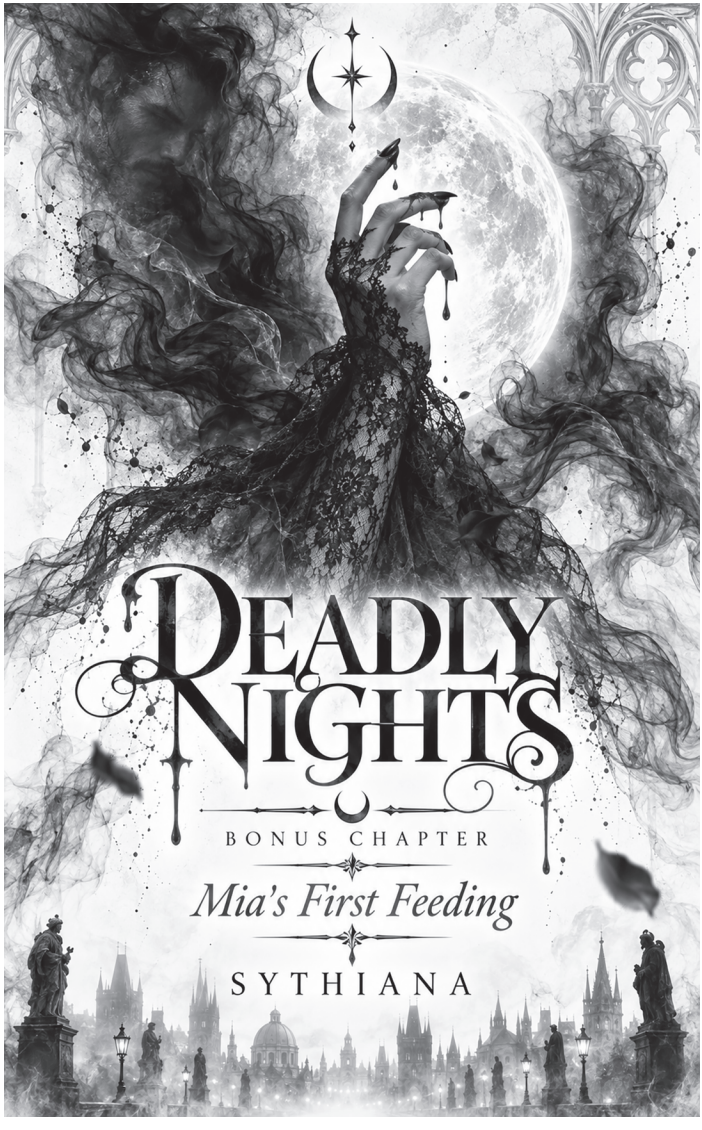

DEADLY NIGHTS
BONUS CHAPTER
Mia's First Feeding
SYTHIANA

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MIA'S FIRST FEEDING

SYTHIANA

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There were scenes that belonged to this world
but could not occupy the pages of the novel
itself.
This was one of them.



BLOOD IS LIFE.
UNTIL IT ISN'T.

Nikolas stretched in bed. Mia slept curled against him, one thigh draped over his, her cheek resting above his heart. Her skin still held the faint warmth, soft beneath his palm and marked by the traces of his mouth and hands.

He had spent hours watching her breathe. Peace was too gentle a word for what he felt the moment he drew her closer. Possession without panic. Stillness so complete that it frightened him more than rage or feverish desire ever had. He still found it hard to believe.

She had chosen him *willingly*.

She had looked at him with fear in her eyes and desire beneath it, had trusted him with her blood, her transition, and the night her body became something other than human. Nikolas lowered his mouth to her forehead and kissed her, his lips lingering there until she stirred.

"Little one," he murmured.

Mia shifted against him, her lashes fluttering. Sleep still softened her face, but the moment she looked up at him, awareness returned in fragments: his bare chest beneath

her cheek, the warmth of his arm around her, the ache in her body, and the scent of dark smoke, skin, and something unmistakably his surrounding her.

"We're going on a trip tonight," he said.

Mia blinked. "Tonight?"

"There is a village near the border where you can practice without half the castle watching you learn." His fingers traced the line of her spine.

Mia nodded, though her eyes were still heavy-lidded.

Nikolas rolled her gently onto her stomach before she could slip back into sleep. "Come," he said, his voice lower now. "Get ready."

"You are impossible," she murmured.

"I've been told worse."

He rose from the bed. His body had settled after the earlier frenzy, but the sight of her amid the twisted sheets sent a fresh surge of arousal through him. He turned toward the dressing room before she could see what the thought of staying in bed was already doing to his breathing.

Mia stretched slowly. The movement was feline, her body lengthening beneath the blankets before she gathered them closer around herself. Nikolas paused at the dressing room's threshold.

"Are you sure we can't stay in bed a little longer?" she asked.

He crossed back, braced one hand beside her head, and kissed her, drawing her breath away until she reached for him before he could deepen the kiss. Her fingers caught in his hair, and when he began to rise, she pulled him back down with sudden certainty.

He cupped her face, his thumb gliding over her cheek. "Little one." The softness of his voice didn't make the

warning any less real. "You are starving. You must drink human blood."

Mia's body went still. Then pain shot through her gums, sudden enough that she inhaled sharply and clutched his arm. "Wait," she whispered. "I don't know if I can do this." Her eyes searched his. "Am I supposed to kill someone tonight?"

A faint smile touched Nikolas's mouth, but his gaze remained intent. "No." He brushed the backs of his fingers along her cheek, then lowered his hand to cover hers. "I will teach you control. You don't feed like an animal just because you are hungry." His voice lost its teasing edge. "You will learn to take what you need and to know when to stop. Human blood must come before your transition is complete. Your body is asking for it now."

He kissed her once more, slower this time, then withdrew and disappeared behind the door. The sound of clothing followed: fabric rustling, leather dragged across skin, buckles clicking into place. Mia stayed in bed, staring at the fire as though it might offer her a simpler answer.

