**Prologue: What Remains**There are nights I dream of laying it all down. The weapons. The war. The weight of being needed.

In the dark, I imagine a world where I'm just a man—no scars, no claws, no one calling my name like I'm the last wall between them and annihilation. Just silence. Just peace. Just breath.

Then the sun rises. And peace dies with it.

These dreams haunt me most when the past claws its way back—memories of who I was before all this began.

I lead a Caern that shouldn't exist—a bastion of unity in a world addicted to division. Not because I believe in peace. Because I'm tired of digging graves for the same damn war.

They call me Nocturnal now. A name that clings like blood to bone. It wasn't the one I was born with. That name belonged to someone else—a boy with sharp eyes and too many books, who thought he could save his brother with gene therapy and dreams.

Miguel Rhaegis died in the jungle. Nocturnal crawled out of it.

The transformation wasn't just physical—it was a complete unraveling and reweaving of everything I'd ever been.

There's a kind of alchemy in trauma. You don't just survive it. You transform.

Once, I hesitated before I killed. Now? My hands know the weight of necks and the silence that follows. Once, I avoided conflict. Now I train children how to win them. Once, I dreamed of curing disease. Now I wage war against it—with steel, and spirit, and fury.

Don't mistake this for strength. It's just adaptation. A scar is only skin learning how not to bleed.

This transformation began long before the jungle—in a house where silence meant survival, where a boy learned to stand between danger and those he loved.

Red Knight tells me I'm still human underneath it all. That I haven't lost the boy I was. But he didn't see what Dragomir made of me. What Maryska unleashed. He doesn't hear the teeth behind my silence. Doesn't feel the beast in my prayers.

But he stays. He stays, and that's enough to keep me trying.

Maybe that's all we are now—monsters who refuse to stop hoping. Maybe hope's the bravest thing left.

That hope began decades ago, in a hospital waiting room where a twelve-year-old boy made an oath to protect what mattered, no matter the cost.

But before I tell you about that oath, you need to understand the forces that have been moving against us—shadows that were watching long before I felt their eyes.

**The Whisper and the Spark**

The night smelled of myrrh and scorched ink.

Maryska stood alone in her sanctum, surrounded by half-finished corpses and prayers. Candles guttered against the weight of silence, the kind that pressed down like a blanket soaked in water. The air was too still, and for once, she wasn't talking to herself.

She was listening.

And then—he was there.

Or something like him.

A shape, more void than form, peeled away from the corner shadows like oil lifting from old stone. No sound. No heartbeat. Not even the breath of intention. Just a presence that coiled in her thoughts like cold wire.

It didn't introduce itself.

It didn't have to.

The figure held out a small, black case. Old. Sealed in wax and sigils burned in languages no one spoke aloud anymore.

When she reached for it, its hand didn't move—just hovered, waiting.

She took the case.

And then a voice, low and slow, like gravity whispering through the bones of the earth:

"You were never meant to raise the god. You were meant to test the vessel."

Then it was gone.

The room exhaled again. Candles flared back to life. The corpses resumed their slow decomposition.

Maryska stood alone with the case. And for the first time in centuries, she hesitated.

But only for a moment.

She broke the seal with her teeth.

Inside: blood samples. Tissues. Fully sequenced genome strands. Names.

Miguel Rhaegis.

Red Knight.

She remembered Rhaegis from an old thesis that circulated the underground bioethics circles—a ridiculous little thing, all theory and messianic idealism. Something about werewolves as evolutionary protectors, spiritual stewards, ecological keystones. He had called them "custodians of entropy." He'd been mocked, of course. Called naïve.

But she hadn't laughed.

Because she'd recognized something in him that none of his peers had.

Conviction.

The kind that either died young—or burned its way into legend.

And Red?

The pup that walked like a man and made war look like ballet.

They were beautiful, both of them. Tragic and inevitable.

And now their code was hers.

Maryska laughed then—a sharp, joyous sound.

Oh, how delicious the irony. The savior and the soldier. The boy who wanted to heal the world and the wild child.

And she would break them with science.

Not Lilith. Not yet.

Lilith could wait.

**Months Later**

She stood on the edge of the Amazon, watching the fireflies gather like souls around the perimeter of her camp. Maldaldo beside her, silent as always, blade at his back, blood in his teeth.

Miguel Rhaegis was out there.

So small.

So wounded.

So perfectly alone.

Maryska smiled.

Time to collect.

But to understand why Miguel Rhaegis became the perfect vessel—why his blood called to her—we must first return to where it all began.

**Los Alamos, New Mexico-Age 12**

The Moment That Changes Everything

The front door slammed so hard the frame shook.

Miguel barely noticed.

The newspaper bag hit the floor, forgotten, as his eyes locked onto Xavier— blue. Lips pale and cracked, pupils blown wide, hands clawing at nothing. Dying.

Miguel's breath lodged somewhere high in his throat. He lurched forward, skidding to his knees, fumbling for the inhaler, the meds—his fingers numb, clumsy, useless—

"No, no, no, stay with me—"

Xavier convulsed, his small body arching. Miguel forced the inhaler against his lips, pressed the pump, counting seconds he didn't have—

A ragged, gasping breath.

Not enough. Not enough.

The phone. The ambulance. He scrambled for it, hands shaking so badly he nearly dropped the receiver.

"Twelve-year-old reporting, my brother can't breathe—he's turning blue, he—just hurry—"

His heart hammered against his ribs. The dispatcher's voice blurred—something about protocol, questions, his parents—

His parents.

Miguel snapped his head toward the kitchen.

His father sat, half-sunk into the couch, beer resting against his knee. He barely turned his head.

His mother sat by the open window, cigarette perched between her fingers, staring at nothing.

Nothing.

Miguel's voice was hoarse.

"He's—Xavier's dying!"

A slow blink from his mother.

His father exhaled, lips twisting in something close to irritation.

"Well, then. Handle it."

Just that.

Nothing more.

Miguel felt something fracture inside his chest.

The sound of sirens barely registered. He scooped Xavier into his arms, bolted for the door, barely hearing his mother's sharp inhale as she never moved to follow.

The EMTs met him outside, taking Xavier from his arms, strapping the oxygen mask into place—but they didn't take Miguel. Not really. Not in the way he needed.

