

# Alpha Damien & His Troublemaker

## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 191

[ 1,773 words ]

Chapter 191

Selene

35 vouchers

I stared at Lucas as he spoke, his voice slow and unhurried, as though he were not revealing something that could shake the very foundation of what people believed about the world.

“A long time ago,” he said, lazily leaning against the tree while chewing on the berries he had taken from his pocket, “even before the moon goddess created you annoying werewolves, the gods created this mist, and we called it the Mist of Life.”

My eyes flickered toward the black mass in front of me, my brows drawing together as I listened carefully.

“Each god placed a part of their power into it, for example, I placed the power of fire within it, while the others added theirs as well, and because of that, it became something far too powerful, something even the gods themselves began to fear.”

The mist shifted slightly, almost as if it could understand every word he was saying.

“It was meant to watch over the world,” Lucas added with a small shrug, “but jealousy is something even gods cannot escape, and because of that, it was corrupted with dark energy, which is why it is black now instead of the pure white it once was.”

“After that,” he continued, popping another berry into his mouth “anything it touched began to lose its life force, slowly draining away until nothing was left, and naturally, the gods decided it was too dangerous to exist.”

I crossed my arms, my fingers tapping lightly against my sleeve as I processed everything he was saying, because none of this was information anyone in my world had ever known. No one knew about the existence of the mist, because if they did, everyone would want its power. After all, everyone wanted to be more powerful than a god.

“But the moon goddess,” he said, glancing at me briefly, “saved it and forced it into hiding to protect it, and over time, people simply forgot it ever existed.”

I let out a quiet breath, my gaze shifting back to the mist, which now remained completely still, almost as if it feared Lucas might destroy it if it dared to move even an inch closer to me.

“That still doesn’t explain why it is here,” I said, my voice calm but edged with suspicion, because nothing about this situation felt like coincidence. Lucas hummed softly, clearly unconcerned, as if this entire situation was nothing more than mild entertainment to him.

“I didn’t expect it either” he admitted casually, “but here it is.”

I exhaled slowly, already feeling a headache beginning to form, because this was far more complicated than I had anticipated when I entered this forest

“Alright,” I said, my eyes narrowing slightly as I focused on the mist. “What I don’t understand is why it wants to merge with me. Is it trying to take over my body?”

Lucas paused mid-chew, raising an eyebrow as he turned his attention fully to me, and for the first time, there was a hint of something sharper in his golden eyes,

“He is trying to merge with you?” he repeated, before his gaze slowly shifted toward the mist, his expression darkening in a way that made even the air feel heavier.

“Why,” he asked, his voice dropping slightly, “do you want to merge with my prey?”

The mist remained silent for a moment, as though it was hesitating, before a voice finally echoed from within it.

“She is the only one who can take my energy, and make me disappear.”

My brows furrowed immediately, confused as I tried to understand what that even meant. Lucas went quiet for a few seconds, his gaze fixed on the mist as if he was piecing something together, before he finally let out a small, knowing sound.

1/4

Wed, Apr 8

Chapter 191

“I see.”

63%

35 vouchers

He turned back to me, his expression returning to that same lazy indifference, though I could still see the sharpness beneath it.

“Well,” he said, “like I told you, anything that comes close to it loses its life force, and by now, you should already be dead just from standing this close.”

I glanced down at myself instinctively before looking back up at him, my lips pressing into a thin line.

“But you are not,” he continued, his eyes locking onto mine. “And that is because you are not like everyone else. You are the closest thing to the moon goddess herself, so your spirit cannot be drained the way others can.”

The mist flickered slightly, as if reacting to his words.

“It has been hiding for a very long time,” Lucas added, his tone almost bored again, “and it probably does not want to exist like this anymore, so the only way for it to disappear is to merge with someone who can contain it.”

“And if it merges with me?” I asked.

Lucas smiled, but he wasn't amused.

“You will become different, not just stronger, Selene, but powerful enough to rival even the gods themselves.”

The forest fell silent after that.

There are moments when everything inside you pauses in disbelief, and this was one of those moments as I stopped in my tracks, my gaze fixed on the swirling mist before me while Lucas words echoed over and over again in my mind, refusing to settle.

Rival the gods.

In all my past lives, no matter how far I climbed, no matter how much blood I spilled or how strong I became, I was never able to reach that level, never able to stand on equal ground with beings that ruled existence itself, and yet now, standing here without having done anything particularly extraordinary, I was being told that all I needed to do was accept this mist, let it merge with me, and I could become something even they would have to acknowledge.

It sounded ridiculous.

It sounded impossible. And yet, nothing about my life had ever followed the rules of what was possible.

My eyes slowly lifted toward the big eye down at me, and for a brief moment I wondered if it was watching this.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lucas said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. “Other people can’t see the mist, and they can’t see me either. We are ancient beings. To anyone watching, it wouldst look like you are talking to yourself.”

I looked back at the mist, my expression unreadable,

“So,” I said slowly, my voice calm, “you want me to take your power, so you can disappear.”

The mist stilled for a moment, and then it moved in what could only be described as a nod, its form trembling slightly before a quiet voice echoed from it.

“Yes, I do not deserve to exist. I am a curse, and curses should disappear”

My eyes flickered at that word, something cold and sharp flashing through them before I could stop it.

A curse.

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How many times had I heard that before?

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How many times had people thrown that word at anything they didn’t understand, anything that didn’t fit into their narrow view of the world, anything that was different, anything that made them uncomfortable?

Curse. Monster. Abomination.

Words people used when they were too weak to face something reater than themselves.

I exhaled slowly, pushing those thoughts down before they could take root, and tilted my head slightly as I studied the mist again.

"If I take your power," I asked, "will it affect me?"

Lucas immediately shook his head, though there was something in his expression that suggested the answer wasn't as simple as he made it sound.

"No," he said, "but you will need to take it without being consumed by its darkness, because your body is different, and you can fight that darkness and turn it into something else, something pure, which is exactly why no god has ever dared to take it, since they would all be devoured by it the moment they tried

A small smile curled at my lips at his words, slow and thoughtful as I let them sink in.

"So," I murmured, almost amused, "I'm different."

Lucas nodded, but this time his gaze was more serious.

"Yes, but do not take this lightly, because that darkness can still consume you if you are careless, and if that happens, you will not simply die, you will rot from the inside out and your spirit will disappear, you will not be reborn this time around."

I let out a soft hum, as if I were considering something trivial rather than a life-or-death gamble, and then I nodded once.

"Alright," I said simply, "let's do it."

There was a pause.

A very long pause,

Lucas stared at me as if he had just heard something completely absurd, his golden eyes narrowing slightly.

ou even listen to anything I just said? You will rot and die if you are not careful."

"What?" he said. "Did y

you

I stepped forward anyway, my

Cady back on the mis as it shifted in anticipation.

“You also said,” I replied calmly, “that I would become powerful enough to rival even the gods.”

Lucas clicked his tongue in annoyance, shaking his head.

“No,” he said, more firmly this time, “you cannot die here. If anyone is going to kill you, it will be me, and why are you even taking a risk like this? Are you not afraid?”

I shrugged lightly as I moved closer, the mist now close enough that I could feel its presence brushing against my skin.

“Afraid?” I repeated, my voice quiet, and thoughtful.

“Maybe”

I paused for just a moment, my eyes narrowing slightly as memories of my past lives flickered through my mind, each one ending the same way, each one slipping through my fingers no matter how hard I tried to hold on,

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35 vouchers

“But if I had never taken risks, I would have never become strong enough to protect the people I love,” I said as I lifted my hand toward the mist. “And this time, I do not just want to be strong. I need to be, because I am not dying again.”

“I will not fall to fate. I will not bow to the Moon Goddess. I will not surrender, not even to death itself.”

“I will not let anyone decide my life for me.”

4/4

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 192

[ 1,801 words ]

Chapter 192

Selene

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I crossed my legs slowly as I settled in place, my posture relaxed despite everything that was happening, my gaze fixed on the black mist in front of me as I studied it in silence, because even though it had no face, or form that I could properly read, there was still something about it that felt different now, and I could sense that whatever it was, it was far more relaxed. than before, as if it had already made up its mind about something.

I tilted my head slightly as I continued to observe it for a moment longer before shifting my attention to the side, my eyes landing on Lucas as I spoke in a calm and almost indifferent tone, as though I was discussing something trivial rather than something that might determine whether I lived or died. “If anything happens to me, take care of Evelyn and Silas for me.”

Lucas frowned the moment the words left my mouth, his expression tightening with clear displeasure as if he did not like what I had just said, and I could not help the faint flicker of confusion that passed through me at his reaction.

If I remembered correctly, he had wanted me dead from the very beginning, so this sudden shift in attitude made little

sense to me.

