

Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 71

[1,233 words]

Chapter 71

Chapter 71

Selene

Isabella stared at the paper on the floor, then at me, then back at the paper again, as if her eyes were failing her after ninety years of service.

Honestly, I couldn't blame her. The bold, glowing word I had written sat perfectly centered on the blessed parchment. I offered her a calm smile, but she didn't return it. She simply lifted a trembling finger and pointed at the paper.

"Did you... did you just do that?"

"Yes," I answered. "I followed your instructions just now and did it."

Her eyes widened again and she leaned slightly closer, inspecting the strokes as if they might suddenly fade away and reveal that I'd cheated.

"Impossible." Isabella straightened, her brows dropping into a frown. "Even if you followed my instructions perfectly, this level of spiritual control cannot be achieved on the first day." She shook her head. "It takes months. Even the most talented students struggle to make a single stroke appear."

She looked from the glowing ink to my face. "And yet, you completed a full word that should take months to learn in one attempt?"

I nodded again. She stared at me as if she were trying to solve a puzzle.

I understood what she was talking about, because in my past lives, this exact stage had tortured me for an entire year.

Writing a single word on a blessed scroll sounded simple, but it wasn't. The parchment rejected weak spiritual energy no matter how many times you tried. You needed perfect focus, a clean thread between body and spirit. And back then, I had none of that. But now it was easy.

“I guess you can call it luck,” I said, giving the simplest explanation I could manage.

Isabella finally exhaled, shoulders easing as she straightened her back and forced her composure to return.

“This is very good,” she said, her tone returning to its usual dignified manner, though her eyes still sparkled with awe. “You are the first Moonborn in history to complete this on the first try.”

I dipped my head politely. “Thank you, Mistress.”

She cleared her throat, slipping back into her strict demeanor. “Our lesson is over for today. I will take my leave now.”

She stood, and I rose immediately after her. “Make sure to take care of yourself,” I added.

Her eyes lifted to mine, and she gave a nod. Without another word, she turned and walked out of the room.

When she finally left, I stretched my arms above my head, feeling the stiffness in my shoulders loosen. For someone who barely moved during lessons, she somehow managed to make my entire body tense just by existing.

Behind me, Evelyn practically bounced on her toes.

“My lady, you’re amazing. I heard even the first training is difficult, and yet you cleared it without much effort.”

I glanced at her. “Effort... I wouldn’t say I didn’t use much effort.”

“W-what?” she blinked.

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“Nothing,” I said, waving it off. “Let’s go back to the room. I need to replenish my brain cells after talking to those dumb people.”

Evelyn nodded immediately. “Yes, my lady”

Silas, who had been standing guard outside the hall, silently fell into step behind me as we walked toward my courtyard

The moment the servants saw me, they lowered their heads.

Even the guards who hadn't bothered to show an ounce of respect in the arena the other day were now bowing deeply, their eyes fixed on the floor. None of them dared look at me or Silas directly. Sila's status had upgraded the moment I became the Moonborn.

Fear was a wonderful tool.

We reached my room, and just as I was about to open the door, a familiar presence washed over me.

I paused.

Evelyn looked at me, worried. "My lady? What is wrong?"

"Don't freak out."

"What do you mean by that?"

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I didn't answer. Instead, I opened the door, and there he was.

Lucas.

The insane phoenix who terrified the entire world, the same creature who made every pack lose sleep for days, was casually sitting on my bed with his legs crossed, brushing imaginary dust off his sleeve like he owned the place.

Lucas's golden-red eyes lifted to mine, bored and unimpressed. "You really have a lot of nerve leaving me waiting, kid," he said flatly.

Evelyn froze, then screamed. Before I could remind her again not to freak out, she launched herself in front of me.

"W-Who are you?!" she shrieked. "How dare you come here!"

I rubbed my temple. I did warn her.

Silas burst in the moment he heard Evelyn's scream. He took one look at Lucas lounging on my blanket, and immediately his sword was out, blade pointed directly at the phoenix's throat.

His voice dropped into a cold growl. "Who sent you here? Your next answer will determine whether you live or not."

Lucas looked at Silas's sword, then at Silas, with the exact same expression someone would give a toddler holding a stick and declaring war.

The corner of Lucas's mouth lifted lazily. "Funny," he drawled, before ignoring Silas completely. His golden eyes slid back to me with all the entitlement of a spoiled deity.

"I'm hungry. Get me something to eat, kid."

Evelyn's face flushed a violent red. She inhaled sharply, ready to release all her fury straight into his face.

I touched her shoulder before she could explode.

She turned to me quickly. "M-my lady?"

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"It's okay," I said. "I know him."

Her eyebrows shot up in confusion, but she stepped back. Silas finally found his voice, still frozen with his sword held taut "You... know him?"

"Yes," I said, moving past him as I walked toward Lucas. "But I do hope he can at least change his character and stop being so proud."

Lucas scoffed loudly. "You're asking for too much, kid. Know your place. Do you even understand who I am? I'm powerful. Obviously I should have an ego."

Silas's jaw clenched. "Who are you?"

Lucas opened his mouth to deliver one of his dramatic titles, but I cut him off immediately.

"He is the new bodyguard."

The silence in the room dropped so hard I was surprised the floor didn't crack.

Silas's expression crumbled. He looked like his brain had simply shut down. Evelyn, on the other hand, looked like she had just seen fate slap her across the face.

"What?" she squeaked.

Lucas finally realized what I'd said. He blinked at me, slowly, almost offended by the audacity of my lie. Then he sat up straighter on the bed, glaring. "Yeah, what?" he repeated. "I wasn't made aware of this. Who do you think you are to appoint me as a bodyguard? Me? I'm too respectable and too important to be someone's bodyguard."

He pointed at himself dramatically, and I resisted every urge to roll my eyes.

I was thrilled to have Lucas back, but I really had to get his ego under control before he introduced himself as the Phoenix Emperor or something equally dramatic in front of an audience.

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Selene

Evelyn placed the tray of food carefully on the table, bowing her head. "My lady, here you go."

"Thank you. Give us some privacy to talk."

Her eyes flicked immediately to Lucas. He still hadn't acknowledged her existence, his gaze was fixed on the food.

"Yes, my lady. Just... be careful with him," she muttered into my ear. "He acts like a crazy person."

I nodded, and she finally left, I turned back to Lucas. He was still staring at the plate, not touching it. I crossed my arms and leaned back in the chair across from him. "I brought you food like you demanded. So why aren't you eating it?"

Lucas finally moved. He extended one finger and poked the chicken thigh, then he stared at the rice with even more disdain.

"You call this food?" he asked, his tone making it sound like I'd piled a mound of dirt on the table.

"Yes," I nodded. "Is it not to your liking?"

"It doesn't look like food."

"Then what do you eat?"

Lucas shrugged like it was obvious. "Depends. I mostly eat beasts around me."

"You eat them raw?" I asked.

He frowned at me. "Is there any other way to eat them?"

I sighed. Right. I'd almost forgotten that Lucas was a phoenix, even if he looked human now. And I doubted a phoenix cared about cooking. He probably ate whatever he killed without giving a second thought to flavor, or spice.

"It's similar to what you eat," I explained. "But cooked meat has flavor, and seasoning. It tastes good. We don't only eat to survive. We eat to enjoy ourselves."

Lucas stared at me as if that concept was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard in his very long, very chaotic life. His suspicion didn't fade, so I reached for the roasted chicken, grabbed it by the bone, sliced the thigh from the whole bird, and held the piece toward him.

"Here. Try it. It won't kill you. If you don't like it, I'll find a beast for you."

Lucas stared at the piece of chicken in my hand and narrowed his eyes. "You better find a big beast. Unless you don't mind me feasting on the people around you instead."

I rolled my eyes. I knew he didn't actually eat werewolves. He only ate unintelligent beasts. But of course he would threaten

me anyway.

He leaned forward and took the chicken from my hand with his teeth. I could tell he was about to complain, but when he chewed, his entire expression froze. His eyes widened like a child discovering candy for the first time in his life.

He stared at me, then at the chicken, and back at me again.

Before I could even say anything, he snatched the piece right out of my hand and took another aggressive bite. His eyes widened even more, and he devoured the rest.

I watched silently, amused.

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He finished the thigh bone clean, tossed it onto the plate, and reached for the rest of the chicken with both hands, before suddenly stopping. He caught my expression, and paused. Lucas coughed loudly, straightened his back, and lifted his chin.

"The food you presented is not bad, kid."

Not bad? After he practically inhaled the entire thing?

He gestured generously at the table. "To show my hospitality, I will finish everything here."