They took Xavier.

They left Miguel alone in the waiting room.

The fluorescent lights hummed above him, sterile and white and empty.

"We can't give you medical details," the nurse said.

"You're not a guardian."

Miguel stared at her.

Not a guardian.

Not an adult.

Not someone who mattered.

He swallowed. His throat burned.

Something inside him snapped.

And the oath—though unspoken—etched itself into the marrow of his bones.

If no one else will protect him, then I will.

**The Oath to No One**

The waiting room smelled like antiseptic and old coffee. The air hummed beneath fluorescent lights too white, too cold—unforgiving in their brightness.

Miguel sat, stiff-backed in the plastic chair, hands clasped between his knees like he could hold himself together by sheer force of will. The nurses passed. The doctors murmured. No one stopped. No one looked.

Three hours.

The clock ticked slow, dragging time out like it wanted him to feel every second of his own helplessness.

Xavier was behind those double doors, somewhere deep in the hospital, strapped to oxygen, drowning in silence Miguel wasn't allowed to breach. He had saved him, he had done everything right, and yet—

"We can't give you medical details. You're not a guardian."

He was not enough.

The words pressed into his ribs, sharp and relentless. His fingers curled into fists against his thighs. He stared down at them, at the boyish, calloused hands that held onto newspapers in the morning and his brother's life at night.

A child's hands.

Not a man's.

His father hadn't come. His mother hadn't called. Neither had bothered to check if their son was dead or alive. It wasn't neglect, not in a way the world would call criminal. It was something quieter. Something worse.

Miguel's throat tightened.

He glanced up, toward the ceiling, at nothing—at everything. A god he hadn't spoken to in years, not since hope had felt like something real.

He spoke anyway.

"You listenin', bastard?"

The words felt too loud in the empty space of the waiting room.

Miguel exhaled, slow, measured, like he could hold the rage down long enough to speak it properly.

"Fine. Listen close. You don't care? That's alright. That's fair. Neither does anyone else."

He clenched his jaw, shoulders stiff, voice steady in its quiet breaking.

"But one day, I'm gonna matter."

His pulse thrummed in his throat.

"One day, people are gonna answer to me when they hurt others. They're gonna hesitate. They're gonna feel fear."

His breath shuddered, but his words did not.

"I'll be the one they beg. The one they fear."

He let his head fall back against the chair, eyes closing briefly.

"I'll be the one who stops them. And nothing—" his voice dipped, low, final, "—nothing will stop me."

The promise settled deep into his bones, something heavier than the words alone.

The door swung open.

Miguel blinked once, slow, as a familiar voice cut through the sterile air.

"Miguel—hell, kid, I didn't know—"

He looked up. Mrs. Daley. The neighbor. Concern in her eyes where his parents had none.

She was already kneeling in front of him, hands on his arms, eyes flicking over him as if checking for wounds that weren't there.

"You've been here alone this whole time?"

He swallowed. Didn't nod. Didn't move.

She squeezed his arm. "Come on. I'll take you boys home."

Miguel stood, shaking off the moment like it was something small, something meaningless.

But it wasn't.

It wasn't.

**Los Alamos, New Mexico – Age 14**

The sound of the plate hitting the floor was Miguel's cue. Ceramic shattered against tile like a gunshot. Forks skittered. His father's chair scraped back.

Miguel was already on his feet. "Nice job, genius," he snapped, stepping between his little brother and the coming storm. "You need instructions now to hold a plate?"

It was enough. The attention shifted. The monster turned.

He didn't remember what he said next. He rarely did. The goal wasn't clarity—it was volume. It was friction. Anything to derail the train before it crushed Xavier.

The first hit always knocked the words out of him. The rest blurred together.

Miguel Rhaegis grew up in a house where silence was survival. Where the air was thick with resentment and sweat, and God watched from a cross nailed to yellowing wallpaper, silent as ever.

His father was a machinist—angry, exhausted, always one beer short of violent. His mother was less than a ghost. She floated from room to room, eyes unfocused, fingers stained with cigarette smoke and detachment. She never stopped him. She never stopped anything.

But Miguel? Miguel stopped what he could.

He stopped his father from turning Xavier into a corpse. Stopped himself from screaming until his lungs collapsed. Stopped time, when he could, by burying himself in things that made sense—molecular biology, theoretical math, obscure physics forums full of strangers who didn't ask about bruises.

He was an honor roll student before he could explain why mitochondria mattered. Chess club captain, AV club nerd, three grades ahead in math. Because the longer he stayed after school, the less time he spent at home.

Friends were liabilities. He didn't bring anyone over. Ever. How do you explain to someone that the yelling isn't the worst part? That it's the long, echoing silence after that breaks you?

So Miguel kept his head down and his mind sharp. Rage became focus. Hopelessness became obsession. And every time he watched Xavier struggle to breathe, every time his brother's hands trembled trying to hold a spoon, Miguel made himself another promise.

*I will save him. I will fix this. I don't care what I have to become.*

That was the first vow. The clean one. The one made in science labs and sleepless nights. The one made before fangs and fury, before chains and slave pits. Before gods whispered back.

Back when he was still just a boy with too much brain and nowhere to put it, except in service of the only person who had ever mattered.

**Cambridge University, Massachusetts**

The moment Miguel Rhaegis walked into his office, Professor Riegel Orks felt a subtle shift in the air, a change that signaled the next piece of his grand design had fallen into place. He did not stand to greet Miguel—there was no need. Orks had already mapped out this encounter from start to finish. He did not need to engage with the young man emotionally or physically, not when his influence was woven so deep into the fabric of Miguel's mind and his path forward.

Orks, at his core, was a probability engine, a manipulator of time's threads, a man who could see the many layers of possibility in a given situation and move through them like a master chess player. The moves he made were deliberate, every step calculated across multiple timelines that existed concurrently, some seen, some hidden. The chaos that surrounded him, the unpredictable variables in the human equation—he thrived in it, his mind ever-multiplying the chances, creating outcomes he could control.

Tonight, though, it was more than simply manipulating Miguel Rhaegis. No, tonight the pieces were moving for a far more insidious reason.

