\_(The jungle never forgets. Neither does she.)\_

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 firepit, \*\*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\*\*

\_Survival was a mistake. She intends to correct it.\_

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 Galacia 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.\_

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\*\*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.

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\*\*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.\_