Just as Lucas reached in again, hands already hovering greedily over the roasted chicken, I slid the entire plate out of his

reach

Very slowly, his golden eyes lifted to mine, staring at me as if I had just committed an unspeakable crime. He didn't say anything, but the look alone was pure disbelief.

I kept my hold on the plate. "Before you continue eating, let's have a little talk."

"Talk?" Lucas leaned back in the chair, head tilted as he studied me. His voice dipped into that low, dangerous drawl he used whenever he wanted to intimidate me.

“You want to talk to me while I’m hungry?” A slow smirk curved his lips. “Kid, you’re really biting off more than you can chew. What if I decide to turn my attention to you, and eat you instead?”

“I’ll live. Now listen.”

He lifted one brow, unimpressed. “Fine. I’m in a generous mood. I’ll humor you. What do you want to talk about?”

“To live peacefully, there are some extra conditions we need to discuss.”

He rolled his eyes. “More conditions? You really are a cautious one.”

“I don’t have a choice,” I said. “Now, about the conditions, you’ll have to put effort into keeping your identity a secret. You don’t need to act like you’re above everyone. Keep doing that, and people will start noticing. And once they notice, they’ll start connecting the dots, especially with how paranoid the world is right now because of you.”

Lucas scoffed. “But I am above everyone.”

“They don’t need to know that.”

“They will eventually find out, kid. Power like mine can’t be hidden forever.”

“Not yet. And definitely not like this. I don’t need people knowing the phoenix they fear is sitting on my bed eating chicken.”

He shrugged carelessly, as if the world’s panic was the most insignificant thing he’d heard all day.

I went on, “And another thing, if you’re going to stay by my side, you have to be my bodyguard. It’s the only identity that makes sense. A man following a moonborn for no reason will cause drama I do not need.”

Lucas didn’t respond. He just stared at me, unreadable, while the scent of warm meat drifted between us. I noticed the faint movement of his throat as he swallowed, hunger flickering in his eyes again. So, I leaned forward slightly and slid the food just one inch closer.

“If you do this, I will feed you this delicacy whenever you want. There are countless kinds of food out there. I know you’ll want to try all of them.”

His eyes flicked to the plate.

“So,” I said, meeting his gaze directly, “do you accept?”

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Lucas lifted an eyebrow at me. I could see in his eyes that he knew exactly what I was doing, baiting him with food like a child. And instead of being offended, he seemed entertained by it. His lips curled into a smirk that was mocking.

“Fine.” He leaned forward, grabbing the plate from my hands with a little more force than necessary. “I accept. I’ll hide my identity. And I’ll be your bodyguard.”

Lucas didn’t hesitate a moment longer. He tore another piece of chicken off the bone, the sound crisp, and took a huge bite. A pleased, involuntary groan escaped him as he chewed.

After a while, I finally asked, “It’s been days since you left. Where did you go?”

He didn’t even look up from the chicken. “I visited an old friend, and took a look around. It’s been a century since I was sealed. The world has changed a lot.”

I watched him quietly.

He said it as though it didn’t bother him, he was a creature who had outlived too much and seen too many things replaced. I understood why he wanted revenge. If I were him, I’d want it too. He hadn’t done anything, and yet he ended up sealed. Just as I was lost in thought, a sharp knock sounded against the door, pulling me abruptly back to reality.

“My lady…” Evelyn’s voice came from the other side. “You have a visitor.”

I glanced toward the door, then at Lucas. He still hadn’t looked up from his food

It must be important, Evelyn wouldn’t disturb me for anything trivial.

I let out a sigh. “Come in.”

The door opened. Evelyn entered first, her hands clasped politely in front of her. She stepped aside, and an older man walked in behind her. He was dressed in the formal dark robes of the palace staff, embroidered with silver threads. I recognized him instantly.

The head eunuch of the royal palace. The man who served the Alpha directly.

His sharp, calculating eyes swept across the room, taking everything in. Then they settled on Lucas. Suspicion flickered in the eunuch’s gaze, his brows tightening just slightly, but he said nothing.

I wanted to roll my eyes, for the Alpha Eunuch to come here personally, I already knew what this was about, but I had to play along. I inclined my head politely. “Good morning. And what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

He bowed deeply. “Good morning, Lady Selene. I have been sent by the Alpha with a message. He requests your presence at the palace tomorrow morning to discuss the mate bond between you and Prince Adrian.”

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Chapter 73

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Selene

The next day, the carriage rolled to a slow stop, the wheels sinking into the snow. I stared at the towering palace gates. The sight before me squeezed something sharp and unpleasant in my chest.

My hands clenched tightly in my lap.

This place was a graveyard of every past mistake I had ever made.

Nights spent practicing until dawn, trying desperately to be perfect; days spent chasing scraps of Adrian’s attention like a starved fool; smiles plastered on my face while my heart cracked over and over again. All those years I wasted trying to fit into a palace that never felt like home. A mate bond that never felt like love. A title that never protected me.

I had no home then, not in the temple, or in this palace.

“Hey,” a lazy voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. “What happened to you, kid? You look like you want to murder

someone.”

I snapped out of it, turning my head slowly.

Lucas leaned against the carriage seat, arms folded behind his head, not even pretending to look respectful. His red hair glowed faintly in the dim carriage light, and his eyes observed me with interest.

Beside me, Evelyn stiffened before snapping. “How many times must I tell you not to speak to the lady with that tone? You’re just a bodyguard. Know your place.”

Lucas cracked one eye open at her, unimpressed, and shrugged. Then he shifted deeper into the cushions, closing his eyes again with infuriating ease.

“You-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know I’m just a bodyguard,” he said, voice dripping with mockery. “No need to remind me every time you breathe. Besides...” His lips twitched. “Shouldn’t you be thanking me? I saw your face. You wanted to ask her if she was okay but didn’t want to overstep. You should thank me for saying it for you.”

Evelyn’s face went red, her eyes widening.

I sighed heavily.

It hadn’t even been a week, and the two of them were already ready to strangle each other. If Evelyn ever found out who she was talking to like that, I was certain she would faint on the spot.

Maybe I should keep Lucas’s identity quiet a little longer for her heart’s sake.

I turned to him and said, “I didn’t want to bring you with me. But you promised you’d be on your best behavior if I allowed you to come to the palace.”

Even as I said it, I mentally cursed myself for the hundredth time.

What kind of idiot brings a phoenix into the most politically sensitive place in the entire pack? If he lost control, if anyone found out who he really was, they wouldn’t just try to kill him. They would accuse me of treason.

Honestly, I couldn’t even blame them. If I were the Alpha, I’d accuse me too.

As if sensing my thoughts, Lucas spoke without opening his eyes. "I know. Don't worry. I won't cause a scene. I didn't come here to play games. I came for my own personal mission."

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Evelyn blinked, confused and slightly alarmed. "W-what mission?"

Lucas opened his eyes, smirked like the devil discovering a new sin, and said one word with absolute seriousness.

"Food."

Evelyn froze. "Food...?"

Lucas nodded. "What else? If the food at the temple is that good, then the food here should be even better."

Evelyn's mouth dropped open. Honestly, mine almost did too.

He came here for food?

I knew he'd eaten like a starved beast yesterday, Evelyn nearly cried at how fast the pantry emptied, but still, I'd thought, at the very least, he wanted to roam the palace for his own hidden agenda. Maybe observe the territory, plan some future revenge. But no, his grand plan was lunch.

A laugh burst out of me before I could stop it. "Hahaha-"

The moment the sound left my mouth, Lucas froze.

His lips parted slightly, and his red-gold eyes locked onto me with an intensity that made the carriage suddenly feel too small. He looked stunned to see me laugh. Then, the second he realized he was staring, he snapped his gaze away and cleared his throat sharply.

Evelyn leaned toward me, scandalized. "My lady, it's not funny! Why did you bring him again? You should've brought Silas. I doubt this man even knows how to fight or protect you if something goes wrong!"

My laughter faded into a softer chuckle as I shook my head. "Silas had to practice. I gave him tasks before coming. And besides, nothing will happen. I don't need protection."

Evelyn muttered under her breath, "I wish we could un-bring him."

That made me smile. "Oh, don't be mean, Evelyn."

I tilted my head and looked at Lucas, whose eyes were closed again. "And don't underestimate him. He's more powerful than

he looks."

Evelyn followed my gaze, stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head firmly. "I doubt that."

Before I could respond, the carriage pulled to a stop.

The door swung open to reveal the head eunuch standing outside, several maids behind him. The moment they saw me, they lowered their heads deeply.

"Good morning, Lady Selene."