Miguel had no idea the weight of the moment. He didn't know that the very air in the office had been crafted, subtly altered by Orks' will, to guide him into the correct frame of mind. The way the light caught the corner of the dossier, the subtle adjustment in the way the chair creaked as Miguel sat—these were all details part of the invisible thread Orks had been weaving for years.

Miguel's trust in him was a well-worn path, a finely crafted illusion of mentorship. Orks had been shaping him long before this meeting, pulling strings behind the scenes to make sure his influence was felt even when Miguel wasn't consciously aware of it. A series of small, quiet nudges that led Miguel to his conclusions, that had guided him through a web of academic success and personal trauma, all without ever touching the core of Miguel's free will. Orks had been the invisible hand, the one who manipulated the research projects that led to this moment in the Amazon—this pivotal moment where the threads of genetics, prophecy, and godhood would converge.

*But this isn't just about Miguel*, Orks thought as he quietly watched the young man fumble through the dossier. *It's about something greater. The pieces are falling into place. The Toreador is desperate, and I—*

Orks paused internally, allowing a brief flicker of emotion to register. Desperate was the right word. The Toreador vampire, obsessed with the creation of gods and immortality, had become increasingly fixated on manipulating the fabric of life itself. She had taken an interest in Miguel's bloodline, in his latent potential.

Her obsession with creating a new breed of immortal plaything—something better than the dying, flawed race of mortals—had led her to make certain deals that were, perhaps, not quite above board.

Orks had been there from the beginning, making the right contacts in the darker corners of academia and the occult world, constructing a network of influence that would eventually bring the Toreador's vision into reality. It was never as simple as the genetic manipulation they so craved; no, the true objective was something much grander, something that would allow them to reshape the world through their progeny.

The Toreador needed a vessel.

A perfect human, someone who carried within them the potential for something greater, something divine. Something with a touch of the Wyld in him, an air of desperation-turned-ambition-turned-obsession. And Miguel? Well, he had the right blood—whether he realized it or not.

Riegel Orks had made sure of that.

In the multi-layered web Orks wove, his involvement with the Toreador had been essential. He had acted as the bridge to Miguel, guiding him through his early research, offering him the perfect opportunities. But beyond that, Orks had carefully inserted himself into her mind. He had suggested the idea of blending the genetic codes of two powerful bloodlines, one already tangled with his own design, the other... Miguel's.

Of course, he hadn't told Miguel that. He wouldn't. Miguel had no idea how deep the game truly ran, how the Toreador's interest in him had twisted through layers of manipulation and chance. Orks' delicate orchestration had started with a small dossier—innocuous at first, but it would eventually lead to the discovery of the hidden tribe and the genetic anomalies within it. It would lead them to the child.

While Miguel obsessively examined the file, oblivious to the whispers of chaos in the genetic data, Orks allowed his mind to drift, to feel the multiple timelines running in parallel. He could already see the outcomes of this encounter—the path Miguel would take into the jungle, the inevitable discovery of Seras, the violent collision of past mistakes with future desires. Each step was calculated, measured, and now… set in motion.

I am not just playing with probabilities, Orks thought, the satisfaction of his control washing over him. I am the architect of them. The timelines bend to my will, folding one into the other, shaping the future as if it were clay. Miguel's choices will be my design. The Toreador's creation will be my crowning achievement.

In the corner of his mind, Orks allowed a small fragment of doubt to flicker—Had he miscalculated? Was there a thread he hadn't seen?

But that doubt, too, was calculated. Even in failure, there was an opportunity. And Orks had spent years working with shadows, learning to play with them until they revealed their secrets.

"Miguel," Orks said aloud, breaking his own musings, "Remember this. What you're about to uncover in the Amazon isn't just academic research. It's... destiny."

Miguel nodded, completely unaware of the weight of the words, of the fate Orks had spun into his life.

The young man had no idea that this was just the beginning, and that Riegel Orks—the father figure he trusted so blindly—was the true puppet master, pulling the strings that would guide him into darkness and godhood.

**The Hidden Hand in the Grand Design**

Riegel Orks had never been one to play directly in the chaos. He wasn't interested in the loud, obvious moves that people like Maryska Nightfire reveled in. No, Orks was a different kind of orchestrator, the kind who saw patterns in the most chaotic of moments, who wove the threads of fate before the world even noticed the loom had moved.

And right now, Riegel was content to watch the chaos unfold as Miguel—young, idealistic, and naïve—chased a dream that was never his own. He wasn't truly aware of the predetermined path that had already been laid before him, but Riegel knew that this was how the game was played. His game.

Riegel watched from the shadows as Miguel threw himself into his work, the Amazonian tribe, the stolen genetic research, unaware of the puppet strings that connected his every move to a grander, more dangerous scheme.

Maryska, the Toreador, had obsessed over the resurrection of Lilith. But the path she had chosen—sacrificing lives, manipulating genetics, and ultimately creating Seras—was one Riegel had subtly guided her toward. He hadn't done it for the resurrection of Lilith. That had never been his end goal.

Maryska believed she was crafting the perfect god, the ultimate being, something divine, but Riegel saw the larger picture. She was simply a tool, another force to be redirected. The child she had created wasn't the key—Seras was simply a means to an end.

Riegel knew the truth: Noc and Red's bloodline—marked with ancient Garou influence—was something of interest, but not for the reasons Maryska thought. It wasn't about creating an army of vampire gods. It wasn't about transcending vampirism or becoming immortal in the classic sense. It was about something far deeper, something that even Maryska couldn't comprehend.

Riegel, in his quiet brilliance, saw the pathways of the future and manipulated them. He didn't push anyone directly. He simply placed the right people in the right positions. He had nudged Maryska into her mad quest for resurrection because it would pull everything into a position where he could control the final outcome. He had manipulated Miguel's place in her life because he knew that Miguel's involvement would bring about something much greater than the resurrection of a mythical figure.

In a sense, Riegel had redirected their fates, pulled the strings of their destinies, weaving them into a design of his own. He wasn't after the god-like beings that Maryska sought. He wasn't after Seras as the perfect being of power. He was after the disruption of the system—control over the inevitable chaos.

The truth was that Seras and Miguel, along with their fates intertwined, were insignificant in the grand scheme of his plan. But they were also crucial in making sure things moved in the direction he desired.

