

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 81

[ 3,271 words ]

Chapter 81

Selene

The whole courtyard went silent.

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Even Evelyn, who practically dragged me out here because she believed the eunuch came for me, looked stunned.

I stared at the eunuch, then at the gifts, and pointed at myself. "Me?"

Sienna snapped out of her shock and jabbed her finger toward me as well. "Her?"

The eunuch nodded politely, unbothered by the tension thickening around him. "Yes, Lady Selene. The alpha instructed me to deliver everything to you." His smile widened faintly. "He was very happy with you during your last visit and wished to express his appreciation. Therefore, he had me bring all these to you."

I leaned back against the wall, taking in his words.

Happy? The alpha was that pleased with me? Pleased enough to send half the palace treasury to my doorstep?

When I looked more closely at the gifts, I could see glimmers of gold through the wrapping. There was solid gold, expensive jewelry, and rare fabrics. This wasn't appreciation. This was appeasement. Almost as if he was trying to win favor from someone extremely important.

He really went all the way.

Sienna's face darkened to a furious, blotchy red. The realization that none of this was for her hit so hard that she forgot to pretend. She snapped without thinking, voice sharp and ugly, "How is that possible? Why would the alpha give her so many things?"

Every head in the courtyard turned toward her.

Even Kane looked shocked. He stared at her like he didn't recognize her. In his eyes, Sienna was always elegant, gentle, and kind to everyone.

What a joke.

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Sienna froze, realizing too late what she had let slip. She looked at Kane desperately, as if waiting for him to save her from her own stupidity.

He remained silent.

I felt my lips curl into a slow, mocking smirk. Selene was a two-faced brat who played innocent for the world but couldn't stand anyone being chosen over her.

Sienna recovered first. In the blink of an eye, that fake smile spread across her face as she turned toward the eunuch with a graceful little bow.

"I-I apologize," she said, voice trembling just enough to seem fragile. "I only care about my sister too much. When I saw all the gifts, I panicked. I thought it was too much for her. I only worry that if she receives so many expensive things, she might... spend them lavishly" She forced a soft laugh. "You know how Selene is. She never thinks before she spends. I just

"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” 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, puffing 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

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 t

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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Selene

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don't want the alpha's generosity to go to waste."

I rolled my eyes. Predictable, pathetic, and fake enough to give a wolf indigestion.

Naturally, Kane bought every word of it. He leaned toward her with that proud big-brother look and patted her shoulder.

“As expected, Sienna. You’re so kind and wise.” Then he shot me a pointed look. “If only Selene was half as wise as you.”

I stared at him for a moment, amused despite myself.

Wise?

Coming from him, it was hilarious. Kane had less common sense than a dog. No wonder in my past lives he was always the first to die whenever Sienna caused trouble, he’d follow her off a cliff if she smiled sweetly enough.

The eunuch, however, was clearly not as gullible as Kane. His expression did not soften.

“If you say so, Lady Sienna,” he replied politely, though there was a firm warning beneath his tone. “But it is not your place to worry about the alpha. The alpha is not a man you can concern yourself with.”

Sienna’s eyelid twitched. Her cheeks flushed a deep, angry red before she forced them back into her gentle expression. Even Kane blinked, startled that anyone dared speak to his precious sister in that tone.

Kane’s mouth opened, ready to bark at the eunuch, but he wisely shut it again. Even he wasn’t dumb enough to pick a fight with the alpha’s direct servant.

The eunuch turned away from them and faced me. His posture straightened immediately, and he bowed again, deeper this time, as if Sienna wasn’t even worth acknowledging.

“Lady Selene,” he said with respect, “are these gifts to your liking? If there is anything that does not suit your taste, I can bring more. The alpha instructed me to ensure you are completely satisfied.”

I exhaled slowly and looked at the mountain of gifts blocking my doorstep. I would have snatched everything without hesitation because I was a greedy person when it came to money. But this time was different.

I didn’t want anything from the royal family. Every single ribbon tied around those gifts was another rope trying to drag me back into their circle. Today it was gifts; tomorrow it would be visits, invitations, expectations, obligations. And that was the last thing I needed.

I had already died enough times tangled in the royal family. And most of all I needed to stay far away from anything involving Adiran and the alpha until I was strong enough to get my revenge.

The only one in that palace I genuinely cared about was Princess Avery.

I sighed quietly, pressing my fingers to my temple as the eunuch, Sienna, Kane, Evelyn, and half the servants in the courtyard stared at me.

I didn't have a choice. If I dared to say I didn't want the gifts, it would immediately be taken as disrespect toward the alpha, and the entire courtyard would explode with unnecessary drama that I did not have the patience, energy, or sanity to deal with today.

The heat pulsing under my skin was already making it difficult to think clearly; the last thing I needed was the royal family getting offended because I rejected the gifts. So I pushed down the irritation gathering in my chest and forced a small, composed smile that I did not mean in the slightest.

"Thank you, it's okay. I'm very satisfied with them. Alpha Rhydian is very generous."

The eunuch visibly relaxed, his shoulders lowering. "Good, my lady. Then I will have the servants move the gifts to wherever you want them placed."

I nodded, even though inside my head I was screaming about how I didn't want any of these things inside my room.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sienna staring at the gifts with envy. Her hands twitched as though she genuinely had to restrain herself from lunging forward to tear open the boxes and claim half the items for herself. Even her forced smile trembled; her eyes could barely hide the resentment burning behind them.

The eunuch seemed to recall something then. He straightened, clasping his hands behind his back with a small clearing of

his throat.

"Ah-before I forget. Lady Selene the alpha is hosting a gathering this weekend with important Alphas from other packs and wants you and your sister to attend"

I stiffened.

This weekend? Alphas?

A cold dread slid down my spine. My heat had only just begun, it was barely manageable for now. By the weekend, it would reach its worst stage, the point where

even a man's presence could send waves of unbearable need through me, and my scent would be nearly impossible to mask, no matter how much control I tried to force. I would be in the middle of a crowded hall, surrounded by alphas and powerful men, any one of whom might sense even the slightest flicker of my heat if I slipped.

There was no scenario in which I could leave my courtyard safely.

Sienna perked up instantly, her eyes shining with excitement because she thought everything in this world was secretly about her. I was ready to tell the eunuch that she could enjoy the party alone, but he continued before I could utter a single word.

"Prince Adrian will be returning, and the alpha requests your presence there, Lady Selene."

Shit.

If I refused, if I so much as hinted that I couldn't attend, the alpha might take it as defiance. Worse, he might suspect my vision and rethink the rejection entirely, undoing everything I just risked myself to secure.

This was a disaster waiting to unfold. Yet I couldn't avoid it.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 82

[ 1,450 words ]

Chapter 82

Selene

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I sank deeper into the cold water until it reached my shoulders, my eyes closed as I forced my breathing to steady. The chill seeped into my skin, but it did little to reduce the restless heat inside my body. Still, I stayed there, unmoving as I tried to meditate, and focus on anything other than my arousal.

After a while, a soft knock echoed against the wooden door.

“Come in,” I said, my voice calm.

The door opened, and Evelyn stepped inside, careful and quiet as always. She was holding a tray as she approached the bath. When she reached my side, she bowed and gently set the tray down. “My lady,” she said softly, “I’ve brought more plants.”

I didn’t open my eyes. I only gave a faint nod in response.

Evelyn lifted the bowl and poured the contents into the water. The crushed plant touched the surface and dissolved almost instantly, the water clouding for a moment before clearing again. A faint scent rose into the air.

Several days had passed since the eunuch’s visit, and every one of them had been difficult. My heat had fully taken hold, and the cold baths had become my only refuge. They didn’t cure anything, but they helped, it was just enough to keep me functional. The plants Evelyn used were meant to mask scent. They worked, but only temporarily, and only if reapplied again and again.

