

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 181

[ 878 words ]

Chapter 181

Third person pov

155 vouchard

The massive eye hovering above the arena flickered with shifting images of the forest, it captured every movement, every deception, every drop of blood, and projected it to the roaring crowd below.

“Oh my gods! Did he know?” a woman in the crowd gasped, her voice trembling with disbelief as she clutched the railing in front of her, her eyes glued to the image of Noah standing calmly before the creature.

“I know, right?” another person chimed in immediately, leaning forward as if getting closer would somehow help them understand what they were seeing.

Around them, murmurs spread, voices overlapping in awe and confusion.

“Other people didn’t even notice anything odd,” a man added, shaking his head slowly. “They were so focused on attacking the eye, what they thought was the enemy that they never even questioned what was right in front of them.”

“Exactly,” someone else agreed, crossing their arms. “But he noticed immediately. Not just that, he kept talking to it like it was normal, even after figuring out what it was.”

A brief silence followed.

“He’s terrifying,” a woman whispered under her breath. “And dangerous.”

“Do you think he would agree to be hired after the rite?” another asked eagerly, her eyes gleaming with ambition. “Someone like that would be invaluable to any household.”

“In your dreams,” a man scoffed beside her, rolling his eyes. “Do you even realize how many people are watching him right now? The House of Magic will definitely try to recruit him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the Alpha’s royal guard is already considering it.”

At the mention of that, several people exchanged knowing glances before nodding in agreement, their attention snapping right back to the eye as the scene continued to unfold.

Not far from the crowd, elevated slightly above the rest, Abigail, the host, stood with her arms crossed, her lips curled into a slow, satisfied smirk as she watched the same projection.

Her eyes gleamed with excitement that was almost predatory in nature.

She had hosted many warrior rites before, had seen bloodshed, brilliance, and brutality in countless forms, but never like this.

Never something like him.

Beside her, one of her staff members glanced between her and the projection, clearly amused by her expression.

“You look unusually happy,” he remarked, tilting his head slightly. “Is it because this year’s rite is bigger than the others?”

Abigail didn’t answer immediately, her gaze still fixed on the image of Noah. The staff continued, gesturing subtly toward the crowd. “Normally people avoid this event because of the violence, but this year.. it’s overflowing. Half the pack couldn’t even get in.”

He let out a small chuckle. “That monitoring eye idea of yours was clever. Broadcasting everything across the pack, now everyone gets to watch the chaos unfold.”

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11:03 am PPPT

Chapter 181

55 vouchere

At that. Abigail finally shifted, her smile widening as she uncrossed one arm and rested her fingers lightly against her chin.

“Exactly,” she said, her voice smooth, almost pleased with herself. “This year will be my year.”

Her eyes flickered again to the projection, lingering on Noah. “And it’s all because of him.”

“The odd boy?” the staff member asked, raising an eyebrow.

Abigail nodded without hesitation. The man hesitated for a moment before speaking again, lowering his voice slightly. “Don’t you find it strange, though?”

That caught her attention just enough for her to glance at him.

“The only person who could have brought him back into the competition is the Alpha,” he continued carefully. “What do you think his connection to him is?”

He leaned in slightly, as if sharing gossip rather than speculation.

“People are saying he’s the Alpha’s bed warmer,” he added. “That the Alpha might actually-”

Abigail waved her hand dismissively before he could finish, clearly uninterested.

“I don’t care,” she said flatly, her attention already drifting back to the projection. “Whether he is or not makes no difference to me.”

Her lips curved again, sharper this time. “I would have brought him back myself if I had the chance, but the Alpha intervened before I needed to.”

She let out a soft, satisfied breath.

“Whatever their relationship is... it worked in my favor. My muse is back in the game.”

The staff member fell silent after that, recognizing the look in her eyes. There was no point in questioning her further when she looked like that.

Truthfully, he understood. Because even he couldn’t look away.

His eyes returned to the floating eye, watching as the forest swallowed more contestants, revealing horrors. That place was no ordinary testing ground. It was alive with danger, layered with traps, creatures, and mind games that could break even the strongest warriors. And yet, his gaze sharpened slightly as Noah’s figure appeared again in the projection, calm, composed, completely out of place in the chaos.

A faint smile tugged at his lips.

He really couldn’t wait to see what that boy would do next.

After all.

Surviving that forest was one thing.

Reaching the end of it?

That was something else entirely.

2/8

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 182

[ 1,467 words ]

Chapter 182

Selene

20 vouchers

I studied the woman in front of me in complete silence, allowing my gaze to linger on her features as my mind calmly pieced everything together, because this was not the time to panic or act impulsively, this was the time to understand exactly what I was dealing with and how dangerous the situation truly was.

Kitsune.

That was what some people called them, fox spirits that were more commonly found in the eastern regions, especially within the Akuma-Okami pack where traditions, language, and even their way of life were entirely different from the rest of the world.

I had only encountered information about them in fragments across my past lives, but I remembered enough to know that they were not creatures to be taken lightly, because unlike ordinary beasts or even most entities, kitsune were cunning, ancient, and terrifyingly intelligent, capable of deception so perfect that even experienced warriors could lose themselves before realizing they had already fallen into a trap.

There were different types of kitsune, each more dangerous than the last depending on their nature and alignment.

There were the Myobu, celestial foxes that served as messengers to Inari-Okami, the god of rice and prosperity, beings that were often regarded as holy and rarely interfered with mortals unless necessary, their presence usually bringing fortune rather than disaster. Then there were the Nogitsune, wild fox spirits known for their mischievous and chaotic nature, tricksters who thrived on confusion, fear, and manipulation, often playing with their prey rather than killing them outright, making them unpredictable but not always immediately lethal.

And then, there was the last type, the one people avoided speaking about entirely, as if even mentioning their name might invite their attention.

Akakitsune. The red demon fox.

Creatures that were not just dangerous, but purely malicious, beings that delighted in bloodshed, that fed on humans and drank their blood not out of necessity but out of desire, growing stronger with every life they consumed, their power reflected in the color of their fur. The deeper and richer the red, the more they killed, and the more they devoured, the more monstrous they became,

And the fur I had seen, even if only for a fleeting moment when her disguise slipped, had not been a faint red or a diluted shade. It was a deep red. And it was thick with the weight of countless lives.

Which meant the creature standing in front of me was not just a kitsune, but a very powerful Akakitsune.

My gaze remained steady. This was no longer just a simple test or illusion within the forest, this was something far more dangerous than what the host had implied, and it made me question just how many other hidden threats were lurking within this place. It was rare to see a kitsune outside the Akuma-Okami territory, and rarer still to encounter one of this level of power wandering freely in a place like this.

Which meant one thing.