From the moment Miguel began his studies under Orks' tutelage at Cambridge, Riegel saw the potential. He placed subtle thoughts, quiet suggestions, and controlled distractions to draw Miguel deeper into the Amazonian expedition. Orks had always known the trajectory of his young protege's life—and from the moment they met, Riegel had begun influencing his decisions.

Orks understood timelines better than most understood time itself. He was an expert in probability, seeing the intricate webs of potential futures and pulling the strings of fate to create the desired outcome. It wasn't a one-step process—it was layered, complicated, and convoluted. He knew, somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, that if he just nudged Miguel, just slightly, then everything would unfold according to his plan.

But that didn't mean he was untouched by the situation. Every action he took—every whisper of suggestion to Maryska, every moment of manipulation of Miguel—was a calculated risk. He watched as events unfolded, played out like a chessboard. Every move mattered. He couldn't afford to make mistakes. And he wasn't making them. He had seen all the possibilities.

Miguel was important, but not for the reasons the young man believed. He was a key, a necessary component in Maryska's madness, but more importantly, he was the vehicle that would carry Seras into the world. Seras, the abomination that was half-wolf, half-human, had the potential to disrupt everything in ways Maryska couldn't predict. Her failure would be Orks' success.

The multiple timelines were already in motion. Riegel's subtle manipulation had already set things into motion. Maryska had taken the bait, and now her obsession was following Miguel to the Amazon, where he would encounter her twisted creation.

Riegel didn't need to be there, didn't need to reveal himself. He was already present in every decision that Miguel made, in every twist of Maryska's path. He had planted seeds years ago, and now the fruit was beginning to ripen. And when it did, he would take the harvest.

In his mind, Seras was nothing more than a catalyst. Miguel? A distraction. And Maryska's goal? Irrelevant. What mattered was what Riegel would do next—how he would manipulate everything for the ultimate endgame.

**Los Alamos, New Mexico- Age 17**

Packing for Cambridge, Leaving the Past Behind

The suitcase lay open on the bed, half-full. Miguel folded his shirts with slow, methodical care. The scholarship letter sat perfectly centered on the desk, untouched since the day it arrived.

Behind him, his father cracked open another beer. The sound of it—the snap-hiss of metal breaking its seal—was so normal Miguel barely noticed.

Nothing new.

Nothing surprising.

Just background noise.

Miguel reached for his books—genetics volumes, research papers, notes scrawled in worn notebooks. His hands were steady as he stacked them into place.

His father snorted.

"You really think you're somethin', huh."

Miguel kept packing.

"Gonna be a big shot? Actin' like you're better than everyone just 'cause you got some scholarship?"

The words rolled off his back, just like always. Just noise, slurred through alcohol, wrapped in years of contempt.

His father took a swig. The bottle hit the table with too much force.

"You failed him."

Miguel's hands paused.

Not clenched. Not shaking. Just still.

"Xavier needed you. And where were you?" His father gestured, vaguely, eyes glazed. "Out playin' smart boy, wastin' time on school. Shoulda stayed. Shoulda kept your head down. College ain't gonna save some dumb Mexican kid from the ghetto."

Silence stretched long.

Miguel exhaled—slow, controlled. Measured.

Then, finally, he turned.

His father sat slouched, beer bottle dangling, eyes yellowed with exhaustion. Not anger. Not even hatred. Just smallness.

And for the first time—Miguel saw it. Really saw it.

This wasn't about him.

It was about his father, and the way he'd always felt lesser. How Miguel's mind—his sharpness, his curiosity, his refusal to fold into mediocrity—had always terrified the man who raised him.

Miguel didn't feel anger.

Not really.

What he felt was pity.

And that—more than anything—was the moment things shifted forever.

His father wanted him to fight. To snap, to yell, to crack under the weight of words meant to shrink him down.

Miguel didn't.

Instead, he picked up the suitcase.

"Take care of yourself."

That was all. No fury. No argument.

Just departure.

His father stared, like he didn't recognize him.

Like he realized—too late—that Miguel was no longer afraid.

Miguel walked out.

And for the first time in his life—he didn't look back.

**The Weight of Freedom**

Miguel stepped out onto the front porch, suitcase gripped tight, the weight of his textbooks pressing down like anchors to another world. The air sat heavy, thick with humidity, clinging to his skin like something trying to pull him back.

He should've just walked. Should've never looked.

But he did.

The front door was still open behind him, swinging lazily in the evening breeze. Through it, the house sat exposed, stripped of shadows.

For the first time, Miguel saw it.

The peeling wallpaper, yellowed and curling at the edges. The water stains on the ceiling, mapping out old damage no one had ever fixed. The carpets, worn thin in places that told stories of too many years spent pacing, sitting, waiting.

His father sat slouched on the couch, beer can slick with condensation, resting against his knee like it belonged there. His shirt was stained, his posture slack, but his eyes followed Miguel, tracking him like a man watching something he can't stop.

His mother sat at the kitchen table, cigarette between her fingers, gaze far away, somewhere deep in the past.

Not here.

Not ever here.

The air tasted stale—cigarettes, sweat, beer, rot. The scent of a place stuck in time, refusing to shift, refusing to change.

And then Miguel understood. Finally.

This was not home.

It had never been home.

It was just a house, just a decaying structure where people happened to exist inside.

A prison built from perception, from memories warped by desperation, from years spent telling himself there was something here worth holding onto.

But there wasn't.

And there never had been.

The realization settled deep—too deep to unravel, too final to argue.

Miguel didn't say anything.

He didn't step back inside.

He simply turned—stepping off the porch, down the cracked concrete sidewalk, into the humid night, suitcase in hand.

And he did not stop walking.

**Cambridge University – Age 22**

Miguel never really believed in miracles. But Xavier's sudden recovery felt close enough.

It began slow—fewer hospital visits, steadier hands, more color in his skin. By sixteen, Xavier was taller than Miguel and running on a treadmill without collapsing. The doctors had no real explanation. Genes that once doomed him to a short life had… stabilized. Shifted. Adapted.

Miguel wanted answers. Not for Xavier's sake anymore—he was thriving. But for himself. Because if suffering could reverse, if broken blueprints could rewrite themselves, then maybe every theory he chased in the dark had a spark of truth.