Because of that, I had barely left the bathhouse or my room. I hadn’t attended my moonborn lessons. I hadn’t gone into the courtyard. I refused visitors without exception. Too many eyes were watching me these days, many people curious about why I had suddenly disappeared from sight.

I noticed servants sent by Sienna lingering nearby more than once, but I ignored them all, giving no one even the smallest opening to pry into my condition.

After soaking for a while longer, I finally opened my eyes.

Evelyn was still standing there, her hands folded in front of her.

“I’m fine, Evelyn,”

I rose from the bath, water streaming down my skin and dripping back into the pool. Evelyn moved immediately, grabbing a thick bathrobe and draping it around my shoulders. I stepped out of the bathhouse slowly, the cool air brushing against my damp skin.

She hesitated before speaking again. "I'm still worried, my lady. Today is the alpha's banquet. There will be many guests, and too many men." She lowered her voice. "You've managed to hide it so far, but with so many people gathered in one place, I don't know if it's possible to conceal your heat completely."

I didn't dismiss her concern. I understood it better than anyone.

"I know," I said as we walked. "That's why I stayed in the water for so long, and why I used more of the plant

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than usual." I paused for a moment before adding, "If I feel it slipping out of my control, I'll leave immediately. I won't push myself."

Evelyn searched my face, then slowly nodded. "Okay, my lady, just be careful."

Evelyn pushed the door open first, and we stepped into my room.

The sight waiting for us made her freeze on the spot.

Sienna was sitting comfortably on one of my chairs, a teacup lifted delicately to her lips as if she owned the place. Behind her stood her maid, Emma, hands folded neatly, chin slightly raised, but she avoided looking at me directly.

Evelyn's voice trembled. "W-what are you doing in Lady Selene's room without permission?"

Emma's gaze snapped to her. "How dare you speak to Lady Sienna like that? Do you have a death wish?"

Evelyn flinched, her mouth parting as if to argue. "But-"

Sienna took another unhurried sip of tea before setting the cup down. She turned her head toward Evelyn, smiling sweetly. "Are you saying I can't come into my sister's room whenever I want?"

Evelyn went silent, clearly unsure how to respond.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose as the dull throb behind my eyes intensified. I didn't have the patience for this today. "What do you want, Sienna?" I asked flatly.

Her smile widened as she stood and walked toward me, closing the distance. She reached out and grabbed my hand, her grip light but insistent. "Selene, the banquet is about to start soon."

I raised an eyebrow, my expression blank. "So?"

She didn't let go of my hand. "Sister, I don't have anything to wear. Can I choose something from the clothes the alpha gave you?"

I stared at her.

A woman who obsessed over appearances, who planned outfits days in advance, suddenly had nothing to wear, on the day of the alpha's banquet? The lie was so transparent it was almost insulting.

Before I could respond, she released my hand and moved straight toward my closet. She opened it without hesitation, eyes scanning eagerly before lighting up. She reached in and pulled out the most beautiful dress hanging there.

It was the dress Alpha Rhydian had gifted me specifically for the banquet.

She held it up in admiration. "Can I have this one?" she asked, turning back to me with a hopeful smile. "Please, Selene. I really don't have anything suitable. You have so many clothes from the alpha anyway. You can give me just one, right?" She tilted her head. "That's what a good sister would do."

My lips twitched.

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The audacity. The shamelessness. The certainty that I would give in, just like I always had before.

Evelyn opened her mouth, clearly ready to explode, but I lifted a hand to stop her.

"You can have it," I said calmly. "Take it and leave."

The room went still.

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Evelyn stared at me. Emma blinked in surprise. Even Sienna froze, clearly not expecting such an easy victory.

“R-really?” Sienna asked, then quickly smiled. “Thank you, Selene.” She clutched the dress to her chest, visibly pleased. “We’ll be going in the same carriage. I’ll get dressed and meet you downstairs.”

With that, she turned and left the room in a cheerful mood, Emma following closely behind.

I watched the door close behind her, my expression unreadable.

Evelyn let out an annoyed breath, her brows drawn together. “My lady, she did that on purpose,” she said, clearly irritated. “She chose the prettiest dress. She wanted to outshine you. I was going to choose that one for you to wear.”

I waved my hand dismissively and sat down on the bed, crossing my legs with ease. “No need,” I said calmly. “I wasn’t planning on wearing that dress anyway. Let her do whatever she wants.”

Evelyn looked even more confused. “Then... what were you planning to wear?”

Before I could answer, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

The door opened, and a familiar face stepped inside. It was Maya, the young girl who had brought the materials for the dress I wore at my coming-of-age ceremony. She stood a little stiffly by the door, hands clasped in front of her.

Evelyn’s expression softened immediately. “Maya? How are you?”

Maya blushed and lowered her gaze. “I-I’m fine, ma’am.”

“Call me Evelyn.”

“Since you already know each other, there’s no need for introductions. Maya will be working as my maid from now on, and Evelyn, you’ll be her supervisor.”

Evelyn paused at my words and turned to look at Maya. Maya swallowed, clearly nervous, as if expecting scolding. Instead, Evelyn smiled widely, placed a hand on her shoulder, and said warmly, “Welcome, Maya. Let’s serve Lady Selene together. But just know this, I won’t forgive anyone who betrays her.”

Maya's eyes widened, and she nodded quickly. "Y-yes!"

"Good girl," Evelyn said, satisfied.

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"Maya, where is the dress?"

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"Excuse me, my lady." She hurried to the closet and carefully brought out a white dress, simple in design, paired with a large coat.

Evelyn frowned slightly. "The dress is—"

"It's plain, with no design," I finished for her. "And that's fine. I had it made with special plants woven into the fabric. The material prevents the cold and keeps my scent hidden for a longer period of time."

Evelyn stared at the clothes, stunned. "I've never seen anything like this before, my lady. You're so intelligent."

I smiled proudly. "Don't worry, Evelyn. We'll use this knowledge to make a lot of money someday. We will be the richest people in the world."

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 83

[ 1,539 words ]

Chapter 83

Chapter 83

Adrian

Her voice wouldn't leave my head.

"I want to reject you, Prince Adrian of the Mooncrest Pack."

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Those words kept echoing in my head like a cursed chant. They repeated with every breath I took, every shift of the wind, every hoofbeat of my horse beneath me. It was like someone had forced a terrible song into my mind.

Ever since Selene Bloodrose's coming-of-age ceremony, since the moment she shifted and then immediately made a wish to reject me, I hadn't been able to focus on anything or anyone. It was infuriating. She was infuriating. And worst of all, I couldn't even understand why.

Why was the girl I barely looked at more than twice in my entire life, lingering in my mind?

My jaw clenched, the muscles tightening with irritation. I snapped the reins sharply in my hand, and my horse responded with a loud snort before sprinting forward, hooves pounding against the frozen ground. The faster we rode, the more I felt the familiar burn in my chest, anger mixed with something I refused to name.

What bothered me wasn't just the rejection, it was the way she acted. Selene used to follow me everywhere, practically tripping over her own feet just to walk a little closer to me. She used to watch me with that ridiculous lovesick expression, blush at every word I said, cling to every chance to stand near me.

But now, she acted as if I was the last person she wanted to see, as though the very sight of me was some kind of burden she could barely tolerate.

She treated me like I didn't matter.

And for a reason I did not understand was why it pissed me off more than anything had in a very long time.

Did something happen to her? The thought crossed my mind, irritating me even more.

Just then, an amused voice broke through my thoughts.

"You've been like this the entire journey," Alpha Tristan drawled from beside me. "It's almost like you want to kill someone."