My face stayed neutral. I shifted, preparing to step out, but Lucas moved first. He rose to his feet without hurry, or care, and stepped out of the carriage before me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Evelyn gasped so loudly the palace guards glanced over. "What on earth is he doing?! How can he get out of the carriage before you, my lady!"

I didn't react. I'd long accepted that Lucas never followed rules that weren't his. But what happened next, even I wasn't prepared for.

Instead of wandering off or making some obnoxious comment, Lucas turned, stood at the carriage entrance and extended his hand toward me.

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"Here," he said simply.

I stared at his outstretched hand, taken aback.

The phoenix... offering me a hand?

Beside me, Evelyn gaped at him as if her brain couldn't process what she was seeing. She raised an eyebrow at him.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "I'm now your bodyguard, aren't I? If I want free food, I should act like one."

Then, with complete shamelessness, he added, "Besides, I saw your kind do this the other day. The woman was blushing because of the man. I wanted to see why."

A laugh almost slipped out of me again, but instead I smiled and placed my hand in his.

"Not every woman blushes because of a man."

Lucas smirked. "I see."

He helped me down from the carriage with surprising gentleness for someone who would burn the world for fun.

I reached out and helped Evelyn down. Ahead, the head eunuch and the palace maids stared at us, watching every small

motion.

The eunuch stepped forward. "Please follow me. Lady Selene. The Alpha is waiting for you."

I nodded silently.

As we walked through the palace grounds, guards and maids stopped what they were doing, turning to watch. Their eyes followed me, some curious, some fearful, some openly hostile. I ignored all of them. My head stayed high, my steps steady. The white fur coat trailing behind me..

We reached the entrance to the main hall. The eunuch stopped and lifted his voice. "Alpha, Lady Selene is here as you ordered."

A deep voice answered from inside. "Let her enter."

The guards opened the towering doors, and I stepped in.

The throne room was massive, the air heavy with power. At the center, seated on the golden throne, was Alpha Rhydian. His golden robe draped around him. Despite his handsome appearance, he looked tired, as if he hadn't slept for days. Probably because he hadn't, thanks to the phoenix standing behind me.

Beside the Alpha sat Luna Riley, elegant as always, her posture flawless and her gaze sharp and calculating. On either side of the throne stood the ministers, their eyes locked onto me the moment I entered, and it was anything but welcoming. They were waiting for me to slip, to give them even the slightest excuse to declare me unworthy. Among them, I spotted my father, his eyes just as cold and scrutinizing as the others.

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Chapter 74

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Selene

“Good afternoon, Alpha. Good afternoon, Luna.” I bowed my head to the Alpha.

Alpha Rhydian’s lips curved into a faint smile. “Rise, Selene.”

I lifted my head, feeling the weight of countless eyes on me, all trying to intimidate me.

In the past. I would have trembled under their stares, shrinking into myself, apologizing for even existing. They always said I had no backbone, and they weren’t wrong. Before I became a warrior, I lacked the courage to make a decision and see it through, but not this time.

This time, my back was straight. My chin was high. My eyes met the Alpha’s directly, sparing no glance for anyone else in the room. This conversation would decide everything, my life, my freedom, and whether I would be forced back into the cycle with Adrian again.

And, that would not happen.

I would never be Adrian's mate, or the next Luna of Mooncrest, in this life, not even if fate forced it upon me.

Behind me, someone muttered under their breath, "Look at her, whenever I see that black and white hair, I get chills."

Another whispered, "Exactly. I still can't believe she's the Moonborn. It doesn't make sense."

"If it doesn't make sense," I said, my voice calm but cutting, "are you implying the Moon Goddess made a mistake?"

The hall froze at my words, and the ministers stiffened, fear flickering across their faces. Alpha Rhydian and Luna Riley turned their gazes on me, sharper and more calculating than before.

If I showed even the slightest weakness now, speaking to the Alpha would become impossible. They would talk over me, dismiss me, and degrade me, worse than they ever had in past lives. So I met each minister's eyes one by one.

"If you are questioning the Moon Goddess, then you must be punished. No matter who you are."

One minister physically stepped back. Another swallowed hard. No one dared to look at me again.

Saying the Moon Goddess made a mistake was a sin, punishable by death. And besides, they feared my wolf. Even without seeing her, they felt her. She was the most powerful wolf in the world, second only to Dominic's.

Alpha Rhydian chuckled suddenly, the sound echoing through the hall. "Interesting, I don't think I've ever seen my ministers this afraid of anyone except me and Adrian."

A few of them flinched at the comparison.

"You will make a good leader, Selene," the Alpha continued. "You know how to use your words accordingly. You are right. No one should dare question the Moon Goddess."

His gaze swept the room. "I trust that is clear to everyone?"

The ministers coughed, stared at the floor, and bowed their heads. "Yes, Alpha."

Alpha Rhydian turned his attention back to me, his voice steady but edged with weariness. "I intended to invite you to the palace earlier, Selene, but these past days have been hectic for everyone. Even before your arrival, we were discussing the phoenix's release."

The moment he said phoenix, my body reacted before I could stop it. I glanced behind me.

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Lucas stood at the back with Evelyn and the eunuch, arms crossed, posture relaxed, and expression bored, he was clearly irritated by the entire display, yet he remained, because he promised to behave.

When his eyes met mine, his lips curled in that insufferably knowing smirk.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

Alpha Rhydian noticed my momentary distraction.

“What happened, Selene? Are you alright?”

I straightened. “Ah-yes. I apologise, Alpha.”

He nodded slowly. “You must be concerned about the temple. Do not worry, I’ve already sent troops to protect both you and the temple, in case the phoenix attempts an attack.”

If only he knew the phoenix was already standing right in front of him.

I kept my expression calm and inclined my head in a slight bow. “Thank you for your generosity, Alpha Rhydian.”

“Now that the greetings are over,” he continued, “let us address the reason I summoned you. It concerns your mate bond with Adrian and the request you made the other day. Would you kindly repeat it? You may change your wish if you wish,

Selene.”

I didn’t change it. I repeated it firmly. “My wish is to reject Prince Adrian as my mate.”

A collective gasp echoed through the hall.

“She actually said it again?!”

“Reject Prince Adrian? Is she insane?”

“Why would she reject him? What is she thinking?”

"I see..." Alpha Rhydian exhaled, but before he could speak further, Luna Riley's voice cut in.

"Selene, is there a reason you wish to reject Adrian?"

I turned to face her.

She continued, "Is it because people around you disapprove of the union? You told the court just now that no one should question the Moon Goddess' decision, yet here you are, wanting to reject your given mate. Isn't that contradicting yourself?"

If I could describe the Luna of the Mooncrest pack in one word, it would be smart. She was not merely intelligent, but also strategic.

She was the kind of woman who could sew a broken situation back together with nothing but her voice. While Alpha Rhydian decided the laws, she was the one who used persuasion to steer outcomes her way.

The pack valued her for that. And just like the alpha, she wanted Sienna as the future Luna,

In all my past lives, she had always adored Sienna. Treated her like a daughter-in-law long before my mate bond with Adrian had ever been confirmed. She was the one who gave Sienna access to the palace, encouraged her closeness with Adrian, and openly praised her. Back then, I used to choke on jealousy every time I saw it.

I had always felt like a shadow in the place where Sienna shined.

Even now, I could still see the disappointment in her eyes, that I was the Moonborn instead of the girl she preferred. She wanted Sienna, yet she had no choice but to oppose my rejection. After all, it would be a disgrace to the royal family if the

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prince were turned down.

I had already decided what to say.

"That." I answered calmly, "is precisely why I am doing this."

The Luna's brows pulled together. "What?"

I met her eyes. "On the day I received my wolf, I had a revelation from the Moon Goddess."

The Alpha straightened, fully alert. "A revelation? You did?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes, Alpha Rhydian."

"And what was revealed?" he asked.

I let out a dejected sigh. "She told me a calamity will occur soon."

"Oh gods... is she talking about the phoenix?" a minister murmured under his breath.

"I don't know what form the calamity will take. The Moon Goddess didn't tell me what it was. But considering everything happening these days, it must be connected."

Alpha Rhydian's expression hardened with worry. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, Alpha,"

The Luna's eyes narrowed, sharp with suspicion. "But if such a revelation occurred, Selene, why didn't you speak up sooner?"

I remained calm, meeting her gaze. "At first, I thought it was just a dream. It didn't make sense, but I still chose to reject Prince Adrian that day, just in case it wasn't an illusion. Later, I tried to tell my father, but he dismissed me before I could even finish a single sentence. No one believed me."

Everyone in the hall slowly turned toward my father, and the color drained from his face.

