

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 31

[1,355 words]

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Selene

Present time

Never judge a book by its cover.

If life had taught me anything, it was that. Beneath all that filth and decay, who would have thought that something so special could hide inside that box?

“One silver!”

My voice cut through the quiet murmur of the hall.

For a moment, the room was silent, as heads turned to our table, eyes widened in surprise. The entire hall seemed to shift their attention toward me as if I'd just grown two heads.

I could practically feel their disbelief.

Their eyes said it all—who is this idiot daring to bid one silver coin on a box of useless junk?

Even Sienna's table had gone quiet. I could feel their gazes drilling into my back, a mixture of shock and amusement radiating from them. It didn't matter. Let them look. They could call me a mad woman for all I cared, because right now, I was too excited to even focus on them.

Finally, after all these years, that box had found its

way

back to me.

Beside me, Evelyn's mouth hung open. She blinked rapidly, turning to me as if trying to confirm she hadn't misheard. "My... lady?" she whispered, voice trembling with disbelief.

The men sitting across from us watched me with the same stunned curiosity. The man in white leaned slightly forward, golden eyes gleaming with intrigue, while the one in black remained still, though I could feel his eyes on me.

I ignored them all.

The auctioneer on the stage hesitated, staring at me as though unsure whether to laugh or continue. Her mouth opened, then closed again. I heard her thoughts spinning through her head.

'You know what? Why not? Nobody else would buy it anyway, might as well/sell it to the lady.'

Perfect.

"One silver," the auctioneer repeated. "Do I hear anyone else? Anyone willing to compete?"

The crowd exchanged confused looks. Someone in the back scoffed loudly, the sound dripping with disdain.

"She's really starting it for one silver," a man muttered. "That's ridiculous. I've never seen an auction house sink this low."

Another person nodded, chuckling. "Tell me about it. She's probably selling it cheap because she knows it's worthless. Only a fool would waste even a single coin on that trash."

A third voice snickered. "That girl's probably new. She doesn't know the difference between junk and treasure. Look at her, she really thinks she's buying something valuable. Poor, foolish thing."

Their laughter rolled through the room, but I smiled faintly. I always loved when people underestimated me.

"That girl is weird, brother. Why would she buy a box of junk for one silver?" Sienna's soft voice echoed beside our table.

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Kane's voice followed, low and confident. "You don't feel any spiritual energy from the box, right?"

"No," Sienna replied almost immediately. "I can't sense anything useful from that box at all."

Kane chuckled. "Then don't bother yourself with her. It's not our business what some foolish woman does with her money. She must be a rich lady who enjoys wasting coins. Don't mind her, Sienna."

I didn't even glance back. My attention stayed fixed on the auctioneer, who was still looking at me with a sly smile, eyes darting across the room as though begging someone to compete. But no one did.

The longer the silence stretched, the more I could see the amusement across her face.

Finally, the auctioneer cleared her throat, smiled and said, "Fine, fine!" She lifted her gravel and struck the podium with a solid thud. "Sold, for one silver coin!"

The sound echoed like a victory drum in my ears.

At last. It was mine again.

"I must say," the auctioneer added, "this is the first time I've ever sold anything for a single silver coin. You're lucky, miss."

From somewhere in the crowd, a man muttered just loud enough for others to hear, "Lucky or stupid."

A few snickers followed.

I leaned back in my chair, resting my chin on my knuckles, and grinned.

I hadn't said a word since the whispers began, not because I couldn't defend myself, but because people like them weren't worth the effort.

In the end, they'd be the ones with regret twisting their guts when they learned what I had just bought for a silver coin. When they realized what that "box of junk" truly held, they'd turn red and choke on their pride.

"I see," a deep voice said suddenly, drawing my attention.

I looked up and met those piercing green eyes again. The man in the black cloak.

"You see?" I echoed, one brow lifting. "What did you see?"

He leaned back in his chair, calm and composed, arms crossing over his chest as if he were testing me with that gaze.

“You didn’t come here for anything else,” he said slowly, voice low and certain. “You came for that box. It’s like you knew it would be auctioned today.”

My fingers stilled on the table. For the brief second, my smile faltered, then returned.

How amusing. Out of everyone in this hall, he was the only one perceptive enough to notice.

I met his gaze again, lips curving into a faint smirk. “Maybe I did,” I said. “Or maybe I just got lucky, like she said.”

But even as I spoke, I knew from the flicker of understanding in his eyes, he didn’t believe in luck any more than I did.

The man in white tilted his head at me. “If what he said is true,” he murmured, “then I wonder what’s in that box that caught your attention so much.”

I met his gaze but said nothing. His tone was casual, but his eyes were studying me. It was irritating.

Why were they both so curious about me? Did I look like someone who owed them answers?

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I narrowed my eyes slightly, suspicious.

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When he noticed my expression, the man in white raised his hands a little, smiling. “Don’t worry, I’m not a thief. If I wanted the box, I would’ve competed for it.”

“Is that so?” I said flatly. “Well then, since you didn’t compete for it, you shouldn’t ask me so many questions about it.”

My voice was blunt, colder than I intended, but I didn’t take it back.

His brows lifted slightly, as though I’d struck him speechless. For a second, the corners of his mouth twitched, he looked amused, maybe even a little impressed.

Before he could respond, a man in a neat dark uniform approached our table and bowed. "My lords," he said politely.

Both cloaked men turned to him, their attention snapping away from me.

The man hesitated, his gaze flicking briefly toward Evelyn and me, then back to the two men.

"Speak," the one in black said, voice low and commanding.

The man straightened quickly. "My lords, about the sword... it has already been taken by another person."

For the first time, a flicker of surprise crossed both their faces.

"What?" the man in white asked sharply. "The red sword?"

The messenger nodded nervously.

The man in black frowned, eyes darkening. "How is that possible? They were supposed to auction it today. Who would buy it before it was even listed?"

"I have no idea, sir," the man said quickly. "The auction house refused to tell me."

I blinked, glancing between them.

The red sword? I had no idea what they were talking about, and honestly, I didn't care.

I'd already gotten what I came for.

I rose from my chair, brushing imaginary dust off my sleeves. "It looks like we're done here," I said to Evelyn, ignoring the

men's conversation.

"My lady?" she asked softly.

"Let's go."

I took her hand and guided her away from the table. Neither of the men tried to stop me as we left, though I could feel their gazes burning into my back.

Tue,

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Adrian

I watched her leave the auction hall, the woman with the calm eyes and that expression that said she didn't care about a single soul in the room. She didn't even glance back once.

For a long moment, I just sat there, my face blank..

That woman...

I didn't know what it was about her, but something didn't add up. She felt familiar, and yet, with the way she carried herself, I was sure I'd never met her before.

I frowned slightly, eyes narrowing at the door she'd disappeared through.

If I'd met a woman like her before, I would've remembered.

"Prince Adrian?" The deep voice cut through my thoughts.

I turned, meeting the amused gaze of the man sitting beside me, he was dressed in white, a lazy grin on his lips.

Alpha Tristan, the crazy alpha who had come to discuss business with my father.

"You're lost in thought," Tristan said, smirking. "Or is it that you're thinking about someone?"

I didn't react, though his words hit a little too close. "You're imagining things," I said flatly.

He chuckled, resting his chin on his knuckles. "Hmph. Am I?"

I didn't bother replying to that question. Instead, I said, "I apologise. You said you wanted to purchase the red sword, but someone else took it before it was even auctioned."

Tristan tilted his head back and gave a short laugh, clearly unbothered. "Ah, yes. It's fine. Maybe the Moon Goddess is telling me to let it go."

He grinned, but there was something dangerous in his eyes, the kind that made most men step back. "After all, if I took that sword, its power might drive me mad or worse."

I glanced at him. "Worse?"

He leaned forward, grin widening. "The demon of the west might come for his sword."

I didn't need to ask who he meant. Everyone in this world knew that name.

Alpha Damien.

The man who had alphas kneeling before him. The man who didn't just win wars, he erased entire packs from existence. They called him the Demon of the West for a reason. His territory stretched further than any other alpha's, vast enough that other alphas believed they could steal a piece of it. But every pack that had tried was gone, and wiped out.

Even my father once dared to dream of taking it.

I remember the tension in the palace back then, the fear in his eyes when news reached him that Damien had found out. My father was smart enough to stop before the real bloodshed began, but the thought still haunted him. He'd tell me sometimes, after a few drinks, that he could still feel Damien's gaze on his back even after all those years.

There was a rumor across kingdoms, that no one who looked upon Alpha Damien's face ever came back alive.

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So yes, I understood perfectly well why Alpha Tristan, the lunatic who enjoyed wars, wasn't foolish enough to chase after the

demon's sword.