I loosened my grip on the reins slightly and glanced sideways. On the next horse over, Alpha Tristan rode with that entertained expression on his face, as though my current misery were nothing more than a performance put on solely for his amusement.

I didn't know whether to ignore him or give him a sarcastic remark. Ever since the phoenix was released, Tristan had been lingering around the Mooncrest Pack like a bored wolf looking for chaos to bite. Instead of returning to his own territory, where any normal alpha would be reinforcing defenses, checking on his people, or at least pretending to take precautions, he followed me around.

His excuse had been simple, ridiculous, and knowing him, likely honest.

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"Things are more interesting in the Mooncrest Pack right now," he had said. "And if the phoenix is really out, this territory will be the first to get attacked. I'd hate to miss that."

Alpha Tristan was the type of man who didn't just seek out powerful enemies, he hunted them, salivating at the possibility of a fight to the death. And considering his own pack was one of the third strongest in the continent, protected by a defense system most alphas envied, it wasn't surprising that he wasn't worried about the phoenix breaking into his pack. If anything, he seemed disappointed it probably wouldn't.

I exhaled sharply and looked away from him, irritation building all over again.

“When are you leaving, Alpha Tristan?” I asked, keeping my voice flat.

Tristan turned his head toward me, lips curving into that smirk that always made me want to punch him just to erase it.

“You say it as if you want me gone, Prince Adrian,” he remarked casually. “How cold.”

I still didn’t understand Tristan. I didn’t understand what his intentions were, or who he was truly interested in. He was unpredictable, like a blade someone had dropped on the ground, sharp edges waiting for the wrong person to pick it up. But one thing had bothered me ever since Selene’s coming-of-age ceremony.

When I carried her in my arms that night, Tristan had looked at her with an expression I did not like. It wasn’t lust, not exactly. It was curiosity, and interest. There was something sharp glinting behind his eyes. And that alone was enough to make every part of me bristle.

My wolf didn’t handle it well either. The moment he sensed Tristan’s attention on her, something fierce and possessive flared inside us. I hated the feeling. I hated the implication even more, that Alpha Tristan might be interested in Selene.

But despite how much the thought annoyed me, the truth remained, Tristan was a powerful alpha, and keeping a firm alliance between our packs was important. Even if I disliked him, even if something about the way he looked at Selene rubbed me the wrong way, I wouldn’t let personal irritation ruin what generations had built.

Trying to keep the conversation neutral, I said, “I only asked because I wasn’t sure if you had other matters you needed to focus on.”

He saw right through it, but Tristan simply shrugged, unconcerned. “I don’t have any other plans. I’m pretty free.” His mouth quirked into that smile. “And besides, there’s a party tonight at your palace. Your father invited me. I’d be rude not to attend.”

I exhaled. This was the first time in my life I’d ever heard an alpha claim he was free. Alphas were never free. They were always busy.

Behind us, I could feel Ethan, my beta in training, riding silently with Tristan’s beta. They seemed nervous about how the conversation was going. I didn’t bother paying attention to them. My focus shifted forward as the palace came into view,

The moment the high walls rose in front of us, I snapped the reins, and my horse instantly surged forward. Snow scattered behind us as we raced toward the gate. We reached it in minutes, and as soon as the guards recognized us, they opened the gate with hurried bows.

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## Chapter 83

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88

55 vouchers

I rode through without slowing, stopping only when I reached the courtyard. I dismounted in one smooth motion, beside me, Tristan landed on the ground with the same ease.

From a distance, warm lights glowed across the palace grounds. The decorations were extravagant. And a party was the last thing I needed right now.

I received his message yesterday, he demanded my return for an important event. I'd almost ignored him. Strengthening our defenses was more critical than attending some celebration. There was a phoenix on the loose. But he insisted I return.

The eunuch and several servants rushed toward us. They all bowed low and said, "Welcome back, Prince Adrian. Welcome, Alpha Tristan. The party has already begun. We have prepared several formal outfits for you to choose from."

I didn't respond. I simply nodded, turned to Tristan, and gave him a brief nod.

He smirked slightly, as I walked forward, Ethan falling into step behind me along with the servants.

Selene.

No matter how many times her rejection echoed in my head, no matter how strangely she'd been behaving, it didn't matter.

There was no way I was going to reject her. Selene was mine, and I wasn't going to let her go.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tristain

I watched him walk away, his back straight, his steps firm, as if nothing in this world could affect him. The amused smirk that had been resting lazily on my lips didn't disappear, but the playfulness behind it did. My gaze sharpened, growing colder, more focused than it had been just moments ago.

Interesting.

I let out a low chuckle under my breath, the sound barely audible. Mooncrest was far more entertaining than I had expected.

Footsteps approached from behind me, familiar and measured. Axel. My beta stopped a respectful distance away and bowed his head slightly.

“Alpha Tristan,” he said carefully, “if I may, can I ask you a question?”

I raised an eyebrow, glancing at him from the corner of my eye. “Go on.”

Axel hesitated for a heartbeat before continuing. “Why are you still in the Mooncrest Pack? I know the phoenix is part of the reason, but...” He paused, choosing his words wisely. “You’re not the type to stay in one place just because of a single threat. There’s something else keeping you here. I know it. Am I allowed to ask

what it is?”

I turned fully to face him then, studying his expression. Axel had always been perceptive.

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Chapter 83

“You’re right,” I said calmly. “The phoenix alone wouldn’t keep me here.”

Axel waited, eyes steady, clearly expecting more.

I shrugged lightly. “The truth is, I don’t know what it is yet either.”

His brows furrowed slightly.

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55 vouchers

“But,” I added, my gaze drifting back toward the palace in the distance, where lanterns glowed against the darkening sky, “I have a feeling we’ll find out today.”

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 84

[ 1,552 words ]

Chapter 84

Chapter 84

Selene

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255 vouchers

“Oh my goddess, I can’t wait, Selene. There will be so many people at the banquet, important elders, nobles, I even heard some alphas will be there. No, forget them. Most importantly, he will be there. Adrian will be there. We can finally talk, spend time together...”

Sienna’s voice filled the carriage without pause, each word tumbling over the next. I leaned back against the cushioned wall, closed my eyes, and pinched the bridge of my nose, forcing myself to breathe slowly. Just listening to her was exhausting, and my body was already stretched thin. Heat simmered beneath my skin, and the last thing I needed was this.

“And Selene,” she continued brightly, “what are you even wearing? Your outfit is strange. I mean, it’s pretty, but you’re covering your whole body. At a banquet full of important people, don’t you think it looks kind of tacky? If you didn’t have any other things to wear, you should have asked me to lend you something.”

I said nothing. If I opened my mouth now, I might say something I wouldn’t bother taking back.

The carriage rocked gently as it moved, the rhythm doing nothing to drown her out. I wondered briefly what sin I'd committed in this lifetime to be trapped in such a small space with her. Of all the carriages in the world, I had to be placed with a parrot that never stopped talking.

"Selene?" she pressed, leaning closer. "Did you hear me? Why aren't you saying anything? You-"

The carriage suddenly slowed, then stopped.

A knock sounded against the door. "We have arrived."

The voice was familiar, though in my current state I didn't bother to place it. Sienna gasped as if she had been waiting for that exact moment her entire life.

"Oh my goddess, we're here!" she exclaimed. "Open the door."

The door swung open, cool night air brushing against my face. I opened my eyes and froze.

Standing there was Lucas.

He leaned casually against the carriage frame, one hand resting lazily at his side, the other tucked into his pocket. His usual careless appearance was gone, replaced by elegant dark clothing that fit him far too well. His golden eyes glinted with amusement, and that familiar, infuriatingly lazy smile curved his lips like he'd planned this entire moment just to see my reaction.

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

Sienna, beside me, stared openly. "Whoa..."