His eyes widened, confused, stunned, and unsure if he should defend himself/or stay silent. I almost wanted to laugh. Everything I said was fabricated, but he also couldn't protest, because there were countless times he had cut me off without hearing a single word. He didn't know whether one of those moments might've actually been important.

Alpha Rhydian slammed his palm against the throne's armrest.

CRACK!

The echo thundered through the hall, and everyone jumped.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Bloodrose!" the alpha roared, his power blasting through the air. "Why didn't you listen to your daughter?! She is the Moonborn, the Moon Goddess's chosen blessing! Anything she says should be your first priority!"

My father trembled visibly, lowering his head even further.

“You dare dismiss her words?” the alpha continued, voice rising with fury. “If you had taken her seriously, we might have been prepared, before disaster struck! Do you understand the consequences of your negligence?!”

My father bowed so low his forehead nearly touched the floor. “Forgive me, Alpha, it is my fault. I take full responsibility. From now on, I will pay more attention to my daughter.”

“It’s too late for that!”

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Father flinched again.

I stared at him, cold and unmoved. To me, my family had already become little more than tools, pieces to be moved on a board until my revenge was complete. My sympathy for them had died long ago.

Alpha Rhydian dragged his gaze away from my father and turned fully toward me. “Child, did the Moon Goddess say anything else to you? Anything we must know? Tell me so we can stop the calamity”

I lowered my eyes, and nodded. “Yes, she did.”

The hall leaned forward. I lifted my head and spoke in a mournful voice.

“She told me that in order to stop the calamity, I must devote myself fully to her with no distractions. And...” I paused, letting my voice tremble just a little, “I must stay away from men until she is satisfied with my devotion. I must never be someone’s mate. That is why I cannot be Prince Adrian’s mate. Even though my feelings for him are still there, I cannot act based on my own desires when the world itself is at stake.”

The ministers stared at me, no longer with contempt or doubt, but with awe, and admiration. It was the reaction I wanted.

“I must reject Prince Adrian,” I finished, “because the Moon Goddess needs my devotion more than I need my own happiness.”

The hall fell silent.

I stood there, the image of a girl sacrificing love for the sake of the world. But deep inside, I felt absolutely nothing but satisfaction.

Once, I never imagined myself manipulating a single soul. But now, no matter the cost, I will accomplish everything I set out to do.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 75

[1,440 words]

Chapter 75

Selene

Alpha Rhydian leaned back in his golden throne, releasing a long sigh. One of his hands came up to rub his forehead, his expression tightening as if he were deep in thought. The ministers kept whispering in frantic little clusters, nodding their heads, eyes darting toward me like I was suddenly some divine relic.

Even Luna Riley, who had been staring holes through me moments ago, looked like she was beginning to accept my words.

Of course they all believed me.

In their eyes, there was absolutely no reason for me to reject someone like Adrian. He was the heir to the Mooncrest Pack, blessed, powerful, admired, the ideal future alpha. Every woman in the pack would kill for the chance to be chosen by him.

I didn't care about any of that. My happiness was more important than that.

And maybe I was being kind, in a way. By fabricating a vision, I gave them hope that the phoenix's appearance wasn't the beginning of doom.

Sure, I was lying through my teeth, but it was a very convenient lie.

Alpha Rhydian finally lifted his head and looked at me again. "Child," he said slowly, "did the Moon Goddess give you a specific time period for this devotion? Perhaps.... once she is satisfied, you and Adrian can-"

I shook my head firmly before he even finished.

"Even though I wish things were different," I said, letting a bit of sadness slip into my voice, "I don't believe that would be right. I don't know how long the goddess will require my devotion. It could be years... decades. Prince Adrian needs a mate. And the pack needs a Luna. I cannot keep him waiting."

A murmur swept through the ministers.

Alpha Rhydian nodded. "That is true."

He turned toward Luna Riley. "What do you think?"

The Luna watched me carefully, still searching for cracks, or any flicker of deceit. But I stayed perfectly composed.

When she found nothing, she gave a small nod.

"Her words make sense," Luna Riley said. "If she truly had the vision, then it would be wise to let Adrian mark another woman. We don't know when the goddess will be appeased. And a pack cannot remain without a Luna for too long."

Instead of irritation, I was satisfied with her answer.

Good. It was exactly the direction I wanted them to go.

Alpha Rhydian absorbed her words, thoughtful once more. After a long pause, he exhaled and turned back to me. "It seems, there is no other choice. The Moon Goddess's will is absolute."

"Yes, Alpha."

"I am very pleased with you, Selene," the Alpha said. "Not only did you play a beautiful melody during the coming-of-age ceremony, but you have proven yourself selfless, placing the fate of the world above your own happiness."

He shook his head with a sorrowful smile. "I never realized you possessed such qualities. What a pity. You would have been a perfect Luna, and a perfect match for Adrian."

02

Chapter 75

A perfect Luna?

What was the use of being perfect? I had been the perfect Luna in my past lives, and yet those lives still ended in betrayal, humiliation, and death. Perfection had saved nothing.

So I simply bowed my head, because soon, they would no longer be my problem. And Adrian would no longer be my curse.

Alpha Rhydian turned to the court, his voice firm as he addressed the ministers. "I have decided that when Prince Adrian returns from his affairs, he will reject Selene, the Moonborn."

No one dared oppose him. One by one, the ministers lowered their heads.

"Yes, Alpha," they all answered.

The Alpha turned back to me, expression softening.

"You have done well, Selene," he said. "I will make sure you are properly rewarded for this. And if you are ever faced with a problem, come to me. I will do my best to protect you."

"Thank you, Alpha."

His gaze shifted past me, toward my father. The man stiffened immediately, shoulders tensing, his eyes darting down as if afraid to meet the Alpha's gaze. "And you will listen to your daughter from now on. Show her the obedience and respect a Moonborn deserves."

My father bowed quickly. "Yes, Alpha."

The Alpha gave a curt nod, rising to his full height as he offered his hand to Luna Riley.

"This meeting is adjourned," he declared. "Beta Maverick."

A middle-aged man stepped forward from behind the throne without hesitation.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Record today’s proceedings,” the Alpha instructed. “Send the report to the other Alphas so they can finally rest easy regarding the phoenix’s appearance.”

Maverick bowed deeply. “As you command.”

With that, Alpha Rhydian and Luna Riley exited the hall, Beta Maverick following closely behind them.

Silence fell the moment the royal family disappeared from view.

The ministers shifted immediately, clearly itching to talk to me now that the Alpha was gone. I didn’t give them the chance. I turned on my heel and started toward the exit, already done with this hall and everyone in it.

I only made it a few steps before a hand clamped around my wrist.

“Stop, Selene.”

The grip was firm. I inhaled through my nose, forcing my shoulders to stay relaxed, and slowly turned my head to look

back.

My father stood there, fingers locked around my wrist, his face pale. Fear, confusion, and something that almost looked like regret flashed across his features. But I knew him well enough to see through the illusion, he didn’t feel regret. A man like him never did. What he truly wanted was control, a way to bend me to his will, especially now that the Alpha favored me.

I met his gaze without flinching, “Let go.”

“I” He started, but before he could say anything, a shadow stepped forward.

Lucas.

He moved silently, but the moment he came to my side, the entire atmosphere shifted. His presence towered over my father like a predator stepping into the light.

Lucas’s lips curved into a lazy, dangerous smirk.

“Let go of her,” he said, voice low. “You don’t have the right to hold onto my prey.”

My father’s hand snapped open immediately. He didn’t even know who Lucas was, and yet something about him forced instinct to override pride. Even the ministers stiffened

and looked toward Lucas with wide eyes, none daring to step closer. It was as if they expected him to shift into some monstrous beast at any moment.

My father blinked, snapping himself out of his initial fear.

“Y-your prey?” he stammered, voice trembling despite his attempt at authority. “Do you know who you’re talking to? How dare

you speak like—”

Lucas bared his sharp teeth. And behind those bored, half-lidded eyes, a flicker of something bright and burning flashed.

“Do you know who you’re talking to?” Lucas asked, as if the whole hall were nothing but a mild annoyance to him.

My father swallowed hard. “Who are you?”

Before Lucas could say something stupid, I stepped in.

“He is Lucas,” I said calmly, meeting my father’s startled eyes. “My new guard.”

His expression hardened immediately. “A guard? And yet he dares to act this way? Get rid of him.”

I crossed my arms, completely unbothered.

“And why should I?”

A ripple of shock moved through the hall. My father’s jaw tightened; being spoken to like that by me, especially in front of others, was already bruising his pride.

