

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 201

[1,383 words]

2011 You reap what you sow

2011 You reap what you sow

Selene

The heavy doors swung open, and bright light flooded in, hitting my face directly. I squinted for a second before stepping forward with the others. The host and the staff walked out first, leading the way into the inner arena. Noah, the prince, his guard, and I followed right behind them.

As soon as we walked into the open space, the whole arena erupted.

Claps, yells, and shouts exploded around us, echoing off the high walls and filling every corner of the massive space. The noise was deafening.

“Hahaha, look at these powerful warriors! These candidates this year are so strong. They will make powerful warriors!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“They all showcased their talent,” another voice called out. “The most impressive talents for this warrior rite are the prince and that boy. They did so well.”

“Right, especially that boy, Noah. I can’t wait to introduce myself to him after the end of the warrior rite. I must bring him to our household!”

Their voices mixed together as people kept clapping and cheering. The excitement in the air was thick and electric.

Noah looked around, his eyes wide with shock and surprise. He clearly hadn’t

expected so many people shouting for them, calling their names like this. His mouth hung slightly open as he took it all in.

The guard beside him tried to keep her face straight, but it was obvious she was happy. Her shoulders were a little straighter, and there was a small spark in her eyes as she glanced around at the praising crowd.

Only the prince and I remained nonchalant.

The prince had won these rites for years, so this kind of praise was probably normal for him. And me? In my past lives, I had been a general. Thousands of people had celebrated me whenever I returned victorious from war. Cheers, feasts, songs in my honor, this was nothing new. It didn't move me.

I didn't pay attention to any of them.

The host finally stepped in front of the crowd and smiled brightly. She raised one finger to her lips, shushing them gently.

It was like magic. The entire arena fell silent almost instantly. Every voice cut off as they turned their attention to her, waiting.

"Woah, the crowd is so happy today," the host said with a laugh. "You must all be very satisfied with today's competition."

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The crowd cheered again, loud and enthusiastic.

The host smiled wider. "Well, today's competition is not over yet. We still have to decide the winner."

Many people cheered even louder this time, as if this was exactly what they had been waiting for. It was obvious what kind of fight they wanted, and who they wanted to see fighting.

The host turned slightly, her eyes moving across our group. I felt the prince's gaze on me the whole time. His blue eyes were locked onto my face, intense, like he was searching for something hidden behind my calm expression.

I didn't shrink away. I didn't look down. I kept my eyes on him, tilting my head just a little as I met his stare directly.

The host continued, her voice carrying clearly through the arena. "We have four people left. We will pair two against each other to fight. Based on today's competition and each warrior's performance, the battle for first and second position will be between the prince and Noah." She paused, letting that sink in. "And for third position, Miles and Angela will fight each other."

She pointed toward the guard and Miles as she said their names.

The crowd erupted once more, the noise rising to a new level. Whistles and shouts filled the air as people reacted to the matchups.

I looked over at Miles. He was staring at the prince's guard with a focused expression, like he was trying to figure out whether he could actually win against her or not. His brows were slightly furrowed, and I could tell he was already thinking through possible moves in his head.

Before he could say anything, the guard spoke up.

"I forfeit."

Everyone turned to her at once, including me.

The prince looked at her, raising one eyebrow. "You forfeit?"

The guard nodded and bowed her head respectfully. "Yes. I forfeit because I already lost, your highness."

Everyone stared at her in confusion. Miles blinked a few times, clearly thrown off. What are you saying?"

The guard straightened up, and turned to look at Miles. For the first time since I had met her, a small, genuine smile appeared on her face.

"I don't need to fight against a true warrior to know I already lost," she said softly. "You protected your subordinate even at the cost of your life. You pushed the prince out of danger while you were in danger yourself. You're a true warrior even at a young age."

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Thank you for showing what a warrior truly is."

She bowed her head deeply to Miles.

The entire arena went quiet at her words. The surprise was thick in the air.

Someone from the crowd finally broke the silence. "Oh my goddess, did the prince's most trusted warrior just bow down to a kid? What is going on?"

Miles looked at her, completely shocked. Then he turned his head toward me. I didn't say anything. I just smiled at him and gave a small nod of approval.

Miles glanced back at the guard. Tears started welling up in his eyes.

I smirked. "Are you crying? I thought it was impossible for you to cry."

Miles quickly looked away, wiping at his face. "You're speaking nonsense. I'm not crying."

I couldn't help it. I chuckled softly.

The host, instead of looking angry that one of the fights had been ruined, remained completely calm. She smiled and turned to face the crowd.

"Well, since she forfeited, Miles is the third winner of the warrior rite."

People cheered loudly for him. The sound rolled through the arena, full of excitement and approval.

The host smiled wider. "Alright, now. It's time for the competition we have all been waiting for. The fight between the prince and Noah."

The cheers grew even louder this time, echoing everywhere. People were clearly thrilled for the final matchup.

I looked at the prince again. His blue eyes were already on me.

He walked toward the middle of the arena without saying a word. Many women in the crowd shouted his name, their voices high and eager, but he ignored them completely, his focus never wavering.

Before I could follow, Miles grabbed my hand gently.

"Noah... about the prince..."

"I know," I said quietly. "But that doesn't change what he did to her."

Miles looked down for a moment, then nodded. "You're right." He let go of my hand.

I smiled at him and ruffled his hair lightly. "I won't do anything extreme. After all, he saved your life. I owe him that much."

Miles smiled back, some of the tension leaving his face. "Thank you, Noah."

I nodded and walked toward the center of the arena. The prince was already waiting, watching me approach.

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When I stopped in front of him, he spoke first, his voice low but clear.

"Are you planning to take revenge for my sister? Is that what this is? Do you think getting revenge will change anything? It won't change the fact that my sister is weak."

I tilted my head slightly, my expression calm.

“Revenge?” I echoed softly. “Aren’t you exaggerating? I don’t care about that. What I care about is karma. And since karma seems to be taking its time, I simply decided to give it a little push. After all, you reap what you sow.”

Prince Caspian looked at me for a long moment, his blue eyes searching mine. Then he removed the whip from his waist with a smooth motion.

“Alright then,” he said. “Let’s see how powerful your karma really is.”



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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 202

[1,535 words]

202 Eyes on me, kid

2021 Eyes on me, kid

Caspian

I stood right there in the center of the arena with the weight of thousands of eyes pressing down on me from every side, the noise from the crowd finally settled down. My fingers stayed wrapped tightly around the handle of my whip, the familiar leather pressing into my palm as I kept my focus locked straight ahead on the man standing opposite me.

Noah looked completely relaxed as he faced me, his entire body at ease with his face calm and steady while he met my gaze without any sign of tension or hesitation in his

eyes. I frowned deeply because there was something different about him now, something I couldn't quite place right away even though I studied him carefully.

It wasn't his posture or the way he carried himself, he had always acted this calm no matter what circumstances surrounded him, always radiating that same confidence that made him seem almost untouchable. He had always moved with that kind of power that didn't need to be loud or aggressive, so that wasn't the point at all.

What felt truly different was his aura, the way it pressed against me so strongly that standing in front of him felt more like facing a god than just another man, the energy around him ancient in a way that made my skin prickle with unease.

I frowned even harder as the question burned in my mind, wondering what could possibly have changed that much in just a few short hours while he had been inside the forest, but no clear answers came to me no matter how much I turned it over in my thoughts.

All I could do was keep looking at him, my eyes searching for any clue in that emotionless expression while my hand tightened even more firmly over the whip until my knuckles ached from the pressure. Noah looked at me for a long moment before he reached out toward Chloe's sword as if he intended to unleash it and prepare for a proper fight, but I had no intention of allowing him that chance, if this was going to be a difficult battle then I was determined to make sure he never got the opportunity to make the first real move against me.

With a sharp and decisive flick of my wrist I sent my whip cracking through the air straight toward him, the blade wrapping tightly around his wrist in an instant and curling around his hand like a living snake that seemed intent on enveloping his entire arm as it squeezed with increasing force.

The crowd gasped loudly in shock as they watched the scene unfold right in front of them, their voices rising in a wave of surprise that filled the arena.

The host spoke loud for everyone to hear, her tone filled with disbelief as she said, "Oh my Goddess, guys, what is the prince doing? Is he not giving any chance to Noah?" She said. "What is going on? This is not his usual style of fighting. He is never this fast to take down his enemies."

People in the crowd started muttering and agreeing among themselves, their whispers spreading quickly through the stands while someone else called out clearly, "That boy is screwed. The prince is dangerous when he is serious at fighting. Even though Noah defeated the beast, can he really beat the prince? The prince has always won every warrior rite."

