair slightly.

“You are really strong, Miles,” I said sincerely. “I am proud of you.”

He stared at me, stunned.

“If you choose the right path, you will become an excellent warrior one day. Much better than I ever was.”

I gave him a small smile as I said those words. His face remained frozen in disbelief, as if no one had ever told him something like that before.

Without saying anything else, I turned toward the door and stepped into the room.

The first thing I saw was Chloe.

She lay on the bed, her face pale and almost colorless. Her eyes were closed, and her body looked far too still beneath the blanket. The only sign that she was alive was the slow rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

I stood there silently, watching her. My expression did not change, but my gaze darkened.

A calm, quiet voice spoke from beside me. “Her core is broken”

I did not need to turn around to know who it was, Only one person in this place had a voice that calm and ethereal

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Remi.

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The pack healer stepped forward from the shadows and into the torchlight, his gaze resting on Chloe's unconscious form.

"The core that stores her magic has shattered. Chloe may never be able to use magic again." He paused for a moment before adding in the same calm tone,

"And without it, her life is now at risk."

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I finally turned my head to look at him properly.

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Remi stood a few steps away from the bed wearing his pale healer's robes, the fabric slightly wrinkled and creased as if he had been moving around restlessly for hours. The usually composed and elegant healer now looked somewhat exhausted, and there were faint shadows beneath his eyes that revealed he had not rested at all. His sleeves were rolled up slightly, and a few strands of hair had fallen out of place, which was unusual for someone as meticulous as him. From the way his shoulders were slightly slumped and the tension in his posture, it was clear that he had been trying to save Chloe ever since she was brought into this room.

“What do you mean?” I asked calmly, my voice steady even though my eyes remained fixed on Chloe’s pale face.

Remi slowly lifted his gaze to meet mine, and I immediately noticed that every trace of his usual playful and teasing expression had completely disappeared. The man who normally liked to joke and make light comments now looked serious. and thoughtful, as if the situation in front of him had stripped away his usual carefree attitude.

“Chloe is different from most people,” he said slowly, carefully choosing his words as though he wanted to make sure I understood the gravity of the situation. He paused briefly before continuing his explanation, and during that moment his eyes drifted back to Chloe’s unconscious form on the bed.

“For ordinary people, the organ that keeps them alive is their heart, because as long as the heart continues beating, the body will continue functioning and sustaining life. However, Chloe does not function in the same way as normal people do.”

The true source of Chloe’s life is her core, which is the place inside her body where her magic is stored and circulated. Chloe possesses an enormous amount of magical energy, far more than what an average person could ever hold, and because of that her entire body resonates with magic constantly. In other words, magic is not simply a power that Chloe can use when she wants to fight. Magic is the very thing that keeps her existence stable.”

“During the fight earlier, Chloe forced an overwhelming amount of magic through her body in a very short period of time because she was trying to push herself beyond her limits. That sudden pressure was far too much for her core to withstand, and the core eventually shattered under the strain. Now the magic that once sustained her body is slowly leaking away, and once the remaining magic inside her completely runs out...”

He hesitated for a brief moment before finishing the sentence. “...she will not survive.”

I remained silent for a few seconds as I absorbed his explanation, my gaze lowering thoughtfully as I considered every word he had just said.

What Remi explained made perfect sense to me.

Chloe was very similar to me in that regard because she possessed an enormous amount of spiritual power within her body. For people like us, our spiritual core was not merely a storage place for power but a central pillar that sustained our entire existence. While ordinary people relied on their heart as the most important organ in their body, someone like Chloe relied on the core that stored and circulated her magic.

And now that core had been shattered.

Which meant her life itself was slowly slipping away

I turned my head to look at Chloe again, and my gaze softened slightly as I watched her unconscious form lying on the bed:

Her face was pale and fragile, and even though she remained completely still most of the time, there were moments when her fingers twitched slightly or her brows furrowed as if something deep inside her body was causing her pain.

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After watching her for a moment longer, I turned my attention back to Remi and gave a small nod of acknowledgment.

“Thank you for explaining,” I said calmly. “I will take care of it now, so you can leave.”

Remi blinked at me in confusion the moment he heard my words, and his brows immediately knitted together as if he thought he had misheard me.

“Huh? Take care of it?” he repeated, clearly puzzled by my statement.

He took a small step closer to the bed while looking between Chloe and me, and the confusion on his face only deepened.

“How exactly are you planning to take care of it?” he asked seriously. “I am a healer who has spent years studying medicine and magic, and I cannot repair a shattered core or stop the magic inside her from leaking away. If someone like me cannot fix something like this, then how do you plan to do it?”

His voice did not contain even a hint of mockery or arrogance. Instead, he sounded genuinely curious, as if he were trying to understand a strange idea that had suddenly appeared in front of him.

I turned my head to face him completely, and my gaze remained steady as I spoke.

“Trust me, I will not let her die.”

Remi stared at me for several long seconds, carefully studying my expression as if he were trying to determine whether I truly believed what I was saying.

Eventually, he let out a long sigh and lifted one hand to run his fingers through his slightly messy hair, a gesture that revealed his exhaustion more clearly than anything else.

When he lowered his hand again, the familiar casual smile that he often wore slowly returned to his lips, although it looked much weaker than usual.