By twenty-two, Miguel was the youngest in his Master's program—accepted on a full scholarship to a competitive genetic sciences initiative in Cambridge. He worked twice as hard as everyone else, slept half as much, and still outperformed most of his peers. Not because he needed to prove something—because he couldn't stop.

The lab was his sanctuary. A sterile heaven of microscopes and soft glows, where blood didn't stain walls and voices never rose above casual inquiry.

And at the center of that sanctuary was Professor Riegel Orks.

Dr. Orks was a geneticist with the soul of a poet and the hands of a pianist—quick, meticulous, and precise. He had the gentle bearing of a man who had seen brutality and survived it by refusing to become it.

From the start, he saw something in Miguel that other instructors missed: a rage so tightly folded into ambition it was practically indistinguishable.

Most professors challenged Miguel. Orks channeled him.

Genetics 301 was where it started. A deep dive into gene expression, mutation patterns, and epigenetic drift. Miguel's favorite part was the CRISPR lab, where they edited bacteria strains by hand, stitching new instructions into life itself like digital gods. Miguel excelled, naturally, but Orks didn't praise him for speed or brilliance.

"You treat every sequence like it owes you an apology," Orks once said. "Like if you just crack the code, the past will undo itself."

Miguel didn't respond. But he came to office hours the next day.

Again. And again.

Soon, they weren't just talking about methyl groups and telomere decay. Orks asked about New Mexico. About Xavier. He never pushed, but he listened. And Miguel, who had spent his entire life surviving silence, began to speak.

It was Orks who first suggested the Amazon.

"There's a tribe," he explained one evening, passing Miguel a thin dossier sealed in a dull manila folder. "Remote. Unmapped. Their genetic markers don't follow any known phylogenetic pattern. There's a hypothesis that their genome may have latent or novel epigenetic regulation we've never seen."

Miguel opened the folder and stared. He didn't speak for a full minute.

"You want me to chase godblood."

"I want you to chase truth. Whatever shape it takes."

That was the moment Miguel stopped seeing Riegel as a professor and started seeing him as something more. A mentor, yes. But also a compass. Someone who believed in who Miguel might become—outside the trauma, outside the teeth.

Miguel agreed to lead the field expedition.

It would be his thesis. His magnum opus.

His last step as a man of science.

Before the jungle swallowed him. Before the bite.

What he couldn't have known was that his path had been designed—a labyrinth with only one exit, and Maryska Dragomir was waiting at its end.

**Cambridge, Office of Professor Riegel Orks—The Turning Point**

Miguel Rhaegis sat across from Professor Riegel Orks, his eyes flickering between the cluttered desk and the quiet, imposing figure of the older man. The office was exactly as it had been every time Miguel had come here—disorganized yet somehow always brimming with purpose. Books on genetics and ancient cultures lined the walls, papers were strewn across the desk, and the faint hum of a heater in the corner kept the room just warm enough to make the musty scent of old papers feel comfortable, familiar.

Orks, his professor and academic advisor, was an imposing figure—calm, composed, and always so sure of himself. Miguel looked up to him in a way he never could with his own father, who had never given him the time of day beyond criticism and blame. Orks was different—encouraging, insightful, and always ready to push Miguel just a little bit further. In many ways, he was the father figure Miguel had never had.

"Miguel," Orks said, voice smooth but with that edge of quiet authority. "I believe it's time you move forward with your research. The tribe you've been studying in the Amazon—the one whose genetic patterns piqued your interest—there's something there. Something you need to explore further."

Miguel leaned forward, his eyes bright with excitement. The Amazon was exactly what he needed to prove himself in the field of genetics—his big chance, his moment to make a name for himself. He had spent years at Cambridge, struggling to gain recognition, but now, it felt like his breakthrough was within reach.

"I'm ready," Miguel said eagerly. "I've been working on the tribal genetics, and I think I've found something. This could be the key to the next stage of my research. But I don't know if I can do it alone."

Orks leaned back in his chair, an inscrutable expression on his face, though his lips curled upward in a small, approving smile. "You won't be alone, Miguel. I've arranged everything. The resources, the materials, the knowledge. It's all here."

He slid a thick dossier across the desk to Miguel. It was neat, organized, with pages upon pages of data, photographs, and field notes. Everything about the tribe, their rituals, their genetics—but there was something more. Something that made Miguel's fingers hesitate as he reached for the file. The paper was smooth, almost too perfect, and there was a faint smell of something unfamiliar on the edges. A smell that reminded him of… something sterile. Clean.

"This is everything you need," Orks said, his voice calm, almost soothing. "You've been on the right track all along. Now you have the information to take your work to the next level."

Miguel opened the file, scanning the first few pages quickly. He saw the familiar notes on the tribe's bloodlines, rituals, and ceremonies. But what made his breath catch was the mention of genetics—the specifics of the tribe

**The Jungle Watches—And So Does She**

The scholarship that freed Miguel from his past eventually led him down unexpected paths. After Cambridge, after degrees and accolades, his research brought him to places where science and superstition blurred. Now, deep in uncharted territory, he faced challenges far different from those he'd left behind.

The jungle never stopped watching.

Neither did she.

Miguel Rhaegis had spent eight days alone, surviving on little more than stale coffee and the relentless demands of his research.

There had been warnings, hushed words from the locals, hands gripping his forearm too tightly as they urged him to leave before the moon grew full.

He had ignored them.

"Folklore. Superstition."

That's what he told himself as he cataloged blood samples, recorded environmental shifts, tracked the dietary habits of a haplogroup long forgotten by modern anthropology.

He was meticulous.

Precise.

Blind.

He never felt the moment the jungle stopped breathing around him.

Never noticed when the whisper of insects died off, when the scent of damp earth became overpowered by something else.

Not until the last of the locals packed their things and vanished.

They did not say goodbye.

Just a glance—one final look of pity, of quiet resignation, before the trees swallowed them.

And then he was alone.

That night, as he crouched near the fire pit, washing sweat from his face with water so stale it reeked of tin, she stood on an outcropping above him, watching.

She had been watching for days.

At first, it was idle interest.

Then, curiosity.

Now, something else.

She crouched, resting one elbow on her knee, chin tilted downward, her eyes glinting softly under the haze of smoke drifting upward from his fire.

