

The First Kill

He was seventeen.

Noc never forgot that. Not once. Not in forty years. Not when the blood washed off. Not when the nightmares came. Not even when he held Red in his arms and felt the pulse of something sacred.

Because before there was love—

There was this.

They hadn't fed him in three days.

Not blood. Not water. Not even hope.

Just darkness, and her voice—sweet and rotted—leaking through the cracks in the stone like poison gas.

"You're special," she cooed.

"You're chosen."

"You'll be glorious."

And every syllable sliced deeper than starvation ever could.

The collar seared his spine every time he tried to shift down. It wasn't just pain—it was punishment, a reminder: *the flesh is not yours anymore*.

When he refused the raw meat they slid through the grate, she laughed. Not cruelly. Lovingly. Like a mother watching her child throw a tantrum before bedtime.

"Soon."

And when the door opened—

He ran.

Instinct. Terror. A snapped leash.

His body didn't ask questions—it bolted, blind and bloody-footed, lungs shredding in his chest. But there was no freedom, only the end of the hallway—

A chamber.

Salt-stone walls. A floor slick with old stains.

Above, a balcony draped in velvet and shadow.

Her silhouette leaning forward, hands folded, as if waiting for curtain rise.

And at the center of the arena—

A boy.

Seventeen. Maybe younger. No scars, no growl.

He was holding a sword like it weighed more than his soul.

Pale eyes. Freckled cheeks. Cheeks that probably still dimpled when he smiled. Not that he was smiling now.

His mouth was trembling. His whole body trembled.

He was crying.

"Please," the boy whispered, sword rattling. "I don't want to—"

The doors slammed behind them like thunder.

No way out.

No way back.

Above them, Maryska's voice slithered like oil on water:

"One of you walks out. You decide which."

That was the moment everything stopped.

No mercy. No time. No sanity.

Just that one sentence and a silence that screamed.

Noc looked at the boy. He didn't see a threat.

He saw himself.

And it didn't matter.

Because something deep inside—something ancient and ruined—rose up and whispered back:

Eat. Or die.

He wanted to scream. To run. To bargain.

But the wolf didn't care.

The wolf smelled blood.

The wolf was starving.

The wolf was ready.

The boy swung first.

He didn't want to. You could hear it in the scream—a broken sound that cracked like a wishbone. It wasn't fury. It wasn't war. It was desperation.

The sword kissed Noc's shoulder. Just a nick. Barely enough to bleed.

But that was all it took.

The wolf moved.

Faster than instinct. Faster than mercy.

Claws flashed. Teeth sank. Flesh ripped.

The boy cried out—real and human and terrified—but there was no strategy, no skill, just raw survival unraveling at the seams. He tried to back away, but the floor was slick, and his hands were shaking, and—

He slipped.

That was the moment. Right there.

When everything could've stopped.

When Noc could've stepped back.

Could've chosen.

But he didn't.

The wolf was already inside.

And it was hungry.

He didn't remember the kill.

Not clearly.

There was blood—so much blood—hot and thick and screaming. There were sounds no living thing should ever make. There were bones giving way under pressure that felt too easy. And there were claws. His claws.

His teeth.

And when it was over—

There was silence.

The sword lay inches away. Untouched. Clean.

The boy—Alexander—was not.

He wasn't breathing.

His chest didn't rise.

But his skin was still warm.

Still real.

Noc dropped to his knees, panting, jaws slick with gore and shame. His hands shook as they hovered over what was left. He reached out, fingers trembling, and touched Alexander's cheek.

So soft. So human. So young.

And that's when he broke.

Not like glass.

Like bone.

Slow. Deep. Permanent.

"Beautiful," Maryska whispered.

That was the worst part.

Not the blood. Not the body.

Her voice.

How pleased she sounded. How utterly satisfied.

Like this had always been the plan.

Like he had just proven her right.

Like the world was exactly as monstrous as she wanted it to be.

He wanted to scream until his throat tore open.

He wanted to tear the collar off with his bare hands.

He wanted to undo it—make the world rewind, make time spit this moment back out and give him a different path.

But there was no other path.

There was only the body.

And the boy.

And the blood.

Seventeen.

Noc was seventeen.

And he had killed someone just like him.

He never forgot Alexander's name.

Not when the fighting pits cheered his violence.

Not when Gaia called him to serve.

Not even when he stood under a moonlit altar and said "I do" to the only soul who ever loved him whole.

Because no matter how many lives he saved, how many oaths he kept, how many monsters he destroyed—

Alexander was the first name whispered when the nightmares came.

And no matter how far he ran, how hard he fought, how much he bled—

That one moment stayed:

The moment a sweet, studious boy died.

And a weapon stood in his place.

Aftermath

There wasn't an "after." Not really.

When Alexander died, I didn't break—I evaporated. One second I was still pretending to be human, to matter, to believe in something. And the next... nothing. No grief. No rage. Just cold.

He was the last piece of light I had left, and Maryska knew it. She didn't kill him—no, she made me do that part. Slowly. In pieces. Until all that was left of him was a memory I wasn't allowed to keep.

She didn't need to raise her hand. She never had to. All she had to do was smile, tilt her head, and say my name like it was a leash yanking tight around my throat.

"Noc. Be a dear."

And gods help me—I was. Every. Fucking. Time.

I stopped crying. That didn't take long. Crying earned laughter. Mockery. Punishment. I stopped thinking after a while, too—not because I couldn't, but because it hurt too much. Thinking meant remembering. Remembering meant pain.

And pain meant I still cared.

So I turned it off.

No more feelings. No more dreams. No more Noc.

Just... her monster.

I was efficient. Precise. Obedient. I wore my skin like armor and smiled with my teeth, because that's what she wanted. I became what she made me.

I watched people die. I helped. I did it without blinking.

Not because I wanted to. Because I couldn't afford to want anything anymore. Wanting made you weak. Wanting made you bleed. And I'd bled enough.

I knew what I was. I was her weapon. Her favorite dog. I hated it. I hated me.

But hate is a luxury when you're starving for survival. And gods—I was starving.

There were moments... brief, slippery things—flickers of who I used to be. I'd see someone cry, or hold their sibling, or offer me a kindness too small to be strategic—and it would hit me like a punch to the throat.

But I never let it show. Because if she saw?

She'd rip it out. Burn it down. Again.

So I buried it deeper.

I became good at not feeling. Too good.

And eventually... I forgot why I started doing it in the first place.