“I know he will probably kill me if I allow his niece to die,” he said lightly, though the seriousness in his eyes betrayed the joke. He shrugged slightly before continuing. “But for some reason, it is very difficult for me to say no to you.”

He glanced once more at Chloe before turning his body toward the door. “Besides, I have already run out of ideas to save her, so I suppose letting you try cannot make things any worse.”

With that, he walked toward the door without looking back. He opened it quietly and stepped outside the room before closing it gently behind him, leaving the room completely silent.

After he left, I stood there for a moment before slowly walking toward the bed where Chloe lay unconscious

I sat down carefully beside her and reached out to brush a loose strand of hair away from her face, tucking it gently behind her ear so it would not bother her. Then I took her hand in mine and held it gently

“Do not worry,” I said while looking down at her pale face. “I will not let anything happen to you”

Chloe did not respond, and her eyes remained closed. However, the trembling in her body gradually slowed until it finally stopped completely.

“What are you doing, Selene?”

The voice came from deep within my mind, calm but sharp with concern

Mira.

My wolf had been silent until now, but the moment I began gathering spiritual energy inside my core, she immediately 2/4

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understood what I was planning.

'Are you really planning to use your own spiritual power to repair her core?' Mira continued, her voice carrying a mixture of disbelief and frustration. 'Do you even understand how much spiritual energy you will lose in the process if you do something like that? You will drain a large portion of your own power to restore her magic, and that means you will become extremely weak during the fight tomorrow. If you go into battle with your spiritual power nearly exhausted, you will lose.'

I remained silent for a moment as I listened to her words, my eyes still fixed on Chloe's face.

I am partly responsible for what happened to her,' I finally. 'I was the one who told her not to give up during the fight. I encouraged her to push forward, and she forced too much power out because of that. Since my words pushed her to continue, I should take responsibility for the consequences.'

Mira immediately rejected that idea.

That is not your responsibility,' she said firmly. 'You told her not to give up, but you never expected her to push herself until her core shattered. That was her own decision.'

You are right, it was her decision. But I still want to save her.'

My fingers tightened slightly around Chloe's hand as I spoke. 'She is a good person, and she has a great deal of potential inside her. Someone like that should not die here before she even has the chance to grow. I refuse to let her life end like his.'

Mira fell silent after hearing that.

She was not someone who spoke carelessly or emotionally. Mira was rational and honest, and she always said exactly what she believed to be true. That was why I trusted her judgment, even when she disagreed with me.

she knew exactly what the consequences would be if I chose to do this.

If I poured my own spiritual power into Chloe in order to repair her shattered core, my own reserves would drop significantly. Entering tomorrow's fight with weakened power would put me at a serious disadvantage.

For someone else, that would mean certain defeat.

After a while, Mira finally spoke again.

She let out a quiet scoff, but there was a trace of acceptance in her tone.

I thought you said you were going to be selfish in this lifetime!

A small smile appeared on my lips.

Oh, I am selfish, I replied. Very selfish!

My gaze softened slightly as I looked at Chloe. But I won't be selfish for the people I care about! I closed my eyes slowly as spiritual power began to gather deep inside my core.

And besides, who said I will lose just because my spiritual power is reduced

The energy inside my body began circulating faster as I guided it carefully toward Chloe

"No matter what happens tomorrow..." My hand tightened diglatly around hers

With that, I completely closed my eyes and began channeling the power of my own core into Chloe's body, carefully guiding my spiritual energy into her shattered core so that the broken pieces could slowly begin repairing themselves while

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Selene

I felt a hand suddenly tighten around my waist.

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My body twitched slightly in surprise, and confusion flickered across my face as the warmth of someone's arm wrapped firmly around me. Instinctively, I tried to lean back a little to create some distance, but the arm around my waist tightened even more, holding me in place as if the person beside me had absolutely no intention of letting me move away.

Under normal circumstances, the moment I felt someone standing so close to me while I was vulnerable, I would have already been on full alert. My body would have reacted instantly, and whoever dared to touch me without warning would have been thrown across the room before they could even realize what happened.

But this time, I did not react that way. Because deep down, I already knew there could only be one person beside me.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked down.

A pair of beautiful eyes were staring up at me, shining softly with a faint twinkle.

Chloe.

Her face was still a little pale, but it was far better than the lifeless color she had last night. The trembling that had once wracked her body was gone, and her breathing was steady as she lay beside me.

Seeing that, I let out a quiet breath of relief that I did not even realize I had been holding.

Last night was exhausting.

I had spent the entire night trying to repair Chloe's shattered core, and the process had been far more difficult than I initially thought it would be. Healing a damaged core required an enormous amount of spiritual power, and I had poured nearly all of mine into her in order to stabilize the damage.

At some point during the process, sweat had begun to drip down my face and neck even though the night air blowing through the window had been cool and refreshing. My entire body had been drenched, and a heavy dizziness had begun creeping into my mind as my energy drained faster than I anticipated.

Even then, I did not allow myself to collapse.

Chloe's core had still been unstable, and if I lost consciousness before sealing it properly, everything I had done would have been meaningless.

In the end, Mira lent me a portion of her spiritual energy to keep me awake. Without her help, I probably would have fainted before completing the final stage of the healing

Once I finally finished repairing Chloe's core and sealed the remaining cracks within it, my body simply could not endure anymore. My vision blurred, and I could barely keep my eyes open.