I didn't say anything in response and simply kept my eyes fixed on Noah the entire time, watching him closely as he remained completely relaxed while looking down at the whip

colled around his wrist, his expression showing no concern at all even as the crowd continued to talk about him as if he were already defeated. He didn't seem to care about their words in the slightest and just continued to study the whip for another moment before slowly lifting his gaze back to meet mine, then he moved his free hand toward it as if he wanted to touch the whip or push it away from his skin.

But something surprising and completely unexpected happened right then, something so different from anything I had seen before that it caught me entirely off guard.

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202) Eyes on me, kid

The whip immediately recoiled and jerked away from his fingers as if it were suddenly afraid of getting touched by him, unwinding from his wrist in a flash before snapping back toward me and wrapping itself securely around my waist once more as if it no longer wanted any part of the fight at all.

The entire arena fell into complete silence in that moment, even the host looked stunned as if she couldn't believe what had just taken place right in front of everyone.

I looked down at my whip with my brows furrowed deeply in surprise, my mind racing as I tried to understand it. The only time the whip acted like this was when I wanted to test it against my uncle but it stopped before it could touch him, but after that incident it had never reacted this way toward anyone no matter how powerful that person happened to be. Yet here it was now, pulling back from Noah as if he were something far more dangerous and terrifying than any opponent I had ever faced in all my years, and the question kept echoing through my head with no explanation in sight.

How is that possible?

Just when my mind was still spinning from the strange way my whip had recoiled from his touch, a soft but firm voice cut through the silence of the arena and pulled me back to the present moment.

“Eyes on me, kid.”

I quickly looked up, and in that split second I saw his fist already coming straight toward my face with terrifying speed. My instincts took over completely before I could even think about it. I stepped back sharply, my body moving on its own to avoid the blow, but even though his fist missed me by a narrow margin, the force behind it was so intense that the air around us swirled violently, kicking up a thick cloud of dust that rose into the air and swirled around us like a small storm had suddenly erupted in the middle of the arena.

I frowned deeply, my heart still pounding from how close that punch had come, and I glanced briefly at the spot behind me where the power of the missed strike had impacted before turning my eyes back to Noah.

How powerful was that punch just now?

Noah stood there looking at me with that same calm, almost emotionless expression on his face. He rolled his shoulders and flexed his hand slowly as if loosening up, then spoke in a steady voice.

“Since your whip refused to fight me, let’s be fair. I will beat you up with my hands instead.”

My eyes darkened immediately at his words, a surge of irritation mixing with something sharper rising inside me. The entire arena remained deathly quiet, as if no one dared to speak or even breathe too loudly after what they had just witnessed. Most of the people watching couldn’t believe that he would dare talk to me in that tone, addressing the prince so disrespectfully right in front of everyone, but Noah didn’t seem to care at all. In fact, something deep inside told me that he wouldn’t have cared even if it had been Alpha Damien himself standing across from him instead of me.

My lips curled up slightly at the corners despite myself. I had always been the kind of person who preferred to keep my true feelings hidden, never showing exactly how I felt because emotions could so easily be used against me in this world of power and strength.

I had spent years perfecting that calm facade, keeping everything locked away behind a mask of control.

But now, for some reason I couldn’t fully explain, my blood began to boil in my veins and my eyes blazed with a heat I rarely let show. The careful facade I always kept firmly in place suddenly slipped off my face without warning.

I smiled, a real one this time, and clenched my hands into tight fists at my sides as I replied, my voice low but filled with challenge.

“You are probably 18 and you talk like you’re older. You’re rude. I’m going to put you in your place....kid.” Noah smirked in response, that bold and fearless expression crossing his face as he answered without missing a beat.

“That’s the spirit. Now, show me what you’ve got, prince.”

The words ignited something fierce inside me. Without another moment of hesitation, I ran straight toward him, my hands raised and ready as the distance between us closed rapidly, the dust still swirling lightly around

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our feet from the force of his earlier punch.



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[2,048 words]

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Caspian

047

B20 vouchers

Just as the fight intensified and my body was already aching from the relentless exchange, I felt a powerful impact that sent me crashing backward, my body hitting the hard floor of the arena with a painful thud that knocked the breath out of my lungs. I groaned loudly, one hand instinctively moving up to hold my throbbing head while my blue eyes flashed with sharp pain, the world spinning for a few seconds as I tried to regain my bearings.

The crowd gasped loudly at the scene unfolding in front of them, their shock obvious as they stared at me lying sprawled on the ground, bruises already forming across my face and body, making me look like a complete wreck with blood dripping steadily from the corner of my mouth as I stared up at the sky, one arm clutched tightly over my stomach where the pain radiated.

People were muttering and talking among themselves in hurried whispers, trying to understand what was going on and why the prince was down like this.

Many of them thought I was being dramatic by staying on the floor for so long, but what they didn't understand was that it was nothing short of a miracle that I was still alive and conscious after everything that had just happened.

Each punch Noah had thrown at me felt like sharp daggers piercing straight through my skin, the pain so intense that it seemed to drag the air out of my lungs with every strike, leaving me gasping and struggling to breathe properly. And to make it even worse, it felt like Noah was actually holding back and being nice to me, as if he could do so much more damage if he truly wanted to end this fight quickly.

I turned my head slowly to look at Noah, who stood a short distance away with his arms crossed over his chest, watching me with the calm, almost patient expression of a teacher looking down at a disappointing student. A small smile played on his lips as he spoke in a steady voice.

"Are you done? That is a bit disappointing. You didn't last for an hour."

My lips curled up slightly despite the sharp pain shooting through my body, and I clenched my hand into a tight fist, determined not to stay down. I tried to push myself up to stand, but the effort made me cough out a fresh spurt of blood that splattered onto the ground. In the distance, I heard my guard shout with clear worry in her voice.

"Your Highness!"

She tried to rush forward toward the fighting area, but I quickly raised my hand to stop her, my voice coming out strained and firm as I said, "It's okay. Stand back."

With great effort, I managed to stand up, staggering a little at first before I finally got my feet firmly under me again. I made my hands into tight fists and stood straight, forcing myself to look composed even though every part of me hurt, and I looked directly at Noah as I said, "Let's continue."

In the distance, some women in the crowd started shouting desperately, their voices filled with concern. "No! You crazy man, don't injure the prince! Stop the fight. This is insane!"

Noah ignored their pleas completely and turned his attention back to me, his expression unchanging as he replied simply "Yes, let's continue."

I moved toward him again, raising my fist to throw a punch with everything I had left, but he moved past me with surprising speed and threw a hard punch straight into my face. The impact made me cough out more blood, and I was about to fall down when he suddenly grabbed my hand, using my own momentum against me as he threw me across the floor. I groaned loudly in pain as my body slid and tumbled over the hard ground.

Before I could recover, he stepped firmly on my chest, pressing me down with his weight while he tilted his head slightly

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and looked down at me with that same calm disappointment in his eyes.

"How unamusing. You are still so weak. You disgust me."

20 vouchers

The words hit me harder than any punch because they were exactly the same ones I had said to Chloe when we fought earlier. I opened my mouth to say something in response, but before I could get the words out, he kicked me hard in the face. Fresh pain coursed through my entire body like fire spreading through my veins. I had never felt this way before in my life. Nobody had ever treated me with this kind of dominance and disregard.

All my life, I had always done whatever I wanted. I had always done what I thought was necessary to protect her, even if it meant hurting her in the process.

Noah scoffed softly and leaned down closer toward me, his voice low but clear as he said, "And you call that protection?"

My eyes widened in genuine surprise at his words, and I looked up at him, staring directly into his face. "H-how do you know what I'm thinking? Did you read my mind?"

Noah didn't respond to that question at all. Instead, he continued speaking in that steady tone. "I don't care about what happened in the past, but you thinking hurting your sister will protect her is the most bullshit thing I have ever heard. You thinking damaging her core will stop her from fighting almost killed her."

I clenched my hand tightly into a fist at his words, the guilt I had tried so hard to push down and bury deep inside suddenly rushing back to the surface with full force.

Last night, when I first heard that Chloe's life was in danger because of the damage I had caused her, I had immediately gone out to find something that could heal her, something powerful enough to fix what I had broken. But by the time I arrived, Noah was already there, healing her with his own hands as if it was the easiest thing in the world. I didn't regret what I had done though. This was the only way I knew how to protect her.

When we lost our parents, I had made a promise to myself that I would protect her no matter what it took, and being this harsh, this controlling, was the only path I saw that would keep her safe. Keeping her out of sight, keeping her away from the dangers of this world, would protect her. I didn't care what I had to do or how much she hated me for it, as long as she stayed alive and untouched by the cruelty that had taken everything else from us.

Noah's lips curled up into a cold smile as he looked down at me, his voice dripping with disappointment when he spoke. "I see you're still a fool."

Before I could react, he wrapped his hand tightly around my neck and lifted me up off the ground with shocking ease, bringing my face level with his as he continued speaking in that same merciless tone.