“Because I am your father,” he snapped.

I stared at him like he’d just spoken the greatest joke in the world.

“Father?” I echoed softly. “When have you acted like a father before?”

He froze, but I didn’t care. “Please, stay out of my life. Don’t tell me what to do. And stop holding me as if you own me.”

He opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“You wouldn’t want me to report this matter to the Alpha,” I said. Now, would you?”

His mouth snapped shut. His face paled. I lifted my chin. “As you can see, I’m very busy. Don’t bother me unless it’s important.”

I didn’t wait for a response. I turned around, and caught Lucas staring at me with something unreadable in his expression. Interest? Amusement? Approval? Who knew with him.

“Let’s go.” I said.

I walked away, my steps steady and unhurried.

Lucas followed behind me. Evelyn hurried after us with wide eyes. And my father remained standing in the hall, stunned and speechless.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 76

[1,573 words]

Chapter 76

Selene

Lucas stepped forward, falling into place beside me. Behind us, Evelyn shot him a glare. I could practically feel the words she wanted to spit at him, but with the palace walls all around us, she wisely swallowed them and kept walking behind us.

Lucas waited for a moment before speaking, voice low with amusement. “I knew werewolves were liars, but I didn’t expect to see one lie so well that even I almost believed it, despite knowing you were lying.”

I shrugged. “Thanks for the compliment.”

He clicked his tongue. "I wasn't complimenting you."

"Mm. Sure."

We walked a few more steps before he continued, his tone drifting into that careless drawl of his.

"And beside that, why don't you want to be that man's mate? From what I've gathered, those people are the royal family. If you become their son's mate, you could rule the pack and eat whatever you want."

Of course. The food part was the selling point for him.

"You're right. There are many perks to becoming Adrian's mate. I could be the Luna of the Mooncrest pack and have someone as perfect as Adrian at my side. But those things would lead to my death."

He stopped walking, but I didn't wait for him. I kept moving. After a second, Lucas hurried to catch up, falling in step beside me again.

"Is this family related to your deaths in your past lives?" he asked.

"You could say that. That's why I have to do everything I can to avoid getting involved with the royal family. At least for now until I am strong enough to take revenge on everyone who had a hand in what happened to me."

"Why waste time?" He shrugged. "You have me. I can burn the whole pack if you want."

I shot him a look. "Like I said, you'd be giving them an easy death."

"Tch."

"And stop threatening to burn down things."

He rolled his eyes but didn't argue.

I was about to say something else when a maid stepped abruptly in front of me, blocking my path. "Good morning, lady Selene. Do you have time? Princess Avery would like to invite you to her courtyard."

The maid stood in front of me, head bowed so low I could barely see her face, but I could feel the nervousness radiating off her. She waited for my response with stiff shoulders, probably terrified that I would turn her away the way I used to do, back when I was too foolish to know who was truly on my side.

Princess Avery. Adrian's younger sister. The only one in the royal family I didn't dislike. I never treasured the way she deserved.

Out of everyone in the palace, she was the only one who had defended me without asking for anything in return. Even when I treated her with coldness, even when I ignored her invitations, even when Sienna whispered her lies into my ears and

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convinced me that Avery disliked me, she still stood by me. During moments when the rest of the court laughed, Avery was the only one who stepped forward with her chin high, shielding me even when I acted like a fool.

I didn't want to stay in the palace longer than necessary. But for Avery, I could tolerate it.

The maid swallowed nervously when I didn't answer immediately, as if afraid I might snap at her.

"Lady Selene," she said softly. "you don't need to worry. Princess Avery only wishes to spend time with you. I promise she isn't planning anything-"

"I know that," I cut in.

Her head jerked up slightly, surprised.

"I was thinking about something else. Let's go. I don't want to keep her waiting."

She looked shocked. She clearly hadn't expected me to agree so easily. I didn't blame her. Princess Avery had invited me countless times in the past, and every single time, I ignored her, because Sienna always said I shouldn't go. And like the naive idiot I was, I listened.

Every time Sienna stopped me from going, she herself left the temple moments later, heading straight to the palace to see the princess, all while pretending she was protecting me. She probably spent those visits feeding Avery lies about me. And still, Avery invited me again and again, as if she believed in some version of me I had never bothered to be.

How foolish I once was.

"O-okay," the maid finally managed, bowing quickly. "Please follow me, my lady. I will take you to her immediately."

I nodded and took a step forward, but paused, glancing back over my shoulder.

“Can I ask for a favor before I go?”

The maid straightened immediately. “Of course, my lady. Whatever you need.”

“My guard and maid are hungry. Please serve them proper meals.”

The maid blinked for a moment, processing the request, then nodded. “Yes, my lady. I will make sure they are properly fed.”

She turned to the second maid beside her. “Take them to the kitchen. Tell the cooks to serve them whatever they request.”

The other maid bowed deeply and gestured for Lucas and Evelyn to follow.

Evelyn immediately stepped forward, shaking her head. “My lady, I’m fine. I don’t need food. I should follow you instead—”

I cut her off with a small shake of my head. “No. I can go on my own. And besides—” I folded my arms and tilted my chin toward Lucas. “I’m giving you a task. Make sure you watch him. Don’t allow him to cause any trouble.”

Lucas scoffed behind me. “Cause trouble? Me? I am always on my best behavior.”

I didn’t even try to hide my eye roll. “Yes. That sentence alone is exactly why someone needs to supervise you.”

Evelyn straightened like a soldier receiving her orders.

“Understood, my lady. I will make sure to carry out your command. Don’t worry, I will watch him like a hawk.”

“Good.”

Lucas’s mouth opened, clearly ready to defend his honour, but Evelyn simply placed a firm hand between his shoulders and pushed him toward the hallway.

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“Let’s go eat,” she told him in a tone that suggested she was prepared to drag him by the car if needed.

Lucas let himself be herded away, muttering dramatically under his breath about “tiny werewolf hands” and “being treated like a criminal,” but he didn’t resist.

Their voices faded behind me as I finally turned to follow the maid.

It didn't take long before we reached Princess Avery's courtyard, and the moment I stepped through the archway, I instantly knew I had entered her territory. Unlike my simple courtyard, Avery's courtyard looked expensive. Everything sparkled, golden lanterns hanging from the eaves, polished marble floors that shimmered, delicate ornaments that glittered even in the shade.

Avery always did love beautiful, and shiny things.

The maid stopped in front of a tall set of double doors and knocked gently before calling out.

"Princess, it's me. Lady Selene is—"

Before she could even finish, a distressed voice came from the other side of the door.

"She didn't come with you, right?"

The maid stiffened. I almost laughed.

Before she could answer, Avery's frantic voice continued, filled with frustration.

"She is so frustrating! This is the third time she's rejected my invitation. I don't understand! Does she hate being near me that much? We were so close when we were kids, why is she avoiding me now?"

The maid swallowed nervously and looked at me, silently asking if she should interrupt. I only shook my head slightly, a small smile tugging at my lips as I listened.

Avery wasn't finished.

"Honestly, Molly, I really don't know what to do anymore. What do you think I should do to make her talk to me? Should I use my princess authority and order her to come? No... no, that sounds too forceful. Maybe I should ask some guards to kidnap her and bring her here nicely. I just want to see her. I miss her beautiful face."

"Did I tell you at the coming-of-age ceremony she smiled at me? I almost collapsed right there. But maybe she wasn't smiling at me. Maybe she was smiling at someone behind me. Oh gods, what if I imagined it?"

When the maid still didn't respond, Avery paused.

"Molly? Why aren't you answering me? Is something wrong?"

The maid finally managed to stutter, "P-princess Avery, Lady Selene is—"

She didn't finish because the door swung open.

Princess Avery appeared in the doorway with her hair slightly tousled, eyes bright with emotion, and when she lifted her gaze and saw me standing there, she froze completely.

Her eyes went wide. Her mouth dropped open. She looked like someone slapped her out of reality.

She took one tiny step backward.

"M-Molly," she whispered, staring straight at me, "I think I'm hallucinating. I've been thinking about Selene too much. I'm starting to see her everywhere."

Molly coughed loudly, stepping aside.

"Princess Avery... that is Lady Selene."

Avery gasped so sharply I thought she might faint.

"W-what. That's Selene?!"

I bowed my head politely and said, "Hello, Princess Avery. It's nice to meet you."

Avery blinked. "Oh gods, that's her voice. It's really her."

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 77

[1,143 words]

Chapter 77

Selene

I lifted the porcelain cup to my lips and took a slow sip.

The tea was sweet at first, then faintly bitter as it settled on my tongue, a strange combination, but oddly soothing.