She had never seen him before. Lucas rarely left my courtyard, spending his days eating, lounging, and watching me as if I were some strange creature he hadn't quite decided what to do with yet.

"Who are you?" she asked, clearly intrigued.

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55 vouchers

Lucas didn't even spare her a glance. It was as if she didn't exist. His eyes were fixed on me, sparkling with

mischief.

"What?" he drawled. "Are you starstruck? I know I'm breathtaking."

I rolled my eyes, any shock dissolving into irritation. "What are you doing here?" I demanded, narrowing my gaze. Then it hit me. "Don't tell me you drove the carriage. What happened to the rider?"

He shrugged, entirely unbothered. "I did. And don't worry, the rider's still alive... I think." He tilted his head slightly, thoughtful. "I just knocked him unconscious and exchanged clothes."

I scoffed as I looked at him. This man was truly strange, admitting everything so casually, as if knocking someone unconscious and stealing their job was the most normal thing in the world.

I sighed, already tired, and asked, "How do you even know how to ride a horse?"

Lucas tilted his head slightly, his expression lazy but his eyes sharp. "I've lived for a long time," he said simply. "It's easy for me to copy what you people do."

"You people?" Sienna repeated, her voice cutting in sharply, reminding me that she was still very much present.

She looked from me to Lucas, her gaze lingering a second too long on him before she frowned. "Who is he, Selene? How do you know each other?"

I glanced at her indifferently. "He's my personal guard."

Her expression dropped instantly. 'Why does this bitch get a hot personal guard? Isn't Silas enough? He's gorgeous. She doesn't deserve anything good.'

I didn't even need to look into her mind to know what she was thinking. The jealousy was practically written on her face.

I looked back at her, my lips twitching with mockery, but I said nothing. There was no need. Sienna was not her main focus today.

Realizing I was watching her, she quickly adjusted her expression, forcing a bright smile. "Oh, is that so?" she said sweetly. Then she turned to Lucas. "Hi, my name is Sienna, Selene's younger sister. I'm so happy you're serving my sister. Please take good care of her. She's very delicate and makes a lot of mistakes."

She laughed lightly. "But don't worry, if anything happens, you can always tell me. And I hope you'll take care

of me too."

She was already acting, laying it on thick, using the same tricks she used on every man she met.

Lucas still didn't even look at her.

Instead, he extended his hand toward me. "Come," he said calmly. "Let's go. I'll be your escort tonight."

I glanced at Sienna just in time to see her face flush red from being completely ignored. If only she knew, Lucas wasn't like other men. He wasn't someone who could be swayed by charm. He was one of the greatest

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beings to ever exist, and her little act meant nothing to him.

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I smiled, placing my hand in his. He helped me down from the carriage with ease. As my feet touched the ground, I could feel Sienna's glare burning into my back.

"Hey, you!" she snapped at someone nearby. "Come and help me down!"

"Yes, ma'am," the servant replied hurriedly, rushing to her side as Lucas led me forward, his grip firm, leaving her fuming behind us.

As we walked into the hall, I felt a shift in the air, countless gazes snapping toward us all at once. My hand rested lightly atop Lucas's arm as we moved forward at an unhurried pace. The hall, already filled with nobles, elders, and alphas from different packs, slowly fell silent.

Lucas noticed it too. His posture didn't change, but his eyes narrowed slightly as he scanned the room with clear displeasure. "Why are they all staring?" he muttered, his voice low and edged with annoyance. "Do they have a death wish?"

I kept my expression calm, lowering my voice as well. "People always stare at things they like to gossip about," I replied. "And besides, I'm used to their gazes by now." My eyes swept across the hall briefly before I added, "If anything, I think you're the bigger problem. Your face is attracting far too much attention."

Even from where I stood, I could feel the lingering stares from noble ladies across the hall, eyes that followed Lucas with open fascination and interest. He stood out far too much. He had the kind of presence that drew people in before they even realized it, and tonight, it was impossible to ignore.

As we continued walking, a sudden jolt shot through my body without warning. My steps faltered for a second as I clenched my jaw, the reaction sharp and unpleasant. The sheer number of men in the hall was starting to affect me. I could feel their attention on me, even though none of them had caught my scent yet. My heat was reacting regardless, my body trembling faintly as warmth pooled uncomfortably, my face draining of color.

"Ah, fuck," I muttered under my breath. The banquet hadn't even started yet.

Lucas's hand tightened instantly around mine as he looked down at me with a raised brow. "Are you okay?"

I nodded quickly, straightening my posture and forcing my breathing to steady. "I'm fine," I said quietly, even though he clearly didn't believe me. I took a slow breath, pulling my control back into place as we continued forward.

He kept watching me from the corner of his eye, suspicion written plainly across his face.

To distract myself, I spoke again. "Will you tell me now why you're really here?"

He glanced at me. "What do you mean?"

"I know you, Lucas," I said calmly, meeting his gaze. "You wouldn't come all the way here without a reason. Don't tell me you're here just for the food."

His lips twitched, almost like he was offended. "You have very little faith in me."

"Well, I wouldn't put it past you. A lazy phoenix causing trouble for food alone wouldn't surprise me."

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55 vouchers

He looked at me for a long moment, his expression shifting into something more thoughtful before he finally spoke.

“You’re right. I don’t actually know why I’m here,” he admitted slowly. “Or why that man wanted me to keep an eye on you today.”

I stopped walking.

My head turned toward him, my earlier discomfort momentarily forgotten. “What did you just say?”

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 85

[ 1,257 words ]

Chapter 85

Chapter 85

Selene

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55 vouctions

I looked at Lucas, my brows knitting together in confusion as his words replayed in my head. He had dropped that statement so casually, as if it meant nothing, and yet it rang louder than everything else in the hall.

When I searched his face for an explanation, he avoided my eyes entirely, his gaze sliding away with ease, his expression closing off as though he had already said more than he intended to.

The silence between us stretched, and just as I opened my mouth to press him further, movement behind us pulled my attention away.

Sienna stepped forward, her heels clicking softly against the marble floor as she walked past us without a glance, her posture straight and confident, her smile already perfectly arranged. She headed directly toward a small group of noblewomen gathered near one of the columns, all of them dressed in elaborate gowns, clearly waiting for her. The moment they saw her, their faces lit up as if she were the highlight of the evening.

“Hello, guys,” Sienna greeted sweetly.

“Hello, Sienna,” one of the women replied warmly. “We’ve been waiting for you. It’s so nice to finally see you. How are you doing?”

Sienna laughed softly, touching the fabric of her dress as she spoke. “Oh, I’m fine. Sorry for being late, you know it takes a while to actually look this good.”

Another girl’s eyes lingered on her gown in admiration. “Woah, I saw that dress earlier at the boutique. I wanted to buy it, but the owner said it had already been sold to the royal family.” She tilted her head curiously. “Don’t tell me the alpha bought it for you.”

For just a brief second, Sienna’s eyes flicked toward me. Then she smiled again, brighter than before. “Oh, yes. The alpha bought it for me. I was so surprised when he gave it to me.”

“You’re so lucky,” one of them gushed. “And why are we even surprised? Everyone knows that your sister knows her place by rejecting Prince Adrian, you’re the rightful princess of the pack.”

The words echoed louder like she wanted everyone to hear. I could feel eyes turning toward me from all directions. I looked back at them calmly, my expression blank, and unbothered by everything around me. As expected, it hadn’t even taken a minute for them to start running their mouths.

Sienna’s lips curved by their words, but she masked it quickly, lifting her hand in a gesture in concern. “Stop, guys, don’t speak that way. You’ll hurt her with your words.”

One of the women scoffed openly. "Hurt her? What is she, a child? We're just saying the truth."