“I am not a babysitter,” he said flatly, his voice carrying a sharp edge that left no room for argument, He shifted slightly, his gaze flickering toward the mist before returning to me, and then added, “Besides, before anything happens to you, I will burn that thing to ash. I can’t have anyone harming my prey except me.”

My lips curled slightly at his words, a faint hint of amusement playing on my face. I gave a small, almost absent-minded nod before responding, "Alright. Thank you... I guess."

I turned my attention back to the mist. "So, what exactly am I supposed to do?"

The mist shifted slowly in front of me, its presence growing heavier in a way that made the air feel thicker, and when it spoke, its voice carried that same distant and echoing tone that felt as though it came from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. "You will die... and be reborn."

I frowned immediately, a flicker of clear displeasure crossing my face, because no matter how many times I had experienced it, dying was not something I enjoyed, and the idea of going through it again was far from appealing.

Sensing my reaction, the mist continued without hesitation. "You will die, yes, but if you are able to take my full power and make it your own, you will return immediately, and I will cease to exist."

"Death does not always mean loss, because sometimes it is simply the end of what you were and the beginning of something new, and that is what will happen to you, you will return

and be reborn, different than before."

There was a brief pause, just long enough for the

weight of its words to settle, before it spoke again, its tone lowering slightly as if emphasizing the importance of what

it was saying. "You will not return, so you must come next. "But if you fail, then as the god has said, you will rot, and your life will

not be

allowed. "What happens, you must let your light find me?"

My darkness to consume you, because it will not be easy, and no matter

how long it takes, you must let your light find me. My frown deepened in confusion. None of what it was saying was clear enough for me to act on, and I did not like stepping into something I did not fully understand, especially when the price of failure was absolute death with no second chance. I opened my mouth to ask what it meant, but I never got the chance.

In the very next instant, the mist moved without warning, its entire form surging forward in a single overwhelming motion before slamming straight into my body, and before I

could even react, it forced its way inside me as if I had never had a choice in the matter to begin with

Pain exploded through me instantly, violent to the point that it felt like my entire body was being torn apart from the inside,

my throat, blood spilling from my mouth and splattering onto the

in a way that made it impossible to think clearly.

and ground beneath me as something inside my chest

my vision blurred as a harsh cough ripped through!

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63%

35 vouchers

More blood followed, spilling from my eyes and nose as my body trembled uncontrollably, and I clutched at my chest desperately, my fingers digging into my clothes as if I could somehow hold myself together, but it was useless because I could not breathe.

Everything blurred together into nothing but pain, and somewhere in the middle of it, I did not even realize when my body gave out and I started falling.

The last thing I saw before everything disappeared was Lucas standing there, watching me with an expression that looked almost pitiful.

Then everything went dark.

The world disappeared completely as if I had been swallowed whole, and in that final moment, just before everything faded into nothing, I could have sworn that my heart stopped beating.

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“Help me!”

“Help me!”

“Help!”

“Help meeee!!!!”

The sound tore through the darkness like a blade, forcing my eyes open as my body jerked violently. My breath caught harshly in my throat as I struggled to pull in air that didn't seem to come easily. For a brief moment, my vision swam before it slowly began to focus again.

And then I saw it.

What stood in front of me had once been human, but whatever was now could no longer be called that. Its face was twisted beyond recognition, the flesh torn and hanging as if it had been ripped apart and crudely left that way. Parts of it were missing entirely, exposing something far worse beneath.

Before I could react, its hand tightened around my throat, its fingers digging into my skin as its nails pierced my sending a sharp sting through me. It leaned closer, its presence suffocating.

It was choking me, trying to kill me.

flesh,

I didn't hesitate or try to understand what was happening. My instinct moved faster than my brain. My hand shot behind me in search of the sword Chloe had given me, my fingers brushing against the handle before gripping it tightly.

The moment I secured my hold on it, I moved in one smooth motion, pulling the blade free and slashing forward with precision as I cut through the arm that was wrapped around my throat, freeing myself from its grip, and without giving it a single moment to react, I followed through with the same movement and swung again, aiming for its neck as the blade passed cleanly through.

Its head fell and rolled across the ground while its body collapse. I did not stay there to watch as I quickly stepped back, putting distance between myself and it while trying to steady my breathing, my hand instinctively rising to my neck as I rubbed over the spot where it had been gripping me,

If I had been even a second slower, I would have died, or maybe already had, and that thought lingered briefly as flashes of what had happened before surfaced in my mind, the memory of that overwhelming pain still fresh, the way it had spread through my entire body and sank deep into my bones and blood in a way I had never experienced before.

I frowned slightly at the memory, but I quickly pushed it aside. This was not the time to dwell on that, what mattered now was understanding where I was.

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I lifted my head and looked ahead, scanning the area carefully until my eyes caught something in the distance, a faint white glow that stood out against everything else, as if it was calling to me.

My heart skipped slightly at the sight as a spark of excitement rose within me, that looked like exactly what I had come here for. Without thinking too much about it, I took a step forward, ready to move toward it. But then I stopped.

Something felt wrong.

I glanced back to where the body had been.

There was nothing there.

I frowned, my grip tightening around my sword as unease settle in, and slowly, I turned around.

“Help me!”

The voice came suddenly, loud and desperate, and the moment turned, the man was already rushing toward me again.

I reacted instantly, moving out of the way with ease as I avoided him and created distance, my eyes locking onto him as I took in his appearance more clearly.

Up close, it was worse than before. He looked like something that should have been long dead, his body decayed and unnatural, his presence wrong in every possible way, and yet he was still moving as if nothing was out of place.

I let out a quiet sigh as I tightened my grip on my sword, my expression flattening with mild annoyance.

This was going to be troublesome. And just as that thought crossed my mind, more figures began to appear from the mist, first a few, then more, and then far too many to count as they slowly filled the space ahead of me, all of them moving in the same direction.

Toward me.

EX

They looked like him, lifeless and decayed, their presence unsettling. And yet, their focus was clear, because every single one of them had their attention fixed on me, as if I were their only target.

I rolled my eyes slightly at the sight, more annoyed than anything else. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy, but at the same time, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter how many of them there were.

Whether it was hundreds or thousands.

My grip on my sword tightened as my stance shifted, my expression calming as my focus sharpened completely. No matter how

many stood in my way, the outcome wouldn't change.

I was getting out of here alive, and

and I would return to the people loved, and the ones I hated.

A pair of crimson eyes flashed through my mind, and a faint smile slowly formed on my lips as a familiar presence filled my thoughts.

I would make it back.

Back to the Demon of the West.

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## **- Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 193**

### **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 193**

[ 2,169 words ]

Chapter 193

Selene

“Help me!”

“Help me!”

VPN

83

5 vouchers

“Help me!”

The voices of dozens of people echoed all around me, overlapping and blending into a chaotic chorus of desperation that filled the entire space, their cries sharp as they

surrounded me from every direction, and yet despite how human they sounded, I already knew none of them needed saving.

I was breathing hard, each breath shallow and uneven as sweat ran down my face and dripped from my chin, my grip tightening around my sword even as my hand began to ache from holding it for so long, the strain settling deep into my muscles as exhaustion slowly crept into every part of my body.

I did not know how much time had passed anymore, whether it had been minutes or hours, because everything had blurred together into a single, endless cycle of killing. All I knew was that my entire body ached from the constant effort of cutting them down again and again without rest.

They did not stay dead no matter how many times I cut them apart or how cleanly I severed their limbs or took their heads. They would simply pull themselves back together as if nothing had happened, their bodies reforming in a way that made every strike feel meaningless.

It was frustrating, but more than that, it was exhausting. Even though I was the one fighting and destroying them, I was also the only one being affected by it, the only one growing weaker with time, while they continued to come at me without slowing down, weakening, or showing any signs of stopping.

One of them rushed toward me again, its body dragging unnaturally as it moved with a broken yet relentless motion, and instead of reacting immediately, I remained still and let it come closer, my eyes locked on it as I waited for the right moment before moving.

When it got within reach, I swung my blade in a smooth motion and cut through its leg, bringing it down instantly, and before it could react or recover, I followed through and severed its head, ending its movement as it collapsed onto the ground.

I did not even get to relax, because I already knew it would not stay that way.

My gaze shifted past them, landing on the white mist in the distance that continued to glow faintly as if it was waiting for me, its presence calm and unmoving despite everything happening around it, and I knew that was what I needed to reach.

That was the goal.

My only way out.

And yet, between me and it stood countless of these things, surrounding me from all sides as they continued to move toward me with the same single intent, their numbers overwhelming as they closed in slowly.

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If even one of them managed to kill me, then I would rot here and never come back.

VPN

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'You look exhausted,' Mira's voice echoed in my mind, calm and observant as always, cutting through the noise around me.

A faint smile formed on my lips, but there was no warmth in it, only a trace of dry amusement as I responded while cutting down another one that came too close. 'Oh, really? I did not notice.'