The next thing I remembered was falling asleep beside her on the bed.

I must have been far weaker than I realized, because I did not even notice when Chloe woke up. Normally I was an extremely light sleeper, and the slightest movement would wake me immediately, but last night my body has clearly reached its absolute limit.

Now she was awake.

1/8

1:02 am P PPT.

Chapter 175

Chloe looked up at me quietly, her cheeks slightly rosy.

'N-Noah..." she said softly.

65 vouchers

Hearing my name in her voice made me smile without thinking. I lifted my hand and placed it gently on top of her head before checking her temperature with the back of my fingers.

Your temperature is normal," I said. "You are better now. I was worried about you."

Chloe's eyes brightened the moment she heard that. She bit her lower lip nervously before speaking again.

You saved me," she said quietly.

I gave a small nod.

'You spent all your magical core on me," she continued, her voice trembling slightly.

I nodded again.

Chloe's gaze lingered on my face, and she asked softly, "Why?"

I looked at her for a moment before answering simply.

'Why not?' I said. "You are special to me."

Chloe's eyes widened immediately when she heard those words. For a moment she simply stared at me as if she could not believe what I had said. Then, slowly, a warm smile spread across her face.

'Noah...' she whispered.

'Hm?' I responded absentmindedly.

Chloe hesitated for a moment before looking at me again.

"Forgive me," she said suddenly. Before I could even ask what she meant by that, Chloe leaned forward, and her lips touched

mine.

My entire body froze. My eyes widened in complete shock as Chloe's soft lips pressed gently against my own. My mind went completely blank, and for a few seconds I could not even process what was happening.

I stayed perfectly still, unsure what I was supposed to do.

Since returning to life, I had experienced countless strange situations, but this was the first time my thoughts slowed down to a complete halt. Because I had never been kissed by a woman before

In all my past lives, I had never once thought about whether I could be attracted to women, Even though many women had approached me, flirted with me, and even looked at me with seductive intentions. I had always ignored them

Back then, my entire world had revolved around Adrian I had been so obsessed with him that never even allowed myself to think about anyone else. But now, as Chloe's lips rested softly against mine, a strange realization slowly formed in my mind.

For the first time, I understood why men loved women so much.

Her lips were unbelievably soft. As Chloe leaned against me, I could feel how fragile her body still was, and the warmth of her pressed gently into my arms. She felt small, delicate, and for a brief moment an instinctive urge rose inside me to hold

2/3

11:02 am Pp

Chapter 175

her closer and protect her from everything that might harm her. But even after that, I did not lean into the kiss.

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55 vouchers

Even though her lips were warm and gentle, even though part of me could feel the comfort in that closeness, I could not bring myself to kiss her back.

There were two reasons for that.

The first reason was Chloe herself. Even though in this body she was only one year younger than me, the truth was far more complicated than that. If we counted the number of times I had lived and died, I was far older than her. I had already lived through things she had not even begun to experience yet. And I had no intention of kissing someone so young.

The second reason was something I did not want to admit to myself.

Crimson eyes suddenly flashed across my mind.

A shiver ran down my spine.

Why was I thinking about him? Why was my heart beating faster at the thought of him when someone else was kissing me?

When I did not respond to the kiss, Chloe slowly pulled back.

A sad smile lingered on her lips as she leaned away from me, and her eyes met mine.

My expression remained calm and unreadable. I tilted my head slightly before speaking.

"I am a woman, Chloe." I said simply.

3/3

AD

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 176

[949 words]

Chapter 176

Selene

Chloe's expression did not change at all.

"I know," she said. "When I woke up earlier, I realized that you were a woman."

12.65 vouchers

I raised an eyebrow at her, as if she could sense the question forming in my mind, Chloe's cheeks turned slightly pink.

"I do not care if you are a woman, Noah, I did not fall in love with your gender. I fell in love with you. So it does not matter who you say you are. I love you, Noah. You are the first person who ever treated me like I was someone worth saving."

She lowered her eyes slightly, and there was a faint tremor in her voice as she continued.

"I don't mind if you already have someone else. I can simply stay by your side. I do not need anything more than that."

Even though she tried to sound calm, I could hear the strain hidden beneath her words. Her body was still weak, and although her core had been repaired, she had not fully recovered yet. She should have been resting instead of forcing herself to say all of this.

"Don't do that, Chloe." I responded. "Don't fall in love with someone just because they treat you with kindness. Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness. That is the bare minimum a person should offer another person."

“Just because someone treats you kindly does not mean you should immediately give them your heart. You should not make the same mistake I once made. Do not settle for less than what you deserve, if you are going to love someone, then love someone who treats you like you are their entire world.”

I pulled back slightly so I could look at her face.

“You are not my entire world, Chloe, and I will not always be here. You deserve more than that, and I cannot give you something that I know you deserve.”

As soon as I finished speaking, I felt her breath hitch.

I leaned back a little further so I could see her clearly.

Her eyes had turned slightly red, as if tears were threatening to form, but she was trying very hard to hold them back.

I knew I was being harsh.

If it had been anyone else confessing to me like that, I would not have spent so much time explaining myself or trying to soften the rejection. I would have simply refused and walked away without another word. That had always been my way of dealing with such things in the past. But Chloe was different.

