

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 61

[1,065 words]

Chapter 61

Chapter 61

Selene

I moved quickly down the slope, my boots scraping against the uneven rock. The mountain air was thin, biting cold against my skin. I had to get out of here before the guards came. They must have already seen that flash of light when the phoenix appeared, the guards would be rushing up here by now to investigate.

And if they found me standing here, they would find who I was, and start asking questions I can't obviously answer. There was no way I was going to tell them I made a deal with the powerful phoenix.

I kept walking until I reached the ridge. The same damn gap I had jumped over last time stretched before me. I crouched slightly, peering down. The wind whistled through the chasm, carrying the echo of rushing water far below.

Nope. Not a chance.

I wasn't stupid enough to try that again. Mira had used her energy to open the phoenix's seal, and I'd used mine to keep it stable. My body felt heavy now, like every movement was twice the effort. If I tried to jump in this state, I wouldn't make it halfway across, I'd just fall to my death.

I exhaled sharply. "Great," I muttered. "Trapped on a mountain with no wolf, no energy, and a phoenix who couldn't bother to help."

If that damn bird had just carried me down, I wouldn't be wandering around like some lost pup.

Rolling my eyes, I turned around and started searching for another way out. There had to be one. Mountains like this always had more than one way out, I just had to find the right one.

I walked for a while. After a while, I noticed the ground changing beneath me. The rough stone gave way to patches of green

grass.

I frowned, crouching down to touch it. It was soft. That meant I'd gone deeper into the mountain.

"When did I even wander this far?" I muttered, glancing back over my shoulder. I couldn't even see the path I'd come from

anymore.

Lost. Wonderful.

I looked around to find a cave. It sat tucked between two jagged rocks. I tilted my head, debating. Every instinct in me screamed that walking into dark caves on cursed mountains was a terrible idea.

But the logical part of me, the part that had learned survival meant taking risks. If the cave existed in this part of the mountain, there might be something useful.

"Just a few minutes," I muttered to myself. "I'll look around and leave."

I stepped inside. The air grew cooler immediately. My boots crunched over loose gravel as I moved further in. Thin beams of sunlight pierced through cracks in the ceiling. For a place that no one dared come near, it was strangely clean.

The sound of voices outside the cave made me stop. "Search everywhere! We have to find out where that strange light came from! Check every ridge, every damn corner-
"There was a pause, "Even that cave over there!"

My heart stopped.

Shit.

I spun around, eyes darting toward the cave's entrance just as a shadow appeared there, it was a man, holding a torch, scanning the darkness. I barely had time to think before I felt someone grabbing my waist.

12:55

Tue, Dec

Chapter 61

I gasped.

Before I could even fight back, the person yanked me forward, deeper into the cave. My body slammed into someone's chest. The air rushed out of my lungs as my fingers instinctively clutched the fabric of his cloak.

My head was pressed against him, and gods, his chest was so warm it felt like it was burning beneath my cheek, rising and falling slowly with each breath. His hand was firm around my waist, and even though my brain screamed danger, my body refused to move. His scent curled around me, intoxicating and impossible to ignore.

When I still didn't move, his deep voice echoed through the cave. "When are you going to get off?"

That voice.

I lifted my head slowly. The moment my eyes met his, my breath hitched.

Crimson. A pair of crimson eyes stared back at me.

No. It couldn't be.

It was the man from the auction, the cloaked stranger who had watched me so intently. But now, seeing those eyes up close, my whole body trembled.

I knew those eyes. I'd seen them before in my past lives.

Red like fire. Red like death.

Alpha Dominic, the Demon of the West.

My executioner. The same monster who ended my past eight lives, the only one who could defeat me when I was at my strongest.

What the hell was he doing here? Why was he in the Mooncrest Pack? And wait, had I seriously scammed this man at the auction for gold coins?!

Oh, gods. I was so dead.

I tried to rationalize, to tell myself it could be someone else. There could be another man with glowing red eyes, right? Right?! But the moment his gaze sharpened, glinting in the darkness, I knew.

Fucking hell. I'm done.

He tilted his head slightly, studying me with that calm look of a predator studying his prey.

Did he recognize me? Did he remember me? Am I about to die?

“Who’s there?!” someone shouted from the cave’s entrance, closer now. The echo of footsteps bounced off the walls. I panicked. I couldn’t be caught here by the guards.

I looked up at the man I was still lying on, swallowing hard. His eyes narrowed, questioning, and dangerous. I didn’t have time to think. Before I could talk myself out of it, I reached up, grabbed the edge of his hood, and yanked it down.

It was really him!

Those crimson eyes locked on me, and for a second, I felt like I was staring straight into the gates of hell.

“Selene, don’t think about it. Think later. Survive now.” I whispered under my breath.

He opened his mouth. “What are you-”

12:55 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 61

Before he could finish, I did the only thing I could think of. I leaned forward, and kissed him, and his body went completely

still.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 62

[1,111 words]

Chapter 62

Chapter 62

Damien

I don't like people.

I never have, and I never will.

So the only place I knew I could stay without seeing them or touching anyone was a cave deep in the Mooncrest Mountains. Jason told me the pack members never came here; it was too dangerous, and the creatures that lived in these mountains. were notoriously difficult to deal with.

But ever since I started coming here, none of the creatures dared approach. They either kept their distance or fled the moment they sensed me. Even then, even with all that distance between me and everyone else, it still didn't help.

Because all I could think about was her.

That woman from the auction.

Even though our first meeting lasted a few hours, something about her dug into me and refused to let go. It was the first time in centuries I'd found my mind returning to a woman's face. The first time I had wanted to see someone again. And I didn't know why.

Thane had stopped speaking entirely. He was furious, pacing in the back of my mind with his fangs bared, still angry that I'd let her walk away. Unlike me, Thane didn't reason. When he wanted something, he took it immediately, without a second thought.

When she walked away that day, he'd tried to force the shift, desperate to chase after her. I stopped him.

The first time I had ever stopped him. I understood why he was angry, but I still ignored him.

What I didn't expect was whatever sick joke the gods thought was amusing, sending her straight into the same damn cave.

Even with a disguise, or the fact that she had hidden her scent and her face back at the auction. I still knew it was her the moment she stepped inside. That was why I dragged her into the cave, I would have killed anyone that ventured inside.

Her heartbeat quickened as the guards approached the entrance.

I should have shoved her away. I should have snapped her neck the moment she touched the edge of my hood and revealed my face. No one outside my pack sees my face and lives.

But when she looked up at me, When those wide eyes met mine, I didn't move. And before I could reclaim control, she surged forward and crashed her lips into mine.

I froze. For the first time in my life, my thoughts simply stopped. And Thane, silent for hours, let out a low, viciously pleased growl, the sound vibrating through my veins.

'More. He demanded.

The rational part of me hissed, Push her away, Dominic. Push her away. Don't let anyone in. You know what happens when you let them close.

But instead, my hand tightened around her waist.

I felt her breath hitch, and I deepened the kiss before I could think better of it. She jolted slightly, surprised, it was ridiculous, considering she was the one who started it. Her fingers curled into my cloak like she needed something to hold on to. Her lips trembled against mine, and it only made me pull her closer.

12:55

Chapter 62

My other hand slid up, cupping her cheek, forcing her closer as I tilted my head and deepened the kiss.

