

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 41

[ 1,437 words ]

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

Selene

Two harps were brought forward and placed in front of us.

One gleamed under the soft lantern light, it was golden, polished, and perfect. It shimmered like something freshly crafted, each string glinting with care and pride. That one, of course, was placed before Sienna.

The other harp stood beside it, white, but dulled with age. Its once-bright sheen had long faded, leaving pale traces of what it used to be. The paint was chipped near the edges, and the strings looked worn from neglect.

Still, when I touched it, I could feel its strength beneath the surface. The frame was steady, the strings taut. A little rough to the touch, yes, but it was dependable. It had been played before, loved once, and even though it had been forgotten, it was still capable of beautiful sound.

I ran my fingers along the strings gently and nodded. This will do.

Beside me, Sienna was already smiling at her reflection on the golden harp. She tilted her head toward me with a grin.

“I hope that will do, Selene,” she said, her tone dripping with fake sympathy. “The white one is an old harp. There isn’t another available, so you’ll have to manage. It may look faded, but I’m sure it can still make a sound. Just don’t play too hard. After all, you might break it if you do too much. An old harp will always be old, no matter what you do with it.”

I almost laughed. Her words were obvious, she was trying to intimidate me, claiming that no matter what I did, I could never beat her. Well, let’s see about that.

I smiled faintly, meeting her gaze. “Well, you never know. Even an old harp can still play well if it’s handled with care. You should focus on your harp, and stop trying to distract me.”

“A-alright.” Her smile stiffened before she looked away.

I turned my attention from her and glanced around. We were sitting at the center of the courtyard stage, where every eye was fixed on us. Lanterns glowed softly above, illuminating the curious, excited faces of the crowd.

People whispered among themselves, their words weaving through the air.

“Hey, who do you think will win?” one man murmured.

“Lady Sienna, of course,” another replied instantly. “She’s been playing since she was a child. How could she lose?”

“I’ve never heard anything good about Lady Selene,” someone else added with a laugh.

“Then why lie? She knows she’ll be humiliated. Everyone will laugh when she fails.”

“She’s obviously doing this for Prince Adrian,” another scoffed. “She’s always acting dumb around him, chasing him like a love-struck fool.”

I sat there, hands resting lightly on the faded harp, and let their words drift around me.

They weren’t wrong. That was who I used to be. The naive, desperate girl who lived in her sister’s shadow, chasing after a man who barely saw her. The Selene who humiliated herself trying to earn crumbs of affection.

Of course, they would think I was doing this for Adrian. It was the easiest assumption to make.

I didn’t have the energy to correct fools.

Even if I tried, they wouldn’t understand, not when their minds were so small and their tongues so eager to gossip.

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I was about to tune them out completely when a lazy voice drifted from somewhere behind the crowd.

“Dogs bark too much these days.”

The words hung in the air.

The murmuring stopped instantly. You could almost feel the collective shock ripple through them. I blinked, a little surprised myself. Who would dare say something like that here, surrounded by nobles and high-ranking wolves?

I turned my head toward the voice.

A woman stood leaning against the far wall, half-hidden by the shadows. She held a glass of wine in one hand, her posture relaxed, and almost careless. The lantern light didn't quite reach her, but her voice carried confidence.

One of the men who had been mocking me bristled, his face flushing red with anger. "Who the hell just called us dogs?" he snapped. "Show yourself!"

The woman chuckled. "What? Am I wrong?" she said, voice dripping with amusement. "Dogs bark too much sometimes, like they don't know their place."

A few people gasped, others stiffened in offense.

"You crazy bitch!" the man growled. "Show your face right now, or I'll make sure you regret it. How dare you, do know who I am?"

you even

The woman's laughter rang out. "Must I?" she replied lazily. "Are you even important enough for me to need to know your name?"

The man looked ready to explode, but before he could speak again, the woman finally pushed off the wall and stepped into the light.

Her presence silenced everyone.

Her long red hair glowed under the moonlight, styled elegantly. Her green eyes shimmered like emeralds, cool and sharp as she swept her gaze across the stunned faces. She took a sip from her glass, then casually brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

"What were you saying again?" she asked with a smirk.

The man froze. His expression shifted from fury to sheer panic as realization hit him. "O-Oh my goddess... Princess Avery."

I blinked, staring.

Princess Avery. Adrian's younger sister.

Of course. I should have recognized that voice, the sharp confidence, the effortless defiance. She was beautiful, dressed in an extravagant gown, the fabric shimmering with intricate embroidery, Diamonds glittered at her throat, catching the faint light with every movement,

She was always standing out.

I remembered her perfectly.

In my previous life, I used to hate her. I thought she was cruel, arrogant, and mean.

We knew each other from when we were children. For a while we'd been close, but somewhere along the way she pulled away. I never understood why. Back then I convinced myself she was just like everyone else, she was just another person who would look down on me the moment it suited them.

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Even as we grew older, Avery still tried to stand up for me sometimes, but I always pushed her away. I'd bare my teeth, snap at her, "I don't need your pity," loud enough for everyone around to hear. I turned her kindness into something ugly, another reason to despise her. And when Sienna whispered that Avery only defended me because she pitied me, it lodged deeper. I believed it, and resented her even more.

Now the man who'd insulted me bowed his head so fast his neck must have cramped. "P-please forgive me, Your Highness," he stammered to Avery. "I didn't know it was you. I- I wouldn't dare-"

Avery didn't bother with theatrics. She scoffed and said, "It doesn't matter. Not only did you disrespect me, you disrespected the moonborn. That is a harsher punishment."

The man swallowed, tried again to apologize, and she snapped, "Get out. I don't want to see your ugly face. All of you."

They backed away, faces white, and hurried out of the courtyard with their tails between their legs.

"How annoying," She muttered and then looked my way.

When our eyes met, she paused. There was that old caution in her gaze, as if she'd spent years rehearsing exactly how to look at me without getting hurt. She was about to look away when I smiled and muttered, "Thank you, Your Highness."

She blinked, completely off-guard, and heat climbed to her cheeks. She hadn't expected gratitude. She turned on her heel and walked away. I watched her go and felt something light flutter in my chest.

Maybe, this life could be different. Maybe I should try to know why she'd kept her distance as children, why she'd defended me even when I spat at her. But then I remembered Adrian was her brother, and shook my head.

“Let’s start the competition. Who wants to go first?” Alpha Rhydian’s voice echoed through the courtyard.

Before I could answer, Sienna shot her hand up. “I will,” she said. “I’d like to go first, please.”

The Alpha nodded. Sienna’s smirk widened, and her thoughts slid effortlessly into my mind.

I’ll play first to set the mood. If I start strong, whatever Selene does will look worse by comparison.’

Predictable. Petty. Perfect.

A slow smile tugged at my lips. Yes, Sienna. Go on. Dig your own grave. I’ll even hand you the first shovel.

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Selene

Sienna smiled, her perfect lips curving with the confidence of someone who knew all eyes were already hers. Her long, slender fingers brushed lightly against the harp strings.

A moment later, sound bloomed from her fingertips.

It was soft at first, a tender note, then louder, weaving into a melody that shimmered across the courtyard.

The crowd immediately hushed, entranced. Faces softened into smiles; some even closed their eyes, swaying slightly as if her melody had reached straight into their souls.

That was the power of the harp. It wasn't just music.

There were two ways to play a harp, the ordinary way, with only one's fingers, and the true way, with spiritual energy flowing through every string, fusing with the melody. The first created sound. The second created emotion.

The second way was rare, it made the harp the most revered instrument in the pack. When played with spiritual energy, it could soothe the restless, heal fatigue, or lift sorrow. It was addictive, intoxicating, and very few could master it

Sienna was one of those few.

Her spiritual energy wasn't particularly refined, but it was strong enough to produce a beautiful, dreamlike sound. Her fingers danced, glowing faintly gold as she plucked the strings, and the melody shimmered with warmth.

A low murmur of admiration rippled through the audience.

