

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 21

[1,143 words]

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Selene

I stared down at the pouch in Evelyn's trembling hands, there were so many coins that the bag strained against its own

seams.

My fingers twitched. If these people could hand over this much without even blinking, then they weren't just dangerous, they were filthy rich.

"You could earn more."

The deep voice broke my thoughts. I looked up sharply, my gaze locking onto the man in front of me. I still couldn't see his face, the hood shadowed everything, but his voice... gods, it was the kind of voice that could make anybody obey. Especially with how deep and hot it was, there was no debate, this man in front of me was really attractive.

Everything inside me whispered I shouldn't respond. My well-trained instincts warned me that this man wasn't someone to play games with. But everything else, my curiosity, my greed, that annoying itch in my chest, told me to keep listening.

It was strange, though. The more I looked at him, the more that feeling gnawed at me. Have I met him before? His presence felt familiar somehow. I'd been trying to ignore it, but it lingered stubbornly. Then again, I had lived through many lives, faces and names blurred together after a while. Maybe he was just another forgotten shadow from a past life.

What was stranger, were the people standing behind him. They kept glancing at him in disbelief, as if they couldn't recognize the man before them. Especially when he spoke to me, it was like they were hearing something impossible.

"Earn more?" I found myself saying before I could stop it. "What do you mean?"

Well, curiosity and money were my greatest weaknesses.

He didn't hesitate. "There is an auction going on. If you get us there safely, I'll pay you four times more than that."

For a moment, I thought I'd misheard. My ears rang, the words echoing in my mind like a play on repeat.

Four times.

Four. Pouches. Of. Gold.

I blinked, staring at him, my mouth opening slightly. Was he serious? One pouch alone could last me for months, maybe a year if I stretched it right. But four more? That would be enough to turn everything around.

With that money, I could finally buy Evelyn the dresses she always admired but never dared to ask for. I could get Silas a new sword and armor, maybe even something enchanted. And I could buy more items at the auction house.

But still, there was a catch. There had to be. A man like that, hidden behind a hood with an aura that screamed danger, why would someone like him ask me for help? It didn't make sense.

As I was lost in thought, Evelyn tugged at my sleeve. She leaned closer, her soft voice brushing my ear.

"My lady, I think I know what is going on."

I tilted my head slightly toward her. "You do?"

Evelyn nodded eagerly, her eyes wide with excitement. "I do. I might not know much about things like this, but I've heard the other servants talk about it before."

Now I was curious. I crossed my arms and arched a brow at her. "Oh? Then by all means, enlighten me."

12:41 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 21

Evelyn's grin widened. She raised her hand and started counting on her fingers. "You saved a man," she said, holding up one finger. "He paid you a huge amount of money," she added, raising another. "And now he's offering to pay you even more just to take him somewhere."

Her tone grew more dramatic with each word, and by the time she held up her third finger, I already had a bad feeling about where this was going.

“It all leads to something simple and obvious,” she said proudly.

“And what would that be?”

Evelyn putted her chest out, smirking like she’d just solved a grand mystery. “That man is in love with you, my lady! It’s love at first sight!”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. My entire mind went blank.

When I glanced back at the group of cloaked figures, the reaction was even worse than I imagined, the three behind him froze, staring at Evelyn as though she had just grown a second head. As if their lord falling in love was the most absurd thing they have ever heard.

The only one who didn’t react was the man himself. He just stood there. If anything, I swore I saw a faint curve on his lips. Was he... amused?

Oh, this was getting interesting.

I turned back to Evelyn, who looked far too pleased with her own theory. “I doubt that’s what’s going on, Evelyn,”

She frowned. “Then why would he do this, my lady? This is too good to be true.”

I shrugged, looking at the pouch of gold again, then at the man. “You’re right. This is too good to be true. I said. “Maybe the goddess really is watching over me today. Who knows?”

Either way, I was definitely going to take that deal, and turn it into an advantage

If they meant harm, I’d protect myself and Evelyn, and escape with all their money. It wouldn’t be easy, every instinct in me screamed that this man was dangerous, but when had difficulty ever stopped me before?

I lifted my gaze toward him, studying the tall figure. That strange, suffocating aura of power surrounded him. I had this eerie feeling that if I so much as made one wrong move, he could crush me like a bug without blinking an eye.

And yet, I smirked.

That was the most exciting part, wasn’t it? The thrill of standing so close to danger, of challenging something greater than yourself. Foolish, maybe, but that wild, reckless part

of me wanted to fight, and test him. To see what kind of monster hid beneath that calm exterior.

Fighting someone stronger than me was the faster way to be stronger,

I smiled at him. “Fine, I’ll help. You just need to follow us, and I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

He nodded almost as if he’d been expecting me to say that. His inen shifted, exchanging glances, clearly uncertain about their lord’s sudden cooperation. But I didn’t care who he was. None of this had ever happened in my past lives, and that was the best part. It meant fate had lost its script.

I wasn’t going to live this life the same way as before, no more letting destiny decide for me. Change was needed.

And I couldn’t wait to see what kind of change this man in front of me would bring.

12:41 Tue, Dec 23 MG.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 22

[1,343 words]

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Sienna

I unwrapped the small plastic paper carefully, the faint smell of honey and mint escaping as I plucked one sweet from the pile in my palm. Smiling. I leaned forward and offered it to Cross.

“Brother, here you go.”

He looked at my hand, one brow lifting. His eyes were sharp as always, but I didn't flinch. I kept my smile in place. “I had Emma make these,” I explained softly. “I know you hate carriage rides and get sick easily during long trips. These will make you feel a lot better.”

Cross's expression softened almost immediately. He reached out, taking the sweet from my hand, and patted my head affectionately. “You're sweet,” he said, smiling in that calm way he always did. “Thank you so much for caring about me.”

Heat bloomed in my cheeks, and I looked down quickly. “It's nothing, Brother. I just want to make sure you're well.”

From beside him, Kane groaned dramatically. “Sometimes I wish I had a weak body too.”

Cross and I both turned to him at once. Kane sighed, resting his chin on his palm, and muttered, “I'm jealous. You always seem to care about him. What about me? I'm also your brother, and I don't like carriage rides either.”

Cross rolled his eyes. “Then stop talking and take a nap.”

Kane narrowed his eyes at him. “You scoundrel, I just saw your expression, you think I'm immature, don't you?”

Cross didn't even open his eyes, leaning back against the carriage seat. “If you know, why ask?”

I couldn't help but laugh. “Please don't fight,” I said, reaching into my lap for another sweet. “Brother Kane, I was about to offer you one too.”

His irritation vanished instantly as I held it out to him. He took the sweet with a grin and said, “You're so kind, especially to your brothers. I'm lucky to have you as my little sister.” He added. “Since you'll have your wolf soon, you'll finally be able to live with your mate. I'll make sure Adrian treats you right.”

My face went red in an instant. “S-stop teasing me, Brother! We're not even sure if Prince Adrian is my mate to begin with.”

Kane smirked knowingly. “I'm not teasing. Everyone knows Prince Adrian is your mate. There are signs that this time around, the Moonborn will become Luna. So everyone knows it's you.”

I smiled shyly at his confidence, but I still shook my head, my fingers tightening slightly around my skirt. “B-but... there’s also Selene. She’s a Moonborn too. She could become the Luna.”

Kane scoffed, waving a hand as if brushing off a fly. “That girl? Don’t worry about her, Sienna. She’s the fake Moonborn, while you are the real one. Everyone knows that. There’s no way a fake like her could compare to you.”

Kane leaned back, his voice firm and confident. “She doesn’t stand a chance against you. You’re obviously Adrian’s mate. Everyone will know when you transform into the white wolf tonight. And when you see Adrian afterwards, you’ll feel the mate bond.”