She gasped against my mouth. I was just about to take it further when a voice cut through the air.

"Who's there?!"

A torchlight flared in our direction.

The guard at the entrance froze mid-step, the firelight spilling over our faces. His eyes went wide in sheer horror.

From the guard's point of view, it must've looked ridiculous, two men kissing in a cave. She was still disguised as a man. And he probably thought we had snuck in here for a secret rendezvous.

Which, apparently, was exactly what she wanted him to think. Because the moment her lips crashed against mine, I understood. The flash of phoenix fire in the sky a moment earlier had already told me she'd broken the seal. And now she was using me as a distraction to fool a guard.

I didn't know if I should laugh or be furious.

This woman had guts.

The guard hesitated at the cave entrance, blinking at us like he wasn't sure if he should be embarrassed or concerned. I lifted my gaze to him without stopping the kiss. His body flinched as my eyes locked onto his, dark, dangerous, and very clearly promising violence if he interrupted.

"O-oh... my apologies," the guard stammered. "Carry on... with your, uh... special stuff. I'll make sure no other guards come here."

He turned away quickly, muttering to himself as he left. "Two men kissing in a cave... that's new. Poor things, they must be hiding their love from their families."

She was still clinging to me, breathing unevenly, and I took the opportunity to stand, gripping her waist. In a swift motion, I reversed our positions, no longer letting her lean on me on the rock. Instead, I pressed her back against the wall of the cave, deepening the kiss without breaking it.

She responded instantly, arms wrapping around my neck, her lips warm and desperate against mine.

Fuck, she tasted sweet.

My hand slid to her waist, the other bracing her thigh as I kissed her harder, until I felt her breath stutter. When I finally pulled away from her lips, she gasped, but before she could speak, I dipped my mouth to her neck.

She let out a sharp breath and tilted her head back, exposing her throat without hesitation.

It was reckless, and dangerous. The neck was sacred to wolves, the place of the mark. And she bared it to me as if she didn't care. Or maybe she wasn't thinking at all.

I kissed her skin, then bit lightly, nipped again, letting my fangs graze her. Her pulse fluttered beneath my mouth. Her scent flooded my senses.

'Mate.' Thane growled inside me, voice low and primal. 'Mark her, Damien.'

I froze.

'What, I breathed, voice rough, 'did you just say?'

Thane's growl throbbed through my skull. 'She is our mate. I felt the bond forming earlier, faint, but real. Growing piece by piece.

12:56 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 62

'I know it sounds reckless, but mark her. We haven't had a mate in thousands of years. This is our only chance to claim what's ours. If you let her slip away again, I swear I'll tear you apart myself.

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[1,183 words]

Chapter 63

Chapter 63

Selene

I was breathing too hard. My lips trembled from the kiss, my pulse racing like it wanted to break through my ribs. My whole damn body tingled, heat curling low in my stomach, spreading like fire. And that was exactly why I slapped myself hard.

The sting burned across my cheek, but it yanked me back to my senses.

Goddess, what the hell are you doing, Selene?!

This was Alpha Damien. The wolf every pack in the world feared. The man who could wipe out an entire pack in a single night and sleep soundly afterward.

Why in all the hell was I kissing him like I missed him? Like I wanted more?

My mind screamed at me, furious, and panicking.

Yes, I had to kiss him because of the guard. Fine.

But why did I continue after he left? I could've stopped. I should've stopped. But the moment he kissed me again, my body reacted like it belonged to him, like it had been waiting for that warmth.

And worse, I was enjoying it.

When his mouth touched my neck, a shiver so sharp ran through me that I was sure Mira woke up from her slumber. For a moment, I thought I heard her say, 'Let him mark you, Selene'

I froze inside. That wasn't real. It couldn't be real. Mira would never say something so ridiculous about a man like him.

Mark me? Yeah, right. That would be impossible. Why don't I just spend my life with him and have his pup then. I thought sarcastically. He is dangerous. I must avoid him in this lifetime. Stay away from him at all cost. He is the most important man in the world.

I repeated the warning to myself like a damn prayer.

I pressed my hand against his chest and pushed.

My strength was laughable against someone like him, but he still stepped back, giving me space. Or maybe he allowed it.

I swallowed hard.

Even with distance between us, my skin still tingled where he had touched me.

Honestly? I didn't hate him, not even after he had taken my life nine times. I barely knew him. I only knew him on the battlefield, cold, emotionless, cutting down every one of my men without a second thought. And the stories, the terrifying stories I'd heard about him. I knew the man I had faced in countless lives, the monster everyone whispered about, the nightmare children feared.

But the man standing in front of me now, he wasn't that cruel. Even at the auction, walking behind me, he wasn't the ruthless monster I had imagined. He was patient. He even let me cheat him.

Was he planning something? Was this all calculated? What was he even doing in the Mooncrest pack? He never went to other packs like this. I had so many questions, but I would rather die than ask them out loud.

If he realized I knew exactly who he was, who knows what would happen.

I forced a smile and deepened my voice, praying he still saw me as nothing but some random man he'd accidentally

12:56 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 63

stumbled into and kissed.

"Uh... thanks, dude," I said, forcing out the words awkwardly. "I owe you one."

Damien raised an eyebrow at me, and the moment his eyes met mine, I panicked and looked away like a guilty idiot.

Even his gaze did something to me. That was the worst part.

"Hmm, about the kiss, you know... that's just a greeting. That's how the Mooncrest pack greets each other."

There was a moment of silence. Yeah, a moment of silence right before I expected to be killed.

His voice echoed through the cave. "By kissing people on the lips?"

I nodded stiffly. "Yeah..."

He just stared. After a painfully long silence, he asked, "So you greet everyone that way? By kissing them on the lips?"

“No!” I snapped instinctively, then I froze, realizing I’d just blown my own lie. I scrambled to fix it. “I-I mean, yes. Yes! Of course. I kiss everyone. On the lips. All the time. Constantly. It’s very normal around here. I was just glad to see another person in the mountains so I kissed you. I hope you don’t mind. We’re both men so... yeah. Nothing big.”

I wanted to vomit or hit myself. Or knock myself unconscious with a rock.

What the hell was I even saying? Did I have a death wish? Did I want the Demon of the West to kill me?

I finally forced myself to meet his gaze, expecting anger, disgust, maybe even murderous intent. But he didn’t look angry.

He was staring at me. No, at my lips. I licked them without thinking, and his eyes followed the movement like it was instinct.

My face burst into flames.

Damn it.

I never reacted like this with anyone else. Why him? Why was he the only one who made me forget how to be a functioning human being? He said nothing for a moment. Then he ran a hand through his hair and asked. “What are you doing here?”

Before I could answer, he grabbed the hem of his shirt, and pulled it off.

I froze.

Oh gods.

His body, broad shoulders, sharp lines, lean muscle carved like he’d been sculpted by some very thirsty goddess, made my brain shut down. My heart slammed against my ribs, and I quickly jerked my gaze away.

“I came to meditate,” I stammered.

“I see,” he said simply.

I swallowed, fidgeting with my fingers as my gaze flicked toward the cave entrance. The guards were still out there, I could sense them. Besides, I couldn’t leave, not unless he dismissed me.

When I dared to peek at him again, he was in a hot spring built into the cave floor, steam curling around him. I hadn’t even noticed it before. His arms were crossed over

the edge, water trailing down his toned skin, and his eyes caught me before I could look away.