There was a hint of amusement in her response, but she did not dwell on it as she continued. "This is not the way to beat them. If you keep going like this, you will only wear yourself down, there must be another way, something you are not seeing yet?"

I tilted my head slightly as I moved, avoiding another attack before countering without hesitation, my body continuing to fight on instinct while my mind shifted away from the battle, focusing instead on her words.

Another way.

There had to be something.

Something I was missing.

"Let your light find me."

The voice echoed suddenly in my mind, cutting through everything else.

I paused for the brief second before moving aside quickly as another one lunged at me, its attack missing completely as I steadied myself, my brows drawing together slightly as those words settled in my thoughts.

My light?

What light?

As I continued moving, cutting, avoiding, surviving, something slowly began to connect in my mind, the meaning behind those words becoming clearer as I replayed them again and again.

Light could mean many things, and it was not the same for everyone, because for some it was power, for others it was hope, and for many it was something far more personal.

The mist had not specified.

Which meant it expected me to know. Because in the end, light was not just something you could see.

It was something that guided you, something that stayed with you even when everything else tried to tear you apart, something that led you forward when there was no clear path ahead.

A slow smile spread across my lips as something finally clicked into place, and I let out a quiet breath while shaking my head slightly at myself before speaking softly,

'Mira,' my voice calm and certain as if I had finally reached an answer that had been waiting for me all along,

She responded with a low hum, as if she had already been waiting for this exact moment, and that alone

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made my smile deepen.

'I want to transform,'

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There was a brief pause before she asked, 'Why?' her voice carried that familiar curiosity that always pushed me to think deeper rather than handing me the answer outright.

'Because you are my light.'

She went quiet for a moment, and then I felt it, that soft, pleased sound from her, subtle but clear, as if she had already known this was the conclusion I would reach and had only been waiting for me to arrive there on my own. That was how Mira had always been, never forcing, never rushing, always guiding and letting me

grow at my own pace.

'Fine,' she said at last, her tone carrying a hint of satisfaction, 'I was already getting tired of this place anyway!'

The change came instantly, the sound of bones cracking echoing through my body as everything shifted and reshaped, the sensation intense but familiar as my form began to change, stretching and reforming until I was no longer standing as a human, and in my place stood Mira, a white wolf whose fur seemed to catch and reflect the faint light around us, making her presence stand out even in the thick mist.

One of the decayed figures rushed toward us at that exact moment, its broken body moving with the same relentless intent as before, but the instant Mira's gaze landed on it, the creature froze completely, its movement stopping as if something far greater had seized control of it, and then, slowly, it bent forward and dropped to its knees in submission.

It was not just that one.

All of them followed.

One after another, the countless figures surrounding us fell to their knees, lowering their heads as if acknowledging something far beyond them, their previous hostility gone as they bowed without resistance.

Mira paid them no attention, her focus never wavering as she walked forward with calm, measured steps toward the white mist in the distance, her fur glowing softly as she moved, creating a stark contrast against the darkness around us until she finally stopped in front of it.

The mist shifted, its presence almost pleased as it spoke, "You took control of my darkness and made it submit to you, you are the one I have been waiting for all this time, the one the Moon Goddess promised would come."

Confusion flickered through me at those words, my thoughts catching on them as I tried to understand what it meant. The mention of the Moon Goddess was not something I had expected, but before I could ask anything, the mist continued.

“You wish to change fate, child, but fate cannot be changed, I have tried, and I failed,” it said, its voice echoing as if carrying the weight of countless years.

“If fate does change, then it was never truly your fate to begin with, because fate is far more complicated than you understand, and what you believe to be your destiny may only be a path leading you toward what is truly meant for you. You have a strong spirit, and you will become very powerful, that much is certain, but now the choice is yours, will you destroy everything in your path, or will you use that power to create something

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greater.”

“Good luck, child.”

VPH

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I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say anything, the mist surged forward and entered my body, and in that instant everything turned white as my entire body trembled under the overwhelming force flooding through me, the ground beneath me cracking and crumbling as if it could not withstand what was happening, and in that moment, it felt like something vast and powerful was being born from within me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Third person pov

In the inner arena, the atmosphere shifted into something uneasy as people stared at the scene displayed before them, confusion spreading rapidly through the crowd as murmurs began to rise from every direction, each person trying to make sense of what they had just witnessed but failing to come to any clear conclusion.

“What is going on?” someone finally asked, their voice cutting through the noise as they leaned forward, eyes fixed on the screen with disbelief. “Did he just... die?”

“I don’t know,” another person responded, their brows furrowed deeply as they tried to piece it together. “How could he die? Nothing even got close to him, so how did he just go down like that?”

“That does not make any sense,” a third voice added, louder this time, carrying a hint of unease. “He was fine one second, and the next he just collapsed. Something is wrong.”

The confusion only grew as more voices joined in, each one layering over the other until the entire arena was filled with restless murmurs. No one could understand what they were seeing, and the more they tried to rationalize it, the less it made sense.

Amidst the noise, the host remained still, her usual composed expression faltering slightly as her narrowed at the screen, because unlike the others, she was not just confused.

She was alert.

Something was wrong.

She could feel it.

eyes

It was faint, a disturbance that did not belong to this place, and she knew she was not the only one who noticed it, anyone powerful enough would feel it too.

There was something in that forest. No, not just something. There were two powerful ancient presences. The kind that did not need to reveal themselves to be known.

If they truly existed there, then it was no surprise that the magic could not properly capture them, because things of that level did not simply get observed.

They existed beyond that.

Her gaze sharpened slightly as the realization settled in, her thoughts moving quickly as she considered the

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implications, because if Noah had encountered those beings, then this was no longer a simple trial.

This place could be in serious danger.

If those ancient entities were here, then everything inside this arena could collapse before anyone even had the chance to react. She was just about to turn, ready to call out to Kaius and Yara to intervene before things escalated any further, when the sudden shout cut through the tension, pulling everyone's attention back to the screen as the man pointed toward it with a trembling hand

"What is that?"

In the next instant, all eyes locked onto the screen, a blinding white light erupted from Noah's body.

It shot upward into the sky like a pillar, tearing through the mist and illuminating everything around it as the sheer force of it caused the entire forest to tremble violently. And it did not stop there.

The arena itself began to shake.

The ground beneath the audience rumbled as the air grew heavy, pressing down on everyone with an overwhelming force that made it hard to breathe, and all around, gasps and screams erupted as fear spread through the crowd. Some stumbled, some froze, and some could not even speak.

The pressure was suffocating.

The host's eyes widened, her composure finally breaking as she stared at the screen, her mind racing as she tried to understand what she was witnessing.

What was happening? What was this overwhelming force? It felt as though something incredibly powerful was awakening.

AD

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# Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 194

[ 2,101 words ]

Chapter 194

Miles

“Ahhh! Ahhhh! What the hell?! What the actual hell?!”

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VPN

83

5 vouchers

My underling’s screams echoed behind me so loudly that they nearly drowned out the sound of the forest shaking around us, and if I were in any other situation, I might have found it amusing, but at the moment, I was far too focused on staying alive to care about his panic.

Branches snapped beneath my feet as I ran through the thick forest at full speed, leaping over every root, rock, and fallen branch that stood in my way while dodging every obstacle with practiced ease. One of my greatest advantages had always been my agility, and moving swiftly through terrain like this was second

nature to me.

Dodging was never my problem. Avoiding attacks was never my problem.

No, my biggest problem right now was the idiot behind me.

I jumped over a fallen tree before twisting my body slightly to glance behind me, only to see my underling sprinting right after me in complete chaos, his hair full of leaves and twigs as if he had run face-first through half the forest already, dirt smeared across his clothes, his entire appearance looking like someone who had been dragged through mud and thrown back out.

“Oh my Moon Goddess, why is this happening to me?!” he cried as tears streamed down his face while he ran. “Ahhh! Why is this happening to me?! What did I do to deserve this?!”

He tried to leap over a root in his path, but his foot caught on something and he stumbled forward, nearly crashing face-first into the dirt before barely catching himself in time.

A massive hand slammed down right where he had been a second later. The impact shattered the ground. If he had been even a breath slower, he would have died instantly.

My underling froze for half a second before looking back, and the moment his eyes landed on what was chasing us, another horrified scream tore from his throat.

Towering behind us was the largest monster I had ever seen in my life.

Its body dwarfed the forest around it, standing like a living titan among the trees, so massive that its mere presence made everything around it feel insignificant, while enormous tendrils of roots and thick vines coiled around its body like twisted armor forged by nature itself, wrapping around its limbs and torso in layers of living bark and wood.

Its mouth was massive, filled with jagged teeth sharp enough to tear through steel, and its glowing red eyes burned with a fury that sent instinctive fear crawling down my spine.