My heart fluttered at the sound of Adrian’s name, my cheeks warming. I bit my lower lip shyly and nodded. “I hope so. I just... I don’t want to disappoint anyone, especially Father and the Alpha. They have so many expectations.”

With his eyes still closed, Cross spoke. “Don’t worry about that. You could never be a disappointment, Sienna. You’re perfect as you are.”

“Thank you, brothers,” I said.

12:41 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 22

The carriage rumbled quietly for a moment before I added, “What about Selene, though? I feel bad... today is also her birthday. Maybe we should’ve brought her with us to the auction.”

Kane immediately shook his head. “That’s out of the question. She’s bad luck, and we can’t afford bad luck, especially at the auction. Things can get tricky there.”

“But-”

“With you, everything is perfect. Your spiritual powers will guide us to the right artifact. And besides, that girl would only embarrass us if she came. It’s better she stays home.”

“Alright... then we can get something for her instead.”

Kane smiled. “Always so kind. After what happened, she doesn’t deserve your kindness. She pushed you into the river, and yet, you still think about her.”

I looked down at my lap and sighed. “Yes. Even if she hates me, she’s still my twin sister. I can’t help but care about her.”

“That’s good, Sienna. But don’t let that girl bully you anymore, alright? You have us. We won’t ever let anything happen to you.”

“I know, I’m lucky to have both of you.”

I turned my gaze toward the window, the soft rays of sunlight dancing across the glass. My reflection stared back at me, I was composed, gentle, and perfect. But the moment no one was watching, the corners of my lips curled into a wicked smirk.

That’s right. No matter what that bitch does, I will always be everyone’s favorite.

The rhythmic clatter of the carriage wheels against the cobblestones faded into the background as another memory surfaced, that day by the river.

I could still see her face, she is so trusting, and gullible. I told her I lost my pendant, the one Father gave me, and she, being the foolishly soft sister she always was, immediately offered to help me find it. She searched along the riverbank, leaning over just far enough. It was so easy to act desperate, to pretend I was slipping, and when she reached out, how convenient that we both fell.

Her panicked scream still echoed in my ears.

And, as expected, when Emma shouted for help, it wasn’t her name they called. It was mine. My brothers came running, their faces full of fear for me. They didn’t even look at her as she struggled in the water.

The only reason Kane jumped in after Selene was because they couldn’t let her die, it would ruin the family’s reputation if the fake Moonborn drowned.

I wanted to frame her that day, to let everyone see her as the monster who pushed me into the river. But then something happened, something I didn’t expect.

She swam out.

Selene, who couldn’t swim to save her life, swam out of that river herself. And when she looked at me, her eyes were different. They were cold, detached, and disgusted.

She had never looked at me like that before.

Not long after, I heard what had happened to her guard, how she’d stood by while that beast of hers nearly beat the man to death. That wasn’t the Selene I knew. The Selene I remembered would’ve cried, pleaded for forgiveness, done anything to avoid trouble.

I wanted to make a scene, to use what happened to Arthur to drag her name through the mud, but I couldn’t. Everyone said

12:42 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 22

it was Arthur's fault for insulting her in front of the temple. Even my brothers wouldn't defend him in that case. So I kept quiet.

But today would be different. Today was our birthday. The day everything would finally be clear. When I get my wolf, my beautiful, pure white wolf, the whole pack will see who the real Moonborn is. Selene can keep her fake title, her fake power. and her fake pride.

Because at the end of the day, everyone loves me.

My brothers, my parents, the Alpha, Prince Adrian, they all look at me as if I'm their moonlight.

I pressed my fingers to my lips, hiding my smirk as I gazed out the window again.

Selene was probably sitting alone in that cold temple, sulking, pathetic and forgotten.

Good. Let her watch from the shadows. Because from today onward, I'll make sure she never steps into the light again.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 23

[1,318 words]

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Selene

“Achool”

I sneezed so hard my whole body jerked. My nose tingled, and I quickly pinched it, sniffing.

“My lady, are you okay?” Evelyn asked beside me, her soft voice full of concern as usual.

I nodded and rubbed my nose. “Yeah, maybe someone’s thinking about me,” I muttered, amused.

Evelyn smiled at that and tugged at my sleeve. “My lady, look! Do you like these? These jewels are so pretty, they’d look wonderful on you.”

I followed her gaze to the vendor’s stand overflowing with necklaces, pendants, and delicate bracelets glittering under the sun. There was gold, silver, gemstone; enough sparkle to make any woman squeal. But I only stared, expressionless.

A while ago, I’d been minding my own business, doing the job I was paid for, escorting the group to the auction house. Yet somehow, my dutiful maid had turned the mission into a shopping trip. Evelyn flitted from stall to stall like a hummingbird, dragging me along with stars in her eyes.

I sighed quietly and glanced over my shoulder.

To my surprise, they were still there, the mysterious group I was supposed to escort were waiting patiently. There was not a single complaint, or a hint of irritation. Even though they’d paid me quite handsomely to make sure they reached their destination safely, they just stood there.

Or more accurately, he was watching.

That man. The one whose presence made the air feel heavier. His posture was lazy, almost disinterested, but his gaze was sharp, and steady.

Every time I felt it on me, a strange shiver ran through my body. It wasn't fear, but something deeper. Something that made my chest tighten and my pulse skip.

It felt as if I was a puzzle he was trying to solve piece by piece..

"My lady, look at this too!" Evelyn's excited voice snapped me out of my thoughts. She held up a pink pendant, her eyes shining like a child's.

I couldn't help but smile. Reaching over, I took the pendant and held it against her neck, tilting my head as I studied her. "This will look beautiful on you,"

Evelyn blinked at me in surprise before quickly shaking her head, her cheeks pink. "I wouldn't dare! And besides, it's ten silvers, my lady. That's too expensive."

I raised an eyebrow. "Too expensive?"

I leaned in slightly, lowering my voice and nudging my head toward the group waiting behind us. "Have you forgotten? We have a walking money bag with us. Ten silvers is nothing."

Evelyn's eyes went wide as if I'd said something blasphemous.

I smirked and added casually, "We can buy more if you like them. Besides," I looked down at the sparkling jewels again, "these things aren't really my style."

"Not your style?" Evelyn asked, blinking at me, confusion written all over her sweet little face.

12:42 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 23

UMG

"Yes. If I want to get something for myself, I will get it somewhere else."

"Where?"

I paused. I couldn't exactly tell her the place I was talking about was a blacksmith workshop, could I? She might faint if she found out that what I actually wanted were swords, bows, arrows, and maybe a few enchanted artifacts for cultivating.

Pretty things never got my heart racing. But sharp blades and rare artifacts? Now those made my blood sing.

So instead, I simply smiled. "Don't worry about that,"

Evelyn looked like she wanted to press, but I turned to the shopkeeper instead. "I'll have all these, please," I said, pointing to the entire section of delicate jewelry, the pendants, rings, and bracelets that Evelyn had been admiring like a starved cat in front of cream.

The shopkeeper froze. Evelyn gasped.

Even the people passing by glanced our way, shocked.

"M-Madam," the shopkeeper stammered after a moment, his eyes darting between me and Evelyn. "Is... is this for your maid? You can't waste such precious stones on a lowly-"

He didn't finish. Because I turned, fixing my gaze on him until his throat bobbed with a nervous gulp.

"And who are you," I asked, "to open your mouth and question me?"

My voice wasn't loud, but it was cold.

"If you can't mind your business," I added, "I'll take mine somewhere else."

The man paled instantly, sweat forming at his temples. He shook his head rapidly. "N-no, my lady, I didn't mean it like that! I will pack everything for you right now!"

"Good," I said simply, then looked away as if he were no more interesting than dust.

Evelyn tugged gently on my sleeve. "M-my lady..."

"Don't think too much about it," I said, glancing at her. "Think of it as a welcome-back gift. I'll get something for Silas too."