I snapped my gaze away so fast my neck almost broke.

Chapter 63

Where was I supposed to look? He was half-naked, maybe fully naked under the water, and my stupid heart was pounding as if I'd run here from the capital.

Control yourself, woman.

Don't look at him. Don't look at the hot spring. Definitely don't imagine what's underwater.

Too late.

My face burned hotter than the steam.

I stepped back. "Let me give you some privacy, I'll wait out here."

"No need," Damien said calmly. "Since we're both men, I don't mind the company."

I blinked at him. "What?"

He gave me a blank, unreadable look. "Join me."

I opened my mouth again, disbelief spilling out. "What?!"

Damien tilted his head slightly, his tone dangerous. "Strip off your clothes and join me."

24

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12:56 Tue, Dec 23

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[1,161 words]

Chapter 64

Chapter 64

Selene

I blinked slowly, staring at the man lounging in the hot spring as if he owned not only the cave but the entire world surrounding it. My heartbeat pounded uncomfortably in my chest.

“Strip off your clothes and join me.”

For a moment, I genuinely wondered if I had misheard him. Perhaps the steam from the hot spring had distorted his words, or maybe exhaustion was finally getting to me after everything that had happened in the past weeks.

Surely he couldn't have meant that. A man like him wouldn't casually tell a stranger he thought was male to undress and bathe beside him as if it were the most natural request in the world.

Who the hell says something like that? To someone they just met? Even if I looked like a man, it didn't make sense. And I absolutely could not strip. If I did that, he'd know I was a woman. He'd know my identity. In this life, I swore I would stay far away from him. I thought if I didn't go to war against his pack, then I would never meet him again.

There would be no massacre, no last stand, and certainly no death. But as fate would have it, here we were again.

Why did destiny keep throwing him in front of me?

If I kept running from something, it kept coming back. Was I truly doomed to die by his hands in every lifetime?

I forced a smile, it was awkward, strained, and desperate. "Really, thank you for the offer," I said, voice cracking like a teenage boy, "but I'd like to decline."

Damien didn't respond immediately. He simply watched me with an unreadable expression, his eyes sharp and focused in a way that made me feel as though he could see right through my disguise.

Steam curled around his shoulders and chest, trailing down over muscles that seemed carved from stone. The water clung to his skin, dripping slowly down his abdomen, disappearing beneath the surface of the hot spring. I had no idea whether he wore anything beneath the water, and the thought alone made my face heat embarrassingly.

I looked away before my imagination started doing things that would get me killed.

Trying to recover my composure, I touched my chest lightly and added, "Even if I'm a man, I'm still a very shy one. Being naked with other men makes me extremely uncomfortable. It's practically a condition."

To my horror, his mouth curved into a small, amused smirk, a dangerous, breathtaking expression that made my stomach twist unexpectedly. He tilted his head as if examining me.

"You're quite funny," he said.

My heart nearly stopped.

"W-what?" I managed weakly.

"You claim you don't share hot springs with men you just met," he said, his tone deceptively mild, "yet you had no problem sharing a kiss with a man you just met."

My face burned so hard I thought the heat from the hot spring had somehow climbed up into my head.

Of course I had to kiss him. What else was I supposed to do? Stand there and let the guard haul me out of the cave? Let everyone discover the phoenix's release? Let everything I had planned crumble?

I kissed him because I wanted the guard to leave. It meant nothing.

12:56 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 64

And honestly, if anyone here should be offended, it should be me. After all that kiss had been my first kiss in this lifetime. I had never planned on giving it to Adrian, but the last thing I ever expected was for Alpha Damien to be the one to take it. And worse, he kissed me back with so much intensity my knees had nearly given out.

I pressed my hands against my body looking at him suspiciously. Was he interested in men? Is that why he kissed me back so easily? Is that why he didn't pull away?

My eyes drifted over him before I could stop myself. I wasn't judging him. In fact, the idea of seeing someone like him kiss another man would probably be interesting. But I wasn't a man. What if he wanted something with me because he thought I

was?

I really wanted to know what he was thinking. But no matter how hard I tried to slip into his mind, I couldn't get through. Some people were easier to read now, especially those with weak mental defenses, like Sienna. But powerful people like Adrian and the fox from the temple had stronger mental walls. I needed more effort to push past them.

But this man? It was like his mind had a massive, impenetrable wall that I couldn't get pass through. The more I pushed, the more his mind rejected me, effortlessly blocking every attempt as if I weren't even trying.

As expected of him. It was terrifying.

"Don't worry," Damien said. "I will not try anything. You're a man, after all. I just need some company."

"Right," I muttered under my breath. "A man."

I bit down on my lip, hesitating. My instincts screamed at me to stay out of the water, to keep my distance, to avoid anything that might expose me. But the longer I stood there, the more suspicious I would seem, and if there was anything I couldn't afford, it was making him suspicious.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I sighed softly to myself and said, "O-okay, I'll join you. But I'm keeping my clothes

on."

Before he could question it, I added quickly, "In contrast to your big muscles, mine are very small, and tiny. For my self-esteem, it's better if I just keep everything on. I hope you understand."

I nodded firmly at my own ridiculous lie.

Men cared about these stupid things like muscles, size, and strength. He wouldn't find it strange. And I wasn't worried about anything feminine showing; I had wrapped my chest tightly with white cloth, flattening everything enough to pass as male.

Damien simply nodded. "Fine."

I released a breath I didn't realize I had been holding and mustered a small smile as I stepped forward. I tried not to look at him. The moment my foot entered the water, a wave of heat enveloped me, sinking instantly into my muscles. A soft, involuntary sound escaped my lips.

It was heavenly.

I sank deeper into the spring, letting the water swallow me up to my shoulders, and for a brief moment, I forgot entirely that the most dangerous man alive was sitting just a few feet away until I felt his eyes on me again.

And suddenly, the hot spring didn't feel relaxing at all, it felt like stepping willingly into the jaws of a beautiful, deadly beast.

12:56 Tue, Dec 23

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- Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 65

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[1,216 words]

Chapter 65

Chapter 65

Selene

'What are you planning?' Thane's voice rumbled through my mind with obvious irritation.

'What do you mean?' I answered, keeping my tone deliberately flat.

My wolf let out the kind of exasperated growl only centuries of frustration could produce.

'Don't play dumb. This is unlike you. You never let people get this close to you. You avoid their touch, scent, and presence. And yet here you are, letting her step into the same water as you, as if you don't despise anyone sharing your space. If you're planning something unnecessary and long, just stop it and mark her. It is quick, fast, and efficient.'

I exhaled slowly through my nose, crossing my arms over my bare chest as my gaze slid to the woman across the water.

She wasn't a man. Even though she kept her clothes on, trying desperately to hide the very thing she thought she could disguise, her body betrayed her. The thin fabric clung to her curves, outlining a small waist, delicate legs, and soft hips. Even her posture looked feminine.

And still she thought she was doing a convincing job.

Thane huffed, restless. 'Look at her. Just look at her. She is ours. Every instinct in me is screaming for her. We have been alone for centuries, Damien. Centuries. And this is the first time we have felt this kind of pull toward anyone. She is—'

I shut him out before he could finish that thought.