Her father sat straighter, his stern face softening with pride. Her stepmother had a pleased, almost smug smile on her lips. and her brothers watched with admiration. Even the Alpha, seated high, nodded slowly, the corner of his lips lifting in approval.

I glanced at Adrian.

He sat beside his father, posture lazy, one elbow resting on the armrest. His expression, however, was unchanged. There was no smile, or any hint of admiration.

In fact, he looked bored. His eyes weren't even on Sienna.

They were on me.

For a brief second, our gazes locked, and my pulse hitched from confusion. Why was he looking at me? His so-called destined woman was right there, performing beautifully in front of him.

I looked away, ignoring the flicker of his attention.

Sienna's song came to an elegant end, the last note trembling like the fading echo of a heartbeat. The courtyard erupted in applause.

"Lady Sienna, that was wonderful!"

"You're amazing! I've never heard music so soothing."

"I could listen to you play all night!"

Compliments poured from every direction, and Sienna bowed her head modestly, though her eyes glowed with pride. Her smile was radiant, and smugly victorious. Just as everyone was clapping and complementing her, a clapping sound cut

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through the air. Everyone turned to the Alpha.

He smiled, his expression one of approval. "As expected, Sienna," he said warmly. "That was truly good. I loved the music, it calmed my nerves."

Sienna's grin widened, her cheeks flushing with pride. "Thank you, Alpha," she said sweetly, her voice soft and humble before turning toward me. Her lips curved into a poisonous smile.

"I just wonder how my sister plans to do it. Her spiritual energy isn't much, and she doesn't even know how to play the harp."

The moment she said that, every eye turned to me. The whispers started again, the murmurs buzzing low through the courtyard.

The Alpha's calm, deep voice echoed across the hall. "Your sister played well," he said, his steady gaze fixed on me. "Are you certain you can surpass her, Selene? I can still give you the chance to forfeit before the game begins."

His tone wasn't mocking, if anything, it was patient, the way someone might speak to a child who didn't know what she was getting into.

Before I could answer, Sienna clasped her hands together, her eyes wide. “Sister, the Alpha is being kind to you,” she said softly. “If you apologize for lying to everyone, I’ll forgive you. I don’t want you to embarrass yourself because you’re trying too hard to prove something to someone.”

The people around us nodded in agreement.

“She’s still so kind, even after being insulted.”

“Lady Sienna is too soft-hearted. I would have refused to forgive her.”

“Lady Selene really doesn’t know her place.”

Their scorn was familiar, tiresome, and predictable.

I sighed quietly.

The same circle again. The same lines. The same story.

Weren’t they tired of repeating themselves? Because I was.

My gaze lifted, meeting Sienna’s bright, confident eyes. “You keep trying to stop me from playing, Sienna, are you that worried I might actually play well?”

For a moment, the smile on her face faltered, before she caught herself. Her expression softened again, her voice calm and gentle. “There’s no way you can beat me, Selene,” she said, forcing a laugh. “I’ve been playing since I was young. I’m only worried for you.”

I tilted my head. “Nobody asked you to be worried about me. Keep your opinion to yourself.”

The air went still for a moment. The smile on her face twitched, but she said nothing more.

I turned toward the Alpha and bowed my head slightly. “Thank you, Alpha, for the opportunity,” I said softly. “But I will still play. It’s a competition, after all.”

For a moment, he studied me, his brown eyes steady and unreadable, then, finally, he nodded. “Alright, play for us.”

I smiled. “Of course.”

As the murmurs started again, I turned my attention back to the white harp before me. My fingers brushed the strings gently, and I almost laughed at the irony of their words.

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Never touched a harp before?

Well, maybe not in this lifetime. But in all the lifetimes I had lived, I had mastered it.

Not just the harp, but the rhythm of sound and energy itself moved through me. My spiritual energy thrummed beneath my skin, alive and overflowing. Most people would need weeks to recover after using so much in a single performance, but I had more than enough to spare.

I was a Moonborn, after all. My energy had always been different.

They all said Sienna's spiritual power was unmatched, that her song was proof of it. But as I listened, I could tell she hadn't used much at all. Her performance was nice, yes, but shallow.

I shrugged, indifferent. It's time to remind them who they're dealing with.

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Adrian

She was confusing.

I couldn't tell what she was planning, if she was even planning anything at all. Maybe everyone was right about her. Maybe she was just foolish enough to walk into humiliation with a straight face.

And yet... that smile.

That confident, quiet curve of her lips didn't belong to someone who was about to embarrass herself. It wasn't the smile of the clingy girl who used to follow me around like a child, desperate for my attention. It was something calm, and dangerous.

I leaned back in my seat, crossing my arms as my gaze lingered on her. Truthfully, I hadn't looked away from her since she entered. She looked different. The white dress clung to her shape perfectly, the soft waves of her hair catching the faint glow of the lanterns. She didn't just walk in, she owned the space, as if it finally remembered who it belonged to.

Beautiful didn't even begin to cover it, and everyone knew it. I could feel the air shift, the way the crowd's awe turned into whispers. Even my father, sitting beside me, had that faint smirk that only appeared when something actually managed to surprise him. I couldn't hide my desire at the sight of her. I wanted her so badly. Even my wolf stirred at the thought of having her with us. The image of her on my bed while I took her refused to leave my mind.

"She really has your attention, doesn't she?" My father said suddenly, his voice low and amused.

I turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

He chuckled softly, not taking his eyes off the stage. "You're my son, Adrian. I know you better than anyone. You hardly pay attention to people, let alone stare at them for this long."

I didn't respond at first. My gaze flicked back to her standing before the harp. "She's... intriguing," I finally said.

My father's smirk deepened. "Very intriguing," he echoed. "It's been a long time since someone entertained me this much. I'm curious to see who the Moon Goddess chooses for you."

He paused, just long enough for me to look at him.

“And if your mate turns out to be one of the twins,” he said, his voice quiet but serious now, “you can’t chase the other. Don’t anger the Moonborn’s choice. If you do, the goddess’ anger will follow.”

I didn’t say anything. My jaw tightened slightly as I looked back toward the center of the courtyard.

Sienna sat there with that familiar smirk, the kind of smugness that always rubbed me the wrong way. She looked too pleased with herself, already convinced she’d won.

As for Selene, there was no nervousness in her posture, no desperate glance toward me like before. She didn’t even see me. Her calmness was unsettling. She simply reached forward, her fingers brushing the strings of that old white harp as her eyes fluttered shut.

For some reason, I found myself leaning forward slightly, my arms still crossed.

Whatever this was...I wanted to see it.

I wanted to see her, even though I wasn’t expecting much.

I was ready to sit through another disaster, another one of her reckless, humiliating attempts to prove something to people who had already decided what she was worth. I thought maybe I’d feel pity for her when she failed. But then, the very first note echoed through the courtyard, and everything stopped.

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A wave of spiritual energy burst from where she sat, rippling through the air like a living thing. It hit me so hard I felt it in my chest. Everyone froze. The crowd, the guards. Even my father, the man who had faced wars without flinching, leaned

forward in his seat.

Selene sat there, calm as ever, her fingers dancing across the faded white harp like she’d been born with it in her hands. Every note carried a strange kind of grace, but beneath it, that same energy pulsed, weaving through the courtyard like a thousand invisible threads.

If I had to describe it, it felt like a field of white flowers blooming inside my chest.

People were breathless, caught between disbelief and awe. I could hear a few gasps, the shuffle of feet as some tried to steady themselves. The air was thick with her energy.

Even Sienna sat frozen. Her fingers that had moved so elegantly before now lay stiff in her lap. Her eyes were wide, her lips slightly parted, and she looked small. And her family couldn't move either.

I didn't know what to feel. My heart pounded hard against my ribs. The sound of the harp filled the night, and her fingers brushed the strings, something inside me reacted.

every time

She looked ethereal. The moonlight clung to her, her hair shining silver and black, her calm smile untouched by the shock around her. She looked like she didn't belong in this place at all. Like she was something divine, and I couldn't look away.