"Don't worry," Nikolas called from behind the door. "I'll show you how to feed without causing unnecessary harm."

Mia nodded, though he couldn't see it. Another wave of pain tore through her gums, and she closed her eyes. Nikolas was right. The thirst had become unbearable. "I don't know if I'm ready," she whispered.



The moon hung high above the hills by the time they crossed from South Bohemia into the Habsburg lands, riding side by side. Mia's Orion, taken from the inn to the castle the same day Mia was imprisoned in the crypt, moved with restless energy beneath her, as though he sensed the hunger stirring in her blood. Nikolas rode close enough that the occasional brush of his knee against hers felt deliberate.

The village emerged gradually: a few low houses gathered around a sleeping square, chimney smoke winding into the night, candles trembling behind shuttered windows. At the far edge of the village stood one of the taverns.

Nikolas dismounted first, then reached up for Mia's hand

as she slid from the saddle. He led her inside without releasing her hand. The moment they entered, heat enveloped them: woodsmoke, damp wool, spiced ale, cheap perfume struggling against sweat and old timber. The room was full without being crowded, its low ceiling ribbed with dark beams, its tables lit by guttering candles that made every face seem more secretive than it was. Men played cards near the hearth. A pair of women laughed too loudly over wine. Near the bar, a fiddle complained through a song no one was listening to.

Nikolas chose a table in the far corner from where he could see every entrance, and Mia could observe the room without drawing attention. She sat across from him, her blood still carrying the restless ache of hunger. He could smell it beneath the sweetness of her skin, bright and wild, making his fangs press insistently against his gums.

He leaned closer.

"The first rule is patience," he said. "Hunger will try to make every beating heart look like an invitation. You don't let hunger choose for you."

Mia sat still.

"You watch first. You listen. You learn who is already looking for someone to follow, who is lonely enough to trust attention, who has been drinking long enough to mistake danger for comfort." His gaze moved across the tavern before returning to hers. "Feeding is not frenzy, little one. It is instinct under command."

Her eyes swept over the room.

Nikolas saw the change immediately. Her gaze began catching on details she would once have overlooked: the tremor in one man's hand as he raised his glass, the woman near the hearth who kept glancing toward the door, the young server moving between tables with exhaustion

hidden behind her smile. Hunger sharpened her expression too, giving her beauty a darker edge.

"Don't stare too long," he murmured. "People feel it when they become the object of someone's attention."

Mia looked back at him.

"And no real names," he added. "No history you intend to keep. Tonight, you are whoever the night demands you be."

She nodded.

Nikolas's gaze narrowed as he followed hers across the tavern. "Avoid those alert enough to remember every detail, and do not let fear choose for you. Fear sharpens the blood. Adrenaline gives it heat and urgency and drives the pulse harder, but terror makes the body unpredictable." His eyes returned to Mia's. "You are learning control, not merely how to satisfy hunger. Choose someone you can lead without turning the entire night into chaos."

His mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. "And you will not feed from a man unless I am present."

Mia's brows rose. "Why?"

Nikolas reached across the table and caught her jaw in one hand, turning her face toward him with a gentleness that did nothing to weaken the command. "Because your hunger is tied too closely to everything else awakening inside you, and men become remarkably stupid when they believe a beautiful woman has chosen them." His thumb grazed her lower lip. "I will not have some drunken fool mistake your hunger for permission."

Mia's eyes brightened. "That's not why."

Nikolas released her chin and leaned back. "It's exactly why."

"You're jealous."

"Focus, little one."

Mia smiled. "You *are* jealous."

His fingers slid into her hair before she could say anything else, and he drew her across the table into a kiss. It was brief, hard enough to steal the amusement from her mouth and remind her exactly where she belonged.

When he released her, Mia's breathing had gone shallow.

Nikolas reached beneath the table and slid his hand along the inside of her thigh, settling there with infuriating certainty, his palm warm against her skin as if the distance between the tavern and his bed had never existed. Mia's pulse leaped at his touch, betraying her before she could hide the reaction.

Nikolas leaned back.

"Choose."

Mia drew in a slow breath and looked around.

After a moment, she pointed toward a young woman seated alone near the far wall, a nearly empty glass before her as she traced one finger through a spill on the table. Every few moments, she looked toward the door, though the hope behind the gesture had already begun to die.

"That one."

Nikolas glanced at the woman. "Why her?"

"She is lonely." Mia continued watching the woman. "Desperately lonely. She keeps looking at the door, but she already knows whoever she is waiting for will not come."

"And?"

A faint irritation flickered across Mia's face, as though the woman's sorrow had sharpened something inside her hunger. "She would follow someone who made her feel wanted."

The corner of Nikolas's mouth lifted. "Good."

Mia looked at him.

"You saw the wound before the blood."

A flash of satisfaction crossed her face.

"This one is yours," he said. "I will not guide your hand."

Her pulse quickened. "And if I make a mistake?"

"Then you correct it."



Mia held his gaze for another second, then rose from her chair. The moment she began walking across the tavern, Nikolas felt the room respond. Heads turned. Conversations faltered and shifted around her. Her dark hair fell over one shoulder. Her skin glowed faintly in the candlelight. Uncertainty still lingered in her movements, lending her the appearance of softness while something ancient stirred beneath it.

She stopped beside the woman's table. "Good evening," Mia said. "I'm Lina. May I join you?"

The woman looked up, startled for only a moment before her face softened into an eager smile. "Of course. I'm Jana. What brings you to our little town tonight?"

"Just passing through," Mia replied, settling across from her. "Though I couldn't resist stopping somewhere warm."

Jana laughed softly, already leaning in.

"Do you come here often?" Mia asked.

"I'm new in town." Jana glanced toward the bar. "I was hoping they might let me work a few shifts here."

"To meet people?"

Jana gave her a sheepish smile. "Is it that obvious?"

Mia smiled.

Across the room, Nikolas watched with predatory stillness, resisting every instinct to intervene while Mia discovered the hunt for herself. She couldn't have chosen a more suitable target. Jana carried the kind of loneliness that made strangers feel like answers.