If a creature like this existed, then there were even more dangerous things lurking in the forest

The thought barely had time to fully form before I felt a sudden, unnatural pull on my hand, invasive enough to snap my attention downward immediately, and what I saw made my eyes narrow ever so slightly

The dagger I had plunged into her moments ago was no longer simply lodged in her body. Her stomach, split open from the wound, wasn't bleeding as it should have. Instead, it was moving as if it had a will of its own

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10:49 am PPPP

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The blade was being dragged inward. The flesh around it rippled as though it were swallowing the weapon whole.

For a brief second, I simply watched, my expression unreadable as I analyzed what was happening, but the moment I felt the pull beginning to reach my hand, I reacted without hesitation, releasing the dagger instantly and stepping back just as whatever that thing tried to drag me in along with it.

The moment my hand was free, I lifted my gaze back to her face, completely unshaken, even as she stood there with that same unsettling smile stretched across her lips, her tongue sliding slowly over them as if savoring a lingering taste.

"Hm..." she hummed softly, her voice now fully feminine, smooth and disturbingly pleased, as if she had just discovered something delightful. "The dagger tastes so good, because you touched it. I wonder how good you will taste, if even the dagger carries your flavor."

I stared at her without a word while she stood there grinning like she had already won. There was something unhinged in her eyes.

"What will you do now?" she asked, her voice dripping with satisfaction as she tilted her head slightly, her lips stretching into a wide, taunting smile. "I ate your weapon. How will you kill me? You're defenseless."

Slowly, the corner of my lips curled upward. It wasn't a friendly smile. It was mocking.

Her expression faltered, confusion flickering across her face as she tried to understand why I wasn't panicking, why I wasn't reacting the way she expected me to.

Without breaking eye contact, I reached behind me and pulled out the sword strapped to my back, the metal gleaming faintly. The moment it left its sheath, the air around us seemed to shift, a quiet pressure settling over the space between us.

Her smile disappeared instantly.

I could see the instinctive understanding of danger in her eyes as her body tensed and her gaze locked onto the blade. But instead of raising it, and attacking like she expected, I simply lowered it, and placed it on the ground.

Her brows furrowed deeply, irritation and confusion mixing together as she stared at me like I had just lost my mind.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her voice sharper now, the earlier confidence cracking at the edges.

I glanced down at the sword for a brief second before speaking, my tone casual, almost thoughtful.

“Chloe gave me this. It would be a shame to use it on you first instead of that annoying prince.”

Her confusion deepened, her lips parting slightly as she tried to process my words.

“Then how are you going to defeat me?” she asked, a hint of impatience creeping into her tone. “You can’t defeat me without a weapon. You have to cut off my head to kill me.”

I lifted my gaze back to her, straightening my posture as I rolled my shoulders slightly, loosening the tension in my body. Slowly, I pushed my sleeves up, exposing my arms, my movements unhurried.

I tilted my head, meeting her eyes fully. A far more dangerous smile spread across my face.

“A weapon?” I repeated, my voice laced with amusement. I clenched my hand slowly, feeling the familiar surge of strength coil beneath my skin. “Who said I needed a weapon to cut your head off?”

For a split second, she didn’t move, then her expression changed. The smugness vanished completely, replaced by fear.

Her eyes dropped to my hand, and I saw the exact moment it clicked for her, the exact moment her instincts screamed at her that something was very, very wrong. She opened her mouth, probably to speak, but she never got the chance.

2/8

10:49 am PP PP.

Chapter 182

I moved.

20 vouchers

It wasn't a step or a lunge; my body closed the distance between us in a blink. My hand shot to her neck, about to snap her head clean off, but her instincts saved her. She jerked backward just in time, her body snapping away from where she had been standing as if yanked by an invisible force. Her hand flew to her neck, fingers pressing against her skin as her breathing turned uneven.

She knew.

Every powerful being knew that feeling. That moment when death brushed so close you could almost feel it. Her eyes snapped back to me, wide now, the earlier madness replaced by alarm.

"W-who are you...?" she asked, her voice no longer playful.

I glanced down at my hand again, flexing my fingers slightly as if testing them, then I smiled wider.

"Where are you going?" I asked, my tone almost playful, as if we were in the middle of a harmless game instead of a fight to the death. I lifted my gaze back to her, my eyes locking onto hers.

"We've just started playing."

I took a step forward.

"Come on."

And then I moved again, faster this time, excitement coursing through me.

"Play with me!"

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 183

[ 1,456 words ]

Chapter 183

Flashback

E 20 vouchers

“I am curious though,” a man slurred from across the tavern, his voice thick with alcohol as he leaned lazily against his chair. “I do not understand why you would serve a woman, much less a woman like your general, who is always so calm and gentle unlike the other generals I have seen in different packs. But I am sure you all enjoy yourselves with that kind of leader, since she must be easy to control and manipulate.”

The words fell heavily into the air, and within seconds, the entire tavern went quiet.

Conversations died mid-sentence, mugs paused halfway to lips, and every pair of eyes slowly shifted toward the group of warriors seated together at one side of the room. Everyone present knew exactly who those men served, and more importantly, they knew just how dangerous warriors of the Mooncrest general could be.

A fight should have broken out immediately.

At least, that was what everyone expected. But instead, something entirely different happened.

The warriors went still for a brief moment, exchanging glances with one another as if silently processing what they had just heard. Then, suddenly, one of them let out a loud laugh, clutching his stomach as his shoulders shook uncontrollably.

The others followed.

Laughter erupted from the group, filling the tavern in a way that felt almost surreal given the tension from seconds ago. Some of them leaned against the table, others wiped

tears from their eyes, and a few even struggled to breathe as they laughed harder than they had in a long time.

The drunk man blinked in confusion, his face flushing as he looked between them, clearly not understanding what was so funny. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but the warriors were too busy laughing to pay him any attention.

At that moment, Ares, the second-in-command, stepped forward from the bar.

He raised an eyebrow as he approached the table, his sharp gaze moving over his men who were still laughing like fools. Without a word, he reached out, grabbed a drink from the table, and took a slow sip before speaking.

“What is it?” he asked calmly, “Why are you all laughing like this?”

One of the warriors finally managed to compose himself enough to speak, though he still chuckled as he pointed at the drunk man. “Oh, this guy said something funny about our general.”

Ares frowned slightly and turned his attention to the man, his gaze immediately making the drunk stiffen in his seat.

“What did he say about her?” Ares asked, his tone neutral but carrying an edge that made the air feel heavier.

Another warrior leaned forward with a grin. “He said our general is gentle, easy to control, and easy to manipulate.” He burst into laughter again. “That is honestly one of the funniest things I have heard in a while. Does he even know who he is talking about? Gentle? Easy to control? Is he talking about a completely different person?”

The others laughed again, their amusement only growing as the man’s face turned redder with embarrassment,

Ares watched the scene for a moment before shaking his head slightly.

That was the thing about the warriors under Selene Bloodrose. They were powerful, and completely unhinged

He turned back to the drunk man and spoke, his voice firm. “Our general is nothing like that?”