Tristan drummed his fingers on the table. "It seems like the Mooncrest Pack has interesting women."

My gaze slid toward him, brow raising slightly. "Interesting women?"

He didn't look at me. His golden eyes were still on the door the woman had just walked through. "That woman and the Moonborn."

I froze for a second.

Moonborn?

Did he mean-Selene?

I blinked, shaking the thought off almost immediately. No, that wasn't possible. He couldn't be talking about her. There was nothing particularly interesting about Selene. She was quiet, awkward, the kind of girl who couldn't start a proper conversation.

Tristan had to be talking about Sienna. Everyone was obsessed with her anyway.

But then...why did the idea of him meaning Selene irritate me? Why did something twist unpleasantly in my chest at the thought of Tristan finding her interesting?

I looked away, jaw tightening.

Ridiculous.

I didn't even know that woman from the auction, nor did I care about the Mooncrest priestess or whoever Tristan was fascinated by. Still, when I glanced once more at the door she had disappeared through, that same uneasy feeling returned.

I finally realized why that woman seemed so damn familiar.

Even though half her face had been covered, her movements, her voice, the way she tilted her head when she spoke all reminded me of someone I knew far too well.

Selene.

But that didn't make sense. It couldn't be her.

Selene wasn't the kind of woman who looked at men like they were beneath her notice. And yet, the resemblance was undeniable.

My mind went back to the river. The way she stood up for herself that day, the quiet, sharp defiance in her eyes, so unlike the timid girl I'd always known. It had been subtle

then, but now that I thought about it, there was something different in her gaze. Like she wasn't the same person anymore.

I exhaled slowly, dragging a hand through my hair as a dull headache began to form behind my temples.

Nothing made sense.

I glanced over my shoulder at the man standing quietly behind Tristan and me. "That woman who was sitting here earlier," I said, voice low but firm. "Follow her, and find out where she goes."

The man bowed his head instantly. "Yes, my lord."

He left without another word, slipping through the crowd and out of sight.

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When I turned back, Tristan was watching me, but, for once, he didn't say anything.

Good. I wasn't in the mood to explain myself.

My fingers curled into a fist on the table. I didn't know what was happening, why I kept noticing her, why she suddenly seemed different. But I would find out.

Especially tonight.

When the moon rose and the two Moonborns finally awakened their wolves, the bonds would form, and one of them might end up being my mate.

If it turned out to be Selene, I wasn't sure if I should feel intrigued, or terrified.

Third person pov

Jack moved silently through the thick forest, his boots barely making a sound against the damp earth. Ahead of him, just a short distance away, the woman he'd been ordered to follow walked calmly with her maid.

He kept his pace steady, careful not to draw attention. Prince Adrian's instructions were simple: find out who she is, and where she goes. Nothing more, nothing less.

Jack adjusted his hood and was about to move closer when something whizzed through the air.

Thunk!

A sharp pain exploded at the side of his head. He hissed, clutching his temple, eyes darting through the trees. "What the hell

Another small stone struck him, this time square on the shoulder.

Jack's expression darkened. His hand went to the dagger strapped to his thigh as he scanned the branches above him.

That's when he saw her.

A woman sat casually on a thick branch, one leg crossed over the other. She wore a dark cloak, hood drawn low over her face. In her hand, she tossed a stone into the air, catching it lazily and repeating the motion, like she had all the time in the world.

"What are you doing?" Jack snapped, glaring at her.

The woman tilted her head slightly. Then, with a small motion, she pulled her hood down.

Jack froze for a brief second.

The woman was striking, short black hair that framed her sharp jawline, and eyes that gleamed hazel-gold even in the dim light. There was a smirk tugging at her lips, one that carried more amusement than apology.

"What do you mean?" she said, voice teasing. "I'm just doing my job."

"Your job?" Jack raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly is that supposed to be?"

Yara looked at him for a long moment as if actually thinking about it. Then she shrugged.

"I also don't have an idea," she said simply, lips curving again. "It's strange, but I'll never disobey my lord. And right now..." Her gaze flicked toward the distant silhouette of the woman Jack had been following. "He wants me to watch over that woman. So, here I am."

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Jack scoffed. "That's unfortunate for you, because I was given the same order. Which means one of us has to go.

Yara's smile didn't fade. If anything, it grew softer.

"I see you don't want to leave while I'm being nice."

"I won't."

"Well then... goodbye." She waved her hand.

Before Jack could even process her words, a massive shape burst out of the shadows behind him.

A white lion.

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It moved like lightning, slamming into him with a force that knocked the air from his lungs. Jack barely managed to let out a startled scream before the lion's massive paw came down on his head, sending him crashing to the ground, unconscious.

The beast growled, lifting its paw again, ready to strike once more.

"Come back, Alba," Yara said lazily from her perch. "The Alpha said we shouldn't kill."

The lion froze, turning its glowing eyes toward her. Then, with a shimmer of light, its body shrank, fur rippling until a small white cat stood in its place. The cat leapt gracefully into Yara's lap, curling up without a sound.

Yara stroked its head, eyes flicking back toward the forest path where the woman had vanished.

"Alright then," she murmured with a faint smile. "Let's resume our task."

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Selene

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The box was light in my arms, yet I held it close as if it were the most precious thing in the world. For the first time in a long while, I was genuinely pleased with how the day had gone. Everything had turned out exactly as I wanted.

I let a smile curve across my lips as I walked down the quiet path, the forest humming softly around us. The auction house was far behind now, the noise of greedy bidders replaced by the rustle of leaves and the distant chirping of crickets.

“My lady,” Evelyn said beside me, her voice hesitant but curious. “Are you sure you don’t want me to help carry it for you? You shouldn’t be holding anything heavy.”

I looked down at the box, before shaking my head. “No, it’s alright. I should carry it myself.”

Evelyn nodded, though her gaze lingered on the box as if trying to understand what I found so fascinating about a pile of dusty old junk. “I wonder what’s so special about that box,” she said, tilting her head. “You’ve been smiling ever since we paid for it and collected it. Is there something about it nobody knows about?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I said teasingly. “Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Evelyn pouted but didn’t push further, and I turned my eyes back to the road. The evening air was cool against my skin. I was in a good mood. Especially knowing that I’d just bought one of the most important items in history for a single silver

coin.

As we walked, I came to an abrupt stop. My gaze drifted toward the dense forest to our right, something in the shadows catching my attention.

Evelyn noticed instantly. “My lady?”

“It seems there’s only one of them following us now,” I murmured, tilting my head slightly.

Evelyn blinked in confusion, looking around nervously. “Following us? Who-”

Before she could finish, a gust of wind swept past, strong enough to rustle our dresses. When I turned, a man was already kneeling before me, one knee on the ground, his head bowed low.

“My lady,” he said, voice deep.

Evelyn gasped beside me. “Silas!”

I smiled, lowering the box slightly in my arms. Silas looked different now His dark hair fell over his forehead, his brown eyes glinting even under the shade of the trees.

Ever since the arena incident, he had recovered remarkably fast. Arthur was still confined to bed rest, but Silas was walking as if nothing had happened. That was the thing about black wolves, their healing ability was something extraordinary.

Before I left the manor with Evelyn earlier that day, I made it very clear to Silas that he was not to follow us. I didn't need anyone knowing that someone as powerful as him was my bodyguard. That kind of attention only led to questions, and questions led to curiosity, something I couldn't afford right now.

But, of course, Silas never listened when it came to my safety.

He followed anyway, lurking in the trees like a watchful predator. I could sense his presence, always keeping a distance but close enough to strike if needed.

He'd wanted to interfere back at the market when that guard raised his sword against me, but I told him to stop. And he did, remaining in the shadows, silent and unseen.

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Now, walking down the path that led back to the temple, I could see the faint flicker in his expression, the way his eyes darted toward the dark line of trees beside us, every muscle in his body alert.

"Is this about the person following us?" I asked.

Silas turned his head sharply, his eyes widening a fraction. For a moment, he didn't speak. Instead, I heard the words echoing faintly from his mind.

'How does she know something like that? The person is so good at hiding their presence, it's even hard for me to pinpoint where they are. That means the lady must be powerful. But how is that possible?'

I almost laughed at that. I really shouldn't have been reading his thoughts. I'd told myself I wouldn't read Evelyn and Silas thoughts. But sometimes, it just slipped. They were both far too entertaining not to listen to.

He frowned slightly, confusion crossing his features at my sudden amusement. "What should I do, my lady?" he asked carefully. "Should I get rid of the person?"

I shook my head. "No need. She doesn't seem to be a problem." I adjusted the box in my arms, glancing briefly toward the forest again. "The issue was the man, but he's no longer following us. She's simply watching now."

Silas's brows drew together. "She?" he repeated. "How can you tell the person is a woman?"