Normally, I wouldn't have cared. Most days, I truly didn't. People could gossip, mock, and whisper all they wanted, and I wouldn't spare them a thought. But today wasn't one of those days. My body was already on edge, my patience stretched thin, and their voices grated against my nerves. I had too much to deal with tonight to tolerate this kind of nonsense.

I was just about to speak and put them firmly in their place, when a calm, deep voice cut through the noise.

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Chapter 85

88

55 vouchers

"Amusing," the voice said lazily. "I didn't know the women of Mooncrest spoke to each other this way."

The effect the voice had was immediate. The conversations around me died instantly, people stopped laughing and whispering, and even Lucas stopped, curiosity flickering across his face. The voice wasn't loud, yet it carried authority, the kind that made people instinctively step back before they realized they were doing it. No one could deny it. This was an alpha's voice.

Everyone turned toward the source at once, myself included. And when I saw him, my body went rigid.

Blond hair, light golden eyes, and that familiar, amused expression that never quite reached his gaze.

Alpha Tristan.

I immediately frowned the moment my eyes landed on him.

You've got to be kidding me.

Of all the people who could have opened their mouth at that exact moment, why did it have to be him?

My expression turned openly distasteful before I could stop myself, annoyance flashing across my face without the slightest attempt to hide it. Alpha Tristan noticed. His gaze

slid toward me, and for a brief second he looked genuinely surprised. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his lips, as if my obvious displeasure was the most entertaining thing he'd seen all night.

That was the thing about this bastard. Everything amused him.

I didn't understand what he was doing in the Mooncrest Pack, and even less why he was paying attention to anyone here, let alone me. I knew Alpha Tristan well enough. He wasn't the type to linger in palaces or attend banquets for fun. He didn't care about gossip, alliances formed over wine, or the polite games of nobility. His interests were simple and brutal, he loved war and fights, and chaos, when it led to bloodshed. In fact, he was infamous for deliberately stirring trouble just so he could justify starting a war.

And yet, as troublesome as he was, nobody could deny his ability as an alpha. His pack was the third strongest in the world, disciplined, ruthless, and fiercely loyal. That fact alone made him even more irritating. To me, Alpha Tristan was nothing more than a dangerously clever alpha with a pretty face and a mind always plotting its next battlefield.

In my past lives, he had been obsessed with me, not because of love, but because I was a warlord. He wanted to take me, even knowing I was Adrian's mate. I had dealt with his fixation more times than I liked to remember, constantly pushing him away, and wary of his interest.

I let out a quiet sigh, barely moving my lips as I muttered to myself. At least I wasn't a warlord yet. Right now, I was just a Moonborn everyone seemed to hate. So he wouldn't focus on me.

Beside me, Sienna stared openly at Alpha Tristan, her cheeks flushing red as her eyes lingered on him without shame.

"Oh my goddess," she whispered, her voice loud with awe. "Who is he?"

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, unimpressed. I had almost forgotten how hopeless she was when it came to attractive men. She was the same with Lucas earlier, her attention drawn instantly to anyone with a handsome face and strong presence. She loved men who were beautiful, powerful, and unattainable,

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collecting them in her mind like trophies she hadn't earned.

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A dangerous thought drifted through my head before I could stop it. I wondered what her reaction would be if she ever met Damien, the demon of the west.

That man was breathtaking in a way that defied reason, overwhelming without even trying. Just thinking about him made my body tense, my heart skipping a beat against my will. My thoughts betrayed me further, drifting to that dream, to how real it had felt, how overwhelming the sensation had been.

If it felt that intense in a dream, how would it feel in reality?

My breath hitched, and I immediately shook my head, forcing the thought away.

No. Absolutely not.

Ah, don't even go there, Selene.

Anyone but that man. Anyone but

Anyone but your executioner.

AD

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 86

[ 1,262 words ]

86 Lady Selene, would you dance with me?

86 Lady Selene, would you dance with me?

Selene

“Sienna, he is looking at you.”

One of the women’s voices snapped me out of my thoughts. I lifted my head and immediately noticed the shift around me. The group of women standing nearby had gone wide-eyed, their expressions glowing as if something miraculous had just happened. Their cheeks were flushed, smiles stretching too wide as they stared past me, all of their attention pulled in one direction.

Alpha Tristan.

Especially Sienna.

She had that shy, carefully plastered smile on her face as she looked toward him, her lashes lowered just enough to appear modest while still inviting attention. The idea of having not only Adrian’s attention, but Alpha Tristan’s as well, clearly thrilled her. To her, this was everything, proof that men of power couldn’t resist her.

One of the women giggled, leaning closer to her. “Oh, Sienna, you’re so lucky. I can’t believe a man like Alpha Tristan is interested in you. Why does everyone like you? Even your two hot brothers can’t stop paying attention to you.”

Another woman chimed in immediately, her voice full of envy. “I know, right? Sienna, tell me, what’s your secret? You have so many men wrapped around your finger. You even caught the interest of the war-headed alpha.”

Sienna’s lips curved into a smug smile. Men like Alpha Tristan looking at her was only natural, in her mind. Still, she glanced at me, as if checking whether I was watching, and whether I looked jealous enough to satisfy her. She turned back to the women, touching her cheeks lightly, feigning embarrassment.

“Come on, girls, you’re being dramatic. How do you even know Alpha Tristan is looking at me? He could be looking at someone else, you know.”

Her gaze shifted fully to me and pointed. “For example, he might be looking at my sister.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “Right, Selene? Do you think Alpha Tristan is looking at you?”

All the women turned to face me at once. A few of them didn’t even bother hiding their laughter, amused snorts slipping out as if the idea itself was ridiculous. I met their gazes calmly, my expression blank, unbothered by their mockery.

I knew exactly what Sienna was doing. She had cornered me perfectly, pushing me into an embarrassing situation with no clean way out. If I said yes, they would laugh and mock me for being delusional, for daring to think that an alpha like Tristan would ever

look at someone like me. If I said no, they would nod smugly and say at least I knew my place.

Either answer would entertain them, and Sienna knew it. She might act foolish most of the time, but when it came to humiliating others, especially me, she was sharp.

Before I could respond, Lucas finally spoke.

“Does it matter?”

The women turned toward him at once, their reactions almost identical. Their faces flushed the moment they met his gaze, breaths hitching slightly as if their bodies betrayed them before their minds could catch up.

It was almost laughable how quickly they were affected by him. Beside me, Lucas looked bored, his golden eyes half-lidded as he stared down at them like they were nothing more than a nuisance he hadn't bothered to swat yet.

He tilted his head slightly, his tone flat and unimpressed. “Is this what werewolf women do these days?” he continued, his gaze sweeping over them without a shred of interest. “Wasting time talking about men and trying to drag others down just to feel superior. How disappointing. Even other beasts don't behave this

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86 Lady Selene, would you dance with me?

pathetically.”

The color drained from their faces, smiles freezing all at once. The smug amusement they had worn so proudly vanished, replaced by shock and humiliation. I felt my lips curl into a faint smirk before I could stop myself.

If I weren't already exhausted and on edge, I might have applauded him. At the very least, he had said what I didn't have the patience, or the strength, to say myself.

One of the women snapped out of it quickly, masking her embarrassment with anger. She scoffed and crossed her arms, glaring at me. “Look at you, Selene. Your guard is speaking for you,” she sneered. “Aren't you ashamed? Or is it that you don't even know how to defend yourself?”

I let out a quiet breath. “I'm tired,”

She blinked, clearly not expecting that answer. “What?”

I looked at her indifferently. "I'm perfectly capable of defending myself and putting you all in your place, I just don't think any of you are important enough to waste my energy on, and I don't have the strength to deal with the aftermath right now."