By the time she finally stopped playing, I hadn't even realized I'd been holding my breath. The courtyard was silent, and stunned as she leaned back in her seat and said softly, "I'm done."

Her voice was bored as if she hadn't just shaken the entire temple with a single performance.

Before anyone could react, my father, Alpha Rhydian, the man who didn't rise for other alphas, who didn't even clap for visiting nobles, stood from his seat. His hands came together, a genuine smile pulling at his lips.

The rest of the hall followed like they'd just woken up from a spell. The applause roared, breaking through the silence.

"Shit, someone slap me. Am I dreaming?" A man shouted from somewhere in the crowd.

A loud smack echoed.

"Fuck, I'm not dreaming," the man gasped. "The good-for-nothing girl actually did that."

Selene rose from her seat, the soft rustle of her white dress breaking the stunned silence that lingered after her performance. She bowed slightly,

My father chuckled, the sound warm, something I didn't hear from him often. He lowered himself back into his seat, still smiling broadly. "Woah," he said, shaking his head with disbelief. "That was amazing. I've never heard anything so beautiful in my life. Even the best musicians in the capital haven't played this well for me."

He leaned forward, his eyes bright with excitement. "I love this child,"

"Thank you, Alpha," She responded.

My father turned his gaze toward her family, the amusement in his expression twisting into something sharper. “That was really good,” he said with a small smirk. “You were saying she wasn’t good, that she would embarrass you. But it seems you were wrong. Instead, she made me very pleased tonight.”

Her stepmother looked pale, her mouth opening and closing without a sound, clearly searching for an excuse that wouldn’t make her look more foolish. Her father sat there frozen, eyes wide as if he’d just realized for the first time that his useless daughter wasn’t so useless after all. And Sienna looked like she had swallowed something sour. Her pretty face twisted just slightly, her eyes darting between Selene and the Alpha in disbelief.

My father turned back to Selene, his voice booming with satisfaction. “You did really well, child. I always keep my word. You

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can ask for whatever you want, and I will grant it.”

The entire courtyard went still again.

What would she ask for?

A favor from the Alpha of the Mooncrest Pack wasn’t a small thing. Anyone else would be trembling with the possibilities, wealth, status, land, even protection. But when I looked at her, I didn’t see greed.

I leaned forward slightly, my curiosity getting the better of me, my voice low as I murmured to myself,

“What do you want, Selene?”

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Selene

I wasn't the kind of person who felt joy just because others praised me. Their words, their claps, their smiles, none of it mattered. I wasn't happy because I won; I already knew I would. It was never about proving my skill, it was about showing every single one of them who had laughed at me, pitied me, or ignored me.

The only reason a smile curved my lips was because it felt good to watch the same people who once looked at me like I was dirt, now stare at me like I was something divine. Their eyes wide, their mouths slightly parted, as if even though they'd seen it with their own eyes, they couldn't believe what they had just witnessed.

They couldn't believe I had done it.

I played the harp perfectly, and effortlessly. I didn't even use much of my spiritual energy, I was saving that for tonight.

This was only the beginning. The shock and awe on their faces, I had a feeling I'd be seeing it a lot more often from now on.

"What do you want, child?" the Alpha repeated, his voice deep.

Every gaze turned toward me again. I could feel the weight of the courtyard pressing down on my shoulders.

The Alpha still sat there, smiling, clearly amused and impressed. Adrian's eyes, on the other hand, were fixed on me in that unreadable way of his. I could tell he was trying to figure me out, like I was a riddle he couldn't quite solve.

My father's eyes had darkened; he looked at me like I was some kind of threat instead of his daughter. My stepmother's lips were twisted in that sour expression she wore so well. My brothers just stared, still too stunned to even blink.

They were all waiting to see what I'd say.

"What do you think she'll ask?" I heard someone whisper close by.

"Isn't it obvious? She's going to ask to marry Prince Adrian."

"Really? Even though he might be Sienna's mate?"

"She'll do it. She's always been that kind of girl. But the Alpha won't allow it. Maybe he'll make her Adrian's mistress instead."

Their laughter was quiet, and cruel, like small knives being thrown in my direction. I didn't bother reacting.

I turned my gaze slowly, meeting Sienna's eyes across the stage. She wasn't even trying to hide it anymore, the hatred burning there was venomous. She wanted to kill me. I could see it clearly now. And that only made my smile widen.

I turned back to the Alpha and lowered my head respectfully.

"Thank

you so much for your generosity, Alpha," I said, my tone calm. "But may I ask for what I want after the ceremony begins?"

The Alpha's eyes narrowed slightly, curious, but he didn't respond immediately.

Someone from the crowd spoke up,

"What did I tell you?" the voice rang out. "She's waiting for the ceremony to start so she can ask the Alpha to make her Prince Adrian's bride, once Sienna becomes his mate!"

I snorted quietly at the remark that came from the crowd. Prince Adrian's bride? Please.

Before I could even open my mouth, my stepmother rushed to play her favorite role. She bowed her head deeply toward

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the Alpha ber some trembling with coorem

“Alpha” she said. “I beg of you please do not listen to her. If Selene dares to ask to become Prince Miniel’s bride when Shemma is his mate. it will anger the Moon Goddess herself”

I blinkend slowly. She didn’t even wait for me to speak before jumping to conclusion. And as expected. Stenna followed bey She lowered her head gracefully, her voice soft and desperate. “Yes, Alpha Please don’t listen to my sister. I can’t let my mate go to anyone else”

It took everything in me not to laugh out loud.

This duo were they serious? How were they so certain Sienna was even Adrian’s mate?

I wanted to clap for their performance, truly, they were committed actors. If only they knew the truth

I ignored both of them and turned to the Alpha instead waiting for his reply.

He leaned back on his chair tapping his fingers on the armrest as he studied me. The courtyard was so silent for the faint sound of his tapping echoed. Finally he said in his calm tone. I gave my word. Selene can ask for whatever she wants. But -his eyes shifted toward the “Selene asks to become Adrian’s mate and Sienna is his true mate I will not allow. We will find another common ground

Sienna let out a soft sigh of relief beside him. Her shoulders relaxed slightly, but her eyes betrayed her. She wasn’t happy. She wanted a full rejection of me

Too bad for her

I smiled and bowed my head Thank you Alpha’

Just then the light in the courtyard dimmed as the moon rose higher. A silvery glow spread across the sky, spilling its light over the trees and stone compound. Everyone turned toward counting softly as it came

The Alpha’s lips curved in a smile. The full moon will soon open. You girls should prepare

Sienna and I both bowed politely before turning to leave immediately, a swarm of people rushed toward Stenna praising and questioning her with their unkind words. She stayed back basking in it

I didn’t linger. I had no reason to. I turned and started walking toward the forest path leaving the cool breeze brush past my

Lady Sele

I paused when I heard Evelyn's bright voice. She was rushing toward me, Silas right beside her. Evelyn's eyes sparkled with excitement as she looked at me.

You were an angel almost bouncing

I couldn't help but and Thank you I made sure everyone felt the energy, especially you two."

Evelyn dampened her hands again. I did feel it was so beautiful my lady in fact like I was standing in a field of flowers. Inwardly I let out a breath and started breathing.

Silas nodded and enjoyed it so my lady"

My aule degenerated I chose Inners because you liked them. Evelyn"

By the way, her blush spread across her cheeks. "Y-you remembered..."

The harp was played, we had a memory. And when you played in with spiritual energy, you could stage

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## Chapter 44

what the listeners felt. Some made people cry, some made them shiver, others stirred courage or nostalgia. But for tonight, I had chosen a field of flowers for those few who truly deserved to feel it.

"Alright, I have to leave now."

Evelyn frowned slightly, concern flashing across her face.

"Silas," I turned to him, "take care of her. Make sure she doesn't get bullied while I'm away. And don't let anyone bully you either. Don't forget what I taught you. I'll be back soon."