"The footsteps," I replied simply, meeting his gaze. "A man and a woman walk differently. Even when they're trying to hide their presence, the rhythm gives them away."

"How do you know that, my lady?" Evelyn asked.

How do I know?

Well, after living as a commander in my past lives, it was impossible not to know. I'd spent lifetimes studying the tiniest details of people, the way they moved, breathed, the sound of their footsteps, the rhythm of their hearts. When assassins came for my life, I had to know everything about them, even their gender, before they ever reached my blade. It wasn't a skill I was proud of, but it had kept me alive more times than I could count.

I didn't bother explaining all that to her. Instead, I waved my hand dismissively and said, "That's another conversation for another day, Evelyn. Let's go back to the temple, it's already late. We can't let anyone know we went out."

Evelyn nodded quickly. "Yes, my lady."

Silas followed with a quiet bow of his head, his eyes scanning the trees again before stepping closer to us.

Just as we started down the road, a soft rustle brushed past me. I turned, catching sight of a man walking by, cradling something in his arms.

I froze.

"My lady?" Evelyn's voice broke the silence. She turned toward me, her brow furrowed in concern. "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer her. My gaze had already locked on the figure walking away. The man was older, his hair gray and wild, his steps slow. In his hands, a small dog barked quietly as he made his way toward the auction house.

It can't be.

I knew that face, and that kind smile.

It was the old merchant who had once sold me the box in my past life.

Evelyn followed my gaze and asked, "Who is he, my lady?"

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"An old acquaintance."

"Acquaintance?" Evelyn blinked. "How can you know someone like that, my lady?"

I shrugged. "I do. It was just one time, but I'm happy to see him again."

She looked even more confused, but I didn't know to give her the chance to ask further. My feet moved on their own, carrying me forward until I was standing just behind the man.

"Wait," I said.

He turned, eyebrows lifting in surprise. His gaze landed on me. "Yes, lady?"

"I owe you something,"

He frowned slightly. "I don't recall ever meeting you, young lady. How could someone like you owe a man like me anything?"

"That's okay,"

Reaching into my pouch, I pulled out five gold coins and held them out to him. The man's eyes widened, shock flickering across his face.

He stared down at the coins for a long moment, mouth parting as if to speak, but no words came out.

"I should still pay," I said softly, pressing the coins into his hand. "Even if you don't remember-I do."

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Chapter 34

Damien

The VIP section was silent.

I leaned back in my chair, crossing one leg over the other, my fingers tapping idly against the armrest as my gaze fixed on the object before me.

The red sword. Or rather, the sword that used to be red.

Now it lay dull and colorless, resting on a velvet pillow. Its silvery-grey blade caught the faintest glimmer of light, yet to the untrained eye, there was nothing special about it, it was just another weapon among many.

It had been lost during a war. And now, after years of rumors, it had resurfaced in the Mooncrest Pack's auction house. This time, I hadn't sent anyone to fetch it. I'd come for it myself.

My eyes drifted over the blade again. To anyone else, it would feel like an ordinary sword. It was useless in their hands, yet they still desired it and feared it because it was mine.

I straightened in my seat, gaze fixed on the weapon. "Come to your owner,"

For a moment, nothing happened. The sword lay motionless, reflecting my face in its cold steel. Then, the metal slowly began to shimmer. A faint red pulse spread from the hilt to the tip, like veins coming alive after a long sleep.

The air thickened.

The sword trembled on the table, a low hum filling the air before it rose from the pillow. It sliced through the space between us, flying straight into my open hand. The moment my fingers closed around the hilt, power surged outward.

Kaius, standing to my left, let out a rough cough, then another. I didn't need to look to know that blood now stained his lips. His aura wavered, flickering under the weight of the blade's power.

Behind me, Jason, stood still. He didn't cough or flinch, but I felt the brief stutter in his aura. Even for him, its presence was suffocating.

The red sword's power wasn't something any ordinary wolf could endure.

I lifted the blade slightly, watching the deep crimson shimmer faintly under the candlelight.

The sword of the demon of the west.

The blade that had drunk the blood of thousands.

People always asked why it was red, why it seemed to pulse like a living thing. Some called it cursed. Others said it had been bathed in fire. But the truth was simpler.

The sword wasn't painted red. It was stained red, by the blood of every man it had ever cut down. Each life it took had been swallowed by the blade, absorbed until its core was saturated with death itself.

I ran my thumb along the flat of the blade, feeling the hum beneath my skin. "Welcome back," I muttered under my breath.

The sword pulsed faintly in response.

I leaned back in my chair, resting the red sword across the table. The moment my hand left its hilt, the blade dimmed, the deep crimson fading into dull silver once again, as though it had never come alive in the first place. A deceptive weapon, appearing harmless.

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I crossed one leg over the other, fingers drumming on the armrest again as I listened to the muted sounds of people clearing the auction hall below.

Hurried footsteps echoed up the stairs as they reached the door.

The merchant appeared, his smile already plastered across his face before he even bowed. "My lord," he greeted, voice filled with that irritating blend of reverence and greed. "It seems the auction has concluded. How was your experience? I must say, we were all quite honored to have you grace our establishment. You didn't buy anything else aside from that remarkable sword, but if there's anything at all you desire, please let me know. I will personally ensure it reaches your hands."

I didn't answer. He kept smiling anyway, wringing his hands nervously.

My eyes drifted back to the hall below as I thought back to what had been sold today, trinkets, charms, useless stones, and that crowd of fools who fought over them as if they were treasures.

Nothing in that hall was worthy of my attention except that woman.

The one who bid a single silver coin for a box of who looked like rusted junk.

While everyone else had scrambled for their meaningless baubles, she'd sat there, she didn't even flinch when the crowd mocked her.

The merchant's voice snapped me back to the present.

"As you can see, my lord, our auction house prides itself on complete transparency. We deal only in quality. Buyers always get what they pay for, well, except for that strange girl who offered a single silver for a pile of junk." He let out a sharp laugh. "Hah! First time something's ever sold for that little. But no matter, it wasn't a loss to us. We would've given it away eventually."

I finally spoke. My voice was quiet, but it was enough to cut through his laughter.

"Do you really think it's her loss?"

The man froze. The smile faltered on his lips as he straightened slowly, eyes darting to mine. When our gazes met, he trembled visibly, as if his body remembered a danger his mind hadn't caught up with yet.

"I... I do, yes, sir," he stammered, his voice cracking.

I tilted my head slightly. "I see."

That was all I said, because the truth was, that box had caught my attention,

When they brought it out, I felt a faint hum. Most people wouldn't have noticed it at all; its energy was buried deep. But my eyes saw what others could not. That box carried ancient power that was stronger than the red sword resting before me.

And she bid for it for a sliver of coin.

I had never seen anyone so unashamed, so brazen, and yet so precise. She sensed a hidden power in it, and she took it for a silver coin.

Interesting.

I turned back to the merchant, who was still frozen in place. "You may leave."

He swallowed audibly. "O-okay, sir. I'll... take my leave now."

He turned so fast he nearly tripped on his own feet, practically fleeing from the room.

The moment the door shut behind him, a shadow materialized before me.

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Yara.

She dropped to one knee, head bowed. "I'm back, Alpha."

I looked down at her. "What about that woman?"

"Like you ordered, I followed her," Yara said, "but I realized I wasn't the only one on her trail, so I took care of the man."

Yara continued, "I followed her until she entered the temple."

I raised a brow. "Temple?"

She nodded. "Yes, my lord. She entered the temple. I was about to follow her, but they must have placed a warding talisman around it. I couldn't get close."

Behind me, Jason's deep voice rumbled. "If you'll allow me, Alpha, from what I heard from the locals, the temple belongs to the priestess family. They're powerful within this pack, second only to the Alpha himself. They were present today, too. The woman with white hair and the two men are all part of the temple. The white-haired woman is said to be the next priestess."

I didn't know who Jason was talking about. I hadn't been paying attention to anyone else.

If that woman was truly inside the temple, then Yara's failure made sense. Our kind didn't belong in sanctified places. The energy there rejected us.

Yara remained kneeling before me, silent. Jason and Kaius stood behind, waiting for me to speak, the air heavy with unspoken tension.

Finally, I spoke. My voice was calm.

"We will stay a few more days in the Mooncrest Pack."

The three of them bowed their heads instantly. “Yes, Alpha.”

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Chapter 35

Selene

“The celebration will soon start, oh, I can’t wait! Everyone is waiting to see the beautiful white wolf!”

“Right, I’ve never seen one before.”

“Of course you haven’t. The last one was Miss Sienna’s mother, and she died giving birth. You were too young to see her wolf. Anyway, Miss Sienna and the master are here. Let’s get Miss Sienna ready for the celebration.”