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10:49 am P P p p.

PPPP

## Chapter 183

20 vouchers

The man blinked, still confused. “But—”

Ares cut him off without hesitation. “Just because she is calm does not mean she is easy to control or manipulate. In fact, it is the complete opposite. Our general is the last person you would ever want to label as someone easy to control.”

His gaze darkened slightly as he continued.

“She may appear composed, but when she is angry, or when someone crosses a line they should never have crossed, she becomes an entirely different person. She turns into someone who does not listen, who does not stop, and who does not care about consequences. When she reaches that point, no one can hold her back.”

One of the other warriors nodded in agreement. “Exactly. And to make things worse, if she has that small smile on her face when nothing is even funny, just know you are finished. That is when she is truly angry.”

Another added with a quiet chuckle, “The only reason people misunderstand her is because her love for the alpha keeps her in check.”

Ares took another slow sip of his drink, his expression turning thoughtful as he stared into the liquid for a moment.

“I sometimes wonder,” he said quietly, “what the world would look like if nothing held her back.”

A faint smirk formed on his lips as he lifted his gaze again.

“If a world like that exists...” he continued, his voice low and certain, “then anyone who has ever wronged her is in for a very rude awakening.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Selene

I stepped toward her again, but she immediately moved back as if the space between us was the only thing keeping her alive. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, each breath uneven and shallow, and sweat slipped down the side of her face as her body trembled despite her efforts to stay composed. The arrogance she carried before had completely vanished, and now she looked like nothing more than frightened prey cornered by a predator. I could see it clearly in her eyes, the fear of death staring straight back at me.

I looked down and sighed, running a hand through my hair as a flicker of annoyance crept in. When I lifted my gaze again, my eyes felt lazy, as I studied her trembling form.

“Why do you keep dodging?” I asked, my tone flat and unimpressed. “You acted like you were strong, so I was expecting more from you. But all you do is avoid me without even trying to fight.”

I tilted my head slightly.

“Why? Don’t tell me you’re nothing but a weak little fox.”

Her expression tightened immediately at my words, and her hand clenched as anger flickered through her despite the fear she was trying so hard to suppress. It was clear she wanted to lunge at me, to prove me wrong, but she held herself back because she knew it would be a mistake. Normally, it wasn’t wise to provoke foxes like this. They were arrogant creatures who despised being belittled and would do anything to prove their strength. But I didn’t care.

In fact, I wanted her to fight me.

My blood stirred with excitement, and that familiar smile spread across my face, the same one I always wore when I found a worthy opponent. I remembered how, in my past lives, even seasoned warriors would flinch when they saw that smile. Though I had never quite understood why. To me, this was no different from any other interest. It was simply enjoyable.

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Chapter 183

20 vouchers

She stared at me for a long moment before her lips slowly curved into a smile of her own, though the anger burning in her eyes never faded.

“Weak fox?” she repeated, her voice sharp with offense. “How dare a werewolf say that to me. Your kind is a plague on this world. You think you’re strong, but you are nothing. The only thing powerful about you is the wolf inside you. Without it, you are worthless, and I will prove that.”

As she spoke, her hand moved to her stomach, and without hesitation, it split open unnaturally, revealing a hidden space within. She reached inside and pulled out a small red bottle as if it had always been waiting there. I didn’t react to the grotesque display; I

simply watched her, my arms crossing loosely as mild amusement flickered across my face.

She held the bottle up, her expression turning smug as her confidence returned.

“I won’t deny it,” she said. “You have enough talent to make me use this after keeping it for a thousand years. This is the blood of someone powerful. But once I kill you, your blood will replace his, so it’s hardly a loss.”

She smiled as she uncorked the bottle and drank it without hesitation.

Her eyes turned completely white, devoid of any trace of their former color, and her body visibly changed as power surged through her. Her muscles tightened, her presence grew heavier, and even the air around her seemed to shift.

Her aura had become dangerous.

3/3

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## **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 184**

[ 1,069 words ]

Chapter 184

Selene

20 vouchers

The woman threw her head back and laughed, the sound sharp and unrestrained. She looked at me as if she had already won, as if the outcome had been decided the moment she drank that blood.

“Hahahaha. See how strong I am now?” she said, her lips curling with pride. “You acted so strong before, but now you’re going to die. I’m going to eat your body and drink your blo—”

Her voice cut off.

Something shifted, subtle but immediate, like the world itself had slipped out of place. Her body stilled, and her expression faltered as confusion replaced arrogance. She blinked slowly, her thoughts clearly failing to keep up with whatever had just happened.

“Huh...?” she muttered. “What is going on...?”

I lifted my hand slightly, bringing it closer to my face as I looked at what I was holding, and a small smile formed on my lips.

“Oh,” I said, my tone light. “Sorry. I thought you were done speaking and had already started the fight.”

I tilted my head as I looked at her, my gaze steady and calm.

“Should I reattach your head so we can restart?”

She stared at me, her eyes unfocused at first before widening as my words began to make sense.

“Reattach my...?” she said, her voice trailing off.

She turned her head.

Her body stood a few steps away, completely still, perfectly upright, and entirely intact except for the fact that it no longer had a head. The cut was clean, almost precise to the point of being unnatural, as if the separation had happened without resistance.

I had already cut it off with my bare hands.

She looked back at me, her eyes widening further, her mouth parting as if she wanted to say something, but no sound came out. The realization settled in too late, and whatever words she had died before they could be spoken.

Her vision dimmed, and her eyes rolled back.

At the same time, her body collapsed to the ground, hitting it with a dull, lifeless sound as all strength left it at once.

I watched in silence as the body began to change, its surface darkening before cracks spread across it like fractures in stone. Within seconds, it started to crumble, breaking apart into fine ash that scattered and dissolved into the air as if it had never been there.

I glanced down at the head in my hand for a brief moment before letting it fall.

It hit the ground softly, and just like the body, it began to disintegrate, turning into ash that drifted away and vanished completely.

"I was right," I said quietly, my voice barely above a murmur. "Nothing here is real in this place."

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10:49 am PPPP.

Chapter 184

20 vouchers

I lifted my gaze upward, my eyes settling on the massive eye above as my expression remained indifferent.

"But it can still kill you, the real problem is the forest."

I rolled my neck slightly, easing the tension before turning away, and I reached down to pick up the sword, gripping it loosely.

"Well," I said to myself, "this will make an excellent training ground."

Third person pov

At the inner arena, the atmosphere had completely shifted, the lively energy that once filled the space now replaced with a suffocating tension as people turned their attention to the massive screen suspended above them, their eyes fixed on the scene unfolding within the forest.

No one spoke at first, as if they were all trying to process what they had just witnessed.

"Gods..." one man muttered under his breath, his voice trembling despite his attempt to sound composed, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. "That guy is not right in the head. He is worse than the devil."