"Yes, my lady."

"Be careful, my lady," Evelyn said quietly.

"I will."

Turning away, the hem of my white dress brushed against the grass as I headed toward the darker edge of the forest.

"Stop." The single word sliced through the air.

I froze mid-step. I knew that voice. I rolled my eyes with irritation. “What the hell does he want from me now?”

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Selene

“Turn around, Selene.” The command was sharp, and authoritative, one that demanded obedience.

I exhaled slowly, fighting the urge to ignore it, and finally turned around.

Standing before me, tall and rigid like some self-proclaimed god, was my father. His hands were clasped neatly behind his back, his posture as unyielding as the cold look in his eyes. Beside him, like a poisonous snake, stood my stepmother, her lips already curled in that familiar, disdainful sneer.

I crossed my arms. "If it's not important, I'd like to take my leave."

My father's frown deepened, and my stepmother scoffed.

"What could be more important than your father, the head of the temple, calling you?" she snapped, her voice cutting through the night. "Don't be arrogant, Selene. Know your place."

I tilted my head slightly, blinking at her. Know my place.

What was this place they were so obsessed with reminding me about? Beneath their feet? Beneath everyone's expectations?

I didn't even bother replying. On a normal day, I might have said something back but not tonight. I didn't have time to waste on them. The forest was calling, and I needed to get there before the full moon rose completely.

"It's not important," I said coolly. "So, I'll be taking my leave now."

I turned to go, but my father's voice stopped me cold.

"So you weren't completely useless today."

My steps faltered. I slowly turned my head to look at him. His eyes were as emotionless as ever, cold, detached, as though even breathing the same air as me was an inconvenience he had to tolerate.

He went on, "I see. Trying to get my attention through your foolish acts actually worked out. I'll reward you for that. I can use this opportunity to ask the Alpha for what I want."

I blinked, staring at him as if he'd grown a second head. What the hell is this man talking about?

Did he really think I'd played the harp just to please him? I wasn't even thinking about him when I stood on that stage.

"And don't be stupid enough to ask the Alpha to let Sienna's mate marry you," My step mother said, tone dripping with venom. "I know what kind of person you are. Use this moment wisely, Selene. This is the best way to make the temple proud, we have to make the Alpha indebted to us."

I stared at them, my lips curling upward in something between amusement and disgust.

It was almost funny. Standing there, both of them looked so proud of their own words, as if their greed and shamelessness were virtues. After everything they'd done, after the

years of humiliation, neglect, and scorn, they still thought I'd hand over something I earned.

If I had to give this opportunity to someone, I'd rather hand it to a stray dog in the street than to them.

I gave them one last cold smile. "You really don't have any shame, do you?"

Without waiting for their reply, I turned my back on them and walked away.

## Chapter 45

I knew they were probably furious at my words. The air had practically crackled with their barely contained anger as I walked away, but honestly, I couldn't bring myself to care. Their feelings, their opinions, their anger, all of it was meaningless to me now. I had more important things to focus on than a pair of arrogant fools with the combined brain cells

of a rock.

The night air grew colder as I walked toward the forest. The sound of the celebration faded behind me, replaced by the soft rustle of leaves and the occasional call of an owl. When I reached the edge, I stopped for a moment and looked around. The trees stood tall and dense, their trunks twisting. The ground was littered with logs and roots, the scent of damp earth heavy in the air, it was exactly what a forest should smell like.

Normally, the temple would never allow such a wild, untamed piece of land to exist within its sacred grounds. But this forest was special. This was where the high priestesses came during the full moon ceremony to receive their white wolf.

And this time, there were two of us. Sienna and I.

I turned to my side just as Sienna stopped a few paces away, her face painted with that polite smile of hers.

"See you later, Selene," she said sweetly, lifting her gown daintily to avoid the dirt as though the mere thought of nature disgusted her. Then she turned, her chin high, and walked into the forest as if she were parading on a stage.

Once she was out of sight, I bent down and reached for the small, nearly invisible pin by my knee, the one that held the lower half of my gown together. With a quiet snap, I pulled it loose.

The heavy fabric slid upward, folding neatly to reveal the second layer, a shorter, fitted dress that gave me freedom to move.

Gasps echoed behind me. I could feel their stares, but I didn't spare them a glance. I wasn't foolish enough to wear a long gown into the forest like some ornamental doll.

I straightened, brushing the dirt off my hand and admiring my work. The short dress still looked elegant, but practical.

I nodded to myself, satisfied, and stepped into the forest.

The air inside was thicker, and filled with the scent of moss and pine. The moonlight filtered through the branches, painting the ground with silver patches. The further I walked, the quieter everything became.

Branches brushed against my arms, logs lay scattered in my path, but I moved through them effortlessly. Not a single twig caught my dress.

In my past lives, the only reason I was thankful to my stepmother about the plain dress was because it was easy to walk. I remembered how it had gone before, the humiliation that had followed Sienna's entrance. The way she stumbled through this same forest, tripping over roots and tearing her expensive gown. She had leaves tangled in her hair, mud smeared on her face, and a look of pure frustration when she finally appeared before the moon altar.

I couldn't wait to see the same scene repeat itself. Now, I just needed to find a good place, the perfect spot where I would meet my wolf for the first time in this lifetime.

I was about to take another step when something dark flickered at the edge of my vision. It moved too quickly to be a shadow. I froze, my pulse steady but alert, my senses sharpening as I waited. The forest had fallen completely silent with just the sound of my own breathing.

After a few moment, a figure stepped out from behind the trees.

A white fox.

Its fur shimmered faintly under the moonlight, each strand glinting like snow. It stood perfectly still in front of me, tail swaying softly, its bright golden eyes watching me with intelligence,

I stared back.

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Chapter 45

So it's you, I thought. The guardian of the temple forest.

I had heard countless rumors about it, the white fox that roamed these woods. Some said it was a cursed spirit, a creature that devoured the weak and unworthy. Others said it was a divine being sent by the Moon Goddess herself.

In my past lives, I had met this fox before. That time, I had been terrified. I believed the rumors, thought it would attack me, so I had turned and run for my life. I could still remember how fast my heart had pounded, how foolish I'd been to fear what I didn't understand.

Later, I learned the truth that the white fox was not a threat but a guardian. It protected the Moonborn during their awakening, guiding them to the sacred place where they would find their wolf. Because in that moment of awakening, the body was at its most vulnerable, their bodies exposed to every dangerous thing lurking in the forest.

The fox existed to lead and protect the moonborn. So if it was standing in front of me now, it meant it knew who was the fake and the real.

Even this creature could tell who the true Moonborn was.

"Can I follow you?" I asked.

The fox tilted its head, as if studying me. Then, without a sound, it turned and began to walk away, its white tail flicking gracefully behind it.

I followed.

It moved fast, but I matched its pace easily, stepping over roots and weaving through branches like I had done this a hundred times before. The deeper we went, the brighter the moonlight became, until it felt as if the whole forest was glowing.

Finally, the fox stopped.

Before me stood a massive stone, luminous under the direct light of the moon. I stepped closer, running my fingers along the cold surface, and immediately felt a surge of power ripple beneath my skin.

The energy here was strong.

"This must be where the past Moonborns received their wolves," I murmured in awe.

The fox said nothing. It simply sat nearby, watching me with those wise, golden eyes.

I didn't ask it any more questions. I didn't need to.

Climbing onto the rock, I reached the top, I lay back, my back meeting the cool surface.

Satisfied, I looked up at the glowing full moon. My chest rose and fell slowly. The world blurred into soft white light as my eyes grew heavy. And then I closed them, falling into a deep sleep as the moon watched over me.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 46

[ 1,401 words ]

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

Selene

IMG

They said when you die, your entire life flashes before your eyes.

It's the same when you awaken your wolf.

The only difference is that death ends everything, and awakening decides who you become next.