Their voices drifted down the corridor, and I pressed my back against the cold stone wall as the group of servants passed by. Their laughter echoed faintly before fading around the corner.

We'd done it. Somehow, we had managed to sneak back into the temple without being seen. It was not an easy feat, considering how tight the security had gotten with the celebrations tonight. But I knew this place like the back of my hand. And with Elias keeping Evelyn quiet and close behind me, we slipped through unnoticed.

Now, crouched behind the window to my room, I rolled my sleeves up and reached for the ledge. "Alright," I murmured, more to myself than them. "We're almost there."

Before I could climb, Elias raised a hand. "Allow me, my lady."

I arched a brow at him, but I nodded. I had to remind myself not everything had to be done by my own hands anymore. The people I cared about needed to feel useful, too.

"Pardon me," he said softly, then stepped closer, his hands firm but careful as he gripped my waist and lifted me up.

I caught the window's edge easily and pulled myself inside, the cool air of my room brushing against my face. The box was still secure in my hand.

"Help Evelyn," I whispered down.

Elias nodded and, without hesitation, helped Evelyn next. Poor Evelyn was bright red, clutching at his shoulders as if her life depended on it. I couldn't help but chuckle, stretching out my hand from above to grab hers.

"Come on," I said, amused, "before someone catches us."

With a small grunt, I tugged her up, and she tumbled through the window beside me, landing with a soft thud on the carpet.

"I'll be in front of your room, my lady."

Silas's voice was calm as always. He gave me a respectful bow before turning away, his long strides carrying him down the dimly lit corridor.

I nodded, watching him until he disappeared around the corner.

The moment the sound of his footsteps faded, I turned toward Evelyn, who, to my amusement, was still standing there with her face bright red.

"You're like a tomato, Evelyn," I said, a teasing lilt in my voice. "Does his touch affect you that much?"

Her eyes went wide. "My lady! Please don't say something like that!"

I raised a brow, smirking. "Why? Am I wrong?"

Evelyn bit her lip, fidgeting, her blush somehow deepening. "I-this is the first time a man actually touched me like that. So

I..."

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I grinned, unable to resist. "So you're tempted, then? By how hot his body felt?"

"L-Lady Selene!" she squeaked, hiding her face in her hands, mortified.

I laughed softly, shaking my head. "You're fun to tease, Evelyn."

She really was. So pure and young, and barely sixteen. She was still too innocent for this cruel world. I had no idea who her mate would turn out to be in the future, but one thing was certain, if he turned out to be trash, I'd make sure to personally tear him apart and find her someone better. Evelyn deserved that much.

Stretching my arms, I let out a small sigh and turned back toward the box resting on my desk. My fingers brushed over the rough wood, a smile tugging at my lips. "Well, enough of that," I murmured. "I should get started on this."

Just as excitement began to rise in my chest, there was a sudden knock on the door.

"Selene," a woman's voice called out, clipped and formal. "This is Hannah. I was sent to deliver a message to you."

Hannah.

My smile faded. That name alone was enough to sour my mood. Before I could even respond with a come in, the door began to creak open.

Evelyn's eyes went wide in panic. We were still in our sarees from earlier, clear evidence that we had been outside the temple. If anyone saw us like this, especially Hannah, rumors would spread faster than wildfire.

I didn't even think twice.

"How disrespectful," I said, my voice sharp and cold.

The door froze halfway open.

"What?" Hannah's voice carried irritation already.

“You are a maid, and yet you open the door before I give you permission? Do you have a death wish?”

There was a tense pause.

Even without seeing her face, I could feel her anger filling the room. I knew that woman too well, her arrogance, her smirk, her smugness that came from serving my stepmother directly. Hannah never hid her disdain for me. Unlike Emma, Sienna’s maid, who at least knew how to act respectful in public, Hannah made no such effort.

Back then, she made my life in the temple miserable, with her sharp tongue and sharper insults.

I tilted my head toward the half-open door, eyes cold. “If you have something to say, say it now. Or do you plan to stand there all night, peeking into a lady’s chambers like a rat?”

Hannah hesitated, then scoffed, voice filled with contempt. “I’ve heard the rumours around the temple quarters about how unruly and bold you are. I didn’t expect it to be true. It seems you still don’t know your place, Selene.”

Evelyn’s face flooded red, ready to speak, but I cut her off with a quick, quiet motion and crossed my arms. “Silas, are you at the door yet?” I asked.

There was the faint scrape of boots, Silas’s answer came low, “Yes, my lady.”

Hannah gave a sharp little yelp of surprise, she hadn’t expected him to be there. In the doorway I could see Silas’s shadow step forward; Hannah took an involuntary step back. The whispers about what he’d done to Arthur had already traveled around the temple.

“First,” I said evenly, “you’ll stay outside and say whatever it is you came to say. Or you’ll leave.”

BEN

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Chapter 35

My voice dropped, colder now. “Second, you’re a servant. How dare you call me by my name? Didn’t your mistress teach you

better? Learn to show me respect, or I’ll make sure everyone remembers what happens when someone dares to forget their place.”

Hannah opened her mouth, pale, then swallowed whatever venom she'd been saving. "Whatever, the madam said-" she began, but when she looked at Silas again the words choked off. Finally, with a forced sneer, she spat, "The madamn says get ready. The coming-of-age is about to start, lady selene. Even if nobody expects anything from you, you're still part of the family. Don't cause a scene and embarrass the Bloodrose name. A dress will be brought for you."

Without waiting for me to say another word, she spun on her heel and stalked off. The door shut behind her with a sharp.

click.

Silas's voice broke the silence. "What should I do, my lady?"

"Let her go," I said. "Don't worry. They will all learn soon enough. I will teach every last one of them a lesson they won't ever forget."

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12:47 Tue, Dec 23 MG

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 36

[1,580 words]

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

Selene

I leaned back against the chair, my gaze fixed on the white dress draped neatly in front of me. It was plain, colorless, and lifeless. It stared back at me, as if mocking me for expecting anything more.

Beside me, Evelyn's face had darkened to something deadly. If looks could kill, everyone responsible for this would have been lying cold on the temple floor by now.

The servant who brought the dress, a young girl, barely older than sixteen, was trembling as she clutched the fabric to her chest. "H-hmm... this is the dress I was asked to bring to you, my lady." Her voice wavered, small and nervous.

Evelyn's anger snapped. She stormed toward the girl, in fury. "This is nonsense! Are you saying my lady should wear this plain-looking dress? It's her birthday and her coming-of-age ceremony, for goddess' sake! Why would she wear something that even the servants wouldn't wear?"

The girl flinched, taking a step back, her eyes wide. "I-It wasn't me... I was just-"

She couldn't finish. Her hands shook, her lips quivering.

I sighed quietly and said, "Stop it, Evelyn."

Evelyn froze mid-step, her chest rising and falling with restrained frustration, before turning to look at me.

"She's not the one you should be shouting at," I continued, my tone calm but firm. "She's just doing her job. You're scaring her."

Evelyn blinked, then followed my gaze to the trembling girl. The anger drained slowly from her face, replaced with guilt. She exhaled deeply and said, "You're right, my lady." Turning back to the servant, she added, "I apologize."

The girl's eyes widened, clearly not expecting kindness after such harsh words. She stammered, "I-It's alright."

"Put the dress on the bed and leave," I said.

4

"Yes, my lady," she whispered. She placed the dress down carefully before bowing and hurrying out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Evelyn let out a long, sharp breath before muttering, "Goddess, these people are heartless. How can they let you wear something like that? Even if they don't like you, they shouldn't treat you this way. I'm sure Lady Sienna's dress will be extraordinary, they want to make you look ordinary next to her."

I didn't respond immediately. My gaze lingered on the white dress.

It was just like before.

Back then, my stepmother had done the same thing, she handed me an ordinary white dress and called it humble elegance. I'd believed her. I was foolish, naive, and desperate to be loved, I hadn't thought that far. It was the first time anyone had ever gotten me anything, and I was so happy. I smiled, held the fabric to my chest, thinking, It's perfect.

Until I stepped out and saw Sienna.

She had been radiant, shimmering in a golden gown that caught the light and made her look like the goddess herself had blessed her. I stood beside her in that plain dress, looking more like her maid than her sister.

The humiliation that followed still burned in the back of my mind. My stepmother had made a scene, acting as if I'd chosen the simple dress to draw pity from the guests. "She's trying to embarrass us!" she shouted. "She wants everyone to think we mistreat her!"

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I tried to explain, but no one listened. That night, I'd felt invisible, like a shadow watching someone else live the life I should have also had.

I blinked away the memory and looked down at the plain white fabric again. My lips twitched. "So," I murmured, brushing my fingers over it, "even in this life, some things never change."