"Weak people like you deserve to die, Prince Caspian." He said the words slowly, repeating exactly what I had once said to Chloe during our fight, driving the blade deeper. "And I will make it happen."

He tightened his grip around my neck even more, cutting off my air completely. My eyes widened in shock as my breath left me in quick, desperate gasps, the pressure building painfully in my throat and chest. The host panicked immediately, her voice rising sharply across the arena. "N-noah, that is enough!"

Noah didn't stop. He didn't even glance at her as he replied coldly, "Don't interrupt me."

My guard rushed forward instantly, trying to come to my aid, but a powerful aura suddenly exploded out of Noah, throwing her backward with brutal force. Yara and Kauis also tried to move in to help, but the same overwhelming aura kept pushing them back, holding them in place no matter how hard they struggled. He was even more powerful than any of us had thought possible.

I couldn't fight back anymore. My strength was fading fast, my vision starting to blur and go black around the edges as consciousness slipped away from me. Everything was turning dark, and in that fading light, I could see death clearly in front of me, and that death wore the face of the boy currently strangling me. My hand dropped limply to my side as if my body

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had finally given up and no longer wanted to fight.

20 vouchers

Just when I thought this was truly the end and I was about to die, a loud, desperate voice suddenly cut through the darkness and pulled me back from the edge.

“Noah, no!”

Everyone in the arena turned toward the source of the voice at once. I didn't need to look to know who it was, but I turned my head anyway, my movements slow and weak.

Standing there at the edge of the fighting area, barely able to stay on her feet, was Chloe. Her eyes were wide with fear and worry, her body trembling from the pain she was still clearly in. Miles stood right beside her, holding her up carefully so she wouldn't collapse.

Noah glanced at her, tilting his head slightly, his grip still firm around my neck as a mocking smile played on his lips. “Look at your sister. She is worried. Who do you think she is worried about? You or me?”

I managed a sad, weak smile even through the pain, the thought coming to me bitterly. She couldn't possibly be worried about me after everything I had done to her. She was probably worried about him, the one who had healed her, the one who actually seemed to care.

Noah rolled his eyes as if he could read exactly what was going through my mind. “It seems you have come up with an answer. You claim you protect your sister and yet in times of danger, you know she wouldn't choose you. Don't you think your so-called protection has been useless?”

I didn't say anything in response. I just looked away from him, closing my eyes as the weight of his words settled heavily on me, and whispered hoarsely, “Finish me.”

Noah scoffed softly, but just when I thought he would finally end it and kill me right there, Chloe's voice rang out again, trembling but determined.

“Noah, please don't kill my brother.”

I opened my eyes slowly and looked at her, completely shocked by what I was hearing. She was still trembling, still clearly in pain from her injuries, but her eyes were fixed on me with genuine fear as she continued pleading. “Please, Noah. Don’t kill my brother. I can’t lose him.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. I hadn’t expected her to speak up for me at all, not after everything I had done to her, the pain, the damage to her core, the way I had tried to break her to keep her safe. I never thought she would still care enough to beg for my life.

Noah smiled again, but it wasn’t the same cold or mocking smile from before. He looked different now, like that of a wise person who had seen too much. He looked down at me and spoke calmly. “There, you have your answer. Your sister cares about you even though you’re an asshole, Prince Caspian. You broke a perfectly normal girl that just wanted to be loved.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze serious as he continued. “You are slowly becoming a villain in her story. Don’t be like my useless brothers. Don’t let your sister become like me. Let her have at least someone that loves her. Don’t let her have ten lifetimes just to be able to live.”

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[1,602 words]

Chapter 204

Selene

I stood there with my hand still wrapped around Caspian’s neck, feeling the way his body had gone limp under my grip, when Mira’s voice suddenly echoed inside my head, soft but full of amusement and judgment all at once.

'Hmm, you said you were going to mind your business in this lifetime. What are you doing? You sound so tacky.'

I cringed internally at Mira's insult, the words hitting me harder than I wanted to admit because she was right in her own annoying way. I responded in my mind without hesitation, keeping my face. 'Hey, I am minding my business in this

lifetime.'

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Mira scoffed loudly in my head, the sound clear and dripping with disbelief. 'Yeah, right. Look at you beating the prince on purpose because you wanted to teach him a lesson and let him know what he did was wrong. Does that sound like minding your business to you?'

I shrugged lightly and smiled to myself as I answered her. 'What? Me? You're mistaken. I'm not trying to teach him a lesson. I'm just trying to win. And besides, Chloe is a good kid. She seems to have a bright future. If I fix this for her, she will owe me, and if I need help one day, she will help me. I'm just trying to build my future.'

I could feel Mira rolling her eyes inside my mind, that familiar exasperated feeling she always gave me when she thought I was being ridiculous. But then her tone softened a little as she replied. 'You're right. She is a good kid. They are both good kids. Miles and Chloe. I hope they will find themselves just like you found yours.'

A small, genuine smile tugged at my lips as I turned my gaze toward Chloe and Miles. They were standing close together now, Miles supporting Chloe carefully so she wouldn't fall while she looked at me with those wide, pleading eyes that carried so much worry and hope mixed together. Then I looked at Caspian. His face was almost completely emotionless, giving nothing away to anyone watching, but I could see it clearly now, the flash of deep regret and heavy guilt that crossed his features for just a second before he buried it again. He looked like a man whose entire beliefs and hopes had come crashing down around him, leaving him lost and unsure of what to believe in anymore.

I smiled, satisfied with what I saw. "Good. You're lucky you're Chloe's older brother, because I'm not particularly kind to people that hurt the ones I love. Since you're given another chance, make sure you use it. After all, not everyone gets a second life. No, what am I saying, sometimes a first life with a happy ending is the best. So make use of it."

With that, I finally loosened my grip and let him go. Caspian dropped to the floor, gasping desperately for air as he clutched at his throat, his body trembling from the lack of oxygen.

I looked down at him without moving to help, my expression staying neutral. Even though I hadn't wanted to kill him, I wasn't going to pretend to care about him either.

"Caspian!" Chloe shouted, her voice filled with panic as Miles helped her move closer toward us. His guard also rushed forward quickly, trying to reach him to offer support.

Chloe stopped right in front of us, and it looked like she wanted to help her brother, her hand even twitching as if she was about to reach out, but she froze at the last moment. Her feet stopped moving and a look of nervousness flashed across her face, like she was scared to get too close to him. She bit her lip hard, clearly torn and not wanting to go near him.

Caspian looked up at her for a brief second before quickly looking away, as if he couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes

anymore.

I shook my head and let out a soft sigh at the dramatic scene unfolding in front of me. "Oh, stop being dramatic, you two."

I reached out and hit Chloe lightly on the head, not hard enough to hurt but enough to snap her out of it.

Chloe touched the spot where I had tapped her and said "Ouch," rubbing her head while looking at me with a slightly hurt expression, as if I had actually injured her.

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I looked at her seriously and spoke in a calm but firm voice. "Your brother is a dickhead, but he is not a bad person. If you don't want to forgive him, don't. You can't force yourself to do things you don't want to do. But if you are worried about him, you don't need to hide it."

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Chloe looked at me with those wide, hopeful eyes, still standing close after everything that had just happened, and I could feel the tension in the air shift the moment the words about her being Caspian's sister left the space between us. The people in the crowd widened their eyes dramatically at the revelation, their faces filled with shock as they started whispering loudly among themselves, the noise spreading through the arena.

"Brother? They are brother and sister? That girl is the princess? Woah, how is this possible?"

Chloe didn't flinch at their words or the weight of their stares. She didn't seem to care at all about the sudden attention or the murmurs questioning her identity. She just stood there, her focus remaining on her brother instead of the chaos around

I turned my attention to the prince, who was still recovering on the ground, and spoke to him in a calm but direct voice. "And you, quit being arrogant. Sometimes you just have to swallow your pride and do the right thing. Sometimes just a simple word is what you need to make it right."

The prince looked at me without saying anything at first, his expression unreadable as he processed my words. A woman in the crowd scoffed loudly, her voice echoing clearly as she said, "Who does he think he is to talk to the prince and princess like they are kids? The prince does not listen to anyone. Does he think the prince will listen to him and do as he says? How delusional."

Many people around her agreed, laughing under their breath as if they couldn't wait to see the prince embarrass me or put me in my place for daring to speak to him that way. But the next thing they knew, the prince slowly stood up, looked straight at me, and nodded his head like an obedient puppy before turning to face Chloe. He raised his hand slightly in front of him, almost like a child admitting fault, and said in a quiet but sincere voice, "I'm sorry, Chloe. I apologise for everything I have done."

The whole arena turned deathly quiet for a long moment. Chloe and the guard both stared at the prince, completely taken aback, their eyes wide with disbelief at what they were witnessing.