When I lowered the cup, I saw Princess Avery staring at me.

Her own cup was suspended halfway to her mouth, her fingers frozen around the handle. She looked as though she still couldn't quite believe I was here, sitting across from her at a small golden table draped with embroidered silk. The sunlight filtering through the windows hit her hair, making it shimmer as she blinked at me.

I smiled and gently set my cup down.

"Thank you for inviting me, Princess Avery. The tea works wonders, especially after the meeting today."

Avery set her cup down so abruptly it clinked against the saucer.

"I heard about that," she said, leaning forward instantly, her expression shifting into worry. "I wanted to come, but Mother wouldn't let me anywhere near the hall. Did anyone try to bully you? Tell me who. I'll make sure they regret it. I'll put them in their place, and make them eat shit if I have to."

Behind her, Molly nearly dropped the tray she was holding.

"Your Highness," she hissed, horrified. "Please be mindful of your words."

Molly turned to me and bowed stiffly. "I deeply apologize, Lady Selene—"

I held up a hand, unable to stop the small laugh escaping my lips. "It's alright, Molly," I said, then looked at Avery with an amused smile. "And besides, when they tried to mess with me today, I gave them shit to eat."

For a moment, both of them just stared at me as if I'd grown a second head. Then Avery burst into laughter. She held her stomach, her eyes sparkling. "I'm glad you did that. Serves them right!"

I found myself smiling as I watched her. But the warmth in my chest reminded me of something I needed to say.

I folded my hands on my lap and looked at her sincerely. "There's something I want to apologize for."

Avery blinked, her laughter fading into confusion. "Apologize? For what?"

"For my rudeness," I said. "You invited me many times, yet I never came. I don't have any excuse that justifies that. You didn't deserve to be ignored. Please forgive me, princess Avery, From now on, I promise I'll try to visit whenever I have the time. So we can spend time together,"

Avery stared at me for a long moment. She didn't even breathe. Behind her, Molly gently nudged her arm. "Princess?"

Avery jerked back to life, her cheeks turning a rosy pink, "I-I would like that," she said quietly, her voice softer than I had ever heard it. "Thank you, Lady Selene."

"Selene," I corrected gently. "You can call me Selene."

Her blush deepened. "Then... Avery," she replied.

In every past life, I was always alone. I had warriors who respected me, men who fought at my side, and died for me. To me, they were brothers. But I never had female friends. No woman wanted to stand beside someone whose hands were stained with blood.

People feared the woman who won wars. They respected me, yes, but respect is not companionship.

So having even one friend in this life felt nice.

Avery leaned closer, eyes bright with curiosity. "So? How was it, Selene? Did you really reject my brother?"

For a moment, I simply stared at her. She was sweet, and kind. But her brother was the man who had dragged me through hell in every lifetime. The man whose choices, directly or indirectly, pushed me toward death.

Could I really be her friend?

Could I really allow myself to grow closer to her, knowing her brother had destroyed me again and again? Knowing that when the day came for my revenge, she might be caught in the aftermath?

And when that happened, what would she think of me?

"Selene? Are you okay?"

I nodded. "To answer your question, no, I will not be your brother's mate. I've already spoken with the Alpha and the Luna, and they accepted my decision. I hope you can also-"

I didn't even finish.

Avery suddenly released a loud exhale, her shoulders dropping in relief before a grin stretched across her face so wide.

"Oh, thank the goddess."

I blinked at her. "...What?"

"gods, did I say that out loud?" Avery's eyes went wide as she slapped both hands over her mouth. "That came out wrong, I didn't mean it like that. I mean...."

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my legs, amusement tugging at my lips despite my best effort.

"I see," I murmured, tilting my head just slightly. "Then what did you mean, Avery?"

"Ugh, I sound like a terrible person right now." Avery groaned, straightening in her seat. She drew in a deep breath, then met my eyes with sincerity.

"What I meant," she said more firmly, "is that I'm relieved you're not Adrian's mate."

My brows lifted. "...Relieved?"

"Yes." She nodded without hesitation. "I love my brother. He's handsome, responsible, respected, every woman in the pack would happily throw themselves at his feet just to get his attention. But he doesn't deserve you."

Avery continued, her voice gentler now. "You deserve someone better. Someone who will put you first, who will actually see you, instead of staring at a duty list." She sighed. "Adrian is... well, stiff. Everything he does is for the pack. He puts the pack above people, and emotions. And I understand why, he's been raised that way since he was a child."

She paused, studying my face with gentleness I wasn't used to receiving from anyone.

"But that's exactly why he isn't right for you. After everything that happened to you, you shouldn't have to become second to anyone ever again. You deserve someone who puts you before anything else."

For a moment, I couldn't speak.

There was a strange warmth spreading in my chest. In my past lives, I had twisted her words, convinced she was telling me I wasn't good enough for her brother, that she looked down on me the same way others did.

But now, hearing her speak sincerely, she wasn't protecting Adrian from me. She was protecting me from Adrian. Protecting me from another life of waiting, suffering, and dying for someone who would never choose me first.

Avery had always been on my side. And I had never realized it.

I smiled. "Thank you, Avery. You're a good friend."

She blinked, surprised. "Friend? We're... friends?"

"Yes," I said. "Friends."

Her face lit up, bright and genuine.

That was the beginning of a real friendship.

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 78

[1,326 words]

Chapter 78

Selene

I was breathing hard, sweat slicking my forehead and tangling in my hair, strands clinging to my face and neck. The heat crawling over my body wasn't just uncomfortable, it was unbearable, especially between my legs. Every twitch, and small movement sent a whine escaping from me, and all I could do was stay still, lying flat on the bed as if that could somehow help.

I closed my eyes and dragged a hand over my forehead, trying to chase the feverish heat away, but it only seemed to burn hotter, spreading through me until my vision blurred.

My breath came in ragged bursts, my body trembling despite my attempt to remain still. “W-what’s happening? W-why do I feel like this?” I whispered, voice barely audible.

A deep voice cut through my panic.

“It’s because you need me.”

I froze. My eyes snapped open, and there he was, Alpha Dominic. The one face I had tried so desperately to forget over the past few days.

He was on top of me, half-naked in just his pants, the moonlight spilling through the window tracing every line of his body. Every muscle was sharp and defined, from the broad planes of his chest to the hard ridges of his abs, down to the powerful curve of his arms. His skin gleamed with sweat, and the heat radiating off him made my breath catch.

His red eyes locked onto mine with such intensity that my stomach dropped, and I couldn’t look away.

I blinked, startled, my body instinctively trying to move. But even the slightest shift made the heat between my legs flare, and I froze again.

“What... are you doing here? How did you get into my room?” I asked, though I knew the question was foolish. He was powerful, nearly impossible to detect, and yet seeing him here felt unreal. My heart pounded with a mixture of fear and need.

Dominic leaned forward, placing one hand firmly on the bed beside my head, the other reaching to lift my chin so that I had no choice but to meet his gaze. “You brought me here,”

I raised an eyebrow, confused. “I-I did?”

“Yes,” he said indifferently, eyes never leaving mine. “Now, let me calm you down.”

I didn’t fully understand what he meant, but somehow, I knew he was the only one who could. My pulse raced uncontrollably, my body responding before my mind even had a chance to think. I nodded, almost pleading, and he didn’t waste another second.

Dominic leaned down, capturing my lips in a deep, demanding kiss. I gasped into it immediately. My body reacted instinctively, arms wrapping around his neck, pressing him closer as if I could drink in every inch of him through the kiss.

When Dominic noticed that I could barely breathe in the kiss, he pulled away from my lips, I gasped, only for him to lean down again, his mouth tracing the curve of my neck. I closed my eyes, tilting my head to give him better access, my body melting into him.

His kisses sent a shiver through me, igniting a fire I had thought I'd long since buried.

It had been so long, years of staying loyal to Adrian, who had stopped sleeping with me in my past lives, leaving me restless and untouched. Other men had tried to touch me, but I had always refused. I had remained loyal to a man who never loved me. And yet here was Dominic, his touches breaking down years of restraint.

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He pulled back slightly, letting me breathe for a moment, and looked down at me. His red eyes glowed with hunger and possession. My cheeks flushed, my skin burning with anticipation, and I shivered under his gaze

"Take off your dress," he commanded.

A shiver ran down my spine, and my fingers trembled as I obeyed. My nightdress slipped off, leaving me completely naked. My pulse spiked, I felt exposed, and vulnerable, and yet more alive than I had in years.

Dominic's gaze devoured me. "Beautiful," he growled, leaning closer. His lips were on me again, this time on my nipple, sucking and nipping.