This time, I wasn't that naive girl anymore.

They wanted me to wear white and look small again? Fine. But I'd make my white shine brighter than their gold.

"Evelyn," I said suddenly.

Evelyn, who had been pacing angrily at the corner, turned quickly. "Yes, my lady?"

“Do we have a needle and thread?” I asked.

She blinked, confused. “Needle and thread? Uh... yes, we do, but-”

“Perfect,” I said, standing and pulling my sleeves back. “Gather any nice designs or materials you can find. We’re going to make some changes.”

Her mouth fell open slightly. “My lady, do you mean you want to work on the dress?”

I nodded. “Yes. I can’t wear this outside as it is.”

Evelyn frowned, hesitating. “But, you’ve never touched a needle and thread before, and the celebration will start in a few minutes.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just bring what I asked for.”

She hesitated for another second before finally nodding. “I’ll bring it now.” She hurried out of the room, skirts brushing against the floor.

When the door closed, I crossed my arms, glancing back at the dress.

The old Selene hadn’t known how to sew. She’d been a powerless girl whose worth depended on others. But the new Selene, the Luna who had rebuilt, who had forged armor for her warriors with her own hands, could turn anything she touched into something beautiful.

I smiled. “Let’s see how they like this version of me.”

A while later, the door creaked open, and Evelyn stumbled inside, panting as if she’d sprinted the whole length of the temple. She clutched a small bundle of fabrics and threads to her chest.

“My lady,” she said between breaths, “this is all I was able to get.”

I looked up from where I was sitting, my legs crossed, the white dress laid flat on the bed. Evelyn set the bundle down and continued, frustration clear in her tone.

“They wouldn’t let me near the design room,” she said angrily. “Even after I told them it was for you, they said only the mistress of the house can give permission to enter. I found these elsewhere. It was all I could get.”

I glanced down at the meager collection, some faded lace, a few colored threads, a strip of embroidered ribbon, and a handful of tiny pearls. It wasn’t much. Hardly enough to transform a dress.

I tilted my head, thinking. It wasn't impossible. But then again, limits had never stopped me before.

I was just considering how to make the best use of what she'd brought when a soft knock sounded at the door.

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Evelyn frowned and glanced at me before calling out. "Who is it?"

A small, trembling voice answered, "I-It's me."

Evelyn blinked. "Who?"

I already knew. I recognized that voice. It was the same young servant girl who had brought the dress earlier.

"Come in," I said calmly.

The door opened slowly, and the girl stepped inside, her hands clutching a large box. Her eyes darted nervously between Evelyn and me.

I raised a brow. "What's this?"

Her cheeks flushed red, and she bit her lip before stammering, "I-I apologize, my lady. But I heard what you were talking about..."

Evelyn's eyes narrowed immediately. "Were you eavesdropping after you left?"

The girl's head shot up, eyes wide. "No! I wouldn't dare! I- I forgot to bring the shoes, and when I came back, I... I heard everything." Her voice trembled, hands tightening on the box. "I'm sorry for listening. I swear, it wasn't on purpose."

I studied her for a moment in silence. Evelyn huffed beside me, clearly ready to scold her again, but I lifted a hand, stopping

her.

"It's alright," I said, my voice calm. "You can relax. Now..." My eyes dropped to the box she was still clutching. "What's that you're holding?"

The girl hesitated, lowering her gaze as if unsure whether she'd made the right choice coming here at all.

“When I heard what you wanted, I thought I could help. I... I work in the design room. There are always leftover designs and materials no one uses, so I thought maybe I could bring some.”

She knelt quickly, setting the box down and opening the lid.

Inside were rolls of fine lace, glittering beads, delicate silks, and threads in rich, shimmering colors, it was more than enough to transform the dull white dress into something beautiful.

Evelyn and I both stared for a moment, caught off guard. Then I felt a small, genuine smile tug at my lips.

“This is perfect,” I said, meeting the girl’s wide, nervous eyes. “Thank you.”

Her face turned crimson, as if she wasn’t used to being thanked. She looked down quickly, stammering, “I-I’m glad you like it, my lady. Oh! I’ll be scolded if I’m late.” She set the box properly on the table and bowed her head. “Please forgive me for intruding.”

I nodded. “You can go.”

She bobbed another quick bow before hurrying out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

For a moment, there was only silence, then Evelyn exhaled and said, “That was... unexpected.”

I kept my gaze on the door a moment longer, and turned back to her. “That girl, find out who she is.”

Evelyn nodded immediately. “Yes, my lady.”

As she turned toward the door, I glanced at the open box again, my fingers brushing the edge of the fine silk.

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How interesting, I thought.

Kindness like that was rare in this place. And people who offered it without reason, always had a story worth knowing.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 37

[2,569 words]

Chapter 37

Chapter 37

Sienna

The moon hung full and bright in the velvet sky, its light spilling through my window. From the courtyard below, I could hear the faint melody of someone singing, it was soft, graceful, and hauntingly beautiful. The temple courtyard was already alive with color and laughter. Lanterns hung from every corner, golden light swaying with the evening breeze. Tables had been set and guests were already gathering, their voices bubbling with excitement.

Beside me, Emma clasped her hands together, her eyes shining. “My lady, you are honestly the most beautiful person I have ever seen. Your dress, your eyes, especially your white hair, it’s like freshly fallen snow.”

I looked at my reflection in the mirror, and for a moment, even I had to admit, she was right. The woman staring back at me was stunning. The golden dress shimmered with every movement, the fabric catching the light like sunlight rippling over water. My pale hair framed my face perfectly, cascading down my back in perfect waves.

A slow, pleased smile curved my lips as I turned slightly, admiring the view from another angle. "What about Selene?" I asked, my tone light, but the smirk tugging at my mouth was sharper than it looked.

Emma's reflection smirked back at me. "Your stepmother gave her the dress. I made sure to choose the plainest one out of them all. When she walks out tonight, she'll look completely ordinary. You, my lady, will be the star."

A small laugh escaped me. "Good."

Just a while ago, my stepmother had given me this beautiful gown as a birthday gift. That was when the idea struck me, to make sure Selene's moment tonight would be as dull as possible. When I told my stepmother I wanted to choose Selene's dress myself, she hadn't even hesitated. She simply nodded, indifferent as always.

Sometimes, I honestly wondered why she treated me so kindly while treating Selene like she was something beneath her shoes. It was almost as if I were her real daughter. Perhaps it was because she never had a child of her own and saw me as her perfect little golden heir.

Either way, I didn't care.

Let her spoil me all she wanted. I wasn't about to complain. My father, my brothers, my stepmother, they all adored me. And why wouldn't they? I was everything Selene wasn't. Graceful, admired, and blessed.

And this was only the beginning.

I adjusted the gold chain resting at my throat and smiled at my reflection once more. "She'll look so plain during the celebrations," I murmured, "but I'm doing her a favor, really. It's better she doesn't draw attention to herself, she'll only embarrass herself when I'm the one who awakes

wakens with the white wolf."

Emma nodded quickly, her expression eager. "Yes, my lady. You're so kind to even think of her that way. It's better she stays in your shadow. That's where she belongs."

I met my own gaze in the mirror, the smile still on my lips.

"Yes," I said softly. "That's her destiny, after all, to always be my shadow."

A soft knock sounded at the door.

I turned from the mirror. "Come in,"

From the other side, Kane's familiar voice came. "Sienna, it's me. I came to escort you to the celebration."

I smiled automatically. "Come in, brother."

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The door opened, and Kane stepped inside. His usual careless grin softened for a second when he saw me. He paused mid-step, eyes sweeping over me from head to toe before a slow smile spread across his face.

"Well," he said, letting out a low whistle. "I'm really glad I invited all my friends to the celebration tonight."

I tilted my head, amused. "Oh? Why is that?"

"So I can brag to them," he said, his grin widening. "I can brag about how beautiful my little sister is. And if any of them even think about trying to hit on you..." He clenched his fist dramatically. "I'll have a good excuse to punch them."

A soft laugh escaped me. "Stop teasing me, brother."

"I'm not teasing," he said, his tone suddenly serious. "You're honestly beautiful, Sienna. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Warmth bloomed in my chest at his words. My brother knew exactly what to say to make me happy.

He extended a hand toward me, and I placed mine in his, rising from the chair. My golden skirts fell in waves around me, catching the light as I turned. I looked around, noticing something.

"Where's Cross?" I asked, trying to sound casual. "I thought the two of you would come together to escort me."

Kane rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, about that. I have no idea what's with him. We were both planning to come, but he changed his mind last minute."

My brows furrowed. "Changed his mind?"

"Yeah," Kane said with a shrug. "He told me to come get you. Said he'd escort Selene instead."