He had been behaving strangely ever since she crashed into our path, and I wasn't about to let an emotional wolf dictate my actions. Yes, she was intriguing. More intriguing than anyone I had encountered in a long, long time. But that didn't mean I

la was going to act on impulse. That was his nature, not mine.

Across from me, she let out a forced laugh.

"Haha, look at us," she said, her voice pitched just a little too high. "Men to men bonding. It's quite nice, don't you think?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. She had no idea how to act around me, and she was failing horribly.

"Bonding?" I echoed. "You're quite far away for someone who wants to bond.

She flinched, her throat bobbing as she struggled to swallow. When she finally forced herself to meet my eyes, I saw her

nervous gaze.

She had seen my eyes flash red earlier. She knew exactly who I was. And yet she was pretending not to.

Ordinarily, anyone outside my pack who caught a glimpse of my true identity never lived to describe it. Their lives ended before their screams could fully form. I wanted to see how long she would keep up this absurd act.

"Oh, I-I'm only far because we're men," she stammered. "If we sit too close, it will be awkward for us. You know... man to man."

Her voice faltered at the end. I let my eyes drift lazily down her soaked figure before returning to her face.

“Don’t worry,” I said, my tone as indifferent. “It wouldn’t be awkward for me.”

Before she could react, I moved.

I closed the distance between us in a single step, letting the water ripple around my waist as I approached her. She gasped, her breath catching sharply in her throat at the sudden proximity. Her wide eyes flicked up to mine before she panicked and

12:56 Tue,

Chapter 65

twisted her head away, heat rushing across her cheeks.

“What are-” she began

I didn’t let her finish. I lifted one hand and placed my fingers beneath her chin, tilting her face back toward me. Her skin was soft for someone trying so hard to pretend she was a man. With my other hand, I braced myself against the cold marble wall behind her, effectively caging her between my body and the stone.

She froze, and a tremor ran through her. Her breath hitched, her lashes fluttered, and that startled look in her eyes was intoxicating.

I leaned in until we were mere inches apart. Close enough to feel the warmth of her breath brush across my lips. Close enough that if I tilted my head even slightly, our mouths would touch. But this time, I didn’t kiss her.

I wanted something else.

I let my eyes shift until they glowed, focusing on her completely. I had tried to read her the other day, but it hadn't worked. Now, if I paid full attention, I should be able to do it this time. I told myself, but it was still the same. All I saw was white. A void that swallowed everything I tried to reach for.

I frowned. No one had ever been able to block my sight before.

What are you?

I was still deep in thought when she squeezed her eyes shut.

I blinked, and did the most ridiculous thing I had ever seen.

She leaned forward, lips slightly puckered, as if offering a kiss. I tilted my head slowly, watching her with something dangerously close to amusement.

"What," I murmured, "are you doing?"

Her eyes snapped open and she jerked back so suddenly she splashed water between us. Her face flushed crimson. When she saw the faint smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth, her mortification doubled.

"N-nothing!" she blurted, voice cracking. "I wasn't doing anything."

She shook her head vigorously, as if trying to stay composed. Then she inhaled sharply and lifted her chin.

"I think that's enough hot spring for today," she declared.

She pressed a hand to my chest and pushed. I allowed the movement, taking a single step back, still watching her.

She bolted out of the water almost immediately.

The moment she stood, water cascaded down her body, soaking the clothes she kept on until the fabric clung to her small frame.

She shivered violently as the cold air hit her wet clothes.

“Goddess...” she muttered under her breath, unaware I heard every word. “Maybe it wasn’t a smart idea to enter with my

clothes on after all.”

I dragged a hand through my wet hair, pushing it back as I rose from the water. The movement sent droplets cascading down my shoulders, running in slow trails across my chest and following the rigid lines of muscle down to my abdomen.

Her eyes followed every single one.

Chapter 65

I stepped out of the spring and reached for the towel resting on a flat rock. Without looking at her, I tossed it in her direction. It slapped softly against her chest, and she fumbled to catch it, nearly dropping it before gripping it tightly. Her gaze snapped back to me as if she wasn’t sure what to do.

Meanwhile, I took another towel and ran it slowly through my hair, and pointed toward a neatly folded set of dry shirt on a nearby rock.

“Change,” I said, my voice low and emotionless. “And leave. The guards should have gone by now.”

I turned away from her without waiting for a response, walking deeper into the cave, the sound of my footsteps echoing softly against the stone walls.

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[1,299 words]

Chapter 66

Chapter 66

Selene

I always told myself that in this lifetime, I would never allow myself to act like the shy, stupid, careless woman I used to be. But clearly the universe found that hilarious, because the moment I stepped into that cave with Alpha Damien, all of my determination to stay calm vanished.

I had been acting like an idiot from the moment our eyes met.

I couldn't think straight. I couldn't even lie smoothly, and lying was something I had mastered so well I could do it half- asleep. But around him? My mind felt like it had been tossed in the mud until everything sensible spilled out.

I didn't understand why.

Maybe it was nerves. Anyone with a brain would be nervous around the Demon Alpha of the West. Or maybe it was because of something else. Because every time he came

close to me, every time he spoke, every time his eyes locked onto mine, something in my chest tightened.

My body reacted without my permission, and it was infuriating.

When he walked away and left me in the cave, I pressed a hand hard against my chest, trying to force my heartbeat to calm down. It thudded wildly beneath my palm, refusing to listen. His scent still clung to the air, and when I picked up his shirt, the smell of him flooded around me so strongly that my knees nearly buckled.

I buried my face in the collar and then jerked back, appalled at myself.

“Get it together, Selene,” I muttered, pressing my palm to my forehead. “It’s lust, nothing more. The man is handsome and any normal person with functioning eyes would be affected. That’s all. Don’t forget who he is, and what he’s capable of.”

I peeled off my soaked shirt, the cold fabric touching my skin as I removed it, and folded it tightly before shoving it into my bag. Then I slipped his shirt over my head, and the moment it settled onto my shoulders, I exhaled sharply.

I tightened the fabric around my waist, tucking some of the excess into my pants so I wouldn’t drown in it. Luckily, Evelyn had insisted I bring an extra pair of pants just in case, and for once, I silently thanked her for overthinking. I put the dry pants on, adjusted my bindings.

With everything finally in place, I stole one last look toward the deeper part of the cave where Damien had disappeared.

I didn’t know what he was doing or why he let me go so easily. And I absolutely refused to think about it any longer.

Swinging my bag over my shoulder, I walked away, stepped toward the entrance, and slipped out of the cave before my thoughts could betray me any further.

Damien

I sat on the broad slab of stone near the back of the cave, leaning my shoulders into the cold surface. The cave had already fallen into silence. Which meant she was gone.

Good.

Or at least that was what I told myself.

I tapped my fingers idly against the rock, the soft rhythmic sound echoing across the walls. Thane simmered restlessly beneath my skin, his disapproval humming like a low

growl in the back of my mind. He didn't like that I had let her leave, that I hadn't followed whatever unreasonable instinct he was tugging me toward.

Chapter 66

He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. I could feel every ounce of his irritation.

"I know you're there," I said finally, not bothering to raise my voice. "Come out."

Nothing happened for a moment before a low amused chuckle rang through, followed by a deep, and far too self-satisfied

voice.

"As expected," he drawled, stepping into view with a lazy gait. "You're the only one who can notice me even when I conceal my presence."