Then Mia saw the pulse beneath Jana's throat, and everything else disappeared. Jana kept speaking, but Mia heard none of it. Her smile remained in place, her posture impeccable, but Nikolas saw her hands go still beneath the table. Too still. He knew that kind of stillness.

To Mia, the delicate beat beneath Jana's pale skin had become louder than the fiddle, louder than the scrape of chairs, louder than every voice around her. Her mouth went dry.

She looked at Nikolas.

He gave her nothing except the smallest inclination of his head.

Your choice.

Mia drew a breath and turned back to Jana. "Would you like some air?"

Jana blinked.

"It's warm in here," Mia continued softly, leaning in. "Come with me."

Jana's expression loosened. Her attention narrowed until her eyes fixed entirely on Mia's, willing and already beginning to empty beneath the first brush of compulsion.

"Yes."

Mia rose. Jana followed her through the narrow corridor at the back of the tavern, past the storeroom door and the stacked barrels that smelled of damp wood and spilled ale. The noise of the common room faded behind them until only the muffled scrape of music through the walls, Mia's breathing, and the quick, frightened rhythm of Jana's heart beside her remained.

Nikolas waited several seconds before leaving the table. Jana turned at the sound of him entering the back room, but Mia guided her gently back against the wall.

Jana's breath came faster. "Please," she whispered.

Mia froze.

Nikolas stopped several feet away. He could have ended the hesitation instantly. Instead, he stayed where he was.

Mia looked at Jana and watched fear gather across her face. Hunger pressed forward with enough violence to make her hands tremble, while everything human in her recoiled from what she intended to do.

Her gaze flicked toward Nikolas.

He remained on the spot.

"This is yours," he said quietly.

For a moment, anger flashed across her face. Then she turned back to Jana, stepped closer, and caught the woman's gaze. "You are safe," she said. Jana's breath

hitched. "You will remain calm. You will not remember being afraid."

The command was imperfect. Too warm. Too forceful. Jana's shoulders eased as the terror drained from her face, leaving behind a distant, obedient blankness. Her strength gave out beneath the compulsion, and Nikolas caught her before her knees struck the floor. It worked. Mia had done it herself. Jana sagged against him, but his gaze remained fixed on Mia.

The woman's pulse fluttered beneath his hand. Warmth, human and ordinary, carrying traces of fear, wine, and loneliness. It held no power over him. It never had. No beauty, no desire, no particular taste he would remember once the night was over.

But Mia's reaction—

Exquisite.

She stood rigidly by the wall, her eyes flicking between Nikolas and the exposed line of Jana's throat. Her jealousy rose so violently that he could smell it. It tangled with hunger, anger, arousal, and something fiercely possessive she had spent too much of her human life trying to suppress.

Mia's eyes followed him as he turned back to Jana. He grabbed her by the jaw and tilted her head back with detached efficiency.

Nikolas smiled, drew in a slow breath, and sank his fangs into Jana's throat.

The scent filled the small room instantly, warm, metallic, alive. The woman convulsed in pain, but Nikolas held her tight and forced her still as he drank. He drank only enough to let the scent of blood bloom through the air and reach Mia in its rawest form. When he lifted his head, he looked directly at Mia.

She stood rooted, her eyes fixed on Jana with a fury that had nothing to do with the woman herself and everything to do with Nikolas's mouth at another throat, his body turned toward someone else, and the terrible calm in his blood-dark gaze when he looked back at her.

"Now, little one," he murmured, satisfaction curling at the corner of his mouth. "Your turn."

Mia stared at Jana. The woman stood motionless, head tipped back, throat bared, eyes unfocused under the compulsion. She looked weak, passive, and far too close to Nikolas. Mia's hunger surged so violently that she almost recoiled from it. The metallic scent of blood filled her lungs. Her mouth went dry, and somewhere beneath the nausea, guilt, and fear, something ancient began to rise.

Nikolas came up behind her. His hand settled at the back of her neck, heavy and warm, steadying her without urging her forward. "Mia," he said, his voice low in her ear. "Drink."

She swallowed hard.

His fingers tightened slightly as he whispered, "You're allowed to want it."

Mia looked at him, and Nikolas saw everything warring behind her eyes. Her scent thickened around him. He breathed it in slowly, the sharp sweetness of her rage winding through him like smoke.

He fucking *loved* it.

With a slight motion of Nikolas's fingers, Jana's head tipped farther back, exposing the pale column of her throat.

Mia's breath broke. She closed the distance, shut her eyes, and pressed her lips to Jana's skin, trembling against the pulse beneath the open wound.

Blood flooded her mouth. Mia moaned against Jana's throat, a low, shocked sound, as warmth spread across her

tongue and tore through her body. It was richer than she had imagined. Her fingers dug into Jana's shoulders. Her body tightened with the rush, caught between revulsion and the terrible pleasure of finally giving her hunger what it had demanded.

Nikolas's hand slid slowly down her back. Power began to rise within her, wild and unfinished. Her scent sharpened again. The sight sent heat through him with savage force. His cock hardened beneath his pants, heavy and insistent, his body answering as it always did when power, possession, and desire fused into one instinct. The taste of Mia's rage fed something almost sadistic in him.

The woman's pulse fluttered uselessly. Her blood was warm. Fear-laced. Potent. Yet none of it held his attention. He was fixated on Mia—beautiful, furious, possessive, and impossible to get enough of.

Mia lifted her head. The tension in her face, the way she clenched her fists, the faint tremor in her breath as her gaze caught on the blood at his mouth—all of it tightened the arousal already pulsing through him until restraint became a private torture.

Nikolas smiled.

Then he drew her against him with his free arm and took her mouth. The kiss stole her breath, his hand sliding into her hair as he held her there and let her taste the blood lingering on his tongue before deepening the kiss with dark, deliberate possession. Mia made a small sound against his lips, furious and hungry.

"Transmute your jealousy into dominance," he growled against her lips, his voice thick with lust. "Don't let jealousy wound you, little one. Let it make you dangerous."