My smile froze. For a moment, I couldn't even process what he'd said.

He'd what?

"W-What?" The word slipped out before I could stop it.

Kane blinked at me. "What's wrong?"

I forced myself to smile again, shaking my head quickly. "Oh, nothing! I'm just surprised. And happy, actually." I let out a little laugh that sounded far too light, even to my own ears. "Cross always seems to avoid Selene, so I was just wondering what changed, that's all."

Kane shrugged, clearly uninterested. "Beats me. I never know what's going on in that guy's head."

I nodded and said nothing more, but my fingers curled slightly against my skirts.

Cross never paid Selene any attention. To him, she was invisible, someone not even worth acknowledging. Kane, at least, noticed her enough to argue or mock, but Cross? He acted as though she didn't exist.

And now, suddenly, he was going to escort her?

I bit my lip, my thoughts racing.

Does he know it wasn't me that night?

No. That was impossible. There's no way he could have found out. Even if Selene did tell him, he would never believe her.

Still, as Kane guided me out of the room, my heart wouldn't stop thudding. That calm smile stayed on my lips but deep inside, unease coiled in my stomach.

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The sound of music and laughter grew louder the closer we got to the courtyard. Even from behind the heavy doors, I could hear the hum of voices and clinking glasses, smell the sweetness of wine and roasted meat drifting in the air.

When we finally reached the entrance, Kane turned to me, his easy smile softening into something more reassuring. "Ready?"

I took a slow breath, feeling the weight of every pair of eyes waiting beyond that door. I nodded. "I'm ready"

He gave me a light squeeze on the shoulder, as if telling me everything will be fine.

The doors opened.

The chatter quieted for a brief second as people turned to look. Then, just as quickly, the whispers began, awed voices that floated through the air.

“Oh my goddess... she’s gorgeous.”

“Tell me about it, her hair, that dress! I’ve never seen anyone this stunning.”

“She really is blessed by the Moon herself...”

Their admiration washed over me. My lips curved into a delicate smile. I lifted my chin slightly and walked forward, each step measured and graceful.

I looked up at the high table.

There sat my father, my stepmother, and beside them, the Alpha himself. My stepmother smiled at me. My father’s face, as usual, was blank, but I could see pride flickering in his eyes. That was enough.

The Alpha’s expression was mild, his small smile polite. But none of them mattered in that moment. Because beside the Alpha sat him.

Prince Adrian.

My heart stumbled. For a second, I forgot to breathe. His green eyes were fixed somewhere in the distance, his expression bored, but when they finally met mine, I felt my pulse quicken.

He didn’t smile or react to my presence.

Still, it was enough to make my chest tighten. He’s here, I thought, trying to contain the small flutter of excitement in my

stomach.

“The Alpha will speak to you,” Kane whispered, and I quickly composed myself.

“It’s good to see you, Sienna,” Alpha Rhydian said, his deep voice commanding quiet across the courtyard. “How are you feeling? Excited to receive your white wolf?”

I snapped out of my daze and bowed slightly, lowering my gaze with grace. “Good evening, Alpha,” I said softly, “Yes, I am. It’s an honor to stand before the pack on this night.”

“Good,” he said, a hint of approval in his tone.

My father leaned forward slightly, his voice respectful. "Shall we begin, Alpha?"

Before the Alpha could respond, another voice cut through the night. "Aren't you going to wait for your other daughter?"

Every head turned. Prince Adrian hadn't moved much, still leaning back in his seat, his fingers idly tracing the rim of his glass, but his words silenced the courtyard.

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I felt the color drain from my face.

"Today is also her coming of age ceremony," he added, eyes flicking briefly toward my father.

My smile faltered. The air suddenly felt colder, heavier.

Why is he mentioning her?

My nails dug into my palm, hidden beneath the fabric of my dress. Every eye in the room shifted toward him, surprise flickering at the mention of her name.

"Prince Adrian," My father said, "that child is not important. We need to focus on Sienna, the one who will be blessed with the white wolf."

He said it so bluntly, so naturally, as though he were stating the most obvious truth in the world. That was the thing about him, he never hid behind sweet words. He spoke what he believed, and he believed I was the chosen one. But Adrian didn't even blink. His eyes stayed on my father.

"So you're saying," he began, voice low, "Sienna is going to have the white wolf? What made you so sure?"

My father opened his mouth, hesitated. "I—"

Before he could finish, Alpha Rhydian raised a hand. "It's alright, Adrian is right. Let's wait for your second daughter. Only the Moon Goddess can decide who will receive the white wolf's blessing."-

The air grew thick. My stomach twisted.

What?

I wanted to choke on the anger rising in my throat. What was happening? Why was everyone suddenly defending her?

Adrian had never cared about Selene before, never even looked her way when others mocked her. And now he wanted to wait for her? To include her?

I clenched my hands beneath the folds of my dress, nails digging into my palm. I could feel my heartbeat pounding in my ears. But then, slowly, I exhaled. It's fine. Let them wait. It'll be better this way. When Selene walks in wearing that pathetic excuse for a dress, they'll all see. They'll see how ridiculous she looks. How ordinary. How unworthy.

They'll see that I'm the only one who shines tonight.

I smirked at the thought.

The heavy doors at the end of the hall creaked open.

The sound echoed like thunder in the silence that followed. Everyone's heads turned toward the entrance, and gasped.

Even my stepmother's smile faltered. My father's eyes widened. The Alpha straightened slightly in his seat. And when I looked at Adrian, he wasn't bored anymore. His eyes had sharpened, a flicker of something desire glinting in them as he stared ahead.

My chest tightened.

I turned slowly to look toward the door, and froze.

My breath caught in my throat.

Walking into the courtyard, framed by moonlight, was Selene.

But this wasn't the pitiful girl I expected.

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Her white dress glimmered faintly under the moon, the fabric soft yet regal, every stitch flowing like light. Elegant embroidery traced the edges in silver and pale gold, subtle but breathtaking. Her hair, styled into soft waves, shone like spun silk, framing a face that was calm, confident, and ethereal. Her skin seemed to glow, smooth and clear, as though kissed by the moon herself.

The world around her dimmed.

For a long moment, no one spoke. No one even moved.

My throat felt dry. My mind scrambled to make sense of what I was seeing.

That dress...

That was supposed to be the plain dress. The ugly one. The one Emma chose deliberately so she would look pitiful beside

So why did it look like that? Why did she look like that?

It was like the Moon Goddess herself had stepped down and taken human form.

I couldn't breathe. My chest burned.

What was going on?

Why was Selene so much better than I expected?

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Chapter 8

The white dress long perfectly against my body, clinging to my waist and flowing down in that

It shimmered faintly under the candle light, the delicate embroidery glistening with every breath of air to pose from the mirror, my eyes studying the reflection staring back

My hair, now styled in waves that framed my face, spilled down my shoulders. I traced the band of sequins brushing over the faint silver designs I'd stitched across the hem and sleeves. Beautiful, I dread I had never as my younger self wear something as beautiful

It had taken only an hour to transform the plain white fabric into something radiant. One hour of courting work reshaping. Every movement had been fast, but precise

As I admired my work. Evelyn's gasp filled the room

"Oh my God!" she smiled, stepping closer, her eyes wide in disbelief. "Is that really the plain white dress?"

I turned slightly, meeting her reflection in the mirror, and nodded, "Yes, How is it?"

Evelyn covered her mouth, eyes sparkling, “It’s stunning, my lady! ‘The most stunning dress I’ve ever weT. I’VE SEYFY AND anything designed this way before, it’s new and hemiful!”

A small smile tugged at my lips. Of course it was new. In this timeline, no one had seen this style yet. In a few years, I knew x would become a popular trend.

I turned to Evelyn, satisfied. “Alright, let’s go, Evelyn. Let’s savor the look on their faces when they realize the late W didn’t work.”

Evelyn grinned, her excitement bubbling over. “Yes, ma’am”

I chuckled softly at her excitement and started toward the door. But before I could reach it, a sound came from the other

side

Knock Knock

1hore, frowning. No one ever came to my room during the celebration in the

“Who is it?” I called out.

There was a short pause before a familiar low, lazy voice answered. “Cross”

My eyes widened slightly, and I felt Evelyn stiffen beside me.

For a moment, I wondered if I’d misheard.

The same brother who acted like I didn’t exist, who could barely look at me without disdain, the one who clung to Sienna as if she were the only person in the world that mattered.

That Cross was standing outside my door?

Evelyn leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “What should we do, my lady?”

12:48 Tue, Dec 23 MG

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 38

[1,326 words]

Chapter 38

I crossed my arms, my gaze still fixed on the door. What did he want? Cross had never once spoken to me during the celebration in any of my past lives. He'd never even looked at me before. So why was he here now, standing outside my room.