I opened my eyes slowly. The phoenix stood before me with a human form, he clearly hadn't grown used to yet, his shoulders were relaxed, stance loose, expression dripping with arrogance. His hair, a vivid burning red, glowed brilliantly even in the dark.

I tilted my head slightly.

He lifted an eyebrow and scoffed. "Wait, don't tell me you don't recognize me. Is it the human form? Or did you finally forget me after all these years?"

"Phoenix," I said. "I remember you."

His smirk sharpened with satisfaction.

"I just don't know why you took a human form."

He shrugged. "Something happened, for now, I'll be staying like this."

His eyes swept over me before narrowing slightly.

"What I don't know," he continued, "is whether I should be more surprised that you were casually talking to another person, or that the woman you were talking to is the one who freed me."

I said nothing. He clicked his tongue and grinned. "As expected, you're still cold."

His smile widened a fraction, a dangerous edge glinting at the corner of his mouth. "Let's see, then. Are you still as strong as you once were? Or have you grown rusty over the years?"

He didn't wait for an answer. His shoulders rolled back, muscles shifting beneath the human skin he wore, and enormous wings began to unfurl from his back. But before he could take a single step toward me, my blade was already at his neck.

He froze, eyes flicking down to the blade pressed against his throat. Then, slowly, he lifted his gaze back to mine.

"You know, that blade like that can't kill me."

"That's why I'm still sitting," I replied calmly. "If I wanted you dead, I would have bothered to stand."

For a long moment he held my gaze, measuring something behind my eyes. Then he exhaled sharply through his nose, his grin shifting into something more genuine.

"You're still as strong as ever, Damien."

Centuries ago, when I wandered too close to phoenix territory, he attacked me without warning. And I subdued him in minutes. He came at me again. I subdued him again. Each time he came at me, he lost every time, but instead of keeping his distance, he began following me, constantly demanding rematches, constantly complaining when he lost, constantly provoking me just to see if I would finally take him seriously.

I didn't mind him back then. He wasn't a threat to my pack, and that was the only thing that mattered to me. He was loud, ridiculous, and irritating.

Chapter 66

One day, he was attacked, and I arrived too late. By the time I reached him, he was already sealed and taken away.

I crossed my arms, studying the red-haired form in front of me. "Did she make a deal with you?"

Lucas nodded without hesitation. "She did."

"Are you going to keep it?"

Another nod, and his mouth curled into that insufferable smirk he always wore whenever he found something amusing. "At least for now. She's... interesting. More interesting than anyone I've met in centuries. And judging from how you treated her, she's even more interesting than you want to admit."

The phoenix tilted his head, eyes gleaming. "Who is she to you?"

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“Well. I’ll eventually find out.”

He turned slightly, as if preparing to leave, then paused mid-step. “Oh, and about her, she said she was...” He trailed off deliberately, watching my expression, before waving a hand dismissively. “Actually, telling you would spoil the fun. You’ll figure it out yourself.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he only grinned wider.

“And by the way,” he added, “my name is not Phoenix for now. Call me Lucas.”

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 67

[1,097 words]

Chapter 67

Chapter 67

Selene

A few days had passed since what happened in the cave. After leaving the cave, I made it home completely undetected, which was fortunate, considering the chaos that followed the phoenix's release.

As expected, the entire Mooncrest pack had been thrown into a frenzy. People whispered in tight corners, warriors stalked through the street with tense shoulders, and the elders held meeting after meeting with white, terrified faces. Even my father, who normally pretended not to care about anything unless it benefitted him, had attended every meeting without

fail.

When they finally confirmed that the flash of light in the mountains belonged to the sealed phoenix, they panicked even more. They were terrified, every pack was, not just Mooncrest, but alphas across the entire world were holding emergency meetings. Their ancestors had been involved in the battle that sealed him centuries ago, and now they feared the phoenix would rise from the ashes seeking vengeance.

And the temple was no different. Everyone had spent the past two days reinforcing barriers, preparing purification circles, and updating evacuation protocols as if the phoenix was going to descend from the sky at any moment and reduce the holy grounds to dust because it was the moonborn that sealed the phoenix. If he wanted revenge, he was obviously coming here

first.

So now the temple was barricaded, warriors patrolled day and night, and the elders jumped at the sound of their own footsteps.

I had to stop myself from laughing more than once.

If they knew the so-called harbinger of destruction was simply wandering around somewhere in a human form, probably causing trouble or annoying someone unfortunate enough to cross him, they would faint on the spot. And if they knew I was the one who released him, and worse, made a pact with him, they would lose their minds.

Alphas around the world would fear me. Elders would panic. My father would try to control me. And Sienna would scheme harder than ever.

It was better this way. Let them run around preparing for an attack that would never come.

Still, every time I remembered the cave, my lips tingled, and my face warmed uncontrollably.

“Lady Selene, are you okay?” Evelyn’s voice cut sharply through my spiraling thoughts.

I jerked my head up to see both Evelyn and Silas staring at me, worry written all over their faces.

“Your face is red,” Evelyn said, stepping closer as if she were about to take my temperature. “Did something happen? Do you have a fever? Maybe we should go inside. It’s been snowing nonstop since yesterday, your body must be freezing. We shouldn’t be outside this long-”

“I’m fine,” I said.

Her worry only deepened. “A-are you sure?”

I coughed lightly, trying to hide the ridiculous blush heating my skin. “It’s nothing. I’m okay, really. You don’t have to

worry.”

They continued staring at me, unconvinced.

Evelyn finally exhaled. “My lady, maybe you should wear a coat. What you’re wearing is far too light for this weather.” Her gaze drifted over my clothes, a simple pair of pants and shirt. My hair was tied up in a high ponytail, already dusted with falling snow. Compared to Evelyn, wrapped in a thick fur-lined winter coat, boots, gloves, and scarf, I probably looked

12.56

Chapter 67

insane wearing this.

It was winter. Normal people wore coats.

I shook my head and turned to Silas instead. “I’m fine. Besides...” I lifted the sword in my hand, letting the metal catch the pale morning light. “How am I supposed to help Silas practice if I’m wrapped in a giant coat? I won’t even be able to move properly.”

Silas and Evelyn exchanged a look. They were both conflicted, clearly trying to think of a polite way to tell me I’m insane.

Evelyn was the first to speak. “Are you certain about this, my lady? Silas is a trained warrior. You might injure yourself. You’ve never used a real sword before. Maybe you should start with a wooden one.”

Silas nodded immediately. "I agree, my lady. I don't want to injure you."

The corner of my lips curled upward. "It's funny that you think you could even put a scratch on me."

Silas visibly flinched. His shoulders stiffened, eyes widening as he clearly remembered everything that had happened in the courtyard, where I had kept everyone on their knees.

I continued, voice calm but firm. "I understand why you're worried. But do not underestimate me. Let's spar and see for ourselves whether you can beat me or not."

Silas took a breath before bowing his head slightly. "Yes, my lady."

I stepped back, giving him space, the snow crunching lightly under my boots.

Evelyn turned to Silas with a very specific look, the kind she only used when threatening him in the name of protecting me. Her eyes narrowed, and I read her mind. 'Don't forget what we planned. Go easy on her.'"

Silas gave a nod, clearly understanding her message without a single word spoken between them.

I couldn't help but smile. They really did care about me in their own way.