If you want a wolf, you face trials. Tests that pull apart your mind, strip your heart bare, and force your soul to prove it's strong enough to hold another being inside it. Many fail. Their wolves look into their hearts, find them unworthy, and refuse to bond.

Those people become wolfless.

In this world, being wolfless was worse than being an omega, because it meant you were alive, but hollow. And if the normal trials for a wolf were difficult, the trial for a Moonborn's white wolf was far more merciless.

It wasn't just about strength or willpower. It was about confronting everything you were, everything you had done, and everything you feared becoming again, until you found a way out.

When I opened my eyes, darkness was all I saw. It was so thick and endless. I blinked several times, rubbing my eyes, but nothing changed. The air was cold, and quiet. I looked down and noticed something faintly glowing in my hand.

A lamp.

Its light was dim, barely enough to pierce through the dark, but it was something. I lifted it carefully, its warm glow brushing against my skin, and took a deep breath.

I remembered the trials well, across all nine of my past lives. Each time had been different, and each time I had barely survived. The trial changed, twisted, adapting to your heart's weakness. It was not something you could prepare for, no matter how many times you experienced it. And yet, here I was again, testing myself once more.

I exhaled, steadying my breath, and took a step forward. The sound of my own footsteps echoed softly, swallowed by the darkness. It was so silent that even the rhythm of my breathing sounded loud.

I kept walking, but everything stayed the same. At this point, I figured I'd just keep going until I found an exit. Some people found theirs almost immediately and awakened their wolves. I thought maybe it would be the same for me this time.

Just when I thought it would never end, a small, broken sob reached my ears,

I froze.

It came from somewhere to my right, like a child trying to cry quietly so no one would hear. My grip on the lamp tightened as I followed it until I saw a small figure, huddled beneath a large, gnarled tree. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her knees, her shoulders trembling as she cried.

Even without seeing her face, I knew exactly who she was.

I slowly sat beside her, the soft glow of the lamp spilling over her small frame.

She didn't look up. Her voice was quiet, and hoarse, when she muttered, "Leave."

I let out a soft sigh and shook my head. "You know, we really look ugly when we cry."

The little girl froze, then slowly lifted her head, and my heart clenched. Black and white strands framed her face, and a younger version of me stared back, tears streaking her cheeks, lips trembling.

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Chapter 46

I smiled faintly.

I remembered this place. I used to come here all the time, back when I was a child. No one ever came looking for me. No one ever noticed when I was gone.

I would sit under this same tree, just like that, crying until my eyes burned. Crying until I couldn't anymore. And then, I'd wipe my face, stand up, and go back home pretending to be fine.

Seeing it now was almost cruel. But that was the nature of the trial. It didn't care about what you wanted to forget. It made you face it.

"W-who are you?" Her voice trembled as she looked up at me, eyes still glossy with tears. "You're not allowed here," she said quickly, wiping her face with the back of her sleeve. Her voice cracked on the last word, but she tried to make it sound firm.

"I'm no one important," I said. My hand reached out almost on instinct, brushing her hair gently before resting on her head. "I just came here to do something."

She blinked up at me, eyes narrowing as though she was trying to understand me. But she gave a tiny nod and muttered, "Then go do what you want and leave, please."

Even as a child, I was trying so hard to push people away while quietly begging them to stay.

I stood up slowly, brushing the dirt off my dress. Looking down at her, I said, "I will leave now. But before I do, let me give you a little advice."

She tilted her head, blinking at me in confusion. "Advice?"

"Don't hide," I said.

She frowned. "Don't hide?"

I nodded gently. "Yes. We don't need to hide anymore. We're stronger than we look."

Her face twisted in confusion, brows drawn, lips parting slightly as if she wanted to ask what I meant. But I didn't stay long enough to explain. I turned away, the lamp flickering faintly in my hand.

"Let me give you some advice too," my younger self said behind me. "Try to remember, Selene."

I froze and turned back, but she was gone, as if she had never been there at all.

What was that?

The darkness seemed to press in around me, heavier than before. I lifted the lamp higher, its weak glow barely holding the shadows back. My footsteps echoed softly as I forced myself to move forward, trying to shake off what had just happened and focus on finding the next part of the trial. But a hand grabbed mine.

I froze instantly, breath catching in my throat. Slowly, I turned to see Kane.

He stood beside me, tall and confident, his lips curved into that charming grin that always used to make the maids giggle.

"Kane...?" I whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean what am I doing?" he asked, laughing softly. "We've been looking everywhere for you, sister."

Before I could even respond, another voice sounded from behind him.

"Where did you run off to, Selene?" Cross asked casually, though there was an edge of concern beneath his tone. He leaned lazily against the wall, wearing that same indifferent expression he always did, like nothing in the world could truly bother

him.

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Chapter 46

I stared at them, frozen in place. "A-are you talking to me?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Kane chuckled, shaking his head. "Of course we're talking to you. Who else would we be talking to? You're our baby sister."

Baby sister?

Something inside me twisted. It didn't sound right. It didn't feel right. But my thoughts were hazy, my mind clouded and sluggish, too foggy to understand why this felt so wrong.

I wanted to speak, to ask why they were here, but the words wouldn't come out.

I blinked.

What was I doing again?

Why was I here?

Kane and Cross both frowned when I didn't answer. Kane's hand squeezed mine, his tone gentle now. "Are you okay, Selene?"

I looked up at him, my vision slightly hazy, a dull throb spreading behind my eyes. "Y-yeah... I think so. I just—" I pressed a hand to my temple. "I just forgot what I was doing. I remember I was doing something important, but I don't know what."

Cross sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. "She's acting strange. Kane, carry her. We'll take her to the physician."

"What? No, I'm fine," I protested weakly, trying to pull away, but Kane was already bending down.

In one smooth motion, he lifted me effortlessly into his arms.

My voice caught in my throat.

His warmth, and heartbeat felt too real. But somewhere in the back of my mind, a whisper told me: They're not here. This isn't real. Still, I didn't fight it. I was too tired, and confused.

The lamp flickered in my hand once more, then went out.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 47

[ 1,377 words ]

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Selene

The soft smell of herbs filled the room. I blinked slowly, the light from a nearby lamp flickering against the walls. My vision adjusted just enough to see an elderly man beside me, his wrinkled hand pressed gently against my wrist. His touch was light, and after a moment, he sighed in relief.

“Thank the Goddess,” the physician muttered, shaking his head. “You’re okay, Moonborn. If something had happened to you, it would have become a real predicament.”

I looked at him quietly, blinking, trying to find words that didn’t sound strange in my own mouth. “...I see,” I murmured.

Across the room, Kane’s voice broke through the haze.

“Are you sure she’s okay, old man?” His tone was sharp, and protective. He stood with his arms crossed, and worried. “She keeps saying something’s wrong with her head. What if it’s more serious?”

The physician chuckled softly, shaking his head. “It’s alright, young master. The Moonborn just had a brief shock. She will eventually feel better later.”

His calmness should've been comforting. But it wasn't.

My hand tightened around the sheets unconsciously. Eventually feel better? Then why did everything still feel so wrong? My chest felt heavy, and my head foggy.

Still, I didn't say anything. Not with Kane pacing restlessly and Cross leaning against the wall, his expression complicated. I didn't want to add to that worry.

I took a deep breath, forcing a small, reassuring smile.

The door creaked open. I looked up to see Sienna and my stepmother, rushing toward me.

"Selene!" Sienna's voice trembled as she reached me, grabbing my hand tightly. The touch sent a shock through my arm, and I flinched.

She paused immediately, her face falling. "W-what's wrong, sister? Why did you flinch? Did I hurt you by any chance?"

Before I could respond, my stepmother's voice cut in. "Move, Sienna. Don't hurt your sister."

Sienna pouted, lowering her head slightly. "I didn't do it on purpose," she said. "I would never hurt Selene."

She turned back to me, holding my hand tighter than before. "How are you feeling? I heard from the maids that you were sick."