Like I had said before, when I looked at her, I saw pieces of my younger self reflected in her. I saw a girl who desperately wanted to be loved, a girl who would cling to the first person who showed her kindness, and a girl who might sacrifice everything for someone who might never return those feelings.

I had already walked down that path many times in my past lives.

I did not want Chloe to repeat the same mistake.

Slowly, I reached out and gently brushed my fingers through her hair, smoothing the strands that had fallen across her face.

“By the way, you did really well yesterday, Chloe. I am proud of you.”

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I 55 vouchers

Chloe looked up at me. For a moment, she seemed completely stunned by my words, as if she had never expected to hear praise from me at all.

I was just about to move away from the bed when the door suddenly opened.

Both Remi and Miles stepped inside at the same time. They stopped the moment they entered. Both of them froze at the doorway as their eyes landed on the scene in front of them.

Chloe was still sitting close to me on the bed, and my hand had only just moved away from her hair. From the outside, the position we were in probably looked far more intimate than it actually was.

Miles looked at me first, then slowly turned his gaze toward Chloe.

A mischievous grin slowly spread across his face.

‘Whoa,’ he said casually. “Did we interrupt something?”

Remi, however, was not paying attention to the awkward atmosphere at all.

His eyes were locked on Chloe. Shock flashed across his face the moment he realized she was awake and sitting up normally.

I ignored both of their expressions completely, and reached for the outer robe I had removed the previous night when the heat in the room had become unbearable during the healing process. I quickly slipped it on before either of them could notice the state of my clothing, making sure the fabric covered my chest properly. Then I stood up from the bed and looked at them with a raised eyebrow.

Miles immediately smiled. “Ah, right, the third tournament is starting.”

I turned to leave the room, but before I could take more than a single step, a hand suddenly grabbed mine.

I paused and looked down.

Chloe was holding my hand. She smiled gently as she looked up at me.

Take care of yourself, Noah.”

A faint smirk appeared on my lips at her words. I gave her a small nod, then I released her hand, turned around, and walked toward the door. As I passed Remi, I glanced at him once, silently telling him to keep an eye on Chloe.

Without another word, I stepped out of the room and closed the door behind me.

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11:02 am PPPT.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 177

[1,824 words]

Chapter 177

Selene

El 64 vouchers

The sky above the forest was bright and wide, painted with soft streaks of white clouds as birds glided through the open air, their wings cutting quietly through the breeze. Below them, the forest stretched endlessly in every direction, tall trees rising. Small animals darted through the undergrowth, occasionally rustling the bushes as they ran past, and the distant chirping of insects mixed with the low murmurs of people gathered among the trees.

I slowly looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings, taking in every detail. We were in a forest now, far away from the roaring crowds and towering walls of the outer arena where the first two fights had taken place. The difference was unsettling. Instead of a massive stadium packed with spectators eager to watch blood spill for entertainment, we were now standing in a vast wilderness where the only witnesses were the trees and whatever creatures lived among them.

A short while ago, the host and several officials had appeared without explanation and ordered us to follow them. No one had told us where we were going, and no one had bothered to explain why the location of the challenge had suddenly changed. We had simply walked in silence until the stone structures of the arena disappeared behind us.

I was not the only one confused. The contestants scattered around me looked equally uncertain, their expressions tense as they glanced around as if expecting danger to leap out from behind the trees at any moment. Judging from their reactions, this was not something that had happened in previous tournaments.

I had no idea what was going on, but one thing was certain. Whatever was about to happen here was not going to be simple.

I shook my head slightly and let out a quiet sigh before leaning back against the rough trunk of a large tree. Crossing my arms over my chest, I closed my eyes for a moment.

Not far away, the whispers of the contestants slowly grew louder as their anxiety pushed them to talk.

This is strange," one man muttered uneasily. "I wonder what today's challenge is if they brought everyone all the way out

here."

'Exactly," another replied. "The tournament has always taken place in the outer arena for years. Why would they suddenly change it today? What are they planning?"

A third voice spoke up, trembling slightly. "A lot of people have already died in the earlier rounds. Do you think they are trying to find even more ways to kill us?"

The man hesitated before continuing in a strained voice. "I have been having nightmares after every fight. Every night I wake up thinking the next match will be the one where I die. I do not want to die."

Normally, a warrior who spoke like that would immediately be mocked or insulted for cowardice, but this time no one said a word in response. Because the truth was obvious.

He was not the only one afraid. They all were.

Everyone here pretended to be proud and fearless, standing tall with their weapons as if death meant nothing to them, but deep down every single one of them feared the same thing. No one truly wanted to die in this forest.

The atmosphere around us grew heavier as people glanced at each other warily, unsure of who among them might become an enemy once the next challenge began.

Beside me, Miles finally spoke, his voice calm and thoughtful as he observed the crowd

"They are scared."

1:02 am P PPT

Chapter 177

I opened my eyes slightly and hummed in agreement.

“Yes.”

Miles watched them for a few seconds longer before adding quietly, “Most of them are scared of you, Noah.”

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265 vouchers

I opened my eyes slowly and lifted my gaze toward the group of contestants standing not too far away. The moment our eyes met, several of them visibly flinched as if they had been caught doing something wrong. A few instinctively stepped back, creating distance between us, while quiet whispers immediately spread through the small crowd again.

‘gods... what is he doing here?’ one man muttered under his breath, his voice filled with disbelief. “Wasn’t he disqualified?”