Mira's voice hummed inside my mind, soft but tinged with amusement. 'Go easy on him, Selene. I know you. You're ruthless when training your soldiers. Don't break him.'

I shrugged. "We'll see about that."

During those days of chaos, Mira woke up, regaining her strength.

I hadn't asked Silas to spar with me just for fun. There were two reasons, and both were important.

First, I wanted to train Silas properly. He was a good fighter, but during the fight with Arthur, I noticed cracks in his stance. Small flaws that, in a real battle, could get him killed. Yes, he had his wolf to fall back on, but I knew better than anyone how dangerous it was to rely solely on that. When Mira had been poisoned in my past lives, I lost access to my wolf and had to fight with my own strength. That's why I hadn't been killed quickly at the beginning.

And second, I wanted to test myself.

I wanted to know exactly how strong I had become in this lifetime.

With Mira awake, my memories restored, and the power of the white wolf flowing stronger than ever, I needed to see what I was capable of with my own hands.

And Silas was the perfect starting point.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 68

[1,443 words]

Chapter 68

Chapter 68

Selene

Whack!

The sound of metal striking flesh echoed through the courtyard.

My blade had only hit Silas with the flat side, yet the impact was strong enough that his entire body jerked sideways. He groaned, stumbling, his boots grinding against the stone as he struggled to keep himself from falling. His breath hitched in his throat, but before he could fully steady himself, I moved.

In one quick motion, I slid forward, twisted my wrist, and kicked the sword out of his hand. It flew from his grip easily, clattering loudly across the courtyard floor. His eyes widened, completely caught off guard, and that small moment of hesitation was all I needed.

I pivoted and hit him square in the stomach with the heel of my foot. Right where his stance had been weakest.

He folded with a harsh exhale and finally collapsed onto the ground, snow puffing around him. Before he could even attempt to rise, I stepped forward and pressed the tip of my blade lightly against his chest.

“I win,” I said simply.

Silas just stared up at me, breathing hard, eyes wide. He didn’t even blink. He looked as if he couldn’t decide whether to be shocked, impressed, or terrified.

The entire courtyard fell into absolute silence.

Evelyn didn’t move or breathe. She stood frozen in place with her mouth hanging open, looking at me as though I had suddenly grown a second head.

‘I warned you to hold back, Selene. Now look at them. You’ve practically traumatized them.’ Mira chuckled.

I smirked and lifted the sword away from Silas’s chest. ‘I did hold back. If I hadn’t, he wouldn’t have lasted a single minute. I just needed to see how good he was.’

I turned to Evelyn, lowering the blade. “Water, please.”

Evelyn blinked rapidly, as if waking from a trance, before rushing toward me with the waterskin clutched in her hands. She held it out stiffly, still staring. I uncorked it and drank slowly, the cold water/soothing my dry throat.

Evelyn wasn’t looking at the water. She was staring at me, then at Silas. And at me again, horror and disbelief fighting for dominance on her face.

Finally, she whispered, voice cracking a little, “S-Silas.... you went easy on Lady Selene, right? You have to tell me you went easy on her. There is no possible way my delicate lady could just beat you like that. So you....” She gulped and pointed at him helplessly. “You went easy on her. Right?”

Silas looked from her to me and then slowly shook his head.

Evelyn gasped so sharply it echoed. “Oh my goddess, are you saying she actually beat you?!” She whipped her head toward me, eyes wide and sparkling with shock. “My lady! Where did you learn how to fight like that? I know I shouldn’t say this but that was amazing! You didn’t even look like you were using all your strength!”

I closed the waterskin and handed it back to her, shrugging casually as if this were nothing special. “That’s because I wasn’t.”

Her jaw dropped even further.

ue, Dec 23

Chapter 68

I turned toward Silas, who still sat on the ground looking like the world had tilted sideways. His face was flushed, and breathing uneven. I studied him for a moment, wondering if he was embarrassed that I had beaten him so easily, or a gry at himself for failing.

I stepped closer and held out my hand. "Here, let me help you up."

Silas stared at my hand, but instead of taking it, he shifted onto his knees and bowed his head so low his forehead nearly touched the snow.

"My lady..." His voice darkened with resolve. "Please teach me."

Evelyn and I both froze.

He lifted his head enough to look at me, eyes unwavering. "Please teach me how to fight. Having fought you, I know how skilled you are, and how foolish it was for me to even think of going easy on you. You were holding back from the beginning. It felt like you were testing me."

He clenched his fist against his knee.

"Please train me. I want to become strong enough to protect you. Even if I can't protect you, then at least, let me become someone capable of fighting at your side."

I stared at him, momentarily speechless.

This was the longest I had ever heard Silas speak at once. The man was always so quiet, and composed, keeping his thoughts buried somewhere deep where no one could reach them. And yet here he was, humble enough to admit his shortcomings, but determined enough to want to change, and brave enough to ask for help despite the difference in our gender and age.

Men like him went far, and survived.

When the day came that I no longer stood beside him, I wanted him to stand strong on his own.

A small smile tugged at my lips.

"Silas," I said. "You have a very nice voice."

He blinked in confusion, eyes widening. "W-what?"

I laughed under my breath and repeated, "Your voice. You should use it more. Evelyn and I wouldn't mind hearing it." I turned slightly toward her. "Right, Evelyn?"

Evelyn went scarlet instantly, her hands flying to her cheeks. "Y-yes! It's, um-it's very manly." Her voice cracked at the word, and she looked like she desperately wanted to jump behind a tree and hide.

I nearly laughed outright.

Evelyn was adorable when she was flustered, and Sila's ears were pink now too.

I extended my hand toward Silas again. "You don't need to ask me to train you. I was already planning to do that from the

start."

Silas stared at my hand for a moment in something like gratitude, before he finally reached out and took it. His large hand wrapped around mine, and I helped pull him to his feet. When he stood, both he and Evelyn were looking at me with respect and awe.

They must have had a thousand questions about what just happened, but they said nothing. They knew some things were

better left unanswered for now.

I opened my mouth to speak, but a loud voice cracked through the courtyard.

12:57 Tue, Dec 23 MG.

Chapter 68

"Selene!"

I paused, already irritated, and slowly turned toward the source of the shout.

A familiar middle-aged man stood rigidly at the entrance, his expression twisted in that same disapproval I remembered all too well. Standing behind him, practically glowing with self-satisfaction, was Sienna,

Of course, Joseph.

His presence alone made me want to throw up. Joseph had been the assistant to my moonborn tutor in my past lives, a role that should have made him supportive, and helpful. Instead, he had spent nearly every breath he took tearing me down. To him, I had always been a useless, undeserving mistake of a moonborn, while Sienna could do no wrong.

To this day, I suspected his bias toward her wasn't even about her talent. He simply worshipped her. He was the perfect little puppet to her.

I crossed my arms, leveling him with an unimpressed stare.

Joseph's face hardened even more the moment he looked at me. "All the things I've heard about you were correct," he spat. "I still cannot believe someone like you is the moonborn. You will waste Lady Isabella's training. You will waste everyone's time. Look at yourself, dressed like a boy, playing around with your maid and your guard, what a disgrace. You are a—"

I turned away before he could even finish.

He didn't deserve my attention. Instead, I looked at Evelyn. "Let's get changed for the moonborn training."

Her eyes sparkled, and she bowed slightly. "Yes, Moonborn."