"This one is different."

Maldaldo shifted at her side, silent. Waiting. The predator was patient.

She wasn't speaking to him.

She was speaking to herself.

She hadn't expected Rhaegis to last this long. She hadn't expected him to keep pushing forward when everything around him had started screaming warnings.

And yet, he did.

Fascinating.

Her fingers curled tighter around the stone beneath her.

She could see it now, the tension lining his body, the exhaustion leaking into his movements, the dark smudges under his eyes from too many nights spent ignoring the whisper of danger.

It was delicious.

There was nothing special about humans who wandered too deep. Nothing remarkable about the ones who didn't heed the warnings.

They died.

Always.

But this one...

This one had survived longer than expected.

And that made her wonder.

Could he survive the bite?

No one did.

Not fully. Not without breaking into something lesser, something shattered, something easy to control.

But still, she watched.

Still, she lingered.

And when the night finally came—when Maldaldo finally moved, when claws finally raked through flesh and tendon—she would be waiting.

Just to see.

Just to watch.

Because now, she needed to know.

Miguel had been alone for eight days, surviving on stale coffee and sheer obsession.

The research site was little more than a patch of clearing tucked beneath the jungle's suffocating canopy—mosquito-infested, drenched in humidity, with the scent of damp earth clinging to everything.

He had no team. Teams cost money.

So he worked alone.

Every blood test, every note scribbled into the battered leather journal by the dim light of his lantern.

The locals had warned him, shaking their heads when he refused to leave with them, their voices thick with unease.

"Dark things walk when the moon is full."

He had dismissed it. Superstition. Folklore.

Then they left, abandoning the research station, taking their supplies, their laughter, their presence—everything except the warning.

And that night, as he stood beneath the dripping jungle canopy, washing sweat from his face near the fire pit, she arrived.

A shadow.

Nothing more than a specter watching from the rock outcropping, silent, patient, waiting.

Not for him.

For the bloodshed.

It came quickly.

Maldaldo wasn't sloppy.

The Glasswalker struck precisely, claws raking through flesh, tearing muscle, severing tendon like a surgeon of brutality.

Miguel never saw him coming—just the sudden force, the crackle of bone, the wet heat of his own blood spilling onto jungle soil.

He hit the ground. Hard.

Vision blackened at the edges, the stars obliterated by thick canopy.

The pain came next.

Blinding. Unrelenting.

Miguel tried to breathe.

But something inside him was breaking. Something was changing.

She watched.

She did not intervene.

She did not speak.

She simply waited.

Because no one survived the bite.

No one.

**The Silver Collar — A Promise of Suffering**

The jungle was still now.

No more screams.

No more howling.

Just him—a collapsed miracle sprawled in the blood-wet moss, breath hitching in uneven fragments, fur matted and steaming from the agony of rebirth.

She crouched beside him, long coat brushing the dirt, predator made queen. A silhouette against the moon-stitched canopy.

His body had burned itself out. Every tendon, every nerve ending, every thread of his soul had been ripped apart and re-woven by forces older than reason. It should've killed him.

It always did.

And yet.

She tilted her head, gaze flicking over his trembling limbs with a fascination that bordered on reverence. "Miguel," she murmured, voice rich with the lullaby cadence of someone admiring the bloom of a rare, poisonous flower.

He didn't answer.

He couldn't.

The transformation had stolen his voice, his strength—his humanity.

She reached out, brushing a gloved fingertip across the sharp edge of his jaw, where wolf and man still warred beneath the surface.

Blood steamed beneath her hand. His blood.

Still hot.

Still alive.

"Do you know what you've done?" she whispered, voice wrapped in velvet and threat. Not cruel. Not gentle. Just curious—the same way a surgeon might admire the twitch of muscle beneath a blade.

"You survived."

A pause, a breath.

"No one survives."

A faint smile touched her lips, carved from something far older than joy. She slid a hand into her coat and drew it out again, holding something small, something wicked.

A silver collar.

Gleaming. Perfect. Made for him.

"So now I need to know..." she said.

The snick of the clasp was quiet. But it rang like a gunshot in the hollow of his mind.

He flinched as it closed around his throat. His body jerked instinctively, the silver burning into new flesh. Smoke curled up like incense from where it bit down.

She smiled wider. "…what will break you?"

Her fingers ghosted along the curve of the metal, tracing it like a lover's promise. The jungle whispered around them—wind rustling through leaves, insects chirping like distant clockwork—but no answers came.

"You'll fight them, you know. My best. My darlings. My monsters," she said, crouching lower, her voice a seductive razor. "You'll win… or you won't."

Her eyes glittered, inhuman and hungry.

"And I'll be watching. Every. Time."

Another soft tug on the collar. Not to restrain—just to remind.

"And when that last part of you finally splinters, when the fire in your eyes gutters out like the last breath of a dying star…" she leaned close, her lips brushing fur, "…then I'll know. I'll know I've found the limit of something extraordinary."

His eyelids fluttered. Consciousness slipped like water through a cracked vessel. His breath slowed. His limbs sagged. The darkness came, and with it, silence.

She didn't stop it.

She just watched, patiently.

Like an artist savoring the final brushstroke.

The jungle exhaled. The moment held.

And somewhere beneath that canopy of gods and ghosts, a miracle of fury and flesh fell asleep in chains—while the monster who made him plotted how to tear him apart.

**March 30th, 2014 — Somewhere deep in the Peruvian Amazon**

The jungle was a living, breathing symphony. Days before it all fell apart, Nocturnal Miguel Rhaegis had learned to move with its rhythm — the chatter of capuchins, the humid sighs of wind through thick leaves, the low drone of insects filling the thick air like static. He kept meticulous notes even in the heat and haze, his journals heavy with data and observations: blood panels from local tribespeople, environmental readings, dietary logs, fungal spores scraped from bark, parasites fished from water sources.

It had been exhausting work — unforgiving, relentless, and lonely. But Noc had always worked best alone. He hadn't taken a team because that required grants, and grants required funding, and he was already burning the last of his savings just to be there. So he slept in a hammock slung between trees, bathed in riverwater, and catalogued his microbiological findings by solar lamp after dusk. Even his microscope was secondhand, propped up on crates and an old field desk. But he made it work. He always had.