I blinked at her confused, and disoriented.

Their faces were full of concern, eyes wide, voices trembling as if I was something precious. For a moment, I couldn't even process it. Why?

Why were they acting like this?

No, why did it feel strange that they were acting like this?

I tried to think, and remember something.

"Ah-" A sharp pain struck through my skull. I winced, pressing a hand to my temple. My head throbbed so hard that the world blurred around the edges.

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Chapter 47

“Selene?” My stepmother’s voice softened. She reached out and touched my cheek gently. “Selene, what happened? Should I call the physician back?”

I forced my eyes open, staring up at her face hovering above mine.

I swallowed hard and shook my head slightly. “No... it’s okay,” I managed. “I’m sorry for worrying you all. I just need some

rest.”

My stepmother hesitated before nodding. “Alright,” she said finally, glancing back at the others. “Let’s leave. Your sister needs.

to rest.”

Sienna looked like she wanted to say something, but when my stepmother gave her a warning look, she simply nodded and stood up.

“I will bring your favourite snacks for you, Selene.” Cross said.

As they turned to leave, I stared quietly at the door until it clicked shut behind them.

The silence that followed pressed heavily against my chest. I pressed my fingers against my temples, trying to breathe through the dull ache pounding in my head. My vision blurred, exhaustion creeping through my bones, and before I knew it, my eyes slipped shut.

When I opened my eyes again, sunlight filtered softly through the curtains. It was morning. I blinked a few times,

disoriented, then sat up slowly. The sheets slid down my shoulders as I leaned against the wall, letting my head rest there for a moment. My body felt lighter than it had the night before.

I exhaled, a faint smile tugging at my lips as fragments of yesterday returned. The confusion, the fear, the headache, but also that strange warmth. The feeling that my family cared about me. It was nice.

The door opened softly, and I turned toward the sound. Evelyn stood there, her brown eyes wide before she gasped and broke into a huge smile.

“My lady! You’re awake!” she cried, hurrying toward me.

Her joy was infectious. I smiled and said, “Good morning, Evelyn. How long have I been sleeping?”

Evelyn grinned, hands clasped in front of her. "A while. But I'm so glad you're awake. Everyone was so worried about you! Your father wanted to see you before he left for work, but he didn't want to wake you."

I blinked, pointing at myself. "...Father wanted to see me?"

Evelyn nodded eagerly. "Yes! He said he'll come back early to see his little princess."

I froze, the words hitting me harder than I expected.

His little princess.

My face grew warm.

Evelyn giggled immediately. "You're turning so red, my lady!"

I looked away, scowling lightly to hide the embarrassment burning through me, "Shut up, Evelyn."

She only chuckled again, clearly enjoying my reaction. "Oh! And Master Cross brought you your favorite snacks. They're on the counter. Should I bring them to you?"

I shook my head, pushing the blanket aside. "Don't worry. I was just about to stand."

My legs felt steady as I crossed the room, my eyes landing on the neat tray beside the mirror. Strawberry snacks, my

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favorite. My lips curled into a soft smile as I reached for one. But I looked up. and froze.

The snack slipped from my hand, falling soundlessly back onto the tray. My reflection stared back at me from the mirror, I had the same eyes, the same face, but my hair.....

I widened my eyes, every bit of sleepiness leaving my body in an instant. I slowly reached up, trembling fingers running through the long strands.

"My lady?" Evelyn's voice snapped me back, full of concern. "What happened?"

I turned toward her, my hand still gripping a handful of hair. "M-my hair..." I stammered. "What happened to my hair?"

Evelyn blinked, frowning in confusion. “Nothing happened to your hair, my lady.”

“Nothing?” I whispered. “Evelyn, there’s something wrong!”

Her confusion deepened. “Wrong?”

I looked back at the mirror, the white shimmering faintly in the sunlight. “Why,” I whispered, my voice trembling, “why is my hair... white?”

My heart was beating so fast it almost hurt. I couldn’t take my eyes off the mirror, the reflection staring back at me didn’t feel like mine.

I was too.... perfect.

Evelyn blinked, looking between me and my reflection, her voice trembling a little. “M-my lady, is your hair supposed to be another color?”

I turned sharply toward her, eyebrows furrowing. “What?”

Evelyn hesitated before saying, “You’re the Moonborn, my lady. Your hair is supposed to be white.”

My mouth parted slightly. She was right. My hair was supposed to be snow-white, as white and pure as Sienna’s.

Slowly, I turned back to the mirror. My fingers brushed through the strands again. The color shimmered like moonlight, but there was something else there, something faint and fleeting. It was white, yes, but beneath it almost felt like there was another color trying to bleed through.

A strange pulse passed through my chest. My reflection blurred for a second, and I felt something deep inside whisper.

“Try to remember, Selene.”

I furrowed my brows, trying to push past the haze in my head. What was it? Why did it feel like something important was missing? But before I could think further, the door slammed open.

A young servant stumbled in, panting hard, face flushed from running.

Evelyn rushed to her. “What’s wrong?”

The servant looked up, still catching her breath, and then turned her wide eyes toward me. “M-my lady, Prince Adrian is in the temple, and he’s looking for you.”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 48

[ 1,225 words ]

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Selene

I held my dress up carefully, trying not to trip over the ridiculous amount of fabric around my feet. The gown hugged my waist tightly, outlining every curve like it was trying to suffocate me into elegance. It was a beautiful dress but it was also way too much for what was supposed to be a simple meeting.

I sighed, tugging at the hem that refused to cooperate. “Must I really wear this, Sienna?”

Beside me, Sienna nodded eagerly, smiling like she was attending her own wedding. “Of course you have to wear the most beautiful dress you own. You’re meeting your mate, after all.”

I turned my head toward her, watching her expression. It was so genuine. She truly believed every word she was saying. I shook my head slowly. “We’re not even sure if he’s my mate. He might be yours.”

Sienna blinked, then gave me a look like I’d just said the dumbest thing she’d ever heard. “Don’t be silly, Selene. Everyone knows Prince Adrian is your mate. Besides,” she said with a teasing grin, “he’s completely obsessed with you. Even if someone else was your mate, I’m sure Adrian would just reject her and choose you instead. And I don’t see him that way.”

I frowned. “That’s not possible. Prince Adrian isn’t obsessed with me. I think he hates me.”

Sienna scoffed so loudly I almost rolled my eyes. “You really must have hit your head, sister. You’ve been saying the strangest things lately. Adrian hates you? That’s absurd! He’s been head over heels for you since the day he saw you.”

I stared at her, brows drawing together. “What are you talking about?”

She tilted her head, confused. “You seriously don’t remember? He’s always giving you gifts, taking you on private walks. sending letters. He even beat up those boys who tried to court you! If that isn’t obsession, then I don’t know what is.”

I listened quietly, my heart beating fast with every word she said. Adrian really did those things?

None of it made sense. Not just because it sounded impossible, but because I couldn’t remember any of it. Not a single thing she said sparked any image or memory. My mind was just blank.

Sienna’s face was glowing with excitement, so I didn’t say anything. There was no point in ruining her good mood by admitting I didn’t remember my so-called mate or his grand gestures.

When I first heard Adrian was looking for me, Sienna had practically dragged me into her room. Before I could blink, she was applying powder, fixing my hair, picking jewelry, and forcing me into this suffocating dress.

I had asked her if she wasn’t in love with Adrian herself.

She paused, then looked at me like I was insane. “Why would I be in love with a man my sister is in love with?”

For some reason I didn’t expect that answer.

Now, walking beside her, I kept silent. The sound of my heels clicking against the ground was the only thing keeping me grounded. My fingers twisted against the fabric as my heartbeat quickened.

Just a few feet away, leaning casually against a tree with his arms crossed, was Prince Adrian.

His eyes were closed, head tilted slightly back, the breeze brushing through his messy black hair. Even like that, he looked breathtaking.