Chloe looked at her brother with a straight face for a few seconds before she moved back closer to me, staring at his outstretched hand as if it belonged to the devil himself, and whispered nervously, "Noah, has he gone mad? Do I need to call Remi?"

I smiled and shook my head. "No. He has not gone mad. He is trying to make it up to you. It's not by force to respond to him, but I can honestly see he loves you, not like my good-for-nothing brothers. Well, maybe not all of them are bad. There is still that warlord that is crazy about me. I don't know if I should even call that a good thing."

I said the last part almost to myself, the words slipping out quietly as old memories flickered through my mind.

Chloe looked at me first, then turned her gaze back to her brother. After a moment, she nodded slowly and placed her hand in his just a little, her voice soft but cautious. "Alright. But we will take it slow."

Caspian looked at her, and before anyone could react, he gently pulled her forward and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug as he said, "I will protect you the right way."

Chloe gasped softly, her face turning bright red. She probably had never felt this kind of closeness from her brother before, and the sudden warmth seemed to overwhelm her for a second.

I smiled at the sight, before stretching my arms a little as I looked toward the host. “Does this mean I won? I can finally get my weapon.”

The host looked at me with her brows raised high, staring as if I were some rare species she had never seen before. After a long moment, she finally smiled and nodded. “Yes. You won. You can pick any weapon you want.”

As soon as she said that, several men walked toward me carrying weapons of many kinds. Each one was carefully covered

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with golden cloth, as if they were holding something truly special and powerful.

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My eyes brightened immediately with excitement, and I rubbed my hands together without even thinking about it. Finally, this was what I had been waiting for.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 205

[1,737 words]

Chapter 205

Selene

The host smiled warmly as she pointed toward the array of weapons laid out before me, her voice carrying clearly across the arena so everyone could hear. "These are powerful weapons. Weapons you won't find anywhere else. Weapons that would make anyone powerful and increase their power significantly. Since you're the winner, choose your pick."

The crowd grew visibly excited at her words, their cheers and murmurs rising in anticipation. Someone shouted enthusiastically, "Oh my Goddess, I love this part of the rite! Weapon choosing is always the best part!"

Another person nodded vigorously beside them and added, "I heard the golden sword would be in this rite. It is very powerful, one strike can cause a lot of damage. He will obviously pick the golden sword."

Many people around them nodded in agreement, clearly convinced that the golden sword was the obvious choice for the

winner.

I wasn't paying much attention to their excited chatter or predictions. Instead, I kept my focus on the weapons in front of me, feeling the many powerful auras radiating from the items. Each one pulsed with strength, tempting me to pick them.

The host gestured again and said, "Remove the clothes."

The attendants quickly removed every golden cloth covering the weapons, fully displaying the items for everyone to see. My eyes brightened immediately at the sight. There were so many powerful pieces laid out, bows, swords, whips, daggers, and everything else one could possibly name, all gleaming under the bright lights of the arena.

I looked around carefully, my eyes scanning each weapon as I tried to figure out which one would be best for me. Maybe it was because of the new power I had awakened, but I could sense exactly how powerful each weapon was with surprising clarity. They were far stronger than most people probably realized, truly formidable pieces. But for some reason, none of them felt right. It wasn't that I wasn't satisfied with them. In my past lives, I had seen and wielded many powerful weapons, yet at the end of the day, they still broke or failed when facing truly overwhelming enemies. I had come here hoping to find something different, something that would truly stand the test of time.

I turned to the host and asked directly, "Is there something else?"

The host looked at me and shook her head. "I don't think so."

She was about to say something more when one of the attendants carrying the weapons spoke up quietly. "There are still weapons in the back."

The host glanced at him and said, "The weapons nobody seems to want?"

My ears perked up at that, and I looked at them both with interest. "Can I see them?"

The host hesitated for a moment before replying, "You can, but those weapons are useless. They have been here forever because nobody seems to want them. But I can still bring them if you want."

I nodded without hesitation. "Please do."

The man looked at the host for confirmation, and when she nodded, he turned and left to retrieve the rejected weapons. Miles came closer to me then, his voice low and concerned. "Noah, are you sure? You don't want any of these? These weapons are top tier, especially the golden sword. You should pick it."

I shrugged lightly and replied, "You can pick it if you want."

Miles shook his head quickly, his face turning a little red with embarrassment as he glanced at the prince. "That's not possible. I didn't win second place. The prince would probably want the sword."

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The prince looked at him calmly and said, "You can have it."

Miles blinked in surprise. "What?"

The prince continued in the same steady tone, "I don't need it. I have a bunch of weapons lying in my room. I don't even fight for the weapons, only to get stronger. So I don't need it."

Miles looked at the prince for a moment before turning back to me, still hesitant. "Can I really take it?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yes, of course. You can take it."

Miles bit his lip, clearly excited but nervous, as he looked at the golden sword. The host stepped forward and announced, "Since the first and second winners do not want the sword, you can pick it. But the sword doesn't obey people easily, so you have to be powerful enough to control it."

Miles nodded and stretched his hand out to take the sword. The moment his fingers touched it, the golden sword trembled violently, trying to resist his hold as if it had a

mind of its own. Something in my eyes flashed, and I whispered low enough that nobody else could hear, "Obey."

The sword stopped trembling immediately. Miles successfully took hold of it, and the crowd erupted into loud applause and cheers, clearly excited by the successful claiming.

Miles looked at me with bright eyes and a wide smile spreading across his face as he held the golden sword firmly in his hand, speaking in a proud but slightly childish tone as if he was waiting for a treat or some kind of praise. "I did it."

I couldn't help but chuckle softly at how cute he looked in that moment, and I reached out to ruffle his hair lightly before replying, "Good boy."

I turned my attention back to the weapons that were still laid out in front of me, scanning them carefully one by one as I searched for the best option among the powerful items. After a few moments of consideration, I picked up another sword that felt just as strong as the golden one.

It was really powerful, radiating steady and reliable energy that seemed perfect for someone who needed balance. I held it out toward Chloe and said calmly, "This is the prince's win," before handing the sword over to her.

Chloe widened her eyes in surprise, clearly caught off guard by the gesture, and she looked at me with confusion written all over her face. "Noah, what are you doing?"

I met her gaze, "Your weapon is too dangerous. It drains out your power fast. Right after what happened, you need a steady sword which will resonate with you. With this sword, you will become more powerful."

Chloe looked at me for a long moment before shifting her eyes down to the sword in her hands, then she glanced over at her brother, who remained completely indifferent about the whole matter as if it didn't concern him at all. She hesitated and said softly, "But he won."

I shook my head slightly and replied with a small smirk, "Don't tell me you forgave him that easily. After what he did, you should be shameless and take everything he has."

Chloe turned her head to look at the prince, searching his face for some kind of reaction. Caspian simply nodded once, as if silently telling her that it was okay and she should accept it. After a moment of internal struggle, Chloe finally reached out and took the sword from me, her fingers wrapping around the hilt.

I removed the sword that Chloe had originally given me from my back and held it out to her, "You should hold it but keep it

safe.”

Chloe looked at the sword in my hand and shook her head firmly. “No. You should keep it. Like you said, I don’t need something this dangerous.”

I shook my head, “You said it’s from your grandfather. It’s important to you.”

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Chloe smiled warmly at me then, her expression softening as she replied, “Exactly. I can’t think of a better person to have it.”

I wanted to argue and say no, but just then the man who had left earlier to fetch the rejected weapons returned, carrying what looked like a large basket filled with swords. At first glance, they all appeared like complete junk, dirty, dull, and giving off almost no aura at all. They looked like the kind of things someone would pick up off the street and immediately throw back down.

I didn’t say anything at first, I simply looked at the basket, studying the pile of discarded weapons quietly. People in the crowd immediately started talking among themselves, their voices filled with amusement and pity. “Look, he is already regretting it. He probably wants that sword back. Poor guy.”

Miles came closer to me with a worried expression and said, “You can have it back, Noah. It’s okay. I will pick something else.”

I shook my head gently, a small smile playing on my lips as I replied, “It’s okay, Miles. Like I said, sometimes even junks can be treasures. I’m going to prove it to you.”

With that, I stepped forward toward the basket and began looking through the swords one by one, my hands moving carefully over the dirty blades. Almost all of them were second-tier swords at best, weak and unremarkable, but something felt different about this pile. I had sensed it ever since they brought the basket out, a small but persistent feeling tugging at the edge of my awareness.

Just when I was carefully searching for the right one, a voice suddenly echoed inside my head, sounding almost playful and a little arrogant.

“Pfft, pfft. You are the powerful person I felt a while ago? Pick me. I’m strong.”

I stopped moving immediately and raised one eyebrow in surprise. That wasn’t Mira’s voice, so who exactly was talking inside my head?