I moaned, arching my back, pressing into him. He moved to the other one, repeating the same torture, leaving me trembling.

He trailed kisses down my chest, over my stomach. My hands twitched, wanting to touch him, but I froze under his gaze. When he reached the most sensitive part of me, I couldn't stop my thighs from parting, betraying myself. He didn't hesitate. His eyes never left mine as he spread my legs fully, exposing me completely.

I was dripping as he lowered his head. The first brush of his tongue made me gasp, hips bucking instinctively.

"Mmmgh..." I moaned loudly, my back arching, fingers digging into the sheets

He circled me expertly, his hands came up, bracing on either side of me, holding me down as he explored me with his mouth. I whimpered, legs trembling, as he continued to drive me higher.

One finger pressed against my inner thigh, dragging slowly upward, just grazing the apex clit. My hips bucked uncontrollably, letting out a desperate whine as heat pooled and coiled inside me. Before I knew it, he slid me slowly with his finger.

My breath came in ragged gasps, my chest heaving, and my hands clawed at the sheets, desperate for something to hold onto. He didn't relent. Another slow thrust of his finger, deeper this time, and I cried out, hips jerking, shivering violently under him.

His thumb pressed down against my clit, circling, and I felt my body tighten on instinct, every muscle clenching around him. Heat pooled and twisted inside me, building faster than I could think. My moans spilled out, and he only held me tighter, guiding me, controlling me, wringing every inch of pleasure from my body.

My hips rocking against the single finger inside me. Another stroke of his tongue and a deeper curl of his finger pushed me closer, until my body could no longer hold itself steady. I came violently, my back arching.

After I came, he didn't waste a second. His hands moved with that same cold control, and before I could even process it, his pants were gone. I gasped, my stomach tightening as my eyes fell on him.

Fuck, he was big. Bigger than Adrian. My mind raced. Could that even fit? Could I...?

But there was no time to think. Dominic's cock hovered at my entrance, and my body trembled instinctively. He tilted his head, those piercing red eyes locking onto mine, his voice low and dark, cutting through the haze of my mind.

"Don't worry. You will take me in."

Before I could even protest, he drove deep inside me, filling me so completely I could feel him stretching me. A sharp pleasure shot through me, making my toes curl and my nails dig into the sheets.

My body arched instinctively, hips pressing into him. I could feel the slickness coating him.

Shit!

Then, as abruptly as it started, it ended. My eyes snapped open. The room was quiet. The warm morning light spilled across my sheets, touching my face. I blinked in confusion, taking in the familiar sight of my bedroom.

Dominic wasn't there. My body was still trembling from the intensity, but reality hit.

I sat up slowly, peeling the blanket off my body. Warm wetness coated my thighs, sliding down in a slow, teasing trickle. My fingers hovered, hesitant, almost afraid to touch it. My mouth hung open as the images replayed in my mind. Heat flared in my cheeks, crawling up my neck.

Don't tell me...

I swallowed hard, heart racing even faster, and whispered to no one, "I had a wet dream about Alpha Dominic."

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 79

[1,185 words]

Chapter 79

Selene

I pressed the tips of my fingers against my temples, massaging gently, trying to calm the heat crawling beneath my skin. My elbow rested on the table while my fingers drummed against the wood in an uneven rhythm, anything to distract myself from the fact that my body was betraying me.

The rhythm sounded like the pacing of a caged beast. Because that's what I was.

A doomed, cornered, irritated beast.

"Selene Bloodrose," I muttered under my breath. "You are a doomed woman. So doomed that even you might not find a way out of this one. Congratulations."

I slumped forward, my forehead almost hitting the table. Of all the disasters I had anticipated, this one wasn't even on the

list.

It wasn't an exaggeration, or self-pity. It was simply the truth.

The moment I woke up drenched in sweat, my heart pounding wildly in my chest, I knew something was wrong. When the wet dream came back in full detail, and I felt how soaked I was, I knew I was fucked.

I was in heat.

Women in heat always dreamed of someone they desired or were drawn to, but of all the men in this world, why him?

Why Alpha Dominic?

A man whose hands had ended my life more times than I wanted to remember. A man whose face, voice, and presence had always meant the end for me. If my body wanted to kill me, there were gentler ways to do it. Dreaming about him felt like

torture.

There is no way I'm attracted to that demon. I would rather mate with a tree.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling, letting out an exhausted groan. "Why couldn't it be Adrian like before? Or... literally anyone else I'm not terrified of?"

My body felt feverish, every heartbeat heavier than the last. It made no sense. I wasn't attracted to Dominic. I was terrified of him. No sane woman in their heat wanted a walking calamity disguised as a man.

Once a year, every werewolf woman faced it, the overwhelming surge of need, pressure, and pain. Women in heat wasn't something you could just push through. If ignored, it built and built, a relentless force that coiled inside you until it became impossible to contain. In the worst cases, it could knock a woman unconscious, or kill her if it spiraled too far.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, when I went into heat, my scent became stronger than most.

In my past lives, Adrian always marked me before my heat arrived. He handled it by sleeping with me. And I allowed it, because back then, I thought he was my salvation. I thought he was the only one who could keep me safe. I was so stupid.

This time, I refused to let him touch me. Which meant only two methods were left to survive this,

Intercourse, which was the fastest and most effective way, or the moon-whisper plant, a rare herb that numbed the heat until it passed.

The first option was out of the question. And the second should have been my salvation. But as that thought crossed my mind, the door burst open.

Evelyn stumbled inside, panting as if she'd run across the courtyard. Her face was flushed, her hair sticking to her forehead and sweat clung to her temples. She shut the door behind her with trembling hands before dropping straight to her knees.

“M-my lady,” she gasped, shaking her head desperately, “you were right. Like you said, I couldn’t find any She swallowed hard. “The moon-whisper plant doesn’t grow during the winter. I searched everywhere. I even went to the market. Nobody

has it.”

I exhaled slowly, my shoulders sinking.

I had already guessed the outcome, but Evelyn still ran through the cold for me anyway. The plant didn’t grow in winter.

I pressed my lips together as a warm wave crawled up my spine, my body reminding me that time was not something I had the luxury of wasting.

Evelyn looked at me again, and fear flickered across her face. “My lady, what are we going to do?” Her voice cracked as she spoke, her eyes wide and full of worry. “Your body is trembling and red. If we’re not careful, your scent will become worse, and once it gets strong enough, the men around here will start sensing it. Even though you’re the moonborn, and touching you means death, some of these men will still try. Men are stupid when it involves a woman in heat.”

She wasn’t wrong. Men were stupid when it came to a woman in heat. Lust clouded any rational thought they had. Even in my past lives, there were many times when a man tried to touch me because they were drawn to my scent, but the only thing that stopped them back then was the fear of Adrian.

Touching the mate of the future Alpha was a death sentence. But in this life, I didn’t have Adrian’s protection. And what terrified me wasn’t fending men off, it was controlling myself around them. If I wasn’t careful, I wouldn’t be fighting them off. I’d be throwing myself at them.

My wolf stirred restlessly beneath my skin, claws scraping at my control, and I clenched my fists to hold her back.

I glanced at Evelyn again. She was still breathing hard, panic written all over her face as she scrambled for a solution. I forced a small smile for her, though it didn’t reach my eyes.

“You’re looking more scared than I am,” I told her. “It’s okay. You don’t need to worry about me. Nothing will happen. I have a lot of self-control. For now, I can still keep my scent under control. As long as I stay indoors until it passes, I’ll be fine. No one visits me anyway. I’m sure nothing will happen.”

“My lady-”

Evelyn's shoulders eased a little, though her worry didn't disappear. She opened her mouth, but the door suddenly swung open again.

Both of us looked toward the entrance, and, of course, standing there was none other than my twin sister, Sienna, pushing the door open like she owned the entire temple. And behind her stood Kane, my equally insufferable brother.

I stared at them, already mentally drained.

You've got to be kidding me. This day cannot get any worse.

Evelyn instantly jumped to her feet and moved behind me, posture tight with tension. She understood exactly how dangerous they were. Sienna and Kane were the last people I needed anywhere near me right now.

Sienna's face lit up the moment her eyes landed on me, her lips curling into a warm, affectionate smile, one that would've

fooled anyone who didn't know her true nature. She practically floated into the room, hands clasped together like I was her beloved sister instead of the girl she spent most of her life ruining.

"Selene!"

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Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 80

[1,831 words]

Chapter 80

Chapter 80

Selene

I straightened, forcing my scent to stay calm, and met both of their eyes with a flat, emotionless expression.