Mia's eyes flashed. "You expect me not to feel it?"

"I expect you to feel it all." His thumb moved slowly

across her blood-darkened lower lip. “Feel it until it burns. Then decide what you will make of the fire.”

Mia stared at him, her breathing uneven.

“I want you as my equal,” he continued, his voice dropping. “I want you beside me with your own power in your hands, hunting because you choose, taking what you need because you know you are strong enough to hold it.”

“And her?”

Nikolas glanced at Jana as though he had almost forgotten he was holding her. “She is blood.”

She didn’t look away from him, even as his eyes darkened.

“You tasted the hunt tonight,” he whispered. “Command it.” Nikolas leaned in until his mouth brushed hers. “You are mine,” he murmured against her lips.



He pulled her against him until she felt the hard press of his arousal through the layers between them. His fingers tightened at the back of her neck. He kissed her again, slower this time, his mouth moving over hers with a hunger that deepened, making Mia's body arch toward him despite her burning jealousy. The woman remained limp, silent, and irrelevant in his arms.

Nikolas returned his attention to the wound at Jana's throat, keeping one arm firmly around Mia's waist and drawing her against the hard line of his body.

"Feel the control," he whispered, his voice hoarse at Mia's ear. "She is here for our pleasure."

Mia's heart pounded.

Nikolas tipped Jana's head farther back, and Mia stepped forward. This time, she didn't hesitate. Her lips found the wound his fangs had made. Warm blood met her tongue, and she closed her eyes on a trembling breath.

He felt her body respond beneath his arm: her breathing shifting as raw hunger gathered into something more controlled, more powerful. His cock throbbed painfully against his pants. The sight of Mia feeding beside him, blood on her lips and jealousy still burning beneath her composure, made him want to take her right there, push the woman aside, spread Mia's legs, and fuck her until every part of her understood what she did to him.

He growled and sank his fangs into the other side of Jana's neck. The intimacy was brutal in its simplicity: Mia held tight against his body, his arm locked around her waist, their mouths at opposite sides of the same pulse, sharing the heat of one human life.

Mia lifted her head, eyes narrowed. Her gaze moved from Jana to Nikolas. A low, guttural growl escaped her throat.

Nikolas's mouth curved, but Mia lowered her head again. This time, Jana let out a thin, broken cry. The compulsion held, dulling her fear before it could become panic, but Mia's hunger had already outpaced her fragile control. She lunged hard enough to startle herself, tearing into the open wound with human teeth and the strength of a body desperate for fangs.

Blood spilled in a heavy stream. Nikolas clamped a hand around Mia's upper arm, but she tore free with a snarl and bit deeper, intoxicated by the warmth pouring over her tongue. Her fingers twisted into Jana's dress. The woman swayed under her grip, blood streaming down the pale column of her neck and soaking into the gold fabric at her shoulder.

Nikolas's smile vanished. He snarled, caught Mia around the waist, and pulled her back. The force nearly lifted her off the floor. For one savage second, Mia fought him, her breath shuddering, blood bright on her lips, before the reality of what she had done cut through the hunger.

Nikolas caught the woman as she sagged. He checked her pulse, felt the thin, uneven beat beneath his fingers, then carried her to the narrow velvet sofa against the wall. Her blood stained his hands. After laying her down, he wiped the blood carelessly against the dark fabric of his sleeve and turned her head to the side so she wouldn't choke as the compulsion loosened.

He turned back to Mia.

She stood silently near the center of the room, her chest rising too quickly beneath the fine line of her dress. Her hands still trembled. Color rode high beneath her skin, and her pupils had widened until her eyes looked almost black. Hunger remained in her expression, but jealousy still burned beneath it with a heat far more intimate.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked quietly.

Mia looked at him, then at the blood on his mouth. "Yes," she whispered.

Nikolas crossed the room, cupped her chin, and tipped her face toward the candlelight, studying the evidence of her first feeding as though it were something precious. Blood on her lips should have been ugly. On Mia, it only darkened his thoughts.

"You did well," he said softly. "You stopped before you emptied her out."

"I didn't stop," Mia replied, her gaze flicking to Jana. "You stopped me."

A trace of amusement touched his mouth. "Then you have learned the first part of the lesson." His thumb grazed her lower lip, catching the blood there. "Hunger is stronger than pride. Give it enough room, and it will take everything."

Mia's eyes narrowed. "You bit her."

Nikolas held her gaze. "And?"

"I hate having to share you," she whispered, fury tightening her voice.

There it was.

The jealousy he had been waiting for, stripped of every polite human disguise.

He had expected the anger. He had expected the blood to sharpen it. Hearing her claim him aloud, blood-warm and trembling, nearly broke the patience he had held since bringing her into the tavern.

He stepped into her space until their bodies touched. "Share me?" he murmured.

Mia swallowed. Nikolas leaned closer, Jana's blood still warm on his mouth. "Look at her, little one. I opened a vein. You drank from it. She served her purpose and will wake

with a feverish memory of a night she cannot fully explain." His fingers tightened beneath Mia's jaw. "My attention never left you."

"But your mouth was on her."

"Yes." His thumb moved slowly along the line of Mia's cheekbone, though the touch held a possessive pressure beneath its tenderness. "And I knew exactly what it would do to you."

Mia's breath caught.

He had wanted hunger and jealousy tangled tightly enough that she could no longer mistake what she felt for simple attraction or fascination. He wanted the truth of it stripped bare: the particular violence of having someone become essential.

"You enjoyed it," she said, anger flashing in her eyes.

"I did." He didn't soften the answer. "I enjoyed watching you fight it. Watching your blood answer before your mind could find a reason to hide." He lowered his mouth to her ear. "I want you hungry for me, Mia. I want you furious when another woman stands too close. I want every part of you to understand there is no one else I would allow to matter."

Her fingers curled against his chest.

Nikolas caught her wrist, drew her hand to his mouth, and kissed her palm before guiding it down to the hard length straining beneath his pants. "This is the difference," he murmured. "She feeds my hunger. You command it."