When I didn’t answer right away, the voice spoke again, this time sounding a bit impatient. “Hey you, I’m down here. I’m one of the swords. Pick me! I’m not supposed to be with these junks. You’re powerful, you will be able to unlock my true power.”

I looked down at the swords in the basket and tilted my head slightly, “How interesting. A sword can talk?”

The sword replied proudly, “Yes, I can talk. I’m not a normal sword after all.”

I nodded slowly, my interest growing as I continued scanning the pile. “I see. You were the faint power I felt a while ago. Where exactly are you?”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 206

[1,690 words]

Chapter 206

Selene

The sword scoffed loudly inside my head, its voice dripping with arrogance as it replied, “You can’t even distinguish real power from weak ones. I will let it go since you’re strong. I’m the black one.”

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I turned my attention to the black sword lying among the pile of junk. It was entirely black from hilt to tip, and it looked even weaker than the others around it. Its whole body was chipped and worn down, the edges dull and the surface scratched terribly, making it seem like the most pathetic weapon in the entire basket.

I couldn't help but comment honestly, "You look worse than I thought."

The sword immediately snapped back at me, sounding offended. "Hey, watch your tongue! Who do you think you're talking to? I'm the eternal sword. Have some respect. I was crafted by the god of war himself. I was given most of his essence. Nothing can break me. My power is unlimited."

My eyes sparkled with sudden interest at its bold words, a flicker of excitement running through me. If even half of what it claimed was true, this could be exactly what I had been hoping to find.

Just then, I started hearing people whispering about me from the crowd, their voices loud. "Woah, has he gone insane? Is he talking to himself?"

Someone else added nervously, "This is scary."

Chloe looked at me with concern in her eyes and asked softly, "Are you okay, Noah?"

I nodded calmly, realizing that they couldn't hear the sword's voice at all. It seemed like the talking was only happening inside my head. "Don't worry about me. It seems like I'm no longer choosing a sword."

I said that while turning away, about to leave the basket behind, when the black sword suddenly called out urgently in my mind, "Wait! Dude, where are you going?"

I shrugged lightly and replied in my head, "Where do you think? You might be strong, but you're too proud. I don't want a proud sword, so you can wait here until someone else chooses you."

I started walking away slowly, counting in my mind, when the sword's voice came back, this time sounding almost desperate. "Please wait! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude. I must have gone crazy. Please forgive me. Can you pick me? I will be obedient."

I stopped and looked down at the black sword, tilting my head slightly as I asked, "Hmm, are you sure? I tend to mistreat people who don't obey."

The sword answered quickly, "I will. I promise. I'm really powerful. My power will shock you."

I looked at it as if I was still thinking it over, even though I had already decided in my heart that I was keeping it. Even though it looked small and unassuming right now, I could feel its true power hidden beneath the surface. I knew it was powerful.

Out loud, so everyone could hear, I announced clearly, "I choose the black sword."

The host looked at me with obvious surprise and said, "The black sword? Are you sure? It's very useless. That was the first sword to ever come here. We don't even know where it came from. We just saw it one day. No matter how hard we tried to see how powerful it is, nothing works."

I nodded confidently and replied, "Don't worry. I still choose this."

The host stared at me for a long moment, clearly doubting my decision, before she finally nodded and said, "Alright. This is

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the end of the warrior rite. We hope it was entertaining for everyone. Next year will be better. Thank you all for watching. Please take care of yourselves."

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She ended the rite officially, but nobody stood up or tried to walk away. The entire crowd stayed seated, all of them waiting and watching me closely to see the look of disappointment that they expected would appear on my face once I actually picked up the worthless-looking sword.

I ignored their stares completely and looked down at the black sword one more time before reaching out and picking it up.

The moment my fingers closed around the hilt, the air around me thickened noticeably and a strong wind suddenly swirled violently, forcing people to raise their hands to block the dust and wind from hitting their faces.

The black sword chuckled triumphantly inside my head and said, "Finally, I'm free. It's been so long."

Suddenly, cracks of black energy started breaking away from its body, and the sword burst into a bright, glowing white blade, causing the entire crowd to gasp loudly in shock at the dramatic transformation.

It then flashed with intense light and moved swiftly toward the sword I was still holding in my other hand, the one that had originally belonged to Chloe. As if it was hungry, it

swallowed Chloe's sword in one swift motion, absorbing it completely and catching me off guard.

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I reacted instantly and said, "Hey!"

But the sword didn't seem to care at all. It simply replied with satisfaction, "That was a nice meal," and started to move toward Miles' golden sword and Chloe's new sword as well, clearly wanting more.

I held it back firmly and warned it in a low voice, "Control yourself or I will throw you away."

The sword immediately controlled itself and spoke inside my head in a slightly sheepish tone, "Sorry, I got carried away. Anyway, let me introduce myself. My name is Devourer. I'm one of the most powerful weapons in the world. I have to eat a top-tier weapon to be able to function properly."

I raised an eyebrow and replied dryly in my mind, "That sounds like a chore."

The sword continued enthusiastically, "But the good news is that the weapon's power transfers to me. I will make it a hundred times stronger. And the best part is that I can change to any weapon of your choice."

As it spoke, the sword suddenly shifted shape right in my hand, transforming into a long bow with an arrow already ready. My eyes sparkled with genuine interest at the smooth transformation. Then it changed again, becoming a sharp dagger and a small knife, before shifting once more into a heavy hammer and then a long spear. Finally, it returned to its sword form as it kept talking proudly. "The best, best part is that I won't ever get destroyed. Even if I break, I will repair myself. I was the God of War's favourite weapon before I was cast away and sealed because I was too powerful."

I looked at the sword carefully, noting how similar this felt to the black mist I had encountered before. I was still confused about how I kept getting involved with such ancient and powerful things, but I wasn't complaining. This was exactly what I had always wanted in every lifetime, something truly reliable that wouldn't break when it mattered most,

I finally spoke to it calmly, "Alright, alright. I already chose you. No need to pitch yourself to me. Change back to a normal

sword."

The sword obeyed instantly and shifted back into its regular sword form.

I turned toward Chloe, ready to address the fact that my new weapon had just swallowed hers, but her eyes were wide as she stared at me with shock written all over her face. Thinking it was because Devourer had eaten her sword, I said apologetically, "I'm so sorry about that, Chloe. It was my fault."

Chloe didn't say anything at first. She just pointed at me with a trembling finger and stuttered, "N-noah... your..."

I was confused for a moment and looked around. Everyone in the arena was staring at me with the same weird expression.

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The entire place had gone completely silent, so silent that if you listened hard enough, you could probably hear a pin drop.

I turned around to look at Miles, the prince, the host, Kaus, and Yara. Yara was the only one looking at me with a smirk on her face, while the rest looked like they had just seen a ghost.

Miles gasped loudly, his eyes widening to an almost comical size as he exclaimed, "Noah, you're a woman?!!"

I paused and looked at Chloe again. She bit her lip nervously and pointed specifically at my hair. I reached up to touch it and realized the hairpin I had used to keep it tied back was now on the floor. My long hair was flowing freely with the wind, making it painfully obvious now that I looked every bit like a woman. My secret was out.

I sighed deeply and ran a hand through my hair, feeling the stress of the day finally catching up to me. "How stressful..."

I was about to say something more when a sudden wave of dizziness hit me hard. My body felt weak all at once, the exhaustion from today's events crashing down on me without warning. I staggered slightly, trying to steady myself, but it was no use. I felt myself starting to fall, my vision blurring as I saw Miles, Chloe, and even the prince moving quickly to try to catch me in time.

Just when I thought I was going to hit the ground, a strong aura suddenly filled the air around me. In a flash, a pair of strong hands caught me firmly around the waist, holding me steady. That familiar scent, the one that had somehow found a way to calm me even in the middle of chaos, drifted around me like a warm blanket.

I blinked slowly and looked up into those beautiful crimson eyes.

I could hear everyone in the arena gasping loudly at the sight.

Before I passed out completely, I heard his deep voice say softly yet clearly, “You make me lose my mind, little wolf.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 207

[1,549 words]

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Selene

My head rang painfully, as though thousands of people were hammering against my skull, trying to split it open from the inside. The throbbing was so intense that I frowned deeply and cursed under my breath before forcing my eyes open.

The first thing I saw was the moon shining directly on my face through the window. It was unusually bright tonight, so bright that its light enveloped my entire body, wrapping around me like it was deliberately choosing me, bathing me in a soft silver glow. It was already dark outside, and the moon’s rays poured into the room.