Evelyn tilted her head, puzzled. "Welcome back? Did you go somewhere before?"

I smiled, the corners of my lips lifting. "Yes, I did and I'm back."

She didn't understand, of course. How could she?

Evelyn smiled shyly and bowed her head. "Thank you so much, my lady... I don't know what to say."

I reached out and patted her head gently. "Then don't say anything. Just take it."

When the shopkeeper returned, trembling slightly, he handed Evelyn the neatly packed bag of jewels. I paid him. I was just about to turn away from the stall when a man with crooked yellow teeth leaned forward from his table, his grin too wide.

“Beautiful lady, would you like to play a game?”

I blinked, slowly. Even without looking properly, I could tell his whole presence screamed shady.

The kind of man who probably made his living fooling gullible travelers and drunkards.

But then again, so was I.

Chapter 23

I tilted my head at him. “What kind of game?”

The man’s grin widened, and behind it, his thoughts slithered clearly into my mind.

Ah, good, a foolish lady. I’ll cheat her out of her money today.

I almost laughed right then. I didn’t even need to read his thoughts to know what kind of scum he was, but it was always satisfying to confirm it.

He gestured dramatically to a wooden table where eight small cups were lined in two neat rows. “It’s very simple, my lady, There’s a ball hidden under one of these cups. If you pick the right one, I’ll give you a gold coin. But if you lose, you give me two gold coins.”

“Two? That doesn’t sound fair to me.” I said.

“That’s the rule of the game, miss.” His grin flashed again, that missing tooth showing. “To make it fair,” he added, “I’ll even show you all the cups afterwards, so you know I’m not cheating.”

“Eh, this stupid girl will never find it. I’ll swap the cups fast, take one gold coin from her, drown it in drinks tonight, and spend the night with a dozen whores.” His mind was loud and disgusting.

I stared at him for a moment, then slowly grinned.

Poor man. So confident, and oblivious. How unlucky he was to meet me today.

I didn’t need his gold coin but I never tolerated anyone trying to cheat me.

“My lady,” Evelyn whispered beside me. “You shouldn’t-”

I rolled up my sleeves slowly, ignoring her. “Fine,” I said, stepping closer to the table. “Let’s do this.”

The man's eyes lit up in greedy excitement, thinking I'd taken the bait.

I smiled innocently and added, "But don't cry when I take your coin, mister."

He chuckled, shaking his head, clearly amused by what he thought was a naive girl.

He had no idea what was coming.

I couldn't wait to see his expression the moment he realized who the real scammer truly was.

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[1,228 words]

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Damien

"Did you see that? That scoundrel's at it again, cheating another poor soul."

“Yeah, he always picks the right ones to scam. That girl’s about to lose a gold coin. Do you know how expensive that is?”

“Rich people are so weird.”

Their voices buzzed around me like flies, but I barely heard them. My eyes were fixed on the woman with the careless smile and that sly, almost teasing glint in her eyes. If I had to describe her in one word, it would be unpredictable.

Everything about her, from the first moment I saw her, defied logic.

Even now, as the crooked-toothed man began shuffling his cups, her gaze didn’t follow the movement like everyone else’s. She simply stood there, her wicked little smirk curving as if she already knew how it would end. Beside her, her maid watched the cups with intense concentration.

And Thane, my wolf, was watching her too.

I felt it in the way his presence stirred inside me. ‘She’s interesting,’ he growled, his tone laced with approval as his gaze lingered on her.

I crossed my arms, my expression as unreadable as ever, though my eyes tracked her every movement. Behind me, I could feel Jason’s questioning gaze fixed on my back.

“You look like you have a lot of questions,” I said, still watching her.

There was a short silence before Jason spoke. “I do. May I ask?”

“Go ahead.”

His hesitation was brief, but I heard the confusion in his voice. “Why?”

I tilted my head slightly. “Why?” I echoed.

Jason stepped closer. “Why her, my lord? You’ve never looked twice at anyone, least of all a woman. But since meeting her, it’s like you can’t look away. You’re standing here, watching, and waiting. You’d never waste your time like this, or let anyone test your patience.”

His words hung in the air. The crowd cheered and jeered at the game in front of us. He added quietly, “Did you see something in her? With your demon eyes?”

Demon eyes? Ah, right. That’s what they called them.

The title never stopped sounding ridiculous to me, but I suppose it made sense to those who feared what they couldn’t understand. My red eyes could see what others couldn’t.

They could see a person's soul, their strength, their darkness. Sometimes, if the conditions were right, they could even glimpse a fragment of the future.

That was why people avoided my gaze, even my own men. They feared what I might see, and what I might uncover.

The first time I looked into her eyes, I tried to read her, but all I saw was white. Blinding, endless white that burned my vision until I had to turn away.

It didn't make sense. Even more, I couldn't tell how strong she was. My sight failed me.

No wonder I couldn't read her.

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Chapter 24

She was like a locked door that dared me to try again.

"You really do have a lot of questions, Jason," I finally said, snapping my gaze back to the present.

Jason immediately bowed his head. "I apologize if I was rude, my lord."

I waved my hand dismissively. "Forget it."

He hesitated, waiting, and I could practically feel the question burning on his tongue. I sighed and decided to answer the one thing he wouldn't let go.

"That's the thing, I don't see anything."

Jason blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"When I look at her," I continued, "there's nothing to see. I can't read her strength, her weakness, or even her life thread. All I see is pure white. It's the first time my eyes have shown me nothing. And when I tried to glimpse her future, there was nothing. It felt as if her story hasn't been written yet. I'm curious."

Thane stirred in my chest again, amused. 'Curious or drawn?'

I didn't answer him. Jason didn't press further. He simply went silent, though I could tell his curiosity was eating at him too.

The sound of the crowd pulled my attention back.

“My lady, I’m done,” the crooked-toothed man announced proudly, gesturing at the cups lined in front of him. “Please, choose the one that hides the ball!”

I turned my gaze back to the woman.

She stood there, calm as ever. The man across from her grinned, while her maid pointed at one of the cups.

“This one, my lady,” the maid whispered nervously. “I think I saw something white when he switched them. It has to be that one.”

The man chuckled. “Are you sure, miss? The ball could be anywhere.”

The maid bit her lips. “Goddess, I have no idea,” she murmured under her breath. “My lady, what should we do? We’ll lose at this point.”

The woman simply twirled her wrist lazily, as if the entire situation bored her. “Don’t stress yourself about that, Evelyn, I already know where the ball is.”

That earned a few chuckles from the crowd. I raised an eyebrow.

Did she really know?

The man leaned forward, smug and certain of his victory. “Then please, my lady, choose your cup.”

She smiled back sweetly, and then, to everyone’s shock, moved. But she didn’t reach for the cups.

Her hand shot out, faster than the man could react, and with a clean motion, she drove her fist into his stomach.

The man’s body folded over, his eyes bulging as he gagged. Then, to the horror and astonishment of everyone around, something white shot out of his mouth and rolled onto the table.

A ball.

The same one he’d been hiding.

12:42 Tue, Dec 230 MG.

Chapter 24

For a moment, the entire marketplace went silent. Then whispers erupted all around.

“Oh, don’t tell me, he was hiding the ball in his stomach all this time?”

“No wonder he always won!”

“I knew that bastard was cheating! But how did she know?”

The maid gasped, eyes wide. “M-my lady! What are you doing?”

She turned toward her. “What am I doing? Oh, nothing. Just proving a point.”

The man was still hunched over, wheezing and glaring at her with disbelief and rage. “A-are you insane?!” he spat out, clutching his gut.

She tilted her head slightly, her expression pure mockery. “Insane?” She stepped closer, lowering her voice. “I could read you clearly. Did you honestly think I’d let you cheat me by swallowing the ball and pretending to move it under the cup later?”

Her words sliced through the tension. The man froze, his jaw trembling.