I almost snorted aloud. Evelyn never called me that. She had always called me Lady Selene, even after the entire pack discovered my identity as the moonborn. But she was doing it on purpose, rubbing the title in Sienna and Joseph's face like salt in a wound.

Joseph's mouth snapped shut. He stared at me as though he couldn't comprehend the gall of being ignored.

He opened his mouth again, probably to scold me or insult me again, but I'd already turned my back fully and started walking toward my room. On my way out, I caught the tiny, triumphant smirk spreading across Sienna's face.

I rolled my eyes.

I didn't have the patience or interest for background characters.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 69

[1,386 words]

Chapter 69

Chapter 69

Sienna

I pressed my lips into a trembling pout, lowering my gaze. “A-are you sure I can be here?” I whispered, letting my fingers twist into my skirt. “I don’t want to put you in trouble, Tutor Joseph.”

Joseph’s expression softened as he stepped closer. “Of course you can stay here. Everyone knows you are the one who should have been the moonborn. You should be the one sitting here in the first place.”

I widened my eyes just slightly, feigning surprise and humility.

He continued, his words growing sharper with every breath. “I have no idea what she did to claim that title, but I will not allow this nonsense to continue. You will train with her. I will personally speak to the Mistress. I’m sure she will agree to tutor you.”

He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I pretended to look uneasy.

“I’ll return shortly, I will go and bring the mistress,” he said, already walking toward the temple entrance. “Stay here.”

“Y-yes, Tutor Joseph...” I murmured.

The moment he was gone, my entire expression fell apart. The sweetness melted off my face. My jaw tightened. My fingers stopped trembling and curled instead into claws around my skirt.

I exhaled sharply through my nose. Pretending was becoming harder by the day. The fragile act of innocence that once came so easily now felt like a mask pressing against my skin, cracking at the edges.

Everything I planned, everything I deserved, kept falling apart one by one. And it was all because of Selene.

I gritted my teeth. That bitch. That useless, quiet little shadow of a girl had become the moonborn. The role that was meant for me. The future I had dreamed of, fought for, manipulated for was gone. And not only that, she had also become Adiran's

mate.

My stomach twisted at the thought. It had been my dream to stand beside Adirán as Luna of the pack. I had already imagined our life, our status, the admiration, the power. It was supposed to be/mine.

Never in all my life did I think Selene would be a threat. She was nothing but a disappointment. A girl whose only purpose was to be stepped on.

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If I had known she was something more, if I had known she would rise above me, I would have done something. But now she was changing. She wasn't the silent, trembling girl anymore. She spoke back. People listened, and feared her.

My chest tightened, breath hitching as I clutched my dress so hard the threads strained and popped.

"My lady," Emma whispered behind me, her voice shaky, "you will tear the dress."

I blinked down at it, realizing I was crushing the fabric in my grip. I slowly loosened my hold, trying to control my breathing.

Emma stepped closer. "Don't worry, Lady Sienna. Everything will be fine. You are you. Even if something doesn't go your way, you always make it go your way. You won't let someone like that girl take your place."

I let out a cold, humorless laugh. "She already has."

Emma straightened her shoulders with a firmness I rarely saw from her. "Then take it back."

She stepped beside me, lowering her voice.

12:57 Tue, Dec 23 M

Chapter 69

“Everyone may call her the moonborn...” Emma said, “but they still see you as the true one. Everyone may know she is Adiran’s mate, but everyone still believes you two are meant for each other. Don’t allow someone like her steal everything from you.”

A slow smile curved at my lips.

She was right. Selene had taken what was mine, and I was going to take it back.

“What an interesting idea your maid has.” The lazy, almost bored voice drifted through the air.

I froze.

My breath caught in my throat as I slowly lifted my head, and Selene was standing a few steps away, arms crossed loosely over her chest, expression flat and unreadable, as if she were staring at something entirely beneath her interest.

Behind her stood her maid and guard. They both looked at Emma as if they were one breath away from tearing her apart. Selene shifted her gaze to her.

Emma stumbled back, visibly shaking.

I clenched my jaw. That useless girl had never hesitated to spit venom at Selene before, she did my dirty work, insulted her, pushed her around, talked down to her as if she were dirt beneath our shoes. But now, just one look from Selene could scare her.

What happened to her? What did Selene do to make my maid so terrified?

My pulse thudded loudly in my ears. I swallowed it down quickly and forced my sweetest smile.

“Selene,” I breathed, voice gentle. “You’re here. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Her face remained completely blank, as if my voice never even reached her.

“And, I apologize for my maid. She tends to speak without thinking. She didn’t mean any of that. Isn’t that right, Emma?”

Emma’s head bobbed quickly. “Y-yes, my lady. It was nonsense. I wouldn’t dare say such things.”

“I’ll punish my maid, don’t take offense.”

Selene's eyes flicked to me, cold and amused, as if she were watching an animal try to pretend it was human. Then she turned away, completely dismissing me. She walked to the cushion on the floor, sat elegantly, and arranged her dress around her legs with a calmness that grated under my skin.

I found myself staring, studying her. I had noticed, but refused to accept it.

She was becoming more beautiful.

Her skin glowed, her cursed hair shone, her posture held a confidence she never used to have, and her curves had grown softer, and more feminine.

Why did she get to grow more beautiful?

My fingers curled so tightly the nails dug into my palm. But I forced out a soft laugh, brushing imaginary dust from my skirt. "I hope you're not annoyed that I'm here. Tutor Joseph insisted I attend. I kept saying no. I'm sorry, I should have refused."

She said nothing.

I widened my smile, though I felt it tremble.

12:57 Tue, Dec 23 MG

Chapter 69

"Well, this isn't too bad." I said, trying to sound cheerful. "At least we can spend some time together. It's been so long since we did. But it's like you don't want to see me. Every time I visit your courtyard, your maid says you aren't accepting visitors. Are you avoiding me?"

"You could say that." Selene said.

"W-why? Is it because of the coming-of-age ceremony? You know I didn't mean any of that. I was nervous. I didn't want to disappoint anyone. Don't let something little like that ruin our relationship."

Selene sighed like she was tired of listening to me talk. She turned her head and looked directly at me.

"You don't have to pretend around me anymore, Sienna."

"I'm sure pretending to be nice must be exhausting. Especially in front of someone you actually hate."

My face went hot at her comment. Selene's lips curled upward slightly, as if my humiliation was funny.

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but the sudden sound of approaching footsteps filled the room.

My expression shifted instantly. I scrambled to compose myself too, quickly smoothing my skirt, painting a flawless smile over my burning cheeks.

Joseph entered first, and behind him, was an old woman. She looked ninety at least, her hair white, her back straight, her presence commanding. Her eyes swept across the room.

This must be the moonborn tutor.

I stood up quickly, smiling warmly, but the woman wasn't looking at me. She stopped walking, and stared straight at Selene. Her gaze lingered there on my sister and my teeth pressed together so hard I nearly bit my tongue

Why was she staring at Selene?

Joseph cleared his throat awkwardly, stepping forward.

"This is Mistress Isabella," he announced proudly. "The Moonborn tutor. Mistress, this is-

"Joseph," Isabella said without taking her eyes off Selene, her voice low and deadly. "Do you have a death wish?"

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 70

[1,444 words]

Chapter 70

Chapter 70

Selene

“Do you have a death wish?”