The locals had helped him, at first — a few men and women from a nearby village who understood the land and respected his strange, quiet dedication. But when the warnings started, they came less often. Whispers of a bruja — a sorceress, a ghost-woman of the jungle. They begged him to leave. Told him the air had turned wrong. That things were moving in the trees at night that should not be.

He didn't believe them — not truly. Not until the camp went quiet.

They were just gone. Their shelters dismantled, trails scrubbed clean, fires left to burn out. A final warning scrawled hastily in Spanish on the side of his supply tent: "Se acerca la sombra. No le mires a los ojos."

*The shadow approaches. Do not meet her eyes.*

Still, Noc stayed. Of course he did. The jungle had always held danger — jaguars, pythons, venomous insects. He chalked the warnings up to superstition and stubbornly pressed on. He had research to complete, dammit. Blood samples to test. Hypotheses to confirm.

He didn't know she was watching.

For two days, the forest pressed inward. Quieter. Heavier. The sounds of life became muffled, distant — like they were afraid. Even the birdsong disappeared.

The attack came during the most human of moments: while relieving himself behind a broad ficus tree just after dusk. No gear. No defenses. His pants around his thighs when the growl came — low, bone-deep, like gravel soaked in hatred. And then the flash of movement: white teeth, shining eyes, the blur of fur and claws.

Maldaldo Galicia was no ordinary wolf. He had been a man once, a predator in a tailored suit, all smooth speech and quiet menace. At night, though, he was something else — something primal. His jaws clamped around Noc's side, tearing through flesh like wet paper. Muscle peeled away. Tendons snapped. The pain was unimaginable, a white-hot shriek of agony that sent Noc's vision blurring.

He tried to scream, but the wolf crushed the air from his lungs with another bite, this one rending across his back. He couldn't move. Could barely breathe. Blood pooled beneath him, soaking the jungle floor, the scent of iron mingling with the damp earth and the bitter musk of the wolf's coat.

Above them, on a high outcropping of black stone, she stood.

Maryska Dragomir. Pale as moonlight. Dressed in silver and shadow. Her eyes were pits — bottomless wells that watched, waiting, curious.

The wolf backed away eventually, panting, its mouth painted in Noc's blood. It sat beside her like a loyal hound as she knelt and looked down upon the broken boy bleeding in the mud.

They never survive, she thought.

Humans weren't meant to endure the bite. Their bodies broke under the strain of transformation. The virus ripped through bone and mind, crushing them in a merciless rebirth. Those who didn't die screaming, went mad.

But Noc didn't die.

He screamed, oh yes — long and hoarse until his throat was raw. He bled, shaking violently as the infection tore through him like wildfire. He clawed at the dirt, lungs gasping for air that wouldn't come. Stars blinked above the canopy, indifferent, and still he didn't die.

And that… that was interesting.

Maryska tilted her head, a slow smile curving her lips. Her eyes glittered. She saw potential now — not just another corpse, not a shattered thing to be discarded.

She saw a toy.

A test subject.

A soul to break.

And as Noc lay there, barely conscious, body torn and twisted, the first shudders of his transformation rippling through ruined nerves… something changed. In him. A fire sparked. The kind that doesn't come from anger or vengeance, but from refusal. From the decision — primal and pure — not to die.

And in that defiant heartbeat, the boy became the monster. And the monster would one day become more than even Maryska could have imagined.

**Maryska's Watch — March 30th, 2014**

He smelled like sun-warmed copper and sweet ambition.

From the moment she first caught his scent, drifting faintly through the jungle canopy like incense smoke, Maryska was intrigued. Not afraid. Not threatened. Just… curious. Humans were usually so easy to read — base creatures driven by sex, hunger, pride, fear. But this one?

He worked alone. Bled into his research. Starved himself for progress. He was driven, to the point of self-erasure. That was rare.

And he was so very tired. She could taste it on the air — like worn leather and burnt sugar. The kind of exhaustion that only came from someone who believed the world owed him answers. Someone who chased knowledge like it would save him.

How quaint.

He was beautiful in that quiet way that humans sometimes were: all sharp cheekbones, furrowed brow, and calloused hands that trembled slightly when he thought no one was looking. His notes were meticulous, his lab setup crude but functional. She read them one night, standing in the dark just beyond the firelight, watching him sleep in his hammock while her fingers traced the neat rows of data in his journals.

Bloodwork. Parasites. Spore behavior. Bacterial interactions with ancient gut flora.

Obsessive. Brilliant, even. But also fragile.

So fragile.

The locals warned him. She had made sure of it. She liked to watch them run. She liked how humans whispered about her — bruja, demonio, la Dama de la Muerte. Let them flee into the bush. She only needed him.

Maryska had been waiting for a moment of vulnerability. She'd considered dragging him from sleep, but there was something crude about that. No artistry. No message.

So when he stepped away to relieve himself, vulnerable and unaware, she smiled.

A flick of her wrist.

Maldaldo, go.

The wolf moved like oil through water — silent, smooth, lethal. He was always eager to please. So devoted. So vicious. The perfect tool. Maryska glided after him, barefoot on stone, rising to an outcropping that gave her a perfect view of the unfolding scene below.

The boy didn't even have time to scream at first. Not really. Maldaldo tore into him with a predator's glee — one bite to the ribs, another to the back. Blood sprayed across the undergrowth in a beautiful arc. Red on green. Life unspooled in ribbons at her feet.

She watched dispassionately as the boy collapsed. He convulsed. Cried out. Clawed at the dirt like it might save him. His eyes bulged, his body breaking down beneath the viral storm now raging in his cells.

The bite never took. Not properly. Not unless the human had some spark buried deep — something foul and furious enough to grab hold of the beast and live. And even then, it burned them out. Almost always.

Almost.

But this one screamed and suffered and bled…

And lived.

Maryska tilted her head. The smirk faded from her lips. Her eyes narrowed, golden and cold. She leaned forward, scenting the air — not just blood and piss and agony now, but change. Something old awakening. Something sharp.

He was turning.

Turning.

She felt it ripple through the Gauntlet like a blade dragged over silk. The boy howled — high and raw and terrible — and the forest shuddered. Flocks scattered. The insects stopped singing. And in that sudden silence, Maryska knew:

She had found something exceptional.