Mia stared at him. The warmth beneath her palm burned with tension. His body had gone taut with the effort of holding himself back. Nikolas lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. The amusement lingered at the edges of his mouth, but something colder, older settled into his gaze.

"Do not mistake what you feel for weakness. You may

leave her alive because you choose to. You may take more than you should because you lose control. Either way, the choice must be yours. Guilt is useless when it becomes a collar someone else taught you to wear." His hand returned to her face. "You don't need to enjoy suffering to survive."

Mia lifted her eyes to his, and the innocence still lingering there nearly caught his breath. "I don't know how to separate it," she admitted.

"You are not meant to separate it tonight." Nikolas grabbed her jaw, forcing her to keep her eyes on him. "I enjoy power and domination, perhaps more than any vampire you'll ever meet. I've been around long enough to seize any chance at amusement. When I see one, I take it. I indulge without guilt or shame. Such concepts are human—flawed, submissive—but they serve us, vampires."

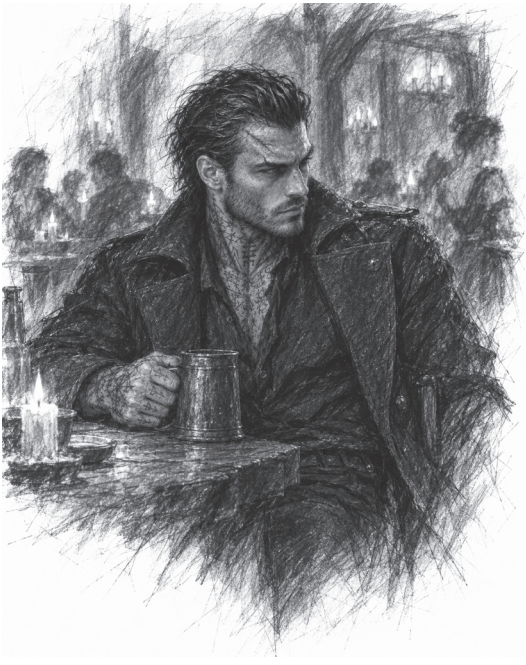
He kissed her, dragging his tongue across her upper lip. "Look at me," he commanded. "We are superior beings. We feed on energy whenever we wish. You are consuming blood to anchor your essence to the blueprint of your existence. Once you master this, you won't need blood at all."

Mia's breath trembled. Something in his eyes made her want to yield, driven by the deep, dangerous certainty that he saw the parts of her she had not yet learned to face. He stood at the threshold of a self that frightened her, and some instinct older than reason screamed for her to follow him to the ends of the Earth, all the way to Hell.

Nikolas wiped the blood from her chin with his thumb and brought it to his mouth. Mia watched as he slowly licked it away. The sight sent heat through her so quickly that she had to catch herself against his chest.

Nikolas lowered his hand with a slow smile, his eyes locked on hers. "Come," he said.

He took her hand and led her back toward the tavern, leaving Jana unconscious on the sofa.



The crowd had thinned by the time they returned. He ordered two of their usual drinks, slid one toward Mia, and reached for her hand beneath the table.

As she lifted her drink, Nikolas watched her over the rim of his own and gave her a knowing wink. There was blood in her now. People noticed her wherever she went. It made him want to tear apart every man who looked at her more than once.

Mia lifted her eyes.

A faint smile touched his mouth, threaded with hunger and amusement. “There’s one last thing,” he said. “Then we leave.”

She nodded, though he felt her attention sharpen.

Nikolas's hand closed around hers beneath the table. His fingers laced with hers, warm and firm, holding her in place as his gaze swept the thinning crowd. He found the man in the far corner almost immediately: young, dark-haired, sitting alone with his drink untouched for too long, his shoulders drawn inward beneath a coat too fine for the tavern, his face marked by the nervous habit of glancing toward every door. A beautiful man, by human standards.

Nikolas hated him before he stood up.

"Wait here," he told Mia. "I'll call you when I'm ready." His thumb grazed her knuckles once before he let go.

The man looked up and noticed him approaching. Fear sharpened his scent before Nikolas even reached the table —a thin, metallic edge beneath sweat and beer, the body's first warning before the mind understood why it should run. Nikolas felt his own instincts answer: a male heartbeat, a male body, a stranger in the same room as Mia who had looked in her direction once too often without understanding why. Something ancient and violent shifted beneath Nikolas's ribs.

"Excuse me," Nikolas said, halting beside the table.

The man frowned.

"Are you John Levy?"

Confusion crossed his face. "No, I'm Peter."

Nikolas leaned closer, just enough for the candlelight to catch in his eyes. "Of course you are."

Peter's gaze locked on his.

Nikolas let the compulsion settle over him slowly, almost tenderly. Terror was useless when one needed obedience. The man's pupils widened, and his expression softened into a vacant stare. "You are pleased to see me," Nikolas murmured. "You've been waiting for me all

evening. You will ask the owner for the back room and lead me there."

Peter nodded.

Across the tavern, Mia watched him with narrowed eyes. She didn't know what he intended. That was deliberate. He wanted to see what she would make of the scene when he denied her an explanation.

Peter spoke briefly with the older tavern owner, who gestured distractedly toward the narrow door behind the bar. Peter disappeared through it.

Nikolas followed.

The room beyond was small and close, meant more for storage than privacy. Barrels were stacked against one wall. A table stood beneath a crooked oil lamp, its surface scarred by knives, spilled ale, and years of careless hands. The air smelled of dust, cork, damp wood, and the old sweetness of wine soaked into the floorboards.

Nikolas turned toward the door. "Mia."

She entered immediately. Her eyes went first to Peter, then to Nikolas. Peter stood near the table, pale and dazed, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides.

Nikolas pointed toward the chair. "Sit."

Mia obeyed, though impatience strained beneath her stillness. He saw it in the way she crossed one leg over the other and tightened her fingers around the armrest as Peter lowered himself into the opposite chair.