I stared at it for a long moment, feeling strangely drawn to its light, before I finally looked away from the window and took in the rest of the room. The space was lit gently with candlelight, and expensive items filled every corner, beautiful furniture, ornate decorations, and luxurious fabrics, yet nothing felt overdone. It all carried a quiet, understated elegance. Even the bed I was lying on felt incredibly soft beneath me, the kind of softness that spoke of wealth most people could only dream about.

I held my head with one hand and frowned harder, trying to make sense of everything. "Where the hell am I?" I muttered to myself, almost too quietly for anyone to hear, as I struggled to piece together what had happened.

The last thing I clearly remembered was picking up the black sword and everyone suddenly realizing I was a woman. After that, the dizziness had hit me hard, and I had started to fall... but who caught me?

Crimson eyes flashed in my memory, and the deep voice echoed through my mind again. I froze.

"You make me lose my mind, little wolf."

Crimson eyes. Alpha Damien.

He was the one who had caught me when I fainted. But why? And how? He wasn't supposed to be at the warrior rite, so how could he have been there to catch me at that exact moment?

My head ached even more sharply as I tried to think deeper, the pain intensifying with every attempt to recall the details. Just then, the door to the room opened softly.

My body reacted on its own in the stupidest way possible. For some reason I couldn't explain, I didn't want to face him right now, so I quickly lay back down on the bed, closed my eyes, and pretended to be deeply asleep.

I kept my breathing slow and even as I heard two sets of footsteps entering the room. One voice belonged to Jason, who spoke carefully.

"Alpha, the people are talking. Rumors are saying you are involved with Lady Selene. And they want to know who she is, the woman that is so powerful."

There was no immediate response, but I could feel a predatory gaze landing heavily on me, as if those crimson eyes were staring straight through my closed eyelids. I forced myself to stay perfectly still and ignore the prickling sensation on my skin.

Finally, Alpha Damien answered, his voice deep and calm. "I see. Shut it down."

Jason sounded hesitant. "But Alpha, the rumors have already spread."

Damien repeated firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument, "Shut it down."

I heard Jason swallow hard, and I almost felt sorry for him. He was the beta of this crazy demon of a man, he must be going through a lot every single day. If I were in his position, I would have lost my mind long ago.

And what did Damien mean by "shut it down"? Did he really think it was that easy to stop rumors? They were one of the

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Chapter 207

fastest and most impossible things to silence once they started spreading. But then again, knowing the kind of man Alpha Damien was, maybe for him it wasn't impossible at all.

I stayed perfectly still under the covers, pretending to sleep while my mind raced with questions and the dull ache in my head continued to throb.

Damien's deep voice cut through the quiet room as he spoke calmly to Jason. "You may leave."

Jason nodded respectfully and replied, "Yes, Alpha. The bath has already been prepared for you."

With that, he turned and left the room, the soft click of the door closing behind him leaving everything in complete silence

once more.

The room fell so still that I could hear my own heart beating fast against my ribs. That familiar feeling was back again, the heavy, predatory sensation of his eyes watching me, studying every inch of my face even though I kept my eyes tightly shut. I lay there

pretending to sleep, my body tense under the soft covers, waiting for him to say something, maybe call me out on my obvious lie and demand to know why I was faking it. But he didn't say a word.

Instead, I heard the slow, deliberate sound of him unbuttoning his shirt. One button after another, the fabric shifting quietly in the candlelit room. A small sigh of relief escaped me internally. Maybe I was overthinking everything. Maybe he hadn't noticed I was awake after all,

The unbuttoning continued, slow and unhurried, and then a stupid, reckless part of my mind whispered, "Look up, Selene."

I paused, wanting to roll my eyes at myself because there was absolutely no way I was opening my eyes right now. I told myself firmly to stay still and keep pretending, yet my traitorous eyes slowly cracked open anyway, careful to keep my lashes low so he wouldn't notice.

I started from the bottom, glancing first at his shoes, then letting my gaze travel upward along his pants, and finally to where his shirt should have been. But he wasn't wearing any shirt anymore. He was completely shirtless.

When my eyes landed on his stomach, they sparkled with appreciation. Even though I had seen him naked and completely open for me that first time, the memory still burned in my mind, and I wanted to keep every detail locked away forever despite who he was..

Gods, this man was a work of art. The Moon Goddess had clearly played favorites when she created him. His abs were sharply defined, a light sheen of sweat glistening across them under the warm candlelight, making every ridge and line stand out. He was so perfectly toned, and the prominent V-line disappearing beneath his pants made the entire picture feel almost unfairly flawless. This man was beautiful. Dangerously, sinfully perfect.

I licked my lips slowly, unable to tear my eyes away no matter how much I told myself I should. If Alpha Damien wasn't the demon of the west, the cold-blooded monster who had killed me so many times before, I would have made him my personal bed warmer without a second thought. With a face and body like his, waking up every single morning would be an absolute pleasure. A small, evil smile crept onto my lips as my mind wandered freely, imagining all the things I could do with him, the ways I could touch and enjoy every inch of that sculpted body,

Just as I was deep in that heated fantasy, smiling wickedly to myself, I finally looked higher, and my gaze locked straight into those beautiful crimson eyes staring down at me.

He was leaning casually against the wall with his arms crossed loosely over his bare chest, one perfect eyebrow raised in quiet amusement. My smile dropped instantly the

moment our eyes met. He looked at me exactly like a teacher who had just caught a child doing something very bad.

And I stared back at him like the guilty child who had been caught red-handed.

We looked at each other for what felt like a full minute or two, the silence stretching thick between us in the candlelit room. My heart was still racing from being caught, but I finally snapped out of it, forcing myself to stretch lazily like someone who had just woken up from a deep sleep.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 208

[1,499 words]

Chapter 208

Selene

My voice echoed through the quiet room, sounding seductive yet playful at the same time, the words hanging in the air like a challenge. If anyone else had heard me speaking to him in that tone, they would have been completely confused, unsure whether I was trying to seduce him or simply annoy him on purpose. No, who was I kidding? If anyone had heard me using that tone with Alpha Damien, they would have lost their minds entirely. After all, who would dare talk to the Alpha like that without immediately losing their life? Only someone who was truly tired of living would act this way toward the demon of

the west.

But I didn't care.

I wasn't scared. I had never been scared of him. The only difference between me now and my old self was that today felt like I had won a lottery ticket. I was in an exceptionally good mood after everything that had happened at the warrior rite. I had gained far more than I had expected, powerful weapons, new connections, and the satisfaction of seeing certain things fall into place. And when I was in a good mood like this, I tended to become fearless, acting however I wanted without worrying too much about the consequences. This was clearly one of those days.

Besides, I didn't actually think the cold-blooded Alpha would do what I said. I was just teasing him, pushing to see how he would react. He would probably kill me on the spot or simply turn around and leave. Who knew? Even at this stage of my powers, I still doubted I could truly beat the demon of the west. es, he was that powerful.

He was like a bottomless well, a man whose power ran so deep that no matter how much you tried to fill it, the well would never be full. His strength felt unlimited, endless in a way that defied logic. I still wondered sometimes how he had become like that. He was supposed to be just a werewolf like everyone else, yet somehow his power could rival that of a living god. I couldn't fully understand that part of him, but it didn't really matter. I wasn't the type to search for explanations for every single thing in life. I preferred to observe from afar, even if I still didn't understand what force had brought us together again in this lifetime.

How could I end up lying in the bed of the very man who had killed me in all my past lives? I must be crazy. But then again, I had always been a little crazy to begin with.

As

my

words finished echoing softly through the room, Alpha Damien simply looked at me, his crimson eyes locked onto mine with that intense, unreadable stare. Then, slowly, his lips quirked up into a smirk.

That smirk should have made me feel at least a little more at ease. At the very least, it should have told me he found what I said amusing, and maybe even calmed the nervous energy running through me. But it did the exact opposite. The moment his lips curved into that dangerous smirk, I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry as my pulse quickened even more.

Mira, my annoying wolf, chuckled inside my head, her voice dripping with amusement. 'How funny, Selene. You are still clueless. You think you're the one in charge of the situation, when that is exactly what he made you think all along. Feel

other than the two of us? He sent everyone out because you are just his prey in around you. Do you feel any other presence other than the two

a trap.

My heart skipped a hard beat as I looked at him, and I almost cused my wolf out loud for betraying me like that, but I didn't have time to argue with her right now. Instead, I forced a smile onto my face and tried to sit up properly on the bed, keeping my voice light as I said, "Hmm, I will be going back to my room now."

I was about to stand up and create some much-needed distance when, in a flash, he moved. Before I could even finish the motion, he caught me in his grasp, turned around smoothly, and sat down while wrapping one strong arm around my waist. In one effortless movement, he pulled me right onto his lap like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I gasped sharply, my mouth falling open in surprise as I instinctively placed both hands on his bare shoulders to steady myself. The speed and ease with which he had done it completely caught me off guard. I held onto his shoulders tightly, my eyes wide

open as I stared at the man now holding me so possessively, one hand firm on my waist and the other resting shamelessly on my ass.