Every step it took made the earth tremble. Every movement caused the trees around it to shake and groan. It bulldozed through the forest without effort, crushing anything in its path beneath its overwhelming size.

There was no mistaking it.

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This thing was the king of every beast in this forest, and right now, it was hunting us.

5 vouchers

The moment my underling locked eyes with it again, his entire face turned pale as tears streamed down harder.

“I don’t want to die!” he screamed, his voice cracking from panic. “Please, I don’t want to die! I’ll do anything! I’ll worship the Moon Goddess wholeheartedly! I won’t drink again! I won’t smoke again! I won’t lust after women anymore! Please, just let me live!”

I shook my head and kept running, refusing to waste breath responding to him as my mind remained focused elsewhere.

I had not expected to run into a monster like this. I trusted in my strength. I knew I was strong, but I was not delusional.

Even I knew there was no surviving a fight against that thing.

And unlike some idiotic warriors who believed bravery meant throwing yourself at impossible battles just to die meaninglessly, I had no intention of standing my ground against something I knew I could not defeat.

If I stopped to fight that monster, I would die, and if I died here, Noah would be disappointed.

That thought alone made me grit my teeth.

No.

I would survive. I would make it to the finish line, and I would meet Noah there, brag to my oldest brother and make fun of everyone who thought I wouldn't survive the rite.

With that in mind, I pushed myself faster, my legs moving harder as I prepared to put more distance between us, then suddenly, the scream behind me made my eyes widen, and I turned sharply

“AHHH!”

My underling had fallen. He was on the ground, screaming in agony, and my heart dropped when I saw why. The monster stood over him. Its massive foot had crushed his leg beneath it.

The monster's eyes gleamed with savage excitement, the look of a hunter that had finally cornered the prey it had been chasing, and the sight of that cruel satisfaction on its face made the air around us feel even heavier as my underling screamed beneath it, clutching his shattered leg while tears poured uncontrollably down his face.

“Ahhh! My leg! My leg!” he cried, his voice breaking from pain as his hands desperately grabbed at the remains of his crushed knee, his entire body trembling violently while agony twisted his face into something almost unrecognizable.

The monster began to move toward him slowly, each thunderous step making the ground tremble beneath its weight, and the deliberate pace of its movements made it clear that it knew there was no need to rush because its prey was broken, helpless, and had nowhere left to run.

My underling's face turned pale with terror as he tried dragging himself backward, using his arms to push

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himself away while his ruined leg trailed uselessly behind him, blood staining the earth beneath his body.

"No... no, do not come closer!" he screamed, his voice cracking so badly that the words barely came out clearly. "Do not come any closer!"

His eyes found me.

"Boss!" he yelled desperately, reaching one hand toward me as if I were his final lifeline. "Boss, please help me! Help me, please! I do not want to die! My mother is waiting for me at home!"

My feet stopped moving. I stood there frozen, my hands clenching so tightly at my sides that my nails dug into my palms as I stared at him. The answer was obvious.

If I wanted to survive, this was the moment to run. The monster was distracted. Its attention was completely on him. If I left now, I could escape, I did not have to save him. I never asked any of them to follow me. I never forced any of them to become my underlings. They chose to follow me on their own, so if they died, it was not my responsibility.

That was the truth.

I was the younger brother of the beta, a member of one of the most prominent families. A man with responsibilities far greater than dying here for some random bandit.

I had too much left to do. I could not die here. So I turned around, and I ran. Behind me, I heard silence for a moment before his voice came again, but this time it was quieter, and strangely accepting.

"I understand," he said softly. "I would not die for me either."

I bit down hard on my lip and kept moving, refusing to stop. Then suddenly, I heard him laugh weakly behind me.

“You know what?” he shouted loudly.

My body stiffened.

“Fuck you, you ugly good-for-nothing monster!”

My eyes widened in shock as I turned slightly and looked back.

The monster had paused. My underling was still pale, still bleeding, still trembling, but despite all of that, he raised his hand and pointed his middle finger straight at the giant beast, a grin stretched across his terrified face as though he had lost his mind.

“My boss is strong!” my underling yelled proudly, his voice loud despite the tears running down his face. “He will kill you immediately if you go after him, so take your time and eat me, you ugly, overgrown, slobbering beast! You are nothing but a freak of nature with a face only the forest could love!”

The monster let out a furious growl, its eyes burning with rage. But my underling did not stop.

“My boss is strong even at his young age!” he screamed proudly, his chest heaving with every breath. “That is why we all followed him, because we want to be as strong as him one day! And I do not regret it! In my next

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life, I will also follow him!”

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The monster roared in fury, enraged by his words, and opened its mouth impossibly wide, so wide that it looked as if it could swallow his entire body in a single bite. My underling stared at it for one brief moment before slowly closing his eyes, his face relaxing as he accepted the death that was about to come.

The monster bent down toward him, its jaws lowering as it prepared to devour him whole. Then suddenly, something shot through the air with blinding speed and pierced directly into the monster's eye.

"RRAAGHHH!"

The monster let out a deafening scream of agony as blood burst from its ruined eye, its entire body jerking backward violently while it stumbled and thrashed in pain, roaring so loudly that the trees around us shook from the force.

Its head snapped around wildly, its remaining eye burning with murderous rage as it searched for the one who had dared attack it.

My underling frowned in confusion before slowly opening his eyes, clearly expecting death only to instead find the monster stumbling backward in agony, its massive body thrashing violently as it roared toward the sky, and lodged deep inside its ruined eye was a sword buried straight through the center.

His expression shifted instantly from fear to shock as he stared upward in disbelief, unable to understand what had happened or why he was still alive, and before he could process it, a hand suddenly appeared in front of his face.

He blinked and looked up, standing before him was me. My hand was stretched out toward him, waiting.

He stared at me like I had lost my mind, his mouth opening and closing before he finally managed to speak.

"Are you crazy?" he asked, his voice full of disbelief as if he genuinely could not understand why I had come back.

I looked at him for a moment before shrugging lightly, as if I had not just thrown myself back into danger for him, and let out a quiet breath.

"I think so," I admitted honestly, a dry smile tugging at my lips despite the situation. "After spending so much time with Noah, I feel like I get crazier with every passing second, because why else would I willingly come back to save a man who cannot even walk properly?"

My underling stared at me, stunned.

"I-" he started, but I cut him off before he could continue.

"But then again," I said with another shrug, my smile widening slightly, "I was never normal to begin with, so stop staring at me like that and let us get the hell out of here."

He looked at me in silence for a second, and then something changed in his eyes.

The fear was still there. The pain was still there, but now there was something else too.

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Hope, and the survival instinct of a warrior.

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A new determination lit in his expression as a smile slowly spread across his face, and he nodded quickly before reaching up toward my hand.

Just as his fingers were about to touch mine, a massive force slammed into my side.

Everything happened in a blur.

A giant hand struck me so hard that I was sent flying through the air before my body crashed violently into a tree, the impact so brutal that the trunk cracked behind me from the force.

My underling's eyes widened in horror.

"Boss!!!" he screamed, his voice full of panic as he stared at me in terror.

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 195

[ 1,139 words ]

Chapter 195

Miles

76

55 vouchers

“Woman, you have to do something about your son because I am starting to get worried. He is different from the others, and why the hell can he not even get one answer right in his exams? Even the servants that work here are smarter than him, so why is he different?” My father’s furious voice echoed through the room..

My mother frowned at him and crossed her arms tightly before snapping back, “Why are you blaming me? I have no idea why he is different!”

“You have no idea?” my father barked as he rolled his eyes with visible disgust. “Maybe it is because he is not even my son! Maybe that is why he is not gifted with medicine like everyone else in this family! This is the Blackhood family! Everyone here is intelligent! We are a family of doctors, so why is he different?!”

My mother’s expression darkened instantly, and her eyes filled with fury as she stepped toward him. “Are you accusing me of cheating on you, you scoundrel? He is your son! I never cheated on you!”

My father did not listen. He simply glared one last time before turning and storming away, his anger lingering in the room long after he was gone.

After he left, my mother turned, and her eyes landed on me. Even though I had only been five years old, I remembered that look clearly.

I remembered the disgust, and hatred in her eyes. The sheer disappointment burning in her eyes as she stared at me like I was not her child, but some disgusting thing she wished had never existed.

She slammed her hand against the table so hard it shook, then pointed at me and shouted, "I wish you would just die, you worthless bastard!"

I never understood why she said those words. I never understood why I was called worthless simply because I could not do what they wanted. Just because I was not as smart as my siblings did not mean I had no worth.

My eldest brother Jason, the beta, was different too. He did not follow what they wanted either, but he was smart, so they accepted him, loved him and praised him. But me? I had nothing.

I was not gifted in medicine. I was strong, yes, but not exceptionally so.