Nikolas pulled out the chair opposite the man and sat. "It has been a long time," he said.

Peter stared at him. The compulsion kept him silent, but fear still trembled beneath his skin. His heart beat too hard, too fast. Nikolas could hear every uneven thud, every breath Peter tried to control.

Nikolas leaned forward. "Stand."

Peter rose.

Nikolas stepped toward him. His hand closed around the back of Peter's neck and drew him forward with enough force to make resistance irrelevant. His fingers locked beneath Peter's jaw as his fangs descended. Blood surged against Nikolas's mouth as Peter's pulse kicked violently beneath it. It was stronger than the woman's. Darker. More charged with adrenaline, male fear, and the body's instinctive refusal to surrender. Nikolas drank only long enough to taste the difference and let the scent spread through the room. His attention never truly settled on Peter. It remained fixed on Mia.

Then he lifted his head.

Mia had gone very still. Her eyes were fixed on him rather than Peter. On the darkened blood on his lips. On his hand at the man's neck. On the way Peter's body sagged against him, held upright by strength that was entirely Nikolas's. Her hunger surged hard enough that she gripped the table's edge to keep herself seated.

Nikolas's eyes narrowed. He had felt the shift in her even before lifting his head: the change in her pulse, the way her hunger sharpened as the scent of Peter's blood reached her. Now his anger and want twisted so tightly together that neither seemed capable of existing without the other. Peter's knees buckled beneath Nikolas's hand. He shifted Peter aside just enough to keep him upright, then turned fully toward Mia, his eyes dark and bright at once.

"Come here, little one."

She rose at once and crossed to him.

The moment she reached him, he caught her hand and pulled her against him, kissing her with Peter's blood still warm on his lips. Mia gasped against his mouth, then kissed him back, drawn into the heat of a young man's

blood on his tongue, the hard pressure of Nikolas's hand at her waist, the savage satisfaction with which he held her while Peter bled only inches away.

His cock hardened painfully beneath his pants, the ache turning vicious under the look in her eyes. She was furious, hungry, and visibly aroused despite herself.

Nikolas broke the kiss but kept his mouth against hers. "Drink," he breathed.

Mia looked toward Peter. For the first time, uncertainty crossed her face. Then the hunger surged through her again, stronger than hesitation, and she approached him slowly. Peter's throat bore Nikolas's fang marks, blood gathering there in a dark, glistening line. Mia lowered her mouth to it, closed her eyes, and tasted him.

The first taste of Peter's blood was hotter and heavier than Jana's, sharpened by his body fighting the compulsion even as his mind remained trapped beneath it. Heat flooded Mia's mouth, swept down her throat, and sank into the deepest parts of her with such force that she inhaled against his skin and closed her fingers around Peter's arms before she consciously chose to touch him.

She pulled him closer, instinctively seeking more of that violent, living rush, unaware of Peter's body folding toward hers, his hands lifting weakly toward her waist, and the unmistakable hardening beneath his pants had left Nikolas utterly still.

A low, guttural growl ripped from Nikolas's throat when Mia leaned closer. Whatever remained of his restraint vanished. Mia lifted her head just as Nikolas closed the distance and stepped between them. Peter was only an obstruction now: a pulse too close to Mia's mouth, a man whose blood had darkened her eyes with hunger and whose hands had dared to rise toward her waist.

Nikolas tore him away with such force that Peter's back slammed into the wall, cracking the plaster. He pinned him there for one brutal second, drove his hand through Peter's chest, closed his fingers around the heart, and ripped it free. It beat once, twice, obscenely alive against his palm.

For one breath, Peter stared past Nikolas at Mia, horror already fading from his face, then collapsed in a slack heap at their feet.

Mia stumbled back as Peter fell, terror tightening her expression, but Nikolas only watched her, Peter's heart still clenched in his bloodied hand. His mouth twisted into a snarl without remorse or hesitation.

He dropped the heart. It struck the floorboards with a wet, useless thud. Blood ran over his wrist.

Mia froze.

Nikolas crossed to her slowly.

His gaze found her mouth first—Peter's blood shining there, her breath unsteady, her pupils blown wide with hunger—and the sight of her sent a surge of possession through him, tightening his whole body. His bloodied hand shot up and closed around her neck, dragging her closer until her startled breath touched his mouth.

"You looked at him as though he could give you something," he growled, each word quiet with the effort of containing a roar. His thumb pressed beneath her jaw as his eyes burned into hers. "Tell me, little one. What did you think you were taking from him that I have not already made yours?"

Mia's eyes widened, and she tried to shake her head, but his grip tightened suddenly.

"You have just proven how little control you possess!" he roared in her face. "How dare you let him believe that hunger was meant for him?"

Mia couldn't answer. Her body still trembled as Peter's blood, the violence, and the scent of Nikolas's fury surged through her at once. Terror blurred into desire, hunger into shame, while the instinct to pull away collided with a darker urge to press closer and discover whether the fire in Nikolas's eyes belonged to anger alone.

"This is why you will never feed from a man without my permission and my presence. Ever. Do you understand?" he roared, pulling her close enough that their lips brushed.

His roar cut through the haze, and her anger surged to meet his.

"You brought him here!"

"You drew him closer, Mia."

Mia's eyes flashed. "I was feeding!"

"You lost control." Nikolas's growl vibrated through the room.

"So *you* can do whatever you want, but *I* can't?" she spat.

Nikolas's jaw tightened. "Exactly." The word landed with its own violence. "I have no intention of controlling my possessiveness." His gaze moved over her face with ruthless intensity, tracking every flicker of fear, fury, and want. "I am the ruler. I decide what touches my blood, what enters my domain, and what comes near what is mine."

Mia stared at him. The fear was still there, cold and trembling beneath her skin, but something stronger was rising through it. Outrage. Frustration. Pure rage.

"Do you understand me, Mia?" he hissed.

"No."

Nikolas's eyes darkened.