Kane had that same arrogant, insufferable look plastered across his face as he stared at me. I hadn't seen him, or crossed paths with him, since the coming-of-age ceremony, but the memory of his expression that day was still clear. The shock. The disbelief. The way his jaw practically hit the ground when he realized I was the one with the white wolf, and not his precious Sienna.

Even now, I wanted to make him angry, but I couldn't because I wasn't in the mood to deal with either of them. My body was already struggling to suppress the heat rising under my skin, and the last thing I needed was these two walking disasters breathing the same air as me. But of course, Sienna either didn't notice my mood or didn't care at all.

She rushed toward me with excitement and then, without warning, threw herself onto me. Her arms wrapped around me so suddenly that I barely had time to react. My hands hovered uselessly at my sides, stiff and unwilling to return the gesture.

Her irritating scent hit my nose immediately.

I raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing? Get off me."

Instead of listening, Sienna hugged me tighter, squeezing me like she thought she could wring affection out of me through force.

"What do you mean, sister?" she chirped with that fake innocence she perfected long ago. "I'm hugging you because I'm so happy. I don't know how to thank you for what you did. I'll forever be grateful. I knew it, sister loves me the most out of everyone in the world!"

My other eyebrow joined the first.

"What? Me?"

She didn't answer. She just kept clinging to me.

I slowly turned my gaze toward Kane. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, watching the whole scene. My glare sharpened. "Hey. Get this thing off me immediately before I do it myself. And I promise you, I won't be gentle."

Kane rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Don't you know how to say something nice? You don't have to be mean to her. She's trying to thank you for what you did."

What I did? What delusion were they living in?

I opened my mouth to ask, but Sienna finally released me and stepped back with a blinding smile, her eyes sparkling like she had just won a prize.

“Sister, I honestly can’t believe it. You are so nice. Thank you so much, sister.”

I let out a long exhale. This was getting annoying fast.

Without a second thought, I pushed her away from me. Sienna squeaked as she fell onto her ass. Kane rushed forward instantly, helping her up.

“Selene, what is wrong with you?!” he snapped, glaring at me as if I had committed a crime.

I shrugged. “You’re bothering me. If you don’t want to speak normal English, then do me a favor and get out.”

“You!” Kane started, anger flaring, but Sienna grabbed his arm quickly, shaking her head.

“It’s okay, brother. Please don’t shout at sister.” She said, then turned toward me again and grabbed my hand with both of hers, smiling like a saint.

“Sister, you

don’t need to hide it,” she said softly. “Father already told me everything. The alpha accepted your rejection. You’ll soon break things off with Prince Adrian.” Her smile widened. “One of the reasons you want to reject him is because of me, right? It’s because you want me and Adrian to be together.”

“...Huh?” I said flatly.

Kane coughed, straightening up with that arrogant air he always wore. “Well, even though you’re annoying, that’s pretty selfless of you. At least you still care about Sienna’s feelings.” He nodded at me, satisfied with himself. “You’re not so useless after all.”

I stared at the two of them for a long moment. And then I couldn’t hold it anymore.

I burst out laughing.

The sound exploded out of me, echoing around the room, far too loud for the situation. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes as I grabbed my stomach, laughing harder the more I looked at their faces.

Sienna froze like a startled deer.

Kane stared at me as if I had lost every last brain cell.

My laughter continued, shaking my shoulders. gods, it felt good. They were so stupid that I couldn't help it.

Kane finally snapped. "What is wrong with you? Why are you laughing like we said something stupid?"

I wiped the small tear at the corner of my eye and slowly calmed myself. A soft chuckle escaped me.

"Because you did say something stupid." I said, smirking. "No wonder you two were being a nuisance."

Sienna blinked rapidly. "W-what are you saying, Selene?"

I leaned back against the pillow behind me, crossing my arms casually as I looked between them.

"Was that what Father said? Did he actually tell you I rejected Adrian because of you? Oh, don't be delusional, Sienna. You were the last thing I was thinking about yesterday. Why would I reject my mate because of a manipulative person like you?"

The embarrassment hit her immediately, her cheeks turned red all the way to her ears. She faltered for a second, her real expression cracking, before she remembered to act pitiful again.

"R-really, sister?" she whispered, voice wavering just enough to seem delicate. "I thought... you did it because you knew I liked Prince Adrian. I didn't mean to make it a big deal, I was just so happy..."

I rolled my eyes so hard it almost hurt. There she went again acting innocent. Only a fool would fall for that performance.

And Kane naturally fell for it within a second.

"Selene! There you go again, acting mean to Sienna. She's always nice to you. Even if you didn't do it for her, you don't have to be so cruel. You could at least lie to make her feel better."

I stuck a finger in my ear as if cleaning it, not even looking at him.

That, of course, made him even angrier.

"Ugh!" he hissed.

I sighed lazily. "You know the door. I don't want to see your faces, so leave."

Kane scoffed. "You know what? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what her reason was. At the end of the day, she already decided to reject the prince." He turned to Sienna with a proud smile. "That means Adrian will be yours, Sienna. You'll be the next Luna of the pack. You deserve it."

Sienna blushed deeply and then turned back toward me with a soft smile.

"Yes, sister," she said. "Thank you so much. Even though you're Prince Adrian's mate, I hope you can give him to me since we already have some chemistry. You won't be angry, right?"

My eyebrow twitched.

"The Luna and even the Alpha like me," she continued, smiling wider. "I'll make sure when you're ready to have a mate, I'll find someone perfect for you."

Kane nodded eagerly, putting out his chest. "Yes. I'll make one of my friends court you," he said as if he was offering me the greatest favor in the world. "You're pretty, and the moonborn. At least one of them might want you."

They wanted to annoy me, but I just stared at them flatly. They could talk all they wanted. Sienna could have Adrian. I didn't want him anymore.

Behind me, I could feel Evelyn fuming. Her anger radiated off her. I could practically sense her preparing to leap forward and tear both of them apart with her bare hands. I was about to shut them up, but there was a knock on the door.

Sienna and Kane paused and turned to me, as if waiting for an explanation. I raised an eyebrow.

Why were they looking at me like I was expecting someone? I wasn't. Why on earth did people keep coming today of all days?

Another knock followed.

"Lady Selene," a voice called through the door. "I am the eunuch from the palace. I have been sent by the alpha."

Sienna gasped. "The alpha? What does the alpha want?" She turned toward me, blinking innocently. "Selene?"

I shrugged. Even I was confused.

Kane, of course, spoke before using a single brain cell. "Maybe the alpha wanted to invite you to the palace but made a mistake coming here."

Honestly, the explanation sounded reasonable. I found myself almost nodding.

Sienna's eyes sparkled. "Oh my, then let's go, brother! We mustn't keep him waiting!" She hurried out of the room. Kane shot me one last dark, self-satisfied look before following her.

The moment the door closed behind them, I exhaled deeply and closed my eyes. I wanted to lie down, but Evelyn grabbed my hand.

I snapped my eyes open. "What are you doing?"

"Lady Selene," she said urgently, "let's go too."

"Why?" I deadpanned. "You heard him. They came for Sienna."

Evelyn shook her head fiercely. "We can't be sure. If they came for Sienna, they wouldn't come to your room. And the eunuch has already been to your room before, he wouldn't make that kind of mistake."

Of course I already knew that. But I was too tired to care, and I did not want to deal with anyone from the palace in this condition. Still, Evelyn wasn't having it. She tugged harder, dragging me toward the door before I could protest.

When we stepped into the hallway, Sienna immediately caught my eye, her hand pressed dramatically against her cheek as she gasped. Beside her, Kane wore that triumphant smirk, as if the world had finally acknowledged his sister.

The eunuch stood respectfully at the side, bowing slightly. My doorstep was buried under a mountain of perfectly wrapped boxes, baskets, chests, and bundles of rare cloth. Servants lined the edges, heads bowed, waiting silently behind the offerings.

I stared at everything and raised an eyebrow.

Huh? What is going on?

Before I could open my mouth, the eunuch straightened and smiled warmly at me. It looked like he was about to speak, but Sienna lunged forward first.

"Oh my goddess, are all these for me? I can't believe it, they're beautiful!"

The eunuch's smile froze. He blinked, confused.

Sienna took his silence as encouragement. “I accept them. I’m so grateful to the alpha. This is too much!” She stepped forward, already reaching toward a box wrapped in gold silk.

Before her fingers even grazed it, the eunuch smoothly stepped into her path and blocked her with a stiff, polite bow. He turned, completely ignoring her, and faced me.

His expression instantly softened again as he smiled.

“Lady Selene, I was ordered by Alpha Rhydian to deliver all these gifts to you.”

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