Another person standing beside him nodded quickly, almost too quickly, his hands slightly shaking at his sides. "R-right... something in me is screaming just watching this. It feels like my wolf is warning me not to even think about going near him, or I will lose my life before I even understand what happened."

Meanwhile, not everyone reacted the same way.

Yara stood rooted in place, her eyes wide as she stared up at the screen, her chest rising and falling slowly as she tried to steady her breathing, but the shock in her expression was impossible to hide. She had always known Selene was strong, but this was something else entirely.

Something beyond what she had expected.

Her fingers slowly curled into fists at her sides, her initial shock melting as a spark ignited in her eyes.

Determination.

If anything, instead of fear, what she felt was anticipation and excitement.

A hunger to test herself.

Not far from her, Kauis stood in complete silence, his usual confident demeanor nowhere to be found as he stared at the screen, his brows slightly furrowed as if he was trying to piece something together that refused to make sense.

He did not speak or move, but the look in his eyes said everything.

Disbelief.

There was no denying it anymore. There was something about that boy. And what made it worse was the realization that this was not even his limit. Kauis exhaled slowly, his gaze darkening just a fraction as a thought crossed his mind, one he could not ignore no matter how much he wanted to.

If the boy was already this strong now, then what would he become in the future?

His jaw tightened slightly at the thought, and then, almost involuntarily, another image formed in his mind,

2/3

10:49 am

pppp

## Chapter 184

The alpha.

If someone like that boy, and someone like the alpha...

20 vouchers

Kauis' eyes flickered, a rare hint of unease passing through them before it disappeared just as quickly as it came.

"... If those two ever stand on the same side," he muttered quietly to himself, his voice low enough that no one else could hear, "there won't be anyone left in this world who can stand against them."

And for the first time since the tournament began, the spectators were no longer simply watching for entertainment.

They were watching something far more dangerous unfold.

3/8

AD

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 185

[ 1,118 words ]

## Chapter 185

### Caspian

I opened my eyes and found myself standing in a forest, though it no longer looked like the one I had entered. Thick mist filled the space around me, so dense that I could barely make out the outlines of the trees, and there was not a single sign of life anywhere. No animals moved, no leaves rustled, and even the air felt heavy, carrying a dark and oppressive aura that pressed down on everything.

I did not panic, and I remained completely still as I observed my surroundings with a calm, emotionless gaze.

My guard stood behind me, her posture straight and composed, her eyes locked onto me as if awaiting my command. A few steps away stood two contestants who looked nearly identical, their features so similar that they could only be brothers, and both of them scanned the misty forest with clear confusion written across their faces.

I frowned slightly as I watched them.

The younger one turned toward the other, his voice uncertain as he spoke. "What is going on, brother, and where are we? Are we still in the forest?"

The older one nodded his head without hesitation, his expression steady as he answered. "Yes, we are still in the forest," he said before offering a small, reassuring smile. "But do not worry because I will take care of you, and I will not let anyone hurt you."

The younger brother visibly relaxed at his words, a trusting smile forming on his face as he nodded. "I trust you, brother, because you have always protected me."

He then turned his attention to me, and despite the fear in his eyes, he lowered his head respectfully.

"Your Highness," he said carefully, "I know we are easy prey, but can you please let us go instead of hurting our eye?"

I followed his gaze upward and looked at the massive eye in the sky, which loomed over us in silence.

I ignored it. Instead, I turned around to face my guard, and the moment I did, she bowed her head respectfully.

"Your Highness," she said.

I let out a quiet snort, my expression shifting into one of faint disdain as I spoke. "What cheap tricks."

Before anyone could understand what I meant, I reached for the whip at my waist and pulled it free in a single smooth motion, and in the next instant, I lashed it forward without the slightest hesitation.

The whip cut through the air and struck cleanly. Her head separated from her body in an instant.

Her

eyes widened in shock as her head fell to the ground and rolled toward me, while her body remained standing for a brief moment before beginning to collapse. I heard someone shout from behind me, but I paid it no attention,

I lifted my foot and brought it down onto her head, crushing it beneath my heel.

There was no blood. Instead, her head and body began to crumble, breaking apart into ash that scattered into the air as if she had never existed at all.

I looked down at the fading remains, my expression darkening slightly,

"How dare you," I said, my voice low and cold, "use such cheap tricks on me."

I lifted my head and turned away in clear disgust, the feeling setting deep within me.

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11:16 Fri, Apr 3 MM.

Chapter 185

I hated Akakitsune, because they were nothing but deceitful and disgusting creatures.

92%

35 vouchers

When I turned back around, the younger brother stumbled backward, his body trembling as fear overtook him, and his chest rose and fell rapidly as he struggled to breathe. His eyes were wide with terror, and when he spoke, his voice shook uncontrollably..

"Y-Your Highness... please do not kill us," aid. "We will do anything."

I looked at him briefly before shifting my gaze to the older brother. He was not afraid. He stood there directly, and there was a faint smile on his lips, while his gaze held a quiet amusement as if he found the situation far more

meeting my eyes interesting than threatening.

I looked at the younger brother, my gaze steady and cold as I spoke. "You are barking at the wrong tree, so learn who your real enemy is."

He blinked at me, clearly caught off guard. "W-what?"

I did not bother softening my tone or explaining myself gently, because I had no interest in either of them beyond what stood in front of me. Normally, I would have ignored something like this and moved on, but I had already said it before.

I hated Akakitsune.

I lifted my hand and pointed upward toward the sky. "There are only two eyes up there," I said. "One is looking at you, and the other is looking at me."

The boy followed my gesture, confusion deepening as he tried to understand.

"Then where is your brother's eye?" I continued. "And where is my guard's?"

He hesitated, scanning the sky more carefully this time.

"There is none," I said flatly. "Because they are not real people. They are Akakitsune taking the form of others."

My gaze

"That is

The

shifted to

a younger

brother, my expression devoid of doubt.

"The real brother."

He stiffened and turned toward him, uncertainty flickering across his face.

The older brother reacted instantly, his expression shifting into something pitiful and desperate. "He is lying, brother," he said, his voice strained with urgency. "What do you mean I am not your real brother? Look at me.

I am real."

He stepped closer, his tone softening as he continued. "The reason my eye is not there is because someone destroyed it the moment I entered this mist. The prince is trying to manipulate you into destroying yours."

I looked at him, a faint mocking curve forming on my lips.

"Manipulate?" I repeated, "Why would I go through that trouble

My eyes sharpened slightly as I continued. "I could kill you without putting in any effort."

I tilted my head slightly, my voice lowering.