Another person beside him shrugged uneasily. “Who knows. Let’s just be careful around him and the prince. Those two are dangerous.” He lowered his voice further as if afraid I might still hear him. “Hopefully this round will be a one-on-one match and they’ll end up paired together. I definitely don’t want to fight either of those demons.”

Several others nodded quickly at his words, their expressions tense.

I watched them quietly for a moment, their fear almost tangible in the air, before shifting my gaze away. I was not interested in their nervous speculations. Instead, I began searching the area for someone else, and it did not take long before I found

Leaning lazily against a tree several meters away was the prince.

He looked completely at ease, as though the tension filling the forest had nothing to do with him. His posture was relaxed.

His expression calm, and his presence carried the same confidence I had noticed since the beginning of the tournament. However, his eyes were fixed directly on me, studying me with the same careful attention that I was using to observe him.

At the beginning of the competition, his gaze toward me had been dismissive, as though he were looking at someone weak and unworthy of his attention. Now that look was gone.

Now his eyes were cautious.

Beside me, Miles spoke quietly. "Are you really going to fight the prince?"

I did not answer immediately.

"I know you're strong," he continued, glancing at me from the corner of his eye, "but he's really powerful. And honestly, you don't look too good right now. How are you planning to fight that devil when you're already at a disadvantage?"

I was not offended by his words. I understood exactly where they were coming from. My warriors in the past had acted the same way whenever I insisted on entering a battle despite unfavorable conditions. They would always try to warn me, hoping I might reconsider.

But in the end, I always did what I wanted.

That was simply the kind of person I was.

I turned my head and leaned slightly closer to Miles, enough that he stiffened in surprise and his breath caught faintly. Lowering my voice, I said calmly, "You should worry about yourself." Then my expression grew more serious as I glanced around the forest once more.

*Stay alert, for some reason, something about this forest doesn't feel right to me. Do not lower your guard

Miles looked like he wanted to argue or ask more questions, but before he could say anything else, movement at the front of the gathering caught everyone's attention.

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Chapter 177

The host stepped forward.

65 vouchers

Her usual graceful smile was on her face, though this time there was something cunning that made the atmosphere feel even more unsettling.

“Welcome to the last day of the Crimson Warrior Rite!” she announced cheerfully, spreading her arms slightly as if greeting honored guests. “How is everyone doing?”

Silence answered her.

Two days ago, the contestants would have responded with loud cheers and excited shouts, eager to prove themselves in front of the crowd. Now none of that enthusiasm remained. Instead, the warriors standing around the clearing simply stared at her and the officials behind her with suspicion.

The host did not seem bothered by their cold reaction in the slightest.

Her smile only widened slightly, as though their distrust was exactly what she had expected.

The host clasped her hands lightly behind her back as she continued speaking. “We have all made it to the last day of the tournament, and whether we want to admit it or not, every single one of you standing here today is lucky to still be alive.” She paused briefly, allowing her words to settle among the contestants before continuing. “Everyone here now has the chance to win a top-tier weapon of their choice. Not only that, but the winner will also receive sponsorship, and many of you may even be offered employment by powerful figures within the pack.”

Her eyes slowly moved across the crowd, watching their reactions carefully as she added the next part. “If you are lucky enough, you may even find yourselves working under the three warriors closest to the Alpha... or perhaps even under the Alpha himself.”

At first, people only exchanged uncertain glances, but slowly the temptation began to creep into their expressions. I could see it clearly. The fear was still there, but now something else had begun to compete with it.

Ambition.

The host noticed it too, but she also saw that the fear had not disappeared completely. Her smile widened slightly, as though she had been waiting for the perfect moment to deliver the final push.

“Oh,” she said casually, as if she had just remembered something insignificant. “Did I forget to mention this?”

She tilted her head, her voice sweet as honey. “The winner will also receive one million gold coins.”

The entire forest went silent.

For a moment, even the birds seemed to stop singing

My previously bored gaze lit up instantly the moment the word money reached my ears. Before I even realized what I was doing. I leaned forward with sudden excitement, my eyes shining as I raised my hand high into the air and shouted, "To

in!"

The sudden outburst shocked everyone around me

Miles stared at me like I had completely lost my mind, his mouth slightly open in disbelief.

I could feel dozens of eyes turn toward me at once.

The prince's gaze was on me.

The host's gaze was on me.

3/4

11:02 am PPPT

Chapter 177

019

165 vouchers

Everyone was staring, but my excitement was apparently contagious, because the stunned silence quickly broke apart as the other contestants began shouting as well. The forest that had been filled with tension only moments ago now erupted with loud cheers and excited voices as greed replaced hesitation.

Miles blinked several times before looking at me again, clearly unable to process what he had just witnessed.

"Noah," he scoffed under his breath, shaking his head. "You're crazy."

I did not even bother responding to him.

My attention had already shifted elsewhere.

My eyes moved toward the prince, and a slow grin formed on my lips as a single thought ran through my mind.

Beating that annoying prince to a pulp and walking away with one million gold coins.

This lifetime was turning out to be far more entertaining than I had expected.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 178

[1,086 words]

Chapter 178

Caspian

65 vouchers

I kept my eyes on the boy leaning lazily against the tree, my gaze tracing the calm lines of that angelic face that seemed almost too perfect to belong to an ordinary person.