She extended her hand casually. “Now then, be good,” she said sweetly. “And give me what you owe me.”

The crowd broke into murmurs again, half disbelief, and half laughter. The man looked utterly defeated, his face pale with humiliation.

Even I couldn’t help the faint smirk tugging at my lips.

I heard Jason exhale behind me.

“My lord...” he said softly, as if still trying to make sense of what he’d witnessed.

I didn’t turn to him, eyes still fixed on her. “Do you still need an explanation, Jason?”

There was a pause. Then, in a low voice, full of respect, he said. “I believe not, my lord.”

12:42 Tue, Dec

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[1,008 words]

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Selene

I flipped the gold coin in my hand, caught it, and flipped it again. The rhythmic clink of metal against my fingers was oddly satisfying. I could feel the mysterious man and his group's eyes on me, but I didn't bother turning around.

The truth was, the only reason I knew the ball was in that man's mouth earlier was because I had read his mind. It wasn't difficult; his thoughts were so loud and greasy it was almost insulting. I had seen all his smug little plans, his excitement at the idea of cheating another stupid noblewoman. So I played along, and let him think he had already won.

That was the fun part.

In this lifetime, I had decided something simple, I would let my enemies think I was playing right into their trap, only for them to realize that they were the ones caught in mine.

The coin glimmered in the sunlight as I tossed it higher, catching it again between my fingers. The man had practically thrown it at me after coughing up that ball, before running off with his tail between his legs. The crowd had not been kind to him; I doubted he'd ever show his face in that market again.

Poor fool.

"My lady, you were incredible! How did you even know the ball was in his mouth? That was amazing! I'm so glad you taught him a lesson," Evelyn's voice rang beside me.

Ever since the game ended, she hadn't stopped praising me, going on and on about how impressive I was.

"And that punch was perfect! The man spat the ball out the moment you hit him. Serves him right, he shouldn't have messed with you in the first place," she went on, her excitement bubbling over and making me chuckle.

I tossed the coin one more time, letting it spin in the air before catching it cleanly in my palm. When I lifted my gaze again, I noticed the familiar stone building coming into view. The carved symbol of the crescent moon and hammer hung proudly

above its entrance.

The auction house.

After all the distractions, we had made it.

I glanced at Evelyn beside me, her face still flushed with excitement, clutching her bag of jewels like it was her entire life, then at the group following us. A flicker of guilt tugged at me. They hadn't complained once, even though I'd wasted their time. And they were the ones paying me, after all.

At the entrance, I stopped and turned toward them, or rather, toward him. The man with the unreadable expression.

"We're here," I said with a small smile, motioning toward the towering doors. "This is the auction house."

I extended my hand, palm open and expectant. "Since I brought you here, mister, you should pay me for my service."

Oh yes, shameless. I knew it. And I didn't care.

He looked at me for a long moment before turning slightly. "Kaius," he said simply.

The tall man behind him stepped forward, bowed slightly, and handed me four pouches.

My smile widened. The weight in my hands was glorious. I loosened one of the strings and peeked inside.

Gold.

Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 25

My grin brightened, practically glowing. Whoever said money doesn't buy happiness clearly never held four bags of gold coins before.

With this much, I could fix half the problems that had been gnawing at me.

I inclined my head politely. "Thank you. It's been a pleasure doing business with you," I said, and even I could hear the satisfaction lacing my voice. Without waiting for a response, I took Evelyn's hand and strode through the doors of the auction house.

Time to make some proper investments.

Damien

I watched her disappear through the doors of the auction house without a word.

She didn't even look back.

I exhaled slowly, the sound barely audible in the still air, my gaze fixed on the spot where she'd stood moments ago. Something stirred in my chest, Thane's low growl of disapproval echoing in the back of my mind for letting that woman slip through my fingers, but I pushed it down. He was complaining a lot today.

"Yara," I said at last.

Behind me, the woman straightened instantly, head bowed. "Yes, Alpha."

I didn't correct her. There was no need, they were already used to calling me Alpha.

"Watch her."

Yara didn't ask why. She never did. Her eyes glowed faintly before she gave a single nod. "Yes, Alpha."

She bowed her head briefly, then moved swiftly into the crowd, disappearing through the doors of the auction house after the woman.

Before I could turn away, a plump, overdressed man came bustling toward us, his jeweled rings clinking as he wrung his hands. "Ah, there you are, sir," he said, his eyes darting nervously between my guards before finally settling on Kaius.

"I've been waiting for you, sir," the merchant said, smiling too wide. "You were the ones who reserved the entire VIP area, yes? I might not know your faces, but I remember your attire."

Kaius gave a curt nod before glancing back at me. "This is my lord, show your respect."

The man's eyes widened the instant they met mine, and he bowed so low his double chin nearly brushed the cobblestones. "Good afternoon, my lord. I've never seen anyone reserve the entire VIP area before. You must be a man of great fortune. It would be my honour to serve you."

I said nothing.

When the silence stretched, he glanced nervously at Kaius, who gave a subtle shake of his head. The merchant cleared his throat, fumbling for composure before speaking again.

“L-let’s go, my lord,” he said quickly, gesturing toward the entrance. “Everything is prepared, just as you requested.”

Without a word, I followed him inside, the others falling in step behind me.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 26

[1,093 words]

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Selene

As we stepped into the grand auction hall, the brightness from the chandeliers hit my face. The air smelled of incense and polished wood. All around me were people dressed in different styles, colours, and insignias stitched into their robes, Wolves from every major pack had gathered here tonight.

It made sense. This was said to be one of the biggest auctions of the decade. Rare artifacts, enchanted weapons, relics from fallen dynasties, treasures that could shift power between packs. Of course, everyone wanted a piece of it.

I pulled my sari a little tighter and walked further in. Luckily, nobody paid any attention to me. With how crowded it was, I blended in easily, I was just another face among the wealthy.

I spotted an empty table near the middle rows and gestured for Evelyn to take a seat. She hurried over, settling beside me as I sank into the cushioned chair with a quiet sigh. The auction hadn't even begun, yet I already felt drained.

"My lady," Evelyn whispered, "pardon me for asking, but why didn't we go in with those people? We were going to the same place after all."

I turned to her and shook my head. "We can't."

Her brows furrowed. "We can't?"

"No," I said simply. "We can't get ourselves associated with strangers. The only reason I was with them to begin with was because they were rich." I rested my chin on my hand. "But if we keep our distance, we'll avoid unnecessary trouble. People like them don't mix well with people like us. Well, at least for now."

Evelyn frowned softly. "But they didn't seem dangerous."

"That's exactly why we should be careful, the most dangerous ones never do."

Besides, I couldn't read his mind. Being able to hear everyone else's thoughts but his didn't sit right with me, it meant he was far stronger than he appeared. And maybe I'd been powerful in my past lives, but right now, I was just a helpless girl, unable to protect myself or the people I cared about.

Evelyn nodded after a moment. "You're right, my lady. We should be careful."

Her loyalty was endearing, and sometimes worrying.

I gave her a small smile and then remembered something. "Oh, before I forget," I said, pulling out a small glass bottle from my pouch. I uncorked it and took a small sip before handing it to her.

Without hesitation, Evelyn took it and drank.

I blinked at her. "You didn't even ask what it is. What if it's poison?"

She wiped her lips and smiled sweetly. "Then it would be an honour to die by your hands, my lady."

I stared at her, speechless for a moment before sighing deeply. "You really are insane."

Evelyn's laughter tinkled softly beside me, and I found myself smiling faintly at the sound. "That drink earlier is just a plant

I soaked in water before we came here."

Her head tilted in curiosity. "A plant?"

"Mhm." I nodded. "It'll help us hide our scent if we end up running into people we know."

12:42 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 26

Evelyn blinked, processing that. "I see, but, my lady, how do you even know what kind of plant can do that? You didn't know things like that before."