"The only reason I have not killed the Akakitsune yet is because I kill it, it is already controlling you and the person it controls dies as well. I have no interest in playing the hero, but will not allow an Akakitsune to kill a werewolf. It is beneath

me"

For a brief moment, something flickered in the older brother's es, but he quickly masked it and turned back to the younger one, doubling down on his act.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 186

[ 1,097 words ]

Chapter 186

Caspian

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35 vouchers

The boy bit his lip, his hands trembling slightly as doubt crept into his expression.

I exhaled slowly, my patience thinning, and tightened my grip on my whip.

It moved as if it had a will of its own, the whip lashed forward, slicing through the mist with deadly precision as it aimed straight for the older brother's neck. But before it could reach him, the younger brother stepped in front of him without hesitation.

"Stop!" he shouted.

The whip halted. It stopped mere inches from his face, the air around it still humming from the force behind it.

That was the nature of my weapon. It always struck those I intended to kill, and it would never harm those I had no killing intent toward.

I let out a quiet sigh, lowering my hand slightly as I looked at him.

"What d

you think you are doing?" I asked, raising an eyebrow

The man swallowed hard, his throat tightening as fear crept into his voice, and he forced the words out despite how clearly terrified he was. "P-please don't kill my brother," he

said, his tone unsteady. "This is all a misunderstanding. I know my brother, and he is definitely my brother. Have mercy, Your Highness."

I looked at him without the slightest trace of sympathy, my gaze steady and cold as I answered him without hesitation. "Have mercy?" I repeated, my voice flat. "Why would I have merey on something that eats and drinks people?"

I shifted my grip on my whip and took a slow step forward, watching him carefully as his body tensed in response to my

movement.

"If you do not step back," I continued, my tone growing sharper, then I will not hesitate to kill you before killing it, and at least then it will not have the chance to eat you."

He instinctively stepped back, fear flashing across his face, but that fear did not last as something stronger replaced it, and I could see the exact moment his hesitation turned into resolve.

He clenched his fists tightly, his entire body trembling, yet he still forced himself to speak. "Forgive me, Your Highness, but I won't step back," he said, his voice shaking but firm. "Believe me this is my brother and not an Akakitsune. If this is not my brother, then may I fail in everything I do, and may I die a painful dea-"

The final word never left his mouth, because a hand suddenly pierced straight through his chest from behind,

His body froze instantly, his eyes widening in pure shock and disbelief, as if his mind could not comprehend what had just happened even in his final moment.

I shifted my gaze past him and saw the so-called brother standing there with a smile on his face, his arm still buried inside the younger man's chest before he slowly pulled it back, letting blood spill as the body in front of him sagged forward.

The

younger brother did not even have time to react or understand what was happening, because in the very next moment, the older brother's stomach split open unnaturally, revealing a dark hollow space, and the boy's body was dragged backward and pulled inside as if swallowed whole before the opening close again without leaving any trace.

Normally, an Akakitsune would take its time enjoying its meal, at because I was standing here, it chose to finish quickly instead.

The creature placed a hand over its stomach, its expression satished as it exhaled lightly and said, "Hmmm... that was

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Chapter 186

delicious.”

35 vouchers

Its body began to change immediately after, its features shifting and reforming until the man’s appearance disappeared completely, replaced by that of a beautiful woman who lifted her gaze to meet mine with a confident smile.

“Now that we have removed the obstacle in our way, let’s talk,” she said smoothly as she took a step closer, her me with clear interest.

eyes studying

“I can tell that you are strong, and I happen to need someone strong,” she continued, her tone almost persuasive. “If you give me some of your blood and perhaps an arm or two, then I will give you a way to leave this forest immediately and win.”

Her smile widened slightly as she finished speaking and waited for my response.

I stared at her for a brief moment, completely unimpressed by her offer and even less interested in her attempt at negotiation.

“Akakitsune are very cunning and manipulative creatures, so this is most likely nothing more than another one of your tricks,” I said flatly as I tilted my head slightly, my eyes growing colder. “I will take my time with this game and win on my own, because there is someone I intend to meet at the finish line.

“And besides,” I added, my tone dropping slightly, “I fucking hate Akakitsune.”

My whip lashed forward without warning, cutting through the mist as it shot straight toward her, but she caught it mid- strike with ease and smirked as if she had expected it.

“How arrogant,” she said, her voice laced with amusement. “You may be strong, but do not be a fool, because I just ate a human, and now I am-

29

She never finished her sentence, because the end of my whip suddenly shifted into a sharpened blade and sliced cleanly through her wrist in a single motion, causing her hand to fall before she could even react.

Before she could process what had happened, the next strike followed immediately, and her head was severed just as cleanly as her hand had been.

Her body collapsed to the ground without resistance, lifeless before it even touched the floor. The whip recoiled smoothly and returned to me before wrapping itself back around my waist as if nothing had happened at all.

I exhaled slowly, a faint irritation settling in as I glanced at the remains without interest. This was becoming increasingly tedious, and I could feel my patience thinning with every moment wasted here.

My hand rested briefly against the whip at my side as I looked ahead into the mist, my thoughts already elsewhere.

Neither it nor

interest in wasting time on things like this, because we were

I

ort had somethings

for something far more interesting.

both wait

The fight with Noah

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 187

[ 1,419 words ]

13:12 Sat, Apr 4 AA.

Chapter 187

Chapter 187

Miles

76%

10 vouchers

I frowned as the severed head hit the ground with a dull thud and rolled across the forest floor, leaving a faint trail before dissolving into ash, and instead of satisfaction, all I felt was a deep, simmering irritation as I stared at where the Akakitsune had been, disgust curling in my chest at the mere thought of it daring to take Noah's form.

"There won't be a next time," I said coldly, my voice devoid of any warmth as I looked down at the fading remains, my golden eyes sharp and merciless, "but if you ever dare to act like Noah again, I will make sure your death is slow enough for you to regret ever being born."

The creature did not respond, its presence already scattering into the wind as though it had never existed, and I clicked my tongue in annoyance, finding the entire encounter unsatisfying.

"Boss."

stract ad interruption barely egitered.

I did not

“Boss!”

My eyes shifted slightly.

“Boss, please help me! This crazy woman is going to kill me!”

I turned at that, my attention finally drawn to the voice, and I saw one of my underlings running toward me through the thick mist, his movements frantic and unsteady, and right behind him, an Akakitsune in the form of a human woman followed closely, its expression twisted with amusement as it chased him like prey enjoying its hunt.

The fool tripped over a rock and fell hard onto the ground, scrambling backward in a desperate attempt to get away while the creature let out a laugh and prepared to pounce on him, clearly intending to finish him off right there.

I watched for a brief moment, carefully observing him to confirm what mattered.

It was really him, not another illusion.

Once I was certain, I moved without hesitation, closing the distance in an instant before slamming into the Akakitsune and driving it to the ground beneath me, catching it off guard as it let out a startled sound and tried to push me away, but no matter how much it struggled, I did not move.

I pinned it down firmly, my hand gripping its throat as I raised my dagger without any delay, and in one clean, precise motion, I sliced through its neck.