"No," she said again, louder now, forcing herself to

meet his gaze even as his fingers still clutched her throat. "You want my respect? Then damn well respect me. I'm not some maid you can order about just because you're angry. I'm not one more frightened woman you can control because it makes your life easier." Her breath shook, but she didn't lower her eyes. "Treat me as an equal, even when it doesn't suit you, or I'm gone!"

For a second, Nikolas didn't move.

"You dare defy me?"

Nikolas's grip tightened around her throat, his thumb pressing into the frantic pulse beneath her skin as he stared down at her, his eyes dark with rage and an almost cruel arousal. She had defied him with blood on her mouth and fire in her gaze, and the thought of making her admit how much she wanted him sent another brutal surge of arousal through him, every muscle tightening with anger. His eyes were almost black now, his mouth parted over the edge of his fangs, Peter's blood still streaking the wrist that had held his heart.

Mia stared at him. His rage did nothing to diminish his beauty. It sharpened it into something more dangerous, almost impossible to look away from.

A wave of desire nearly brought her to her knees, and her hand shot up to grip his throat. His pulse hammered beneath her palm, the sheer force of him contained beneath skin and muscle. She tightened her grip until his neck went rigid beneath her hand.

Nikolas's growl deepened into a snarl as he tore her hand away, but Mia didn't flinch. Her heart raced, her breathing shallow, but she held her ground.

The rage on his face deepened and mingled with the arousal he had been trying to suppress. His cock was impossibly hard against her, unmistakable through the

layers between them, heavy and punishingly real. The knowledge sent heat tearing through her, blurring the edges of her anger.

His pupils widened. His grip eased around her throat, but his hand remained there.

Mia kept her eyes locked on his, trembling with the savage satisfaction of finally getting beneath his control. She slid her free hand between their bodies and pressed her palm over the hard length beneath his pants. A soft moan escaped her as she felt him. Nikolas sucked in a sharp breath, the sound breaking into something almost animal.

"You're hard," she whispered. The words came out as half accusation, half wonder.

His eyes burned into hers. "You are standing in front of me with another man's blood on your mouth," he said roughly. "You put your hand around my throat, defy me to my face, and demand that I see you as my equal." His mouth lowered toward hers. "What did you expect?"

Mia pulled him closer and kissed him. The kiss was wild, stripped of apology or gentleness. Her mouth opened beneath his as though she could consume the rage still living between them, and Nikolas answered with equal force, his hand leaving her throat only to grip the back of her neck and deepen the kiss. His fangs scraped against her tongue, but she didn't care.

She kissed him harder, her hand still firm over his cock as he tensed beneath her touch. Nikolas growled against her mouth and drove her back against the wall, pinning her there beneath the full weight of his body.

Mia moaned into the kiss and arched her back. "I want you," she breathed, breaking from his mouth just long enough to say it, ignoring the dead man cooling just a few feet away. "Here. *Now*."

Nikolas pressed his forehead to hers, breathing hard.

"Promise me."

Mia's fingers tightened over him.

"Promise me you won't feed on male victims without my permission and my presence," Nikolas said, his voice rough against her mouth. "I want to hear it."

Mia held his gaze, fury still bright in her eyes, Peter's blood dark on her lips, her hand resting over the hard length of him through his pants.

"I promise," she whispered.

A low growl rolled through Nikolas, like thunder trapped beneath stone, then hauled her into him and kissed her with a violence that stole her breath. Behind them, Peter's body shifted against the wall and settled heavily onto the floorboards, but neither of them looked back. Mia clung to Nikolas, tasting blood and rage on his tongue as her jealousy answered his, burning into something far beyond anger.

His hands slid down her back, gripping her hard enough to make her arch into him. When his rigid erection pressed against her stomach, she felt the full, merciless consequence of what she had done to him. His eyes stayed fixed on hers as his thumb caught the crimson drop gathering at her lower lip. He looked at it once before licking it away.

Mia shuddered.

A slow, wicked smile touched his mouth as he caught her wrist and guided her hand back over the hard line of his cock.

"Yours," he rasped.

Hearing it made something deep in her body tighten, the dangerous thrill of being wanted beyond reason.

Nikolas turned her with one swift movement, bending

her over the bloodstained table. Her palms met the scarred wood, its uneven grain tacky beneath her fingers with spilled wine and cooling blood. Smoke and iron still hung thick in the room, charged with the aftermath of his jealousy.

Nikolas pushed her dress over her hips and spread her legs. His hand slid along the inside of her thigh, his fingers dragging slowly upward until they found her wet and already aching. He paused there, two fingers pressed lightly against her, simply feeling her tremble.

"You'll want to hold on tight, little one," he growled.

Mia's eyes widened, but she tightened her grip on the table's edge. Fear still lived inside her, tangled with hunger and the adrenaline still burning through her blood, but she didn't pull away.

She had stood before him, her hand at his throat. She had demanded to be seen as his equal.

She chose him.

Nikolas grabbed her hips and shoved her hard against the table before driving into her in one savage thrust. The force jolted her forward against the wood and tore a piercing scream from her throat. His grip on her hips was the only thing that kept her from sliding off the edge entirely.

Mia clutched the edge's, her breath shattering as her body clenched around the sudden, overwhelming fullness of him. He was impossibly deep, the pressure intense enough to blur her vision. Her thighs shook, every muscle locking tight around him as her body struggled to accommodate his size.

"That's right," Nikolas grunted, his voice rough. "Take me."

He bent over her, his chest pressing flush against her

back. One hand flattened against her stomach, holding her pinned and still. The other slid into her hair and gathered it slowly into his fist until his knuckles rested against the back of her skull. Then he pulled, tilting her chin up and baring her throat to the smoky air.

"Let me own you."

Mia gasped. The words reached the same dark place inside her that had wanted him to lose control when Peter came too close, that had craved proof she could undo Nikolas as thoroughly as he could undo her.

Her body yielded around him, driven by the desperate need to feel every brutal inch of him.

Nikolas didn't give her time to adjust. He began to fuck her in a fierce, relentless rhythm, their argument still alive in every thrust, along with the savage pleasure of having her beneath him after she had looked him in the eye and refused to bow.