Werewolves were beautiful creatures by nature, and everyone knew that much. It was difficult for a werewolf to be truly ugly unless fate had been particularly cruel, and in my life I had seen countless people whose appearances could easily turn heads in any gathering. Yet the boy standing there was different in a way that was difficult to ignore.

His face could rival anyone's without effort. It was the kind of beauty that made women jealous and forced men to glance twice despite themselves. Looking at him almost felt like staring at something carefully crafted by the moon goddess herself, as though she

had taken extra time shaping every detail until the result embodied the very definition of beauty.

The man before me was undeniably beautiful.

And I had learned that young girls these days had a strange fondness for beautiful things.

Was that the reason my little sister had become so obsessed with him that she was willing to risk her life for his sake? Was it simply because he looked like that?

The thought made a faint frown settle on my face.

Not only had Chloe unleashed every ounce of her spiritual power to try to defeat me, but I had also heard that he had spent the entire night saving her life afterward. The memory of it made my eyes darken as the murmurs of the crowd faded into meaningless noise around me.

My mood dipped sharply, and the whip coiled around my waist tightened slightly as if it could sense the shift in my emotions. That weapon had always responded to my anger, almost like a living creature waiting for permission to act, and it had been a very long time since I had felt the kind of irritation now stirring in my chest.

I hated the idea that someone of such low standing could affect me this way, and the fact that he had stopped my whip so effortlessly that day only made the irritation worse.

Still, I could not deny the truth.

Even though I disliked him, I could not deny that he was strong.

Anyone who had been fighting since childhood learned to recognize a threat when they saw one, and Noah was very clearly a threat. I still remembered the moment when he had looked at me after I injured Chloe. There had been real killing intent in his eyes, something raw and terrifying that made it obvious he would not have stopped until one of us was dead. If Yara and Kauis had not stepped in at that moment, the situation would have turned into a fight neither of us could easily walk away from.

My fingers closed around the handle of my whip as my gaze remained fixed on him.

I wanted to kill him.

More than that, I wanted to see who would win if we truly fought without anyone interfering.

The whip began to slowly loosen from around my waist, the dark coil sliding slightly as if eager to be released, but just as it started to unfold, someone stepped quietly behind me.

My guard bowed her head respectfully before speaking,

1/3

11:02 am

Chapter 178

“Please don’t, Your Highness.”

I paused, though my eyes never left Noah.

0441

\$5 vouchers

“My lord.” she continued carefully, “your uncle will not appreciate it if you start another fight outside the official challenges, especially after what happened yesterday with your sister. He was busy then, but I am certain he will not ignore it if something like that happens again.”

Her voice lowered slightly as she added, “Especially with him.”

She glanced toward Noah briefly before returning her gaze to the ground.

“For him to still be here means the Alpha allowed it,” she said quietly. “You do not know what kind of relationship exists between them, so it would be wise to be cautious.”

I did not say anything for a moment, my gaze still fixed on the boy leaning against the tree as my fingers remained loosely wrapped around the handle of my whip. The weapon seemed to sense my hesitation, and after a few seconds I slowly released it and let my hand fall back to my side. Behind me, I heard my guard let out a quiet breath of relief. The tension in her posture eased immediately, and the hand that had been gripping her arrows relaxed as if a heavy weight had just been lifted from her chest.

“Report,” I said calmly.

She straightened slightly and nodded before answering in a steady voice. “Your sister, Princess Chloe, is much better now. Her condition has stabilized completely.”

I listened silently as she continued.

“Her core has fully healed,” she added. “It was restored by Noah.”

My eyes shifted back to the boy at the mention of his name.

I knew exactly how much power it took to heal someone’s core. Even the most skilled healers hesitated before attempting something like that because the cost was enormous. It drained spiritual energy to a dangerous degree, sometimes leaving the healer vulnerable for days.

Yet he had done it without hesitation.

He had done it knowing it would weaken him before today’s challenge.

My brow lifted slightly in confusion as I studied him again. No one was that selfless. Not in this world. People always wanted something in return.

So what did he want?

Had he done it because Chloe was a princess? Was he hoping that saving her would earn him favor with the royal family! Perhaps he believed that getting close to us would grant him influence or protection

But then another question appeared.

What exactly was his relationship with my uncle?

My uncle did not care about anyone. He rarely showed interest in people unless they were useful to him in some way. Yet somehow Noah had not only survived yesterday’s chaos but had also been allowed to remain in the tournament

u had a

None of it made sense.

2/3

11:02 am P

Chapter 178

Noah was confusing. I could not understand him at all.

3/3

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 179

[947 words]

Chapter 179

Caspian

My guard seemed to notice the faint crease forming between my brows because she spoke again carefully. “Be careful, Your Highness. You are strong, but you should not underestimate him. There is something about that boy that feels... different.”

Her eyes scanned the trees around us before she added quietly, “And this entire forest gives me a bad feeling.”

I followed her gaze and looked around.

She was right.

I could feel it too.

There was something wrong with this forest. The air felt heavier than it should have been, and a faint unease stirred deep inside me as if some instinct was quietly warning me to stay alert.

My guard seemed ready to say more, but before she could continue, the host's voice rang out again from the clearing.

"Alright," she said cheerfully, clapping her hands once as if to gather everyone's attention. "I am glad everyone seems to be in such good spirits, but let us get back on track."