I shrugged casually, a small smile tugging at my lips. "I'll tell you soon enough. For now, just relax and enjoy the auction. If I spot anything worthwhile, we might walk away with quite a few treasures today."

"Yes, my lady!" she said eagerly, already looking around the grand hall as though deciding what treasures we would take

home.

I leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes for just a moment to rest. The low hum of conversation filled the hall, when suddenly, a furious voice rang out.

"Those bastards! How dare they! How could they say the entire VIP area was already booked? How dare they do this to the temple!"

I didn't need to open my eyes to know who that voice belonged to. Evelyn gasped beside me, gripping my sleeve. "My lady, it's Master Kane!"

As expected.

I sighed inwardly and slowly opened my eyes. There they were, Kane, Cross, and Sienna, standing near the center of the hall where everyone could see them. Kane's face was red with anger, his voice loud enough to echo across the marble walls. Cross, on the other hand, looked the same as always, cold and detached, arms crossed, watching his brother's outburst in silence.

And Sienna, sweet, perfect Sienna stood between them, her innocent expression intact, as though she didn't realize the entire hall was staring at them.

Kane slammed his hand against the counter, making the attendants flinch. "Those people-I could have them arrested for treating us like this! Especially you, Sienna, the Moonborn herself! How dare they show you such disrespect!"

Cross's voice cut through his brother's fury. "You can't."

Kane turned to him sharply. "What?"

Cross met his glare evenly. "The auction house has its own authority. Two years ago, after several nobles tried to exploit their power, the Alpha granted them autonomy. They can do whatever they want as long as it isn't against the law. Even the Alpha can't interfere without just cause."

Kane clicked his tongue, his jaw tightening. "That doesn't make sense. We're from the temple! Do they not know who we

are?"

A low murmur rippled through the crowd.

"Who are they?"

"Look at the girl's hair, white as snow. That must be the priestess. The Moonborn from the temple."

"I heard she's powerful."

"Powerful or not, this is an auction. Everyone's equal here. What's the point of making a scene?"

"They were denied the VIP section. It was probably reserved by someone wealthier."

"I know, right? They should just sit down instead of causing trouble. The auction's about to start."

I smirked faintly to myself, leaning my chin on my hand.

Typical Kane, always barking at anyone who dared not bow to him. Typical Sienna, playing the innocent while secretly

12:4 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 26

drinking in every drop of attention. Typical Cross, unbothered, detached, as if none of it concerned him.

And typical me, sitting quietly in the crowd, watching the chaos unfold like some poorly written play.

What a bunch of drama queens.

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12:42 Tue, Dec 23 M

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 27

[1,465 words]

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

Selene

Kane was about to raise his voice again, his jaw tight, that familiar look of indignation burning in his eyes when Sienna gently reached out and placed a hand on his arm. “It doesn’t matter, brother,” she said softly, her tone calm and almost angelic.

Kane blinked at her, startled. “But-”

She shook her head again, her expression composed yet filled with that sickeningly gentleness she was famous for. “Brother, it’s a rule. Besides, we can’t do anything about it. We’re not the only ones who didn’t get a VIP seat. I’m sure there are many others. So we shouldn’t complain.”

The crowd, who just a moment ago had been whispering about Kane's temper, immediately changed their tune.

"Woah, I'm surprised a young girl like her has this much sense."

"Yes, she's not only polite but wise. Unlike her older brother."

"She really is a good priestess. At least the Mooncrest Pack has someone with manners."

A soft ripple of approval spread through the hall.

I sat there, watching the entire performance unfold with a mocking smile tugging at my lips. How amusing. Only Sienna could twist a bad situation into something that made her shine brighter, even at the expense of making her brother look like a fool.

I glanced at Kane. He was looking at her with an affectionate smile, clearly oblivious to the fact that his beloved sister had just humiliated him in front of half the hall. Of course, he didn't realize it. Kane was good at swinging swords, not at using his brain.

What a dumb fool.

I sighed quietly and shook my head.

"Alright," Kane said finally, smiling at Sienna. "Let's just find a place to sit."

He looked around, and to my utter misfortune, his gaze landed on the table directly next to mine. "Over there," he said, gesturing toward it. And just like that, my peaceful corner became less peaceful.

Kane led Sienna to the table beside mine, and they both took their seats. The scent of Sienna's perfume floated in the air, pricking at my senses. I forced myself not to react.

When Cross moved to take his seat, he paused when his eyes landed on me.

I raised an eyebrow, meeting his gaze head-on.

Oh, right. I almost forgot about him.

Unlike Kane, Cross wasn't a fighter. His body was frail, his immune system weak, and he often fell sick. But what he lacked in strength, he made up for in intelligence. He had a sharp mind. His memory was precise and photographic. Once he saw something, he never forgot it.

Even without my scent, if there was anyone in this hall who could recognize me under this disguise, it would be Cross.

I rolled my eyes. What a bother.

12:43 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 27

I turned my head away from Cross's gaze, ignoring the intensity in his eyes. After a moment, he finally sat down too, thank the goddess. Maybe now I could have a moment of peace.

Beside me, Evelyn was practically shaking like a leaf. Her breathing had gone so shallow I could barely hear it. I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. If she trembled any harder, she'd probably rattle the table.

"W-what should we do, my lady?" she whispered, her voice high. "What if they find out?"

I closed my eyes, and leaned lazily against the chair. "You're going to make them find out faster with the way you're acting." I murmured.

Evelyn swallowed hard. "Why are you not freaking out, my lady? These people are literally right beside us! One wrong move and our identity will be known!"

"Calm down, you're too stressed. If you panic over little things like this, how will you handle harder situations?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could feel her looking at me like I'd completely lost my mind. Maybe she thought I had. But honestly, I didn't care. Stressing over things I couldn't change was a waste of energy, and right now, energy was something I wanted to save.

So, I kept my eyes closed. I was just about to drift off when a deep, calm voice cut through my peace.

"Are these seats taken? Mind if we join you, miss?"

My eyes snapped open. Not again.

Standing in front of me were two men, one dressed in white, the other in black. Both cloaked, and exuded an air that immediately set off alarms in my head.

Their faces were covered, but the moment my eyes met the man in white's, his golden eyes gleamed faintly under his hood. The man in black didn't look at me at all, his arms crossed, his posture saying he'd rather be anywhere else but here.

Great.

Just what I needed. More mysterious, powerful strangers.

Even without using my ability, I could sense they were both strong. Maybe not quite like the man I'd met earlier, the one whose mind I couldn't read, but close enough that the air around them felt charged.

I really wanted to groan. Why did I keep meeting people like this today? Was there some cosmic joke I wasn't aware of?

The man in white smiled slightly, amusement flickering in his eyes. "Miss?" he asked again, voice polite, and teasing. "Can we sit here with you?"

I straightened slightly, schooling my face into something equally polite. "There are other seats you can choose from,"

He didn't even blink. "They're all fully taken," he said, still smiling. "You're the only table with three extra seats."

His tone was still polite, but there was a subtle glint in his voice, like he was enjoying this.

Damn him.

Why do polite men always sound like they're mocking you?

I forced a smile that didn't reach my eyes. "Of course," I said sweetly, gesturing at the chairs. "Be my guest."

The man in white smiled, he was far too charming for my liking. "Thank you, miss,"

He sat across from me with unhurried grace, the man in black following silently behind him, every movement sharp. For a

12:43 Tue,

Chapter 27

moment, he didn't look at me, until he did.

The instant our eyes met, my breath caught in my throat.

Those green eyes.

Something inside me paused. A flicker of recognition pulsed through me before I could stop it. They were familiar.

He raised an eyebrow slightly, and for a moment, the world around us faded. It was just a brief silence, an unspoken question passing between us that neither of us seemed to have the answer to.