Whenever I stood before someone truly powerful, I was reminded of how ordinary I really was. I had no talent. No special trait. No redeeming quality. I was nothing. But even if I was nothing. Even if I had nothing others admired. There was one thing I possessed that most people did not.

I never gave up.

My eyes snapped open.

Pain exploded through my body so violently that I dropped to one knee instantly, coughing harshly as blood spilled from my mouth and dripped down onto the dirt beneath me, while more blood ran from my ears and forehead.

Every inch of my body screamed in agony

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55 vouchers

My chest burned, my ribs felt shattered. Even breathing hurt so much it felt like knives were digging into my lungs every time I inhaled.

Honestly, I should not even have been complaining. It was a miracle I was still alive. If not for my reflexes, I would already be dead.

The moment that monster swatted at me, I had instinctively shifted backward to lessen the impact, but I had not been fast enough to avoid it completely, and even with that adjustment, the force had still sent me flying like a ragdoll.

I slowly lifted my head, groaning as blood dripped down from my forehead and blurred my vision, making it difficult to see clearly, but even through the haze, I could make out the towering form of the monster still standing strong.

My sword remained lodged deep in its eye, but it had done almost nothing. Its eye was damaged, yes, but instead of weakening it, it only looked angrier. Its entire body radiated fury now.

I heard shouting nearby, but my ears were ringing so badly that the voices came through muffled and distorted, blending together into noise that made my skull pound harder. Then gradually, the sound became clearer.

“Boss! Boss, are you okay?! Can you hear me?! Boss!”

It was my underling. I turned my head toward him and saw him staring at me with panic written all over his face, yelling like a madman while trying to crawl toward me despite his broken leg.

I grabbed my head and groaned, my voice weak and strained as I glared at him.

“Can you shut up?” I muttered painfully. “You are making my head hurt worse.”

My underling let out a long, shaky breath, and relief washed over his face as he smiled so hard it almost looked ridiculous despite the tears still clinging to his eyes. “Thank the Moon Goddess,” he said, his voice full of relief as he clutched his chest dramatically, “I thought you were a goner, boss.”

I wiped the blood from my mouth and exhaled tiredly before muttering, “So did I.”

“RRAAAGHHH!”

The beast let out another deafening roar, its voice shaking the forest around us as its remaining eye burned with fury, and my underling slowly turned toward it before glancing back at me with an awkward expression. “I think you might have made it angry, boss.”

I rolled my eyes despite the pain coursing through my body and replied dryly, “You think?”

Ignoring the screaming pain in my ribs and legs, I forced myself upright, every movement sending sharp pain through my entire body, but I gritted my teeth and stood

anyway. There was no time to stay down and recover, not when that monster was still breathing.

My underling looked between me and the beast before his face turned serious, and he said, “You need to leave. If you stay here, you will die, and I will try to hold it off somehow, so just run while you can.

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I cracked my neck slowly and stared at the beast, who was glaring at me with enough murderous hatred to make it obvious that after stabbing its eye, I had become its number one target, before replying, “I doubt it will let me leave after what happened, and as for you holding it off, you are insignificant to that thing, so unless your plan is to annoy it with your screaming until it dies from frustration, then no, you are not buying me any time, and I have no other choice but to fight.”

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## **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 196**

[ 1,116 words ]

Chapter 196

Miles

55 vouchers

My underling shook his head, clearly wanting to argue, but before he could say another word, the monster roared again and charged directly toward me with enough force to make the earth shake beneath its feet.

Despite the pain, I forced my body to move and dashed out of its path at the last possible second, narrowly avoiding its attack before sliding across the ground and moving to its side, but the beast barely even paused before turning and charging at me again with even more anger than before.

I prepared to dodge again, but just as I shifted my weight, something suddenly wrapped tightly around my ankle, and my eyes widened the moment I looked down and saw a vine coiling around my leg before it yanked violently and sent me flying straight toward a nearby tree.

I reacted immediately and twisted my body midair before grabbing a tree branch to stop myself from slamming into the trunk, my hands tightening around the wood as I caught myself just in time, but the moment I looked up, my entire body froze because the beast was already right in front of me.

Its mouth was wide open.

Damn, it was far too close.

My heart dropped instantly as realization hit me. I could not dodge this, there was no way out. I was going to die.

That thought rang through my head as I stared at its jaws coming down toward me, ready to rip my head clean off, but before its teeth could reach me, a flash of steel cut through the air, and suddenly the beast roared in pain as blood sprayed from its face when someone slashed across it with enough force to stop its attack completely.

Before I could even react, someone grabbed me by my collar and yanked me backward with absurd ease, carrying me away from danger so fast I barely understood what was happening.

My heart skipped for one brief second.

Noah?

I quickly looked up, expecting to see familiar blue eyes staring down at me.

Instead, I was met with the emotionless face of the prince. He held me by my collar with one hand like I weighed absolutely nothing, lifting me so casually that I felt more insulted than grateful, and my face twisted in disgust immediately.

“Hey,” I snapped, glaring at him. “Who told you to help me?”

Caspian tilted his head at me slightly, looking almost confused by my attitude, but before he could answer, the beast roared and charged toward us once again.

Before it could even get close, arrows suddenly shot through the air and pierced directly into its face one after another with deadly accuracy, causing the beast to recoil and scream in pain as blood splattered from the

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impact.

76

55 vouchers

I looked up and saw the prince’s guard standing nearby with her bow raised, her beautiful face calm and focused as she fired another arrow into the monster without hesitation, clearly protecting him while we stood there.

Before I could say anything else, Caspian simply let go of my collar.

I dropped straight to the ground. Pain shot through my backside the moment I hit the dirt, and I hissed in pain before glaring upward while rubbing my ass.

“What an ass,” I muttered bitterly beneath my breath.

“You are wrong,” the prince said calmly.

I blinked and frowned up at him. “Huh?”

He looked down at me with that same cold, unreadable expression and said, “I did not save you because I wanted to.”

I stood up slowly while brushing dirt off myself and narrowed my eyes. “Then why did you save me?”

He answered without hesitation, “You are the beta’s younger brother, and my uncle values your brother highly, so your life has some worth.”

I nodded slowly in understanding because, of course, that made sense, and I should have expected that from someone like him since this annoying prince only cared about status and politics anyway, but just as I was about to make a sarcastic remark, he added, "And my younger sister also cherishes you."

I paused immediately.

My brows furrowed as I stared at him in surprise.

Did he not hate Chloe? Then why was he suddenly talking as if he cared about her feelings?

He clearly saw the question written all over my face, but instead of answering, he ignored me completely and turned his gaze back toward the monster before looking over at his guard.

She met his eyes for a moment, then slowly shook her head.

The prince turned his attention back toward the beast, his expression remaining as cold and unreadable as ever as he watched the creature struggle against the barrage of arrows, and then he spoke in a calm voice that carried no panic despite the danger surrounding us. "We are going to run."

I stared at him in disbelief before raising a brow and saying, "Run? Well, now I am surprised. I thought someone as arrogant as you would insist on trying to kill it just to protect your pride."

The prince did not react to my words in the slightest, nor did his expression change even a little as he replied flatly, "We cannot beat it. It is too strong, but we can attempt to outrun it."

That answer caught me off guard more than I cared to admit, because I knew how powerful this bastard was,

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and even if I hated him, I was not stupid enough to deny his strength, so hearing someone like him admit that he could not defeat that monster made one thing painfully clear.

That beast was far stronger than I had thought.

The prince did not wait for anyone's response and simply turned around before saying, "Let us go."

Even though I disliked him, I was not foolish enough to argue when my life was involved, so I nodded and turned toward my underling, who was still clutching his crushed leg while trying not to scream from the pain, and I quickly walked over to him.

"Let us move," I said as I bent down, preparing to help him up. Before I could, the prince suddenly grabbed my wrist.

I frowned and yanked my hand away before glaring at him. "What are you doing?"

He stared at me for a second before saying bluntly, "The others were right. You are not smart."

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 197

[ 1,740 words ]

Chapter 197

Miles

875

55 vouchers

I did not even have the energy to be offended anymore, so I simply ignored him and bent down to help my underling up anyway, draping his arm over my shoulder as I muttered, "I know I am not smart. You do not need to keep reminding me."

"If you help him," the prince said coldly, "you will die, because that thing will catch up to you in no time."

I looked toward the monster and saw his guard still keeping it back with her arrows, but even I knew that would not last much longer, so I tightened my grip on my underling and replied, "It does not matter. I can do it."

"No, you cannot," the prince said immediately. "You will die, and you know that."

I turned my head toward him and glared. "Mind your business."

I started trying to pull my underling with me, but suddenly he resisted, his body refusing to move no matter how much I tugged at him, and I turned toward him in annoyance only to see him smiling sadly at me.

"It is okay, boss," he said softly. "Please leave me behind."