She smiled brightly as she continued speaking. "After all, there is a lot of money involved here. One million coins can change many lives."

My gaze shifted back toward Noah again just in time to see his expression brighten noticeably when he heard the amount.

I tilted my head slightly. I had never seen anyone react to money with that level of excitement before. In fact, he had been the first person to shout earlier when the reward had been announced.

It was almost ridiculous how obsessed he seemed with money.

"There will be two challenges today," she announced, "But the first one is very simple. Anyone can win if they are careful."

The contestants around the clearing exchanged doubtful looks, clearly not convinced by her reassuring tone, but she ignored their skepticism and gestured toward the forest stretching behind her.

"As you can see, we are standing in a forest, at the edge of this forest, there is a finish line."

She paused briefly before continuing

There are twenty-one of you left in the competition, but only four of you will advance. The first four people to reach the finish line will win this round and move on to the final challenge."

All around the clearing, contestants began glancing at each other with wary expressions, their brows furrowing as they tried to understand what kind of trap might be hidden inside something that sounded so simple.

Someone from the group stepped forward slightly and raised his voice so everyone could hear him "So all we have to do is reach the finish line first?"

The host nodded immediately, her smile bright and confident as she answered, "Yes. That is all you need to do."

She lifted her hand and pointed toward the sky above the forest canopy, and only then did I notice the strange floating objects drifting slowly in the air above us. They looked like enormous eyes made of magic, each one quietly hovering though alive.

1/3

11:02 am PPPT

Chapter 179

55 yolastic

“These eyes were created with magic.” she said. “They will follow each of you everywhere inside the forest and allow the audience in the outer arena to watch your progress. There are twenty-one of them, one for each of you. However, if you destroy your eye, or if someone else manages to destroy your eye, you will be immediately disqualified from the challenge. That means you must protect your eye carefully. Is that clear?”

Another contestant spoke up from the crowd. “So if we want someone to lose, we just have to destroy their eye?”

The host nodded again without hesitation. “Yes, that is correct. But do not underestimate the eyes themselves. They were created with very strong magic, so destroying them will not be easy. But, if someone does manage to destroy one, the owner of that eye will automatically lose.”

Some contestants visibly relaxed when they heard that explanation. A few even began speaking excitedly among themselves.

“Huh. This is actually easy,” one man said with relief.

Another nodded enthusiastically. “Right. It is not nearly as difficult as I expected. We might actually win this.”

Their optimism spread through a portion of the group, but not everyone looked convinced. A few of the more experienced fighters remained silent, their expressions thoughtful as they studied the forest around us.

They understood something the others did not.

The host was not the type to reveal everything so easily.

My attention shifted again toward Noah.

Instead of reacting like the others, he simply sat there calmly, listening to the host for a moment before turning toward the boy who always followed him and Chloe around. The younger boy leaned closer as Noah whispered something quietly into

his ear.

The boy froze for a moment before his eyes widened in sudden understanding, then he nodded quickly. Noah leaned back against the tree again and casually lifted his gaze until it met mine.

For a brief second we simply stared at each other, then his lips slowly curled upward.

The expression was subtle, but the meaning behind it was obvious.

Wait for me. I am coming for you soon.

A faint smile pulled at my own lips in response, surprising even my guard beside me. I rarely smiled, especially in situations like this, yet something about that silent challenge stirred a quiet excitement in my chest.

I spoke under my breath, my voice low and rough.

“Fine.” My eyes remained locked on his. “I will wait for you and see how strong you really are.”

Come.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 180

[1,604 words]

Chapter 180

0191

55 vouchers

Selene

The host smiled brightly as her gaze swept across all of us, as if she were savoring every bit of tension hanging in the air. "Is today's match clear to everyone, or does anyone need me to repeat myself?" she asked lightly, tilting her head as though she already knew the answer.

No one spoke, and instead, people simply shook their heads, their expressions shifting into excitement as their eyes lit up with anticipation, as if they could not wait for the match to begin. Some of them even looked smug and arrogant, their lips curling into confident smiles as though they had already decided exactly what they were going to do to win.

I looked at all of them quietly, my expression giving nothing away, but inwardly, I could not help the faint shake of my head at their behavior.

People were far more gullible than I thought, because the moment they were given even the smallest end of a stick, they convinced themselves that they held the entire thing, never realizing they were only a single step away from their own downfall.

As that thought crossed my mind, I turned slightly, and at that exact moment, I felt the host's gaze was on me.

I lifted my eyes and met hers, and her smile deepened instantly, her expression even more excited than it had been the previous day, as though she was relieved that her favorite pet was still playing her game. I did not respond to her look because I had other things to think about, and she was not important enough to distract me.

"Good," she said smoothly, her voice filled with satisfaction. "Now that we understand the rules, let the game begin." She paused briefly before continuing, her tone turning almost playful. "A word of advice though, before you leave."

People immediately turned their attention back to her, curiosity flickering across their faces as they waited.

She tilted her head slightly, her eyes gleaming in a way that felt almost dangerous. "Guard not only your body," she said softly, "but your mind."

Before anyone could question what she meant, the fog around us began to thicken unnaturally fast, spreading across the forest floor and rising into the air until it swallowed the trees, the sky, and everything in sight. In the next moment, the host and her people standing with her vanished completely, as though they had never been there at all.