I tore my gaze away first, letting my eyes trace over him. He was tall, broad-shouldered, every line of his posture radiating authority.

I was just about to say something when the lights in the hall dimmed suddenly. A hush swept through the crowd.

A beautiful woman stepped gracefully onto the stage, her long crimson gown shimmering under the spotlight. She bowed her head slightly.

“Welcome, everyone,” she began with a warm smile. “I’m your auctioneer for today.”

The crowd murmured softly, excitement and anticipation buzzing in the air.

“I’m happy to say that there will be many unique items here today, items that everyone will want, items that nobody expects.”

Her eyes swept the room, the corners of her lips curving knowingly. “I hope you are one of the lucky ones, and if you’re not lucky...well, you can always try another day.”

“There are two rules we have in the auction house, and everyone here must follow them, irrespective of your status or

wealth.”

“The first rule,” she continued, “is that nobody should attempt to obtain an already purchased item by threatening or forcing another bidder. If anyone is caught doing so, there will be consequences, and that person will be banned from ever entering the auction house again.”

She paused, scanning the crowd. “And the second, and most important, rule, if an item is auctioned and nobody knows its true worth, once purchased, there are no refunds. Whether you buy something worthless for a fortune or something priceless for a single coin, the deal is final. This place is not for the cautious. The auction,” she said with a playful lilt, “is a gamble.”

I leaned back in my seat, crossing one leg over the other with ease. I could still feel his gaze on me, but I ignored it.

I was probably overthinking things. There was no way that man was here.

“And now that we’re all seated,” the announcer’s voice boomed through the hall, “let the auction begin.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 28

[1,433 words]

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Selene

Have you ever seen a room full of hungry wolves? That's exactly what this place looked like, wolves dressed in fine clothing. all wearing polite smiles while their eyes gleamed with greed. Every single one of them was ready to tear another apart for the next glittering trinket.

The air inside the auction hall buzzed with tension and desperation.

People leaned forward in their seats, paddles clutched like weapons, eyes flicking between the auctioneer and the item on display, each calculating how much they could risk for the sake of pride.

"We'll start this item at five thousand silver coins," the auctioneer announced, her voice slicing through the low hum of the

crowd.

“Five thousand silver coins!”

“Six thousand!”

“Eight thousand!”

“Ten thousand silver coins!” a short man shouted, his voice carrying across the hall.

The tension built with every call, and just when it seemed the old man would win, an arrogant voice thundered across the hall, shattering the noise.

“One hundred gold coins!”

Every head snapped toward the source, and I knew who it was, there was only one voice that could sound that proud and that irritating at the same time. When I finally turned, I was right.

Kane lounged in his chair, tilted slightly back, paddle still raised high, that infuriating smirk painted across his face.

Beside him, Sienna sat with hands folded delicately in her lap, the perfect picture of innocence and grace, while Cross remained quiet, eyes scanning the stage as if the entire commotion didn't even concern him.

The whispers started immediately.

“Oh my goddess, again? Another item?”

“He's already bought five things!”

“Is the temple that rich? He's acting like the auction house belongs to him.”

“I swear, if I see that smug look again, I'll lose it.”

Kane didn't even twitch at the voices around him. He sat there as if they were nothing but wind. That man had skin thicker than iron in moments like this.

The auctioneer's smile widened the moment she heard the bid. “One hundred gold coins-going once... going twice... sold!”

The gavel hit the podium with a sharp crack. Kane leaned back, satisfied, clearly pleased with himself.

Sienna turned to him with that sweet smile that made everyone adore her. “Brother, don’t you think that’s too expensive for a jade pendant? You’ve been buying me so many things, I’m starting to feel bad,” she said softly, her voice laced with concern, as if she didn’t already know exactly how her words would sound to everyone listening.

12:43 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 28

Kane only chuckled, waving her concern away. His expression softened instantly, like he’d forgotten the entire room existed. “Of course not. That jade is rare, and it’ll look beautiful on you. I have to spoil my little ter. You deserve everything.”

I shook my head and turned away from the sight of them. If only he knew what kind of disaster the sister he cherished so much would bring to him one day.

Beside me. Evelyn shifted slightly, her worried eyes glancing between me and them. I knew that look well. She thought I was jealous.

I turned my gaze to her, and she quickly averted her eyes, pretending to adjust her dress. I sighed quietly, a small smile ghosting across my lips. Evelyn still thought I cared about things like attention or affection from my brothers. That part of me had died a long time ago.

They could dote on Sienna all they wanted. They could gift her the moon, crown her in gold, and call her divine. None of it mattered to me.

I gave Evelyn a small nod, silently telling her I was fine.

Turning my attention back to the stage, I leaned back in my chair. The auction had been going for over an hour now. A few impressive items had already been sold, Kane, of course, bought almost everything for Sienna. He didn’t even blink when the price doubled or tripled. What a fool with too much money and too little sense.

Other buyers also joined the bidding wars, their eyes glittering with greed or pride.

Still, I didn’t lift a single finger to bid. Even though some of those items were tempting.

The Glowing Runestone, for instance, a stone capable of creating a protective barrier against danger. It was a useful tool. And then there was the Silver-Tipped Dagger, forged in the north under the silver moon, said to pierce through enchantments. I might have considered buying that one for my bodyguard, but Silas never used daggers. He preferred swords.

No, none of those attracted me.

I was waiting for that item I came for.

“You haven’t auctioned for anything yet. Why?” The deep, low voice came suddenly from my left, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blinked and turned my head. Oh. Right. The two men sitting at my table. I had completely forgotten they were even there.

The one who spoke was the man in the black cloak, the silent one. The air around him seemed to hum slightly. His face was hidden, but his presence was dangerous.

Even the man in the white cloak beside him looked surprised, his head tilting slightly as though hearing his companion speak was a rare event.

Throughout the auction, the man in white had been the one making small remarks, his tone amused and casual. He was the one who had bought the Silver-Tipped Dagger, his eyes lighting up as if he’d just found a new toy to test blood on. A fighter through and through. But the man in black hadn’t said a single word until now.

I raised an eyebrow at him. His voice... it didn’t sound like that man. So it wasn’t him. And yet, why did I get this uneasy feeling whenever I was near him?

It was subtle, that tension under my skin. A quiet hum, crawling at the back of my neck, telling me something wasn’t right. Everything about him reminded me of him.

I clenched my jaw and quickly looked away, forcing the thought out of my head.

It couldn’t be, but ever since the auction began, I could feel his eyes on me. That calm, heavy gaze that seemed to see too

12:43 Tue, Dec 23 IMG

Chapter 28

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much. I wasn’t afraid, far from it, but my instincts didn’t like his attention. It wasn’t like the other man at the market, the one whose stare had felt oddly pleasant.

That man’s gaze had stirred something strange inside me, like warmth curling through my veins, a dangerous curiosity that made me want to look back.

This one was the opposite.

With this man, I had the urge to fight him. To draw blood and grin while doing it.

I caught myself glaring at him and exhaled, waving the thought away.

Before I could bury myself too deep in my thoughts, the man in white cloak spoke, his golden eyes gleaming with intrigue.

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his gloved hand, his elbow pressing lazily against the table. "I'm also curious," he said. "Why haven't you bought anything, miss? There were plenty of items any young lady would die for, jewels, silks, perfumes. Yet your eyes didn't shine once."

His lips curved slightly. "In fact, you looked bored. The only thing that caught your interest was that Silver-Tipped Dagger. You looked at it like a child discovering her favorite toy. So tell me..." He tilted his head, "do swords interest you more than jewels?"

I turned my gaze toward him, meeting his eyes directly. I didn't like the way he was looking at me, as though I were some curious creature he wanted to prod and observe. But I had to admit, he was annoyingly perceptive.

His words reminded me of someone I'd once known.