All of them turned red with embarrassment once again. It was obvious they didn't like what I said, especially since I hadn't raised my voice or shown any anger.

Sienna opened her mouth, clearly ready to smooth things over with her usual good-girl act, but before she could speak, one of the women suddenly leaned forward and whispered urgently, "Guys... Alpha Tristan is making his way towards us."

Their attention snapped away from me instantly, and their heads turned in unison, smiles reappearing as if nothing awkward had happened just moments ago. One of them laughed and said, throwing me a disdainful look. "You're right. He's coming. Let's pay attention to him instead of this bitch who clearly doesn't matter,"

I shrugged. Reaching out, I took two glasses from a passing server and handed one to Lucas. He glanced at it, raising an eyebrow. "What is this?"

"Something that will make today go faster,"

He studied me for a second, and I almost opened my mouth to say it wasn't poison, but before I could, he had already taken a sip. I chuckled under my breath. I honestly didn't know whether he trusted me that much or if he was simply confident he could digest anything without consequence. I lifted my own glass and took a sip as well.

"Oh, he's coming," one of the women whispered excitedly. "He's definitely going to ask you to dance, Sienna."

Sienna smiled shyly, touching her hair. "Do you think so? Should I dance with him though?" she asked. "Wouldn't Prince Adrian get jealous?"

I took another sip of my drink, tuning them out completely. It wasn't my concern whether Alpha Tristan was interested in Sienna or not. None of this mattered to me. The only thing that would become a problem was if he decided to get in my way, and if he did, I wouldn't hesitate to deal with him just like I planned to deal with Sienna and Adrian.

Alpha Tristan stopped in front of us.

The women looked between him and Sienna with barely contained excitement, clearly waiting for him to ask her for a dance. Even Sienna had already extended her hand slightly, confidence shining in her eyes.

He ignored her completely.

With that familiar lazy smile, he turned toward me instead. He held out his hand, looking at me through his long lashes, and said, “Lady Selene, would you dance with me?”

Everything froze.

The hall went silent, and I nearly choked on my drink as I stared at Alpha Tristan, my mind blank for a split second.

What?

2/3

86 Lady Selene, would you dance with me?

Did this crazy bastard just ask me to dance

3/3

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 87

[ 1,066 words ]

871 Prince Adrian was a fool for letting her go

87| Prince Adrian was a fool for letting her go

Tristain

Since I was a little boy, I had always loved unusual things.

Things that didn't fit neatly into what people called normal. While children my age laughed over wooden toys and paraded around with fake swords and bright trinkets meant to entertain nobles' children, I felt nothing but boredom when such things were

placed in my hands. None of them stirred anything in me. They were hollow, and meaningless.

But the day I picked up a real sword, everything changed.

I was ten years old, far too young to feel that kind of rush, and crave violence the way I did. Yet the moment my fingers wrapped around cold steel, adrenaline flooded my veins as if my body had been waiting for it.

I still remember the way my heart pounded, as though it had finally recognized something familiar. I challenged my brother that day. He was thirteen, stronger and well trained, and he laughed at my audacity, amused that I would dare to fight him when he was so much larger than me. I didn't even know the basics of swordplay or understand footwork or form, and yet, somehow, I won.

I can still see it clearly.

The tip of my sword pressed against his throat, his laughter gone, replaced by panic and disbelief as he stared up at me. The fear in his eyes was intoxicating. In that moment, that was when it clicked.

Ah, this is it.

That was when I realized what I loved.

Fighting was unusual. War was unusual. The clash of wills, the rawness of survival, the way people revealed who they truly were when faced with death, that was what fascinated me. I didn't care for toys, women, or even power itself.

Power was merely a means to an end. I fought my brothers for the alpha position not because I wanted to rule, but because power granted freedom. With it, I could fight whoever I wished, go to war without restraint, and immerse myself in the chaos I craved.

And that was why the woman standing in front of me now caught my attention.

Yes, she was beautiful, the most striking woman in the room, but beauty alone had never been enough to hold my interest. What captivated me was the way she carried herself. The way her gaze skimmed over everyone as though they were beneath her notice. The way she had stood in the arena two months ago, surrounded by warriors, yet held them in check without raising her voice or demanding obedience.

It sent a chill down my spine.

As a warrior, I knew one the instant I saw one. And she was a warrior, dangerous at that, the kind who survived, adapted, and struck when it mattered most.

From the coming-of-age ceremony until now, everything about her behavior had defied expectation. She didn't act like the women I had known; she didn't seek attention, validation, or protection. She moved like someone who already understood how the world worked and had decided she would not bend to it.

She was unusual.

But what surprised me most, though, was the man standing behind her. My gaze flickered to him.

My wolf stirred uneasily within me.

'Be careful, my wolf, Mark, warned from the back of my mind. 'Be very careful of him, Tristan.'

Most people in the hall were too distracted by music, wine, gossip, or their own inflated importance, to notice him properly. But I noticed.

No, more than that, I felt him.

That man was the most dangerous person in this entire hall.

1/2

Successfully unlocked!

871 Prince Adrian was a fool for letting her go

My wolf had been restless ever since the moment we stepped inside, pacing at the back of my mind in a way

he never did without reason. Even now, his warning instincts were screaming, as if every nerve in his body was on edge.

'What is he?'

'I don't know. Just be careful. He's dangerous.'

That alone would have been alarming, but the next words made my interest flare rather than fade.

'If he wanted to, Mark continued, 'everyone here would die.

My eyes flashed, not with fear, but with excitement. 'That powerful?' I thought, my lips twitching. 'I wonder if he'd be interested in fighting me.'

Mark groaned, the sensation almost like an eye roll. 'You're an idiot. You can get yourself killed if you want, but leave me out of it. I'm not fighting him.'

I smirked to myself. That reaction alone told me just how serious this was.

As if he sensed my scrutiny, the man finally looked down at me. His golden eyes flared for a brief moment, brighter than mine, ancient in a way that made my instincts prickle. It felt as though he was weighing something, deciding whether I was worth eliminating or simply not worth the effort.

For a split second, the air between us thickened.

I smiled at him, before turning my attention back to the woman standing before me. My hand was still extended toward her, waiting patiently as if nothing unusual had just passed between two predators measuring each other.

"What do you say, Miss Selene?" I asked. "Will you dance with me?"

The hall remained frozen in silence. I could feel the disbelief, and the whispers forming. Even she looked taken aback, her expression caught somewhere between confusion and annoyance, as if she genuinely couldn't understand why someone like me would bother her.

And that amused me far more than it should have.

I wasn't a romantic man, and I had never pretended to be. But I knew my face, my status, and the effect I had on people. Women had always been interested in me, drawn by my curiosity, power, and attraction. Yet here she was, looking at me as though my presence was an inconvenience.

This was our first proper meeting, and already she acted as if I had offended her simply by existing.

It doesn't matter.

A smile curved my lips. I would use this opportunity. This woman carried far too many secrets, and I intended to take my time uncovering every single one of them. Prince Adrian was a fool for letting her go.

2/2



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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 88

[ 1,146 words ]

881 Alpha Tristan, do your best to entertain me

88| Alpha Tristan, do your best to entertain me

Selene

“Oh my goddess, did you see that?” someone whispered, their voice loud despite how hard they tried to keep it low. “He asked her? He asked Lady Selene? Lady Sienna’s sister?”

Another voice followed immediately, breathless with disbelief. “I saw it. gods, this is shocking. Everyone thought he would ask Lady Sienna instead. I can’t imagine how stunned she must be right now.”

“I know, right? I still can’t believe it.”