I stared at him. "What nonsense are you saying? Were you not begging earlier, crying about not wanting to die?"

He laughed weakly before nodding. "I was, but it cannot be helped now. You did your best for me, and for that I will serve you even in my next life, but please just leave and tell my mother that I died bravely, because I want her to be proud of me."

I frowned deeply. I was not someone who got emotional easily. I never had been. But for some reason, hearing him say that left a bitter feeling in my chest that I could not ignore.

Was that really how the world worked?

Did the weak simply die while the strong moved forward?

Was that all there was to life? If that were true, then when I was weak, should I have died too?

My hand clenched tightly, then I shook my head and pulled him closer onto my shoulder.

"No," I said firmly. "It does not matter if you are weak, because if I am strong enough, then I will help you, and we are getting out of here together no matter what."

Everyone around me stared. Even my underling looked completely shocked. The prince watched me silently for a moment before shaking his head and muttering, "Everyone who stays around my sister is a fool."

I smiled at that and glanced at him. "Including you?"

His eyes narrowed slightly.

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B5 vouchers

I chuckled before adding, "I have siblings too, so I know what it looks like when someone cares about their younger sibling but pretends otherwise because they think being cold will protect them, but trust me, it will not, because all it will do is make you lose her. So you better change before you lose the most important person in your life."

The prince said nothing, but notably, he did not deny it either.

"Your Highness, we have to leave!" his guard suddenly shouted.

We all turned toward her and saw that her arrows were gone.

She had no more left, and the monster was furious. Its body trembled with rage as it growled, its remaining eye burning with murderous hatred.

I did not waste another second. I tightened my grip on my underling and turned, trying to get the hell out of there as fast as possible. But the beast had no intention of letting any of us escape.

It suddenly lifted one of its massive feet high into the air and brought it crashing down toward us with terrifying force, clearly trying to crush all of us beneath it. But before it could hit, the prince snapped his whip forward.

The whip shot through the air and wrapped around the monster's leg before tightening instantly, stopping its massive foot just above our heads, the sheer force of the prince's strength making the creature's limb freeze in place despite its weight.

My eyes widened in surprise as I stared at him. The prince did not even look at me.

He simply gritted his teeth and said, "Leave."

His guard immediately jumped down beside him, pulling out her sword and stepping into position with her blade pointed toward the monster.

The prince's voice remained calm as he said, "We will delay it."

I frowned deeply as I stared at the prince and his guard standing before that monstrous beast, both of them prepared to risk their lives just to buy us time, and honestly, I had not expected that from him at all.

I had always assumed that if things ever became desperate enough, the prince would abandon everyone else without hesitation and save himself first, because he always carried himself like the type of man who valued his own life above everyone around him.

Part of me wanted to leave immediately, because hell, I should have left, and no matter how much I hated to admit it, running was the smartest thing to do in this situation, but even though I found the prince insufferable and arrogant beyond belief, I also knew one thing for certain, Chloe would never forgive me if I stood by and let her brother die when I had the chance to help.

Just as I was trying to think of what the hell I should even do, the beast suddenly roared loud enough to make the ground beneath us shake before violently yanking its leg free from the prince's whip, and then in one terrifying motion, it raised its enormous arm high into the air until its massive hand cast a shadow over all of us, blocking out the light above before swinging downward with enough force to flatten every single person standing there.

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My eyes widened immediately. It was too fast.

Far too fast.

There was absolutely no way any of us could dodge that in time.

670

55 vouchers

My thoughts disappeared and my body moved before my mind could even fully process what I was doing. I immediately turned toward my underling and shoved him with all the strength I had left, sending him flying away from me and crashing onto the ground, and then I spun toward the prince and drove my foot into him without hesitation.

The prince's eyes widened in shock, clearly caught off guard by the fact that I had just kicked him, and he stumbled backward and fell hard to the ground.

His guard reacted instantly, because unlike him, she actually had functioning battle instincts, and immediately leapt toward him without hesitation, her entire focus naturally on protecting the prince above all else.

As for me, I stayed exactly where I was. There was no point trying to move anymore. The hand was already above me. It was coming down too fast, and I could not escape.

I let out a long breath and slowly closed my eyes as the shadow consumed me, and under my breath, I muttered one final thought.

“Noah is going to kick my ass for this.”

The giant hand came crashing down.

The last thing I heard before impact was my underling screaming so loudly his voice nearly tore apart.

“NO!!!”

Then everything went silent, and darkness swallowed me whole.

\*\*\*\*\*

I waited for pain. I waited for the crushing force of death. I waited to feel my bones break and my body be torn apart beneath that monstrous strength, but nothing happened.

Nothing came, there was only silence.

My brows furrowed in confusion as I slowly cracked one eye open, genuinely wondering if death itself had somehow missed me, and muttered weakly, “Huh... what is going on?”

For one ridiculous moment, I honestly wondered if the afterlife was just messing with me, when a voice suddenly spoke in front of me.

A voice so familiar that my entire body froze instantly.

“You are right. I would have kicked your ass if you died, so open your eyes and stop being dramatic.”

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Chapter 197

My entire body went cold.

That voice.

No way.

There was absolutely no way.

(75)

EX 65 vouchers

My eyes snapped open fully, and I looked up so fast my neck nearly hurt. Standing in front of me was Noah.

My breath caught in my throat.

He looked familiar, but different.

His blue eyes, once vibrant and clear, were now much lighter than before, so pale they almost looked white, glowing with an unnatural brightness that made him seem less simple than before, and even his black-and-white hair had changed, the white strands far brighter now as they mixed with the black in a way that made his entire appearance seem almost ethereal.

That same familiar smirk rested on his face. That same teasing expression, but none of that was what shocked me most. No, what truly terrified me was the overwhelming pressure radiating from him.

The sheer presence pouring from his body was so powerful it made the air itself feel heavy, like the entire world around him was bending under his existence alone, and breathing suddenly felt harder just standing near him.

And even more unbelievable than that, he was holding the beast's hand back with one hand.

One hand.

The same monster that had moments ago made every single one of us feel helpless. The same monster that had us all running for our lives. The same beast that felt like a walking god compared to us, was being held back by Noah like it weighed absolutely nothing. Like he was stopping a child swinging a toy.

Noah slowly turned his head toward me and tilted it slightly, that same lazy smirk widening across his face before he asked casually, "Miss me, kid?"

My eyes widened so much they physically hurt.

I stared at him, then at the beast, then back at him again.

My mouth slowly opened, but my brain struggled to process the sight before me, and the only words I could force out were a stunned whisper.

“Gods....” I muttered breathlessly, staring at him in complete disbelief. “What are you?”

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 198

[ 1,062 words ]

Chapter 198

Selene

33%2

5 vouchers

I looked at the boy standing in front of me, and for the first time since I had met him, the usual playful expression that he wore so effortlessly was completely gone, replaced instead by something raw and unguarded as his eyes stayed wide in

shock.

His breathing uneven and labored as if every breath was a struggle, while his pale face and slightly trembling hands made it obvious just how shaken he truly was, even if he himself did not seem to realize how much his body was exposing him in that moment.

He looked like a mess, but more than that, he looked real. Like someone who had been pretending for far too long and had finally reached a point where he could not keep it together anymore.

The first time I met Miles, I had already noticed it, that small detail that most people would miss because they did not bother looking deep enough. But I had lived too many lives and seen too many kinds of people to overlook something like that. So it had been obvious to me from the very beginning that Miles was wearing a mask.

It was not the kind of mask Sienna wore, the kind that hid something ugly and rotten beneath a carefully crafted appearance meant to deceive others. His mask was not meant to fool people. It was meant to protect himself.

He did not want anyone to see how vulnerable he really was. He wanted to act like an adult so badly that he forced himself into a role he was not ready for, because more than anything, he did not want to be seen as worthless.

I did not know what had shaped him into that kind of person, and I had no interest in finding out, because dwelling on someone's pain, even your own, was useless and achieved nothing in the end.

I had gone through more than enough myself, yet I never sat around thinking about my suffering, because if anything, I was far too petty for that. Instead of drowning in the past, I preferred making those who wronged me regret every single thing they had done. Watching them suffer brought far more satisfaction than clinging to pain ever could.

And maybe one day, Miles would understand that as well. He did not need validation from anyone, and that in the end, the only person he truly needed was himself.

With one hand casually holding the massive foot of the beast that was trying to crush us, as if its overwhelming weight meant absolutely nothing to me, I lifted my other hand and ruffled his hair in a relaxed manner, my lips curling slightly as I looked at him.

"What am I?" I said lazily. "Do I need to knock your head to remind you who I am?"

No one said anything. Not a single person moved. They all just stared at me as if what they were seeing did not make sense. Especially the prince, whose usual composure had completely shattered as his eyes remained wide and his mouth slightly open, clearly unable to process what was happening in front of him.