A man with the same golden eyes and dangerous smile. An Alpha who lived for war, and chaos, who found beauty in the sound of a blade cutting through air.

A crazy Alpha I'd met briefly in one of my past lives.

I wasn't going to dwell on that either. I'd met too many people in too many lives; not every echo of familiarity deserved my

attention.

The only reason I even paid attention to the man in black cloak, was because he reminded me of him, the man who took everything from me

12:43 Tue, Dec 23 MG

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 29

[1,548 words]

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Selene

“How boring.”

The words slipped from my lips before I could even think about it. My tone was flat, and indifferent.

The two men sitting at the table turned to me, their faces a mix of confusion and surprise. Evelyn, beside me, stiffened as if she wanted to disappear under the table.

The man in white tilted his head slightly, golden eyes glinting with amusement. “Boring?” he repeated, as though he wasn’t sure he’d heard me right.

I nodded, meeting his gaze without flinching. “You’re boring, old man.”

He blinked, and his brows arched in disbelief. “Boring old man?” he echoed, as if testing how the words sounded coming from my mouth. “What gave you the idea I’m old? I’m quite young, actually. Twenty-eight.”

I shrugged. “It’s only old men who think they can define what a person should or shouldn’t like based on their gender. You must be one of those people who think a woman should like pretty things just because she’s a woman, or that she can’t fight just because she doesn’t have a cock. So yes. You’re an old man.”

The table went dead silent.

Evelyn froze mid-breath, her face turning crimson. The man in white’s raised his brows slightly, while the one in black cloak just stared.

Evelyn was the first to snap out of it. “My lady!” she gasped, grabbing my arm, mortified. “You-you can’t say words like that.”

I blinked, turning to her slowly.

Oh, right. I almost forgot, I was back in the body of an eighteen-year-old.

I probably shouldn't be saying things like that so openly. But the habit was hard to kill. In my past lives, I'd commanded men twice my size who spat curses, and I'd learned to speak with a tone that made them listen.

Words like that were nothing to me.

I sighed softly and nodded. "Alright, alright. I'll be careful."

When I turned my gaze back to the two men, they were both watching me again. The one in black cloak's stare was unreadable, weighing me as though I were something worth studying. But the man in white laughed. A low, rough chuckle that drew curious glances from nearby tables.

I looked at him, unimpressed.

He leaned back in his chair, still smiling, eyes gleaming like he'd just discovered something rare. "Lady," he said, his voice rich with amusement, "you're interesting. I've never seen a woman like you before. And it's not every day someone gets to impress me, especially a woman. And oh, this time around," he added with a teasing tilt of his head, "I'm not being a boring old man. I'm speaking the truth."

Why was he talking as if I should care about that? As if I should feel honored that he found me interesting? His approval meant absolutely nothing.

I ignored him, turning my gaze to the front where the auctioneer's voice echoed across the grand hall.

Chapter 29

"Now, for the next item," the auctioneer said with a bright smile, gesturing toward the cloth-covered pedestal beside her. "The item most people have been waiting for!"

The room shifted, excitement rippling through the crowd. Chairs creaked as people leaned forward, their eyes gleaming with desire. I stayed still, fingers drumming lightly against the armrest, already predicting what would happen next.

In a dramatic way, the woman pulled away the white cloth.

Light spilled across the room. The crowd gasped.

"Oh, Goddess," someone whispered, voice trembling in awe. "They weren't lying, it's really the Moonstone Amulet."

"That's incredible."

"I heard it was lost decades ago."

“It’s worth so much, whoever gets it will be so lucky!”

Their eyes burned with hunger, already calculating how much they could bid.

When I glanced at the two men beside me, they hadn’t moved. Their gazes weren’t even directed at the amulet. It was as if something that dazzled everyone else in the room was little more than dust to them.

The man in white smirked, gold eyes sliding toward me. “Not interested too?”

“Hmm. Should I be?”

His smile deepened, intrigued. “I see.”

The auctioneer lifted her voice again, cutting through the murmurs. “As you all know, the Moonstone Amulet is a legendary artifact capable of strengthening a wolf’s power during a battle. Though the enhancement is temporary, it grants a single wolf the strength of ten wolves. It is a rare treasure indeed, one our auction house was fortunate enough to acquire.”

The crowd grew louder, restless with excitement.

“I’m sure many of you will be heartbroken if you fail to obtain it,” the auctioneer continued, grinning. “So please, bid well! The highest bidder will win!”

As expected, several eyes turned toward one particular table, the one where Kane, Sienna, and Cross sat.

“That’s the Mooncrest temple group,” someone whispered behind me. “He’s definitely going to bid again.”

“Yeah,” another muttered. “We have to make sure someone beats him this time. He’s already taken half the rare items tonight.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd, people glaring daggers at Kane as if hatred could bankrupt him.

The auctioneer raised her hand. “Alright, we will start the bidding for the Moonstone Amulet at two hundred go-”

“Five hundred gold coins.”

The hall fell silent,

The auctioneer froze mid-sentence. Her mouth was still open, the words caught somewhere between her throat and her disbelief.

Every head in the room turned, mine included.

At the Mooncrest table, Cross had lazily raised his paddle. He was leaning back in his chair, eyes still closed, as if he hadn't

12:43 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 29

just dropped the equivalent of a small fortune with a single breath.

Kane blinked, then chuckled. "You know that's not how bidding works," he said, his tone playful. "You're supposed to let them think they have a chance before you crush their hopes."

Cross tilted his head slightly, not even opening his eyes. "That's a waste of time," he replied flatly. "It's faster to get it for Sienna without dealing with anyone."

The room buzzed with disbelief. People were so stunned they didn't even know whether to clap or curse.

"Five hundred gold coins?" someone whispered, voice trembling. "They're insane."

"Insane, but gods, look at them," another woman said, fanning herself. "Both handsome and rich? Their sister's so lucky."

"I know right?" another one added bitterly. "I wish I had brothers like that."

Across the hall, Sienna blushed prettily at the compliments, lowering her gaze shyly.

The auctioneer, snapping herself out of the daze, cleared her throat and forced a bright smile.

"Five hundred gold coins, going once, going twice..."

She paused dramatically, though everyone already knew the outcome.

"Sold!"

The gavel came down.

A heavy silence followed before the crowd erupted into murmurs again as the Moonstone Amulet was carefully removed from the stage.

The woman on stage clapped her hands together, her ruby-red lips stretching into a wide grin. "Oh, would you look at that! The auction tonight is even more interesting than I thought!"

No one matched her excitement. The crowd, still bitter about losing the Moonstone Amulet, only murmured half-heartedly. The woman's smile didn't falter; she was far too experienced to be discouraged.

"Come now," she said sweetly, "don't be sad. There are still plenty of items left! And our next lot is quite the mystery."

Her tone carried just enough intrigue to pull everyone's attention back to the stage. I arched an eyebrow, curious despite myself.

"This next one," she continued, "isn't a single item but a collection, but a set of objects brought in together. Even we at the auction house have no idea what they are. But," she paused dramatically, "you never know when something that looks ordinary might turn out to be extraordinary."

That caught people's attention.

"Bring it in." At her command, two men appeared from the side of the stage, each carrying a large, old wooden box. They set it carefully on the table, and the auctioneer lifted the lid.

A puff of dust rose into the air.

Inside the box lay a messy assortment of rusted trinkets and broken fragments, metal plates, cracked stones, a few dull gems, and objects so corroded it was impossible to tell what they once were.

The crowd's interest died instantly.

"What the hell is that?" someone muttered loudly. "That's just junk."

12:43 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 29

"Yeah," another scoffed. "They're selling trash now? Who'd be crazy enough to buy something like that?"

Laughter rippled through the room. Even Evelyn beside me looked unimpressed, tilting her head at the pile of rust and dust. But I felt my pulse quicken.