The creature stopped moving immediately as its head separated and rolled away, while the rest of its body began to crumble into ash just like the others, leaving no trace behind.

I stood up without sparing it another glance, completely indifferent to the sight as I slid my dagger back into place with ease.

Behind me, my underling was gasping for air as he leaned heavily against a tree, his entire body trembling as he struggled to process what had just happened.

“gods... what the hell was that?” he said, his voice shaking uncontrollably. “Why was that thing chasing me?”

I looked away from him, my expression flat and uninterested as answered. “That was an Akakitsune, and it takes the form of a human, often someone you know, in order to get close enough to kill you.”

He stiffened at my words, his fear only growing as he muttered himself under his breath. “What the hell... I almost got killed by that crazy thing...”

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13:12 Sat, Apr 4 OAA ·

Chapter 187

I turned my head slightly, something in his reaction catching my attention as I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Wait,” I said, my tone shifting just enough to make him freeze. What form did it take for you?”

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He went completely still at the question, and then his face flushed red almost instantly as he scratched the back of his head awkwardly, clearly avoiding my gaze.

“Boss...” he muttered, unable to answer properly.

I stared at him for a moment, already piecing it together, before letting out a quiet scoff.

“Don’t tell me,” I said, my voice dripping with disbelief, “that thing did not even need to take a familiar form and simply appeared as a beautiful woman, and you still almost let it kill you”

His face turned even redder at that, embarrassment written all over him as he hurried to defend himself.

“In my defense,” he said quickly, “she was very beautiful, and she was naked and... seducing me, so what man could say no to that?”

I looked at him in silence for a long moment, my expression unreadable as I processed what he had just said. Then I exhaled slowly.

I had not realized my people were this stupid.

“You found a beautiful naked woman in the middle of a forest like this, and you were not even slightly worried that something might be wrong?”

He gave me an embarrassed smile, as if that alone would somehow justify his stupidity, and I could already feel a headache forming.

I let out a slow sigh, dragging a hand down my face before speaking again. "The Akakitsune did not even bother trying to fool you properly," I said. "It already knew how dumb you are, so there was no need."

Honestly, I did not even know why I kept taking in underlings like this, because this was not the first time I had dealt with this level of idiocy, and at this point, it was starting to feel like a pattern rather than coincidence.

Maybe it was because they were dumb that they chose to follow me.

I shook my head slightly and started walking forward, deciding not to waste any more time on it, and as expected, he immediately scrambled up and hurried after me, staying close as if afraid something else might jump out at him.

After a few seconds of silence, he spoke again, his voice more cautious this time. "If the Akakitsune takes the face of someone you know, then how did you figure out it was not real, oss?"

I stepped over a fallen branch without breaking my stride and answered without looking back. "I would not have known if it was not for Noah,"

He went quiet immediately, and I could practically feel the tension coming off him at the mention of that name, because it was obvious by now that people had started to fear him.

He swallowed audibly before speaking again. "Then... how did that monster know?" he asked. "He is not here with you, so are you saying he figured it out beforehand?"

A faint smile formed on my lips at that, not out of amusement, but because I remembered exactly what Noah had said before everything in this forest turned into chaos.

His voice was still clear in my head.

"The forest is dangerous, so be cautious and monitor your surroundings for even the slightest change, but remember that

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Chapter 187

there will be things here you cannot handle, and when you meet them, run."

I had asked him how I was supposed to know what I could not handle. And he answered simply.

“You will know when you see it, because your instincts will tell you to run.”

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I was about to respond to my underling and explain that much when I turned slightly, only to see him standing frozen in place, his entire body trembling as his eyes locked onto something behind me.

I frowned at him, irritation flickering for a brief moment as I was about to ask what was wrong with him. Then it hit me. Every nerve in my body tensed at once, instinctive chill ran down my spine as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up without warning.

My heart dropped.

Something was wrong.

Terribly wrong.

For the first time in a long while, my body reacted before my mind could process anything, something deep inside my chest. screamed at me not to turn around, as if even the act of looking would be a mistake. But I had no choice.

I slowly clenched my hand, steadying myself, then, slowly, against every warning screaming through my veins, I turned. And the moment my eyes landed on it, I understood.

I finally understood what Noah meant. Because right now, every instinct in my body was telling me the same thing.

Run.

3/3

AD

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 188

[ 1,627 words ]

Chapter 188

11 35 vouchers

Selene

I bent slightly forward with my legs planted apart, my grip looses I stared at what remained of the fight in front of me, bored as if the entire ordeal had drained every ounce of excitement I initially had. With a quiet sigh slipping past my lips, I released my hold on the severed head in my hand, letting it dro carelessly to the ground where it hit with a dull sound before rolling across the dirt, leaving a faint trail behind it as it went still.

I straightened up slowly, brushing invisible dust off my clothes fore tilting my head upward, my eyes scanning the space where the sky should have been, only to be met with that same endless, suffocating mist that swallowed everything whole and gave nothing back in return. There was no sun, no sense of me, no indication of how long I had been trapped here.

At first, I was excited.

Fighting had always been one of the few things that truly stirred something inside me, especially when there was a chance to grow stronger, to sharpen my skills, and to push myself beyond my limits against worthy opponents. That was what I had expected when this round began, especially in a place like this, but the reality had been disappointing.

Having faced far more formidable and demanding monsters across the span of my ten past lives, the creatures in this forest felt like nothing more than child's play. They were strong by ordinary standards, yes, but to me, they were predictable, slow, and far too easy to tear apart.

My gaze drifted downward, landing on the scattered bodies around me, each one belonging to a different type of monster that had once rushed at me with killing intent, only to end up lifeless at my feet. At some point, they had even tried to overwhelm me by attacking all at once, but that only made things easier, because it meant I didn't have to waste time looking for them.

A faint movement caught my attention as I watched their corpse begin to crumble, their forms slowly turning into ash that was carried away by an unseen wind, disappearing as if they had never existed in the first place.

I reached behind me, gripping the handle of the sword and I turned slightly, already deciding that there was no point lingering any longer. If this place had nothing left to offer me, then I might as well find a way out, and if I was lucky, I might even run into Noah along the way.

I had taken only a few steps when a soft whisper brushed through the air.

"Selene, the Moonborn."

I stopped.

My entire body went still in an instant, and my eyes widened slightly, the name echoing in my

Selene? Not Noah?

Someone had just called me by my real name.

mind.

Slowly, I turned my head, my expression shifting as interest flickered in my eyes, replacing the boredom that had been there just moments ago. My lips curled upward into a faint, intrigued smile as I adjusted my grip on my sword, my senses sharpening as I searched for the source of that voice.

So, something here knew me.

That alone made things far more interesting than anything I had encountered so far.

I turned around fully, ready to face whatever creature it was, but the moment my gaze landed on it, my steps halted, and my brows drew together in confusion.