My dress, the one I clearly hadn't put on myself, though I hadn't made a big deal about who changed me, had ridden up

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high on my thighs, exposing my flawless white skin. My thighs were now pressed directly against his lap, and we were so close that there was almost no space left between our bodies.

This was more than shameless. If anyone walked in and saw this scene, they would lose their damn minds. Not only was the demon of the west holding a woman like she was something precious, but the fact that I, a former Luna, and general, a troublemaker, and a crazy woman, was full-on shivering and trembling because of his actions would have given my warriors an instant heart attack.

I looked at Alpha Damien, my heart beating so fast no matter how hard I tried to control it. He sat there completely relaxed and calm, his crimson eyes locked on me as if this entire situation was perfectly normal.

"What are you doing, Alpha Damien?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady even though my body refused to cooperate.

He tilted his head slightly, his deep, raspy voice echoing low in the room as he answered, "What am I doing? What do you think? Didn't you ask me to come here?"

I nodded quickly, still trying to maintain some composure. "Yes I did, but it was meant as a joke. And don't act so innocent. Why is there nobody in your chambers? What are you planning on doing to me?"

My voice came out calmer than I felt, but my body was still shivering, especially when his hand on my ass slowly slid lower, the deliberate movement making it incredibly hard for me to think straight.

Damien didn't stop holding me. Even when I wasn't sitting properly on his lap, he had the audacity to push me down further with one firm hand so that I was fully seated against him my thighs straddling his lap completely. His bare skin burned through the thin fabric of my dress, making my breath catch in my throat.

He leaned toward me slowly, his face drawing closer until our breaths mingled. We were so close now that if he moved even an inch more, our lips would touch. My heart hammered wildly in my chest, and I could feel every inch of the tension crackling between us. But instead of kissing me right away, he spoke, his voice low and deep, sending a shiver down my spine.

"I'm a straightforward man," he said, crimson eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that made it hard to look away. "When I want something, I must have it. Even if that thing is something I can't understand, I must have it. I must have you, little wolf."

His voice went even deeper on those last words, and for a moment it felt like two voices were speaking at once, his own and something more primal, as if both the man and his wolf were claiming me together.

Before I could form any reply, before I could even process the weight of what he had just said, he pulled me closer with a firm grip on my waist and kissed me deeply.

The moment his lips met mine, everything else faded. The kiss was intense, possessive, and left no room for hesitation. His hand stayed firm on my ass, holding me in place against him, while the other slid up my back, pressing me flush against his bare chest. I could feel the heat of his body, the hard lines of his muscles, and the undeniable hunger in the way his mouth moved against mine.

My hands tightened on his shoulders as I kissed him back, my body reacting before my mind could catch up.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 209

[1,282 words]

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Chapter 209

Selene

It felt good.

Gods, it felt so damn good.

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The way his lips captured mine so possessively, the way his strong hands wrapped around my waist and held me like he never wanted to let go, it was just a kiss, yet it was making my entire body react in ways I couldn't control. My body trembled against him, my breathing came out hard and uneven as I held onto his neck tightly, trying desperately to kiss him back and match his pace. But it was useless.

Alpha Damien was insane in the best and worst way possible. He pulled me even closer, pressing my hardened breasts firmly against his bare chest, and kissed me as if he wanted to swallow me whole. He gave me no time to relax, or breathe, not that I wanted any of that right now.

Maybe it was because of the new power I had gained today, but breathing wasn't difficult. I could control my breath normally even under this intensity. I would have been happy about discovering that strength earlier, but right now nothing else existed in my head. My body had completely taken over.

Just when I thought I couldn't handle the intensity anymore, I pressed down against something hard. The moment that hardness rubbed against my probably already wet clit, I couldn't help it, a soft moan escaped my lips. I heard him let out a low, deep groan at the contact, but he didn't stop kissing me. Instead, he held my face with one hand while the other stayed firm on my waist, kissing me harder, biting and nipping at my lips, his tongue invading my mouth as he claimed every inch of it.

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck, and without thinking, I started moving my lower body against his cock, chasing that same spark of pleasure I had just felt. Every time I rolled my hips against the hardness straining in his pants, waves of pleasure coursed through my entire body. I closed my eyes tightly, unable to believe how good it felt. He wasn't even inside me yet, and it already felt this incredible.

I thought I could control myself, but I couldn't. My waist started moving faster on its own, grinding slowly but insistently against his cock. I felt him groan again, the sound vibrating against my mouth before he suddenly broke the kiss. His lips moved downward, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along my neck. The sound of his groans made it almost impossible to control myself. I wanted to hear more of them. I wanted to give him pleasure. I wanted him to groan for me.

I put my hand on his chest and used all the strength I had left to push him away. He pulled back slightly and looked at me, his crimson eyes darkened so much that the sight alone sent another rush of heat through my body, arousing me even more. I had spent so much strength and time at the rite today, I deserved to enjoy myself. I deserved to mess with this dangerous man.

I licked my lips slowly and kept my eyes locked on his without looking away, I leaned in closer, my gaze never leaving his. His hand stayed firm on my waist, but he didn't rush me or try to kiss me first. He simply allowed it, as if he wanted to see exactly what I would do next.

I leaned in until our faces were inches apart, looking like I was about to kiss him. But instead of pressing my lips to his, I placed my finger gently on his lips, pressing it there for a moment before sliding it down to his neck. I leaned forward and kissed the side of his neck softly, then bit down on the skin, sucking on it hard enough to leave a mark before kissing the same spot again. A low groan escaped his lips at the contact.

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I could hear Mira's voice in my mind, urging me to mark him properly, but I ignored her and moved to the other side of his neck, repeating the same actions, kissing, biting, and sucking until another red mark bloomed there.

If anyone had asked me why I was doing this, I wouldn't have had an answer. I was confused myself. I didn't know if I was trying to claim him or if I just wanted to scare his people tomorrow morning when they saw the marks all over his neck. I didn't think about it too much. I simply did it, covering every visible part of his neck with red hickeys.

When I was finally done, I leaned back and looked at my work. His neck was now full of red marks, and it wouldn't take a fool to understand exactly what had happened. I smiled, satisfied with the sight, before looking back up at his face. The look in his eyes had darkened even more. I could tell he was slowly going insane.

Normally, I didn't care if a man wanted me. I didn't care about men in general. But when this particular man wanted me, when he looked at me like this, I loved the feeling it gave me. I smiled wider and moved downward, pressing soft kisses to his chest while keeping eye contact the entire time. I continued lower, kissing along his defined abs, my hands slowly running over the hard muscles, admiring every ridge and line.

As I kissed his lower abs, right near the edge of his pants where that tempting V-line disappeared, I slowly slid off his lap. When I reached the spot just above his waistband, I looked up at him, spread his thighs apart, and positioned myself between them. Now I was face to face with his cock, still trapped beneath his pants. It was straining so hard against the fabric that I could clearly see the outline.

I ran my hand over the bulge, feeling it jerk strongly under my touch. My heart skipped a beat. Was he really that hard already? Why did it feel way too big even while still inside his pants? Then I remembered his size from before and understood. This man was huge, and that was the same huge cock that had taken my virginity.

I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel in my mouth. I had never gone down on my knees for a man before, not even for Adrian. He had never liked having sex with me beyond what was necessary to produce an heir. But right now, I wanted to put Alpha Damien's cock in my mouth. Even though a small part of me whispered that I shouldn't, the bigger part of me desperately wanted to.

Just when I was lost in thought, a deep, low chuckle sounded above me, making me look up. Alpha Damien was leaning back against the bed, tilting his head as his eyes flashed with dark amusement. His voice came out deep and taunting.

"Afraid?"

I stopped for a moment before my lips curled up into a smirk. My hand moved to the front of his pants as I replied, "Shut up, Alpha Damien, and moan for me."

Then I unzipped his pants and pulled them down along with his boxers in one smooth motion, causing his hard cock to spring free right in front of my face

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[2,214 words]

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Damien

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I looked down at the woman kneeling before me in the soft moonlight that filtered through the window of the chamber, her beautiful milky skin glowing with an almost ethereal look that made every inch of her look even more tempting than usual, her long lashes casting delicate shadows across her cheeks as she kept her gaze fixed downward on my hardened cock with her pink pouty lips slightly parted in a way that suggested she was staring at something she desperately wanted to devour yet didn't quite know how to approach.

I couldn't say a single word. I was far too mesmerized by the sight of her like this, completely lost in the vision before me, and for a brief second I could hardly believe that this was the same bold and confident woman I had encountered so many times before, the one who always seemed to know exactly what she was saying and doing without hesitation. Right now she looked so innocent and clueless that a dark, primal urge rose inside me, making me want to skip every single step of patience and simply take her right here and now until she understood exactly what kind of effect she had on a man like me.