I leaned forward, eyes fixed on the box.

Finally.

A smile tugged at my lips.

Finally, it was here.

Without hesitation, I reached for the paddle resting on the table. Evelyn turned to me, wide-eyed and confused, while the two cloaked men at my table glanced my way with curiosity.

I lifted the paddle high and said clearly, my voice slicing through the stunned silence.

“One silver!”

Gasps echoed around the hall.

The crowd turned toward me as if I’d lost my mind.

12:44 Tue, Dec 23

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 30

[1,488 words]

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Selene

Flashback

The sounds of clashing swords and men shouting orders echoed faintly across the field, but most of my warriors were no longer sparring. They’d gathered in a thick circle near

the edge of the camp. I recognized that sound, the mix of excitement and childish awe. I sighed, crossing my arms as I turned toward them.

Whenever my men formed crowds like that, it was always for one of three reasons, women, wine, or weapons. And since we were far from any village and I had banned drinking after the last incident, I already knew which one it was.

“Ares,” I called, glancing at the tall man beside me. He was my right-hand man, loyal, efficient, and unfortunately just as easily distracted as the others. “What are they doing this time?”

Ares followed my gaze toward the commotion, his lips twitching with amusement. “There’s a merchant, Commander. Seems he’s selling items, and the boys are excited to buy them.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course.

“They do realize that most traveling merchants sell nothing but polished junk, right? Half the things they hawk are fakes, the rest are curses waiting to happen.”

Ares chuckled under his breath. “We do know, Commander. But you never know, sometimes, luck strikes.”

“Luck,” I repeated dryly, shaking my head. “That’s what you’re calling stupidity these days?”

He grinned, unoffended.

I turned away, already done with the nonsense. I had reports to review, strategies to revise, and about a thousand men who couldn’t survive a week without me telling them how to breathe. The last thing I needed was to waste time watching a bunch of grown men buy fake trinkets.

“Commander!”

The call came from somewhere in the crowd, followed by others echoing it like a chant.

“Commander, come and take a look!”

“Yeah, Commander! There’s good stuff here!”

I stopped mid-step, closing my eyes for a moment. Goddess, give me patience.

When I turned, every one of those idiots was staring at me expectantly, eyes wide, faces eager, like children showing off shiny rocks they’d found in the dirt.

I arched a brow. "You all know I have better things to do, right?"

A chorus of groans and grins followed.

"Come on, Commander!" one of them shouted. "At least look! If you like something, we'll get it!"

"That's right!" another added. "We won't buy a thing unless you do!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, suppressing the smile threatening to break free.

They were soldiers, bloodthirsty, loud, undisciplined at times, but damn it, they were my soldiers. And somehow,

12:44 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 30

somewhere along the line, I'd stopped being just their commander and turned into their mother, apparently.

I sighed, letting my arms fall to my sides. "Fine," I said at last, walking toward them. "I'll take a look."

A cheer erupted, echoing through the camp.

Ares laughed quietly beside me. "You spoil them, Commander."

"Shut up," I muttered, though there was a small smile tugging at my lips as I pushed through the crowd.

I stood in front of the merchant's table, dust swirling faintly around the scattered items laid out. The old man behind the table straightened when he saw me.

"Good afternoon, Commander," he said, bowing his head slightly. "May the Goddess be with you. Would you like to take a look at the items and choose one? They might seem useless, but I assure you, there are good things here."

My gaze swept over the collection.

Rusty blades, broken pendants, shards of crystal dulled by time. They were all junks. There wasn't a single piece that looked worth the effort. My men watched eagerly from behind me.

And yet, as I looked at the old man again, my attention drifted lower, to his feet. His shoes were nearly torn apart, the leather splitting so badly I could see his skin through

it. Half the sole was gone completely. The ground here was dry and hot; walking through it must've been agony.

He didn't show it. He just stood there, smiling, as if the pain didn't matter.

I looked back at the table, scanning the trinkets again. My eyes landed on a small, wooden box tucked at the corner, half- covered in dust.

"Where did you get that?" I asked, pointing at the box.

The old man blinked, following my gaze. His face softened, and he smiled. "Ah... that one. I got it from the auction house a few years ago."

My brows lifted slightly. "The auction house?"

"Yes. You remember, don't you, commander? That popular time, when nobles and alphas from all over came to buy treasures. Everyone was talking about it."

Oh, I remembered.

Even though it had been years ago, that day was carved into my memory. My brothers had gone to the auction, it was our birthday, but they chose to celebrate only her.

They returned that night with arms full of gifts and treasures for her. I remembered watching her from the shadows, smiling brightly as she unwrapped each one, while I had cried myself to sleep.

That was the night I realized I could never compete with Sienna.

I blinked the memory away. "I do remember,"

The merchant smiled wider, his wrinkles deepening. "Yes, yes, that's the one. I couldn't afford to go inside, of course, but after the auction ended, I stayed outside. They sometimes sell the unwanted items to merchants like me. That's when I saw

this box."

He looked at it fondly, brushing his fingers over the rough surface.

"Many people weren't interested in buying anything from it, they said it was cursed or worthless. But I didn't throw it away.

12:44 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 30

Something in me kept whispering that it might be worth something someday.”

Cursed? Worthless?

I knew what it felt like to be seen as worthless.

To wander from place to place, carrying strength but never belonging anywhere. To be tolerated, admired even, yet never truly home.

Behind me, I heard Ares’ familiar voice. “Commander?” His tone was careful, as if gauging my silence.

“I’m fine.” I said before turning to the old man, who was still watching me nervously, as though afraid I’d change my mind. “How much?”

The merchant hesitated, eyes darting to the box, then back to me. His hands trembled slightly as he rubbed them together. “Anything, Commander. I will even sell it for one silver, if you decide.”

“Ares,”

“Yes, Commander?”

“Give him a gold coin for this.”

The old man’s eyes widened instantly, his lips parting in disbelief. I wasn’t finished.

“And give him a new pair of shoes,” I added. “Let him dine before resting in one of the tents. It’s getting late, and he must be tired.”

Ares blinked, then bowed his head slightly. “Yes, Commander.”

The old man’s jaw trembled. “M-my lady-”

I ignored his stammering, my eyes drifting toward the rest of the table. “And another gold coin to buy everything here. Let my men choose what they want.”

A ripple of joy broke out behind me.

“Thank you, Commander!” my soldiers shouted in unison. For men who faced death daily, it was absurd how easily they were pleased by trinkets and scraps.

The old merchant dropped to his knees suddenly, bowing until his forehead touched the dirt. Tears streaked his weathered face, falling freely to the ground.

“Th-thank you... Moonborn,” he whispered hoarsely. “Thank you so much for your mercy, my lady. I don’t deserve this. You are a blessing from the Moon Goddess herself.”

“It’s fine.” I turned and walked away, Ares’ steady footsteps following behind me.

After a moment, he spoke, voice low but edged with concern. “Commander, forgive me for speaking freely, but don’t you think your generosity was too much?”

Without looking back, I said, “Gnerosity?

wasn’t generous.”

Ares slowed his step, the leather of his armor cranking softly as he straightened. He glanced at me, confusion creasing his brow. “Then what was that, Commander? You paid two gold coins for pieces of junk and you gave him hospitality. You even fed him. That’s generous.”

“Sometimes, Ares. Even pieces can be worth something.”

12:44 Tue, Dec 23 C.

Chapter 30

He studied me for a long moment, then cocked his head. “And the hospitality?” he pressed. “Why that?”

“We are known as cold-blooded warriors,” I said. “It’ll do us good to be remembered as more than that. Reputation is currency too.”

Ares couldn’t help it, he grinned. “You’re cute when you make excuses, Commander.”

I turned my head just enough to let him see my face, my jaw tight. “Call me cute one more time,” I warned, my voice low, “and I’ll rearrange your face.”

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