My brow furrowed. It wasn't impossible for events to change, small details shifted sometimes between lives, but this was different. Something had to have caused it. Something that altered his behavior.

I froze.

Wait.

The auction.

Could it be because of the auction? Did Cross somehow realize that I was the woman who'd been sitting at the table beside him? Impossible. I'd hidden my face and masked my scent, no one should've recognized me. But with Cross, somehow, it didn't feel entirely impossible.

Another sudden knock snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Are you not going to open the door?" Cross said, clearly impatient.

I let out a quiet sigh, glancing at Evelyn, whose eyes were wide with uncertainty. "Fine," I murmured, straightening my dress. "Let's see what he wants."

I walked toward the door, each step slow. My hand wrapped around the handle, and I opened it.

Cross was leaning casually against the wall, his arms folded, eyes closed, as if he hadn't just been standing outside a woman's room for several minutes. But the moment he heard the door creak, his lashes lifted, and our eyes met.

And for a second, he froze.

His gaze swept over me from head to toe, slow and searching, as though he couldn't quite recognize the person in front of him. His usually calm face flickered. It was slightly, but enough for me to notice.

I raised an eyebrow. "Is something wrong?"

He met my gaze again, something unreadable in his eyes, before saying, "I came to escort you."

I blinked, taken aback. Of all the things he could have said, that was the last one I expected because it didn't make sense. He was supposed to go with Sienna, that was how it had always been. If he was here, it only confirmed what I thought, Cross suspected something, and he wanted to observe me.

I exhaled quietly. He's going to be a difficult one.

He didn't seem to notice my inner turmoil, or maybe he did and simply didn't care. He straightened from the wall, offering his arm casually. "Let's go."

I glanced at his outstretched arm, then back at his face. The air between us felt heavier than it should. I slowly nodded and slipped my hand into his. "Alright."

If Cross truly suspected me, then I needed to play along, and do exactly as he wanted, so he'd stop paying attention to me.

We walked in silence.

The corridor was dim, lit only by the soft glow of lanterns on the walls, the sound of our footsteps echoing faintly across the floor. Cross didn't say anything at first, and I was glad for that. I didn't have the patience or the desire to force small talk just for the sake of filling the silence.

My gaze drifted down to our joined hands. His grip was firm but not rough. I tilted my head slightly. This was the first time

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Cross had ever taken my hand.

In all my lives, I had never felt his warmth. It was strange, and unfamiliar.

I looked away. I wasn't going to dwell on something so meaningless. I wasn't being sentimental, nor did I crave his attention. Even if fate itself handed me another chance to mend things with my brothers, I wouldn't take it.

They'd had plenty of chances, and they'd wasted them all.

I wasn't fighting for anyone's love anymore.

So I straightened my back, fixing my eyes ahead and ignoring everything else.

"You are determined."

I didn't look at him. "What makes you think so?"

"Your body language," Cross replied easily. "The way your eyes flash when you're deep in thought. The way your hand tightened around mine just now. It shows you're determined to do something."

The corner of my lips lifted slightly. As expected of my brother, even when he didn't speak, he saw everything.

Still, I didn't answer. I didn't want to give him an excuse to dig deeper. But that didn't seem to stop him.

"What are you determined to do, Selene?" he asked after a second, his tone probing. "I didn't pay attention back then Sienna was unconscious, but now that I look closer, you're different. Even right now, the way you carry yourself, your temperament, it's not the same as before."

I smiled, amusement flickering inside me. "You're also different, brother."

He turned his head toward me, his brows drawing together slightly, as if to ask how

I met his gaze, my tone detached. "You're talking too much."

His expression shifted, and I continued. "You haven't said a single word to me in eighteen years, and now you suddenly claim I'm different. Tell me, do you even know what I was like before to say that?"

Silence.

He didn't respond. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again.

Got you.

It was rare to see Cross speechless. But that was the thing about him, he lived by logic, and reason. His mind always searched for structure and proof, And the best way to defeat someone like that, was to use their own logic against them.

When we reached the entrance, we stopped.

Cross moved ahead slightly, placing one hand on the door. The moonlight spilling through the cracks cast a glow over his face, making his eyes unreadable.

Without looking at me, he said quietly, "Did you leave the temple today?"

I didn't react.

I'd been expecting that question. From the moment he'd shown up at my door, I knew he'd ask it.

So I blinked before meeting his gaze with confusion carefully painted across my face. "Leave the temple? Why would I leave the temple? I have nowhere to go. I was in my room all day."

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Cross studied me for a long moment, his expression impossible to read. His eyes lingered, searching for cracks in my words, for signs of a lie. But I didn't flinch. Finally, he said, "I see, then, I'll take the task."

My brows furrowed. "What task?"

He turned his head slightly toward me. "The task of getting to know you."

Before I could respond, he pushed the door open.

The silver light of the full moon spilled across the threshold, brushing against my skin, making the white fabric of my gown shimmer faintly.

I froze for a second, the brightness almost blinding after the dim corridor. When I turned my head toward Cross, he wasn't looking at me anymore. He stood straight, his face impassive as he looked forward, as though nothing had happened.

I shook my head slightly, wondering if I'd misheard him. Getting to know me? That wasn't something Cross would ever say.

I stepped forward, the moonlight following me, and every gaze seemed to land on me at once.

At the far end of the courtyard, seated in the private section, my father, stepmother, and the Alpha were watching. Their faces flickered with surprise. My father's usual cold expression faltered for a moment. Even my stepmother looked stunned. But my eyes didn't linger on them.

They found him.

He sat beside the Alpha, his expression unreadable, his gaze dark and heavy as it locked on mine. He didn't look away. He took me in slowly as if seeing me for the first time. And unlike the shy, flustered girl I'd once been, the girl who used to shrink beneath his gaze, I didn't look away.

We meet again, Adrian..

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 39

[1,283 words]

Chapter 39

Chapter 39

Selene

“Who the hell is that?”

“Are you fucking blind? Can’t you see the hair, it’s the other Moonborn.”

“The other Moonborn? Are you serious, the plain-looking girl? I have never seen her look this beautiful in my life.”

“I know, right? Look at the dress, it’s showing her curves. And her face, pale and flawless, she’s not even wearing makeup and still looks better than everyone else here.”

The murmurs spread through the courtyard, a mix of disbelief and fascination. Heads turned, conversations halted, and eyes followed me where I stood. I kept my expression calm, my posture straight, as though I couldn’t hear a single word they said.

My gaze was locked on Adrian.

He looked younger than the last time I saw him. If I was eighteen now, that meant he was twenty.

Time moved differently for werewolves. Our lives stretched long, and so did the years it took us to age. A werewolf could remain twenty for decades before turning twenty-one. Even after all this time, he looked unchanged, the same green eyes, the same black hair, the same commanding presence that always seemed to fill the room.

I used to love that expression. It used to make me feel hot all over. But now, just looking at his face made me want to punch him.

“I, Adrian Blackthorn, Alpha of the Mooncrest Pack, reject you, Selene Bloodrose, as my mate.”

The words still echoed in my mind like a curse. He had thrown me away as though I was nothing. After everything I gave him, he left me bleeding and humiliated in front of the entire pack.

And now, I would make him feel exactly what I felt. I would take everything from him.

I finally tore my gaze away from him, breaking that silent pull between us. My eyes found Sienna and Kane. Sienna’s expression almost made me laugh. The flawless smile she always wore faltered, the mask was slipping. Disbelief flashed first, then anger spread across her cheeks. Her fingers dug into the silk of her dress, knuckles white, eyes wide with a mix of jealousy and fury. For a moment, she looked like she wanted to leap across the room and tear me apart right there.

Sienna probably expected something different.

She expected me to walk in wearing that plain, pitiful dress, head bowed and eyes lowered, her perfect little shadow. The forgotten sister who made her shine brighter.

My lips curved upward into a small, mocking smile.

Her face went redder, and her breath caught as if she'd been struck.

Beside her, Kane noticed her change immediately. "Are you okay?" he asked, his hand reaching out to steady her.

Sienna blinked, snapping back into her performance, and quickly shook her head. "Y-Yes, I'm okay. I was just... dizzy."

Kane frowned, still worried. "Do you want to rest for a bit?"

She forced a faint smile and said, "I'm fine, brother."

I watched the exchange quietly. Kane had always been protective of her, though he rarely noticed how easily she

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manipulated him with that sweet act. It was almost impressive how quickly she could change her expression.

My gaze shifted slightly to Cross. He hadn't let go of my hand. Yet I noticed his gaze was on Sienna.

He should have already gone to her side, abandoning me the moment Sienna looked unwell. That was how it always was. Sienna fainted, Sienna frowned, and the world bent around her, but he didn't move.