Huh?

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15:13 Wed, Apr 8

Chapter 188

63%

35 vouchers

In front of me, there was no solid body or monstrous form waiting to lunge. There was only a mass of black mist, swirling slowly in place as if it were alive, shifting and twisting without ever forming a clear shape. Its presence was both there and not there at the same time, making it impossible to tell what exactly I was looking at.

For the first time since entering this forest, something had managed to catch me off guard.

“What are you?” I asked, my voice calm but edged with caution. Because whatever this thing was, it was not normal.

The mist did not answer my question, at least not directly, and instead it spoke in that same strange, echoing tone.

“You have a strong spirit,” it said slowly, almost thoughtfully, as studying me from the inside out. “Especially your wolf. I can tell she is really strong.”

My brows pulled together in confusion at its words. I had no idea what it was talking about, and honestly, I was already losing interest in whatever it was trying to say, I sighed softly, already bored, and turned around as if dismissing it entirely, waving a hand lazily over my shoulder.

“I have to go now,” I said flatly. “Go bother someone else.”

I had taken barely a single step when the air in front of me distorted, and in a flash, the black mist appeared right in front of me again, so suddenly that even I had to stop myself from reacting on instinct.

I clicked my tongue and took a small step back, my eyes narrowing slightly as annoyance replaced that brief flicker of surprise.

“That’s creepy. Mind not popping up right in front of me like that?”

The mist did not react to my irritation at all, and instead continued speaking as if I hadn't said anything.

"Even though you have a strong spirit, you have gone through a lot," it said, its voice lowering slightly. "A lot more than someone could ever imagine. You have brushed through death ten times already. You are living another life again."

This time, I froze, and slowly, I lifted my gaze back to the mist, my expression no longer bored, dismissive, but alert. I took a step back, creating distance between us without even thinking about it, my fingers tightening around my sword as my mind raced.

What the hell was this thing?

How did it know that?

I didn't hesitate this time, raising my sword slightly, even though I had no idea if a physical weapon would even work on something like this, but I wasn't stupid enough to stand here defenseless.

"I'll ask again," I said, my voice colder now. "What are you?"

For a moment, the mist was silent, its form swirling slowly, and then it spoke again. "Don't be scared, child, I might be very dangerous, but not to you. I'm only here, because you called me

I blinked once, the words not making sense.

"I called you?" I repeated, my tone flat, unconvinced.

"Yes," the mist replied, its voice almost pleased now. "Well... your spirit did. I have never seen a spirit as strong as yours in all my lifetime, I have finally found someone I can merge with."

I raised an eyebrow slowly, my gaze fixed on the strange black thing in front of me, because no matter how I looked at it, I could not understand what it was supposed to be or what it wanted from me, and even though there was no killing intent coming from it, that alone did not make it any less dangerous.

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35 vouchers

My instincts were already screaming at me, clawing at the back of my mind in a way I had learned never to ignore.

'Mira, I called inwardly, my tone calm but firm, even as my body remained tense and ready to react at the slightest movement. 'Why are you so quiet, and what exactly is that thing in front of me, and more importantly, can it be killed?'

There was a brief silence in my mind, one that stretched just a little too long for my liking, before Mira finally responded, her voice unusually serious in a way that immediately put me on edge.

'I do not know what it is,' she said slowly, as if even she was choosing her words carefully, but I know one thing for certain, Selene, and that is the fact that it is very dangerous, and very ancient, far older than anything we have encountered before.

I blinked, genuinely surprised by her answer, because it was not often that Mira sounded uncertain, let alone cautious.

Is it really that dangerous?' I asked, my eyes never leaving the thing in front of me as I subtly shifted my stance, preparing for anything it might do.

'Yes, Mira replied without hesitation this time, 'it is not as dangerous as Alpha Damien or the phoenix, but it is something that even the gods fear.

That made my heart skip a beat. Everyone knew the phoenix was powerful, a god whose very presence could make people drop to their knees without him even trying, and Alpha Damien that man was a different kind of monster entirely, one I had experienced firsthand.

So if Mira was comparing this thing to beings like them, even indirectly, then that meant one thing.

This was not something I could afford to be reckless with.

Especially not now. Not when I was not at my full strength like I had been in my past lives. Fighting it would not just be risky.

It would be suicide.

I narrowed my eyes slightly, my thoughts moving as I analyzed the situation. After thinking it through, I did the smartest thing I could think of in that moment.

I followed my own advice.

Without hesitation, without pride, and without giving myself time to second guess the decision, I turned on my heel, and

ran.

3/4

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 189

[ 1,084 words ]

Chapter 189

63%

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Selene

I moved without thinking, my body acting faster than my thoughts as I leapt over a fallen log and kept running, my steps light and precise as I wove through the dense forest, careful not to waste even a second of time or a drop of energy. I did not know if I could outrun that thing behind me, but I knew one thing with absolute certainty, I was not the kind of person who would stand still and wait for death to catch up to her. That had never been my style, and it never would be.

In my mind, Mira's voice echoed, calm but laced with curiosity. Are you really going to run? Don't you think you should try to understand what it wants?

A breathless laugh almost escaped me at her words.

Understand it? That sounded like something a naive protagonist in a story would do, someone who believed everything in the world had a reason that would somehow work

in their favor. was not that kind of person, and I had lived far too many lives to entertain such foolishness.

What if I stopped to understand it, and it decided to kill me on the spot, or worse, take over my body? No, I was not taking that risk. I preferred the simplest solution, the most efficient one. If running increased my chances of survival, then I would run without hesitation. It really was that simple.

When a massive tree blocked my path, I did not slow down. I planted my foot against the trunk, pushed myself upward, grabbed onto a thick branch, and swung over before landing smoothly on the other side, continuing forward without breaking my rhythm. Ever since that black mist appeared, I had not encountered any other creatures, and that alone was unsettling. It was as if everything else in the forest had sensed it and fled, or worse, were too afraid to even exist in its

presence.

I was just about to turn into another clearing when my instincts screamed at me, forcing my body to halt as I jumped back without hesitation. Something massive landed right where I would have stepped next.

I lifted my gaze and found myself staring at a monster that looked like it had been stitched together, its head resembling that of a lion while its body carried the hulking mass of a bear. It let out a deafening roar the moment it spotted me, its eyes locking onto mine with murderous intent as it charged forward without a second of hesitation.

I sighed, irritation flickering through me as I prepared to deal with yet another inconvenience, my body already shifting into motion to take it down quickly and move on. But before I could even act, something else appeared.

A dark, shifting presence slid between me and the monster, forcing me to stop abruptly, widening despite myself.

It caught up.

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The black mist stood there, if it could even be called standing, its form twisting and writhing in a way that made it impossible to fully comprehend. The monster in front of it froze instantly, its massive body trembling as if every instinct it had was screaming at it to run,

The mist spoke, its voice low, raspy, and inhuman, as if it was dragging each word from the depths of something ancient. "You dare touch what I have set my eyes on? You must be courting death."