I did not pay him any attention.

My focus stayed on Miles,

"N-Noah..." he said, his voice shaking.

A small smile formed on my lips as I looked at him.

“You did well,” I said calmly. “You did what a true warrior should do. You protected yourself, but when the people you care about are in danger, you protected them as well, and that is something not everyone can do.”

His eyes began to water at my words, his emotions finally slipping through the cracks of the mask he had been holding onto for so long.

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Chapter 198

“You are not dumb after all.”

His lips trembled as he tried to speak again. “Noah...”

I let out a soft chuckle at the way he called me.

He really was still just a kid.

“RRAAAGHHH!”

33%

5 vouchers

The beast roared again, its furious voice snapping my attention away as its remaining eye burned with rage, its massive body trembling as it tried to force its foot downward to crush us, but no matter how much strength it used, my hand did not move, holding it in place as if it weighed nothing.

I slowly turned my gaze toward it, my eyes narrowing as I looked at the creature.

“Shut up. I am talking.”

An overwhelming aura burst out of me in an instant, and the force of it made the ground tremble violently beneath my feet while the air itself seemed to grow heavier, pressing down on everything around me and sending a visible shock through everyone present.

The beast's eye widened in fear, and its massive body began to tremble as instinct took over and told it to retreat, but I did not allow it to move. My grip tightened around its leg, holding it firmly in place no matter how much strength it used to struggle.

“What a bad animal,” I said. “I guess I will have to teach you a lesson.”

Before anyone could understand what I meant, I pulled my arm back and then threw it forward in one smooth motion, sending the enormous beast flying through the air as if it weighed nothing at all.

Its body tore through the forest, crashing through trees before slamming into a massive trunk in the distance, and the impact was so powerful that it shook the ground again, making debris scatter in every direction.

Everyone gasped at the sight as they looked between the beast they had struggled so much to fight and me, trying to comprehend how I had just thrown it away so easily.

The beast roared in pain as it struggled against the tree, trying to move away, but I tilted my head slightly as I watched it.

“Where do you think you are going?” I asked, my tone steady, walking towards it. “Like I said, I am a very petty person, and you almost killed someone I care about. Do you really think I will let you go that easily?”

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III

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## **Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 199**

[ 1,568 words ]

Chapter 199

Selene

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Fear filled its eye as it tried to jump away, but before it could move, I disappeared from where I stood and reappeared above it, then dropped down and landed on its chest with enough force to slam its body into the ground.

The impact forced the air out of it as it struggled violently beneath me, its remaining limbs thrashing as it tried to push me away, but I reached forward, grabbed both of its arms, and tore them off without hesitation.

The beast let out a loud, agonized roar, but I ignored it completely as I threw its arms aside and bent down slightly, placing my hand against its chest while looking directly into its eye.

“You are the first to test my power,” I said, my voice emotionless as I held its gaze. “Strong, right?”

I paused for a brief moment before continuing, my tone steady and certain. “I will become even stronger, and I will protect myself and the people I care about.”

My grip tightened slightly as the ground trembled faintly beneath us.

“I will destroy anyone who stands in my way, and even if fate itself cannot be changed, then I will destroy fate along with it.”

“No one has the right to decide my destiny except me.”

I moved, and my hand sliced cleanly through its neck in a single motion, separating its head from its body as easily as if it were made of nothing.

I stood up slowly, holding its severed head in my hand, and then turned to look at the others in the distance. They were all staring at me in fear and shock, their expressions filled with confusion as they tried to understand what they had just witnessed. I said nothing.

They were probably wondering how I changed this much, but even I did not fully understand what was happening to me. All I knew was that everything changed the moment I touched that mist. One second, I was standing there trying to understand what it wanted from me, and the next, my entire body was wrapped in a strange warmth that did not burn or hurt, but instead felt almost comforting, as if something ancient and powerful was embracing me.

That warmth spread through every part of me, sinking deep into my bones and my blood. I could feel my body changing in a way I could not fully understand, as if something was being torn apart and rebuilt at the same time. Before I could make sense of it, everything went dark.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer there. I was back Back in the real world. But everything felt different.

I did not feel like the same person anymore. Even my appearance had changed, and I remembered Lucas looking at me with that rare expression before saying that I was almost as beautiful as the Moon Goddess herself. Normally, I would have ignored something like that, but the way my body felt made it it possible to deny that something about me had truly transformed.

My body felt light. My breathing was calm and steady. The strength flowing through me was overwhelming.

I felt stronger than I had ever been in any of my past lives, and at alone was enough to make me realize that whatever that mist was, it was not something ordinary. My senses had sharpened as well, my sight clearer and my hearing far more precise than before, which was why I had been able to hear Miles from far away and make it here just in time.

If I had been even a moment later, things would have ended differently.

Even though we had only just met, Miles was a good kid. For some reason, I wanted him to live.

The mist that had once covered the forest began to fade away, I slowly pulled back as if it had completed its purpose, and for the first time since entering this place, the sky became visible again, clear and open above us as the forest returned to

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Chapter 199

what it should have been.

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I let go of the beast's head and tossed it aside. It rolled across the ground before coming to a stop. Then I jumped down from its body and landed lightly in front of Miles.

"That is taken care of," I said calmly. "Let us go and finish the rite"

He just stared at me completely frozen.

I tilted my head slightly. "Miles?"

He blinked, as if snapping out of a daze. "Y-Yes."

"Let us go," I repeated.

He nodded quickly, still shaken, and moved to help the injured man on the ground. He lifted him carefully despite his own condition. The man, however, could not stop staring at me. Fear was clear in his eyes.

'What the hell. She is a monster.' His mind echoed in my ear.

I said nothing.

Instead, I walked behind Miles as he carried the injured man, my gaze shifting briefly as I looked back. Sitting lazily on a tree branch not too far away was Lucas. He looked completely relaxed, as if none of what had just happened concerned him in the slightest. He casually ate berries while watching everything unfold, his eyes locked on me.

I had expected him to leave the moment I woke up, but he had said there was someone he wanted to meet here, so I let him stay. Hopefully, he would not cause trouble.

I turned my gaze away from him, only to meet another pair of eyes.

The prince.

He was looking at me differently now. Not with arrogance, or with indifference. But with something new.

I raised an eyebrow slightly as I held his gaze. I still had no intention of forgetting what he had done to Chloe, but I had also seen him try to protect Miles earlier. Even if I did not understand why, I was not going to start anything without knowing

more.

Maybe there was more to that arrogant prince than what met the eye.

I turned around and walked away without saying anything, my steps steady and unhurried as I left the aftermath behind me, and it did not take long before we reached the exit of the forest because there was nothing left to slow us down anymore. The mist had disappeared, the monsters were gone, and the path ahead was completely clear.

When we stepped out into the arena, I immediately noticed the guards waiting for us, standing in a composed line as though they had been watching everything from the very beginning, and at the front stood the host, Yara, Kaius, and Remi, along with several other staff members who remained slightly behind them, all of them facing us with expressions that were far too focused to be casual.

The moment we walked forward, their eyes found me almost instantly, not drifting, not hesitating, but locking onto me with a precision that made it clear they had already decided who they were paying attention to. I could see it clearly, the subtle shift in their expressions, the way their gazes lingered just a little too long, the way their posture seemed just a bit more alert than before, as if they were no longer simply observing a participant in the rite but something far more unpredictable.

There was caution in their eyes, and perhaps even a hint of unease.

I did not care.

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Their thoughts did not matter to me, and neither did the way they looked at me now, so I simply continued walking forward, staying just behind Miles as if nothing had changed.

Remi was the first to move, stepping forward as his attention shifted to Miles. "You can hand him over to me. I will heal him."

Miles glanced down at his underling, who looked far worse now that the adrenaline had worn off, his face pale, his body trembling slightly as sweat dripped down his skin, and after a brief hesitation, he carefully passed him over, making sure not to worsen his condition as Remi took hold of him with ease.

Remi adjusted his grip, supporting the injured man properly before giving a small nod. “You did well,” he said calmly. “I will take care of him now.”

He turned to leave, already moving back toward the others, but just before he fully walked away, his gaze shifted slightly, just enough to meet mine for a brief moment, and in that short instant, I caught the faint curl of his lips, so subtle that anyone else might have missed it entirely, before he looked away again and continued on as if nothing had happened.

Before I could think more about it, the host stepped forward, her presence immediately drawing attention as her usual bright and composed smile settled on her face.

“Welcome,” she said smoothly. “Everyone, welcome to the final stage of the Warrior Rite.”

Her gaze moved across us slowly, taking in each person.

“You are the four who made it to the final stage.”

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AD

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## Hope Is Not Optional — Manuel Flores 200

[ 2,007 words ]

## 200 The bold little troublemaker

Damien

What was that?