My breath hitched before I could stop it. There was something magnetic about him, something sharp and calm all at once. The kind of presence that made you forget how to breathe properly.

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## Chapter 48

For a long moment, I just stood there, watching him.

Sienna's grin was so bright it was almost blinding. She looked between me and Adrian and said in a sing-song tone, "Alright, Selene. Go get your man."

Before I could even process what she'd said, she pushed me.

"W-wait. Sienna!" I barely managed to get the word out before I stumbled forward, the ground slipping beneath my shoes. But I didn't fall.

A firm hand caught me by the waist. The scent that surrounded me was familiar. My breath caught as I looked up.

Those green eyes were deep, vivid, piercing straight through me. Adrian looked down at me, his gaze sweeping over my face. There was something soft there, a tenderness I didn't remember ever seeing in his eyes before.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears.

For a moment, I forgot how to move, breathe, or even think. His lips curved slightly, and he said, his voice low and smooth, "Is your dress making things hard for you?"

I blinked rapidly, trying to catch up with his words. "Y-yes, but I'm fine-"

Before I could even finish, he bent slightly and lifted me off the ground.

"Prince Adrian-!" I gasped, instinctively wrapping my arms around his neck. My face burned as he held me easily, one arm supporting my back, the other under my legs.

"Be quiet, Selene," he murmured, his breath brushing against my ear. "Let me do my duties."

"D-duties?" I echoed, utterly dazed.

He didn't answer. Instead, he carried me effortlessly to a nearby chair. His hold was firm, his fingers pressing lightly at my waist as if he couldn't quite bring himself to let go.

When he finally set me down, I barely had time to collect myself before his hand tilted my chin upward. His touch was gentle but commanding.

"Yes," he said, eyes glinting with quiet certainty. "My duty. You are my duty."

My cheeks flamed. What was he saying? Especially here, in the temple of all places! If anyone saw us right now, they'd—

He chuckled softly, clearly enjoying my flustered expression. "I love seeing you like this, Selene."

I froze, my body trembling.

Adrian finally released my chin and stepped back, though his smile lingered. "I have urgent matters to attend to today," he said, "but I still came because I wanted to see you."

My voice came out quieter than I intended. "Thank you, Your Highness."

His eyes darkened slightly, his tone turning low and serious. "Mate."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Call me mate," he said, his gaze holding mine. "You'll be mine tomorrow, when you turn eighteen."

My lips parted, but no sound came out. Then he moved closer again, wrapping his arms around me in a firm embrace. My body stiffened at first, but the steady beat of his heart against mine made me falter.

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Chapter 48

His next words sent a shiver down my spine.

"Even if you don't turn out to be my mate," he whispered against my ear. "I'll still mark you, Selene. I will never leave you. I'll treat you right for the rest of our lives."

For a moment, everything stopped. As his words sank in, I couldn't tell if my heart was fluttering because of his promise or because something deep inside me whispered that none of this was real. Something felt off, but I couldn't

bring myself to care. I was happy.

And if this was a dream, then I hoped I'd never wake from it.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 49

[ 1,328 words ]

Chapter 49

Chapter 49

Selene

The next morning, I honestly thought I was still dreaming.

Because when I walked into the room and saw the table, covered from one end to the other with brightly wrapped boxes, glittering ribbons, and expensive-looking trinkets, I froze. My mouth fell open.

“What...” I pointed at the mountain of gifts in disbelief. “Are you serious? Is this all for me?”

Kane grinned proudly, leaning against the table. “Yes, Selene. We gave Sienna hers already. These are yours.”

I blinked. “All of them?”

“Every single one,” Cross said, his tone lazy as usual, but there was a small smile tugging at his lips.

I turned back to the table, my heart racing. Everything looked so beautiful. Silk ribbons, rare crystals, perfumes that smelled like wildflowers after rain. Everything must have been so expensive.

“You rascals,” Father’s sharp voice cut through my thoughts.

I turned around and found him glaring at my brothers. His scowl was deep enough to scare the maids standing near the doorway.

It wasn’t just Father, though. Stepmother was glaring too, her arms crossed tightly. And Sienna, standing perfectly poised beside her, looked ready to breathe fire.

Cross blinked innocently. “What did we do?”

Sienna scoffed, her hands on her hips. “What did you do? Is that not obvious?”

Kane furrowed his brows. “What? We brought you a lot of gifts too.”

“That’s not the point!” Sienna huffed, flipping her perfect hair back. “I don’t care about your gifts! It’s the fact that you cheated! We all agreed to give sister fair gifts so no one would get jealous, but you two went behind our backs and brought this much. That’s not fair!”

My stepmother nodded firmly, glaring at the boys. “You two are such scoundrels! Why would you cheat like that?”

Kane just shrugged, completely unbothered. “It’s not our fault you guys are slow. Maybe you should cheat next year.”

Father’s face turned red, and his hand shot out to grab a vase. “Nobody stop me. I’m going to teach these fools a lesson!”

Sienna immediately pointed and said, “Yes, Father, I support you! Beat up Kane, I know he was the one who made Cross do

it!”

Kane’s eyes widened. “What?! No, I wasn’t! It was Cross’s idea! Come on, Cross, tell them!”

Cross crossed his arms, his expression calm and unreadable. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kane gasped. "You backstabber!"

Before anyone could stop him, Father started chasing Kane around the room, brandishing the vase like a weapon.

"W-wait! I'm serious, it wasn't me!" Kane yelped, dodging behind the table as Father shouted something about 'ungrateful

children.'

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Chapter 49

The scene was ridiculous, and yet, everyone was laughing. Even Sienna, and Stepmother.

I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. Watching Kane's panicked expression while Cross casually sipped tea from the corner, it

was too much.

For a moment, I let myself sink into the scene. The sound of laughter, the warmth, the easy teasing. My heart felt full.

My parents loved me.

My brothers cared for me.

Sienna wished me happiness.

And Prince Adrian wanted me.

I smiled to myself. Everything was perfect.

'Are you sure about that?' A whisper brushed against my ear.

The laughter in the room didn't stop, but my heart did. I froze, eyes darting around.

"Who said that?" I whispered under my breath.

No one looked my way. My family was still laughing, Father now chasing Kane out of the room entirely. There was no one behind me. Nothing but the faint echo of the whisper that shouldn't have been there at all.

I slowly touched my head, frowning.

Maybe I misheard. Yes. Maybe that was all. But still, why did my chest suddenly feel so cold?

The laughter was still ringing faintly in my ears when the whisper came again.

Remember, Selene. Remember who you are, and the promise you made to yourself. Remember the trauma. The hardship you had to go through. Do not make light of your deaths.

My fingers trembled.

'You lived nine times, and died nine times. Do not fall into an illusion that will never be real'

The

room spun. I couldn't breathe or move.

My eyes darted toward my family, but my vision blurred for a moment before it cleared, and suddenly, they were all looking at me. Concern etched into their faces.

"Selene?" Stepmother touched my shoulder, her brows knitted together. "What is it, dear? Why do you look so pale?"

"Selene?" Sienna's voice followed. "Sister, what's wrong?"

Kane, Cross, even Father, all of them were looking at me with that same worried expression. But behind them stood me.

Four of me.

I felt my breath hitch as my eyes darted from one to the other. The child, tiny, wide-eyed, clutching a ragged doll to her chest. The teenager, eyes hollow, bruises hidden under her sleeves. The Luna, regal and broken all at once, her crown tilted slightly as blood streaked her cheek. And the warrior, battle-worn and fierce, blade buried in her stomach.

They all looked the same, their black and white hair cascading over their shoulders, those blue eyes piercing through me as if demanding I remember.

Chapter 49

They didn't move. They just stared. And something inside me shattered.

A bitter laugh escaped my lips before I could stop it.

“Ah,” I whispered, looking down at my trembling hands. “I see. It was all an illusion.”

Sienna blinked. “Huh? What are you saying? Selene, you’re not making any sense. Maybe you should rest-”

I sighed, the sound heavy, and blinked back the sting in my eyes. When I looked up again, my voice was calm.