Isabella’s voice cracked through the room like lightning, sharp enough to make the walls feel smaller. I looked at her, and despite all my lifetimes, she hadn’t changed at all.

Same hard stone face. Same commanding presence.

Same sharp eyes that saw through everything.

She was still Isabella.

Her family line had served the moonborn long before any of us were born. Generations dedicated to training the moonborn. Only the best among them were ever allowed to train a moonborn, and Isabella had been the one to train my mother. And in all my past lives, she trained me.

She was strict, and cold. She didn’t care about status, power or rumors. She spoke what she believed, and she never sugarcoated anything. She’d scolded the alpha without blinking. She’d thrown elders out of lessons for interfering. She did whatever she wanted.

Yet she was one of the few people who treated me with fairness. When the entire pack whispered that Sienna should have been the moonborn, Isabella was the only one who didn’t listen.

“The moon goddess does not make mistakes,” she’d said.

For once, I wasn’t expecting it, but I felt warmth rise in my chest at seeing her again.

Joseph, on the other hand, looked like his soul had left his body.

“M-mistress,” he stammered, “w-what did I do?”

Isabella finally tore her gaze away from me and turned toward him. The glare she fixed on him could have sliced stone.

“What did you do?” she repeated slowly. She was too calm, and that kind of calm meant danger. “Are you truly saying you don’t know what you did?”

Joseph swallowed, his hands shook, and his feet shifted on the floor as if he wanted to bolt but didn’t dare.

He lifted one trembling hand and pointed at Sienna.

“M-mistress, I know only the moonborn should be allowed to be tutored, but, even though Selene is the moonborn, Sienna is-” he hesitated, then pushed out the words, “Sienna is even more powerful. And I believe she has the capacity to be useful to the pack if you train her as well.”

“Tutor Joseph, please, don’t say that. Selene is powerful too. She is the moonborn. Maybe... I shouldn’t have come.” Sienna said.

The performance was almost impressive.

I stared at the two of them, wondering whether I should feel disgusted or simply amused. Their act was so ridiculous. Sienna, feigning reluctance she didn’t possess, and Joseph, puffing up like a good person.

Joseph shook his head quickly.

“No, no, don’t say that, Sienna,” he insisted. “It is just a white wolf. Everyone knows that doesn’t mean anything. Capacity

12:57 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 70

and strength matter more, and you are far more capable than her. You’ve achieved so many things in the past. I don’t believe having a white wolf makes someone better than others.”

He lifted his chin proudly, as if he’d said something profound. “That was why I brought Sienna too, Mistress, so you can-

CRACK!

A deafening slap echoed through the entire hall.

Joseph's head snapped sideways. His body followed a second later, stumbling as he lost balance and landed flat on his ass on the floor. He stayed frozen there, one hand clutching his rapidly swelling cheek, eyes wide with disbelief.

The room fell into complete silence.

Behind me. Evelyn choked out a strangled whisper, "Ah-did you see that? How does she have that much strength?"

My lips curled upward. "That's Isabella for you. She may be old, but she has more strength than most people can dream of"

I turned my gaze to the old woman, and she looked nothing like her usual calm, stone-faced self. Isabella's hand was still suspended mid-air, shaking with fury. Her breaths came heavy with rage as she stared down at Joseph like he had personally offended her.

Which, in her eyes, he had.

Evelyn leaned closer behind me, whispering, "Why is she so angry...?"

I didn't look back. My gaze stayed on Isabella.

"Joseph disrespected the moonborn," I said quietly.

That was the thing about Isabella's bloodline. They were a powerful family. They might not bow to alphas. They might not care about status or politics. But they were loyal to the moonborns. And that was because centuries ago a moonborn saved Isabella's ancestor. Ever since then, her entire family line swore loyalty to the moonborn. It was a vow passed down generation to generation.

Isabella might be strict with training, but outside of lessons, she treated me like royalty. She never met my gaze directly. She bowed when I entered the room. She corrected anyone who spoke to me without respect.

So for Joseph, a mere assistant to dismiss the white wolf in front of her, it was the same as insulting her family's sacred duty.

Honestly, this was exactly why I hadn't bothered shutting Joseph up earlier. Men like him always dug their own graves. And Isabella never hesitated to push them straight into it.

"M-mistress..." Joseph whispered, voice trembling.

“You fool!” she snapped. “How dare you speak so disrespectfully about the moonborn? Have you forgotten your training?”

Joseph flinched as though she had slapped him again.

“The moonborn is the chosen child of the Moon Goddess,” Isabella continued, fury vibrating through every word. “By denying her, you deny the Moon Goddess herself. Have you no fear of the goddess’s wrath upon your own head?”

Joseph sank to the floor. His lips trembled. “I—I didn’t mean it like that, Mistress. I apologise. I must be out of my mind. Please forgive me.”

“Forgive?” Isabella scoffed. “I will never forgive you for such an insult. You will be imprisoned until my family decides your

fate.”

“Guards!” Isabella barked. “Take him to my family house.”

ue, Dec 23

Chapter 70

Two guards hurried in, grabbing Joseph by the arms.

“No! Please!” he shouted, twisting uselessly in their grip. His eyes shot to me. “Moonborn, please! I apologise for my words. Please beg for me. Please be merciful!”

I tilted my head at him, and read his mind.

‘It’s this bitch fault! But I heard that girl is a nice idiot. She will beg if I ask her to.

His thoughts were as clear as the disgust I felt for him.

In my past lives, Joseph insulted me, humiliated me, dismissed me. And every time Isabella tried to punish him, I begged for him like a fool.

Isabella’s eyes flicked toward me, watching.

Would I repeat my past mistake?

I looked at Joseph’s shaking form and felt nothing.

“Me?” I said softly, pointing at myself. “Beg?”

He blinked rapidly. “Y-yes!”

I shrugged. "I don't think I can do that."

"Why not?!"

"You said it yourself, didn't you?" I said, repeating his earlier words back to him with a sweet tone. "Capacity and strength matter more. And since I apparently have none of that, I can't possibly help. Maybe you should ask someone who does."

Joseph's face turned white.

He jerked his head toward Sienna. "Lady Sienna, please-"

Sienna turned her face away, pretending she didn't hear him at all. He looked back at her in betrayal. The guards dragged him toward the door, his pleas echoing, growing weaker with each step.

I watched him leave. Isabella inhaled slowly, controlling the last remnants of her rage before turning her gaze to Sienna.

"I would like to ask you to leave, Lady Sienna," she said. "Only the moonborn is allowed in my lessons."

Sienna stiffened. I could see the humiliation burst across her face. But Isabella's stare left no room for protest.

Sienna forced a shaky smile and bowed her head.

"I-I understand, Mistress Isabella."

No, she didn't. But she had no choice.

She gathered what was left of her dignity and turned sharply, hurrying out with Emma trailing behind her like a frightened mouse. I watched her leave in absolute silence, almost tripping over her own feet in embarrassment.

When the doors closed behind her, Isabella turned toward me. And despite her age, she lowered her head in a deep, respectful bow.

"I would like to apologise to you for my assistant's behavior. I will ensure he faces appropriate punishment. He has gravely insulted you."

12:57 Tue, Dec 23

Chapter 70

“It’s okay, since that is taken care of...” I stood up, straightened my back, and bowed my head slightly. “I am Selene Bloodrose, your new student. Please take care of me.”

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