I forced myself to hold back and maintain control even though it took every ounce of my willpower, telling myself firmly that it was only natural for her to appear this way.

I had been the first man to ever be inside her or to touch her with any kind of sexual intent, which meant she genuinely wouldn't know what to do or how to proceed, yet at the same time the thought of teaching her everything using my own body made arousal surge through my veins, while the mere idea of her ever sleeping with other men or allowing any other hands to touch what belonged to me burned something dangerously possessive deep inside my chest, causing my eyes to darken even further.

In my mind, Thane, my wolf, growled with clear impatience and possessiveness, 'mark her and make her yours already so that no men would dare go near her if you do'

I knew deep down that he was right because marking her would ensure no one else would ever dare touch what was mine, but something inside me still warned that forcing a mark on her against her will would mean she would never truly forgive me for it, and even if I could physically keep her by my side through force, she was not the type of woman who would simply stay trapped without eventually finding a way to strike back, like a dangerous snake left loose in the house that would bite the moment it saw an opportunity, so I deliberately ignored Thane and cut him off inside my head to stop his insistent demands.

Before I could gather any further thoughts or regain full composure, her small, warm hands suddenly reached out and wrapped around my cock, the tentative yet bold touch sending an immediate jolt of pleasure through me that forced a low, deep groan to escape from my throat before I could stop it. My eyes locked onto her face instantly as I watched her reaction.

She looked up at me with that familiar blend of confidence mixed with curiosity in her eyes, as if she was carefully trying to read whether or not I liked what she was doing.

When I didn't immediately respond or give her any clear sign, she tilted her head slightly to the side with an innocent expression and spoke in a soft, almost puzzled voice, "Is this wrong? My warriors told me men liked this though," the casual way she mentioned her warriors discussing such intimate matters made me pause for

a moment.

Who the hell were they to talk to her about things like this, and the fact that she said it so naturally, as if it were nothing important at all, only stirred the possessiveness inside me even hotter.

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“Hmm, if I ever meet them again, I will ask them-” She continued speaking almost to herself in that same quiet tone, but I cut her off sharply before she could finish the sentence, my possessiveness reaching its absolute peak as I stated firmly, “Ask them? Why ask them when I can teach you myself.”

She blinked up at me with surprise written across her face and asked, “Sorry?”

I looked straight into her eyes and commanded in a low, authoritative voice. “Use one hand, little wolf”

Selene paused for a moment. She looked up at me with those beautiful eyes, a small smile slowly forming on her lips as if she had just accepted a challenge. Then she removed her second hand, leaving only her right hand wrapped around my thick cock. The moment her fingers curled tighter around me, a rush of heat shot through my body. Her touch was soft and surprisingly confident for someone who claimed to be clueless. I could feel every inch of her palm sliding against my skin, and the sight of her delicate hand gripping my hardness made my cock twitch visibly in her hold.

She had no idea how good she already felt.

“Stroke it,” I told her, my voice rougher than before. “Slowly from the base all the way to the tip.”

She didn't hesitate. Selene kept her eyes on mine for a second longer, then lowered her gaze to my cock and began moving her hand. Up and down. Slow and deliberate. Her grip was firm but not too tight. Each stroke sent waves of pleasure rolling through me, making my abs tighten and my breath grow heavier. She moved with natural rhythm, as if her body already understood what mine wanted. When she reached the swollen head, she instinctively rubbed her thumb over the sensitive tip, spreading the bead of precum that had gathered there. The slick sensation made me groan deeply, my hips jerking forward just slightly into her hand.

She got it perfect on the very first try. I didn't need to correct her even once.

“Good,” I murmured, my voice thick with lust. “Now use your other hand to cup my balls. Roll them gently in your palm while you keep stroking.”

Selene obeyed without question. Her left hand moved between my thighs, cupping my balls with care. She rolled them softly, massaging them in time with the steady strokes of her right hand. The dual sensation was incredible. Pleasure built in my groin,

spreading up my spine and making my muscles tense. Her hands felt like silk against my skin and the way she watched my face for every reaction only made me harder.

I watched her closely, mesmerized by how quickly she was learning. Her cheeks had a faint flush, her lips still slightly parted, and her breathing had grown a little faster. She was getting aroused just from touching me.

“Faster now,” I ordered, my voice dropping even lower. “Squeeze a little tighter on the upstroke.”

She followed my words immediately. Her hand moved quicker along my length, squeezing just enough on every upward stroke to make my cock throb in her grip. The wet sound of her palm sliding over my skin filled the quiet room, mixing with my low groans.

Before he could tell her what else to do, Selene leaned forward on her own. She didn't wait for me to guide her further. Her soft lips parted and wrapped around the swollen head of my cock, taking me into her wet mouth without hesitation. The sudden move caught me completely off guard. A sharp groan tore from my throat as intense pleasure exploded through my body, my hips jerking forward slightly at the

warmth and suction.

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She was a noblewoman from the Mooncrest Pack, a conservative pack where women were raised to be proper and reserved, yet here she was on her knees, sucking my cock like she didn't care about any of that. Like she wanted to pleasure me even more than I wanted to teach her.

Her hand continued stroking the thick length she couldn't yet fit in her mouth, moving up and down in a steady rhythm while her tongue swirled around the sensitive head. She sucked gently at first, then with growing hunger, her cheeks hollowing as she took me deeper.

“Fuck...” I breathed out, my fingers tightening in her hair as I fought the overwhelming urge to grab her head and thrust into her throat.

Selene moaned softly around my cock at the sound of my voice, the vibration sending another sharp spike of pleasure straight down my spine. Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, dark with lust, while her hand kept pumping the base of my cock. She clenched her thighs together visibly, rubbing them as if the sight of me groaning and losing control because of her was turning her on just as much.

I was barely holding back. Every instinct screamed at me to take control, to fuck her pretty mouth until she couldn't think straight. Then she pulled back suddenly, her lips releasing my cock with a wet pop. She licked her lips slowly, tasting me, and looked straight into my eyes with that fearless gaze.

“You can fuck my mouth,” she said, her voice husky and bold.

Before I could even process the words, she leaned forward again and took me back into her mouth, deeper this time, her eyes never leaving mine as she waited for me to take what she was offering.

I looked down at her, completely taken back by her actions, she was offering her mouth so shamelessly. Surprise flashed through me for a second, followed by a dark surge of lust. My lips curled up into a slow, predatory smirk.

“You're trouble, little wolf,” I growled, my hand sliding firmly to the back of her head.

I didn't hold back anymore. I looked down at her with hunger burning in my eyes, my hand firm on the back of her head as I pushed my hips forward and slid my thick cock deeper into her mouth. She took me without resistance, her lips stretching around my girth as I began to fuck her mouth with slow thrusts at first, savoring the tight, slippery sensation of her tongue pressing against the underside of my shaft.

I held her head steady with my hand, fingers threading through her long hair as I rocked my hips harder, driving my cock further into her throat with each thrust. The wet, obscene sounds of her mouth filled the room, and every time the head of my cock hit the back of her throat, she gagged softly around me, her eyes watering but never breaking eye contact. The sight of her like this, on her knees, taking me so deep while tears gathered in her lashes, made my control slip even more.

“Fuck... that's it,” I growled, my voice rough and low as I fucked her mouth deeper, holding her head in place so she couldn't pull back. “Take it all, little wolf.”

Her throat constricted around me every time I pushed in. I could feel her hands gripping my thighs tightly, her nails digging into my skin as she struggled to breathe through her nose, yet she never tried to stop me. She just took everything I gave her, her tongue still moving desperately against my cock even as I used her mouth harder.

I lost myself in the rhythm, thrusting faster now, my hips snapping forward as I fucked her pretty mouth with deep, relentless strokes. The way her throat squeezed around me was driving me insane. My balls tightened,

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pleasure coiling tighter and tighter in my lower belly until I could barely hold back anymore.

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I looked down at her, my crimson eyes dark with warning, silently telling her I was about to come.

She didn't pull away.

Instead, she kept her eyes locked on mine, obedient and bold at the same time, her gaze never wavering even as tears slipped down her cheeks. That look alone pushed me over the edge.

With a deep, guttural growl that echoed through the room, I buried my cock as deep as I could go and came hard in her mouth. Thick ropes of cum spilled across her tongue and down her throat. She swallowed everything obediently, not wasting a single drop, her throat working around me as she took it all.

When I finally pulled back, breathing heavily, she moved away slowly. She licked her swollen lips clean, a small, satisfied smile curving her mouth as she looked up at me with shining eyes.

"Hmm," she said softly, her voice a little hoarse but still playful. "I thought I would hate it, but it's more fun than I expected."

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