“I do not have a family.”

They froze.

“What?” Stepmother whispered, her voice trembling. “We... are your family. How can you say that?”

I pulled my hand away from her touch, the warmth of her skin suddenly feeling like fire. Slowly, I stood, my gaze sweeping across all of them.

Father’s brows furrowed. Sienna’s lips trembled. Kane and Cross exchanged frightened glances.

“You heard right,” I said softly. “I do not have a family.”

I looked past them, past their faces that once looked so full of love and care. The air seemed to shift, the illusion trembling like glass ready to break.

“But, I will build one. It just won’t be with you.”

Sienna flinched as if I had struck her. She shook her head rapidly, her eyes wide and wet. “Selene, please, stop talking like that. Did we do something wrong? Please tell us, we’ll fix it, I promise!”

Her hand clutched my dress desperately, but I didn’t look at her.

I’d lived too long. Died too many times. And in every life, they all led me to my death.

So I let out a shaky breath, my gaze steady and cold.

“It’s too late for that. I will no longer fight for something that is not worth fighting for.”

The illusion began to crack.

“No-no, please!” Sienna yelled, echoing as her face twisted in terror. But her body was already dissolving, flaking into dust like painted ash. My father’s figure blurred, my stepmother’s hand reached out, and then shattered.

The temple, and the gifts melted away like frost under flame until there was nothing left.

Without thinking, I walked forward. My steps left faint traces in the snow that had appeared underfoot. The air was crisp and quiet, so quiet that I could hear my own heartbeat.

I was alone again. Or so I thought.

“Selene.” The sound of my name rippled through the silence.

I turned slowly, my breath catching in my throat.

There, standing against the swirling snow, was a massive white wolf. Her fur shimmered like starlight, eyes glowing a soft, celestial blue. She exuded power. “You passed my trial.”

“Mira...”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 50

[ 1,367 words ]

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

Selene

I had always wondered what I would say if I met her again.

Would I cry? Would I apologize? Would I even have the courage to look at her?

I asked so many times but no matter how many times I imagined the scene, I never came up with an answer.

Now that she was really here, standing before me, her fur glowing like moonlight and her gaze sharp, I couldn't speak.

My heart ached as I stared at her because it was all my fault.

Everything that happened in the past, all the deaths, the betrayals, the pain, it was because of me.

I was the one who kept Mira through every cruel chapter, dragging her into my mistakes. I was the one who made decisions that led to our tragic moment.

I cared too much about people who never truly cared for me. I gave everything for a family that abandoned me, for a mate who didn't see my worth, for a cause that destroyed me.

So yes, it was understandable I would end up with such a cruel fate. But it was never Mira's fault.

She had always stood by me. Always warned me.

Always believed I was worth more than chains and pity.

Even when she begged me to walk away from Adrian, even when she told me to choose myself, I ignored her. And because of my foolishness, she paid the price, she was poisoned by Sienna, suffering a death that wasn't hers to bear.

Just like me, she was reincarnated over and over again.

Just like me, she forgot everything each time.

But in this lifetime when I remembered. Mira must have remembered too.

"You're quiet," Mira said at last. Her glowing eyes pinned me where I stood. "Or are you ashamed to face me? Do you deem yourself unworthy because of the past?"

A soft laugh escaped me. "Still so blunt," I muttered.

Her tail flicked. "Still so weak," she countered. "You took a long time to pass my trial, Selene. So much for being a fearless commander."

I scoffed. "You made it really difficult to pass. You literally wiped my memory clean, how was I supposed to know it was an illusion?"

Mira didn't answer at first. She just looked at me for a long moment, the snow swirling between us. Then, slowly, she began to walk forward, each step graceful.

When she stopped in front of me, her fur brushed against my hand.

“I needed to see if you were still willing to open your eyes and change your future, or if you were going to throw it away like

before.”

“And what’s your conclusion?” I asked.

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## Chapter 50

Mira lifted her gaze, meeting mine without hesitation. Her blue eyes glowed with certainty.

“You’re different now,” she said. “Determined to change your fate and the fate of those you care about. Even if you have to sacrifice everything in your path to do it.”

“And since you’re ready to do that, Selene, I will accept our bond and become your wolf.”

Her forehead touched mine, a surge of warmth and light flooding through me, burning away the last traces of illusion.

I couldn’t help it, the smile broke across my face before I even realized it. And without a second thought, I threw my arms around Mira, burying my face in her soft, snowy fur.

She let out a long sigh. “Ah, here we go again,” she said. “If I were to count your age by how many times we’ve died and gone back to the past, we’d be well over two thousand years old by now, and yet you still behave like a child.”

I laughed against her fur, unable to stop myself. “I really missed you, Mira,” I whispered, my voice shaking slightly.

Mira didn’t answer right away, but she didn’t need to. I could feel her happiness through our bond.

After a while, I pulled back. Mira tilted her great white head and said softly. “Since the test is over, you should go back. Go and show them who the true Moonborn is.”

I nodded, taking one last look at her before spotting a glowing door not far away. I walked toward it, then turned back. “See you later, Mira.”

“Go,” she said. “I’ll be here.”

I opened the door and stepped through.

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on the big rock in the middle of the temple forest, the moonlight bathing my face. I blinked against the brightness and lifted a hand to shield my eyes.

'Mira?'

'I'm here, Selene. I will always be here. But this time we will not die. We will make it, and make everyone kneel before us.'

I sat up slowly, the night air brushing against my skin. The moonlight caught in my hair. From here, I could see everything.

It really was beautiful, and full of possibilities.

And this time, I was going to take every opportunity fate offered me.

I stood, stretching my arms before leaping down from the rock. My movements were effortless, and lighter than before.

When I landed, I felt the weight of a gaze. I turned around and saw the white fox.

He stood at the edge of the clearing, his fur gleaming faintly under the moon, eyes bright with interest as he watched me.

I tilted my head slightly, curious. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but I wasn't sure if my mind-reading could work on the creature. Reading thoughts was draining, and the stronger the being, the heavier the toll.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder what secrets hid behind those intelligent eyes.

I hesitated for a moment, watching the white fox's tail sway gracefully. My fingers twitched at my side.

Should I even try?

Mira's voice whispered faintly in the back of my mind. 'Be careful. Reading creatures is different. They don't think like us.'

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Chapter 50

I wanted to listen to her but curiosity burned stronger than caution. So I took a small breath, focused my energy, and reached toward him with my mind.

The connection hit like cool wind.

'You can read my mind, can't you, child?'

His voice was clear. Deep and ancient, carrying the weight of centuries.

I froze, eyes wide. He'd caught me.

Slowly, I nodded. The fox turned his head toward me, golden eyes glowing softly.

'This is not your first life, is it?'

Every muscle in my body went still. My mouth parted, but no sound came out. How could he possibly know that?

I opened my mouth to ask, but before I could form the words, his thoughts came into my mind again.

'You look a lot like her,' he said. 'You look like the last Moonborn. At that time, she was just as reckless but far more disciplined. The most powerful Moonborn I have ever seen. Her spiritual powers were pure.'

My heart stumbled painfully in my chest.

He was talking about my mother.

I had never heard anyone mention her, not since the day she died giving birth to Sienna and me. It was as though she'd been erased from existence. And Father never said a word about her again.

'But now that I look at you,' the fox continued, his gaze sharpening, 'your spiritual power is even greater than hers. So powerful, in fact, that your existence can either save or destroy the world.'

His voice softened. 'I wonder what your destiny will be?'

He turned, the faint shimmer of moonlight trailing behind him as he walked away, vanishing into the forest.

I didn't follow. I just stood there, staring at the place where he disappeared.

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Maybe one day, I would find him again. Maybe one day, I'd learn more about the woman who gave me life, the woman everyone else chose to forget. But for now, I had something else to do.

I turned toward the temple lights glowing faintly in the distance.

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