Someone else chimed in, hesitating before speaking, as if afraid of being judged. “Well... no offense, but even if nobody wants to say it out loud, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” She said, “Lady Selene is the prettier twin. Just look at her. Lady Sienna’s dress is beautiful, yes, but Lady Selene’s is different, unique, and elegant. I wanted to ask where she got it, but I was too shy.”

Another woman agreed quickly, her eyes fixed on me. “You’re not the only one. I wanted to ask too. I’ve never seen a dress like that before. And her skin, gods, it’s flawless. I wonder what she uses.”

Their whispers overlapped and echoed through the hall. I could feel the attention shifting, the weight of countless gazes pressing in from every direction. And many women were blushing openly as they stared at the man standing before me, their admiration barely concealed. But my gaze was different.

I felt nothing toward Alpha Tristan, there was no flutter, excitement, or foolish fascination. I liked beautiful men, yes, but I had never been obsessed with them. Desire was fleeting. None of that mattered to me now.

What did matter was standing just beside me.

I turned my eyes slightly and looked at Sienna.

Her expression was dark. Her hands were clenched so tightly at her sides that her knuckles had gone white, her breathing uneven as she stared at the scene unfolding in front of her. The whispers didn't help. Every word spoken around us, every stolen glance in my direction, carved deeper into her pride.

She might not care about anything, or why Alpha Tristan had asked me instead of her, but there was one thing Sienna Bloodrose had always cared about more than anything else in this world.

Attention.

And right now, it wasn't hers.

If I wanted to, I could erase her existence easily. I could make her death look like an accident so perfect that no one would ever question it. I was good at that. I had carried out many assassinations that looked like accidents for Adrian in my last lives. But what would that accomplish? Letting her take her last breath so quickly would be mercy, and mercy was something she did not deserve.

I had suffered ten times.

Nine times, I was killed by a demon. The tenth time, I killed myself. And every single path that led to those endings had been paved by my mate and my twin sister, hand in hand, smiling as they destroyed me piece by piece.

To kill them outright would be letting them go too easily.

No, I would take everything they loved instead. Strip it away slowly. Make them feel helpless, insignificant, and forgotten. And since Sienna adored the spotlight more than life itself, since she thrived on being admired and

chosen and desired.

I would take that too.

I turned toward Alpha Tristan, his gaze still fixed on me as if the rest of the hall had faded into nothing. Calmly, I placed my wine glass on the table beside me, the faint clink

barely audible beneath the murmur of shocked whispers around us. Then I set my hand into his, feeling the firmness of his gloved fingers close around mine. I smiled.

Successfully unlocked!

1/2

88 Alpha Tristan, do your best to entertain me

“Of course, Alpha Tristan.”

Every gaze in the hall snapped toward us, disbelief written plainly on their faces. They hadn't expected me to agree, not after all the years I had spent orbiting Adrian like a foolish moth drawn to a single flame. In their eyes, I was still that Selene, the one who never looked at another man, who existed only for her mate.

They could stare all they wanted. That Selene was gone, buried along with the girl who had once begged for scraps of affection.

Tristan's lips curved upward, clearly pleased, and he took a step forward. I was about to follow when a presence leaned in close, breath warm against my ear.

“I would advise you not to dance with other men, little wolf,” Lucas murmured, his voice low and dangerous.” You know werewolf men get possessive of what belongs to them.”

A shiver ran down my spine despite myself. I raised an eyebrow slightly, my thoughts racing.

Werewolf men? What exactly was he implying? That Adrian would be jealous? Or someone else? I wanted to turn and asked for an explanation, but before I could, Tristan's grip tightened and he gently but firmly pulled

me away.

I glanced back once, just in time to see Lucas leaning against the table, a drink in his hand, golden eyes sharp and watchful. There was something unsettling in his expression, as though he already knew this night would spiral into something far more interesting than a simple banquet.

Tristan led me toward the center of the hall. The music hadn't stopped, but the dancers had, clearing space as all attention shifted to us. He ignored them completely, his focus unwavering as he turned to face me. A flash of white fangs accompanied his smile as he leaned down slightly, his tall frame casting a shadow over mine.

“Lady Selene,” he said, his tone deceptively polite, “am I permitted to touch you? It is a slow dance, after all. I wouldn't want to be rude to someone so important.”

Rude?

Coming from the same man who had once chased me relentlessly in another life, the word almost made me laugh.

Instead, I looked past him briefly, my eyes finding Sienna. Her face had gone pale, her expression tight, as though the walls themselves were pressing in on her.

The sight was satisfying.

I didn't answer Tristan with words.

I stepped closer instead and took his hands, guiding them to my waist.

That made him pause, genuine surprise flickering across his features before interest replaced it. I looked up at him, meeting his gaze without flinching, his blond hair falling across his lashes as he stared down at me.

Then I lifted one finger, tapping it lightly against his chin as if I were inspecting a finely crafted weapon rather than an alpha who thrived on war.

"Alpha Tristan," I said softly, my voice meant for him alone, "do your best to entertain me."

2/2

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 89

[ 1,068 words ]

89 We met at the auction hall

89 We met at the auction hall

Selene

Tristan stared at me as though he genuinely didn't believe what he had just heard. For a brief moment, his steps slowed, his gaze sharpening as if he was trying to decide whether I had truly spoken those words to him, whether I had just treated an alpha, a warlord feared across the continent, like something meant to amuse me.

The silence between us lasted only a moment before a low chuckle slipped from his throat, and whatever disbelief he had vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Without wasting another second, he pulled me closer, his grip firming around my waist as he drew my body flush against his. He leaned down, his breath hot against my ear, his voice dropping into something intimate and dangerous when he spoke.

"Your wish is my command, Lady Selene."

I lifted my gaze to his face, noting the sharp excitement glinting in his eyes. He looked like a man who had just found a new favorite toy, one that intrigued him enough to make him want to test every limit it had.

I could read minds if I wished, but his was not one I wanted to touch. Tristan was older than Adrian, more experienced, and more unhinged in a way that didn't show on the surface, and prying into his thoughts would cost me more energy than I was willing to spare tonight. Besides, I already knew nothing polite lived inside a man like him.

Despite how calm I was, my condition had not improved. If anything, standing this close to him only made it worse. Alpha Tristan's scent was overwhelming, pressing against my senses in a way that made it harder to breathe evenly, and I had to be careful so he wouldn't notice anything off.

I placed my hands on his shoulders, steadying myself as I followed his lead and allowed him to guide me into the dance.

We moved together in the center of the hall, surrounded by countless staring eyes, though I didn't bother acknowledging them. I could feel his intense gaze on me constantly, as though he were trying to memorize every detail of my face, my posture, my reactions, as if breaking me down piece by piece would help him understand what I was.

I kept my expression composed, my movements smooth, focusing only on keeping my scent in check and counting the seconds until the dance would end. Even though part of me enjoyed seeing Sienna's jealousy burn, I knew better than to let myself get entangled with a mad warlord.

Nothing good ever came from getting too close to men like Tristan.

As expected, he was the first to break the silence.

“Most people try to start a conversation during a dance, Lady Selene,” he said smoothly, amusement laced through his voice.

I finally met his gaze, my expression blank, “What could someone like me possibly say to you, Alpha? We are nothing alike. I am just a delicate lady, and you are an alpha who lives for war. I doubt we would find anything interesting to talk about.”

Alpha Tristan’s hand remained firm at my waist as we continued to move in slow steps across the floor. His voice dipped lower as he spoke again. “Is that so?”

I nodded lightly, prepared to let the conversation die there, when he continued instead, his grip tightening just enough to keep my attention.

“I don’t think so,” he said calmly. “I believe we have something very interesting to talk about.”

I lifted my gaze to him then, one brow arching despite myself, a flicker of curiosity breaking through my indifference. Tristan noticed it immediately, of course he did. A predator always noticed the instant its prey took the bait.