They were all strange.

I let out a soft breath and turned slightly toward him. "Let's go," I said.

He didn't respond, but he followed, his steps aligning with mine.

When we reached the center of the courtyard, I could feel the weight of every gaze following me. Kane and Sienna stood just ahead. I passed them without a second glance and turned my attention to the Alpha seated nearby.

The old man looked exactly as I remembered him. Strong features, a commanding presence, and the same steady brown eyes that held both kindness and danger. There was something in him that mirrored his son, Prince Adrian, only more seasoned, and guarded.

My opinion of him had never been simple. I respected him. He was a great ruler, someone who valued his pack above all else. But that was also his greatest flaw.

He would do anything for his pack. Even if it meant spilling innocent blood. Even if it meant destroying another pack for more territories.

He wasn't cruel for the sake of cruelty, he simply believed that power and survival were the same.

He had never treated me unfairly, but he had never treated me as one of them either. I always knew he wanted Sienna to be Adrian's mate.

I smiled and bowed my head slightly, lowering my gaze just enough to appear respectful, but not meek. "Good evening, Alpha."

Alpha Rhydian's deep voice rumbled through the courtyard, calm and authoritative. "Good evening, Selene." His brown eyes softened a little as he studied me. "How have you been? It's been a long time since I last saw you. I remember, you were only ten back then. Your father always brings your sister to the palace, yet you never come along. Tell me, do you find the palace boring?"

His tone was light, but there was an undertone there, like he wanted to see how I would respond.

I met his gaze with a small smile. "Not at all, Alpha. I've simply been busy with the temple. That is why I've been unable to attend. Please forgive my absence."

He tilted his head, that curious smile never leaving his face. "Busy?" he asked. "What could you possibly be busy with that even your sister is not?"

Ah. There it was. The jab hidden behind a kind voice,

The murmurs around us quieted. I could feel the shift in the air, the expectant pause of the crowd waiting for me to stumble. Even my father's gaze was heavy on me. I didn't need to look up to know he was glaring. When I glanced his way, I saw the same cold warning in his eyes that he'd given me my entire life.

'Don't embarrass me.

He really never saw anything good in me, but I wasn't here to please him.

I smiled and turned back to the Alpha. "I have been busy learning the harp instrument, Alpha."

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Surprise flickered across the faces around us. Even Adrian raised his eyebrow slightly, his eyes narrowing as if trying to read

“The harp?” Alpha Rhydian repeated.

“Yes, Alpha,” I said smoothly. “I learned that you are fond of the instrument, so I have been practicing, hoping one day to show you my skill and, perhaps, please you with my performance.”

For a moment, there was silence. Then, the Alpha chuckled, a low, genuine sound that carried through the courtyard. “Is that so?” he said, amusement dancing in his eyes. “You do know, Selene, that the harp is not an easy instrument to play. Only a few people manage to master it. Your sister, for example, played the harp for me just last week. And she did quite well.”

He leaned forward slightly, resting his elbows on the table. “Can you play as well as her?”

I met his gaze directly, my lips curving into a confident smile. “I believe I can play better than her.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 40

[1,163 words]

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Selene

M

“I believe I can play better than her.”

The words left my mouth echoing through the courtyard, reaching every corner, and every ear.

The air went still. Even the soft music and chatter from before died instantly. I could feel every gaze turn toward me, stunned, curious, some even offended by my audacity.

Even Alpha Rhydian’s eyes widened slightly before his lips curved into a small, amused smirk. “Interesting,” he said, his tone calm, but there was a spark of intrigue there, like he wanted to see where this would go.

Before I could say anything else, a soft, delicate voice broke through the silence.

“My deepest apologies, Alpha,” my stepmother said, bowing her head slightly, her tone the perfect mix of regret and politeness. “It seems I did not train this girl properly.”

I tilted my head slightly, my eyes narrowing.

“She is lying to you,” she continued smoothly. “Selene has never even touched the instrument before. I doubt she even knows what it looks like. She’s simply trying to gain attention. I know it’s a crime to lie to an Alpha, but please forgive her. She always acts impulsively. I will make sure to discipline her properly.”

A perfect performance.

To everyone else, she sounded like a mother trying to protect her foolish child from punishment. But I could hear the venom beneath her words, the satisfaction in her tone. She didn’t care if I got punished, she wanted me punished. She wanted to humiliate me publicly, to stain my name in front of everyone important.

And for a moment, the whispers around the courtyard picked up.

“How shameful... how can she lie to the Alpha?”

“Right? I heard she’s an attention-seeking girl. I wasn’t sure if it was true before, but seeing her now, it must be.”

“She’s so annoying. I’ve heard her sister play, her sister’s incredible. There’s no way she’s better than her.”

Alpha Rhydian wasn’t easily fooled. His expression didn’t change, he only leaned back slightly in his seat, smiling faintly. “Is that true, Selene?” he asked. “You’ve never touched the instrument before??”

I opened my mouth to answer, but another voice cut through the air.

“No, Alpha,” Sienna said quickly.

Her tone was laced with that humility she always wore like a mask. She stepped forward slightly, bowing her head. “My sister has never seen or played the harp before.”

I turned my head toward her.

Her face was the picture of innocence, her lips curved in a small, sisterly smile, her eyes full of concern. But beneath that sweetness, I saw mockery, gleaming behind her gaze.

“Selene,” she said, voice soft. “Why are you telling lies to the Alpha? Please don’t do that. You know you’ve never touched the harp before, so how could you possibly play it? And better than me?”

She gave a small laugh. “I’ve been playing since I was a child. There’s simply no way you could play better than me. Please be

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honest. Don’t embarrass yourself any further. I don’t want the Alpha to get angry with you.”

The crowd murmured again, nodding to her words. To them, she sounded so kind, and reasonable, while I was the arrogant fool who dared to challenge her.

I smiled slowly, meeting her gaze, the corners of my lips curving upward.

“Instead of jumping to the conclusion that I cannot play,” I said, my voice calm but firm enough for everyone to hear, “why don’t we just find out?”

The courtyard fell silent again.

I tilted my head slightly toward Sienna. “The both of us can play together.

Sienna blinked, her lips parting slightly. For a second, she looked as if she couldn’t believe I had actually said that. Then she raised a perfectly shaped brow, masking her shock behind a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Play together?” She repeated.

I turned to the Alpha, giving a graceful bow of my head. “What do you think, Alpha Rhydian? Can my sister and I play together? I’m sure it will be quite entertaining for you.”

Alpha Rhydian leaned back in his seat, studying me with a look that almost seemed intrigued. His lips curved into a knowing smile. “Sure, why not? We still have time before the full moon ceremony begins.”

“If I may ask, Alpha,” I said, lifting my gaze to meet his, “since this will be almost like a competition, can the winner ask for something?”

He paused mid-movement, one brow arching higher as he studied me again. “Ask for something?”

“Yes, Alpha, can the winner ask for anything?”

There was a murmur of surprise around us, people whispering, wondering what I was thinking.

Before the Alpha could reply, my father’s deep voice broke in. “That doesn’t seem like a bad idea, Alpha,” he said with a small smile. “It could be a fun game to pass the time before the ceremony.”

Of course. He was already picturing Sienna’s victory, imagining the family gaining the Alpha’s favor through her.

My stepmother quickly chimed in. “Yes, it would be delightful, Alpha. It’s just a harmless little competition.”

Even Sienna joined in, her eyes glimmering with confidence as she turned to me, smiling like a cat ready to play with her prey. “It sounds fun, Selene, let’s do it.”

I glanced between the three of them, my father, stepmother, and sister and for a moment, amusement rippled through me.

A few minutes ago, they were all against the idea, trying to stop me from embarrassing the family name. But now that they were sure Sienna would win, they were eager,

They thought this would be their chance to humiliate me in front of everyone and gain favor from the Alpha at the same

time.

How convenient.

I turned back to Alpha Rhydian, who was watching the exchange with that same unreadable smile. He seemed to understand exactly what was happening but didn't intervene. He was curious now, I could see it in his eyes.

Beside him, Adrian shifted slightly. His voice came low but firm, "You shouldn't, Father."

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Alpha Rhydian only chuckled, ignoring his son's warning. His gaze returned to me, sharp and assessing, as if trying to read the thoughts behind my smile.

"Fine," he said finally. "I will give the winner whatever they want."

Gasps broke out across the courtyard.

Adrian groaned beside his father, rubbing a hand over his temple. "You're encouraging chaos," he muttered, but Alpha Rhydian didn't seem to care.

Sienna, meanwhile, looked radiant, her smile wide and full of certainty, as if the victory had already been handed to her.

I smiled too because this was going exactly according to my plan.

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