The room shook violently, a deep rumble rolling through the palace walls like something massive had slammed into the ground far away. The heavy oak table rattled hard under my hands. Dust trickled down from the ceiling beams in thin gray lines. Everything trembled for several long seconds before the shaking finally eased and the room grew still again.

I stayed exactly where I was, seated in my high-backed chair. I raised one brow slightly, scanning the chaos. The elders seated across from me looked terrified. Their faces had drained of all color, turning a sickly pale. Their eyes darted around frantically, up at the ceiling, over to the walls, down at the floor, as if they expected the whole palace to come crashing down on them. Their hands gripped the edges of the table so tightly that their knuckles stood out white.

Behind me, Jason shifted his weight. I could feel the sudden tension radiating off him. He frowned deeply, his body going rigid as he scanned every corner of the hall, one hand hovering near the hilt of his blade, ready to draw at the first sign of real danger.

One of the elders swallowed hard. His voice came out shaky and thin. "W-what is going on?" He glanced around again, eyes wide with panic. "Was that an earthquake... or are we under an attack?"

Another elder shook his head quickly, though his entire frame was still trembling. "What are you saying? Under attack? We can't be under attack. Who would dare attack the Crimson Pack, our alpha pack? Do they

have a death wish?"

A third one nodded in agreement, sweat already forming on his forehead. "Right. It is not possible. Nobody would dare attack the pack... but what was that just now?" He paused, lowering his voice like he was afraid to say it too loudly. "Even though it was a little far, I can feel a powerful oppressive aura. Is something in the pack?"

The elders exchanged nervous glances.

I didn't speak right away. Instead, I leaned back slowly in my chair and tilted my head just a little, watching them in silence. My cold blue eyes stayed calm, almost bored as I observed their trembling forms. They always reacted like this when they faced me, shrinking back, bodies shaking as if I were the real threat in the room. It had stopped surprising me a long time ago.

I glanced at the large clock on the far wall for the fifth time that hour. The hands were moving far too slowly today.

Just like yesterday, I had left the Warrior Rite and returned to the palace to handle pack matters. Normally, I only showed up on the first day as a formality, then left the rest to Yara and Kauis while I focused on real duties here. That was how things had always worked. I didn't need to linger. But things were different now.

Lately, I kept finding excuses to go back to the training grounds. Whenever I had even a small window of time, I caught myself heading there. And right now, sitting in this meeting, I couldn't stop thinking about going there. I couldn't wait to return.

I couldn't wait to see her again.

Jason had noticed the shift in me. He hadn't said anything directly yet, but I could see the questions in his eyes whenever he looked at me. He knew I was acting differently, making decisions that felt strange, breaking routines I had followed for years. It didn't bother me the way it probably should have.

I had never been the kind of man who let things eat at me, especially not when I could control them and simply chose not to. I wasn't the type to deny myself something I wanted. I wasn't about to start now.

Especially not with her.

I still didn't fully understand why she was affecting me like this. She was just one woman, bold, defiant, and

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2001 The bold little troublemaker

somehow always pushing back against everything I represented. I wasn't used to noticing anyone this way. I wasn't used to my thoughts drifting back to the same person over and over, or my body tensing with

anticipation at the idea of seeing her again. It irritated me a little, this pull I couldn't quite explain. But ignoring it felt even worse.

All I knew for certain was that I wanted her. And I was going to have her.

My voice finally cut through the heavy silence. "I called you here for an important meeting. You will all be entrusted with a critical matter."

Every elder turned their heads toward me at once. Their eyes met mine, and just like always, they instinctively leaned back in their seats, bodies trembling harder. That

familiar fear flashed across their faces, as if they were staring straight at something dangerous.

One of the oldest elders swallowed hard, lowering his head in a deep bow. His voice came out respectful but shaky. "Thank you for entrusting this matter to us, Alpha Damien. We will do our best to make sure you're satisfied with whatever you want us to do."

I didn't say anything. I just sat there, my cold blue eyes resting on them calmly.

Jason stepped forward from behind me. He handed each of the elders a document, one by one. They took the papers with confused looks, glancing at each other as if trying to figure out what was happening.

One of them muttered under his breath, "This is the first time the Alpha has given us something to do in a long time. I wonder what it is."

Another nodded slowly. "It's probably very important. The Alpha is a rational man. We don't need to worry about anything."

They started whispering among themselves as they opened the documents. At first, small smiles appeared on their faces, like they were pleased to finally be given a task directly from me. But those smiles dropped almost instantly.

Written in bold letters across the top of the page were the words.

Famine Preparation.

The elders paused, staring at the words in confusion. They looked up at me, their eyes meeting mine for a brief second before they quickly looked away again, as if my gaze burned them.

The oldest one bit his lip nervously before speaking. "A-alpha... famine? Is there famine in the pack? Why do we need to prepare for famine?" His voice trembled slightly. "There are no signs of famine in any part of the world. Or are there any signs of famine?"

All of them turned to look at me then. Even Jason. He stared at me with the same confusion in his eyes. None of them understood why I was suddenly concerned about something like famine when there was no indication of it anywhere.

I looked at them for a long moment, my fingers tapping slowly against the wooden table. The sound was soft but steady in the quiet room. Finally, I spoke, my voice lazy and unhurried.

"Someone told me that."

Everyone blinked. They stared at me with wide eyes, their faces filled with pure shock, like they couldn't believe the words that had just come out of my mouth.

One of them, still clearly stunned, said, "Impossible. Alpha Damien believed the words of someone just because they told him? How is that possible?"

Another elder leaned forward slightly. "That is not even the question you should be asking. You should be asking who that person is. Who would make the Alpha of the Crimson Pack, the man who trusts almost no one, believe that there would be a famine? Not only that, he even made a plan to prepare for it in the pack. That person must be dangerous."

My lips curled up slightly at the corners. My eyes flashed as the thought crossed my mind.

Dangerous? That was an understatement

2/5

Successfully unlocked!

She was different from everyone else. She did whatever she wanted without caring about consequences or who stood in front of her. She didn't care that I was Alpha Damien. She looked at me with those fierce eyes and spoke her mind like it was nothing.

They were right. I had always been a rational man. I didn't do things unless there was a clear, logical reason. I never acted on blind faith or someone else's word. But this time, just because she said it, I believed her immediately. There were no questions, or demands for proof. I had simply started making preparations. The elders began whispering among themselves again, forgetting themselves for a moment in their shock. Their voices overlapped in low, hurried tones as they tried to make sense of what was happening.

The elders were still whispering among themselves, their voices low as they tried to process everything. My fingers had stopped tapping the table. Instead, I ran my hand through my hair, pushing it back from my face, and tilted my head slightly as I looked at them.

"Keep your mouths shut," I said, my voice calm but firm.

My crimson eyes flashed for a brief moment. A small wave of my aura slipped out. The elders instantly went rigid. Their bodies started shaking harder, the whispers dying in their throats.

“That is enough,” I continued, leaning back in my chair. “I have made my decision. The plan written on the document will be followed. That is all. Leave.”

The oldest elder bowed low immediately, his forehead almost touching the table. “Yes, Alpha Damien.”

The others followed right after, bowing quickly before they gathered the documents and hurried out of the room. Their footsteps echoed down the hall until the door closed behind them.

I watched them go, my expression unchanged. When the last one disappeared from sight, I turned my head toward Jason, who was still standing behind me.

“Go to the rite. Find out what happened. I know you’re worried about your brother.”

Jason looked at me. For a second, it seemed like he wanted to say something, maybe ask why I was suddenly preparing for a famine that made no sense, or question the strange tremor from earlier. But when he met my firm gaze, he swallowed whatever was on his mind. He nodded once and bowed respectfully.

“Yes, Alpha.”

He turned and left the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

Now the hall was completely empty. Only the faint sound of distant footsteps remained before fading away.

I placed my hand on the arm of the chair, resting my face against it for a moment.

“Stop hiding and come out, Phoenix,” I said quietly, turning the chair around to face the large window behind

There, sitting casually on the wide windowsill with a smirk playing on his lips and a handful of berries in his hand, was Phoenix in his human form. He looked completely at ease, as if he hadn’t just been eavesdropping on a private meeting.

“We meet again, Alpha Damien,” he said, his voice smooth and amused. “The only werewolf that can destroy a god.”

He smiled wider, popping one of the berries into his mouth before continuing. “Oh, you’re not the only one now. Another powerful person has been made.”

I stared at him for a long moment, my crimson eyes narrowing slightly. The words hung in the air between us. Another powerful person. My mind immediately went to her, the bold little troublemaker who had somehow shaken things up without even trying.

I didn't speak right away. Instead, I just watched him, waiting to see what else he would reveal. Because if Phoenix was here, showing himself like this, it meant things were shifting faster than I had expected.

And for the first time in a long while, I wasn't entirely sure where this path was leading.

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