1/3

Successfully unlocked!

89 We met at the auction hall

“You see,” he went on, his tone almost conversational, “a few weeks ago, I met a rather interesting woman.”

I tilted my head slightly, trying to follow where he was leading this.

“We met at the auction hall.”

For a split second, my body reacted before my mind could catch up. My step faltered, barely noticeable to anyone else, but Tristan felt it. Instantly, his hold adjusted, his movements controlled as he guided me back into the flow of the dance, as though nothing had happened at all. My lashes fluttered as I looked up at him, caught off guard despite myself.

His lips curved higher when he noticed my pause.

I forced my expression back in composure, “Interesting. And what does that have to do with me?”

Tristan's eyes gleamed as he continued, clearly enjoying this far too much. "She was unusual. I've never seen anyone like her before. The way she spoke, the way she carried herself, even the things she chose to bid on were strange. There were countless priceless items in that hall, yet she ignored them all and placed her bid on an old, rusty wooden box."

My brow lifted again, this time more sharply. There was no doubt now. He was talking about me. And yet, I frowned inwardly, because I didn't remember ever seeing him there. If Alpha Tristan had been present, I would

have noticed. I was certain of that.

Then, as if a door had been quietly unlocked in my mind, a memory surfaced.

"Miss? Can we sit here with you?"

The words echoed clearly, and my breath caught just slightly as I recalled that day. Two men. One dressed in white, relaxed and amused, the other darker, quieter, with sharp green eyes and an annoyed air about him. At the time, I had dismissed them as suspicious nobles with too much curiosity and too little sense.

Now, my stomach tightened.

The man in white, his demeanor, his confidence, the way he watched everything as if it belonged to him, it

matched Tristan far too well.

My gaze hardened as the realization settled. We had met before. And worse, Alpha Tristan knew it was me

behind the veil.

To make it worse, another thought struck me, harder than the first.

If Tristan had been the man in white, then the man in black, green eyes, irritated posture, familiar presence.

My grip on his shoulder tightened imperceptibly as the answer surfaced.

gods.

It had been Prince Adrian.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 90

[ 1,161 words ]

901 Take your hands off my mate, Alpha Tristan

Selene

I looked up at Alpha Tristan and smiled, as if nothing he had said had shaken me in the slightest.

“I see,” I said calmly. “But why are you telling me all this? I believe it has nothing to do with me.”

He studied my face as though I were something amusing, something that refused to behave the way he expected. I didn't flinch under his gaze. I didn't care. If shamelessness was what it took to survive men like him, then I would wear it proudly. Even if he knew that the woman from the auction was me, there was nothing he could do about it. As long as I remained clueless, as long as I never admitted anything, he had no proof. And even if he tried to tell others, who would believe him? Why would someone like me sneak into an auction in disguise just to buy a worthless wooden box?

Besides, I hadn't broken any laws. Let them suspect all they wanted.

Tristan suddenly spun me, the movement smooth, before pulling me back against him. His hand settled firmly at my waist again while my fingers caught in the fabric of his shirt to steady myself. The music continued, the world kept turning, but his eyes gleamed with something sharp.

“I don't understand why I'm telling you this either,” He leaned in close, so close that I could feel his breath near my lips. I stilled, already calculating how much force it would take to drive my knee upward if he crossed that line. But instead of kissing me, he shifted at the last second and spoke against my ear.

“But if I ever meet her,” he murmured, “there are two things I want to know.”

I pulled back just enough to look at him, one brow lifting.

“And what would that be?”

“What exactly was inside that box,” he said first.

My frown was instant, and I almost glanced toward the annoying phoenix nearby, but I stopped myself in time. Before I could respond, he leaned back just enough to properly meet my gaze, and then, without warning or permission, his fingers lifted to catch my chin, tilting my face toward his.

Gasps rippled through the crowd around us, but Tristan didn't care in the slightest.

His gaze bored into mine.

“And secondly,” he said, “lady, Selene, what exactly are you?”

My breath hitched, not in fear, but in irritation.

What am I? What kind of question was that? I didn't look away. I refused to. We stared at each other, locked in a moment that felt far too intimate, as everything else beside us ceased to matter.

I opened my mouth to answer when a deep voice echoed through the hall.

“Get your hands off my mate, Alpha Tristan.”

I froze.

I knew that voice. Even if I were unconscious, even if I were dying, I would recognize it anywhere. Once, it had been medicine. Once, it had been a drug I couldn't live without.

But now it was a poison that burned through my veins.

Around us, the hall erupted in shock.

“Oh my gods, it's Prince Adrian.”

“The royal family has arrived. Quick, pay your respects.”

As if waking from a spell, people dropped to their knees or bowed their heads, voices overlapping as they spoke in unison. “We pay our respects to Alpha Rhydian and the royal family.”

I remained still and finally turned my head to the side.

The royal family was standing there.

Alpha Rhydian stood at the front, tall and imposing, the Luna beside him with her hand pressed lightly against her chest. Princes Avery were just behind them, both of them staring at me in disbelief.

Princess Avery's mouth hung open for a full second before her shock melted into delight. She let out a soft, drawn-out "Oooo," her eyes sparkling as she looked between me and Alpha Tristan as if she were witnessing the most entertaining thing she'd seen all night.

1/2

90 Take your hands off my mate, Alpha Tristan

Prince Adrian stood there, his attention fixed entirely on me, and on Alpha Tristan's hands still resting on my waist. His expression was dark, stormy, the kind I knew far too well. I had once memorized every shift in his face, every change in his aura. When Adrian was furious, the air around him always grew heavy and oppressive, as though the world itself was bracing for impact.

His eyes dropped to Tristan's hands, and when Tristan made no move to remove them, Adrian's jaw ticked sharply.

"I said," Adrian spoke again, his voice low and dangerous, "take your hands off my mate, Alpha Tristan."

I glanced at Tristan from the corner of my eye. As expected, there was no fear in him at all. If anything, he looked genuinely entertained. Adrian's anger seemed to amuse him, as if this were nothing more than a pleasant distraction. To make matters worse, he tightened his grip around my waist, pulling me just a fraction closer.

Adrian took a step forward, fury flashing across his face. "You piece of—"

Before he could finish, Alpha Rhydian moved. He stepped between them and placed a firm hand on Adrian's shoulder.

"That's enough, Adrian," his father said calmly.

Adrian turned to him, his anger still burning, but Alpha Rhydian didn't back down.

"Don't start a fight that could lead to war," he continued. "An alpha must always keep a clear head."

Adrian's fists clenched at his sides. The anger didn't disappear, but he swallowed it back, forcing himself to stand down. There had always been one person he listened to, no matter what, and that person was his father, the alpha of the pack.

Once Adrian finally stopped moving, Alpha Rhydian shifted his attention to Tristan. He nodded politely, as though there hadn't just been a near explosion moments ago.

"Alpha Tristan," he said, "I've been looking for you. I didn't realize you were already at the party... and dancing with my daughter-in-law."

I almost scoffed.

Daughter-in-law?

Mate?

The unpleasant words rang in my ears. It seemed they were already forgetting one crucial fact, that I would never again be part of their family.

Before Tristan could respond, I reached up and removed his hand from my waist. The simple action drew everyone's attention instantly. Even Tristan paused, surprise flickering briefly across his face as he stepped back and gave me space.

I turned fully toward Alpha Rhydian and offered him a polite smile before bowing my head slightly.

"Thank you for inviting me, Alpha Rhydian," I said, before looking at Adrian.

"I see Prince Adrian has already returned. Thank you for the opportunity to bring him back. Now we can finally reject each other, with your permission."

The color drained from Adrian's face.

He stared at me, disbelief written clearly across his features.

"What?" he said. "Reject each other?"

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