The creature tried to retreat, its survival instincts finally taking over, but it was too late. The mist moved faster than anything I had seen before, wrapping around the monster before it could even take a full step away. In a matter of seconds, its form twisted and reshaped, mimicking the creature it had just captured, except this version was larger, darker, and far more terrifying.

Without hesitation, it brought its massive foot down, crushing the original monster beneath it as if it were nothing more than an insect. Instead of blood or remains, black spots spread across the creature's body, consuming it entirely until it disappeared as though it had never existed. Then, just as quickly the mist returned to its original form, as if none of that had happened at all. And then, it turned to me.

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15:13 Wed, Apr 8

Chapter 189

I stood there, my body still, my eyes fixed on it as a rare sense of unease crept into my chest.

Gods... what kind of monster was this?

63%

35 vouchers

One thing was painfully clear to me now. That thing did not belong to this forest. It was real. And for some reason, it wanted

The mist shifted in front of me, its form rippling as though it was alive, breathing, watching, and thinking all at once, before its voice echoed again, smooth and coaxing, as if it had all the time in the world to convince me.

"Shall we continue now?" it asked, almost patiently, almost amused. "Like I said, I am not here to harm you, I just want to merge. You are the only one strong enough to take me in."

I stared at it for a long moment without responding, my eyes narrowing slightly as I took in the way it moved, the way it lingered too close without truly touching me. Then I let out a slow breath and sighed, already knowing how this would go.

There was no world where I would willingly merge with something like that, and there was also no obvious way out of this place, which meant that, whether I liked it or not, this was going to turn into a fight.

I shrugged lightly, before muttering under my breath with a faint smirk tugging at my lips.

“Well, I might as well put that lazy phoenix to work.”

Before the black mist could respond or question me further, I raised my hand and brought my finger to my mouth, biting down without hesitation until I tasted iron on my tongue, and a bead of blood welled up before dripping down slowly. The moment the blood fell and touched the ground beneath me, I spoke clearly, my voice steady and commanding as it cut through the eerie silence of the forest.

“I call the fire phoenix god to my aid.”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 190

[ 1,044 words ]

Chapter 190

Selene

63%

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For a brief second, nothing happened, and the world remained still, as though even the forest itself was holding its breath, waiting to see if anything would answer my call. Then, without warning, the ground beneath my feet trembled violently, cracking apart as a burst of blazing fire erupted upward from where my blood had fallen, forcing me to take a step back as heat surged through the air in a powerful wave.

The mist recoiled as well, retreating slightly as if wary, and when I lifted my gaze toward the source of the flames, the fire twisted and condensed before revealing a familiar figure standing casually at its center.

Lucas stood there as if he had simply stepped out for a walk rather than been summoned, his posture completely relaxed, a chicken thigh lazily held in his hand as he took an unbothered bite, his bright golden eyes half-lidded with boredom.

He chewed slowly, then glanced around as if mildly inconvenienced by his surroundings before speaking in a tone that made it clear he found this entire situation annoying.

“How troublesome,” he muttered, taking another bite. “I was just about to ask Evelyn for more food.”

I stared at him for a moment, completely unimpressed, before rolling my eyes as I crossed my arms over my chest, already feeling a headache forming just from looking at him.

“You are still a glutton as always, Lucas,” I said flatly. “You are out there enjoying yourself while I am here trying not to get killed.”

At

my words, his lips slowly curled into a faint smirk, and for the first time since he appeared, he turned his full attention to me, his golden eyes sharpening ever so slightly as they flashed with something far more dangerous beneath the laziness.

No matter how many times I saw him, it was still absurd how attractive his human form was, the kind that could easily make anyone lower their guard if they did not know better, but I knew exactly what stood in front of me.

This was not just some man.

This was a god..

“Oh, you’re still alive?” Lucas said. “I thought you were dead already, and I was even considering looking for your body so I could eat you, since if I can’t kill you, I might as well eat the descendant of the woman who trapped me.”

I let out a quiet breath. "As you can clearly see," I said dryly, "I'm very much alive. Though that might change very soon if you don't deal with that thing in front of me,"

His eyebrow lifted at my words, and then a slow, crooked smirk spread across his face, his golden eyes glinting with interest. "Wow," he drawled, dragging the word out like he was savoring it. "Is the powerful, crazy woman actually asking me for help? I never thought I'd live to see this day come so soon,"

I clicked my tongue and shot him an unimpressed look, folding my arms loosely across my chest. "You talk too much, or is it that you've gotten weaker over the past few weeks?"

His smirk twitched, clearly offended, and just as he opened his mouth to snap back, the black mist surged forward again, faster this time, more aggressive, its presence pressing down on the space around us.

"Merge with me," it whispered again, its voice no longer soft but insistent, and desperate.

Before it could get any closer, Lucas lifted his hand lazily, as if swatting away an insect, and flames burst to life from his palm, bright and violent, burning with a heat that distorted the air itself.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm talking,"

flatly.

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Chapter 190

63%

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The mist recoiled instantly, retreating several feet back as if it had been struck, its form trembling at the edges where the fire had almost touched it.

As his golden eyes flared brighter, something changed in the atmosphere, and a suffocating pressure spread through the forest, forcing the trees to tremble and the distant creatures to scatter in panic.

Even without looking, I could feel it, everything around us was acting to him. The phoenix might not be at his peak yet, but even like this, he was still terrifying. And if this was him weakened, I didn't want to imagine what he was like in his full

power.

The black mist didn't advance again this time, keeping its distance as if it finally understood that Lucas was not something it could casually approach.

Lucas tilted his head slightly, examining his own flames like he hadn't seen them in a while, then looked back at the mist with mild interest, as though he had just remembered something vaguely familiar.

He stared at it for a moment longer, his brows knitting slightly.

"Wait," he said slowly, his tone changing. "I know you."

I blinked and turned my head toward him, genuine confusion crossing my face. "You know it?"

He nodded once, still staring at the mist. "Yeah. I heard it disappeared a long time ago. I didn't expect it to be hiding in a place like this."

My frown deepened as I looked between him and the thing hovering in the distance, my mind racing to make sense of any of this. "What are you talking about?" I asked. "And more importantly, what does it want with me?"

Lucas finally looked at me, and then, he smiled. Not his usual lazy, mocking smirk, but something far more intrigued.

"You really are a strange one, aren't you, wolf?" he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Huh?"

He chuckled softly, shaking his head like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. "Not only did you manage to form a blood oath with me, the god phoenix," he said, his gaze piercing straight through me, "but you also caught the attention of something that even the gods are wary of."

"What are you saying, Lucas?"

His smile widened just slightly.

"I'm saying, you are a dangerous monster, Selene."

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