Each thrust snapped her hips forward against the table's edge. The grain bit into her palms as he dragged back and drove deep again, the impact punching the air from her lungs in broken, rhythmic cries she couldn't suppress. Her dress was still bunched at her waist. Her feet had left the floor. Only his hands, the table, and the relentless weight of him behind her kept her in place.

Nikolas leaned over her and pressed her flat beneath him. His mouth found the curve of her neck, and his fangs broke skin. Mia cried out as he drank, blood spilling in a thin, bright line down her spine while her body clenched around him. Her sweetness hit him hard enough to make him groan into her throat as he drove deeper, his hands locked around her hips to keep her exactly where he wanted her.

Her body burned.

Every stroke sent another wave crashing through her, stretching her to the edge of what she could take without quite crossing it. She felt the thick, hard pulse of him inside her, the way he swelled and throbbed as though he intended to leave an impression she could never unfeel. His hips rolled forward again, harder, angling deeper.

Nikolas yanked her head back by her hair. She gasped and met his gaze over her shoulder.

His face had changed. Blood darkened his mouth. His eyes were almost black, consumed by rage, hunger, jealousy, and the savage arousal of seeing her flushed and trembling.

He drove deeper, and Mia's breath broke as the pressure edged toward too much, each thrust pushing her beyond what she thought her body could take. He drove forward to the hilt.

Mia screamed.

Her back arched off the table, her hips jerking back instinctively as her body clenched hard around him. He held her there, buried all the way, letting her feel the hard pulse of him as her body fluttered and gripped around him. His hand tightened in her hair, forcing her head back farther to look at him while he took every sound from her mouth as though he had earned it.

"You demanded equality," he said, his voice roughened by the effort of control. "You can fight me." His mouth dipped to her ear, lips brushing the shell of it while his cock pressed impossibly deep inside her. "But I'll spread your legs and fuck you whenever I want. You will never doubt what you are to me."

His mouth found hers in a brutal kiss, his tongue forcing past her teeth and swallowing the moan that

climbed her throat as he began to move again in long, grinding strokes.

"I'll make sure you have my blood in your veins," he whispered against her ear, his breath hot against her skin as he drove into her in a steady, punishing rhythm, "my scent buried so deep beneath your skin that no man could touch you without tasting me first."

He shifted his angle, pressing harder between her shoulder blades as his hips tilted beneath her, each thrust driving against the sensitive front wall inside her. Mia's fingers clawed across the table for something to hold and found nothing. She screamed again, the sound torn from somewhere beneath language.

Then he pulled out entirely.

The sudden emptiness made her gasp. She felt him slide against her, slick and hard, the blunt pressure shifting upward against her ass. Mia yelped and instinctively tried to pull forward.

His hand came down hard on her hip, pinning her in place. "Shh." His thumb pressed against her, slow and deliberate, easing her open while she shook. "You'll take me like a good girl. All of me."

He pushed forward. Mia's mouth fell open on a soundless cry as the broad head of him breached her, her body clenching hard against the stretch. He didn't stop. He drove deeper in short, measured thrusts, retreating only enough to take more each time until his hips met her ass and she felt him buried to the hilt, impossibly full.

Mia's scream split the air.

"That's it, little one," he breathed against her ear. "Let me hear you."

He began to move in long, grinding strokes, withdrawing almost completely before driving deep again,

forcing her body to relearn him each time. Mia trembled against the table, breath breaking into short, stuttered gasps as she struggled with the relentless fullness of him.

He grabbed her ass cheeks and spread them wide with both hands, thumbs holding her open as he watched himself sink into her. Then he drove forward to the hilt and held there, fully seated, grinding in tight circles against places inside her she had never felt before.

"I will sear you with my name," he growled as he pulled back and drove into her again, "until your body remembers me before it remembers breath." His hips set a punishing rhythm, each thrust pushing a strangled sound out of her throat. "Every part of you will bear the scars of my possession. Every being in every realm will understand that you are under my hand"—he drove deeper, grinding into her—"and utterly, irrevocably mine. In this life. In any life that follows."

A ragged cry tore from her throat. Her body tightened, her eyes rolling back as he locked her hip in place and changed the angle, driving another scream from her.

"Take it all, little one," he murmured. "I know you crave it."

"Nikolas, I—" An orgasm crested without warning. Her hips rolled back against him in hard, shaking pulses. Her fingers slipped against the table, her whole body shuddering beneath his hands.

The last of his restraint broke.

He lunged forward, driving her flat against the table as his fangs pierced the curve of her neck. He drank deep while he fucked her through every aftershock still rolling through her, holding her there as she spasmed around him. He refused to let her go.

She pressed her cheek to the table and held on. Her

knees buckled, and he caught her, locking one arm beneath her hips and hauling her back against him until she felt him everywhere.

Then a savage, guttural roar tore from his chest. He buried himself to the root and held there, pulsing hard as he spilled inside her in long, shuddering waves while she still trembled beneath him.

Mia nearly lost consciousness. Her vision went white at the edges. Her legs were dead weight. Only the iron lock of his arm around her waist kept her upright, his chest heavy against her back and his breath ragged against her skin.

His mouth brushed her ear.

"*Mine.*"

Mia shivered.

He braced both hands on the table beside her hips and drove forward once more, making her feel every inch of him before he withdrew. The slow drag of his withdrawal made her gasp before he turned her toward him.

Mia's whole body trembled, and for a moment he watched her with a love that bordered on violence. Then he kissed her before she could look away. "We have to go, love."

Mia's eyes flicked toward Peter's body. "Should we—"

"No." Nikolas took her hand and led her out of the back room without looking back.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An architect of worlds where Original vampires stalk alternate dimensions, ancient warlocks unravel buried truths, and desires come alive on pages drenched in blood.

I am everything,
I am nothing,
watching you feel,
hearing you dream,
counting your heartbeats.

Haunted by unhinged hunger,
I stand longer than darkness.



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