Something broken, yes. Something trembling. But inside that soft academic shell was fire. Spite. Defiance.

A survivor.

And she loathed him for it.

She should have ended it there. Snapped his neck. Burned his notes. Fed him to Maldaldo and moved on.

But instead… she turned to the wolf beside her and whispered,

"Bring him in."

And just like that, the boy was no longer prey.

He was a project.

**The Long Game of Maryska Dragomir**

Before the collar, there was curiosity. Before obsession, there was a name: Miguel Rhaegis.

She first heard his name in a research abstract.

A forgettable paper. Dry. Unremarkable.

Something about epigenetic anomalies in remote populations and ancient mythologies as expressions of blood memory. Too ambitious. Too unpolished.

But there was a flicker of something beneath the jargon. A hum.

A hunger that mirrored her own.

So she read it again.

And again.

Then she found the boy behind the paper.

He was young—too young for what he was doing. Gaunt. Spectacled. The kind of creature who spent more time with the dead than the living. Not quite beautiful, but there was something raw in him. Uncut potential.

A blade waiting to be forged.

He didn't even know he was asking the right questions. He just… felt his way through the world, like a child crawling toward fire.

She watched him for months. First through data. Then through windows.

Los Alamos was a tomb of bureaucrats and dreamers. He fit in with neither. Always alone. Always awake. Always digging.

They called him obsessive.

She called him promising.

She never needed to glamour anyone to read his notes. He left them everywhere. On desks. In lab notebooks. On walls. Diagrams with red thread. Theories half-insane but laced with truth.

He believed there were monsters in the blood.

He believed he could save them.

Oh, darling, she thought, how quaint.

By the time he secured fieldwork funding—barely enough for a one-way flight and a tent—Maryska had already cleared her calendar. No one else would interfere. She made certain of it.

She followed him to the jungle like a ghost.

Always watching. Always one step behind.

At night, she crept through his makeshift camp and read the journals he hid beneath his hammock. Sometimes she left them open to different pages, just to see if he'd notice.

He didn't.

Not at first.

She left marks in the trees where the natives would see them. Charcoal symbols from their grandmother's nightmares. The old kind, the kind that whispered leave now or die screaming.

One by one, they left him.

First for short trips. Then overnight.

Then entirely.

He thought it was his fault. That he'd offended them. That they feared the work.

But no.

They feared her.

And now he was alone.

Perfect.

He still spoke aloud sometimes, narrating his findings to the trees like someone trying to outrun loneliness. She learned the cadence of his voice. The rhythm of his thoughts. She even felt a flicker of something...almost like guilt when she saw how thin he was getting.

Almost.

She waited for the right night.

The rain had made the earth soft. The moon was high. He'd just finished cataloging a new sample—muddy boots tossed beside his cot, hair slicked to his brow with sweat.

He looked like a drowned cat.

She watched him trudge into the trees to relieve himself, muttering in that dry voice.

And then she unleashed Maldaldo.

Her oldest. Her favorite. A creature of elegance and brutality.

It didn't take long.

The fight was over in minutes. Flesh torn. Bones split. Blood everywhere.

But he didn't die.

He transformed.

And Maryska Dragomir—Toreador, predator, connoisseur of pain and beauty—felt something she hadn't felt in decades:

Wonder.

**Maryska Dragomir — The Artist and the Animal**

They never survive the bite.

It was the first truth she learned when she discovered her ability to call wolves. The second was that they never remain themselves afterward. The soul, if it stays, twists. Collapses under the weight of pain, of transformation. It becomes a thing to be shaped. Beautifully, horrifically malleable.

And yet, he lived.

Maryska had watched him through the dense jungle brush like a patient sculptor hovering over untouched marble. He was all sharp edges and quiet drive, methodical in a way that offended her Toreador sensibilities. Not a drop of chaos in him. No art. No madness. Just data, discipline, and exhausting decency. He could have been boring, like the rest. But there was something—something—feral glinting just beneath that lab coat, behind the dark eyes that never quite softened.

So she sent Maldaldo. A test. A beginning. Not to kill, just to crack the shell.

She didn't expect him to survive.

Maryska stood on the cliff's edge above his writhing body, silent as moonlight, watching. Listening to the way he screamed. The music of agony. The tearing of flesh and ego, the violent undoing of a man who believed in structure, logic, and control. And even as he bled and whimpered and cursed the stars... he refused to die.

It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

So she took him.

Not as a prisoner—as a project.

**What Maryska Wanted**

Maryska Dragomir had long grown tired of mortal playthings. They shattered too easily. What she wanted—what she needed—was something rare. A creature of duality. Savage but sentient. Loyal but lethal. She didn't crave a lover, or a servant. She wanted a blade with a heartbeat.

Noc had all the right ingredients: strength, trauma, intelligence, and that stubborn little ember of defiance that refused to go out no matter how she smothered it. That ember drove her mad. She told herself she hated it.

But really, she was afraid of it.

She broke his body, again and again. Pit fights that pushed him past exhaustion. Humiliations designed to erode his identity. Isolation. Degradation. Moments of twisted tenderness, confusing rewards after brutality, keeping him off balance.

She studied him like a living sculpture, chiseling away hope. Polishing his rage. Teaching him to compartmentalize pain, then weaponize it.

But Noc never broke. Not completely.

He gave her obedience—but never loyalty.

He gave her silence—but never submission.

He gave her fear—but never love.

And that—that was her undoing.

**Why She Failed**

Maryska didn't understand that true wolves don't break. They bleed, they bend, but their soul has a rhythm older than anything vampiric elegance can comprehend. She mistook pain for leverage. Mistook control for connection. She wanted to own him, but he was never hers.

Even when he fought in her arenas with bloodlust in his eyes, it wasn't her name on his lips. Even when he trained like a machine, it wasn't her will he served.

He was hiding himself in plain sight, keeping the last shard of who he was buried where her claws couldn't reach. That final sliver of self was beyond her grasp, and she hated it.

So she pushed harder.

Made mistakes.

Grew desperate.

In the end, she lost him—not in the arena, but in that quiet, defiant place she could never reach.

And that, more than his escape, infuriated her.