Panic spread instantly through the crowd as people looked at each other, confusion quickly turning into fear

“What is going on- someone began to say, but before he could finish his sentence, his voice suddenly cut off, and in the next second, he disappeared, swallowed whole by the fog.

More people began to vanish.

One after another.

Some screamed as they tried to run, while others stumbled back in terror, but it made no difference because the fog reached them no matter what they did, engulfing them completely and erasing them from sight as if they had never existed.

I watched everything quietly for a moment before turning my head to the side.

My gaze met the prince's.

He was already looking at me.

His expression was calm and unreadable, his eyes steady as if nothing about this situation concerned him in the slightest, 174

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and the woman standing behind him looked just as composed. Neither of them moved, and neither of them showed even the slightest sign of panic. Then, in the next moment, the fog swallowed them too.

A small smile curled at my lips as I watched them disappear.

The white fog closed in around me immediately after, wrapping around my body and pulling me into it without resistance, and when I opened my eyes again, everything was pure white.

There was nothing around me, as though the entire world had been erased and replaced with an endless void where even the trees had disappeared.

I raised an eyebrow as I looked around, trying to take in my surroundings, but there was nothing to see. Then suddenly, I felt something tighten around my wrist.

I turned immediately and saw Miles standing beside me, his small hand gripping mine tightly as if I was the only thing keeping him grounded in this empty space. His eyes were wide as he stared at the white void before turning to me, panic flickering across his face as he spoke.

“N-Noah, what is going on?” he asked, his voice unsteady. “Where are we? What happened to the rest of the contestants?”

When I did not answer him immediately, Miles’ expression shifted dramatically, and then he gasped loudly, his mouth falling open as if the truth had just struck him like lightning.

“Wait,” he said, his voice rising in panic as he tightened his grip on my hand, “don’t tell me we are dead. How can we die so soon when we are still this young? I have so many things I still want to do, so many people I still need to defeat. I cannot seriously just die now!”

I stared at him, completely unimpressed by his outburst, before lifting my free hand and pinching his cheek without warning, applying just enough pressure to make him yelp in pain.

“Ouch!” he cried, instantly letting go of my wrist to clutch his cheek as he looked at me with wide, offended eyes. “That hurt. What did I even do?”

“I wanted to show you that you are not dead,” I said flatly, withdrawing my hand as if nothing had happened.

He pouted immediately, his expression somehow becoming even more childish.

“Then where are we?” he asked, glancing around nervously at the endless white space. “And where are the others?”

I did not answer right away. Instead, I lifted my gaze upward, my eyes narrowing slightly as I focused on the massive, unblinking eye watching us from above.

“We are still in the forest, I said calmly.

Miles frowned, clearly unconvinced, as he turned in a slow circle, scanning the empty surroundings.

“Forest?” he repeated, his tone skeptical. “Are you sure about that? Because I do not see any trees or anything that would make this eerie place resemble a forest.”

I shrugged lightly, my expression indifferent. "The forest was always eerie. Most people just never noticed it. There was something wrong with it from the very beginning"

He looked at me more carefully this time, his earlier panic fading into curiosity. "Is that why you told me to hold onto you earlier?" he asked. "Did you already know something like this would happen?"

"Yes, I thought it would keep us together instead of separating us so I could keep an eye on you and protect you."

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His face lit up at my words, a bright smile spreading across his lips. "As expected of you," he said cheerfully. "You are really smart, Noah."

I turned my head slightly to look at him, my gaze lazy on the surface but sharp underneath, and then I spoke in a calm, almost absent tone.

"But that did not seem to work."

He blinked, confusion flashing across his face. "What?"

He did not get the chance to finish his sentence.

In one smooth, effortless motion, I pulled the dagger from where I had hidden it within my clothes and drove it straight into his head without even the slightest hesitation.

His body froze instantly, his eyes widening in shock as the blade sank deep, and his lips parted as if he wanted to speak, but no proper sound came out.

I did not stop. I pulled the dagger out just as quickly and drove it down again, this time into his chest, forcing the air out of him as he coughed violently, blood spilling from his mouth while his trembling hands tried to grasp the blade.

"W-why..." he choked out, his voice weak and broken as he looked at me in disbelief. "Why would you do this to me, Noah?"

I looked down at him, my face completely devoid of emotion, my grip on the dagger steady.

“Quit the act,” I said coldly. “I know you are not Miles, and the more you pretend to be him, the more I will enjoy hurting you.”

For a brief second, his expression remained twisted in pain, but then, slowly, his lips stretched into something unnatural, something far too wide to belong to a child.

The illusion shattered.

His face distorted, his features melting and shifting until red fur sprouted where skin once was, forming the sharp, cunning face of a red fox, and then even that form twisted again, reshaping into the figure of a woman.

A very beautiful woman stood before me, completely bare, her long black hair cascading down her body, covering just enough to leave everything else to the imagination, her presence both alluring and deeply unsettling.

She tilted her head, her lips curling into a delighted smile as her voice changed into something softer, and far more dangerous.

“Oh.” she said, her eyes gleaming with hunger as she looked at me, “I like you.”

Her smile widened, revealing the predator beneath the beauty.

“You are far smarter and quicker than the rest of them, she continued, her gaze dragging over me as if she were already deciding how to consume me. “You will be absolutely delicious to cat.”

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